

## Parental Speech and Language Acquisition: An Anthropological Perspective

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**Abstract:** None available.

**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: The contribution of anthropology to the study of pre- and perinatal development will largely derive from the concept of culture, which is defined as the systems of meaning that members of society attribute to each other in their behavior. The concept is useful in the study of child language acquisition, since it necessitates a description of the ways that caretakers conceptualize their interactions with prelinguistic and language-acquiring children. Facilitative roles of parental speech are foregrounded, and meaning systems are made visible rather than overlooked or assumed. Illustrations are provided from English, Spanish, Luo, Samoan, and Quiche Mayan. The editorial to this issue mentions the contributions that anthropology has made to pre-natal and peri-natal studies (see also Laughlin 1989). Within that framework, the present article is focused on what anthropology might contribute to the study of children's first language acquisition. Anthropology, by virtue of its concept of culture and its descriptive, observational research methods, is well placed to address specific issues in child language acquisition research. One major issue in child language research has been the role of speech addressed to young children in aiding or promoting language acquisition. The argument will be presented below that the issue has been clouded by lack of information about what parents, or their socialization surrogates, actually do when they direct speech to infants or young children. The absence of a strong data base pertaining to the contextual support and the nature of parent-child interaction severely limits our ability to understand how linguistic features of interaction may promote child language acquisition.

**THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS** Culture The concept of culture has been central to anthropological inquiry since the nineteenth century, when it was developed more or less concurrently with academic anthropology. The individual largely responsible for the emergence of both the concept and the discipline was Edward B. Tylor, who provided a definition of culture that has informed anthropology for more than a century: "Culture ... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 1). Tylor's seminal definition of culture has been the starting point for many of the reconceptualizations the concept has undergone in the anthropological community, including the way that culture tends to be viewed in contemporary anthropology. Among the features proposed by Tylor were: (1) culture consists of knowledge; (2) culture is acquired; and (3) acquisition occurs within a societal framework. The same features can be seen in the definition that prevails in anthropology today, supplied by Ward Goodenough: "A society's culture consists of whatever it is that one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves (Goodenough, 1957, p. 167). In other words, culture is an information system that allows members of a society to interpret each other's behavior in meaningful ways. Behavior is viewed in broad terms. Even behavior that has clear biological bases, such as emotions, fall within the scope of culture, since societies have culturally defined frameworks within which they interpret emotionally-derived behavior as meaningful (see Lutz, 1988).

**Methodological concerns** In research that involves anthropology and other disciplines, two points about the importance of the culture concept should be highlighted. One is that a focus on culture requires a methodological framework in which the notion or concept of an "individual" is contextualized. The focus is on a framework within which individuals can relate to each other. Moreover, the "relation" is in terms of meaning, which is shared and which is a constitutive part of any event in which behavior occurs. To state that point otherwise, a notion of a "natural" individual—an acultural one—requires that meaning not be assigned to his

