

## LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION

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### Summary

This chapter describes language socialization research, which documents and theorizes the diversity of cultural paths to communicative competence and linguistic/cultural community membership. The chapter presents an overview of its genesis, its distinctive theoretical foundations and methodological orientations, and some of the important insights it has yielded. In conclusion, this chapter considers the contributions the paradigm has made and potentially can make to our understanding of pressing social issues such as maintenance of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness by non-dominant groups and improvement of education for traditionally underserved populations.

### 1. Introduction

How does a novice become a member of a particular cultural community? Language socialization research has shown that language plays a crucial role in this process. Linguistic structures at every level – phonological, lexical, morphosyntactic, pragmatic, and conversational – bear social and cultural meanings for members of a speech community. In order to become active, competent members of their community, novices must learn to understand and use these linguistic structures in appropriate ways. They do so through recurrent communicative encounters with more knowledgeable community members, who interact with novices in ways that are culturally specific. These encounters shape novices' understandings not only of how and for what purposes they may use language, but also of who they are, how they should behave, and what they should feel. That is, through participation in routine interactions with more expert members of the community, novices are socialized *through the use of language* and *socialized to use language*.

Language socialization research is an ethnographic and interactional discourse analytic approach to the study of human learning and development. Researchers record and analyze routine interactions between novice (or less competent) members and veteran (or more competent) members in order to identify and understand (1) the linguistic and social organization of these interactions, and (2) how this organization shapes novices' development as linguistically and culturally competent members of the community. Microanalysis of natural discourse is embedded in holistic study of the community, illuminating the structures of everyday communication as cultural arrangements, shaped by and in turn shaping community beliefs and values.

Language socialization is a collaborative enterprise, often contested, and ever continuing. Active and selective in her acquisition of skills, identities, and ideologies, the novice may resist being socialized. Language socialization continues across the lifespan, as individuals become participants in multiple communities, including families, neighborhoods, peer groups, schools, professions, religious groups, and other institutions. Scholars have conducted research in a wide range of settings, finding considerable cultural variation in the ways novices are apprenticed into language, as well as some aspects that may be universal. Topics of investigation have included socialization into literacy, caregiver socialization of emotions, development of knowledge about status and roles through language use, and language socialization in situations of language and culture contact.

## **2. Beginnings of the Paradigm**

In the early 1980s, linguistic anthropologists Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin first formulated the language socialization research paradigm. Having conducted extensive fieldwork in small-scale non-Western societies (Ochs in Madagascar and Western Samoa, Schieffelin in Papua New Guinea), they saw the need for an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective on children's linguistic and social development. They sought to bridge the gap between two fields of inquiry that had been developing separately and in very different ways: developmental psycholinguistic research on first language acquisition and anthropological research on child socialization (or enculturation). Language acquisition research had focused on the individual, either as acquirer of the language or as provider of language input. Most researchers viewed language acquisition as separate from sociocultural context and assumed that findings from studies conducted almost exclusively in white middle-class settings in North America and Europe were universally valid. In contrast, socialization research examined diverse communities, exploring cross-cultural variation and placing sociocultural context at the center of analysis. However, this body of work largely overlooked the role of language in the socialization process.

Ochs and Schieffelin proposed that language acquisition and culture acquisition were interdependent and that the interaction of the two processes needed to be studied toward the better understanding of both. They pointed out that interactions between children and caregivers could be understood as cultural phenomena embedded in the larger systems of cultural meaning and social order of the society into which the child is being socialized.

In their seminal 1984 article, they illustrated the diversity of cultural paths to communicative competence by comparing “developmental stories” from three cultural communities – Samoan, Kaluli, and Anglo-American white middle class. The authors identified significant differences in how members of these societies (1) organized interactions involving infants and very young children and (2) conceptualized the child and its social and linguistic development. Moreover, they proposed a link between caregivers’ speech behavior and the values and beliefs held by members of their social group, arguing that the former were expressions and reflections of the latter. These ideas were further explored in monographs by Ochs and Schieffelin, and in their edited volume *Language Socialization Across Cultures*. This collection included studies conducted in a wide range of societies: Japanese, Kwa’rae (Solomon Islands), Basotho (Lesotho), Mexican-American, African-American, and American white working class.

One year before Ochs and Schieffelin’s 1984 article appeared, two books were published that are also part of the early language socialization canon: Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words* and Susan Philips’ *The Invisible Culture*. Both works document the ways children from non-mainstream communities in the U.S. were apprenticed into verbal behavior – Heath studied black and white working class families in the American Southeast, while Philips studied Native American children on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation – and both compare community practices with those of the dominant culture. Moreover, the authors identify differences between the practices of home and those of the school and consider the implications of these differences for the educational success of children from the non-mainstream communities.

From its beginning, language socialization research has been concerned with theoretical and applied issues. Researchers generate ethnographically sensitive accounts of children’s apprenticeship into the cultural and linguistic practices of their communities, both to document the diversity of developmental pathways and to identify those aspects of language socialization that are shared. To these ends, the paradigm integrates theoretical perspectives and methods from anthropology, linguistics, education, psychology, and sociology.

