

RETHINKING THE DEAF CHILD'S RELATION TO LANGUAGE

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1. In this paper I will try to gather some reflections that come from studies about what I will call “the deaf’s child relation to language” (Behares, 1995) in the last 40 years.

This field of research is related at the same time to historical approaches that come from different traditions. On the one hand it is related to the psycholinguistic studies of the perception of language under particularly affected conditions, since the congenitally deaf does not perceive the oral language (or he does so in extremely particular ways). On the other hand, this field is frequently incorporated into the studies of language acquisition, since it has been accepted, since 1960, that sign languages are natural languages that the deaf subjects acquire them through the same or similar strategies that the hearing people use to acquire the language used in their environment.

Until 1960 “the relation” that we have taken as the object of our work was reduced by researchers to a pathology of language and it was treated outside the realm of linguistics (by audiology, neuropsychology, speech therapy and phonoaudiology, etc.). Until that date it was very rare to hear somebody talk about “language acquisition in a deaf child” except for a fringe area of the theory of acquisition that dealt with the question of deviation from “normal development”.

With the advent of “Stockoe’s discovery” (Stokoe 1960) the situation changed radically. His findings allowed for everything related to deafness to enter the world of linguistics and directly into the area that linguistics has been granted as its own, that is, the description of a particular language. Immersed in the theoretical context of North American structural-functionalism, Stokoe and his many followers, demonstrated that sign languages were languages in a descriptive sense and that each was related to a deaf community as a as linguistic community (the speakers of that sign language).

Such linguistic descriptions (principally of American Sign Language), have enabled us to consider, for the first time, the acquisition of language by deaf children, not any more conceiving it as a mere problem or hindrance, pathology or deviation. Deaf children of deaf parents acquire these sign languages as their first language with the same procedural characteristics as any other child acquires language from his parents. However, deaf children of deaf parents represent just a small percentage of the congenital or prelinguistic deaf children (no more than a 6%).

Most of the deaf children have hearing parents, which means they have no immediate access to the sign language of the deaf community in the context of their

early interactions. What is the situation of deaf children concerning their early relation to language? Since 1970 this question has been analyzed and discussed within the studies about mother-child interaction, obviously, on the basis of the so called interactionist theories.

Even though everything related to the acquisition of sign language by deaf children of deaf parents is not without theoretical interest, this paper will be devoted to the analysis of theoretical aspects originated by the study of the interaction between hearing mother-and deaf child.

2. Because deaf children have no possibilities for a perceptive input of oral language and deaf children of hearing parents are never exposed to speakers of sign language, there are severe limitations in the acquisition of language by these children. It is for this reason that the relation between “communication” and “symbolic activity” started to be seen within the framework of interdisciplinary interactionism. The interaction between hearing mothers and deaf children started to be of great interest to interactionists since it involves some valuable theoretical questions such as the passing from “prelinguistic” processes to the “linguistic” processes, the oral and gestural modalities, the conventionalization of the “natural communicative behaviors” into the structures of a particular language, and others derived from these.

Due to its own “interdisciplinary” nature, interactionism brought into the research about hearing mother-deaf child interaction all its theoretical difficulties. The opposition between the more psychological tendencies of interactionism (those which propose a conception of interaction as communication or as an intersubjective phenomenon empirically observable) and those that remain closer to the linguistic tradition (specially the ones called “dialogical” visions of interaction) was particularly strong and interesting in the field of deafness.

Something easy to corroborate even by the common sense of deaf people and of the teachers of deaf people is the fact that almost all deaf children of hearing parents have, when they are three years old, a way of communicating of their own, different from the oral language and the sign language of the respective communities and even different from the artificial instruments of manual representation of the oral language (signed languages, manual alphabet etc.). In fact these children chat with their mothers and sometimes also with other members of the family, in their own relatively conventional system of gestures. This intuition is already general in a certain way in the area of those who work with deaf children; Tervoort (1961) objectivized this intuition under the name of “esoteric symbolism”, when still the relationship of deafness with language had not been researched systematically in the direction of linguistics.

Esoteric symbolism consists of the conventional (or more or less conventionalized) symbolic resources shared only by a mother and a child, incomprehensible by the users of any of the languages used in the social context. Another way of saying the same thing, even if Tervoort does not use the same terms, is the following: *restricted linguistic system*. In fact, Tervort describes it as a register in which there are similarities with other forms of shared cryptic speech (e.g. twins); the situation of use of a language exists and it has a structure, similar to that of a language,

without its being really one, and there is a reduction or simplification of the resources generally used by a language, even if we consider the age of the children.

Esoteric symbolism, in this way conceptualized, seems to have for Tervoort and other authors that have included it in their analyses, three possible causes: the “natural” conditions that every child has (even if he is deaf) to construct a language; the communicative needs of the mother and the child, attributed to a psychological element; and the absence of a model of language to be imitated since the mother does not have or know the language of the deaf and the child does not have natural access to the spoken language.

Of these three causes, the one most highly considered by Tervoort is the last. In this way he clearly states the difference between the nature of the process of the deaf children of hearing parents, and deaf children who have in their home a language to imitate.

