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# The acquisition of routines in child language

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of routines is one aspect of language development. Routines such as *Bye-bye*, in contrast to more referential language, appear to be among the earliest acquisitions and are congruent with the sensori-motor child's capacities. This study investigates performance of the highly constrained Hallowe'en *Trick or treat* routine in 115 children from 2 to 16 years of age. Changes in competence and the role of parental input are examined in relation to cognitive and social factors. (First routines; the Hallowe'en interaction; children's production; adult participation; adult metalanguage; implications for ethnographic research.)

During the past few years it has become increasingly clear that children's language acquisition is facilitated by specialized input from the adults around them. A number of studies have shown that language addressed to children is characterized by phonological, morphological, and syntactic features that render it simpler, more regular, and easier to segment than language addressed to adults (Broen 1972; Remick 1969; Snow 1972). If, as seems to be the case, the rules of such language are more easily discoverable than has been previously suggested, the child's task in extracting these rules need not be as dependent upon innate mechanisms as some researchers have suggested (Chomsky 1957, 1965; Fodor 1966).

Adult language to children has other special features: it is uniquely designed to impart to the child information about the world, and about the social rules for the use of language (Gleason 1973). As researchers on child language, we have increasingly focused upon the broader question of the acquisition of communicative competence, which must include the study of not only the acquisition of linguistic rules, but also the social setting for their use.

It is evident from sociolinguistic studies of adult language that the use of language in the social setting is rule-governed; and failure to follow the rules has socially disruptive consequences (Ervin-Tripp 1969; Hymes 1973). A speaker who says *Goodbye* on answering the telephone, for instance, or one who calls his employer by her first name without invitation, will certainly suffer the consequences of his socially inappropriate behavior. Although there have been some studies of the structure of routines in adult language, little is known of how and when children acquire them. Most of the routines which have been

isolated have been those embedded in adult discourse, a fact which has made it difficult to delineate their onset and termination. The lack of clear specification for these routines makes it even more difficult to describe their appearance in the language of children. Some routines, like the beginnings of telephone conversations, are highly constrained and easily identified, and thus are amenable to study. While children eventually learn to talk on the telephone, there are other routines that are learned earlier and in a richer social setting – greetings and politeness routines, for instance.

## EARLY ROUTINES

We became interested in routines, that is, greetings, farewells, and other ritualized forms of language behavior, because they are an important part of linguistic socialization and because they seem to be a rather distinct kind of language: appropriate use of routines depends more upon saying the right things at the right time than upon deeper cognitive structures. Learning the routine that goes something like *Hello; How are you?; Fine, thanks, and you?; Fine;* doesn't require knowing what it means to feel fine. In fact the truth can be disruptive. Parents must begin to signal early on that there are some things that one simply says and that there are other things that one says only as a result of some deeper conceptualizations. While the major part of this paper is about one particular routine – the Hallowe'en *Trick or treat* sequence – we have also had the opportunity, through informal visits and through watching videotapes of mothers with their prelinguistic year-old sons, to gain some insights into the earliest stages of acquiring these social formulas.

Two things stand out: the first is that from the beginning, adults mark routines as such and treat them differently from other linguistic behavior. The commonest marker is the word *Say* as in *Say 'Thank you', Jeremy, Say 'Hello' to Mrs Spencer*, or later, *What do you say?* The second observation is that the earliest routine is *Bye bye*, and that it is nonverbal in its earliest stages. Nonetheless it is marked by *Say*. Even when the child is only expected to open and close its fist, the adult, who may shake the baby's arm, is liable to say *Say 'Bye bye'*.

One possible explanation for the early acquisition of this routine is that it is appropriate to the preverbal baby's stage of cognitive development. It may be seen as something like an instrumental act, related to the infant's feeling of omnipotence; he waves his hand and other people turn and go away. Other simple routines, like the *Hi* of greetings, do not appear so early, and do not have this magic quality. Saying *Hi* does not cause people to appear, but waving *Bye bye*, seems to 'cause' them to disappear. We have been accustomed to looking at the child's first referential words as the beginnings of language, and to ignoring quasi-gestural behavior, yet the latter may actually be more powerful. In the general hierarchy of the child's interaction with the world it is probably more

essential to make the connection between waving and having people disappear than to associate a word pronounced by another with the object referred to by that word.

Another thing that sets routines apart is the general failure of adults to provide expatiations or expansions based upon them. An adult teaching a lexical item and a concept embeds it in a number of frames: *See the doggie? That's a doggie. The doggie is eating his dinner.* But *Bye bye* and other early routines, including politeness formulas (*Thank you* in particular) and greetings, do not spark any explanatory discussion.