### **3. Theoretical Foundations**

Language socialization research takes a sociohistorical (or cultural-historical) approach to human development. That is, the development of individuals is held to be inseparable from the socioculturally organized and historically developing activities in which they engage, tools they use (including language), and institutions of which they are a part. The child is seen as an active appropriator of the knowledge and skills of her community, constituting her own understandings thereof as she engages in activity with others. Because the child’s understandings may differ from those of her more expert interlocutors, she is not the only one to be changed through socialization: her interlocutors and the very practices in which they engage may also be transformed.

The notion of practice is central to the paradigm. Practices are meaningful actions that occur routinely in everyday life, are widely shared by members of the group, have developed over time, and carry normative expectations about the way things should be

done. As novices are apprenticed into community practices, they develop a ‘feel for the game’ or a ‘practical sense’ of the world – what the sociologist Bourdieu calls *habitus* – that enables them to participate in community activities with increasing competence and commitment. In language socialization research, speaking and listening are viewed as practices.

Also fundamental to the paradigm is the concept of communicative competence, first proposed by Del Hymes in response to generative linguist Chomsky’s explicit exclusion of sociocultural aspects of language use from his definition of competence. Hymes theorized what a speaker must know in order to comprehend and produce speech in real situations in ways that are both grammatically correct and appropriate in relation to the context in which the language is used. Language socialization researchers study the development of communicative competence as a process wherein the novice is socialized into the linguistic and sociocultural practices of the community.

Language socialization theory is also rooted in the social-interactional traditions of sociology, including work by Erving Goffman (symbolic interactionism) and Harold Garfinkle (ethnomethodology). In these traditions, naturally occurring social interactions are viewed as sites where meaning, identity, and social order are negotiated and constructed. Language socialization researchers analyze in detail face-to-face interactions to understand how communities use language to build their social worlds as novices are socialized into particular skills, knowledge, values, roles, and identities.

#### **4. Methodology**

Paul Garrett identifies four core methodological features of language socialization research: (1) a longitudinal research design, (2) field-based collection and analysis of a substantial corpus of audio or video recorded naturalistic discourse, (3) a holistic, theoretically informed ethnographic perspective, and (4) attention to micro and macro levels of analysis, and to linkages between them. As the paradigm has increased in popularity, more and more work has been published that purports to be language socialization research while lacking some of these fundamental features. The importance of each of these features becomes evident, however, when the origins and aims of the paradigm are considered.

Language socialization research studies development – that is, change over time – in the linguistic and cultural competence of community members. While changes can be observed within a single interaction (a developmental process known as microgenesis), researchers are interested in how participation in recurrent, culturally salient activities shapes development. Thus, longitudinal design is essential to capture the shifts and transformations that occur over a period within which significant development occurs. A typical study spans several months to more than a year, and some researchers continue to work with the community throughout their career. As in much developmental psycholinguistic language acquisition research, a language socialization study focuses on a small group of novices, who are recorded at regular intervals. Due to the intensive nature of the data collection and analysis, the number of focal participants is small (three to eight), and the researcher may focus on one or two activities or settings.

Language socialization research seeks to identify patterns in novice-veteran interactions. While a few examples may illustrate a particular interactional structure or communicative behavior, any claim regarding its typicality must be grounded in analysis of a large body of data. A year-long study may yield between 60 and 100 hours of audio and/or video recordings of interaction, which are then transcribed locally and in conjunction with native speaker consultants. Recordings allow the researcher to examine communicative behaviors repeatedly, in close detail, and with participation by members of the community. Without this kind of fine-grained and assisted analysis, the researcher would have difficulty parsing – or even noticing – important interactional patterns.

Language socialization research endeavors to understand these patterns in relation to local social and cultural systems (such as kinship, religion, schooling, the economy).

Thus, microethnographic methods (audio and video recording, transcription, and analysis of natural discourse) are combined with traditional ethnographic methods. These include (but are not limited to) participant observation, interviewing, and collection of site documents (locally produced and/or frequently used texts such as newspapers and religious tracts).

In addition to working with community members during the transcription process, many researchers show their video recordings to research participants to prompt spontaneous comments and observations that often provide important social, cultural, and linguistic information, a method known as playback or stimulated recall. Researchers also consult prior research on the community or region from multiple disciplines in order to situate their own study in the broader social, cultural, and historical context.

Language socialization research is about more than the production of detailed ethnographic accounts of the development of individuals in specific cultural contexts; it also seeks to understand how individual developmental processes relate to large-scale social, cultural, and historical processes.

From the social-interactionist perspective, macrophenomena (e.g., language change or gender inequities) are realized through microphenomena (face-to-face interactions). Language socialization researchers examine routine activities to understand how they shape not only community members' development of communicative competence, but also the reproduction and transformation of social, cultural, and linguistic forms and norms.

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**Biographical sketch**

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