I
A survey of the issues

CHAPTER ONE

Children and language

What do children use language for?

In this section, we will be looking at the various stages that all children go through when they start talking. However, it is important to remember that we cannot see what is actually going on inside a child's head, so that despite the intense scrutiny that has been made in recent years of the ways in which children acquire language, much of the mystery remains. This is one reason why we will concentrate on what children actually *do* with language, since that can be observed and studied by an outsider. A second reason is that it is of far greater relevance to their relationships with their parents than most technical studies, which tend to deal with such topics as the order in which certain fine points of grammar are acquired, or the connection between language and the physiology of the brain. For example, it is possible to analyse in great detail how a child gradually acquires the complex grammar of negation, but when Eliot (2 yrs 1 mth) says 'No Teletubbies!' his mother needs to know whether he wants her to change TV channels or not.

1.1 Building up relationships

– Morning.
– Morning.
– Bit nippy, isn't it?
– Yes. Really nippy.
– Oh well.
– Yes, well. See you.
– See you.

We spend much of our lives building up and maintaining social relationships by means of rituals of this kind. If we look at the actual content of such exchanges, at what is actually *said*, we find that they are almost totally bereft of meaning. But if we look at their functions, at what is *done*, we see that they are of very great importance: quite literally, they hold society together.

Try to imagine what would happen if next time you met your neighbour in the lift and he said: 'Hello', you did not answer. Not to return a greeting is to shun someone's society, almost to deny their existence, which is why we get so upset if it ever happens to us.

Moreover, in most circumstances, no other serious conversation can take place until these rituals have been observed. It is extremely rare for us to 'go straight to the point': even as we are saying that that is our intention, we are usually acknowledging that what has happened up to that moment was *not* the point.

Babies learn the first rudiments of social interaction a long time before they can actually utter anything that sounds like language.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that this process starts at birth, since parents use the baby's various movements and noises to simulate the give-and-take of interactive conversation. C. E. Snow (1977) in an article on the development of conversation between mothers and babies quotes the following example of 'turn-taking' between a mother and her infant.

MOTHER: Hello. Give me a smile then. (gently pokes infant in the ribs)
INFANT: (yawns)
MOTHER: Sleepy are you? You woke up too early today.
INFANT: (opens fist)
MOTHER: (touching infant's hand) What are you looking at? Can you see something?
INFANT: (grasps mother's finger)
MOTHER: Oh, that's what you wanted. In a friendly mood, then. Come on, give us a smile.

From the ages of three or four months, babies will respond to parental smiles and will also 'greet' their parents in this way in order to initiate interaction. Whole 'conversations' thus take place with a succession of actions and reactions, gurgles, cries, smiles and the like, teaching the child to take his turn in conversations. This behaviour is so fundamental to human communication that we rarely think of it as something we had to learn.

In the months preceding the time when they start producing words that

can be recognised as such by their parents, babies produce a great variety of sounds, including many that do not exist in their parents' language or languages. This is perfectly normal and is, indeed, an absolutely essential phase in children's development. They are learning to control and use their vocal apparatus, and trying out all the different articulatory possibilities it allows, but not yet associating any of the noises so produced with particular meanings. Gradually, the range and number of sounds diminishes, largely because the parents' reactions favour and encourage some (that is, the sounds of their languages) rather than others, in a sort of whittling down process.

One of the main ways in which parents help children with this process of discovery and selection is by associating certain sounds with certain routines. The child who smiles back, plays 'boo', says 'Mummy and Daddy', 'thank you' and 'bye-bye' is learning the essentials of social routines – greeting, recognising, identifying, thanking, leave-taking and so on – which he will use throughout the rest of his life. V. Cook (1979) comments:

> My daughter Nicola . . . used to make a sort of 'eeyore' noise whenever she handed something to someone. It was some time before we realised that she was trying to say 'Here you are'. She had learnt that 'Here you are' is part of the routine for handing people things, even if her parents were hardly aware that this was so.