## THE HALLOWE'EN ROUTINE

One routine that most children acquire and that is unique in its application is the *Trick or treat* sequence which is used only on Hallowe'en Eve. The Hallowe'en scenario in our community unfolds as follows: adults stock their houses with candy in preparation for children coming to the doors and frequently leave outside lights burning as a sign of welcome; costumed children, carrying bags, singly, or, more typically, in small groups, come to the door and ring the bell; when the door is opened, the *Trick or treat* routine begins or should begin. Few children beyond the age of fourteen go trick-or-treating.

There is no other day of the year when these words are appropriate. The routine must be learned within the circumscribed limits of one particular kind of setting on one particular day. By comparison, *Merry Christmas* and *Happy New Year* are general formulas that can be said over a longer period of time and in many situations where pleasant salutations are appropriate. Aside from the situational constraints, the Hallowe'en routine is remarkable for its inflexibility: while a number of possibilities exist for what to say on meeting a friend in the street, the child has no options, other than silence, on ringing the doorbell at Hallowe'en. He has to say *Trick or treat*, and to produce the usual sort of greeting would sound bizarre. It would, for instance, be entirely inappropriate for a costumed child to ring the doorbell and say *Good evening* unless, of course, he were costumed as Count Dracula and produced it with a strong Hungarian accent.

Our basic method of data collection involved tape recording what happened in one household on two successive Hallowe'ens and in a second household the following year. Both houses were located in middle-class suburbs of Boston. We mounted a cassette recorder near the door and turned it on every time the bell rang. As the children were leaving, one of us stopped them, much to their surprise, and asked how old they were. Despite the inappropriateness of the question, they answered, not without a little hostility. Altogether, over three Hallowe'ens a total of 115 children came to the door. We have one other kind of data obtained when we were able to accompany two mothers and their children

as they went from door to door and tape record what was happening in the street.

We thus have data on what the children say when they ring the doorbell, what adults at home say to the children as they give them the candy, and what the adults who accompany children from door to door say.

*The children*

The children's portion of the Hallowe'en routine consists of three nuclear utterances, two of which are parts of other formulas: *Trick or treat*, *Thank you*, and *Goodbye*. Children by and large did not initiate any conversation beyond the routine. The exceptions to this occurred when the children were friends of the family, in which case we have greetings like *Hi! Do you know who we are?* But a typical interchange is patterned as follows:

1. The child rings the bell.
2. Adult opens the door.
3. Child says *Trick or treat*.
4. Adult answers with part of some adult routine like *Come on in* or *Oh, my goodness*, and gives the child candy.
5. Child says *Thank you* and turns to go.
6. Adult says *Goodbye*, and the child, on leaving, says *Goodbye*.

Some adults elaborate with questions or exclamations about the child's costume and, in cases where the child and adult know one another, additional conversation may transpire.

To see what children were doing at various ages, we divided them into five groups. Table 1 shows the percentage of children in five age groups who produced each of the three nuclear utterances of the Hallowe'en routine. The children's behavior was very consistent. The youngest children – two- and three-year-olds – typically said nothing at all. Four- and five-year-olds tended to say nothing

TABLE 1. *Percentage of children who use nuclear utterances of Hallowe'en* Trick or treat *routine with increasing age*

| Subjects | Portion of routine | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | *Trick or treat* | *Thank you* | *Goodbye* |
| Under 6 years | | | |
| N = 19 | 47 | 21 | 26 |
| 6–8 years | | | |
| N = 26 | 54 | 58 | 27 |
| 9 years | | | |
| N = 27 | 44 | 57 | 36 |
| 10 years | | | |
| N = 18 | 67 | 83 | 22 |
| 11 + years | | | |
| N = 25 | 56 | 88 | 51 |

but *Trick or treat* – there is some variation all along the scale here because of coaching from adults, which will be discussed in the next section. Somewhat older children say *Trick or treat* and *Thank you*; and children over ten produce the whole routine – *Trick or treat*, *Thank you* and *Goodbye*. The evolution of the Hallowe'en routine has all of the outward appearances of a developmental scale but it would be difficult if not impossible, to posit any deeper underlying cognitive structures on which the scale is built.

*The adults*

An examination of the adults' portion of the *Trick or treat* routine revealed that adults answering the door have completely stereotypic routines of their own: the routines may be different from one another, but each adult works out and replays her or his own routine every time. For instance, on one Hallowe'en, a woman answered the door twelve times and said:

*Come on in* – 7 times
*Wow* or *Oh, my goodness* – 7 times
*Let's see the costumes* – 3 times
*Hi, look who's here* – 3 times
*Can you open your bag* – 3 times
*Well, hi* – 3 times
*Goodbye* – 6 times

In addition, she made some comment on the costumes a total of 10 times. Choosing from one or another of these, her typical routine was *Come on in; Let's see the costumes* (Some comment on the costumes); *Open your bag*; and *Goodbye*.

