



# The Theory of the Integrated Language Perspective

The integrated language perspective is based on three major interrelated principles:

- Children are constructive learners. They are active meaning makers. They are continuously interpreting and making sense of their world based on what they have already learned, on what they have already constructed and reconstructed.
- Language is the major system by which meanings are communicated and expressed in our social world. Because language is used for various purposes our meanings are expressed in various ways, by various language patterns. Thus, language cannot be understood, interpreted, or evaluated unless it is related to the social contexts in which it is being used. Moreover, language and its patterns are learned through actual use, as part of human activity for various purposes in various social contexts.
- Knowledge is in the minds of individuals. It is organized and constructed through social interaction. It is built-up mental representations that are based on our individual experiences and is constantly changing over our lives. Thus, it is always being modified; it is tentative and provisional. Knowledge is not a static, absolute, "out-there" object but a process of knowing or coming to know. Because we are social beings, our knowledge is always affected by our culture, existing social circumstances, the historical moment, and so forth.

*Children are active, constructive learners.*

*Language is used for many social purposes that are expressed by many language patterns.*

*Knowledge is organized and constructed by individual learners through social interaction.*

In this chapter we examine these principles in more detail, and then extend and elaborate on them throughout the book. We begin by considering how children learn to use oral, or spoken, language.

## How Do Children Learn Spoken Language?

Regardless of race, class, or family background, children learn their native language during infancy and the preschool years with ease and success. Without special tutoring or formal instruction they learn not only the structure of language but also how to use it for numerous communicative purposes. They learn language within a natural environment of language use. An integrated language perspective applies to the classroom principles operating in early language acquisition. Therefore, the first question we must address is: What are the characteristics of a natural environment of language use? Infants, who initially do not know what a language is or what it is for, discover both by *interacting* with their immediate family and other members of their community. The medium of these interactions is *conversation*. Thus, our first step is to examine what goes on in our everyday face-to-face conversations.

What is the nature of conversation? How are conversations organized? Try to envision a normal conversation between two adults (a male and a female in this example). Consider the pattern of a typical conversation: First, the speaker expresses or translates the meaning of his experience, intentions, and ideas through a conventionally agreed-

*Spoken language is learned within a natural environment of language use.*

**General organization of conversations**

*Intersubjectivity is understanding another's perspective so that meanings—which includes ideologies or values—can be shared.*

Egginis (1994); Fairclough (1989, 1992); Lemke (1995); Luke, 1996

Bakhtin (1986); Hasan (1995)

*Conversations require collaboration and negotiation.*

Wells (1981)

*Even very young children actively participate in conversations.*

upon communication system so that these experiences, intentions, and ideas can then be shared with the listener, who is also an active meaning maker. The listener uses this coded message offered by the speaker and other cues provided in the situation to construct the meaning that she believes the speaker to have intended. She then signals in some way—by gesture or what she says next—that the meaning of the speaker has been understood. This exchange between a speaker and listener (who take turns as speaker and listener) is what linguists and psychologists call *intersubjectivity*. It means that I (the speaker) know that you (the listener) know what I mean, and you know that I know that you know. For any conversation to have any success at all, speakers and listeners have to be sure that they are talking about the same thing—referring to the same meanings. An integral part of these meanings that are being considered in this intersubjectively are the values or *ideologies* that each participant expresses through language.

Actually, this account of a typical conversation is too simplistic. It sounds as if the speaker's meanings are totally unknown to the listener until that speaker has completed his linguistic utterances during his turn in the conversation (and vice versa, for the listener's turn as speaker). In fact, at the very point of utterance, at the very beginning of a conversation, meanings are created for both participants. This is because, based on the situation or circumstances of the conversation, the listener usually has a good idea of what the speaker is going to say, the speaker can also predict what the listener will say next, and so forth. Most of these predictions are subconscious, operating below the level of awareness, and they account for most of what is understood in conversations. The ideologies the two members of the conversation may bring to the conversation are also subconscious, perhaps in this case because they are of a different gender and may see the topic from different perspectives.

This example also characterizes intersubjectivity in conversations as an all-or-nothing affair. That is not the case, rather, the intersubjectivity achieved by participants in conversations is always a matter of degree. We can all recall an extreme case, a conversation in which we felt that we and our conversational partner were not talking about the same thing at all. Nevertheless, most conversations are successful because most of the time intersubjectivity has been established.

