

# Language Acquisition and Language Socialization

Ecological Perspectives

edited by

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# Becoming a speaker of culture

4

*Elinor Ochs*

## Introduction

Over the past several decades, anthropology has expanded the locus of ethnographic interest to include a broader band of social identities beyond focal male members of a community. Due in large part to a sea change in the philosophy of social science, the lives and perspectives of women and transgendered persons have been incorporated into analyses of power, labor, personhood, and other dynamics of society and culture (Brown 1976; Foucault 1990; Gal 1992; Haraway 1988, 1989, 1991; Keenan 1974; Kulick 1992; Ortner 1974, 1984; Strathern 1987). Yet, an important sector of the human population continues to be marginal to anthropological research. Specifically, young children are nearly invisible in ethnographic studies (Goodwin 1997).

The marginal status of children within anthropology is linked in part to their reduced visibility in settings in which political decision-making, economic exchanges, and religious rituals take place. Across many social groups, small children are considered to lack the knowledge and skills needed to fully participate in core community activities and they tend to be relegated to female-dominated domestic and educational settings. Moreover, young children, especially those under the age of five, are less than ideal informants for ethnographic field researchers. To understand the cultural organization and everyday business of childhood requires researchers to shadow children for long stretches of time as they engage people and objects in the world (Harkness and Super 1983; Heath 1983; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Finally, the marginality of children as objects of anthropological concern is likely rooted in a view of infants and young children as natural rather than cultural beings. This perception is so strong that anthropologists who conduct research on early childhood are often viewed as tackling issues of developmental psychology rather than anthropology or, at best, straddling the two fields. The distancing of child-oriented research from anthropology is even greater when the children under ethnographic study have mental disabilities.

The study of children presents a colossal challenge to ethnographers in that they are faced with articulating society and culture through the eyes of children as well as of those who attend to them. Children are often described as objects of care, and childhood is treated as an ideology and a life phase. But what does the social world look like from the perspective of the children themselves? How do children across the world's societies think and feel about relationships, actions, activities, places, artifacts, moral values, and so on? Ethnographers are distinguished by their desire to capture the perspective of the "other," and much has been written about the complexities of this enterprise (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Haraway 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986). While ethnographic perspective-taking is daunting regardless of the object of study, attempting to capture the perspective of young children requires not only proximity and sustained observation but also literally getting down to children's level and viewing situations as they do, stepping into their shadows. I am usually stooped behind a child with a video camera capturing an unfolding scene faced by the child and a remote microphone picking up the child's vocalizations to the self and to others.

An ethnographic account of children with mental disabilities further taxes the perspective-taking capabilities of anthropologists. In addition to the challenges of capturing a child's point of view and entry into society, the ethnographer's goal is to assess how a particular psychopathology helps to configure how the child thinks, feels, and acts in the world. For three years, clinical psychologist Lisa Capps and I collaborated on an ethnographic study of intelligent children diagnosed with autism. Autism is a disorder characterized by social, cognitive, and communicative impairments (Frith 1989; Happe 1994; Sigman and Capps 1997). Even high-functioning children with autism display only a limited ability to take the perspective of others, recognize and express certain emotions, construe the relation of parts to whole configurations, and grasp certain pragmatic meanings of language (Baron-Cohen, 1996; Hobson 1986; Loveland *et al.* 1990; Sigman *et al.* 1986, 1992; Ungerer and Sigman 1987; Wulff 1985). Nowhere is the import of culture more evident than when observing children with autism attempting to participate in social activities. They strive to display and interpret the appropriate physical and psychological stances and actions for activities and identities, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding with a little help from those around them.

