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MULTIPARTY CONVERSATIONS AS AN ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This short essay will discuss the necessity of postulating multiparty conversation as a model in the research on language development. Studies that examine the conversations involving more than three persons including children have been accumulated. Multiparty conversations may be a naturalistic linguistic environment for children. However, the fact that they are held in the natural environment is not the critical reason why researchers need to focus on such conversations. With regard to the model of multiparty conversation, a possible question that is raised concerns how children participate in conversations by acquiring some interactional role. It was argued that revealing the process by which children learn the role allocation system through participating in conversations may be one of problems to be dealt with in the study of language development.

Recently, some child language researchers suggest that it is necessary to carefully investigate the ecological environment wherein a child develops languages. This ecological approach to language learning (Kobayashi, 1997) depicts the process of development in terms of not only the physical and cognitive ability of each individual but also the interaction during conversation and the socio-cultural background. The conversation that children participate in forms the primary environment in which they encounter their first language; thus, it appears particularly important to examine the precise characteristic of the conversation. Therefore, this study will explore which aspects of conversation need to be examined as a future task.

Generally, language learning is enabled by acquiring certain linguistic information through communication with others. We must inevitably encounter a number of persons in everyday life. Thus, one of the requisites for language learning is the necessity of exchange with not just one person but with more than two persons.

It was in the past few decades that researchers began to notice this aspect of linguistic environment in children's language development. Blum-Kulka and Snow (2002) indicated that before the 1980s, many Western researchers assumed the dyadic communication involving an adult and a child as the situation wherein the child acquires linguistic information. When the researchers posed the question as to how the content and form of linguistic information affect children's language learning, they observed an exchange between a child and mainly a parent. Their concern did not lie in the social process by which the child obtains information, but in the content of language. In other

words, in these studies, observing dyadic communication and obtaining data from it was likely to be no more than a methodological necessity. On the contrary, certain studies have focused not only on the content and the form of speech but also on the usage of language and the process of communication itself. These functionalist-approach studies inspired by Bruner (1983) have suggested the investigation of the actual process of communication, although they have targeted the dyadic interaction mainly between a mother and a child.

Recently, researchers have increasingly focused on the conversational process among more than three persons including children. Such communication settings involve children and their parents (Oshima-Takane, 1988), the adults in their communities (Field, 2001), or their parents and siblings (Barton & Tomasello, 1991; Dunn & Shatz, 1989; Kasuya & Uemura, 2002; Oshima-Takane, Goodz & Derevensky, 1996; Rabain-Jamin, 1998). During this movement, a book edited by Blum-Kulka and Snow (2002) that treated the relationship between multiparty conversation and language learning was also published. The book aimed to describe children's linguistic environments in its natural form (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002). What is the reason for this attention to multiparty conversation? They described it as follows ;

The goal of the volume presented here is to focus on children learning language in naturalistic contexts. We take *naturalistic* to imply contexts that are often multiparty, that involve both mutigenerational and peer interaction (or at least interactions in which the child's relationship to more than one adult or one child is simultaneously relevant). (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002, p.4)

Certainly, multiparty conversations occur in our social lives and seem to be the natural context for children's development. However, determining which type of conversation is naturalistic may depend on social, economic, and cultural factors. If a socio-economic situation does not allow for a mother to communicate with other adults, she will consider her child as an interlocutor and will try to speak to her or him. On the contrary, as Ochs and Schieffelin (1995) indicated, if a mother could interact with other adults easily, she might consider her child as a mere spectator in adult conversations. For example, Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) indicated that children's communicative environments may differ across cultures. In some cultures, children will participate primarily in dyadic verbal interaction, as in typical in white American middle-class families. In other cultures, children will participate primarily in multiparty interaction, which can be observed in Samoan families. Because both types of conversational settings are natural for the members of each culture, there is no special reason to pay attention only to the multiparty conversation. What, then, is the critical reason for the researchers of language development to focus on it?

The reason I provide below concerns the necessity of examining how a child participates in conversational settings. In principle, this problem cannot be solved based on the dyadic model of communication but on the model of multiparty interaction. Sociological studies that have treated face-to-face interaction give reasons for why the dyadic model is inappropriate.