behavior. Although such a concept may be useful, it is difficult not to smuggle meaning into accounts of behavior. If meaning is ascribed to behavior, linguistic or otherwise, then a cultural framework must be present for adequate description of the behavior. Otherwise, culture can remain invisible, rendering description incomplete and even misinformative. A second, methodological point is that since Tylor's time, anthropology has tended to be broad, even holistic, in research perspective. Anthropological inquiry tends to be exploratory and descriptive, and the cornerstone of inquiry has been to make culture visible, to explicate behavior in terms of patterns of meaning within a broader cultural framework. In anthropological research, culture is typically a critical variable. That methodological view is often contrasted to the more formal, experimental methods of psychology in which, for example, an "individual" may be defined as acultural. While the contrast has some merit and utility, it can easily be overdone. A better way, perhaps, to characterize the methodological differences is that descriptive research places priority on validity over reliability and on internal as opposed to external validity. Anthropological inquiry tends to be preoperational and thus preparatory to hypothesis testing, although the caveat must be made that there are notable exceptions (see Thomas, 1986; Bernard, 1988). The anthropological emphasis on making culture visible lends itself to qualitative, conceptualizing research, in effect of producing a richer contextualization of behavior. An example of making culture visible should be instructive. The cross-cultural studies on socialization undertaken by the Whiting team in the 1960s (B. Whiting, 1963; B. Whiting and J. Whiting, 1975) led to several significant findings (see Laughlin's 1989 survey). One major finding was that one particular type of caretaking stood out as unusual among all of the other types surveyed. That type is characteristic of the United States. Its central, defining feature is that mothers tend to be in prolonged, close proximity with offspring in residences which isolate them from other individuals. That residential pattern, one nuclear family per housing unit, has fostered an isolation of one adult and offspring, clearly the exception in comparison with other societies where child caretaking responsibility is shared among several co-resident individuals. The point is that the pattern is not "natural" to human socialization, which is easily overlooked in the absence of cross-cultural research. The apparent "naturalness" of the isolated mother-child pattern of socialization to members of U.S. society is a cultural folk-model, and in fact a strong one. The current, hotly contested debates about two-track career women and about daycare as a substitute for mother-specific socialization are derived from that folk-model. That is not to say that the issues are not real, but that the socialization pattern is culturally motivated, and the set of issues and problems cannot be fully understood unless that fact is recognized. The Developmental Niche Numerous efforts have been made to develop a model that would integrate a cultural approach to human behavior with a more psychological, "individualized" approach (Broffenbrenner, 1979; Fishbein, 1976; Kessel and Siegel, 1983; also see Monroe, Monroe, and Whiting, 1981). One recent and promising effort in the area of human development is the idea of a developmental niche (Super and Harkness, 1986). Recognizing that research on child development has tended to be either on the socializer, who exemplifies cultural behavior, or on a decontextualized, acultural child, who reveals universal developmental processes, they propose an integrative perspective that includes the social settings of behavioral development, the customs of child care and rearing, and the psychology of the caretakers. Although each of the three components is related in different ways to the larger societal environment, they are interrelated and form a system. The important point is that culture is not hidden in that framework, and moreover, it is a vital part of the environmental input from which a child abstracts the knowledge which becomes part of his or her own cultural understanding. One of the strong points of the developmental niche concept is that it accommodates change. The three sub-components must remain more or less in harmony, but each component can vary according to its own input. A child's physical maturation, for example, may lead to new or altered and culturally based expectations as to what the child's behavior should become, placing new pressures and priorities on them by their parents (see Blount, 1977). The interrelationship of the subcomponents and the allowance for change in the system make the developmental niche a valuable framework for contextualizing research that may focus on only one or two components of the system but can, at least in theoretical terms, be related to the other

components. PARENTAL SPEECH Preliminary Problems in Research The developmental niche model has excellent potential to advance research on the role of parental speech in child development. The model can serve as a systematic framework to guide research, and it also can serve as a target against which research to date can be evaluated. In each instance, the model can provide direction for the description of linguistic features of parental speech and for the use of the parental speech register. As a target to aid assessment of work to date, the model can make explicit a number of obstacles and oversights that have arisen in this field of inquiry, as discussed below. Numerous observers have noted that children's caretakers in many societies have a special speech register for addressing language-acquiring children, and a host of explanations have been proposed to account both for the phenomenon and for the contribution that it might make to language acquisition. Although our understanding of that speech register has been advanced by those observations, the research suffers in many instances by being "monotonic" (Pye 1988), i.e., based on only one language or one aspect of acquisition. For example, considerable discussion has been devoted in recent years to the role of "motherese" in children's first language acquisition (Wanner and Gleitman, 1982; Gleitman, Newport, and Gleitman, 1984), but the work has focused on simple linear relationships between the mean length of maternal utterances and the syntactic gain by children. The usefulness of that measure should be seriously questioned, since it constitutes a unidimensional, decontextualized approach to understanding parental speech (see Bohannon and Warren-Leubecker, 1988). While correlations between syntactic aspects of parental and child speech can be sought, failure to find significant and positive correlations cannot serve as a basis to reject any or all contributions of parental speech to child language acquisition. Further discussion on that point is given below. Other efforts to clarify the contributory role of parental speech have frequently been on logical grounds, the thrust of the argument being that language acquisition cannot be fully explained by speech input and thus speech input must play only a minor, insignificant role, if any (Gleitman and Wanner, 1982). An argument has even been made that parental speech input to a language acquiring child could have a retarding effect on acquisition by limiting the range of grammatical constructions available to a child for his or her processing (Wexler, 1982). However logical that type of argument might appear, it is based on an unwarranted assumption that the availability of all of the grammatical forms of a language, tout ensemble, better facilitates language acquisition than grammatical forms adjusted, through time, to a child's level of comprehension and production. That assumption also allows for the conflation of all speech registers in the acquisition process, thereby removing social and contextual features from the acquisition process by fiat. Although a child obviously must learn his or her own language, it seems rather extreme to project that the learning is accomplished by a miniature automaton parsing and reassembling linguistic structure alone. Understanding of the language socialization functions of parental speech has been impeded not only by premature conjectures about its marginal importance, but also by the piecemeal nature of research and a corresponding lack of standardization of concepts and measurements. A principal problem is the general lack of calibration of parental speech characteristics with the developmental phase or stage of children who receive the speech. These two general problems-premature judgment and lack of standardization-are in part consequences of the same phenomenon, a focus on the early emergence of grammar as the most important aspect of child language development and a view of parental speech that tended to restrict it to a single function, the enhancement of acquisition of grammar. "Motherese" thus has been defined as containing relatively short, syntactically simple utterances (usually a single clause) and assessed by the correlation, if any, between "motherese" and child syntax (Gleitman, Newport, and Gleitman, 1984). Critics of the "motherese" hypothesis, i.e., those who reject any role for it and thus support an innatist position, point to the absence of correlations as evidence for its marginality (Gleitman and Wanner, 1982). That view, however, is based on an exceptionally narrow, syntax-driven, conceptualization of parental speech and a small slice of the developmental period of language acquisition. In other words, it is unnecessarily restrictive and narrow to equate parental speech with "motherese" and to assess its supportive role in language acquisition only by the criterion of a direct, causal link between the syntax