To illustrate this social dynamic, consider the knowledge and skill that Erin, a young girl with autism, needs to play the game of softball at school and the ways in which Erin's teacher and unaffected classmates respond to Erin's limited abilities. The first time that Erin is up at bat,

she hardly swings and strikes out. The next time Erin approaches home base for her turn at bat, Gary, one of the boys on her team, advises her on how to swing the bat:

- Gary: All right! (.) Erin you're up.  
[Come ↑o:n↓  
[[approaches Erin]]  
Erin: ((walks behind boy toward home base))  
Gary: ((picks up bat and faces Erin))  
Erin: ((turns around toward boy))  
Gary: Erin (.) [Swing [like that okay?  
[[swings bat horizontally]]  
Erin: ((approaches, reaching for bat))  
Gary: [Not like this  
[[swings bat angled more vertically]]  
[Straight like that okay?  
[[swings bat horizontally]]  
((hands Erin the bat))

When Erin does not swing at a ball, Gary continues to instruct her:

- Gary: Erin! Don't swing at anything you don't like!  
((Pitcher throws ball; Erin does not swing))

Eventually, Erin hits the ball lightly to the immediate right of home base. She begins to run holding the bat, then hesitates, gazing toward the teacher, who initially tells her to go to first base, then changes her mind and declares the hit a foul. As Erin returns to home base, the teacher asks her classmates if the ball had hit Erin, in which case she is entitled to walk to first base. What transpires is a dispute between Erin's team mates and the opposing team. No one consults Erin herself:

- Teacher: Did it hit her?  
Team mates: Yes!  
Teacher: [That's what I thought.  
Opp. team: [No! ( ? )  
Catcher: n-  
Gary: ((touches his own wrist, indicating where the ball hit Erin))  
Catcher: [No, it hit the [bat Miss Ruby  
[((takes off face guard and hurries toward teacher))  
[[Gary and team mates walk toward teacher]]

Gary +

Team mates: **It hit her on [the hand**

(((pointing to hand)))

((Opposite team members shout objections))

Catcher: No, (.) I saw it hit- it

As the dispute ensues, one of Erin's team mates approaches Erin, points to first base and directs her to go there. While Erin walks toward first base, the catcher convinces the teacher that the ball hit the bat and not her hand. Eventually, as Erin returns to home base, Gary asks if the ball hit her. Erin says nothing but slightly shakes her head negatively. The catcher uses this gesture to declare victory:

Gary: ((approaches Erin))

(Did it hit you?)

Erin: (((picks up bat and walks toward home plate)))

Gary: [(Erin? Did it hit you?) Did it hit you Erin?

(((following Erin)))

Erin: ((Slightly shakes head horizontally while walking))

Catcher: See! She even said it. almo::st.

Once again at bat, with the stakes high, Erin is given more instruction. One of her team mates stands behind her and positions her body for hitting the ball.

In addition, Erin's team mates move behind the catcher to monitor her judgment:

Team mate: [I'm standin' right here.

(((stands behind fence right behind catcher)))

Catcher: I'm tellin' the ↑truth.

To the delight of her team mates and teacher, Erin hits a legitimate ball. Although the ball is thrown to first base before Erin arrives and she is declared out, Erin is applauded and she appears pleased:

Team mates: (GOOD!)

(GO ERIN!)

GO::!

RUN ERIN!

((Ball is thrown to first base before Erin reaches there))

Teacher: YAY – ERIN YOU'RE OUT

[BUT THAT WAS YOUR FIRST [HL::T!

Erin: (((walks back toward home base, smiling)))

Team mates: [YA :::::Y!

(((clap)))

Teacher: [YA::Y! ALRI::GHT!

Team mate: [Good hit Erin!

(((Erin walking toward outfield, smiling)))

What can Erin's encounter with softball tell us about what a member needs to understand about society and culture? First, Erin needs to know the *categories* and *rules* of activities: For example, in the game of softball there is first, second, third, and home base and specified player positions, the batter tries to hit the ball, run the bases in order and return home, three strikes/four balls and you are out, three outs and your team takes to the field, and so on. These are rules that anyone who knows softball could articulate for a novice.

