Along with the development of language itself, there emerges a capacity to attend to language and speech as objects of reflection. The development of language awareness is, of course, part of the general development of consciousness and self-consciousness. One can distinguish levels of metalinguistic capacity, from the dimly conscious or preconscious speech monitoring which underlies self-correction, to the concentrated, analytic work of the linguist. Much of this route is traversed in the preschool years. The following aspects of language awareness appear, between the ages of two and six:

1. self-corrections and re-phrasings in the course of ongoing speech;
2. comments on the speech of others (pronunciation, dialect, language, meaning, appropriateness, style, volume, etc.);
3. explicit questions about speech and language;
4. comments on own speech and language;
5. response to direct questions about language.

This paper is a discussion of the development of language awareness in my daughter, Heida, between the ages of 2;9 and 5;7. Examples are drawn from my diary observations of her linguistic development, reflecting the range of metalinguistic phenomena observable in one preschool child. Heida lived abroad between the ages of 2;9 and 3;11—chiefly in Turkey, but with travel through a number of other countries. The resulting contact with a series of foreign languages makes this case different both from normal monolingual and bilingual development, and may have stimulated particularly early attention to linguistic phenomena. I discuss several aspects of this attention below.
METALINGUISTIC VOCABULARY

It would be valuable to study the language available to children for the discussion of language and speech. Heida used the verb mean at an early age, due to contact with foreign languages; however, it was also used to request definitions of English words. By 3;4 the following metalinguistic vocabulary items were attested: mean, be called, name, word, say, speak, voice, and look like (meaning sound like).

Mean

The use of mean was present from the second day in Europe, at age 2;9. At first it was used to elicit pairings of English and foreign words, in either direction. After having been in Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, and Yugoslavia, she would initiate series of questions, such as: "What does bread mean in German? What does bread mean in Yugoslavian?" and so forth.

This question frame was later replaced by frames using say, call, and word: "How say X?" "What do you call X?" "What is X called?" and "What the word for X?". Apparently she understood that naming a language (German, Turkish) in one of these question frames would elicit a strange-sounding word which could be used with practical effect in a communicative setting (ordering food, buying things, etc.). (Dictionaries, being the frequent source of such verbal counters, became prized possessions).

She did not understand, however, that her own speech could be part of such a language game. English words could not be distinguished from the concepts to which they make reference. This is most clearly revealed in an observation from age 3;4, after she had been in Turkey for over four months.

§1 (3;4). She doesn’t accept her English words as a language, but apparently treats them as something like pure word meaning. She asks: "How a say red in English?" She doesn’t accept red as an answer, but insists on something else to be called an English word, along with words in other languages. Later in the day she asks: "What is spoon called in English?".

In response to questions of the form, "What does X mean?", I would sometimes provide an English definition rather than a foreign word. Heida readily accepted both translations and definitions as responses, and came to use mean for both functions in her own speech:

§2 (3;3). She offered the following spontaneous translations, which is correct: "Geli means ome and kog means run."

§3 (3;3). She has been confused for some time about the meaning of before and after, and today asked explicitly: "What does before mean?"

Note that the same question is used both to request definitions and foreign equivalents.

At the same time she was able to discuss the meanings of her own statements, accepting and rejecting paraphrases as "meaning" what she was trying to say. Somewhat later, when almost 3;6, she was able to offer her own paraphrases:

§4 (3;5). She explains her own idiosyncratic usage, "Even I want some milk." She accepts a paraphrase with really, and says it means: "I want some milk—very much I want some milk."

It is evident that part of Heida’s understanding of mean related to the appropriate usage of words, either English or foreign. The requests for definitions and discussions of paraphrases indicate that she was not applying mean solely to elicit pairs of English and foreign words. It was not always clear, however, what kind of answer she expected to a "What does X mean" question. Beginning at 3;1 she began to take English words apart, expecting each part to have a "meaning," as if unwilling to accept the existence of duality of patterning:

§5 (3;1). Heida asks: "Cookie. What does cook mean?" When given an answer, she went on to ask: "What does ku mean?" She did this with several other words, e.g., "piger. What does z mean?" She even dissected 3 into e and 3: "Hit—what does wit mean—wit—witch?" She also broke down w: "What does oo mean? Wall—oo... all."

§6 (3;1). She attempts to break an utterance down into phrases, words, and parts of words: "Are these little petal things? What’s are these? What’s are mean? What’s me mean?"