Thus, an important aspect of a typical conversation is that it is a *collaborative* activity between participants who take turns offering, modifying, extending, and sustaining a meaning that is coconstructed by their joint efforts. In any conversation, participants must *negotiate* the meanings that are expressed. Again, it's done subconsciously—because each person has different ideas, experiences, and values. Also, each person has different purposes and expectations about what the conversation is to achieve. As with intersubjectivity, these processes of collaboration and negotiation are a matter of degree. However, in most typical conversation interactions, each participant subconsciously makes constant adjustments to take account of the perspective of the other.

How do these ideas of intersubjectivity, collaboration, and negotiation function in learning spoken language? The following is a conversation between Mark, aged twenty-three months, and his mother (taken from Wells's longitudinal study of language development). This conversation occurred in the kitchen after breakfast while Mark's mother was involved in domestic tasks. Helen, Mark's nine-month-old sister, was also there, seated in her high chair. The conversation begins with Mark's discovery that when he looks into a mirror, he can see both himself and his mother. (See Figure 1.1.)

Even though Mark has limited linguistic resources—he uses one- or two-word utterances, and there is much repetition—it is clear that he is an active participant in a coherent conversation. His remarks are full of meaning and his mother is able to pick up that meaning and respond to it. They negotiate and collaborate to construct this meaning. Intersubjectivity occurs through his mother's responses in units 5 and 9 of Figure 1.1. It is lost later when she introduces a new topic (that Helen has fallen asleep) in units 17 and 18, but by unit 23, intersubjectivity has been achieved again. Now, Mark can add information to his topic (*Jubs bread*) and his mother can take the meaning and reply with more information about the topic he has initiated.

1	Mark: Mummy(v)		[Mark is looking in a mirror and sees reflection of himself and his mother]
2	Mummy		
3		Mother: What?	
4	Mark: There, there Mark		
5		Mother: Is that Mark?	
6	Mark: Mummy		
7		Mother: Mm	
8	Mark: Mummy		
9		Mother: Yes that's Mummy	
10	Mark: *		
11	Mummy		
12	Mummy(v)		
13		Mother: Mm	
14	Mark: There Mummy		
15	Mummy(v)		
16	There, Mark there		
17		Mother: Look at Helen	
18		She's going to sleep (long pause)	
19	Mark: [e ə æ](=look at that)		[Mark can see birds in the garden]
20	Birds Mummy(v)		
21		Mother: Mm	
22	Mark: Jubs (=birds)		
23		Mother: What are they doing?	
24	Mark: Jubs bread		
25		Mother: Oh look	
26		They're eating the berries aren't they?	
27	Mark: Yeh		
28		Mother: That's their food	
29		They have berries for dinner	
30	Mark: Oh		

Figure 1.1

Source: Wells, 1981, p. 102

Thus, this conversation between Mark and his mother is like an ordinary conversation. Turn-taking is well established, topics are sustained over turns, and both participants seem to understand each other's contributions. This successful interaction did not happen overnight. Its roots can be found in the time when Mark was a tiny baby.

### Early Communication Developments

The past thirty years of research have indicated that intersubjectivity can be seen very early in infancy. Children have an innate ability to know another human being. Researchers have carefully studied the behavior of two-month-old babies and their mothers on videotape. They have been able to analyze how the babies move their whole bodies—how they move their mouths and faces, their hands and legs—along with those of the mothers' movements, and they have demonstrated that strong reciprocal, highly synchronized, interactional patterns exist between participants. The mother (or father, or another important caregiver) may talk to or smile at the young baby, who in turn may gurgle and move mouth and face (and other body parts) in such a way that researchers have termed the interaction a primitive conversation, or protoconversation. Thus, at the very beginning of life the infant's reciprocal behavior shows an ability to take account of another's perspective. These early interpersonal relations constitute a *primary intersubjectivity* and provide the initial communication framework by which children learn their language and how to make meaning in their culture.

The past several decades of research have shown that young babies also appear to know much more about the properties of objects than was earlier thought. Very young babies are endowed with an ability to hypothesize about how objects "work" in their world. At approximately six months, infants begin to interact with objects in a different way. As a result, a new kind of intersubjectivity is ushered in that influences language development in important ways. Before six months, a baby interacts with ob-

See Bates (1976) & Trevarthan (1979a, 1980) for more information on early infant communication.

*Learning language and learning one's culture evolve out of early interpersonal communication.*

Bower (1974, 1978); Kagan (1972); Stern (1985); Trevarthan (1979a, 1980); Trevarthan & Hubley (1978)

Trevarthan (1979a, 1979b, 1980); Trevarthan & Hubley (1978)

**Secondary intersubjectivity**

jects *or* humans, but not with objects and people *simultaneously*. At this new stage, objects begin to be incorporated into the earlier, purely interpersonal intersubjectivity to form a new type of intersubjectivity called *secondary intersubjectivity*. As parent and baby interact with objects in everyday activities the baby gains important understandings about action schemes involving objects. For example, the parent as an actor acts on an object such as a ball or cup, and the baby serves as recipient of this action. Then the roles of participants get reversed as the baby becomes the agent of the action on the ball (giving the ball back, for example), so that now the parent is the beneficiary of the action.