But Erin also needs to know much more. She needs to know *expectations* and *strategies* for positioning the body and bat, when to swing and not swing, how to swing, where to direct the ball, when to run and when to stay put and more. Knowledge of and skill in rules and strategies is critical both to playing the game of softball and to establishing Erin's social identity as a member of a team and player in this game. Here we see how classmates try to apprentice Erin into these roles, such that she animates their authorial prompts, and they ventriloquate her voice: "See she even said it - almost!"

Despite the profoundly organizing role of culture in our lives, researchers often have a difficult time discerning culture outside the more structured arenas of rituals and games. Those of us trying to understand children as social creatures, i.e. as *members*, have had to come to grips with the fact that cultural expectations about how people are to act, feel, and think in specific situations do not typically take the form of *explicit instructions* but rather must be *inferred* from performances of conventional, socially co-ordinated activities, and interpretative practices. The problem for us is also the problem for children like Erin. And imagine what a problem that must be.

To infer situational expectations, Erin must *minimally track and interpret goal-directed acts* (e.g. swinging a bat, running to base, declaring a pitch as ball, strike, foul and the like) and *take note of participants' psychological stances toward these acts* (e.g. positive or negative alignment).<sup>1</sup> She must *also link acts and stances to what is expected of particular participants* (e.g. batter, catcher, referee, team mates, opposing team). All this requires perspective-taking and empathy of a magnitude difficult even for a high-functioning autistic child like Erin to attain.

Erin must also *contextualize actions, stances, and participants in terms of what just occurred and what is anticipated to occur next*. That

is, *she must understand the more general activity underway*. Here again autistic children have great difficulty in that they have problems grasping the relation of a part to a whole. They lack what Uta Frith (1989) calls "the drive for coherence."

Erin's task is made all the more complicated by the ethnographic fact that typically *more than one activity* is occurring. Within the activity of playing softball, for example, Erin's team mates are engaged in advice-giving while she is responding to the pitcher's throws. The team mates also simultaneously argue with the opposite team and try to persuade the teacher they are right, at the same time as someone directs Erin to run to first base. Off the softball field, in everyday social interaction, people routinely interweave several activities: They talk while carrying out some physical task, for example. And the talk itself is usually a complex overlay of discourse activities. Interlocutors may, for example, embed arguments and explanations within stories, or stories within arguments, explanations, prayers, or apologies. Being a competent interlocutor entails interweaving and disentangling such overlapping enterprises.

To push the envelope of cultural requirements even further, Erin cannot usually count on participating in a stable, sustained activity whose rules and strategies for participation are predetermined. While this may hold to some extent in formal events (Irvine 1979), most of social life is informal, and informality is defined by *relative spontaneity* and *fluidity*. Informal interaction is systematic, but its systematicity resides locally at the level of the interactional turn (Sacks 1992; Sacks *et al.* 1974). Thus, once a particular kind of turn is produced (e.g. greeting, a request for information), a particular kind of next turn is expected (e.g. a greeting response, an answer). When it is not forthcoming, it is noticeably absent. The ordering of such turn sequences in conversational exchanges, however, is typically not predeterminedly scripted. Further, boundaries between sequences of turns are often not explicitly marked, so that one activity may evolve into another with no warning (Duranti 1992). What started out as an announcement sequence slips into storytelling, or storytelling evolves into a plan for future action and so on (Ochs 1994). Erin and all novice members of communities need to *monitor turn by turn the emergent, contingent interactional construction of social realities*.

To be counted as culturally competent, Erin has to learn in addition that *while communities establish conventional parameters for carrying out social activities and realizing social identities, members have play within those parameters for doing so*. Even an activity as codified as a softball game, for example, does not constrict participation to invariant acts and role realizations but instead allows for

different kinds of team mate, batter, catcher, referee, and so on. Autistic children tend to overgeneralize norms for activities and identities. A father teaches his 10-year-old autistic son to look people in the eye and shake hands when he meets them. The boy extends this norm to all situations, shaking hands, for example, with all the kids on his soccer team at the beginning of each practice and each game.