of the mother's speech and the child's speech. A broader conceptualization of parental speech seems advisable. Characterizations of Parental Speech One of the earliest attempts to characterize parental speech broadly, but principally in linguistic terms, was Charles Ferguson's article on "baby talk" in six languages (1964). He identified several recurrent characteristics across cultures in the "baby talk" code. These included simple canonical structure of word-form, CVC and CVCV (consonant-vowel-consonant, etc.); basic consonants (stops and nasals) and common vowels; reduction of phonological clusters; phonological reduplication; absence of inflectional affixes (except for a diminutive suffix specific to the code); and lexical domains centered on kin terms, body parts, and animals. The descriptive catalogue was devoted principally to the segmental code, although a preference for high pitch and certain intonational contours, i.e., suprasegmentals, were mentioned. Special interactional processes such as imitation (mimicking) and repetition were not identified as part of the behavior. Ferguson also was not concerned with the age or developmental stage of the children who were the recipients of the special code, other than the global period of language acquisition. He left open the question of when given features might be used according to degree of acquisition. Despite its limitations, Ferguson's work provided the first steps in a general characterization of the "baby talk," or parental speech, register. Two logical steps could be taken to continue the work: (1) the identification of further characteristics of the code; and (b) descriptions of usage patterns through examination of parent-child interaction. Since Ferguson's initial work, considerable advances have been made in further identification of characteristics of the code. Ferguson expanded his comparative base and extended the list of segmental characteristics of the register (1977; 1978), and descriptive accounts of parental speech registers in specific societies have been produced, e.g., Berber (Bynon, 1977), Latvian (Ruke-Dravina, 1977) and Quiche Mayan (Pye, 1986). The characteristics were also extended to include suprasegmentals. Blount (1972a) discovered in a study of language socialization of Luo children in Kenya that the most distinctive characteristics of parental speech were suprasegmentals, especially intonation and intensity of speech. Garnica (1977) extended the list of prosodic and paralinguistic features to include fundamental frequency and duration of syllable nuclei in each utterance, sentence final pitch terminals, whispering, and primary stress. Garnica went on to demonstrate that the patterns of prosody (pitch, frequency, and duration) were different in speech to two-year-olds and five-year-olds. Prosodic aspects of parental speech have, understandably, continued to be of interest. Penman, Cross, Milgrom-Friedman and Meares (1983), for example, found that prosodic features of maternal speech varied across age of infant and across mode of speech (informational versus affective). The most extensive expansion of parental speech characteristics, in terms of number of identifiable features was in a study of English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents (Blount and Padgug, 1977; Blount, 1984). The study, exploratory in nature, identified prosodic, paralinguistic, and interactional features in parental speech to infants approximately nine to 22 months of age. A complete list of the features is given in Table 1. A description of the features is given in Blount (1984) and need not be repeated here. The points to emphasize here are that a sizeable number of special features are present in parental speech and that interactional, language-usage features such as parental repetition of child utterances and prompters to talk are included. In one sense, all of the features are interactional, since they occur in parent-child face-to-face interaction, but some features constitute a part of the actual interactional structure beyond the characteristics of the vocalizations themselves. In other words, the parental speech features include not only how the speech is articulated but how the vocalizations "fit into" and function in the social interaction.

