

Language socialization ‘before speech’: infant’s participation in socio-cultural meaning making processes

Carolyn Demuth

Aalborg University, Denmark

Within the Language socialization approach it has long been pointed out that children through their participation in ‘language activities’ children not merely learn to talk but develop a cultural understanding of social reality and to engage in culturally appropriate forms of social interaction (Ochs 1988). Similarly, ethnomethodologically informed research in child-CA is interested in the study of how children learn to participate in meaningful social interaction (Forrester, 2012). ‘Language activities’ understood as locally organized meaning-making processes comprise, however, also communicative modalities beyond speech (Ochs, Solomon, & Sterponi, 2005; Goodwin, 2000; Gratier, 2003). Facial expression, gaze direction, back channel response, and pointing are effectively used in interactions with young infants long before they start speaking. Rhythmic aspects such as turn-taking and musical features also contribute to a sense of shared experience (“primary intersubjectivity”; Trevarthen, 1998). Language socialization hence can be said to actually start ‘before speech’ (Takada, 2011). Caregivers frame the child’s experiences within a culturally structured interpretation of the interaction and position the child in ways that deem appropriate within these cultural frameworks. Mother and infant tacitly negotiate ‘contracts’ (Hundeide, 1993) of what is acceptable and permissible. Through repeated exposure to these cultural frameworks children not only gradually learn to participate in meaningful social interaction (Forrester, 2012) but also acquire a cultural understanding of self and self in relation to others. In a previous study with data from 1995, we could show for instance, that German middle class mothers position infants as quasi-equal partners with whom they negotiate individual preferences of both interactional partners, as narrators of their personal experience, and as being expected to comply with a specific time schedule of the family that requires a capability for self-regulation in distress (Demuth, 2008).

The present study aims at contributing to a better understanding of how already pre-verbal infants learn to participate in culturally organized social interaction by drawing

on a newer sample of participants thus taking into account socio-cultural change over time. It investigates free play interactions of German middle class mothers with their 3 months old infants in 2011. The data corpus comprises video-recordings of 20 mother-infant interactions at the homes of the families that were transcribed using the Jefferson Transcription notation. It applies a CA informed discursive psychology approach (Potter 2012) to the sequential analysis of these interactions. Special focus is given on how 'contracts' are negotiated between caregiver and infant that point to broader cultural frameworks and how social order is co-constructed in the ongoing interactions. It aims at identifying the situated discursive sociocultural practices used by mothers in these interactions to produce nuanced versions of the world. Preliminary findings will be presented and discussed in light of possible developmental outcomes.