Finally, Erin needs to know *how and when to modify or even abandon conventional ways* of participating in activities and conventional social identities. While the tenacity of convention is great, individual members, families, classrooms, sports organizations, and other institutions within a community do change, particularly when confronted with novel conditions and problems.

### A perspective

An interest in the cultural organization of children's social and communicative practices has shaped my career as an anthropologist. In 1973, while completing a dissertation on Malagasy conversation and oratory, I thought it would be fascinating to understand how children come to be communicatively competent and began videotaping the conversations of my two-year-old twin sons over a period of nine months. Although documentation of children's communicative skills was part of the mission of the ethnography of communication paradigm developed during the late 1960s, only a handful of anthropologists were conducting research of this sort (cf., for example, Blount 1977; Kernan 1969). I found myself drawn to psychologists and linguists centrally concerned with children's pragmatic competence and spent my professional life from 1973–1999 in departments of theoretical and applied linguistics.

During this period I sought to position the study of communication by and to children more centrally in the panoply of anthropological concerns. The first breakthrough came after presenting a paper on children's conversational competence at the 1974 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. In a serendipitous moment that sparked over two decades of collaboration, I sat down next to Bambi Schieffelin, an anthropology graduate student who had studied developmental psycholinguistics. Schieffelin and I joined forces and soon developed a subfield we called "Developmental Pragmatics" (Ochs and Schieffelin 1979). This enterprise drew together scholarship across the social sciences on how young children, over developmental time, produced and interpreted language in context. Developmental pragmatic research analyzes children's competence to introduce topics, refer to old and new information, make requests, tell stories,

engage in arguments, and other situated language practices (Bates *et al.* 1979; Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984; Garvey 1984; Ochs and Schieffelin 1983; Scollon 1976).

Schieffelin went to Papua New Guinea in 1975 to document child language development among the Kaluli people. Three years later, accompanied by Alessandro Duranti and Martha Platt, I went to Western Samoa to record children's developing linguistic skills. In the course of these field efforts, anthropological and developmental interests melded. Schieffelin and I became aware of systematic ways in which the language of children and language directed to children is grounded not only in the immediate discourse context but also in the context of historically and culturally grounded social beliefs, values, and expectations. As we have reported in depth, Schieffelin and I found that Kaluli and Samoan caregivers alike typically did not use simplified baby talk and generally did not try to interpret the unintelligible utterances of infants (Ochs 1988; Ochs and Schieffelin 1984, 1995; Schieffelin 1990). Supported by like-minded scholars such as anthropologists Shirley Brice Heath (1983), Karen Watson-Gegeo and David Gegeo (1986a, b), and psychologist Peggy Miller (Miller 1982; Miller and Moore 1989), we decided to create another subfield called "Language Socialization," dedicated to discerning the sociocultural patterning of child-adult and child-child communication (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986).

### Premises of language socialization

Language socialization is rooted in the notion that the process of acquiring a language is part of a much larger process of becoming a person in society. As originally formulated, the discipline articulates ways in which novices across the life span are socialized into using language and socialized through language into local theories and preferences for acting, feeling, and knowing, in socially recognized and organized practices associated with membership in a social group (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Language socialization research analyzes how and why young children are apprenticed through language into particular childhood identities and activities and how older children and adults learn the communicative skills necessary for occupational and other community identities. Language socialization studies also examine how members of multilingual communities are socialized into using different codes, and how language socialization practices impact language maintenance and language change (Baquedano-Lopez, 2001; Kulick 1992; Schieffelin 1994).

Language socialization has become a fruitful tool in understanding how children may be socialized into mental disorders such as phobias. Lisa Capps and I, for example, examined how children of sufferers of agoraphobia may be socialized into anxiety through family narrative interactions (Capps and Ochs 1995). We found that children are often drawn into collaboratively recounting and reacting to narratives that depict protagonists as helpless in a world spinning out of control. We also suggest that such narrative practices may ignite and sustain fears associated with the panic disorder for adult sufferers.