Her husband, who answered the door four times, had his own routine. He said:

*Hi* or *Hello* – 4 times
*Come on in boys/girls*? – 4 times
*All by yourself?* (to the two children who were)
*Goodnight* – 4 times

He did not comment on the costumes or the occasion.

In addition, the adult routine might include questions about candy preference or directions about opening the bag so that the candy might be dropped into it.

*Adult metalanguage*

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must consider the role of the adults and older children who accompany young children on their Hallowe'en rounds. We were immediately struck by the amount of explicit teaching that occurred. Parents accompanying children insisted that they say *Trick or treat* and, in

particular, *Thank you*. An excerpt from the transcripts may illustrate this point. The characters are a mother and her five-year-old daughter and another mother and her five-year-old son. The children are friends, as are the mothers.

*Girl's mother*: (Approaching a house) Don't forget to say *Thank you*. (Children go to door and return to sidewalk). Did you say *Thank you*, Sue, did you say *Thank you?*
*Sue*: Ya.
*Mother*: Good.
*Boy's mother*: Ricky, did *you* say *Thank you?*
*Girl's mother*: Did you say *Trick or treat*, Sue?
*Boy's mother*: (Approaching another house) Will you remember to say *Trick or treat* and *Thank you?*
*Girl's mother*: (Children have walked to door. She calls to them from the sidewalk.) Don't forget to say *Thank you!*

The consistent use of *Say* to mark segments of the routine is striking in these examples. This behavior is typical and was observed both in parents and in older siblings accompanying children. Some parents used the formula *What do you say* repeatedly, a formula which had very little success with children under four years of age. It was also very common for adults to provide verbal reinforcement of some sort like *Good* and *Right* when the child performed correctly, but there was no further discussion and no embedding of the routines in any other frames.

## CONCLUSION

This raises some question once again about the nature and function of input language to children. For parents to say *Give me the ball. That's the ball. The ball is red* may sound like ideal language teaching lessons. But the intent in such interchanges may be incidental to the fact that it is a concept-teaching lesson. The parent does none of this with routines, where performance is all that matters, and in fact never discusses with children what *Bye bye* or *Trick or treat* mean – with routines, it doesn't matter what you think as long as you perform at the right moment. Thus the acquisition of routines proceeds in the opposite direction from much of the rest of language. With most of language, competence comes first, then performance – language is mapped onto some prior cognition. With routines, performance comes first: the adult marks the routine by the use of some device like *Say*, and insists that the child perform. Only later, long after he has learned to say *Bye bye* or *Thank you* or *Trick or treat* might he come to know what, if anything, it all means.

Other researchers (Brown and Hanlon, 1970) studying language acquisition in children have noted that in the early stages adults are more concerned with the truth value of children's utterances than with the infelicities of their surface

realization. Here, with the acquisition of routines, we have found that the reverse is true, namely, that parents' primary concern is with correct performance and no emphasis is placed upon cognitive factors. While the acquisition of routines may proceed in different fashion from the acquisition of the part of the child's language we have been accustomed to study, the two processes appear to proceed in parallel. The social uses of language, in the form of routines like *Bye bye*, appear as early as, if not earlier than, the referential use of language, and must be considered in any theory that attempts to deal with the child's acquisition of language as a means of human communication.

The present study has examined only a few of the many routines that English speakers acquire in the process of socialization. The Hallowe'en routine is at one extreme of the ritualization continuum in that it is highly constrained. Highly ritualized routines have been documented in other cultures. For instance, Richards (1956) described an initiation ritual for single girls of the Bemba, a tribe in Northern Rhodesia. Although the initiates had to memorize the wording of the ritual, it was not until years later, when as mature women they had observed the initiation many times, that they gained a deeper conceptual understanding of what the words actually meant.

While highly ritualized routines are easily identified and thus more amenable to examination, the study of less constrained routines, such as greetings, are certainly as valuable to an understanding of the relationship between cognitive and social variables. It is also probable that the proportions of ritualized to non-ritualized speech in everyday intercourse will vary considerably from culture to culture.

Ethnographic data on routines have thus far provided valuable insight into the social organization of various cultures, but they have not yet been included in a unified theory of language acquisition and socialization. Ethnographers can make an important contribution to that unified theory by including the acquisition of routines in their investigations.

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