



# First-order reality and reflexive practices in children's language development

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## ABSTRACT

From a phenomenological perspective, Maurice Merleau-Ponty distinguished between ideas about one's own body (body image) and the functioning of the body in its immediate environment (body schema). To capture the dynamics of the characteristics of language as suggested in second-order linguistic negotiation of meaning and in spontaneous first-order linguistic behaviour, this article proposes to conceptualize the embodiment of language in children's development in terms of a *language image* and a *language schema*. The article points to some of the complexities involved in processes of analytical imitation and reflexive enculturation and offers an interpretation of the first-order reality involved in a narrative performance of a four-year-old.

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## 1. Introduction

The distinction between second-order and first-order linguistic activities (Love, 1990, 2004) is particularly important in illustrating how the concept of a language as a second-order construct likely emerged from the retrospective endeavours of philosophers, teachers, and grammarians describing first-order processes of speaking and writing on the basis of the second-order products of written language. The spatially organized signs of the text encouraged the divisions and units necessary for theorizing about the temporally organized *in situ* production of linguistic sounds. The description of the qualities and characteristics of linguistic stability and repeatability became a point of focus with the invention of the alphabet (Harris, 1986, 1995, 2000; Olson, 1994). Indeed, the idea of a language as a fixed code was based on those qualities and characteristics. The fixed code was understood as a prerequisite to explaining how language made the transference of thoughts possible. In order for communication to be successful, the same linguistic knowledge had to be attributed to the communicating parties. The notion of a fixed code subsequently produced a concept of communication in speech act theory that pictured linguistic interaction as a matter of using utterances to reflect and transfer the meaning of sentences (Searle, 1995) or of pragmatically inferring that meaning from a particular context of use (Grice, 1982).

Thus the distinction between second-order and first-order language has provided integrational linguists with conceptual means to follow and unravel the reasoning behind twentieth-century linguistics. But what are the implications of this distinction for assessing the relationship between metalinguistic practices (second-order activities) and the first-order reality of spontaneous linguistic behaviour in children's language development? In this article, I argue that the assessment should take into careful consideration how and why children's reflexive abilities are inseparable from the rest of their developing communicational skills in everyday interaction. This point was already made by Taylor and Shanker (2003), but I am going to take it one step further and suggest why communicational skills in language development in fact *presuppose* reflexive

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abilities. I suggest that reflexivity is also involved in analytical forms of imitation, and that children's imitative actions are analytical when they serve a communicational purpose that goes beyond the confirmation of their emotional bonds with particular others. Phylogenetically, language seems to have developed from the phenomenon of *mimesis* and increasingly complex processes of imitation. Ontogenetically, imitative communicational actions play a dominant role in children's pre-linguistic as well as linguistic development (Reddy, 2008; Stern, 1985; Tomasello, 2003).

I also argue that a phenomenological approach, one that takes its point of departure in the first-person perspective as inextricably linked to the intentionality and temporal organization of consciousness, makes it possible not only to conceptualize how second-order actions influence and eventually induce first-order behaviour, but also to substantiate the *dictum* of integrational linguistics that each and every instance of the production and interpretation of language is founded on and develops its complex communicational characteristics from individual experience. Furthermore, a phenomenological approach implies that language is embodied and somehow entangled with the way the body shapes the mind (Gallagher, 2005).

First, I present Donald's (2001) view of intermediate-term and episodic awareness as the aspect of the evolution of the human mind that expanded our capacity of memory and granted mankind the possibility of not only keeping together sequences of episodes as they had been experienced, but making it possible for the individual rememberer to privately constitute these episodes as events or publicly make them available to others through narrative performance (*mimesis*). Because it takes a unique and creative effort to constitute, organize and frame what is to be imitated or 'repeated' as a particular event, second-order consideration is arguably involved in all complex forms of imitation and repetition. It would seem that the illusion of the repeatability of words and utterances (Love, 1990) can be traced back not only to the invention of the alphabet, but to the profound importance of *mimesis* and imitation in the pre-linguistic evolution of the human mind (Donald, 2001). Even before we had language we would therefore have had to have reflexivity and metadiscursive<sup>1</sup> practices to initiate and organize communication.

If communication originally came about through processes of interpretation and imitation, *communicational* first-order activity turns out to be in itself a result of second-order activity. It is inherently imitative in that it involves a kind of analytically-based *response* to what was previously experienced. In fact, it *presupposes* a myriad of possibilities of second-order activities. It seems reasonable to assume that it was because of the communicational needs of pre-linguistic people and because of the reflexive dimension of the embodied mind that those needs fostered, that language itself became reflexive.

Taylor (2012) has identified some of the most important concepts involved in metadiscursive practices. These include intentionality, reference, meaning, truth, and understanding. It is worth considering whether these concepts are essential not only to metadiscursive practices, but to imitative practices as well. In *mimesis*, something is intentionally produced to be 'about' the phenomena that are imitatively referred to. The interlocutors need to interpret the purpose of the performance in order to critically assess what seems to be true or false. Indeed, Donald claims that the ability to deceive was accomplished long before language was developed (2001: 190). Communicational success depended on the understanding that interlocutors displayed when expressing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance.

The point is that reflexivity is not only in itself a pre-linguistic phenomenon. It is also a mode of consciousness that children depend on when they begin to develop language. To be able to intentionally communicate about the world, children must attend to it in a selective and analytical manner. Children have a pre-reflexive awareness of their own first-order reality but if they want to *communicate* about that reality they have to be able to consciously constitute and represent objects and episodes. They have to be able to keep them apart in order to compare and evaluate them, and they have to be able to involve other people in the way they (re)contextualize aspects of past or present experiences. These movements of the mind are in and by themselves reflexive acts and it is therefore that some kind of metadiscursive practice is presupposed in analytical imitation as well as in linguistic first-order communicational efforts. Eventually children's speech becomes automatized and it is pre-reflexively enacted. It is because of the fluency and characteristics of uninhibited spontaneous speech that its underlying premises are so easily overlooked.

Second, I present Gallagher's (2005) interpretation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of the distinction between a body image and a body schema, a distinction that originated within psychology. The notions of a body image and a body schema refer to two closely coordinated systems that continuously interact to enable planned bodily action as well as spontaneous movement. A body image is built on perceptions and observations, attitudes and explicit knowledge of one's own body. A body schema, on the other hand, does not involve conscious awareness. It refers to the *ability* to move as well as the gradually developed capacity for habitual or automatized movement in the face of well-known activities in recurrent situations. I suggest that similar processes of interaction are involved in children's language development. To my knowledge, there is no—at least not yet—empirical evidence to support such a distinction. Nevertheless, I provisionally use the terms *language image* and *language schema* as a means of conceptualizing the dynamics involved in children's development of second-order and first-order linguistic skills. A language image consists of perceptions and observations, attitudes and explicit knowledge about language as reflected upon and learned, whereas a language schema is an automatized *ability* to spontaneously speak and (eventually) write when participating in everyday social interaction. Image and schema influence and empower each other as children gradually engage in ever more complex linguistic practices. This way of conceptualizing

<sup>1</sup> *Discurrere* in Latin means running back and forth. This seems like a useful interpretation of what it means to communicate without language. One would have to run back and forth between what was remembered and what was performed.

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