In language socialization research, social interactions are mined for culturally rooted ways in which veteran and novice participants coordinate modes of communication, actions, bodies, objects, and the built environment to enhance their knowledge and skills. Drawing on the cultural psychological notion that human development is facilitated by participation in socially and culturally organized social interactions, an important unit of analysis in language socialization research is the social *activity* in which more or less experienced persons participate (Leont'ev 1979). Activities such as playing a game, sharing a meal, or planning an event are analyzed for the psychological stances and actions that experts and novices routinely provide or elicit. Such moves shape the direction of activities and apprentice less knowledgeable and less skilled persons into activity competence. In the softball game involving Erin, for example, members of each team and the referee use the following linguistic structures to both configure Erin's actions and mentor her into the rudiments of the game.

Novices become acquainted with activities not only from their own and others' attempts to define what transpires in an activity, but also from how those participating in the activity respond to them. Are the expressed stances, actions, and ideas acknowledged or ignored? Do others display alignment, as when the referee initially supports the judgment that the pitcher's ball hit Erin?

Teacher: Did it hit her?  
Team mates: Yes!  
Teacher: **[That's what I thought.]**

Or do others display nonalignment, as when members of the opposing team disagree with Erin's team mates?

Opp. team: **[No! ( ? )]**  
Catcher: **n-**  
Gary: *((touches his own wrist, indicating where the ball hit Erin))*  
Catcher: **[No it hit the {bat Miss Ruby**

And is the uptake minimal, as when Erin displays attention to Gary's explanation but otherwise offers no facial or vocal feedback? Or do others provide elaborate responses, including not only tokens of attention but also elaborate assessments, descriptions, justifications, explanations, analogies, anecdotes, and the like? For example, the catcher of the opposing team successfully convinces the teacher-referee that the ball hit the bat, not Erin's hand, through an eyewitness demonstration of what transpired:

- Catcher: [Miss Ruby, (.) Miss Ruby  
 [((standing opposite teacher))  
 I saw it hit [her on the bat right here.  
 [((looks down and taps bottom of her  
 face guard))  
 Teacher: ((looks down to where catcher is  
 indicating))  
 Opposing team: It hit her on the bat.  
 Team mates: ( ? )  
 Teacher: OKA:Y. IT'S COUNTED AS A: (.8)  
 stri::ke.

From this perspective, socialization is an interactional achievement, and language socialization researchers are in the business of articulating the architecture of such interactions.

Social interaction is a fascinating platform for discerning the moment-by-moment creation of social life. At the same time, if our goal is to discern how novices become competent members of communities, it is important to situate interaction between more and less knowing participants in past and present cultural ideologies and social structures. Thus, softball players' stances and actions are organized by historically rooted norms and expectations about how to play and negotiate the game.

### Understanding social context

Vital to competent participation in social groups is the ability to understand how people use language and other symbolic tools to construct social situations. In every community, members draw upon communicative forms to signal social information; indeed, one of the important functions of grammar and lexicon is to key interlocutors into what kind of social situation is taking place (Gumperz 1982; Hanks 1989; Silverstein 1993). Four dimensions of the social context are particularly relevant to the socialization of cultural competence: the ability to signal the *actions* one is performing, the psychological *stances*

one is displaying, the social *identities* one puts forward, and the *activities* in which one is engaged. A social *action* is here defined as a socially recognized goal-directed behavior, e.g. responding to a question, asking for clarification, hitting a softball with a bat, catching a softball, running the bases (Leont'ev 1979). Psychological *stances* include both affective and epistemic orientation toward some focus of concern. *Affective stance* includes a person's mood, attitude, feeling, or disposition as well as degrees of emotional intensity (Biber and Finegan 1989; Besnier 1990; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989; Labov 1984; Levy 1984). In the softball game, for example, participants use a variety of lexical and grammatical affect markers to assess Erin's actions:

- "It *did* hit the bat:t.  
 "↑O:::H!  
 "YA::Y! ALRI::GHT!"  
 "Good hit Erin!"

