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# Does the ‘Young Learner’ exist? A systemic functional investigation of mood and make believe in the speech of Korean children and their teachers<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The ‘Young Learner’ has proved extremely lucrative as a market niche, especially—but not exclusively—in language education. Yet as a theoretical construct, it remains poorly defined and undifferentiated (in Korea it refers mainly to preschool and early elementary grades, while elsewhere it can be used freely from infancy to adolescence). This paper uses a systemic-functional investigation of two moments in the early school lives of Korean children to show their specificity; we use an analysis of Mood use to show how Korean teachers find out whether children can or cannot tell their teachers what they can and cannot do using the honorific sub-system of Korean Mood, and an analysis of Transitivity and embedding to show how Korean teachers attempt to teach make-believe to children. We end with some modest but practical pedagogical conclusions taken from the data itself. Less modestly, we argue that the ‘Young Learner’ should be retired.

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## Introduction: the ‘Young Learner’ and its discontents

The notion that there exists a special category of ‘Young Learners’—and that these young learners are not to be treated like unusually short adult learners—may be traced all the way back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (e.g. by Piaget, in 1969: 140). As Rousseau puts it in his quasi-novelistic treatise on education, *Emile*:

‘The man (sic) must be considered in the man, and the child in the child. To assign each his (sic) place and settle him (sic) in it, to order the human passions according to man’s (sic) constitution is all that we can do for his (sic) well being (1763/1979: 80).’

Today, it is not simply Rousseau’s overgeneralization of the masculine gender that may strike us as antiquated. One of Rousseau’s central arguments for differentiating the young learner from the adult is that because of high infant mortality rates and childhood diseases, fewer than half the children in school will survive to take the adult jobs for which education is supposed to prepare them; therefore, schooling needs to be enjoyable in its own right, lest a person’s whole existence be reduced to an arduous preparation for a calling that will never come. Thanks to youth unemployment, this argument is

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perhaps not as dated as we would like to think. But, more surprisingly, particularly for educators who consider Rousseau's insistence on the specificity of childhood as a bulwark against adult authority, he has this apparently irrational advice on schooling a son:

'Let him know only that he is weak and you are strong, that by his condition and yours he is necessarily at your mercy. Let him know it, learn it, feel it. Let his haughty head at an early date feel the harsh yoke which nature imposes on man, the heavy yoke of necessity under which every finite being must bend (1763/1979: 91).'

Rousseau's argument is perfectly rational; it is merely anti-rationalist. When we read it in context, we understand that Rousseau's clear distinction between the child learner and the adult was in its time an argument against the child-centred education of his own day, namely that of John Locke. Where Locke would reason with the child and for the most part eschew violence, Rousseau insists on a clear distinction between force, which is natural, and authority, which is merely human.

Yet, in hindsight, the two viewpoints seem more linked than distinct. Locke did argue that children were rational creatures who could be reasoned with, but he added the rider 'When I talk of Reasoning, I do not intend any other but such as is suited to the Child's Capacity and Apprehension (1693/1899: 61, §81)'. Locke's appeals to 'authority', derided by Rousseau, included natural forces like keeping children in wet shoes in winter so that they would not catch cold easily (4, §7), keeping mealtimes irregular lest the child become well-fed and complacent (11, §15), and judicious whippings (65, §87) to be used to overcome obstinacy rather than ignorance. Sensibly, Locke reasoned that if beatings were unnecessary for learning French and Italian, they should also be unnecessary for Latin and Greek. Above all, Locke shared Rousseau's famously naturalistic views of language learning: 'Languages were made not by Rules or Art, but by Accident, and the common Use of the People,' opines Locke. He concludes: 'And he that will speak them well, has no other Rule but that; nor any thing to trust to, but his Memory, and the Habit of speaking after the Fashion learned from those, that are allowed to speak properly, which in other Words is only to speak by rote' (145, §168).

This apparent rapprochement between force and authority, nature and culture, and above all between naturalist and empiricist theories of language learning is hardly an artefact of hindsight; if anything, the objects in the rear-view mirror are even closer than they appear. As Halliday has pointed out, the two main currents of thought in language 'acquisition' today are still the naturalistic one, based on Universal Grammar (e.g. White, 2009), and the empiricist one, based on frequent and comprehensible input (e.g. Ellis, 2009). But Halliday adds that, viewed from his own social-semiotic perspective, they have a lot more in common than in dispute (2004: 309).

Halliday argues that instead of 'acquisition', where language is an object outside the child's consciousness which the individual child must confront and seize as his or her own property, the process of language learning in both the first and the second language learner may be understood as a process of construal—not so much 'construction', which still implies something quite external to the child's consciousness, but rather a 'figuring out', first of a 'child tongue' which has no parallel in adult speech and then of the 'mother tongue' used in the child's environment (2004: 258). So learning a first language is not that different from learning a second language, although not for the reasons that Locke thought and many naturalistic researchers in Second Language Acquisition still think. It is not that second language learning—like first language learning—occurs more by rote than by rule, it is that first language learning and second language learning both involve both—but above all they involve learning to make meanings which are psychological by learning to assign and exchange roles that are essentially social.

Halliday's stated preference for Vygotsky's perspective that consciousness is essentially a social mode of being (2002: 354) in turn suggests a very different kind of rapprochement, one that is at the heart of the present article. Two decades ago, in a pivotal paper published in these pages, Gordon Wells, who was already a pioneer in long-term studies of language in education (1986), explored what Hasan (2005) called an 'exo-tropic' relationship between Halliday's systemic-functional view of language and Vygotsky's functional-systemic view of the mind (1994, republished as the first part of *Dialogic Inquiry*, 1999). On the face of it, he had a tough task: Halliday speaks of semantic functions made up of lexicogrammatical systems, while Vygotsky preferred to talk of psychological systems made up of intra-mental functions. One of Wells' many important—and original—insights was his view that the two different functions of language that Vygotsky noted in child development—the first, of other-directed social contact and the second, of self-directed verbal thinking—correspond to the two primary 'metafunctions' we find in Halliday's systemic functional grammar, namely the interpersonal (that is, the function of enacting social roles, through the exchange of information or goods and services) and the ideational (that is, the function of construing experience or ordering figures of experience).

At the beginning of a book co-authored with his student Alexander Luria, *Tool and Sign in Child Development*, Vygotsky divides the history of child development into a 'botanical age' and a 'zoological one'. In the former, the model of growth is vegetable, not to be speeded by pulling or tugging, and the site of education is a garden (a 'kindergarten') where children can blossom. In the latter, the model of growth is animal, a matter of taming and training the child, and the site of education is a laboratory or classroom (like a cage or one of Thorndike's famous 'puzzle boxes') where stimuli can be controlled and responses shaped. The atomism of both approaches—in Vygotsky's terms, the vegetable and the animal, or in Halliday's terms the naturalistic and the empiricist—stems from their ahistorical conception of the child, the child as an asocial and sub-cultural being (1994: 6–7).

But if both Halliday and Vygotsky insist upon the social and cultural linkedness of the child and the others in the child's milieu, they also insist on the distinctness of the stages through which the child passes, and the distance between what

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