

Snow C E. Mothers' speech to children learning language.

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Speech addressed by mothers to their own or others' two-year-old children was significantly simpler and more redundant than speech addressed by the same women to 10-year-olds. The effects were much smaller if the child-addressee was not present in the room with the speaker, but some adjustments were made even by adults unfamiliar with children in the absent-addressee condition. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 250 publications since 1972.]

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"Graduate students in psychology at McGill University in the 1960s had few formal course requirements, and they organized student-run seminars as a way of educating themselves more widely while decreasing the anxiety generated by the lack of structure in their lives. I participated in the 'human' (rather than the 'physiological') seminar, and in the fall of 1967 was dragooned into doing a session about child language—a then newly emerging research area. I remember vividly the difficulty in obtaining copies of the papers that would be the basis for my presentation—almost all were unpublished, available only as mimeograph copies. The only book available was the collection of papers by Smith and Miller,¹ and the entire literature of the field of language acquisition fit into a few file folders.

"The literature on which I based my presentation was strongly nativist in conviction, echoing Chomsky's^{2,3} claims that children come equipped with an innate knowledge of linguistic universals. A major plank in that argument was the 'degeneracy' of the linguistic data available to the child. The presumption of degeneracy was based in turn on the assumption that speech addressed to children was not different in any significant way from speech addressed to adults.

"Although in my seminar presentation I defended the innatist position against behaviorist-skeptical attacks, I worried privately about the generally accepted Chomskian characterization of input to children on two grounds. First, I recalled from my own childhood that my father had talked to children much as he talked to other adults—and how different that made him seem from most adults, who must therefore have been adjusting their language considerably for child addressees. Second, whereas linguistics as carried out by transformational grammarians is justifiably a highly introspective enterprise, with data drawn largely from the linguist's intuitions, statements about the nature of speech addressed to children were susceptible to empirical tests. I felt somehow offended that linguists made, accepted, and uncritically propagated claims about such matters with no sense of obligation to make the relevant observations—especially since the data were so readily available. I undertook as a thesis project an analysis of whether speech to young children just learning to talk differed from speech to older children in ways that might facilitate language acquisition.

"The study that I did was one of several being carried out in the late 1960s to demonstrate that speech directed to young children is simpler, more repetitive, more concrete, and in other ways very different from speech directed to adults. That it has been cited many times is partly chance—it was the first published—and partly convenience—it documented a phenomenon that many researchers already knew about and believed in but needed a legitimating citation for. It was an early publication in a field that has since grown enormously in size. The collection of papers and books that started in those couple of file folders in 1967 has now expanded into several file cabinets and bookshelves. A recent annotated bibliography just on speech to children reviewed over 300 studies published since 1976.⁴ The extent to which the study of linguistic interaction between caretakers and children has become a separate field, rather than being treated as one approach to the study of language acquisition, distresses me somewhat. Nonetheless, its development as a separate field and its relevance to such practical concerns as remediation for language delay, design of bilingual elementary curricula, therapy and education for handicapped populations, and second language teaching have undoubtedly contributed to the frequency with which this paper has been cited."

1. Smith F & Miller G A, eds. *The genesis of language: a psycholinguistic approach*.

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966. 400 p. (Cited 115 times.)

2. Chomsky N. *Syntactic structures*. The Hague: Mouton, 1957. 116 p. (Cited 1,465 times.)

3. -----, *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1965. 251 p. (Cited 2,720 times.)

4. Proctor A. *Annotated bibliography on input*. In press, 1984.