A long series of studies during the 70's and 80's, addressed the interaction hearing mother-deaf child, in the context of empiricist interactionism¹. In the basis of these works there is a definition, more or less tacit, of interaction as cognitive, interpersonal “game”. The interpretation in these cases depends on the psychological theories, sometimes more pragmatic (Brunner's school, Vigotsky's school), and sometimes more directed to the cognitive pole (piagetian, formalists).

Esoteric symbolism is not seen by these authors in its specific role, but as a difficulty or deviation from the process of language acquisition. As a deviation in the acquisition of language, when the relation deaf child-language is to be analyzed, esoteric symbolism is left aside. It is not an oral language (English or another), which could be acquired in the interaction with the mother. Neither is it a sign language (ASL or another) shared by the mother and available to the child. Conclusion: the acquisition of a language, even though the child is in natural conditions for this process, does not take place.

I am not going to analyze here the psychological implications (affective or cognitive) of the impossibility to acquire a language, since those studies frequently analyze them in detail. But I would like to point out that these studies take the question out of the research on language acquisition, and place it in the less defined field of the theory of communication, exclusively understood in psychological terms without any reference to the linguistic matter itself.

Empirical interactionist studies make esoteric symbolism come from the efforts of the mother and the child to establish a minimal share of communicative substrate.

Other works approach the innateness already referred to by Tervoort: this is the case of works by Goldin-Meadow (Goldin-Meadow y Feldman 1975, Goldin-Meadow y Mylander 1990). For these authors the ways of communication the deaf children of hearing parents develop, have the form of *language-like behaviors* and these authors describe in them universal linguistic properties. Since there is no model to imitate, such insistence in the exhibition of universal linguistic properties, can only be accounted for by innateness according to these authors, on the euphemistic basis of emphasizing the

¹ From this group we will mention as characteristic and because of their analytic density, the works of Bonvillian et. al. 1983; Caselli et. al. 1985; Erting 1982 a and b; Greenstein et. al. 1977 and Maestas y Moores 1980.

contribution of the child to the “structural regularity” as a “resilient” property of language.

The Other subject in the acquisition is here reduced to “input”. While, as in the case of the interactionists, the core of the question was placed in the psychological level, giving to language no role at all, in this case, the study of language as preformed structure puts the other subject completely out of any explanatory view. In both cases the symbolic and the intersubjective domains in relation to the functioning of the language are not taken into account.

3. Approaching esoteric symbolism from the field of communication supposes an instrumental vision of language and leads rapidly to individual psychology. The theory of preformation applied to this subject makes it impossible to go beyond the contradiction that implies this assertion. From my point of view, in order to deal with esoteric symbolism, it is necessary for us to place ourselves at in the level of language as functioning, and to think of its characteristics as effects of this functioning. To say it in other words, it is not possible to characterize esoteric symbolism per se within the theory of communication, it is necessary to think of it as an effect of the functioning of language.

To justify this option we draw on the approaches of the relationship *language-subject-discourse* by authors such as Pecheux (1990), Henry (1992) y Milner (1987). For these authors a vision of language, characterized as a system of “stabilized, manageable meanings” which refer to the “real” world, external to language, is not valid (Pecheux 1990). For them the order of language as “an indefinite re-casting of interpretations” (Pecheux, *ibid.*) must be in a central place of any theorization.

As Henry says (1992) “Linguistics shows that in discourse or in speech some thing is materially repeated” and “what is repeated, it has been known since Saussure, is differences, that is, relationships, what Saussure calls **signifier**”. The functioning of the language is made of relations between signifiers and not of objects (signs?) manageable or inclined to be combined. These relations are dominated by drift, determined by lack and not by possession.

Acquiring a language is, then, being captivated by a particular language “to which children as well as adults are subjected” (De Lemos 1992). The Other subject is an instance of the functioning of the settled language. The mother and the child as well are “spoken” by the language, it is in the drift of the relations of the language that they become “*êtres du langage*” and that they can interpret and be interpreted (Cfr. Milner 1983).

The hearing mother interprets the gestures of the deaf child in that drift of relations in which she herself is spoken. At the same time the deaf child will become a subject as he is spoken by the *alterity* (otherness) of the language. The oral language of the mother turns to be the limit of these interpretations. This is why we can say that esoteric symbolism is an effect of oral language, since both mother and child are spoken and interpreted in oral language.

The speech of the child is always a discourse effect and so is esoteric symbolism. The speech of the child is “undetermined” without the mother’s interpretation to attach

it to the law of language. Nothing different happens with esoteric symbolism. Its peculiarity comes from the physiological impossibility for the reception of the spoken form (oral) of the language by the child, and from the gestural interpretation in the context of the relationships of a certain language, which coincides with that language in which he could construct the illusion of mastering it.

Esoteric symbolism is the effect of the interpretation of the mother by her language (oral), but it does not have as a result the oral language. Anyway, the language of the mother and the language of the child are going to differ, either that the child stays within esoteric symbolism or that he acquires another language later (the sign language) in contact with the deaf community.

4. Once we overcome the instrumental conception of language and the vision of esoteric symbolism as a mere communication phenomenon, we can revisit it as a simple effect of the language functioning in the Other, who interprets the linguistic production of the child.

From this new perspective, the relation of the child with the languages of his environment (oral or sign languages) takes a new dimension: it is a constituent link of his subjectivity (subjectiveness), and not any more a simple device for use, placed at the level of the exteriority of behaviors and linguistic structures.

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