

Sociocultural Experiences in Language Development in Children: How Does Learning Words Make a Child a Subject?

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Abstract

Since its birth, language unites humans to culture. This condition constitutes the child, who, as a subject in its mother language, has the power to create the reality around them from the cultural experience mobilized in the language. The child is born, fulfills its biological functions, and, together, lives the culture in its constitution. The appropriation and development of language is born in historical-social interactions and depends on the cultural environment in which the child is inserted and the enunciative acts that occur. In this perspective, we adopt the thought of Émile Benveniste in his theory of referential enunciation (*me-you/he*) to explain language acquisition in children. The objective of the present study is to analyze how culture, via social interaction, allows children to acquire language.

Keywords: Language and Linguistics; Language acquisition; Benveniste; Enunciation; Child.

1. Preliminary concepts

In this article, we aim to reflect on the relationship between child and language, from a perspective of language acquisition via social interaction. For this, we rely on the theoretical principles of Émile Benveniste, mainly those concerning *língua* (language) and *linguagem* (language), explained in his two volumes of *Problemas de Linguística Geral* (*Problems of General Linguistics*.)

Initially, we will deal with the terms *língua* (language) and *linguagem* (language), which are, in a Benvenistian conception, understood as follows: *língua* is a system of concepts conventionally organized into levels and units, articulated by form and meaning, since *linguagem* is constitutive of human nature, becoming an essential and unique trait of man among animals. The *enunciation* puts the language into operation through an individual act of use (BENVENISTE, 1974-2006, p. 82), bringing into play the speaker, the addressee and the reference, the *me-you/he* relationship. *Acquisition*, on the other hand, can be understood as the act of acquiring a language, or as Silva (2007) explains, language acquisition is the act of enunciation and enunciation is the acquisition structure that comprises the device (*me-you/he*)-*HE*, which holds the child (*me*); the other (*you*); the *língua* (*he*); and culture (*HE*).

For Benveniste, *língua* constitutes the human experience of an universe of infinite realities in which there is an innate relationship between nature and culture. The human is born in nature, fulfilling a biological function, but he becomes a man in the culture that involves it: “Chamo cultura ao ‘meio humano’, tudo o que, do outro lado do cumprimento das funções biológicas, dá à vida e à atividade humanas forma, sentido e conteúdo. A cultura é inerente à sociedade dos homens, qualquer que seja o nível de civilização” (BENVENISTE, 1974-2006, p. 31-32) (“I call culture the ‘human environment’, everything that, on the other side of fulfilling biological functions, gives human life and activity form, meaning and content. Culture is inherent in human society, whatever the level of civilization” (BENVENISTE, 1974-2006, p. 31-32).)

Culture, thus, is seen as a symbolic faculty, defined by complex representations and determined by values such as tradition, law, politics and the arts. In this way, culture becomes an element “impregnado no mais profundo da sua consciência, e que dirigirá o seu comportamento em todas as formas da sua atividade” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 32) (“impregnated in the depths of its conscience (and which will direct its behavior in all forms of his activity” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 32).)

Therefore, the symbolic faculty is the source of language and thought. In this complex, language is the symbolic expression par excellence. Thus, there is no thought without language, the very knowledge of the world being linguistically determined. Such a determination is argued by Benveniste when he says that “a linguagem reproduz o mundo mas submetendo-o à sua própria organização”, e que a “linguagem articulada, consistindo de um arranjo orgânico de partes, de uma classificação formal dos objetos e dos processos” (BENVENISTE, 1995, p. 26) (“language reproduces the world but subjecting it to its own organization”, and that “articulated language, consisting of an organic arrangement of parts, of a formal classification of objects and processes” (BENVENISTE, 1995, p. 26.) Moreover, the author defends the relationship between articulated *língua* and society: “[...] a língua interpreta a sociedade. A sociedade torna-se significante na e pela língua, a sociedade é o interpretado por excelência” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 98) ([...] *língua* interprets society. Society becomes significant in and through *língua*, society is interpreted par excellence” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 98.)

Like any individual, children experience material and social dimensions through culture, and this establishes development routes based on cultural-linguistics (Levine, Caron, & New, 1980). In this way, we intend to analyze how enunciation, through intersubjective relations and culture, develops, in children, the ability to acquire language, and how this makes them subject in their categorized world.

2. Intersubjectivity in language acquisition

We adopt the intersubjective and referential relationship, expressed in the *me-you/he* relations defended by Benveniste (1966-1995; 1974-2006), which includes the following relations: intersubjective (*me-you*) and referential (*he*). The *me-you/he* triad, in this perspective, is updated as follows: child-other/language-culture.

Such relationships are glimpsed in Benveniste's works when Silva (2007) defends two perspectives: i. man in culture, considering the presence of cultural intersubjectivity; ii. from this intersubjective relationship, a speaker/locutionary relationship, in which discourse appears through the *me-you* interaction, constituting what we call linguistic-enunciative intersubjectivity.

Flores (2013), when referring to the human-language-intersubjectivity triad, addressed by Benveniste, says that “o homem é homem porque tem linguagem e nela se inscreve sob a condição da intersubjetividade” (FLORES, 2013, p. 116) (“man is man because he has language and is inscribed in it under the condition of intersubjectivity” (FLORES, 2013, p. 116.) This same scholar deals with the speaker-*língua*-subjectivity relationship, in which the term subjectivity “está ligado, intrinsecamente, às noções de locutor e de língua” (p. 116) (“is intrinsically linked to the notions of speaker and *língua*” (p. 116) - this existing interrelationship between the concepts occurs because the speaker acquires the *língua*.

