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Origins of discursive and rhetorical practices. Rhetorical perspectives on children's language acquisition

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Abstract

Children's language acquisition is normally explained either in biological, nativist or in functionalist and usage based terms. The main thesis of this article is that rhetorical terminology introduced by Aristotle is fruitful for our understanding of the development process children go through when learning language. Introducing rhetoric to descriptions of children's language acquisition presupposes the presence of rhetoric in all communicative practices. This article introduces the concept of a civic art of rhetoric as developed by Eugene Garver in his reading of Aristotle as a theoretical framework for describing what characterizes children's earliest communication. The article should therefore be understood as a discussion of rhetorical concepts relevant for describing children's language acquisition. This approach highlights language acquisition as a cultural practice and children's first communication as something more than just imperfect verbal communication.

Key words

children's language acquisition, child-adult communication as a rhetorical art, rhetorical patterns in communication

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Introduction

Children's ability to learn language is remarkable. Already in their first year of life, children are normally able to use words (and proto-words) as symbols to express their will and communicative intentions. Researchers of children's language acquisition are still puzzled by this development from children's use of a broad range of signals in communication to their use of verbal symbols and syntactic rules, and disagree on how to explain it. Generally, we distinguish between competence-based *nativist* explanations which emphasize inborn factors (Berwick, Chomsky, & Piattelli-Palmarini 2013) and *usage-based* or *emergentist* theories which – although they acknowledge inborn cognitive or interactional abilities – ascribe the development of syntactic rules to the use of language in meaningful contexts (Elman 1996; Langacker 1998; van Valin 1993). We have also seen combinations of these two approaches in recent years (for example, Ninio 2006). However, one shortcoming in the abovementioned theories is their focus on children's ability to produce recognizable linguistic units rather than on children's overall communicative competence. What infants can produce of verbal symbols and sentences in their first months and years is clearly restricted, whereas their phonological and more general communicative abilities are highly developed already at birth. In this article, I will take a review of children's earliest communicative abilities as my point of departure, and indicate what a rhetorical conceptualization of these abilities may look like. The questions I will discuss are what it implies to describe children's language development in rhetorical terms, what kind of rhetoric is needed for such a description, and in what ways such a rhetorical description could enrich our understanding of how our verbal, discursive practices develop. To provide a basis for the discussion, I will first point to some empirical facts regarding newborn children's communicative abilities and skills.

Infant's ability to discriminate between linguistic units

Many studies show that children are born with the ability to discriminate between linguistic units, and that this ability may facilitate pattern recognition in the flow of talk they encounter. When it comes to phonological discriminative abilities, Christophe, Mehler and Sebastian-Galles (2001) found that a group of three-day-old French children could discriminate between verbal items with or without a prosodic boundary (for example, *mati* from “*mathématicien*” and *mati* from “*cinéma titanesque*”). This discriminative ability develops during infancy, and already at the age of nine months, children react to disruptions of phonological phrases in a given language (Gerken, Jusczyk, & Mandel 1994). One way in which to interpret these findings is to assert that children are born with certain auditory discriminative capacities, the development of which may be strengthened or weakened by the actual language in question. Yeung et al. claim that children acquire a language specific phonological system organized in a certain order, starting with lexical stress and tone development before the child is 5 months, vowels between 6–8 months, consonants from 8.5 months, and phoneme duration from 18 months (Yeung, Chen, & Werker 2013). This means that children are especially sensitive to prosodic or musical aspects of a language already from birth, implying that phonological categories such as frequency, length, stress and tone are important clues the infant uses to make sense of the surrounding speech (ibid. p. 123-124). Other researchers have shown that this process starts even before birth, in the prenatal period. Mazuka (2007) sums up some of this research and refers to Decasper et al. (1994), who showed that infants can, immediately after birth, discern between nursery rhymes read aloud by their mothers between the 33rd and 37th weeks of pregnancy and nursery rhymes that were not read in this period. We also know that, from the moment of birth, children demonstrate a preference for the speech of their own mother over that of other women (Spence & Freeman 1996). They also prefer their mother's native language over foreign languages (Moon, Cooper, & Fifer 1993). Furthermore, they demonstrate preferences for the more phonologically distinct child-directed communication over adult-directed communication (Cooper & Aslin 1990). Some researchers claim that these phonological discriminative abilities also help the child to identify semantic units such as words. In line with this, Miller and Eimas (1995) show how the discrimination of acoustic units assists the child in discovering and mapping lexical units (see also Gervain & Mehler 2010; Mazuka 1996; Nazzi & Ramus 2003). The auditive aspects of speech which the child encounters therefore seem to be one important source of discursive competence. In more rhetorical terms, we could say that the dynamics and rhythm of a given language are important artistic qualities which children use to make sense of it and use as a tool to express themselves.