*Epistemic stance* refers to a person's knowledge or belief, including sources of knowledge and degrees of commitment to truth and certainty of propositions (Chafe and Nichols 1986). The softball players and referee used epistemic stance markers, for example, to establish the truth of the claim that the pitcher's ball hit Erin's bat:

- "Miss Ruby, Miss Ruby I *saw* it hit her on the bat right here."  
 "OKA:Y, IT'S COUNTED AS A: (.8) stri::ke ... (Claudia) said it hit the bat:t."  
 "See! She even *said* it (.) almo::st."  
 "I'm tellin' the ↑tru:th."

The contextual dimension of *social identity* comprises a range of social personae, including, for example, social roles, statuses, and relationships, as well as community, institutional, ethnic, socio-economic, gender, and other group identities. In the softball game, Erin is apprenticed into the identities of softball player and team member. At the same time, the way her peers mentor Erin and speak on her behalf construct her as a classmate with certain impairments and special needs.

Finally, *social activity* refers to at least two co-ordinated, situated actions and/or stance displays by one or multiple persons. Typically, these actions and stance displays relate to common or similar topics and goals. As noted earlier, activity is a vital unit of analysis in cultural psychology and language socialization research, because it establishes a social milieu or medium for less and more competent persons to perceive, collaborate with, and potentially be transformed by one

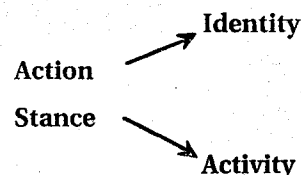


another in culturally meaningful ways. A game of softball, in this sense, offers Erin repeated opportunities to watch, listen, have contact with artifacts (e.g. bat, ball, bases), and enact the game.

As this discussion implies, children and other novices are exposed to dimensions of social context not in isolation but in concert, as they are drawn into the life of the community. The four contextual dimensions of action, stance, identity, and activity are interdependent in that social groups associate particular stances with particular actions, associate these linked stances and acts with particular social identities and activities, and associate particular activities with particular identities (Ochs 1996):

Actions ∪ Stances  
 Actions ∪ Stances ∪ Identities  
 Actions ∪ Stances ∪ Activities  
 Activities ∪ Identities

Moreover, identities and activities are more complex than actions and stances, in the sense that particular social identities and activities culturally entail particular actions and stances. That is, actions and stances are the cultural building blocks of social identities and activities.



Thus, the activity of playing softball culturally entails such actions as pitching, striking, hitting, catching, and adjudicating. That is, such actions contribute to the constitution of the softball game. Carrying out these actions, in turn, helps to instantiate identities such as batter (hitter, strike-outer), catcher, referee, team mate etc., which in turn helps to instantiate being a child in this community.

The building of activities and identities is generative, in the sense that activities and identities themselves build more complex activities and identities. Thus, for example, the activity of one player being up at bat is part of the larger activity of one team being up at bat, which in turn is part of an activity unit called an inning, which is part of the larger activity of playing softball. Activity theorist Yrjö Engeström (1990, 1993) conceptualizes social structures such as medical clinics, courts, professions, workplaces, and schools as activity systems, i.e. a set of

interconnected, situated activities. Thus, we might think of the activity of playing softball as one of many activities that structure the public school as a community institution. In this vein, Erin's competence and participation in the institutional life of the school depends on her understanding and participation in recreational activities such as softball. Similarly, social identities can help build other identities. Erin's identity as a more or less successful softball player helps to instantiate her as a more or less successful student and classmate in this school community.