**Table 1**  
**Categories and features of parental speech**

I. Prosody	Tenseness
A. Volume: air	Stress
Breathiness	Nasality
Breath held	Rounding
B. Volume: sound	B. Segmental (phonetic)
Whisper	Alteration
Lowered volume	Substitution
Raised volume	III. Lexical-Grammatical
C. Pitch/Intonation	A. Lexical
Falsetto	Special lexical items
High pitch	Nonsense forms
Low pitch	B. Grammar
Exaggerated intonation	Grammatical deviations
Singing	IV. Interactionals
D. Rate of speech	A. Structural
Slow rate	Attentionals
Fast rate	Prompters
E. Duration	Tag questions
Lengthened vowel	Repetition
Lengthened consonant	B. Modeling
Shortened vowel	Imitation
Shortened consonant	Turn substitution
II. Paralinguistics	Personal pronoun substitution
A. Non-segmental	Interpretation
Creaky voice	

Several of the results of the English and Spanish study are relevant to the discussion here. Comparison in frequency of feature usage across families, holding child age and language group constant, showed remarkable consistency. Exaggerated intonation and repetition (multiple expressions of an utterance by a parent), were the most common features, suggesting that they play a prominent role in parental speech. Language and culture differences also were observed. The English-speaking parents relied comparatively more on prosodic features-pitch, intonation, duration, breath, and tension-whereas Spanish-speaking parents relied comparatively more on interactional features-pronominals and attentionals (utterances designed to attract a child's attention)-and on different prosodic features-tempo and volume. Constraints on Parental Speech by Age of Child The English and Spanish study also indicated that the most frequently used features in each language were not distributed differently across the age ranges of the children. Although some features were more likely to be used in speech to older children (post 18 months), they were relatively infrequent in occurrence in comparison to intonational and pitch features. In each language group, the features that showed increased usage to the older children were specifically interaction related, repetition and interpretation in English and fast rate and interpretation in Spanish (interpretation means that a parental utterance assigns lexical meaning to a child's utterance, even if the latter has no clear reference or sense). Only in the period beyond 18 months was there an apparent, concentrated effort by parents to make the interaction meaningful in a linguistic sense and to resemble verbal interaction. That suggests that the parental concerns were not principally with language development per se but were to foster and promote interaction in a proto-conversational form. Their extensive use of some two dozen special features in their speech appeared to be designed to attract a child's attention, to focus the attention, and use the attention to exchange vocalizations. The use of three or more features per parental utterance probably is a reflection of the elusiveness and fleeting nature of a child's attention. Overall, as exploratory as it was, the anthropological study of English and Spanish parental speech suggests that the structural demands of capturing and engaging a child's attention during the latter part of the first and much of the second year of life promote the use of special, attention-getting features in the speech of parents. In terms of the developmental niche, the