Another important aspect of language has its roots in this secondary intersubjectivity stage. Babies develop an understanding with their caregiver that they can share a focus on an object or person—a topic—that can then be commented on. That is, Baby, Mommy, or ball can serve as a topic about which something can be said: it can go or be up or pretty. Therefore, in the middle of the first year the young infant is already discovering two important universal features of language: that these basic relationships between agents (persons), actions, and objects can be encoded or expressed in language, and that an object in the world can serve as a *joint* topic, a focus that the baby can share *with* another person and that can subsequently be commented on. Much of what young children learn about the properties of objects is mediated by conversations about various everyday physical activities, and is therefore largely constructed in social interaction.

The example of Mark's conversation shows how his present turn-taking, conversational exchanges with his mother have been supported by earlier reciprocity in routines of activity and vocalizations with another person. That is, Mark's language system has built on and extended these earlier understandings. His mother's showing that she values what he says in general, as well as the specific meanings he has expressed, is also present at the early beginnings of Mark's development of speech.

Mark also has clearly moved beyond what is called the *protolanguage* stage of language development that has been described by linguist Michael Halliday. Protolanguage typically begins at the end of a child's first year or the beginning of the second year before conventional words, or vocabulary, and grammar develop. Protolanguage emerges when the child pairs certain sounds with certain meanings, or functions, in a regularized, systematic way. Mark's utterance in unit 19 of Figure 1.1 is a remnant of his protolanguage. That is, a particular set of sounds is used by Mark to mean "look at that." Babies can do things with language with such a system, although usually only immediate family members and caregivers can understand and interpret their communication efforts. One-year-olds, for example, can use their own sound-meaning constructions to give commands, get something, ask about something, or express a "we-ness" with another.

**Back to Mark**

Mark's language has developed from a protolanguage sound-meaning system to a rudimentary level of organization that relates meaning and sounds in a different and more complex way. Here are the beginnings of a *grammar*, a structural language system that allows him to mean two things at once. For example, Mark's *Jubs bread* (unit 24) enables him to express the meaning relationship of an agent, *Jubs* (his word for "birds"), and an object, *bread*, and at the same time express the pragmatic meaning of indicating this aspect of his experience (the birds and bread) to his mother.

This primitive grammar will be gradually expanded and developed as Mark has more conversations about his everyday experiences. The next conversation (Figure 1.2) between Mark and his mother occurred two months later and gives us an idea of how children increase their mastery of the language system. Here Mark (now twenty-five months old) is looking out of the window. Earlier he had been watching a neighbor working in his garden and now the man has disappeared. Look how Mark has progressed in only two months! His utterances are longer and more complex (see units

Bruner (1975a, 1975b, 1983, 1990)

Babies learn important universal properties of language through social interaction.

Halliday (1975, 1993)

Protolanguage is a baby's system of regularized sound-meaning constructions.

Before adultlike grammar and vocabulary emerge, protolanguage provides a set of functions through which to communicate.

Grammar: Language both classifies experience into categories and expresses that experience to others.

Wells (1981)

1	Mark: Where man gone?		[Mark has seen a man working in his garden]
2	Where man gone?		
3		Mother: I don't know	
4		I expect he's gone inside because it's snowing	
5	Mark: Where man gone?		
6		Mother: In the house	
7	Mark: Uh?		
8		Mother: Into his house	
9	Mark: No		
10	No		
11	Gone to shop Mummy(v)		[The local shop is close to Mark's house]
12		Mother: Gone where?	
13	Mark: Gone shop		
14		Mother: To the shop?	
15	Mark: Yeh		
16		Mother: What's he going to buy?	
17	Mark: Er-biscuits		
18		Mother: Biscuits mm	
19	Mark: Uh?		
20		Mother: Mm	
21		What else?	
22	Mark: Er-meat		
23		Mother: Mm	
24	Mark: Meat		
25	Er-sweeties		
26	Buy a big bag sweets		
27		Mother: Buy sweets?	
28	Mark: Yeh		
29	M-er-man-buy the man buy sweets		
30		Mother: Will he?	
31	Mark: Yeh		
32	Daddy buy sweets		
33	Daddy buy sweets		
34		Mother: Why?	
35	Mark: Oh er-[a] shop		
36	Mark: Mark do buy some-sweet-sweeties		
37	Mark buy some-um-		
38	Mark buy some-um-		
39	I did		