It was not until 4;7 that she offered a spontaneous definition: "Today I learned what super means. It means really, really, really something."

Say

Say first appeared in reference to writing, at 3;1. Looking at signs, she would ask, "What does it say?" Say was also used as another way of asking for translations: "How say X?" These uses seem tied to the immediate speech situation, but the following example may indicate a generic use of say as habitual speech behavior. At 3;1 she was learning to count in Turkish, and seemed to be struck by the arbitrariness of ordering of number words:

"Why cause you don’t say first kaap, itti, dort (five, two, four)?"

At 3;4 say was used to refer to inner speech: "I said to myself, 'I want my mama and my papa to play with me'."

Use of Other Metalinguistic Terms

Speak was used only in the context of specific language names:
§7 (3;3). She asks: "Do we speak English because we're from Englly?" I explain, and then ask: "Where's German from?" She answers: "German... German." I go on: "Russian?" "Rusy." "Turkish?" "Turkey." "Italian?" "Italian." "Talmey." 

From the first month in Europe, at 2;10, she noted that some foreign words "sound funny." On one occasion, at 3;3, she created terms to characterize foreign accent (also indicating memory for accent):

§8 (3;3). I was telling a joke in a Yiddish accent and Heida said: "That looks like Great-Grandma" (who speaks with a Yiddish accent). There was no one on the street who looked like her great-grandmother. Heida added: "That's like Great-Grandma's voice." Eight days earlier she had heard a five minute tape recording of her great-grandmother's voice. Apparently this was sufficient for her to recognize the foreign accent.

Meta-linguistic Comprehension

In the context of various informal tests, Heida showed ability to comprehend instructions to attend to features of language or aspects of language use. At 3;5 she was able to play a game with the instruction, "Give me a word that sounds like X." At 4;3 she was able to answer questions about "Which is right to say" in reference to past tense forms (discussed below). At 4;4, with limited reading ability, she could play a category game using first letters as cues, as in, "Give me a food starting with A." At 4;5 she understood backover as an instruction both to spell and to pronounce words backwards. At the same age she was easily trained to understand opposite as an instruction to provide antonym responses.

Spontaneous Attention to Adult Speech

The examples discussed above of attention to foreign speech and accent indicate that Heida was actively monitoring adult speech. Furthermore, there were many examples of explicit discussion of things which puzzled her, including metaphor, anomaly, synonymy, and unfamiliar words. At 3;2 she was disturbed by apparent synonymy, asking: "Why cause you have two names, orange and tangerine?", apparently thinking that the two names apply to the same fruit. An observation from 4;2 shows attention to new words:

§9 (4;2). She monitors adult speech closely for unfamiliar words and asks for their meanings—both in speech addressed to her and in overheard conversations. For example, I say: "She's really tired. Maybe she'll sleep really soundly, and then she won't have any dreams." She asks: "What does soundly mean?"

At 4;5 she was struck by an apparent anomaly:

§10 (4;4). While drawing, she overhears an adult conversation in which someone says, "Klee says..." Heida interjects: "Clay doesn't have mouths!"

And at 4;9:

§11 (4;9). She picks up on usage which violates her sense of grammaticality. On the TV news she hears the word person and mulls over it for some time, since she had recently discovered that people is the normal plural of person.

Spontaneous Attention to Own Speech

The lowest level of attention to own speech comes from spontaneous corrections and re-phrasings. An observation from 3;1 suggests that self-monitoring was relatively late to develop:

§12 (3;1). If her verbal formulations are not at once understood, she lies on the floor and cries or screams—but doesn't attempt to reformulate her statement.

This suggestion is supported by a diary note from 3;2:

§13 (3;2). Self-corrections are still rare, but note: "It's watching we cutting... our cutting... we cut... It's watching our cutting."

This level of attention is well established by 3;4; for example:

§14 (3;4). Successive reformulations: "Some friend of mine gave it to me. A girl friend gave it to me. A girl my friend gave it to me. A girl my friend gave it to me." Self-correction: "You didn't give me a fork. You didn't give me a fork."

Attention to the sound qualities of words seemed to appear earlier than attention to meaning or grammar. I have already noted spontaneous analysis of words into syllables and sounds, beginning at 3;1. At the same age she engaged in rhyming play, noticing sound similarities in words in her own speech:

§15 (3;1). "Eggs are beggs. Enough—duff. More—bore." Other attention to word details: "It's just the same—tuna tuna." She made up the name hokadin and broke it into syllables: hoke—a—din.