defining or limiting characteristic is the tenuous attentional and interactional capacity of the child, reflected in the parental "psychology" of special speech accommodation, but not devoid of cultural preferences that shape the frequency and the form of some of the special features. Culture is thus made visible within a framework in which its content can be seen as meaningful. The English and Spanish study made culture visible in another way by illustrating that the common cultural definition of parental speech as built of special lexical items, such as "choo-choo" for train, and of simplified grammatical constructions, such as "baby like milk?", is erroneous. Those types of forms occurred only infrequently, as did all register-specific lexical and grammatical features. Any study that took for granted, on the basis of a cultural folk-model, that those types of features characterize parental speech would be very incomplete and misleading, no matter how careful the measurement of those features. The emergence of meaning-related features in parental speech in English and Spanish at approximately 18 months set against a continuation of attention-related features from nine to 22 months indicates that parental speech is multi-functional. Moreover, the different functions may be related to the communicative capacity of the child. At 18 months, the children were more adept at the use of lexical items and had some concept of labelling and meaning. Meaning-related features began to appear in parental speech at that time. Other studies suggest a transition in parental speech of a different kind when infants first begin to use lexical items. A number of researchers have noted that the semantic and syntactic aspects of parental speech are more complex and less like "baby talk" prior to the onset of a child's first words (Brown, 1977; Cross and Morris, 1980; Phillips, 1973). The clear implication is that when a child begins to encode lexical meaning, the parental speech begins to adjust to that capacity. Addressing the issue of age-related speech input directly and using data from Australian English, Robyn Penman et al. (1983) suggest that maternal speech in a child's prelinguistic stages has monologic and dialogic components, whereas once language begins to emerge, a dialogic component comes to the fore. The earlier, monologic component appeared to be more a commentary on the infant's behavior than speech addressed to him or her, a phenomenon also observed among the Luo (Blount, 1971). The Luo also report that efforts to engage infants in vocal communication prior to the onset of words is culturally prohibited. Another type of transition was suggested by Roger Brown (1977), who proposed that the maternal speech register is shaped by two relatively independent interpersonal functions, the affective and the communicative. The results of more recent research indicate that considerably more is involved and that the different functions are reflective of infant interactive capacity. An affective component may be present throughout the first two years or so of a child's life, although it is likely to be concentrated in the first 4-6 months, when attracting and holding a child's attention is a major undertaking (see Stern, Spieker, Barnett, and MacKain, 1983). Prosodic and paralinguistic features are likely to predominate then, embedded in concentrated nonverbal cues such as vision (see Tronick, Als, and Adamson, 1979). In terms of meaning-related vocal behavior, the first nine months or so is likely to contain monologic parental speech, describing infant activities but not for proto-conversational exchange. The prelinguistic phase of a child's development is thus likely to contain not one but two types of parental speech, monologic descriptions and heavily affective, attention-getting and attention-sustaining dialogic speech. As lexical meaning begins to emerge in an infant's vocal behavior, the monologic forms become less frequent, affective attentionals begin to predominate, and as vocabulary grows, meaning-related features appear more frequently in parental speech (see also Blount and Kempton, 1976, for a similar account). The multifunctional model of parental speech described above is based on the notion of accommodation. An individual with developed, complex communicative skills modifies those in order to interact with an individual who has limited skills, severely limited in terms of referentiality, meaning, and sense (Blount, 1977; Bohannon and Warren-Leubecker, 1988). Affect is enhanced and reinforced throughout, serving as the "topic" in early stages, as a means of focusing on the topic at later stages (Tomasello, 1988), and sustaining verbal interaction as meaning becomes more and more central to the interaction. Universality of Parental Speech? Since accommodation to the capacity of the child constitutes the basis of the parental speech model, and since infants appear to follow a relatively pre-set developmental model (Stern et al., 1983), it would be tempting to conclude