As noted earlier, children with autism have considerable difficulty relating parts to a whole (Frith 1989). Even high-functioning children with autism stumble when directed to put together puzzle pieces of, for example, a horse or a ball. Similarly, they have problems linking actions and stances to create a larger, coherent narrative (Loveland *et al.* 1990; Solomon 2000; Tager-Flusberg 1995). One might expect, then, that these children would have difficulty discerning the links between actions and stances to identities and the relation of one kind of identity to broader identities. While a full study of how part-whole deficits associated with autism translate in the social realm, our ethnographic recordings indicate that high-functioning children with autism do seem to recognize which identity is expected of them in which circumstance, and that success in these identities is crucial to attainment of other desirable identities. In everyday classroom and playground activities, they are sensitive to the social implications of their own failures to act, think, and feel in expected ways. As the following interaction between 10-year-old Karl and his classroom aide demonstrates, children with autism can at times articulate a part-whole logic of identities that leads them to portray themselves as failures. In the middle of taking a math test, Karl expresses great frustration at not being able to solve the problem on the test, and turns to his aide for help:

Karl: [°Would you help me? I don't know aa-nny-thing  
 [((turns to his aide, whispers))  
 Aide: [((comes over to Karl's seat, squats)) What?

As the aide approaches him, Karl looks at the multiplication table on the wall and sees a possible answer. The aide quickly reproaches him:

Karl: It's thirty-six?  
 Aide: > You're not supposed to be lookin' at that (.)  
 [Look <

At this point, Karl articulates his negative stance toward math and being a "math person":

Karl: [I don't like math  
 (((turning to/away from aide))  
 I am not a math person.  
 .hh I am a robot person  
 not a [math person.

After Karl identifies himself as a "robot person," his aide first expresses surprise then attempts to redefine his identity appropriate to the activity at hand:

Aide: [You are:↑e  
 Karl: Yes:!!  
 Aide: Okay (.) right no:w (.) you are a person doing a  
 test (.) okay?

But Karl resists this imposition of identity and follows it up with a declaration of his failure at "being a kid:"

Karl: He is not a test °person anymore  
 (.)  
 Eight  
 Aide: And you are [not supposed to be looking up on  
 that cha:rt.  
 Karl: [Two  
 I am not good at being a ki- d.  
 Aide: You are good at everything you wanna be.

In this brief exchange, we see instances of how stances and acts help to constitute social activity and identity. The activity of taking a math test, for example, culturally entails that Karl displays certain types of stances and carry out certain acts but not others:

Stances and actions that help realize activity of math test, and identity of test-taker, and math person, and child	Karl is expected to: – be quiet, gaze down at his paper, attempt to solve problems, write answers and otherwise display involvement in the task; Karl can: – elicit some assistance from his aide; Karl cannot: – look at the math problem chart on the wall
---	--

Failure to adhere to these expectations leads Karl to deny or forfeit his identity as a "math person" and to retreat into a nonacademic

identity as "robot person", which he has constructed for himself and which he frequently enacts while at school. Karl perceives that being a "math person" is a necessary condition for the more general identity of "being a kid" like everyone else around him. Notice that the aide tries to contradict his attribution of identity with the admonishing assessment, "You are good at *everything* you *wanna* be." While this evaluation is a form of cultural empowerment, it does not acknowledge Karl's limitations or handle his specific frustrations.

### Language and social context

Where does language fit into this perspective on the construction of and socialization into culturally and situationally organized actions, stances, activities, and identities? Every social group has available to its members a repertoire of linguistic forms. Like a communicative palette, members draw upon this repertoire to portray particular stances, acts, activities, and identities. I have argued, however, that few linguistic forms explicitly and exclusively encode activities or identities. Rather, linguistic forms generally encode psychological stances and actions that are linked to activities and identities:

Linguistic Form → Stance  
Action → Activity  
Identity

For example, linguistic forms that express negative psychological stances are linked to the activity of disagreement, yet these forms index this activity only indirectly because they encode a stance that is culturally associated with disagreements. This does not mean that everyone who engages in disagreements always uses certain negative forms, but rather that if one wants to engage in disagreement, one can do so by using linguistic forms such as "No!" and "not" in English.

