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FATHERS AND OTHER STRANGERS: MEN'S SPEECH TO YOUNG CHILDREN

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The decade of the 70's in child language research looks very different from that of the 60's. The years of formalism yielded a great deal of information on the order in which various linguistic structures are acquired by children, and hinted at the presence of linguistic and cognitive universals. At the same time, very little was said about the actual process of acquisition; the child was seen as a miniature grammarian testing out his linguistic hypotheses, which had to be innate because no child could be expected to make order out of the jumble of decadent performance surrounding him. Now, as Molière's Dr. Sganarelle would say, 'Nous avons changé tout cela'.[1] A number of studies, beginning with small papers in Susan Ervin-Tripp's laboratory at Berkeley and including the work of Patricia Broen, Juliet Phillips, Catherine Snow, Helen Remick, and others in various countries have shown that mothers' speech to children learning language appears to be an ideal teaching language, one that is characterized by well-formedness, simplicity, repetition, and other design features that appear to facilitate the child's prehension of the system, all delivered at half the rate of adult-adult speech. Moreover, mothers have been shown to adjust the length and complexity of their utterances to conform to the child's gradually emerging competence. The theoretical onus on the child has thus been considerably lightened as language acquisition has come to be viewed as an interactive process involving both the child and a sensitive adult.

Now that it is known that mothers' speech to young children has special input features, it is important to determine if these features are limited to mothers' speech or if they are in a more general sense

characteristic of adult language to young children. There are obvious practical consequences: with family roles changing and the advent of daycare, the question of whether or not non-mothers are able to provide the kind of linguistic environment that may be crucial to the interactive development of language becomes increasingly significant. Catherine Snow answered part of the question when she showed that women who were not themselves mothers had in their speech to children the same modifications as mothers. But men's language has remained a mystery: to date there have been essentially no published studies of men's speech to children. In fact, for a while there was some question as to whether there was such a thing as men's speech to children: in a study of fathers' speech to their 3-month-old infants, Rebelsky and Hanks found that fathers spent an average of only 37.7 seconds a day engaged in this activity. Perhaps many fathers share the sentiments of Nikolai in War and Peace, who regarded infants as nothing more than a lump of flesh and only became interested in them when they reached the age of a year or 15 months and began to talk. At any rate, fathers do talk to their children, as do other males, and the nature of that language is the topic of our current investigation.

The primary data examined comes from two male and two female daycare teachers in a small daycare center at a large university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and from three mothers and three fathers at home with their children, mostly at the dinner hour. The home samples are part of a study conducted by Gary Kriedberg, a student at Boston University. We have also looked at another comparative study of mothers' and fathers' speech that was conducted at the Boston Graduate School of Education by Audrey Stein. Stein compared the stories that mothers and fathers in five families made up for their children in response to a picture book. The children were all of preschool age, and the families were visited twice; on each occasion one parent showed the child the book and made up a study to go with the pictures. Stein found that in the storytelling situation the mothers' and fathers' language were similar in terms of mean length of utterance and mean preverb length, both measures of complexity, as well as in other adult-child register features, like repetitions, expansions, and expatiations. But the mothers produced significantly more speaker changes (turns), exclamations, and questions, as well as other indices of the close mother-child relationship, while the fathers tended to involve the child less and to be less 'tuned in' to what the child was trying to say or was interested in. It was clear, however, that despite these differences, the fathers' speech in this storytelling situation contained special modifications for children.

The home and daycare samples cover various nonexperimental loosely structured activities, like eating dinner or having juice and crackers and playing in the playground. Kriedberg compared the

fathers' and mothers' speech at home along a number of dimensions, and we compared the female with the male daycare teachers. This report describes some findings of Kriedberg's home study, where the parents occupy different roles, and terminates with results from the daycare study, where females and males occupied essentially the same roles.

The mothers and fathers at home all simplified their speech when addressing their children. Their mean preverb length and mean length of utterance within each family were quite similar, although the fathers' MLU was less closely tied to that of the child than was the mothers': mothers used less complex speech with their younger children and produced longer, more complex utterances when addressing the older of their two children. In one family, where the younger child by two years was a girl, the father nonetheless directed longer utterances to her than to his son. This is perhaps a reflection of the fact that there were large differences between fathers and mothers in the types of sentences they produced: fathers' language was filled with direct imperatives, especially to their sons. Since imperatives have zero preverb length this contributes to the shorter average length of father-son utterances. In the home samples, fathers produced significantly more imperatives than mothers. Fathers also produced more threats and more jocular names, names that had a pejorative undertone, like dingaling, especially to their sons. One additional difference between fathers and mothers, which has not been quantified, was that fathers seemed to employ some fairly rare lexical items, like telling a two-year-old that he is being aggravating. Like the mothers', the fathers' speech was essentially limited to the here and now, and was clearly a register especially marked for talking to children, but because of the imperatives, threats, and affectionately insulting names, the fathers' language 'felt' qualitatively different from the mothers' language. Finally, the fathers' language clearly demarked their role within the family: a father playing with his small son, for instance, might break off the game to send the child to his mother to have his diaper changed.