that the model is universal. It is certainly widespread. Ferguson (1977, 1978) compared baby talk in 15 societies, representing language families as diverse as Siberian, Semitic, Yuman, and Dravidian. The list today could be considerably expanded, to the extent that universality might seem plausible. Universality, however, is a strong claim, and preliminary questions should be asked. Are there societies in which investigations have failed to detect parental speech? In those societies which have parental speech, are there common forms and functions, or is there a high degree of variability that tend to render them culturally specific? To the author's knowledge, there are no reports of societies totally devoid of parental speech. One society, Samoa, is reported to have almost no forms (Ochs, 1982). However, in that study, the youngest child observed was 19 months old, at the beginning of a 12 month study. What occurs prior to 19 months is not clear. Ochs reported that infants and caregivers have considerable physical and social contact, but that the infants' behavior is not treated as social acts and that they are not engaged in communicative-like interactions, as widely reported for British and American infants. The text is not explicit, however, as to whether Ochs refers to infants pre-19-months of age or whether she refers to those in her sample at post-19-months of age. If it is the former, then no data base is reported, and if the latter, several interesting questions are raised. One question is what happens during the prelinguistic phase, especially when contact between a Samoan mother and her infant is the most extensive. Are there prosodic, affective parental utterances? All that can be said here is that there is no evidence for Samoan to serve as a counter-example. A second question is what characterizes the parental speech to children who are already into lexical and early grammatical acquisition? Ochs' answer to that question is clear. Samoans "... do not use baby talk lexicon, special morphological modifications, simpler syntactic constructions . . . [not do they]. . . expand children's utterances" (1982, p. 101). Moreover, only a minimum of cooperative utterance-building is reported between child and caregiver. Ochs interprets the general absence of interactional and language-supportive caregiver behavior as due to the cultural definition accorded to Samoan children, essentially a low-status position within a highly statusconscious society. Ochs' main point is consistent with and supportive of one of the major themes of the current paper, namely that how parents interact with children is constrained in part by cultural definitions. Samoans represent a society in which the cultural constraints are especially strong once a child has the ability to communicate verbally. Speech to a child must be assessed in relation to the culturally defined status of the child. To expand that point even further, Samoan socialization behavior can profitably be viewed in terms of the developmental niche concept. Caretaker psychology, cultural definitions, and social settings interrelate during the post-19-month development of children to socialize them, language-wise, toward Samoan social organization. A question can still be raised as to what communicative support Samoans provide for young children. Although Samoan caregivers may minimize the overt language support given to children in language acquisition, some accommodation for the lesser capacity of children does appear to occur. Comparative analysis of parental speech to Samoan, Luo, and American children at the age of two and one-half years indicated a skewing of wh- questions toward the semantically simpler "what" and "who" forms as opposed to the more complex "when" and "why" forms (Blount, 1972b). Consistent, however, with Ochs' later study, analysis of the use of parental yes/no questions and of the distribution of imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives in parental speech indicated that in Samoan and Luo, the children were not defined and viewed as social equals to adults. They were addressed with more imperatives than the American children and with almost no yes/no questions (which asks for an opinion or observation and thus implies a more equal status of the interlocutors). In one sense, the form of Samoan and Luo parental speech behavior could also be viewed as accommodative, since it was selected to be consistent with and thus to model the appropriate language interaction with children, appropriate according to cultural expectations. In other words, the absence of salient linguistic markers in Samoan parental speech does not mean that no accommodation is made to the child's linguistic interactive capacity. To the contrary, the speech appears, in fact, to be tailored to the cultural definition of the child and thus consistent with the broader cultural parameters. The research on Samoan indicates that parental speech may be patterned in subtle ways according to cultural definitions of personhood

and status. Parental speech may thus have virtually no register-specific prosodic, paralinguistic, or interactional forms similar to those in Table 1, with the caveat that the children are likely to be beyond the prelinguistic stage where such features would be more likely to be interactively effective. The importance of culture in the selection of linguistic features that constitute a parental speech register can be seen in another study on a non-Western language. Clifton Pye (1986) evaluated Quiche Mayan parental speech against the 17 register features identified in Ferguson (1978). He found that the Quiche speech contained only five of the 17 features: repetition, baby-talk forms for qualities, compound verbs, diminutives, and special sounds (all imitative of child speech). Pye also discovered forms in Quiche that were not included in Ferguson's inventory: whispering, initial syllable deletion, baby-talk forms for verbs, a register-specific verbal suffix, a more fixed word order with relatively fewer overt noun phrases, more imperatives, and a special interpretive routine. Pye concluded that like other societies, Quiche has a special register for talking with children and that the register is largely culturally defined. The choice of features to characterize parental speech is due to what the Quiche Mayan deem appropriate, constrained by the structure of the adult language. Addressing the functionalist explanation of "motherese"-that the input is simplified and enhances acquisition-Pye points out that the Quiche parental speech register does not constitute simplification. In fact, some features make the register more complex, e.g., special sounds and a special verbal suffix, and Pye thus rejects the idea that motherese is designed as a language-teaching device. He sees the origin of the register in the cultural concepts about children and in the culturally defined ways that children and speech associated with them fit into a larger societal organizational and behavioral framework. The conclusions reached in the Quiche Mayan study were similar to those of the Samoan studies in that speech was culturally defined and that language acquisition did not appear to be a function of the speech. The youngest age of the children in the samples was also similar, 22 months in Quiche and 19 months in Samoan. Unlike Samoan, however, which was viewed by Ochs as devoid of a parental speech register, Quiche clearly had one, even though Pye did not view it as language-acquisition supportive. A problem, however, arises here. Why do the features occur in speech to children well into the one-word stage of development if they are not supportive of acquisition? Do they mark affect, as is the case in English and Spanish? Are they merely attention-getting devices? No information is available to answer those questions, but perhaps the Quiche parental speech is marked with parental speech features merely as socially appropriate forms independent of questions of comprehension and acquisition. The latter is the explanation accepted by Pye. Even in cases, however, where didactic or comprehension issues are not explicit, to rule out any instructional role seems premature. When children become aware that speech is directed to them and they attend to the speech, no clear basis exists for rejecting all roles that the speech might have in promoting understanding and acquisition. In other words, if there are interaction patterns that are routinely marked with special features of speech and a child is beginning to process lexical meaning, then the special features may at least have a role as attentionals in behavioral exchanges that promote language exchange and thus the acquisition of meaning. A second consideration emerges in the Quiche study. What are the characteristics of parental speech in the prelinguistic stage of development? Pye indicated that Quiche mothers wait until their infants begin to use words before they begin to converse with them and that they lack any notion of talking with their infants to stimulate linguistic development. The Luo, however, also have the same ideas, including a strong cultural prohibition against conversing with a prelinguistic infant, but that does not prevent them from using a parental speech register to "address" infants. Do the Quiche Mayans (and the Samoans) report that they do not converse with their infants but in actual fact "speak" to them in a parental speech register laden with prosodic and paralinguistic features? English-speaking and Spanish-speaking mothers also will deny, sometimes vigorously, that they converse with their infants, but observations of their behavior will show that they almost always use highly stylized speech to attract the attention of their infants and engage in affect-laden proto-conversational exchanges. Quiche and Samoan may be different in that regard, but we cannot draw that conclusion from the evidence currently available.