In the texts *Estruturalismo e Linguística (Structuralism and linguistics)* and *Semiologia da língua (Semiotics of língua)*, in PLG II, Benveniste (1974-2006) deals with an intersubjectivity linked to human relations in society, defending that man is not born in nature, but in culture. With the idea that the whole mechanism of culture has a symbolic character, the author argues that the action on *língua* “a chave da relação humana entre a língua e a cultura, uma relação de integração necessária” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 24) (“the key to the human relationship between *língua* and culture, a necessary integration relationship” (Benveniste, 1974-2006, p. 24.)

Thus, in Benveniste, *língua* is always mediation between man-society, man-culture and man-man in their spectrum of intersubjective relationships. In these relationships, the child experiences intersubjectivity in a very particular way, since the position of the enunciator is usually filled by the parents, who in some cases occupy the child's enunciative position, because, as the author states, “a criança nasce e desenvolve-se na sociedade dos homens. São homens adultos, seus pais, que lhe inculcam o uso da palavra” (Benveniste, 1966/1995, p. 31) (“The child is born and develops in the society of men. It is adult men, their fathers, who instill in them the use of the word” (Benveniste, 1966/1995, p. 31.) In this sense, it can be said that the child learns not a natural faculty of language, but the world of man.

3. Language acquisition: from symbolic thinking to the biological-cultural dyad

By expressing his thoughts through language, humans communicate. González (2016, p. 72) says that “o surgimento da consciência humana se deve ao desempenho da linguagem” (“The emergence of human consciousness is due to the performance of language”). Likewise, it is with language that human beings develop and modify their thinking, building “uma realidade histórica e social chamada cultura” (GONZÁLEZ, 2016, p. 72) (“a historical and social reality called culture” (GONZÁLEZ, 2016, p. 72.) Thought allows the individual to begin to situate himself when inserted in a certain group and context. The child's thinking begins to organize and structure itself in an increasingly complex way. In their constitution as *me*, children are born in their innate biological aptitude, and in interaction with the *you*, in the culture (MEC, 2016).

Early in life, language promotes categorization, at least in part, through its status as a social and communicative signal, but throughout the first year, infants focus on the referential power of language, and by the second year, they begin to separate distinct types of nouns (eg, nouns, adjectives) and their relationship to distinct types of concepts (eg, categories of objects, properties) (FERGUSON & WAXMAN, 2017). Even before learning words, babies represent events in terms of abstract concepts such as causality, path, manner, or goal.

And it is during this process of representation through oral, gestural or written language that the child externalizes their thinking, because, “[...] a linguagem é um método exclusivamente humano, e não instintivo, que se desenvolve no seu processo de evolução histórico e por mediação da própria cultura, que tem sua origem no trabalho humano que ele realiza” (GONZÁLEZ, 2016, p. 74) (“[...] language is an exclusively human method, not an instinctive one, which develops in its process of historical evolution and through the mediation of culture itself, which has its origin in the human work it performs” (GONZÁLEZ, 2016, p. 74.) From language, thought develops and then externalizes itself, as language is the expression of thought in a communicative way (AMARAL, 2021).

Most research investigating the early development of a link between language and cognition in young children has focused on word learning, since to learn the meaning of a word we must identify a part of the continuous flow of speech, identify a referent for that word and establish a mapping between the word and its referent (PERSZYK & WAXMAN, 2018; NOVACK & WAXMAN, 2019; HAVY & WAXMAN, 2016).

Words are concepts that carry the senses and meanings of culture. At this point, the child begins to communicate, to externalize their thinking and to appropriate human culture (AMARAL, 2021). In children, the development of oral or spoken language gives them a qualitative leap and humanizes them because they stop having primitive thinking (crying, babbling) and begin to develop more complex thinking, with the appropriation of the senses and meanings of human culture:

O pensamento verbal [...] é determinado por um processo histórico-cultural e tem propriedades e leis específicas que não podem ser encontradas nas formas naturais de pensamento e fala. [...]. Espera-se apenas que, neste nível, o desenvolvimento do comportamento seja regido essencialmente pelas leis gerais da evolução histórica da sociedade humana (VYGOTSKY, 2003, p. 63 apud AMARAL, 2021).

Verbal thought [...] is determined by a cultural-historical process and has specific properties and laws that cannot be found in natural forms of thought and speech. [...]. It is only expected that, at this level, the development of behavior is governed essentially by the general laws of the historical evolution of human society (VYGOTSKY, 2003, p. 63 apud AMARAL, 2021).

For humans, language intrinsically interacts with cognitive capabilities, such as representing and categorizing objects and learning abstract rules. For example, we can specify a particular individual (fish), the category to which that individual belongs (animal), a property of that individual (color/shape), and the action it is engaged in (swimming).

About this experience of categorization, Benveniste states that:

“a aquisição da língua é uma experiência que vai a par, na criança, com a formação do símbolo e a construção do objeto. Ela aprende as coisas pelo seu nome. Descubra o que tudo tem um nome e que aprender os nomes lhe dá a disposição das coisas. Mas descobre também que ela é a mesma que tem um nome e que por meio dele se comunica com os que a cercam (BENVENISTE, 1974/2006, p. 31).

“*língua* acquisition is an experience that goes hand in hand, in the child, with the formation of the symbol and the construction of the object. They learn things by their name. Discover that everything has a name and that learning the names gives them the disposition of things. But they also discover that they are the same one who has a name and who, through it, communicates with those around them (BENVENISTE, 1974/2006, p. 31).

According to Amaral (2021), the word expressed orally, the intonation of the voice and the gestures that accompany it (a finger pointing, hands on the waist, facial expressions) begin to create bodily and emotional reactions in the child and little by little shape their personal conduct and life in society.

Based on these principles, we finally affirm that the child establishes themselves in language through the use of words in social relations, in the enunciations in their environment. This emission and perception of words makes the child a subject of/in the language and which marks the experience of language acquisition.

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