A rhetorical conceptualization of early language acquisition should therefore include such musical and rhythmical aspects of language when describing how language is used to influence others.

Infants naturally initiate interaction

Not only are children born with an ability to discover phonological categories; Joaquin (2013) gives a useful review over research supporting the idea of what she, in a research tradition from the 1970s (see Bullowa 1979), calls the *interactional instinct*, and the following overview relies heavily on her presentation. Children are born with a general communicative tendency which cannot be seen as mere reflexive imitation. Kugiumutzakis (1998) shows that newborns with an average age of 26 minutes use complex imitation as one of several strategies to take part in interactions. Other communicative resources are cooing, vocalizations, gestures, smiling and crying. By using such resources, the newborn child is able to achieve the desired attention from the adult caregiver. One study of children between 17 and 43 weeks old shows that as much as 79 percent of the interactional sequences studied were initiated by the child (Pawlby 1977). In fact, in this case it would be more accurate to say that caregivers imitate the child than vice versa. Additional support for the strong interactional tendency in humans is the study of Farroni et al. showing that newborn children have a preference for the direct, mutual gaze over the averted gaze (Farroni, Csibra, Simion, & Johnson 2002). Furthermore, Trevarthen proposes that there is a connection between facial expressions and posturing of the head and that, right from birth, infants have a full register of body language which they use to initiate and maintain contact with caregivers (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Examples of communicative gestures in early infancy. From (Trevarthen 1979: 329). © 1979 Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

In her discussion of children's communicative abilities, Joaquin refers to Tronick (1989) when she notes that:

[...] infants have specific internal goals, which include meeting their homeostatic and sociostatic needs. To accomplish these goals, infants process information about their current state and the state of those in their social environment. They evaluate whether they are succeeding or failing in meeting those goals, at times through "reading" the messages given by caregivers through their emotional expressions, and they will modify their behaviors, at times communicating their emotional state to reach their goals. Thus, we see infants regulating interaction to achieve a desired interaction. (Joaquin 2013: 40).

This goal-driven communication in infants is part of their general communicative abilities, and several researchers underline the similarities in interactions between newborns and adults and adult-to-adult communication. In line with this, Jaffe et al. (2001) found that when both children and adults communicate, rhythmical and turn-taking patterns are more closely coordinated at the start of an interaction and become less coordinated as mutual trust and comfort grows. From a conversation analytic point of view, Filipi (2007) showed the ability by 10-month-old children to initiate repair and to signal to interlocutors that their communication was inadequate. These findings indicate that, right from birth, children, like adults, have communicative goals and that children have a wide range of communicative resources at their disposal. Children's communicative development and its associated language acquisition is not to be seen as mirroring adult behavior, but is rather characterized by the infant's complex and active imitation, its initiation of communication and mapping of non-verbal and proto-verbal signals with its communicative intentions. In addition, studies from polyadic and traditional societies support the idea that infants adjust their own contributions in interactions in a complex and culture-specific way that is characteristic of a given culture (de Leon 2008; Ochs, Solomon, & Sterponi 2005).

The art of rhetoric

My point of departure when it comes to understanding and describing rhetorical practice is the interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy offered by Eugene Garver (Garver 1994, 2004, 2006, 2011). As Garver sees it, one of the most central aspects of Aristotelian rhetoric is the concept of *ethos* and how *ethos* connects with *logos* in civic speech. In our context, however, the *ethos* in the children's argumentative speech is not verbal or discursive in the traditional sense. In child-adult interaction, the 'arguments' would have to be formulated by an observer or the adult participant. On the other hand, as shown above, we know that children are highly sophisticated when it comes to recognition and use of non-verbal linguistic patterns,

and that they influence their caregivers through intentional communication. These are abilities that are important in language, even though they are not verbal in the traditional sense. An important aspect of communication (and maybe of language as such) is the intentional use of linguistic patterns, and this indicates that we should direct our attention at a more general level of rhetorical practice than verbal argument. The framework Garver offers for reflection around ethos is the claim that, for Aristotle, rhetoric is a *civic* art with internal guiding ends in addition to external ends (Garver 1994: 6-7). Let us now take a closer look at this argument.