Similar attention to word and sound segmentation appeared about a year later, in connection with acquisition of reading.

At 4;3 she was aware of her own speech articulation skills, noting progress:

§16 (4;3). She clearly repeated "Look at that," trying to draw my attention to something, but really trying to draw attention to her first clear pronunciation of th."
DEGREE OF PERSONAL CONTROL OVER LANGUAGE

The immediate impact of the foreign language experience on Heida was the introduction of non-English vocabulary. From the second day in Europe, at age 2;9, she invented a new word for milk, insisting that it be called (bap). She frequently babbled in foreign sounds, and continued to invent words of her own. She clearly had no difficulty in accepting alternate sound patterns as names of things in different languages, and could play the game of asking for translation equivalents from 2;9 on. At the same time, as indicated in the discussion of mean above (§1), English words seemed to be exempt from this flexibility of usage. Bread really is "bread," though it can be called brot or hleb or äkmak in certain special languages games. In similar fashion, Heida was troubled by synonymy (orange and tangerine example, above) and rejected metaphor, insisting on literal meanings.

Yet, at the same age (3;4-3;5) she began to take a pretense attitude toward name changes, tentatively willing to unhook word and referent, at least in play:

§17 (3;4). She plays with the idea of changing names with her best friend, Jess: "I wanna be called Jess. Sometimes Jess can be called Jas. Jas and I can be called Jess. I will have two names: Heida and Jess."

§18 (3;5). She is wearing pants but wants to be wearing a dress so that she can dance. She says to me: "Call it a dress, please." I reply, "It's not a dress." She says, "Pretend."

It is impossible to know to what extent these uncertain attitudes about the fixed or variable nature of word-referent relationships were due to her multilingual exposure. She actively reflected on this problem, showing a concern with justification for word usage, both within and between languages. Her questions suggest a nascent awareness of the separability of sound vehicle and concept. At 3;2 she questioned both the use of a proper name ("Why cause he name was George?") and a compound noun ("Why cause it's called Thanksgiving?"); and at 3;3 she questioned Turkish usage ("Why in Turkish kaka is BM?"). Although the data are scanty, these and other observations (especially those on word segmentation) at least suggest that a child of this age is able to reflect on the sound-meaning relationship.

AN EMERGING SENSE OF GRAMMATICALITY

A sense of grammaticality is implicit in self-corrections, and perhaps in puzzles over unassimilable aspects of adult speech. In the case of Heida's developing awareness of the English past tense, however, one can trace a path from initial unawareness, to a sense of correctness accompanied by uncertainty in regard to particular words, to an explicit normative sense. The story begins at 4;2, when Heida's speech was rich in overgeneralizations. (Presumably these forms had been used unselfconsciously for some time.) An observation at 4;2 notes: "She adamantly refuses to accept irregular past tense—i.e., the correct forms—insisting on her own, long-term overregularizations." A sense of appropriateness is already present—but for her forms, rather than the adult forms.

A few weeks later, at 4;3, she judges adult forms as correct in a test situation, though she does not use all of these forms herself:

§21 (4;3). I ask Heida a series of questions of the following form: "Suppose you were eating something yesterday. Which is right to say: 'Yesterday I ate something' or 'Yesterday I eaten something'?

The order of correct and incorrect verb forms varied. The sentences frames varied, but all avoided mention of the verb in the past tense. She accepted the task at once, and almost always gave me one word answers confidently supplying the correct form of the verb (with two exceptions). That is, her response to the example was ate. This is unusual in that she rarely uses some of these verbs correctly in her own speech; yet she is clearly aware of the correct forms. Note that about a month ago she was adamant in defending her overregularizations (e.g., comed). Also, in dictating a letter today, she corrected herself twice: "... came... comed... come... comed... came."
Informal testing of this sort continued, with no feedback, but probably
drew her attention to discrepancies between her forms and adult forms. At
§22 (4:4). In the past tense test she accepts correct alternatives and
rejects incorrect alternatives, even if she doesn't use the correct
forms in her speech. For example, she offers known but accepts knew;
she offers winned, rejects won, and accepts won. She will occasionally
change her initial form when challenged ("Are you sure?" "Is there an-
other way?"). Thus she has a sense of grammaticality which is not regu-
larly reflected in her use of past tense forms.
By §24 (4:5) she began to judge both her forms and the standard forms as correct:
§23 (4:5). She now accepts several past tense forms as correct for
irregular verbs. For example, she says stringed; I offer strung; she con-
cludes: "String is OK too." Apparently she has decided, for now,
that some verbs have equally correct alternate past tense forms.
§24 (4:5). Her sense of past tenses is becoming more open. For example,
on the past tense today, she accepts both finded and found. I ask: "How
come there are two ways, like finded and found? Are they both right?"
She replies: "I don't know. I think they are." For many verbs, now,
she accepts both forms on the test.