Similar routines are used by babies to attract their parents' attention, to get what they want, in other words, to serve all their social needs, even though they may be able to use only one 'word' at a time and even though these words might be far from sounding like 'proper' words.

1.2 Exchanging information

Babies very soon want to 'show and tell'. In fact, they usually start producing their 'first words' to name the people around them and the things which are important to them: Mummy, Daddy, bottle, biscuit, dog, and so on. They also name 'actions' and the results of actions, as when they say 'gone' after their mother has left the room or when their bottle or bowl is empty.

When a child uses only one-word utterances of this kind, it is very difficult to know exactly what he means or what he is trying to do. This means that parents are constantly guessing, repeating or elaborating on what they think baby is saying, and this is, in turn, the richest possible 'input'

for the child, who uses it as raw material to develop his own language and intellect.

This exchange of information is not one-sided, though. Babies do more than just 'name' things mechanically for the sake of putting a label on them. They are also, it seems reasonable to guess, expressing interest in certain things they have noticed: after all, there are lots of things they do *not* name. They are, then, making critical comments on the world around them.

1.3 Thinking

The 'mistakes' children make when they start naming objects at this one-word stage reveal that they are beginning to make sense of the world around them. This is particularly obvious when the child uses one word to refer to two objects which have something in common, but which are usually given different names. When a child uses 'Daddy' for all male human beings, or 'doggy' for all four-legged animals, he is revealing that he has already classified animate beings along a number of dimensions which may not yet be the right ones, but which are none the less meaningful: 'doggies' are not to be confused with 'daddies'. It should not worry parents to find small children making even bigger 'mistakes' than this: they are just testing and learning the system. An eight-month-old girl notices a brass ornament and stretches out to touch it. Her parents recognise what it is she's after, and she learns the Swedish word for 'horse' *häst*. But the child's *häst* does not yet mean 'horse', as we see when she uses it first to indicate another object in which she is interested, next as a general attention-getter, then as something like 'pretty', before even beginning to put it into the 'animals' pigeon-hole.

A child learning a language is *learning about the world*, about how it is organised and how it works. This is very different, if only in degree, from the adult learning a second language, who tends to work the other way round: he brings his world with him and uses the language to try to express it. Moreover, as a result of their cognitive development, adults can use language in ways which are not available to young children; they are able to make conscious use of cognitive skills, for instance to solve complex problems or to plan a series of actions.

One of the greatest advantages of bilingualism is that even very small children realise that the relationship between words and the objects they refer to is not a necessary one, that the same things can have different

names. It does seem that this early exercise in abstraction does give the bilingual the mental flexibility and openness which has frequently been reported by experimenters and psychologists. This flexibility in turn is one of the main protections against what monolinguals often imagine must be an unpleasant experience – thinking in two languages. Quite literally, the bilingual does not *mind* this. There are a number of reasons why this is so: first, there are thought processes that are non-verbal or pre-verbal anyway. Secondly, verbal thought – our 'interior monologue' – is usually conscious and the bilingual will *choose* which language to think in. Thirdly, many bilinguals are in the habit of always thinking in one language except when they are actually using another (our guess is that this is the majority). Fourthly, many bilinguals actually like being able to think in two languages, often using it as a creative approach to problem-solving, a sort of lateral thinking.

Unfortunately, this is one of those cases where 'if you have to ask the question, you may not understand the answer' and all the bilingual can do when he is asked what language he thinks in is to say 'Well, it depends . . .'

1.4 Playing with words

Babies and small children love playing with language. Before they can produce actual words, they will spend long stretches repeating the same sounds apparently just for fun. Children who can only say very few words will use them to sing themselves to sleep. Playing with sounds and words in this way seems to be a completely spontaneous activity in children; it is also an important part of the learning process and it is an activity which the child will continue to perform with various degrees of complexity, going from bad jokes to humming songs to writing poetry, throughout his adult life.

'Lullation', as this behaviour is sometimes called, serves much the same purposes, and gives the child much the same sort of pleasure, as do nursery rhymes and all sorts of verbal activities and games later on. Amongst the purposes there is obviously the learning through repetition of basic words, sounds and structures, but the high proportion of 'nonsense' – expressions like 'ring a ring of roses', 'Humpty Dumpty' and 'hey diddle diddle' – is surely there at least as much for the fun of it.