SUMMARY: CULTURE AND FUNCTIONS OF PARENTAL SPEECH What functional role or roles in language



acquisition does parental speech in fact play, if any? What has been suggested here is that parental speech may play a role in that it creates the behavioral framework and context out of which language acquisition emerges. A distinction probably should be made between parental speech to prelinguistic infants and to those who have embarked on the acquisition of lexical meaning. In the first instance, parental speech registers are clearly part of the attention-getting and attention-sustaining processes which underlie the emergent patterns of social interaction in which language will later play a role. Although societies may differ in the extent to which parents thus engage their infants, it is difficult to imagine, given the vocal and interactive capacities that prelinguistic infants manifest and the careful attention that they demand, that caretakers do not engage in some vocal exchanges with them. The chapter on that set of questions and issues is certainly not closed. In the second instance, parental speech to infants who have embarked on vocabulary-acquisition, the evidence is clear that speech plays a role. Parents do call infants' attention, repeatedly, to the association, through modeling, of specific vocalizations and exemplars of the classes named by the vocalization (Ninio and Bruner, 1978; Bohannon and Hirsh-Park, 1984; Hoff-Ginsburg and Shatz, 1987). The suggestion is also presented here that parental speech supports acquisition through creation of contexts culturally appropriate for children's behavior. Children are provided the context in which to learn what meaning is associated with specific vocalization types (see Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986, for case studies of prompting routines in that regard). Not only lexical meaning but socially appropriate forms of talk are thus made available to children for learning. Lastly, the suggestion has been made that the rejection of parental speech as instrumental in the acquisition of grammar is premature. As noted, that issue has been central in discussions about what "motherese" is and whether it is language-acquisition related. That issue has been heavily clouded by lack of clarity about what aspects of "motherese" may be relevant, what developmental age or age-range is involved, in effect by a general absence of any clear conceptualization as to what is appropriate to measure and what calibration should be used. The issue about what should be measured depends, obviously, on what it is that is considered to be acquired. A child who has acquired concepts of plurality and past tense ultimately must learn for himself or herself how to encode those into the structure of the language, and it is clear that parents in no society provide explicit instructions in training sessions as to how that is to be accomplished. The observation that children must learn the encoding for themselves, and even that part of that "learning" may be based in some bioprogram, does not mean that children do not use environmental information, including parental speech, to arrive at the proper formulation of rules for encoding. Much of the problem seems to reside in a strict separation of rules to generate linguistic form from any principled contextual support for the discovery that the rules, however "learned," are expressed in a particular way. The important questions are what is the information that a child needs to make the discoveries necessary for the expression, say, of English plurals, and where does the child get that information. The place to begin to look is not merely at plurals in the adult language but at the routines in which parents and children participate and in which concepts such as plurality become salient and meaningful. The routines involve cultural definitions of what is possible and appropriate, and that type of information, given our present state of knowledge, must involve descriptive, exploratory studies that are sensitive to the importance of culture. Anthropological research is relevant and has contributions to make in those regards.

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