While the mothers and fathers had a number of differentiating features in their language, male and female daycare teachers produced language that was quantitatively and qualitatively very similar.[2] The mean length of utterance of the five longest utterances for each was computed; the females averaged 14.9 and the males averaged 14.8. Repetition rates for the males were higher than for the females: males averaged 31 percent repetitions, while females' speech contained 24 percent repetitions. Again, we note anecdotally some unexpected lexical usage by males: one teacher asked a child if she found something intimidating. The child was in a class of 3-year-olds. But the topic of discourse for males and females is very much in the present,

and both males and females are concerned with the child's immediate needs, as is evidenced by the following excerpt from the transcript:

> Male teacher: (to Jenny) Does Jenny want to go to the toilet? Do you want to go to the toilet? (to Michael) Did you go to the potty after nap?

Here the language of this male teacher is filled with baby talk features, and the concern is one that in many homes is the exclusive province of mothers, but within the daycare center male and female teachers accepted responsibility for attending to the children's immediate needs, and their language reflects this.

There are two main features that distinguish between the language of the male and female daycare teachers. The first is in the use of the child's name. In a sample of 100 utterances, males called the child by name an average of 32 times. Women did so only one-fourth as often. These vocatives were used about as often in noninitial as in initial position.

TABLE 1. Daycare teachers' use of child's name, per 100 utterances

Teacher	Initial position	Noninitial position	Total vocatives
Mr. B.	12	19	31
Mr. J.	20	12	32
Ms. S.	1	4	5
Ms. L.	6	4	10

The second quantifiable difference between the language of female and male teachers was in sentence type: males again used more imperatives than females, but that has to be seen in light of the fact that the females' speech was singularly devoid of direct imperative constructions: they averaged 2 percent. Males averaged only 11 percent, which is a smaller proportion of imperatives than mothers use at home, and in a different universe from the fathers.

TABLE 2. Percentage of utterance types

	Imperatives	Declaratives	Questions
Fathers (N=3)	38.33	33.33	28.67
Mothers (N=3)	19	52	29
Male teachers (N=2)	11	47	42
Female teachers (N=2)	2	48	50

One important point to note in discussing differences between teachers and parents is that the teachers were dealing with someone else's children. Parents are also aware that they cannot speak as strongly to their children's friends as to their own children. When some children were interviewed about how they felt about the way adults talk to them, one 9-year-old girl volunteered that when she went to a friend's house 'my friend's mother is always much nicer to me than she is to her own child.'

Thus, one of the variables to be taken into account in studying language addressed to children is that adults have separate ways of talking to their own children and to other people's children. This must be added to other variables like sex of adult, sex of child, age of child, the topic, and the setting.

In the setting of the home, mothers and fathers do not produce identical speech, although fathers' speech has many of the formal characteristics of mothers' speech. But fathers are not as well tuned-in to their children as mothers are in the traditional family situation. They do not have to learn to attend to subtle signals from the child, and frequently have no penalty to pay for any lack of attention: someone else cleans up the accidents. On the other hand, there are probably serious and far-reaching good effects that result from the fact that traditional fathers are not quite so sensitive to the needs and intentions of their children. Toward the end of A First Language (p. 412), Roger Brown speculates about why children bother to learn the adult linguistic system at all, since the evidence indicates that their mothers understand them, whatever their needs, and are rarely even conscious of gross syntactic deficiencies on the part of the child. One reason must surely be that children possess deep, inner--epigenetic, if you will--drives to acquire and integrate adult knowledge and adult competence in all of their behaviors. Another, simpler, motivating force is to be found at the dinner table and in the playground: children have to learn to talk to their fathers and other strangers, and these people are not tuned in to them in the warm, sensitive way their mothers are. In Stein's storytelling situation, the fathers sometimes misunderstood what the children said. They also concentrated on telling an interesting story, while mother spent more time interacting with the child, asking questions, making sure he or she understood. The children had to exert themselves more for the fathers, and try harder to make themselves both heard and understood. In this way, fathers can be seen as a bridge to the outside world, leading the child to change her or his language in order to be understood. Of course, children without fathers also learn to talk, but the opportunity to try out new linguistic skills on someone not as intimate as your mother but closer than a stranger may be one of the hitherto unrecognized benefits of coming from an intact family. Perhaps the

first step outward toward the outside world and the one that necessitates sharpening linguistic skills is the one in which you try to tell your father what happened while he was away.