This point is more important to the parents of bilingual children than might at first seem to be the case, because some parents worry that it is a symptom of confusion, since naturally the bilingual child will call on both

his repertoires to 'talk nonsense': in a sense it is, but it is also the process of getting it all sorted out. To put it another way, in what sense is: '*Beurre*, bird, butter, *beurre*' chanted dozens of times, inferior as word-play to: 'Hickory, dickory dock, the mouse ran up the clock' or: 'A tisket, a tasket, I've got a little basket', and in what sense is it more 'mixed' than such rhymes?

Far from being an alarm signal of any kind, verbal play of this kind should be seen as a healthy, normal stage for any child to pass through. Indeed, one might almost go as far as to say that it is in cases where the child does *not* do this sort of thing that the parents should start getting worried. Generalisations of this kind are dangerous, though, so for the moment we will limit ourselves to the observation that a very high proportion of the parents of productive bilinguals in our study mentioned an early period of mixing, which seems usually to have occurred between one and a half and three years of age. This 'statistic' must be taken with more than a pinch of salt: firstly because of the considerable variation between children in these matters, secondly because it is based on parents' recollections of how their child developed, not on any stricter form of observation.

1.5 Communicating while learning

From the moment a child reaches the 'two-word' stage his ability to express himself increases enormously and he starts producing utterances which look like adult sentences. He also becomes more efficient in his conversational routines and in exchanging information. Another important development is that he begins to indicate that things do *not* exist or that he does *not* want something, by putting 'no' in front of the names of objects.

However, at the beginning of this stage the child still makes no use of 'link words' ('to', 'off', 'the', 'and', 'if', etc.) nor does he put grammatical endings ('runs') at the end of words. These words and endings are gradually added during the years that follow: again, the time taken will depend to some extent on the individual child, but it also depends on the language in question. Some languages (for example, Finnish, Russian) have more word endings than others, so naturally children take longer to learn them. This does not mean that such languages are more difficult for children to learn, since all languages have roughly the same degree of complexity: but that complexity can be distributed differently, so a certain area of a given

language *can* be more difficult than the same area in another language. This is another reason why bilingual children's development of their two languages can vary, in detail, quite considerably.

In English, the first ending to be learnt will usually be '-ing', as in 'Mummy coming'. This is followed by the genitive 's' as in 'Mummy's car' and then, much later, by the plural 's' as in 'cars'.

Perhaps more important, the child now learns that word order also varies and changes meanings. However, 'cracking the code' of word order will take him some time, during which he will make many 'mistakes'. In very general terms, the problem is one of aligning grammatical structures with possible meanings, of linking language with reality. For example, if he is presented with a toy dog and a doll and told 'Give the man the dog', he will give *the man to the dog* rather than *the dog to the man*, because in most sentences the noun which follows the verb is the person who receives something ('Penny gave John the book') and he has not yet learnt that in real life you usually give people pets and not vice versa.

Another area of difficulty related to word order is *questions*. Typically, children will start by using 'question words' such as 'where' and 'what', but without making the necessary changes in the order of the words which follow. For some time, they continue to produce sentences like: 'What time it is?'

As the child's language slowly develops, he also becomes a more sophisticated interactor. This is reflected in his use of pronouns: he starts calling his mother and father 'you', for example. This is an important step, since it shows that he is no longer limited to expressing *himself*, that he is now aware of the separate existence of others and can relate what he is saying to them. Indeed, it is fascinating to note that this development usually coincides with the time when the child turns his picture book the right way up when he wants to show it to someone: he has realised, quite literally, that there are other points of view.

Once the child has made this distinction between 'I' and 'the others', his personality begins to develop; he becomes more assertive when he plays with other children, but on the other hand he also starts cooperating with them. It is now that he starts playing with other children, his linguistic and social development going hand in hand, as will be seen if he attends some kind of playgroup. This is partly why children starting or consolidating a 'second' language under these circumstances invariably learn it so quickly, easily and well; their whole being is directed to that purpose at a time of maximum readiness and opportunity. They are not learning *about* the language, they are learning *in* the language through using it.