An art, or *technē*, is a teachable technique for success, and in the beginning of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle tells us that the art of rhetoric should make clear to us why some persuade by habit and others by chance. He thus defines rhetoric as “[...] an ability [*dynamis*], in each case [...], to see the available means of persuasion [...]. This is the function [*ergon*] of no other art.” (*Rhetoric* I.2.1355b26-28, quote from Garver 1994: 25). Garver formulates what is new in the Aristotelian conceptualizations of argumentation and rhetoric by saying that “Aristotle’s originality consists in taking the internal principle of motion, from the *Physics*, and an internal end of action, from the *Ethics* and *Politics*, and generating the novel idea of argument.” (Garver 1994: 27). In line with this, Garver suggests that for Aristotle, every art – like every virtue – has two ends: an external end which complies with activities as *kinesis* and an internal end which complies with activities that are *energeiai*. Whereas instrumental activities are successful when they realize an external end, activities with an internal end are successful when they comply with internal standards of completion and perfection for that art. Garver writes that it is “these internal fulfillments and enactments of an *ergon* Aristotle calls *energeiai*” (Garver 1994: 28). Thus, we have the basic concepts of *kinēsis* and *energeia*, which in turn are connected with two types of ends for and motions in every art.

If we transfer this line of reasoning to the art of rhetoric, then rhetoric is not primarily to convince or persuade somebody. The art of rhetoric is not defined by an external end, but – as Aristotle puts it – the art of rhetoric is to see (or to find) the available means of persuasion. In other words, we can say that when we practice the art of rhetoric, we place ourselves in a tradition and act according to the artistic and ethical standards for rhetorical speech in a given community or, as Garver put it, in a discussion about real and apparent enthymemes: “The sophist aims directly at winning the case, while the rhetorician aims at the internal end of finding in a given case the available means of persuasion.” (Garver 1994: 164). Thus, the difference between real and apparent enthymemes is “not one of logical form, or, more broadly, of artistic power, but of purpose: not formal or efficient cause, but final cause.” (ibid.). For Garver, only ethical criteria will work if we want to differentiate between the rhetorician and the sophist. Rhetoric must have

an internal ethical end, and artistic form must be tied to this end; that is, ethos and logos must be connected in the civic art of rhetoric. Such a rhetoric is crucial for human communities:

Speech [logos as opposed to phonē] is for making clear what is beneficial or harmful, and hence also what is just or unjust. For it is peculiar to human beings, in comparison to the other animals, that they alone have perception of what is good or bad, just or unjust, and the rest. And it is community in these that makes a household and a polis. (*Politica*, I.2.1253a13–18, quoted from Garver, 2011, p. 227).

It is interesting to note the strong political connection between speech and community made by Aristotle in his *Politics*, and one of Garver's main claims is that *On Rhetoric* has to be read in the light of this connection. Discursive practices and interactions are therefore rhetorical in the sense that they are crucial for "living well and living together" (see Garver 2011). When we use language in interactions, the rhetorician would say that we are not only using a linguistic structure as a means by which to communicate or to improve our linguistic system in a learning process; we are also practising the guiding ethical end of language to construct and maintain communities.

My own research has shown that second-language learning amongst adults can be described within this rhetorical framework (Bergersen 2012). In this study I analyzed how informants describe their learning processes in biographical interviews (Pflegerl, Khoo, Yeoh, & Koh 2003). Rhetorical theory and Aristotelian philosophy were placed in dialog with empirical data with talk-in-interaction characteristics. A detailed presentation of how this relationship was established falls beyond the scope of this article, but I read the interactionally formed descriptions of learning a new language as rhetorically formed civic arguments of which ethos was the dominant proof. The joint construction of ethos connected the speakers to a discursively constructed society. The forming of arguments governed by ethos established parallels between the informants' first language (Polish) and their second language (Norwegian), since ethos and credibility can be seen as discursive forms that transgress linguistic borders. I described the ethos-construction as an activity, an *energeia*. In particular, I studied reported and animated speech (Bakhtin & Holquist 1981; Tannen 2007; Vološinov 1986), and showed how the use of such speech and the more general rhetorical concept of *ethopoeia* defined rhythmical rhetorical patterns. Each case in my study was characterized by a different rhetorical pattern (relational, dynamic and recursive), and I read this as examples of more general rhetorical speech patterns that exceed situational and linguistic borders. Thus, these rhetorical patterns establish connections between first-language use and second-language use (as well as connections to learning, because using language is, to some extent, also a learning activity).

