



A Day in My Language Life (CLA)

Anna Sarchet puts her linguistic glasses on and takes a close look at the beginning of her day.

When I taught A Level English Language, I advised my students that the most successful amongst them would be those who were inquisitive and analytical about language all the time, not just when they were in the classroom. Simply being a good listener and training yourself to look at the world through linguistic glasses will take you a good way down the road to success. It will also mean that you enjoy it so much more - even grammar (always the least interesting aspect of language A Level to my students) comes to life when you realise its impact on your own experience.

So I decided it was high time I took my own advice and donned my linguistic specs to have a long, hard look at a day in my linguistic life...

Child Language Acquisition

My day begins much earlier than I would choose and the first conversations I have are with my twin daughters, Zara and Ava. Conversation is perhaps something of an overstatement; at just ten months they are in the first stage of language acquisition and their utterances consist of reduplicated babbling sounds - ba ba ba ba, ma ma ma ma and da da da being the most common. As a proud parent, I would like to believe that ma ma ma is their first attempt at 'mummy', but with my linguistic glasses on I am forced to concede that this is very unlikely. Firstly, it would be a little early for them to have reached the one word stage (usually this occurs around one year) and secondly the consonant sounds they are producing (bilabial consonant sounds - m, p, b, w) are simply the ones that they can make using their lips. Babies' lips are highly developed through months of sucking in order to feed, and these sounds are therefore simply the easiest for them to make. Their utterances are not yet invested with any specific meaning, though they do seem to be a conscious act of communication.

Of course, as the proud parent, I do my best to ensure that I am supporting the babies' language development and my response to their babbling would be described as Child-Directed Speech or CDS - the term used to describe the way in which adults adapt their speech to respond to young children in their care. I answer them with short sentences, simplified grammar and most notably a higher pitch in my voice. I ask them lots of questions with high rising intonation, encouraging responses and modelling the structure of conversation.

For example:

Me: helloooo (.) are you awake (.) did you have a good sleep (.)

A: ba ba ba da

Me: you did (.) shall we get up now (.)

A: ma ma ma ba

Me: yes let's get up (.) is Zara awake (2) shall we wake her up (.)

You can see even in this short snippet the number of questions I ask and the way in which there is space for the baby to respond. This is an important early lesson in turn-taking and is preparing the ground for their future conversational skills. It should be noted that my use of CDS does not mark me out as a particularly skilled or committed parent. CDS appears to be intuitive and instinctive and its patterns are replicated in parent-child communication across the globe. You might hear CDS referred to as motherese, though many (myself included) believe this term is unnecessarily gender-specific and a bit dated.

At about this time my other daughter, Mia, who is five years old, comes to join the conversation and it is fascinating to note the different stage of language acquisition she has reached. Obviously, she is far more accomplished than the twins (some might say a bit too accomplished, especially when it comes to arguing about whether or not to put her school uniform on...) but her acquisition of language is still not complete. My morning interactions with Mia exemplify different theories of child language acquisition. Firstly, consider this:

Me: what would you like for breakfast (.)

M: special K

Me: special K please

M: special K please

Me: good girl

This exchange demonstrates my attempts to teach Mia politeness conventions: I model the use of please, Mia repeats the phrase and I positively reinforce her correct use of it. This exemplifies the behaviourist theory of language acquisition, the chief proponent of which was psychologist B.F. Skinner, which asserts that children learn to speak by imitating the language they hear and by parents reinforcing and correcting their utterances.

A little later, the following exchange takes place:

Me: Mia where is your other shoe(.)

M: it's over there

Me: where

M: I don't know I throwed it over there

As Noam Chomsky would point out, this causes some problems for Skinner and the behaviourists. It is clear that Mia is not imitating when she uses the word 'throwed', though she has applied a logical grammatical construction. Chomsky would term this a virtuous error: a non-standard form which though

incorrect shows a capacity beyond simply copying what has been heard. Common examples include plural nouns (sheeps instead of sheep; mouses instead of mice) and past tenses in verbs (Mia's example above; wonned instead of won - you can probably think of many more). Chomsky's nativist theory asserts that the ability to use language is innate and employs the term Language Acquisition Device (LAD) to describe the brain's in-built capability to make sense of language.

There are other linguistic approaches to Child Language Acquisition - you will certainly come across Bruner, Piaget and Halliday in the course of your studies but my linguistic day has been dominated by children so far, so perhaps it's time to move on.

Description vs Prescription

On the train on the way to work, I often read the *Metro* newspaper. With my linguistic glasses on, there are many comments I could make about graphology, grammar and lexis but what really catches my eye is a letter complaining about the use of the word 'medalled'. As far as the writer of the letter is concerned, medal is a noun and using it as a verb is an example of the insidious influence of the Americans on our great language and a sign that the end of the world is nigh. Such a prescriptive attitude is quite common in the popular press: you will frequently find articles on how the English language is declining as a result of the malevolent influence of technology and the inability of today's 'youth' to speak properly. You have probably been urged by your language teacher to take a much more descriptive approach. You are much more likely to come to interesting conclusions if you refrain from making judgements about language and instead consider it dispassionately in terms of its audience, purpose and context.

Language and Power

Once at work, the register of the language I use immediately changes and becomes much more formal. Working in education means I use a professional lexis; indeed many of my non-teaching friends regard the jargon I use to talk about my work as virtually incomprehensible. Some would say there is an increasing level of jargon in the field of education and this raises interesting questions about why such vocabulary is used. It is not simply because there are things which exist in education which don't exist outside of it and therefore need special names; it is also related to issues of power and authority. Consider for example the difference in the semantic field used to describe the institution where you are receiving your education. We could use the words school, academy, college, comprehensive and they would all share a very similar denotation but the connotations are quite different.

It is only half-past eleven and I have begun to realise that in linguistic terms, a day is an incredibly long time. There are hundreds of aspects of the English language that I have encountered and could have commented on: the language of advertising for example, the variety of accents and dialects I hear on the train and in the office, the ways in which my daughter is acquiring written language. There isn't room here for any of that but perhaps this has given you a sense of how you might look at your own linguistic life. Thinking about language in different contexts will increase your confidence in applying the theoretical frameworks but more than that I hope it will open your eyes to the richness present in even the most everyday remark.

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This article first appeared in emagazine 56, April 2012.

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