

***Pragmatic Development*** by Anato Ninio and Catherine E. Snow.  
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Many language rules that children learn from early childhood are inseparable from social conventions. Even in the first year of life, a baby learns the rules of turn-taking through interactions with his or her mother: The mother says something, then the baby vocalizes, then the mother speaks again, and again the baby vocalizes. Over the years the child gradually learns a variety of conversational skills, such as opening and shifting topics, holding the floor, distributing turns of talk. As its title suggests, Anato Ninio and Catherine Snow's new book focuses on such pragmatic development.

Four scenarios—pragmatic failures and successes in everyday situations—open Chapter 1, in which Ninio and Snow outline the goals and topics of the book and define the domain of pragmatic development. The authors emphasize the importance of studying how children develop communicative abilities which enable them to cope with particular situations and perform social-communicative acts effectively. However, as the distinction between psychology and linguistics is not always clear, the boundaries between developmental pragmatics and other domains, such as various types of cognitive and social skills, are incapable of precise definition. In fact, as children's capability increases, enabling them to generate and integrate a variety of linguistic components—syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and lexical—these components are further connected with children's growing social-cognitive competence. The authors' conceptualization of pragmatic development, then, is predicated upon their empiricist, interactionist paradigm in which individuals and society construct one another through social interaction, and children are not passive beneficiaries of their environments but active agents in their own socialization throughout life.

Ninio and Snow's empiricist view presents a nice contrast to the nativists' conception that human beings are genetically endowed with the capacity to create sentences. Nativists would argue, for example, that input is of negligible importance for first language acquisition, pointing out that children in Japan learn to speak Japanese, whereas children in the United States learn to speak English even though the environmental input is minimal—and often agrammatical. Ninio and Snow, on the other hand, bring up a characteristic feature of Japanese conversational discourse called back-channels, and contend that nativists' argument is too simplistic and that instead, language is shaped by culture-specific experiences and beliefs. According to the authors, the Japanese listener's frequent use of back-

channels is supportive behavior, reflecting Japanese belief that the receiver is responsible for making sense out of the sender's message. In North America, in contrast, the sender is believed to be responsible for producing a coherent, clear, and intelligible message.

The implication of the above contrast, according to Ninio and Snow, is that through the process of socialization, parents transmit to their young children not only language-specific representational forms and rules but also culturally preferred interaction styles. In framing the volume, the authors draw on a central tenet of Cultural Psychology, namely the "constructivist" conception of meaning, which stipulates that social interactions are culturally constrained. To draw an example from politeness, imagine a situation in which you ask a person living on the same street for a ride home. It goes without saying that you make a request differently, depending on a variety of factors such as age, sex, social hierarchy, personal relationships, and the like. The expression of communicative intents, however, might also differ cross-culturally. In some cultures using indirect requests might be a societal norm, such as "I was wondering if you would be able to give me a ride on your way home," whereas in other cultures such indirect communicative strategies are simply dismissed. This volume examines how children acquire such culturally distinct communicative strategies in the process of language development.

The chapters of this volume are logically divided and well organized. Preparing readers for the discussion of later chapters, Chapter 2 provides a valuable and richly illustrated description of the Ninio and Wheeler taxonomy and coding scheme, along with other coding systems derived from it. An abundance of speech act categories suggests the complexity of communicative acts that the child is expected to acquire and control in interpersonal communication in years to come. The main body of the book, Chapters 3-6, presents a detailed discussion of pragmatic development, generally in chronological order. Chapter 3 concerns the prelinguistic period. Chapter 4 addresses the first words children use (although the authors caution that, due to the general limitation of children's speech, the social functions are more salient than pragmatic functions at least initially). Chapter 5 maps the later development of the speech act system. Chapter 6 compares children's use of speech in face-to-face interaction with their mothers, drawing on two longitudinal observational studies—one conducted by Ninio and the other conducted by Snow and her colleagues. The chapter ends with a discussion of young children's developing indirect communicative strategies, in which, according to the authors, two-year-olds can correctly interpret indirect requests—speech acts which, considering young children's relative social inexperience, indicate surprising pragmatic sophistication.

Ninio and Snow start the main body of their discussion (i.e., Chapter 3) by addressing long-standing controversies in developmental psychology, such as whether early functioning exerts an effect on later functioning. The authors from the start target their criticism on Piaget's view that infants learn about everything from scratch, constructing the notion of object permanence, for example, gradu-

ally during the sensorimotor period of cognitive development (until about two years of age). This critique of object permanence is reasonable given recent research (e.g., Wynn, 1992) that refutes Piaget's belief that infants are not born with an understanding of how objects exist in space and time. Although the authors cautiously present a broad array of theories, their criticism of Piaget, and in particular his contention that changes from stage to stage are abrupt and qualitative, further leads to their partial support of an alternative theory, that children's early language is continuous with their preverbal communicative systems.

One of the primary goals of this volume is to stress that early mother-child interactions are a primary contributor to children's acquisition of meaning in socioculturally appropriate ways. As empiricists, Ninio and Snow insist that the importance of imitation should not be underestimated; they also highlight the role of "scaffolding," the temporary support that the mother gives the child to perform a task (Bruner, 1977). Scaffolding encompasses a variety of parental supports for language development in the young child. Sometime in their first year of life, infants make sounds, trying to match what they hear from their environment. Mothers also help children handle and construct schemata—structures in semantic memory that specify the general arrangement of a body of information. To interpret the meaning of what the mother says, one-year-olds initially make use of the surrounding context such as particular settings. As they grow, however, schemata gradually become established and applicable to a wider range of contexts. This environmental shaping is largely attributable to mothers' scaffolding. More than that, the joint construction of stories by preschool children and mothers in later years, for example, is an important context in which mothers provide guidance and support to children's preparation for literacy.

The final two chapters address discourse development: conversational skills in Chapter 7 and connected (or extended) discourse such as narratives, explanations, and word definitions in Chapter 8. These two chapters complete the authors' goal to untangle the relationships among the emergence of conversational skills, extended discourse, and speech acts (which they detail in the earlier chapters of the book). In narrative contexts, for example, like other domains, children's speech is guided and scaffolded by mothers. As Eisenberg (1985) suggested some time ago, children begin to talk about past events at about two years of age, at first with much assistance from mothers. Moreover, preschool children tell narratives, following general schemata (or general event knowledge) that they have acquired early on through interactions with their mothers. The authors further report research findings that stylistic differences between parents affect children's later narrative style; for example, those mothers who ask for background information early in development have children who provide elaborated accounts about settings later in development. Ninio and Snow thus repeatedly emphasize that parental talk provides a verbal framework for children's representations.

For those involved in language development, *Pragmatic Development* is long overdue. After reading this book, readers will likely be struck by the substantial amount of theoretical discussion. Another strength is the depth of research pre-

sented and discussed in the book. Unfortunately, its strengths are, in a way, also its weaknesses. Excessive focus on theories and too much information on research findings in some chapters might make it difficult to follow for some readers. Despite this potential drawback, the book is an important contribution to our understanding of pragmatic development. As adults, most pragmatic rules are so culturally ingrained that we are not even aware we are following them. Thus, it is refreshing to see a clear and sophisticated explication of language development from a pragmatic point of view. The book is recommended not only as required reading for language development courses, but also as an informative resource book.

### REFERENCES

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