This is a curious intermediate stage in forming an explicit sense of
grammaticality. It continued for several months, at least until 4:9. During
this period of concerted attention to the past tense--both spontaneously and
in periodic testing--apparently both forms sounded correct to her. It is as
if she had a good statistical sense that both standard and overgeneralized
forms occurred frequently, but had failed to note that the overgeneralizations
came from her own speech and the standard forms from the speech of adults.
Perhaps a sense of familiarity with both forms led her to judge both as gram-
matical (that is, as "right"), suggesting that judgments of acceptability
may be based as much on familiarity as on consistency with norms. A charming
and rather amazing example from 4:7 graphically reveals the flickering nature
of the sense of grammaticality at this stage. Overgeneralizations planted
in adult speech elicited protest from Heida only if the standard form hap-
pened to be momentarily present in her consciousness:
§25 (4:7). If she has just used the correct past tense of an irregular
verb, she is annoyed with me if I respond to her with the overregular-
azation; but if she has used the overregularization, she does not object
to my following suit. If I follow her incorrect form with the correct
form, she will often switch to the correct form. The following dialogue
is a good example of how the two forms flit in and out of consciousness
in the course of natural conversation:

Dan: Hey, what happened last night after we left? Did Barbara
[the baby sitter] read you that whole story? Remember you
were reading Babar?

Heida: Yeah... and, um, he... she also... you know... mama, mama, uh, this morning after breakfast, read the
whole, um, book of the three little pigs and that, you know
that book, that... [digression of about one minute]

Heida: I don't know when she read...
Dan: You don't know when she what?
Heida: ... she read the book. But you know that book—that
green book—that has the gold goose, and the three little
pigs, and the three little bears, and that story about the
king?
Dan: M-hm.
Heida: That's the book she read. She read the whole, the whole
book.
Dan: That's the book she readed huh?
Heida: Yeah... read! [annoyed].
Dan: Oh.
Heida: Dum-dum!

[brief interlude about dressing]

Dan: Barbara readed you Babar?
Heida: Babar, yeah. You know, cause you readed some of it too.
Dan: Well I just started it.
Heida: Yeah. She readed all the rest.
Dan: She readed the whole thing to you, huh?
Heida: Yeah... nu-uh—you readed some.
Dan: Oh, that's right; yeah, I readed the beginning of it.
Heida: Readed? [annoyed surprise] Read! [insisting on the
obvious].
Dan: Oh yeah—read.
Heida: Will you stop that, papa?
Dan: Sure.

Beyond 4:9, she began to accept a single standard of correctness, recognizing
her own overgeneralizations as errors. Perhaps these examples represent a
general phenomenon of the emergence of linguistic norms in various domains.

LANGUAGE AWARENESS AND READING

Learning to read requires awareness to several levels of language.
Early attempts to segment words into syllables and small units of sound pre-
ceded the acquisition of reading and writing. Detailed phonetic analysis
was reflected in early spelling. I will not explore these issues here, as
they are similar to the phenomena reported in detail by Charles Read (1971).

A few examples indicate this sort of metalinguistic attention:
§26 (4:4). She tries to spell pee and insists that it should be spelled
PHEE, emphasizing the aspiration on P, but also the end-glide on the
vowel, which she shades off into H. She spells pad as PD, not feeling
a need for a vowel, but following the tongue as it comes to rest. She
begins to sound out tea cream as /æ/, and tries to spell it with initial
A; begins to sound out angel as /æ/.

§27 (4:4). She can play a category game using first letters as cues, e.g.
"Give me a food starting with A." In playing this game, she offered *chair* as a response to, "Give me the name of a piece of furniture starting with T."

CONCLUSION

These observations are only suggestive of the nature and extent of early language awareness. The capacity to reflect on the form, meanings, and uses of language is clearly present at a very early age. More detailed investigation is needed to establish the generality and sequencing of the metalinguistic abilities reflected in this case study.

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FOOTNOTE

1. "Read" represents /red/ throughout.

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