

Contribution of Social Agents to the Linguistic Environment and Skills of Children

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Language is a tool of socialisation; and through socialisation, a child learns to use language. In an extended family system, which is most prevalent in India, a child has a larger universe in terms of the parental as well as the grandparental speech model. The present study examines the relative contribution of socialisation agents, that is, the mother, father, grandmother, grandfather and siblings, to the linguistic environment of the family and the acquisition of linguistic skills in children. Eighty-four boys and girls ($M = 32$ months) were taken from joint and extended families. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to measure the linguistic environment of the family. A battery of linguistic measures was used to assess the language development of the children. A Multiple Regression Analysis was performed on scores of all five social agents obtained on Linguistic Environment Inventory and three measures of linguistic skill. The findings show that grandparents, particularly the grandmother, play a strong role in Indian joint families.

Keywords: Language Socialisation, Linguistic Environment, Grandparents

Language is a remarkable human phenomenon. It enables us to conceptualise, communicate, learn social norms and adapt to one's culture. Children develop linguistic competence from daily social interactions, sharing of experiences and participation in social and family activities. As a result, the acquisition of linguistic skills by young children originates in social experiences. These experiences include the manner in which people stimulate and direct ones attention, respond and organise the spatial relationships among individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). While participating in daily social interactions at home and in communities, children learn how to express their emotions and feelings by choosing appropriate words, structured in grammatically correct sentences (Luke & Kale, 2005).

A review of studies on child language shows that growth in vocabulary and syntax is greatly influenced by environmental factors. The quality and variety of stimulations at home, to which the developing child is exposed, have a profound impact on various cognitive and linguistic skills (Bradley et al., 1989; Coon, Fulker, Defries & Plomin, 1990). The structural properties of

maternal linguistic inputs are found to be positively correlated to the syntax development (Shukla & Mohanty, 1995) and the semantic development of children (Pinker, 1981). The children benefit from the complex sentences spoken to them by their parents and teachers, as these complexities in linguistic exposure increase their ability to understand and use sentences (Huttenlocher, 1998). On the contrary, less shared context between mother and child is found to be crucial factor in delaying the language development of children (Moosely, 1990). Not only the mother, but also the father (Hewlett, 1991), other adults in the communities (Field, 2001) and caregivers (Rudd, Cain & Saxon, 2008) contribute to the linguistic environment of the child. The impact of linguistic environment on acquisition may be inferred even as early as the prenatal stage. Neuroscience researches have demonstrated that auditory discrimination by the foetus is far more developed, and it comprehends its native language before it is born (Mirabilis, 2003; Mythily, 2004).

The emphasis on the parental, specifically on maternal/caregiver's, role is because of the functional and structural characteristics of nuclear

families prevalent in the West. However, the language learning experiences and communicative environment of a growing child vary across cultures. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) observed that Samoan children participate in multi-party interaction not as in dyadic verbal interaction, typical in white American middle class families. Koo (1996) found the language socialisation in Asian languages, such as Korean and Japanese, different. In Korea, a speaker must choose the appropriate expressions and verb endings to reflect the social relationship among co-speakers.

In the joint families prevalent in India, the language socialisation of a monolingual or a bilingual child is different. The developing child has various adult speech models that influence language development, particularly during the period of language differentiation.

India has a great heritage of the joint family structure. A joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, share a common kitchen and incomes and take part in common worship. It implies the living together of the members of two or more elementary families, that is, brothers, their wives, children, parents, grandparents and grandsons/daughters. Due to the impact of urbanisation as a major factor, among others, the traditional joint families are weakening and extended and nuclear families are emerging. Families that may not share a common kitchen and incomes but live together in one household, help each other on different occasions and celebrate festivals and ceremonies together are labelled as extended families. In the joint/extended family system in India, role structure, authority system and network of kinship relations have a differential impact on the verbal environment of the child. In this system, although the mother is the principal caretaker of the child, there are other potential caretakers and substitute mothers, for example, grandmothers and married/unmarried aunts living in the family (Kakar, 1978). In *Brahmavaivaratya Purana*, an ancient Indian scripture, there is description of 16 "mothers," which means 16 types of females in the family, for example, mother of father/mother, sister of father/mother etc., can be labelled as mother due

to their affective bond with child. They are an integral part of the environment in the child's development. An affective bond is forged through specific rituals between the new born and other female members of the family who participate in the child's care with motherly affection and involvement (Singh, 2011). Grandparents are placed at the highest rank of hierarchy (Bharat & Sinha, 1985). The unconditional acceptance and conformity with the adults' wishes, aspirations and behavioural ways is a desired norm (Saraswati & Pai, 1997, p.80). Major family decisions, including the child's rearing, education and health care, are taken with their consent (Khan, Anker, Dastidar & Bairathi, 1988). Most discourses in Indian families are marked with hierarchically loaded forms of speech, intonations and naming (Chaudhary, 1999). The socialisation of the Indian child is characterised by interdependence between the individual and larger social settings in which the child is embedded. In this type of social setup, the child is exposed to not only linguistic expressions of the social positioning of family members and interpersonal dynamics but also has more interactions, both verbal and physical, with grandparents and other family members, and not only with the mother.

In spite of changes in Indian society, the cultural ethos remains the same. The value of jointness is embedded in our Indian culture (Sinha, 1990). Emotional bonds are stronger in joint families (Kaura, 2004). Even the nuclear family cannot be labelled as a truly separate unit. The concept of a nuclear family to the Indian is not the same as it is to the Western people (Desai, 1964). Kurtz (1992) observed that even where joint families and extended households are not common, nuclear families report the presence of close relatives in nearby locations who seem to fulfil the function of group affiliation, particularly for child rearing. The network of familial relationships and its developmental outcomes, specifically on language acquisition, has been studied rarely.