The relation between language and the construction of social context can be useful in understanding the emergence of language and cultural competence across the life span. Most children and other novices learn to use and recognize linguistic markers of stance and actions, and learn how to use these stance and action markers to instantiate certain social activities and identities. We can use this framework to discern levels of sociolinguistic competence (Ochs 1993).

First, we can determine whether or not and how a child or other novice *linguistically indexes an action or stance*. Did he use action or stance markers that are part of the group's sociolinguistic repertoire? For example, does Karl use action and stance markers that are recognizable to the speech community? In Karl's case, he does use such forms. In other cases, sociolinguistic incompetence may be due to a lack of

knowledge concerning local conventions for act or stance production. Second, we can examine whether or not and how novices linguistically encode actions and stances that are appropriate to particular activities and identities. For example, are the linguistically encoded actions and stances that Karl expresses appropriate to the identities he is trying to establish and annihilate? Even though his aide disapproves of his social logic, Karl appears adept at linking his inability to solve math problems to his inability to be a "math person" and this problem to his lack of success in "being a kid." To varying degrees of explicitness, Karl displays local understandings and expectations concerning what it means to be a test taker, math person, and child. In other situations, however, Karl and other novices may fail to linguistically signal the activity or social identity in play, not because they lack understanding of how to linguistically mark particular actions and stances but because they lack understanding of how a particular social group associates those acts and stances with particular social identities.

The research framework presented here is useful in understanding cross-cultural similarities and differences in the relation of language to action, stance, activity, and social identity and their implications for second-language socialization. In this perspective, there is considerable overlap across speech communities in how language users signal actions and psychological stances but considerable differences in how communities use actions and stances to realize particular activities and identities (Ochs 1993). For example, actions such as requests, contradictions, affirmations, and summons are marked similarly across languages (Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984; Gordon and Lakoff 1971; Grimshaw 1990). Similarly, psychological stances of certainty and uncertainty, emotional intensity, and politeness have corresponding forms cross-linguistically (Brown and Levinson 1987; Labov 1984; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989; Besnier 1990). These commonalities assist novice second-language acquirers who venture across geographical and social borders. Alternatively, those who enter new speech communities face cultural differences in the *kinds* of actions and stances considered appropriate in carrying out a particular activity or assuming a particular identity, and in the *frequency, elaboration, and sequential positioning* of actions and stances expected in carrying out a particular activity or assuming a particular identity. These cross-cultural differences often thwart the language socialization of novices trying to access second cultures. Communication breaks down because the action or stance is not expected by one or another interlocutor, or went on too long or too briefly or at the wrong time and place in the particular activity underway, or for the particular social role, status, or relationship attempted. Because *some* but not all relations between

language and social context are familiar and expected, novice and veteran language users may be disturbed at how the other is communicating.

### Coda

In developmental studies, the notion of culture has become quite fashionable. Witness the formation of the subfield of cultural psychology and a general awareness that thinking and feeling are situated in a culturally constituted life space. At the same time, the marriage between culture and developmental research is uncertain. While culture is considered important to fathom, it is obscure and difficult to analyze. You can't see it; you can't count it in any obvious way. Culture, like God, seems unknowable. Central to understanding the relation of language and culture in human development is long-term, rigorous ethnographic observation, recording, description, and analysis of displayed preferences and expectations for encoding and displaying psychological stances and social actions, and their historical and ontogenetic enduring and changing relation to social identities and activities. Without this ethnographic knowledge, it is difficult to grasp the realms of social meaning that novice and veteran members of communities are building when they interact, and the sociocultural fissure points that land them in tangled webs of miscommunication.

### Notes

1. As will be discussed in later sections of this chapter, the term "psychological stance" here refers to a person's feelings or sense of certainty toward an object of concern. "Positive/negative alignment" describes a person's stance as affiliating or disaffiliating with the stance taken by another person (Ochs 1993; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989).

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