Children as rhetoricians

This is not the place to discuss in detail the relationship between second-language learning and first-language acquisition (but see Joaquin & Schumann 2014). The question in our context is rather whether we can find guiding artistic and ethical ends (ends internal to the practice) and patterns of ethos–logos connections in children’s discourse similar to that found in adults’ discourse. My review of children’s discursive abilities in infancy indicates that we can.

First, the artistic side of language is clearly an important factor in children’s language acquisition. As shown above, children already have the ability to recognize acoustic and rhythmical patterns in their mother’s speech before they are born. These prosodic patterns can in rhetorical terms be characterized as *technē*: learnable techniques which define a tradition or a craft. Frequency, length, stress and tone help children learn how to identify linguistic units and to use these units as a tool to influence their environment. One finding in my research on adults’ discourse has been the presence of rhetorical entities on a higher level than the sentence that are defined by the rhythm or dynamic of argumentation. Rhythmical patterns in discourse are therefore not necessarily a form separated from meaning. The construction of ethos in a text can also be regarded as a form, and using a language rhetorically is not only about mastering different techniques instrumentally, but also about practising guiding ends for that art. As shown earlier, children can be viewed as rhetorical agents with sensitivity for linguistic and interactional patterns already from birth. A plausible hypothesis could then be that infants’ productive and receptive communicative abilities are simply generalized and verbalized during their language development. Thus, what can be observed in all language use throughout a person’s discursive development is the process of realizing the same underlying ability for language. This indicates that the external goal of acquiring language conventions is realized through generalizing and specifying rhetorical patterns rooted in culture but recognizable to the infant. The patterns are inherent in the infant’s communicative practice and can – in the terminology used here – be conceptualized as guiding artistic ends.

Second, our review has shown that, right from birth, children are disposed to interaction and communication. Through vocalizations, gestures, smiling and crying, the child not only responds to the caregiver (or even to an experimenter), but also actively initiates communication. Tomasello (2003) writes about children’s ability to read intentions. According to Tomasello, children are equipped with the abilities to follow and interpret caregivers’ intentions and to direct the caregivers’ attention in a desired direction. In other words, children are innately sensitive to the pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of communication. By engaging in and initiating communication, children establish small situational and discursively constructed

communities. This activity can, in line with the terminology Garver uses in his interpretation of Aristotle, be conceptualized as the guiding ethical end in children's rhetorical practice. Once again, we are talking about inborn abilities and naturally given practices on which the child can expand and adjust to the characteristics of adult communication.

Third, many researchers have highlighted the imitative abilities of infants. Reissland (1988) documents that, already in the first hour after birth, children can imitate various mouth gestures (see Joaquin 2013: 34 for a more extended review on imitation). As Joaquin points out, recent research understands children's ability to imitate as not merely a behavioral reflex, but rather as volitional and intentional (Meltzoff 1998). A concept such as 'interactional instinct' or even the concept of imitation itself does not necessarily give an accurate picture of this phenomenon. We could also understand interactional practice as more in line with the research on reported speech, which is so central in Bakhtinian-inspired linguistic anthropology (Bauman 2004). I propose therefore that we view children's ability to imitate as evidence of the human condition in which we live to "live in a world of others' words" (Bakhtin, Holquist, & McGee 1986: 143). Another way to put it would be to say that when children imitate, they take the interlocutor's communicative signals and symbols and make them their own. When children make the words of others their own, they perform and animate language and participate in a discursive tradition. This could very well correspond to the reported speech I found in adults' discourse, and an example of the inborn rhetorical ability of *ethopoeia* in children. A strong hypothesis on the background of this line of argument would be that animated communication, or *ethopoeia*, plays a crucial role in children's language acquisition and that this rhetorical figure is a communicative resource children and adults have in common to regulate discourse, create rhetorical patterns and learn language by using it. In animated communication, *ethos* and *logos* are connected in the same performative way as intentional intersubjectivity and discourse patterns are connected in human interactions, offering the child a way into the rhetorical art of language.