By the age of five or thereabouts, the majority of children have cleared the major hurdles of 'grammar', but will still make a number of errors. Here, as elsewhere, individual variation can be extraordinary – which is one reason why we have been careful not to state ages at which any of the phases we have discussed 'should' or 'will' be reached. The celebrated cases of Einstein, who did not speak till he was three, and of Runeberg who waited until he was four and then went on to become Finland's national poet, should not be interpreted as meaning that all children who do likewise will become great mathematicians or writers. But they are a useful reminder that parents do often worry unduly about their children 'not doing what the books say they should be doing at that age' when there is no cause for concern.

We will be returning in more detail to the development of the bilingual child in Chapter 4. For the moment, though, we are going to look at a number of basic ideas about language which might be helpful to parents trying to understand what it is that their child is learning.

Some general ideas about language

1.6 'Languages' and 'dialects'

There are between three and five thousand languages spoken in the world at present. The vagueness of this figure is due to the fact that there is no way of distinguishing between dialects and languages on linguistic grounds alone. We *all* speak a dialect and we *all* have accents. Moreover, linguistic boundaries only rarely coincide with political or geographical boundaries; if you start walking through France from Calais and go all the way to the southern tip of Italy, you will never find two adjacent villages where inhabitants do not understand one another, yet at some 'point' you will have gone from French to Italian. In fact, it is more accurate to say you will have gone from France to Italy, since the border is national and political, not linguistic.

Certain dialects, or groups of dialects, have greater prestige than others, and it is these which we usually refer to as 'languages'. But this prestige has nothing to do with the intrinsic qualities of the dialects in question. They are not more beautiful, more logical or older than the other dialects. Their prestige springs from their uses and their users. Such dialects are usually those spoken by the educated and the upper classes; they are the ones used in the official administration and education of the country; they have a written form and have been studied and standardised. The word 'language' is a social and political label we attach to a dialect that is officially

recognised. This is why, when there is disagreement about the status of a dialect, the conflict is inevitably political in nature. For example, when people argue as to whether Breton, Scots or Basque is 'a language', they are usually arguing about the degree of political autonomy of the speakers or the region where the variety in question is spoken.

Because languages are not distinguished from dialects on linguistic grounds, it is quite possible to find separate official languages that have more in common than other dialects of the 'same' language. For example, we speak of the 'Scandinavian languages' – Norwegian, Danish and Swedish – even though they are very similar and often mutually comprehensible. On the other hand, we speak of 'dialects' of the Chinese language even though at least eight of these dialects (or rather families of dialects) are mutually incomprehensible. Words like 'Norwegian' and 'Chinese' are political, not linguistic statements: they tell us that the area in question is a separate nation. As it has often been said: 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy of its own'.

In many places, people speak two dialects. When these are officially recognised as languages, we say that such people are 'bilingual', but in purely linguistic terms anyone who has two different forms of speech available is bilingual. When Philip Riley was a grammar-school boy in the London of the 1950s, he and his classmates received elocution lessons in Standard English and their cockney accents were frowned on at school, so that most of them spoke differently at home and at school. In the same way, the German businessman who 'puts on his regional accent with his slippers in the evening' is just doing what bilinguals do. This, again, is why it is so difficult to count languages, dialects and bilinguals: there are no clear dividing lines.

The four or five thousand languages of the world differ widely in the number of people who speak them. The average number of speakers per language is estimated to be one million. On the other hand, nations also differ widely in the number of languages spoken in them, the average being about thirty. The idea then, that each country has *one* language, spoken uniformly by all the people within its borders, is both naive and inaccurate, even though most countries do have a standard dialect or dialects, recognised as the official language or languages.

1.7 The written language and the spoken language

Speech is the primary form of language. It existed before there was any form of writing and children learn to speak before they learn to write.