



Making sense with private speech



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ABSTRACT

Private speech, as conceptualized by Vygotsky, has been studied primarily as a means of self direction or executive function. It is reconsidered here in terms of its relation to social speech and to thought. A portion of the “crib speech” of a 2-year-old is presented in the context of her representation of her father’s account of a prospective event, focused on the problems of comprehension of adult talk, and of understanding the complex relations involved in the perspectives of self and other. The function of private speech for the young child is seen in its value as external representation, a major function of semiotic forms in human cognition.

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What is the relation of private speech – speech for or to the self – to social speech? What can the study of private speech in very young children tell us about this? In this article I describe some of the ways that private speech relates to social speech during the language learning years, and how it may relate to other aspects of development such as memory, thinking and social cognition. These significant issues in semiotic cognition have been relatively neglected in contemporary studies of cognitive development. In contrast, both Vygotsky and Piaget saw private speech as having a significant place in the relation between thought and language. A revival of interest is now apparent, especially in relation to executive functions (i.e., controlling action) in the context of problem solving tasks. (See [Winsler, 2009](#) for a review and reports of some of this work.) I argue here that the potential for the study of private speech in cognitive development is broader than presently visualized in these terms and suggest new avenues of exploration.

The basis for my discussion here rests on a reconsideration of the uses of private speech by one 2-year-old child when alone before falling asleep at night or naptime, recorded at intervals over a year’s time. Studies of this child’s “crib speech” by nine developmentalists who jointly considered the data were published in [Nelson \(1989c\)](#). That source should be consulted for details of the data and its collection. Throughout our discussions of the transcripts of Emily’s talk while alone a major issue hung in the background without resolution: what function did the “crib talk” play in the ongoing developments of language and the path toward more complex cognition? In order to use language in relation to cognitive problems, including memory, learning, and the acquisition of knowledge, its forms (e.g., words) and structures (e.g., grammar) must be acquired. This seems obvious and noncontroversial, but over decades of research on the topic, acquiring a first language has turned out to be both theoretically and empirically subject to variable interpretations and arguments. What is equally evident is that in fact there is not one road to the acquisition of language by the child, even within a given language community, rather variability is the common theme ([Bates, Bretherton, & Snyder, 1988](#); [Brown, 1973](#); [Nelson, 1973](#) and many others).

Crib speech is relatively common, but far from universal and rarely studied. One level of interest in it is that of language content and use: what to say and how to say it, both as spoken by others and as produced by oneself. This is the level reported in 1989 in terms of production (but see [Levy, 1989](#)). Comprehension of others’ language is less obvious in the monologues for obvious reasons, but there are hints of comprehension problems based on her interpretation of parental pre-bed talk. The

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not-always-smooth passage to comprehension of complex discourse by a beginning language user even when the topic is known and shared between speakers is an important but little addressed topic in the field. Both of these levels – and the more advanced one of learning about a new area of knowledge from its discussion by an informed other – whether the topic is a tale set in an unknown land or a bit of scientific finding – require that the learner understand words and phrases appropriate to the material. Deeper levels of understanding are only feasible if the problems of the former have been resolved. The practice of private speech may move forward the goal of comprehension on both levels, thus making possible use of discourse for the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of cognitive skills. Among the deeper levels of understanding possibly promoted by private speech is its use for memory, learning, imaginative construction, understanding of self and others, and the nature of the cultural world. Before considering these topics the phenomena of private and crib speech should be clarified.

1. Crib speech as private speech

“Crib speech” refers to the child’s talk while alone by an infant or young child (1–3 years) who sleeps in a bed designed for infants and toddlers (a “crib” in American speech, a “cot” in British vernacular). Most studies of private speech in young children have been concerned with the use of self speech for self-regulation. The title of the recent book “Private Speech, Executive functioning, and the Development of Verbal Self-Regulation,” (Winsler, 2009), indicates this focus. Verbal self-regulation was also a main focus of Vygotsky’s empirical investigation, and the related executive function is clearly a topic of interest among many developmental psychologists today. The circumstances under which private speech is generally observed, namely in problem-solving tasks arranged in laboratory settings, may; however, restrict its interpretation. There speech is private – or egocentric in Piaget’s terms – being addressed to the self *within a social setting where social speech is the norm*.

In contrast, “Crib speech” of the sort I consider here is *private in a double sense*, (1) being addressed to the self (2) in a private situation with no one else present. It is not unusual for such speech to occur when children are playing alone, a situation that has rarely been studied as such, although it is known to occur frequently. Winsler (2009), reports a study of 48 mothers of preschoolers, of whom 98% reported that their children had been observed using private speech during problem solving or in fantasy play (presumably alone). Fifty-five (55%) percent also reported that their children had engaged in private speech before going to sleep at night or naptime. These percentages are much larger than has been reflected in studies of crib speech, of which there have been very few. As Winsler (p. 27) noted “crib speech is a topic in need of much additional systematic research.” Indeed, speech used in solitary fantasy play, or pre-sleep speech when alone may be more typical of the total uses of private speech by young children than that encountered in social task situations. In play, speech is often used, alone or with others, to make manifest the thoughts and actions of the imagined world. In other contexts it may serve a variety of mental functions: recounting, reflecting, articulating problems, reciting new knowledge bits, weaving new knowledge into old structures, imagining other places, people, and doings, among others. These observations suggest the need for both more studies of private speech in different contexts and more consideration of the different functions that private speech may serve in early childhood.

The study of Emily’s crib speech was initiated as a study of memory in the very young, based on the child’s own verbalizations of past experience. Bedtime talk by a 2-year-old engaging in “language practice” when he was alone at night, recorded and reported by his mother, linguist Ruth Weir, served as an example (Weir, 1963). Her reports of his talk seemed to reveal hints about his view of what had happened during the day, suggesting that a similar study could present a unique perspective on the experiential memory of a 2-year-old. Emily’s parents (both professors at Yale University) agreed to participate in this exploratory study and made valuable contributions to it throughout the study. The recording began at bedtime when Emily was a 21-months-old first-born. The tapes, recorded intermittently by her parents when convenient and deemed likely to be fruitful, included some pre-bed talk with parents as well as talk by Emily alone before she fell asleep at night or at naptime. Recording continued at the discretion of the parents for approximately one year.¹ In the beginning some of the speech recorded was in play with the dolls and other figures sharing her bed. These were very low and difficult to transcribe or interpret. In contrast, Emily employed a “recounting voice” in a higher and louder tone, and it was these that entered the transcribed data. From the beginning (at 21 months of age) Emily’s use of language was very advanced for her age, and over time her speech became more readily interpretable. Her mother’s notes and the pre-bed talk with parents aided in its interpretation. Nonetheless, decoding the intended content of her talk was a challenge—and likely would be for the talk of any child engaging in truly private speech such as that in the crib.

Because the child Emily, between 21 and 34 months, was already very advanced in both vocabulary and syntactic structure when the recordings began, the data invited analysis of a variety of different topics, reported in Nelson (1989a), including the use of first person forms, temporal and causal terms, and emergent narrative formats, as well as the comparison with parental discourse, based on samples of pre-bed talk. The database included no other measures or observations of Emily’s development, and only glimpses of her “real life” afforded through conversations and occasional checks with her parents as to references in the monologues. Therefore, the studies were closely tied to specific issues of language use and development questions of the relation of this kind of talk to other problems in cognition or social development were not addressed.

¹ Transcripts were prepared by KN or a research assistant and were often amended in response to close group listening. Later the tapes were transcribed in CHILDES format and are available in the CHILDES data base at Carnegie Mellon University.

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