Calibrating the child for language: Meredith Williams on a Wittgensteinian approach to language socialization

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the normative and reflexive foundations of language socialization. In several publications Meredith Williams makes a strong case for placing Wittgenstein's discussions of the normative character of social learning at the heart of an account of the child's development of language and mind. This paper examines Williams' argument, concluding that it needs to be complemented by an account of the child's scaffolded socialization into the community's metadiscursive practices. It is by means of the child's increasing metadiscursive competence that the child comes to measure the phenomena and experiences of language as 'we' do in 'our' community's linguistic-cultural world.

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When we abandon the reductive and other ambitions inspired by false pictures, and associated bad questions, we can see that the only legitimate question is how the child, and so ourselves as a species, gets into the normative dimension.

(Williams, 2010a, p. 199)

1. Introduction: The anti-intellectualist turn in the study of language development

Within the various fields of research focusing on child development, increasing attention has been given in recent years to the child's socialization within the normative practices of her cultural community. In this research, questions such as the following loom large: How does the child learn to form joint commitments and shared social goals? How does she become one who not only adheres to but eventually helps to maintain the norms and conventions of her culture's social practices? By what means does she come to understand—and, bit by bit, to conform her behavior to—the expectations, rights, conventions, rules, institutions, and obligations which constitute the normative foundations to social life and cultural understanding in her community?

Pioneering research on language socialization has been carried out by linguistic anthropologists, drawing on fieldwork in different languages and cultures. Using a largely ethnographic methodology, this research focuses on describing the widely varying cultural techniques by which the child is led to become an increasingly competent participator in the normative practices of her speech community (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986; Clancy, 1986; Schieffelin, 1990; Ochs, 1996; Kulick, 1997; Brown, 2001; Kulick and Schieffelin, 2004; Gaskins, 2006; Howard, 2011; Duranti et al., 2011). Within developmental psychology, the work of Michael Tomasello and his colleagues stands out among many others (Tomasello et al., 2005, 2012; Herrmann et al., 2007; Tomasello, 2009; Gräfenhain et al., 2009; Rakoczy et al., 2008; Rakoczy and Tomasello, 2009; Rossano et al., 2011; Schmidt et al., 2011). Based on an experimental methodology, their research seeks to identify

the specific aspects of the child's cognitive capacities which enable her to acquire social norms. In a ground-breaking paper, Michael Tomasello and his colleagues propose that

> ... the crucial difference between human cognition and that of other species is the ability to participate with others in collaborative activities with shared goals and intentions: shared intentionality. Participation in such activities requires not only especially powerful forms of intention reading and cultural learning, but also a unique motivation to share psychological states with others and unique forms of cognitive representation for doing so. The result of participating in these activities is species-unique forms of cultural cognition and evolution, enabling everything from the creation and use of linguistic symbols to the construction of social norms and individual beliefs to the establishment of social institutions.

> (Tomasello et al., 2005, p. 675)

In what is a broadly interdisciplinary field of research, a third perspective on the foundations of the child's socio-cognitive and linguistic development emerges from the growing school of thought in the philosophy of mind which adopts a fundamentally anti-intellectualist and anti-representationalist perspective on cognition (Varela et al., 1991; De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Stewart et al., 2010; Hutto and Myin, 2013; Hutto, 2013). Of particular note is the "normative naturalism" propounded in the work of Meredith Williams. In her *Blind Obedience* (2010a), *Wittgenstein, Mind and Meaning* (1999), and other important writings published over the past 25 years, Williams makes a strong case for placing Wittgenstein's discussions of the normative character of social learning at the heart of an account of the child's development of language and mind. Based on her readings of the later Wittgenstein's discussions of language-learning, normativity, and rule-following—as these are found in the *Philosophical Investigations, On Certainty,* and the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*—Williams proposes an anti-intellectualist and anti-representationalist account of how the child comes to be a competent language-user and skillful participant in her culture's normative practices.

The second part of the paper consists of a synopsis of Williams' views on the normative foundations of the child's language socialization. The third part raises the possibility of complementing Williams' argument by giving greater attention to the role played—in both how and what the child learns—by the child's initiation into her community's metadiscursive practices: that is, into the community's commonplace practices of talking about (and responding to talk about) communicational activities. The paper's fourth and final sections consider Williams' notions of "bedrock judgments" and normative "calibration" and their applicability to our understanding of the reflexive aspect of the child's enculturation into language.

2. The normative foundations of language learning

To understand Williams' argument regarding how children learn their first language, we should begin by considering a foundational distinction made in her schematic picture of the language-learning process. This is the distinction between "the master" and "the novice" (also called "the initiate learner"). "The master–novice relation is the medium through which I ... construct (part of) Wittgenstein's views" (Williams, 2011, p. 199). Williams' uses "the novice" as a cover term to refer paradigmatically to the young child who is learning a skill, technique, or competence: e.g., the young child first acquiring a natural language (Williams, 2010a, p. 20). The novice is the child who does not yet have the basic skills or techniques to participate competently in the language practices of her learning environment: she is "semantically and epistemically innocent" (Williams, 2010a, p. 255). The "master" is Williams' contrasting term, used to stand for those who are linguistically-competent, skillful practitioners within those language practices.

> The terms "master" and "novice" are not to be found in Wittgenstein's writings though the expressions "child", "pupil", "instruction", "learning", and "mastery" are scattered throughout the later writings. I introduce these terms "novice" and "master" to keep track of certain important methodological and explanatory ideas to be found in the later work, especially in *Philosophical Investigations*, but also in *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* and *On Certainty*. I use these terms to refer to the initiate learning relation between the child and the adult or the pupil and his teacher. These are situations in which the child or pupil does not have the cognitive competence required to exercise the skill that is the object of learning. There is an asymmetric dependence of the novice on the master, a dependence that is not epistemic but linguistic and causal.

> (Williams, 2011, p. 199)

> The value of the master–novice situation is that elements of language use "come apart" as it were, revealing the different dimensions of the background against which we engage in our use of language.

> (Williams, 2010b, p. 355–356)

The diagnostic picture which Williams draws of language learning is one in which such novices acquire language by being brought up in the language-rich interactional scenes of the childhood environment: scenes which are normatively structured in a way that Williams' use of the terms "novice" and "master" is intended to foreground. Adopting the expression Wittgenstein uses in his discussion of the child's learning of names in the opening sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Williams characterizes the process of the novice's initiation into verbal practices as "ostensive training". "Training is acculturation into a social practice" (Williams, 1999, p. 50). Within the normatively-structured learning environment, the child's initiation into verbal practices is "scaffolded"—that is, is supported or assisted—by her language-competent parents