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Scollon's goal in this book is the development of a theory about mediated discourse and its relation to practice theory. His scope is interaction involving "mediational means or cultural tools such as language, gesture, material objects and institutions" (Scollon, 2001: 7). His intention is to show how practical action and the actions accomplished by language are related. His own means for conveying this theory is the analysis of a corpus of data on the ontogenesis of language in a child.

These data are Scollon's own rich diachronic material on a one-year-old child. A superb study of the ontogenesis of syntax appeared as his dissertation in the seventies (1975, 1979), involving regular tape recordings, phonetic transcription, and situational notes by his wife, Suzanne Scollon. In this important project, Scollon upset previous notions of syntax by showing that in at least one case early sentences developed from one word utterances which followed one another, before arriving at two word, prosodically unified sentences. The context of these built-up utterances was vividly described interaction in the context of activities. But after this work, and later papers with his own child, he turned to other topics, primarily in issues of culture and literacy, and did not keep contact with child language research.

It is reassuring to the first generation of researchers on spontaneous conversational interaction to know that archival transcripts and tapes continue to be useful, though in this case it is to the original linguist. In the history of child language research, it was often the rawest of data which were the most useful to others, unfiltered by theories that didn’t survive time.

This book is projected at an audience interested in practice theory and critical discourse, in Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Wertsch (1998), and Fairclough and Wodak (1997). It is not intended for an audience of students of developmental pragmatics or child language, if we judge from the references. The margins of my copy are filled with notes on citations related to what Scollon discusses--to Schieffelin and Ochs (1986), Snow
and Ferguson (1977) and later work. Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) recently reminded us that although culture is transmitted and in part created by children, anthropologists rarely pay attention to them. Here again we see that children are incidental to other purposes.

Yet, although Scollon does not intend to contribute to the scholarly literature on children, his middle chapters do so in important and focused ways. He takes four perspectives on his data, forming a chapter from each perspective.

The first he calls "the ontogenesis of a social practice," with a focus on the activity of handing an object to another person. We see in his data how the adults around the child interpret the child's utterances and actions and bring them into correspondence with their own goals in the handing activity. The effect is a kind of mutual accommodation of both child and adult, much as we find that a physically handicapped parent and her infant adjust their bodies to each other over time.

Handing, he finds, can be accompanied by silence, by naming of the object, by identifying a function for the object, or by interpersonal or behavioral directives. The child may also have speech accompaniments which are ambiguous or none of these, such as the "/h/ + V" described by Carter (1979) as accompanying giving and taking. These varieties, of course, start with the partner. With time, we see the child expand her own variety of uses of handing. Scollon argues that this is the ontogeny of habitus, reflecting what the child's interaction history has been, and so he suggests there would be a slightly different history for another child in a different milieu. For instance, would the discourse around handing be different in Japan, where Choi and Gopnik (1995) tell us that mothers talk about functions before naming, and children have a vocabulary burst in verbs before the burst for nouns?

This richly detailed kind of history is certainly what Tomasello (2001) had in mind when he recently claimed that the push of developmental cognitive psychology to innateness is because researchers underdescribe the situation of learning. Scollon's specificity is just what is needed. Tomasello (1992) also used such an approach in recording his daughter's verbs. One could start with any focus, of course. By starting with motion, rather than with words, Scollon can begin much earlier. Even the symbolic system can begin earlier if it is done with gesture before sound (Goodwyn, Acredolo & Brown, 2000).

Bourdieu used the term habitus, cognate with habit, and derived from an individual's history and conditioning (Bourdieu, 1990), for what others have called social customs. Scollon considers that the habitus is a
complex network of social practices, or "an individual's accumulated experience of social actions" (Scollon, 2001: 6) and on pp. 80-83 he explores a variety of relations between practices such as simultaneity, disruption, and integration. He points out that often several practices are underway at once. In the analysis of my videotapes in families with young children, we found it almost always possible to situate turns with offers and requests within the nexus of activity motivating each act. However, we could not succeed, for other purposes, in segmenting the talk sequentially into episodes, according to activities. It appeared that the reason is that, at least in families with children, home activities and thus practices are intertwined so that often there is no break between them temporally; rather there is overlap and alternation. A familiar example of intertwining activities of adults is sociable talk and food management talk at a dinner table.

The issue recurs in a later chapter proposing another perspective called the "nexus of practice" in which Scollon shows us that for the baby the focal practice, handing, occurs in constellations with a caregiver's nurturance, body care, and cajoling, for instance. It is certainly indisputable that the nexus is culturally variable, and might yield a different ontogeny in another location.

The third perspective he takes is on the ontogeny of the role of actor by the child. A unique analysis is presented here of the variety of ways in which the child's voice is taken up by the adults. This is a major contribution to the large literature on baby talk or motherese which has not, as far as I know, considered a conversational perspective on the functions of the voices used in the presence of or in allusion to children. Scollon suggests no less than seven different alignments of the child into the interaction, as bystander, addressee, ventriloquized voice, target of mimicry, topic, allusion, and as a foil to mediate the interaction of others (Scollon, 2001: 94). Surely the linguistic properties indexing these alignments will differ; here there is a whole program of possible study. The data from his own child suggest that in baby talk cultures—not all societies have baby talk—these alignments can appear as early as the third day of life. Many studies of parent-infant interaction have pointed out that talk to babies begins from birth (just as talk to animals does not presuppose response). What we have not seen before is a location of baby talk in such a subtle analysis of its various forms and functions.

In developing the ontogeny of these functions from his diachronic data, Scollon finds that the talk gradually gave agency to the child, with radical changes within a brief period between 12 and 14.5 months. The
child in these scenes moves from being largely an object to becoming able to display her own voice and her own volition, and to resist the imputed voice given her by others. Budwig (1989) has shown us there are major family differences in the parental treatment of child agency, which are consequential for the ontogeny of features of the linguistic system reflecting agency, such as pronouns. Scollon’s microscopic analysis of family practices could reveal how such family and cultural differences develop.

The fourth focus is on the objects which serve as mediational means both in adult situations, such as eating and drinking, manufacture, art, medicine, repair, and service encounters, and in many children’s activities. Discourse is secondary to practice, in Scollon’s view, at least for children, since he finds the talk is mainly concerned with agency and with constructing mediational means by such speech as naming. Some objects will take on major roles developmentally, such as books and pencils, so the developmental course of their insertion into practices is revealing.

Scollon used this analysis of child-adult interaction as an exemplary case history of the creation of habitus. He implies that this analysis can lead us into institutional research and other macro societal issues. It seems likely that in the studies of institutional functioning by conversation analysts we could find comparable instances of the development of a group or of the inclusion of a new member, which require equally detailed study of process at several levels. He does not actually demonstrate this claim, except with an analogy to coffee consumption. Here we have a brilliant analysis of the ontogenesis of a child’s handing, naming, and agency, but an author who does not notice the relevance of this analysis for developmental pragmatics and child language research. The reader is left with curiosity about what studies of adult practice are or could be analogous. Perhaps many readers will be able to make the connection.
References


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