Assuming the conversational model consisting of two persons, logically, one partici-

pant must be the speaker, and the other the hearer. On the other hand, in the multiparty model, it is certainly indeterminate whether the speaker and hearer is one and the same participant. In the first place, in multiparty conversations, which participant is to be assigned to the speaker or hearer is not decided beforehand. Considering the conversation between three persons, when one person gets the floor, the remaining two persons are not necessarily both hearers. The speaker may address a person that s/he supposes is a hearer, and may ignore the other person as an unratified participant. In addition, the supposed hearer must behave as though s/he is paying attention to the speech. In short, the actual interaction in multiparty settings must comprise the participants' role allocation and self-selection processes.

This aspect of conversation has been examined by sociologist Goffman (Duranti, 1997). According to Goffman (1981), there are various interactional roles, such as the role of an addressed hearer, unaddressed hearer and eavesdropper, in multiparty settings. If the need arises, the speaker may speak to the ratified participants in a loud audible voice, or on the contrary, s/he may speak in a low voce to prevent eavesdroppers from hearing. Thus, the number of people present in the same social setting may effect how an individual acts in a conversation. It is important to note that only the multiparty situation entails various hearer roles, and the participants should negotiate who acquires which interactional role through real-time conversation.

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) proposed a turn-taking system; the system is supposed to operate in everyday conversations. It is believed that interlocutors scramble the next turn or relinquish it based on the system. Therefore, acquiring the role of the speaker or the hearer does not constitute a mere social event. Participants must pay attention to the precise timing for starting speech. Conversation is organized through participants' assigning and accepting of their interactional roles. In this manner, at the local "now and here", people should decide how to participate in their conversation. This role allocation system was suggested by examining multiparty conversations.

The system can be extended to dyadic conversation. Heath (1986) analyzed the settings of an outpatient clinic where one doctor and one patient engaged in medical interviews. The interviews began with the doctors questioning the reason for their visits. The first speaker was usually the doctor. However, the timing for starting speech was followed by the shifting of the patients' gaze toward the doctor. This can be explained by the fact that the doctor's first speech was controlled by the patient's body movement. Heath (1986) illustrated the interactional process wherein the roles of the speaker and hearer were negotiated collaboratively in the course of assigning and self-selecting roles by the doctor and the patient. Considering the dyadic model as the fundamental social structure, the diversity of interactional roles and the real processes for their negotiation mentioned above might be overlooked. Rather, real dyadic conversations can be analyzed and understood effectively from the perspective of the multiparty model.

That dyadic communication emerges in the situation where at least three or more persons exist is not a simple matter. While one person speaks to the others, the remaining people must cooperate in maintaining silence in order to ensure the success of the dyadic conversation. This can be illustrated by the data obtained from school classrooms. By demonstrating the discourse during a "sharing time" episode in a classroom,

Erickson (1996) suggested that the timing for an utterance may become the prerequisite in establishing a dialogical relationship. When a student was unable to reply to the teacher's question at the right timing, the remaining children attempted to acquire the right to speak and actually said something. In response, the teacher raised his finger and hissed at children. This gesture seemed to be the action used to clarify which person had the right to speak at that time. However, while the chosen child was reluctant to answer the question, another child eventually answered instead. This case implies the difficulty of maintaining a dyadic relationship in a multiparty situation such a classroom. The important implication of this is that dyadic conversations must be collectively organized by all the participants.

Returning to the original topic, the children learning their language have to principally participate in the conversation around them. If a child is rejected from a conversation, s/he is unable to obtain any information necessary for language development. Thus, the question of how children participate in conversations is worthy of close investigation.

When a child standing observing a conversation among people attempts to participate in it, s/he should be assigned some interactional roles by the other participants; otherwise, the child may have to forcefully acquire the right to speak. In principle, it is necessary to focus on multiparty conversations in order to reveal such processes. Multiparty conversations should be paid close attention to not because it forms a naturalistic context for a child to obtain linguistic information but because it offers an adequate model for describing the process in which s/he participates in conversation by assuming a certain role.

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