# Module 3: Language Acquisition and Socialization

## Before you Read

Have you ever spent time with a toddler? Lately, my two-year-old has been attempting to put me in time out when I do things he doesn’t approve of. He has also been commanding our cat to *“¡Bájate!”* (get off) the kitchen table. He is quickly discovering that having the ability to verbalize a command he has long understood does not translate into the ability to effectively carry out the command. As he acquires the ability to speak, he is also beginning to understand more about his place in the world as a member of his family and of society. The vast majority of human beings are born with the ability to acquire language, and go through a process of language acquisition and socialization.

In this module, we will be learning more about this process, focusing specifically on the ways in which *the process of acquiring a language is affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society AND how the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language* (Ochs and Schieffelin 2001, cited in Ahearn 2012). Simply put, we learn language through socialization, and we become socialized through language. In addition, we will be using the concepts learned in our textbook to read an ethnography: Keith Basso’s classic book, *Portraits of the Whiteman*. As you read the first two chapters of this book, think about the way in which language socialization becomes evident in the examples provided.

Remember, terms that have been **emphasized** require special attention and should appear in assessments such as our graded group discussions, or in tests or quizzes. The supplementary materials in this module are meant to better illustrate the concepts and ideas discussed in the reading. Also, please note that items that are [hyperlinked](http://anthropology.cos.ucf.edu/content/index.html) are connected to interesting audio or video supplementary materials.

## Focus Points

As you read, you should pay special attention to the following themes, concepts, and issues:

* What is the relationship between learning how to speak and learning how to act?
* What is the impact of **multilingualism** in language acquisition?
* Linguistic anthropologists conceptualize language acquisition as **socially mediated.**
* Language socialization is also embedded in broader structures of **power**.
* How are **language ideologies** transmitted at the same time as language itself?
* How is language socialization a **lifelong process?**

## Language Socialization: Katie and Bage

Ch. 3 of our textbook begins with a description of two babies being raised in two very different places: Katie, an American three-month-old growing up in a middle-class family in the United States, and Bage, a three month-month-old Kaluli boy growing up in Papua New Guinea. Ahearn identifies two phenomena present in American caregiving that are absent in Papua New Guinea: [“self-lowering,”](http://youtu.be/GltHZ_pEf6o) when a parent simplify their speech or bring themselves down to what they perceive is the infant’s level of understanding, and [“child raising,”](http://youtu.be/lmEKMkBM2T8) that is, treating the child as more competent linguistically than she really is. By contrast, in Papua New Guinea, young children are never directly addressed and are expected to adapt themselves to specific situations rather than the other way around. Video of Papua New Guinean parenting isn’t as easy to find on You Tube as that of Americans, but this brief clip from the movie [*Babies*](http://youtu.be/5IkoPUAijXs)illustrates some of the differences between the way infants and toddlers are socialized in the United States and in non-western societies such as Namibia, Mongolia, and Japan. I also found this fascinating [clip](http://youtu.be/4vjiW_vLuxs) from Margaret Mead of the first minutes of a Papua New Guinean baby’s life.

What sorts of people might Katie and Bage grow up to become? How will their worldview be affected by how they’re socialized into their respective societies? And, most relevant to our class, how does the process of language acquisition intersect with the culturally and linguistically specific factors in every person’s upbringing?

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## Language Acquisition and the Socialization Process

### Chomsky on Language Acquisition

As you have read, Noam Chomsky, one of the most influential linguists of our time, has stated that environment has a very minor role in the language acquisition process. For Chomsky and his followers, the Universal Grammar (UG) hardwired into the brain of every human being provides the template needed for learning human language.

Some linguists, cognitive scientists, and child development specialists disagree with the Chomskyan view, however. In particular, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists take issue to Chomsky’s claim that a young child’s exposure to language is “restricted,” and argue that most children are exposed to sufficient linguistic input that they may acquire language without the hard-wiring of a UG.

Central for Linguistic anthropologists is the fact that language acquisition does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Children are not simply learning a language, they are learning about what constitutes acceptable behavior in their societies. Remember my anecdote about my toddler? He is not only learning how to speak, he is also learning that some behavior results in negative consequences (a time out) and that he does not have the authority to give others a time out, but he does have the authority to tell the family cat to get off the kitchen table. All of this information is codified in language and is impossible to separate from language. In other words:

1) The process of acquiring language is deeply affected by the process of becoming a competent member of society. AND

2) The process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language.

### Do all children learn grammar the same way?

“Grammar” does not refer to the set of rules you learned about in grade school. Rather, grammar refers to the specific ways in which particular languages behave: If a language uses a form of the verb “to be,” for example, or a specific word to indicate possession by a single person and another by several people (“mine vs. ours”). Toddlers often make certain kinds of grammatical mistakes with regularity –speaking in the third person, using “me” instead of “my”, and confusing the second person singular, saying “you” when they mean “me.” Please read pages 54-56 of your textbook very carefully and consider Ahearn’s discussion of Elinor Och’s research in Western Samoa, where she discovered that children learn different grammatical features of their language at different times than children who spoke other similarly-structured languages and English.

## Language Acquisition in Bilingual or Multilingual Contexts

Studying children growing up in bilingual contexts is highly revelatory of both the language acquisition process and the social factors and language ideologies that are embedded in multilingual contexts. In pages 56-60, Ahearn presents the example of Taiap and Tok Pisin, two languages spoken in Gapun, Papua New Guinea. Why is one of these languages disappearing? What is the local explanation for the disappearance of the language, and what has linguistic anthropological research uncovered?

Taiap and Tok Pisin are two languages embedded in a social context that is mediated by power differences. If you have not done so already, turn now to Chapter 1 of Keith Basso’s book, *Portraits of “The Whiteman.”* Pay special attention to Basso’s description of a little girl play-scolding her puppy using the language of “the whiteman.” How does this passage reflect language socialization? How does Apache joking reflect particular types of language ideologies and power relations?

## Language Socialization throughout the Lifespan

Although we have spent most of this module discussing language socialization among children, it is important to remember that language socialization is a process that continuous throughout one’s life. In your textbook, Ahearn presents the example of how law school students are socialized into becoming lawyers. In what ways have you come to be socialized into a new way of speaking or thinking in your life?

## Disclaimer

The material presented in this module is not exhaustive; it is meant to function as a guide to our course materials. Concepts, key terms, and ethnographic examples that appear in our readings or that are discussed in future f2f classes can and will be used in assessments even if they are not specifically mentioned in this course module.