Figure 1.2

Source: Wells, 1981, p. 107

11, 26, and 36 especially). He is a better respondent when his mother asks for information (units 17 and 22). Moreover, most of his talk deals with persons and events that are not present in the here and now but recalled or imagined. Here is evidence of Mark's developing understanding of a certain *script* in his culture; a knowledge of what typically happens at shops. A script, sometimes also called a *schema*, represents what Mark has generalized about the events that he has observed at the local shop and perhaps at others like it that he has visited. Mark's mother's behavior is critical in supporting this "story" about the shop. She provides a reasonable explanation for his question about where the man has gone. In units 9 and 10 Mark rejects it and provides in unit 11 an alternative—*gone to shop*. She checks this meaning in units 12 to 14 and then joins his game, again also giving him a message about how she values this kind of fun through language

Scripts specify obligatory and optional actors, actions, and props or objects relevant to particular goals and circumstances. Mark's mother helps him by suggesting the action of buying (unit 16) and then urges him to come up with different props. Mark

Nelson (1986); Swales (1990)

*Scripts, or schemas, are generalized event knowledge.*

*Both learning language and learning through language are fostered in conversations.*

Halliday (1975, 1982, 1993); Wells (1986, 1994)

Bruner (1983); Wells (1981, 1994); Wells & Chang-Wells (1992)

*All language is communicated through texts.*

*A text is a social exchange of meaning.*

Halliday (1996); Halliday & Hasan (1985); Hasan (1995)

*A text represents a process of semantic choices.*

*A text always relates to a context of situation.*

*Context of situation: (1) What's happening? (2) Who is taking part? (3) What role is language playing?*

*Language is a resource used to express meanings to others.*

*Register is language variation.*

tries out three actors as customers for the services obtained at the shop (the goal and circumstances of the script). First, the man (the disappearing neighbor), then his daddy, and finally Mark himself buy certain props. Mark tries out several props for the man to buy, but only Daddy and Mark buy sweets, obviously a favorite of Mark's.

These two conversations illustrate how children's participation in everyday conversations enables them to learn language *and* learn through language. In fact, these two types of learning are almost indistinguishable in the natural environment of language use. Notice how skillful the mother is in supporting this learning. She is "teaching" but not directing language lessons on sounds, words, or sentences, or lessons on birds or shops. She "leads from behind" by being "contingently responsive" to Mark's efforts. That is, she tracks and pays attention to what Mark is trying to express about what he already knows and what he is attempting to know. By addressing his meanings—which include his values and beliefs—about the world, she expresses her values and helps Mark acquire a system of language structure to express or realize these meanings.

## Spoken Communication

People express meanings in both oral and written language through text. We do not speak or write isolated words or sentences. Instead, we speak and write through connected discourse or text. Individual words and sentences in a text can be understood only when they are related to other words, sentences, or the text as a whole. However, oral and written texts are different because they serve different purposes in our culture. This section examines the nature of oral language texts so that they can be contrasted with written language texts and the reading and writing processes in a later section.

### *What Is a Text?*

A text, either spoken or written, is a social exchange of meanings—a semantic unit. *A text is both a product and a process.* It is a product in that it is an output of a particular social interaction that can be recorded and studied. The two conversations between Mark and his mother in the preceding section were texts in this sense. In fact, every language example in this textbook is such a product (although no oral language texts could ever be duplicated exactly in print, of course).

It is the second sense of text that we want to emphasize, however. A text is also a process in that it represents a *continuous process of semantic choice* based on factors that are operating in a particular context of situation. For any context of situation, we can ask three general questions: (1) *What's happening?* What is the setting or subject matter? What are the topics being discussed? (2) *Who is taking part?* What is the personal relationship of the participants? (3) *What role is the language playing?* What do the participants expect their language to do for them in the situation? What is the purpose of the language being used?

On the basis of these three contextual factors, participants select certain wordings or expressions to relate their meanings. Consequently, Mark's and his mother's linguistic contributions were choices made because of particular factors operating in each conversational setting. And we couldn't have evaluated or even understood their wordings unless we also considered this situational information.

Language is a meaning potential or resource, and drawing on this resource, speakers make certain linguistic choices on the basis of what's going on in a situation. Different situations result in different linguistic choices, different wording patterns. For example, a college student's discussion of homework with a roommate in a dormitory would be different from this same student's conversation with a blind date while en route to a movie, which, in turn, would be different from the student's talk when meeting with the college dean over some academic issue. Our language varies depending on the context in which it is used. Language variation that exists in varying contexts is called *register*.