While this may describe families that maintain the traditional model, there are many families that no longer conform to this model, and it may well be asked what are the linguistic consequences of shared parental nurturant roles and of daycare with both male and female caretakers. Until now, all of the studies of input language to children have been studies of women's speech. It was possible that child language register was limited to females and that males were incapable of producing appropriate speech--if any speech at all--when addressing young children. Our data, and the small studies I have referred to, indicate that the important features of adult-child speech are found in the language of both fathers and non-fathers when addressing young children. This is not to say that men and women, fathers and strangers, all talk alike when dealing with young children, but rather that the important features of simplicity, well-formedness, repetition, and immediacy are present in the language of all of them. At home with their own children, fathers frequently are cast into the role of disciplinarian. Their language contains more direct imperatives, while the mothers tend to couch their imperative intent in question form. Avoidance of direct imperatives appears to be a general feature of women's language in our society. The fathers also use more imperatives when speaking with their sons than with their daughters, and they use more gruff affectionate terms toward the little boys: little girls are rarely called dingaling, nutcake, or tiger by their fathers. The heavy use of imperatives to the boys gives the impression that in our society males become accustomed early on to taking orders, and, if their fathers provide role models, to giving them.

The male and female daycare teachers were not as different from one another as were fathers and mothers at home. The differences that did exist, however, were in the same direction, the greater use of imperatives by males, for instance. But at the same time, daycare males, like females, expressed many of their requests in question form and tended to state social rules in an impersonal and non-threatening way. The following excerpt from the transcript indicates how one male daycare teacher handled a child transgressor:

> Mr. B: Mickey, do you know what the rule is? When someone screams and says they want to get up, you don't hold them down. Mickey, we don't hold people down when they say they want to get up. You were holding Sarah down and she kept saying she wanted to get up. Okay. So the next time someone says, 'excuse me, I want to get up', you let them up.

By contrast, a father at home, faced with a much less serious situation, expressed himself as follows:

Mr. X: Anthony, stay out of here before I break your head. Don't go in there again or I'll break your head.

Both men's utterances are clearly marked as adult-child register: The child is called by name frequently and there are numerous repetitions, but the father is threatening and imperative, while the daycare attendant speaks in an understated, very explicit, and rather 'preachy' way that is perhaps itself an example of schoolteacher register. This is especailly true of the 'we don't's' where 'we' really means 'you'. Finally, it would appear that while the traditional father at home may not be attuned to the immediate needs of his child and may speak to that child in a gruff, imperious way, this is not at all the case where the male shares the nurturant role, as in the daycare center, and, presumably, by extension, in those families that share child care duties. The male daycare teachers' speech is singularly devoid of the kinds of threats that have been seen emanating from the traditional fathers at home. In the use of imperative constructions there is no overlap between home and school samples. In fact, mothers at home produce more imperatives to their children than do males in the daycare setting.

While the language of fathers at home has the same basic syntactic features as the language of mothers, it is distinguished from mothers' speech to children along lines that are connected with the father's role, both as authority figure and as one who is not called upon to be completely sensitive to the needs and intentions of the child. Traditional fathers are not primary providers of nurturance, nor are they called upon to be sensitive to the signals that indicate that nurturance is called for.

In the daycare center male and female teachers occupy the same role and many of the differences that have been noted between mothers and fathers disappear. Male daycare teachers' speech to young children is more like the language of female daycare teachers than it is like that of fathers at home, even though it contains some markers characteristic of male speech in general. While the greater use of imperatives might indicate that males are more 'controlling', it is difficult to explain why men call children by name so much more frequently than women do. The use of the child's name at the beginning of an utterance may also be an attention-getting or controlling device, but utterances frequently terminated with the child's name as well. One possibility is that the use of the child's name is a marker employed by males more frequently than females to indicate that they are speaking in adult-child register; females rely upon other devices,

such as varied or exaggerated intonation patterns, to accomplish the same end. Even if one cannot see the addressee, one can usually guess correctly that a woman is talking to a child if she employs exaggerated or singsong intonation; under the same circumstances, if one hears a man call the addressee by name several times over a short period of time, one can also guess that he is speaking to a child.

It is probably possible to find other differences in the language of male and female daycare attendants, but the similarities in their language in terms of MLU, preverb length, topic of discourse, and repetitions are striking. If the small daycare sample we have seen is in any way typical, we can take assurance from the fact that daycare teachers' speech is very like mothers' speech: both female and male daycare teachers appear to provide children with the kind of linguistic input that now is considered necessary for the development of language. Men, as well as women, modify their speech when addressing young children, and where the men occupy a nurturant role they become increasingly sensitive to the needs and intentions of the children.

NOTES

1. Molière, Le médecin malgré lui, Act II, Scene 4: 'Cela était autrefois ainsi: mais nous avons changé tout cela, et nous faisons maintenant la médecine d'une méthode toute nouvelle.'

2. The daycare data was tape recorded and transcribed by Elsie Zanger, and analyzed by Georgene Robinson. I am grateful to them both.

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