Thus, when described by analogy with the civic art of rhetoric (*ars rhetorica*), the internal, guiding end in *ethos*–*logos* connections defines the art of language learning through realization of its ethical and artistic aspects. The point I am making here, expressed in more conventional terms, is that there are several practice-inherent activities in language which the child knows from birth. The child's drive to influence its surroundings and to interact with other people motivates it to use language and thus to acquire language as a structure. This tendency could be understood as the ethical end in early communicative practices, implying that the child finds it pleasurable and necessary to establish and maintain discursive

communities in communication. Furthermore, the child seems to find satisfaction in achieving the internal artistic end of mastering the linguistic patterns that characterize a given language. Already from birth, the child is endowed with abilities to recognize these patterns and to use them to communicate intentions and to take part in interactions. These basic statements hold some important implications for the study of language acquisition.

What kind of language acquisition? What kind of rhetoric?

The most important analytical consequence this rhetorical reading leads us to when it comes to children's language acquisition is that the study of children's receptive and productive linguistic abilities must be seen in relation with interactionally formed rhetorical patterns. Based on the perspective proposed here, a description of children's ability to produce increasingly advanced linguistic structures would have to go hand in hand with an interpretation of how children use communicative resources to influence their surroundings and in this way maintain discursive communities by establishing a co-constructed ethos. A rhetorical description of such practices has some advantages over traditional linguistic theories when it comes to conceptualizing children's language acquisition. Most importantly, it is not the case that children use or learn language by putting one linguistic building block on top of another and in doing so accomplish communication. A linguistic theory focusing on phonemes, morphemes or single words has thus less explanatory force than does a theory focusing on what children are trying to achieve in interactions with the communicative resources available to them. I would assert that children's manipulation of linguistic patterns should be seen as techniques for influencing their surroundings in order to establish discursively constructed communities. Based on the rhetorical view on language use proposed here, it is possible to describe the acquisition of a linguistic structure as it emerges from children's rhetorical and communicative activities in infancy. This rhetorical approach has the advantage of enabling us to describe both language use amongst children and adults within one and the same theoretical framework, and such a conceptualization will give our description of children's language use a connection to concepts that are central to our culture. It will position children not simply as recipients or imitators, but as agents that are actively involved in passing on cultural traditions.

This rhetorical approach to children's language acquisition also has consequences for rhetoric as a discipline. One of the most striking aspects of adult-child communication is its interactive and cooperative nature. If rhetoric is to be a discipline that offers fruitful conceptualizations of such discursive phenomena, it

cannot focus exclusively on the rhetorical performance of individual speakers. It must instead focus on how meaning is achieved in cooperation with communication. Furthermore, child–adult communication is a private and emotional phenomenon, and may be viewed by some as the opposite of the public speech we normally associate with rhetoric. Nevertheless, I would assert that although child–adult communication is not public in a traditional sense, it can be regarded as civic, given that communities are established and maintained through such communication. The rhetorical tradition offers the empirical data discussed here a terminology which allows us to describe these data as culturally contingent forms of communication. What is perhaps more challenging is that adult–child communication calls for rhetorical terminology that is also suitable to the flow of talk and not only verbally well-formed and structured propositions. This means that rhetorical patterns cannot be derived from verbally formed propositions alone, but also from more abstract rhythmical patterns in verbal communication and sounds, body language and gaze – all of which the child is able to perceive. When analyzing rhetorical patterns, the researcher should also give an account of the interaction as a whole, since adult–child communication cannot be understood in terms of its individual elements. This means that a rhetorical theory of such communication will rely heavily on the researcher’s interpretation and may therefore be rejected by supporters of ‘hard’ facts in mainstream linguistics.

Few rhetorically inspired theories exist which attempt to answer all of these challenges (but see Billig 1996). My proposition in this article has been to use classical rhetorical concepts such as guiding ends of civic art, the patterned connections between ethos and logos, and the rhetorical figure *ethopoeia*, and to ask how these concepts help us understand empirical phenomena that are crucial in children’s language development. In this way I hope the article has shown that the art of rhetoric and the art of learning a first language can be conceptualized analogically. Obviously, further analysis would have to be developed to determine this theory’s explanatory force. For example, the theoretical approach proposed here raises the question of how movements in children’s language development and the forces behind them can be described in terms of the movements and forces which characterize the art of rhetoric (such as *kinēsis* and *energeia*). Further research is therefore needed to clarify the extent to which rhetorical theory could be a fruitful way to understand the underlying forces in human communication and children’s linguistic development.

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