The present study attempts to address how verbal interactions between the language-learning child and other family members in a joint/extended family constitute the linguistic environment and

its functional relevance in the language acquisition of young children. Second, it addresses how grandparents account for the linguistic acquisition of young children.

The objective of the present study is, therefore, to investigate the relative contribution of social agents — mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, siblings and others — towards the linguistic environment in an extended family structure and their functional relevance in the development of linguistic skills in children. It was hypothesised that grandparents, acquiring a higher status in the Indian family structure and having frequent interactions with their grandchildren, would contribute more to the linguistic environment and language development of children than other socialisation agents would.

Method

Sample:

The participants in the study were 84 children, both boys and girls, of 24 to 37 months in age (Mean = 32 months). Neuroscientists view that the first two years mark an important period of brain development, during which a density of short-range synaptic connections is formed on the basis of available inputs from the environment (Newport, 2001) that affect cognition and language development. This stage of language development is considered very crucial for the phonological, morphological and syntactic aspects; therefore, two-to-three year-old children were considered for the study. Three types of families, namely, joint family living with parents (N = 36); joint family living with parents, brothers, their wives and children (N = 21); and extended families who lived in the same household but had separate kitchens (N = 27), were included in the study. Only those children were included that had at least one grandparent or surrogate grandparent living with them in the same house. Since mere presence is not effective for the child with regard to language development, the study excluded those families where grandparents were suffering from prolonged illness or disabilities for over one year.

Measures:

Linguistic Environment Inventory (LEI): Linguistic environment was conceptualised in

terms of the quality as well as the frequency of linguistic stimulations in home. Investigators used various methods, such as observation, interview and inventory, to measure the home environment. Bradley and Caldwell (1979) constructed the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) Scale based on approximately 10 years of research data. This scale is administered in the framework of an interview about the child and observations of the mother's behaviour are also made. Consequently, the investigator does not rely exclusively on parental reportage. Following HOME, a semi-structured interview schedule was constructed to measure the nature of the linguistic environment in the family. Twenty-six questions were assigned to eight categories, namely (1) variety of speech spoken in the family; (2) stimulations through toys, games and reading materials; (3) linguistic interaction of the child with other family members; (4) affection and warmth; (5) opportunities for learning linguistic skills at home; (6) visit to places where linguistic exposure is prevalent, such as theatre, drama, puppet show etc.; (7) opportunity for meeting with visitors in the house; and (8) opportunity for learning linguistic skills from neighbours. In order to construct this schedule, an open-ended interview of 30 mothers from all the 3 social classes, that is, upper, middle and lower classes, was taken to explore the settings during which interaction takes place between social agents and the children and the content and quality of the interactions. Based on interview data, a pool of 26 items was generated and distributed among the 8 categories mentioned above. This schedule was pretested on 15 families (other than those included in the study). The responses on these items were coded on a 5-point scale. Pre-coded data by the present investigator was provided to judges to determine the reliability of the scoring system on these items. An inter-item correlation analysis revealed that the eighth category, namely, opportunity for learning skills from neighbours, was not significantly correlated with the remaining categories. It was, therefore, dropped. Two categories, namely, variety of speech spoken in the family and opportunity for learning linguistic skills at home had a single item. The high alpha

coefficients for different categories, namely, stimulation through toys, games and reading materials ($r = .93, p < .001$), linguistic interaction of the child with family members ($r = .96, p < .001$), affection and warmth ($r = .85, p < .001$), visit to places where linguistic exposure is prevalent ($r = .82, p < .001$), opportunity for meeting visitors in the family ($r = .82, p < .001$), showed that the domain was more or less unidimensional. As a result, a composite score was given for overall linguistic environment, which was indicative of the nature of the linguistic environment in the family. An alpha coefficient for the entire inventory showed the internal consistency of measures (.93, $p < .01$). A significant correlation between the linguistic environment score and the social class score ($r = .89, p < .01$) established the concurrent validity of the inventory.

To assess the role of social agents, namely mother, father, grandmother, grandfather and siblings, a total of the scores on 13 items of the III category of LEI, i.e. the linguistic interaction of the child with other family members, was scored separately. The maximum possible score of each social agent was 65 and the minimum was 13.

A battery of the following tests was used to measure two aspects of language development, i.e. comprehension and production of speech.

Grammar Comprehension Test (GCT): The Hindi version of an adaptation of BellugiKlima's GCT by White et al. (1973) was used; the back-translation technique was employed to ensure the accuracy of the translation. The test was a performance test that included toys, pictures, dolls and other play materials. Certain modifications were made to make it appropriate for Indian situations, e.g. topi (cap) was used instead of 'hat' etc. With the help of these toys, the child executed certain instructions given by the tester. Each correct response was scored as

1 and the incorrect response as 0. The total number of correct responses was taken as the child's index of grammar comprehension. The test-retest reliability coefficient was $r = .56 (p < .05)$.

Word Meaning Test (WMT): This test, consisting of 26 stimulus words ranging from more-concrete objects (e.g. knife, bicycle etc.) to less-concrete objects (light, air God etc.), was used to measure their vocabulary. The child was asked to talk about a particular object one by one. Responses on these objects were recorded verbatim. A content analysis of the responses revealed that they could be coded into one or all of the four categories, i.e. identification, relevant cues, function and the structure of the objects. They were scored in a progressive manner. The reliability of the scoring system was established. Three judges scored a sample of responses pre-scored by the investigator (Mean $r = .91, p < .01$). Inter-coder reliability was also determined (Mean $r = .86, p < .01$). A split-half reliability coefficient of the test ($r = .91, p < .01$) showed high internal consistency.

Expressive Skill Test (EST): Children were shown nine carefully chosen pictures that depicted boys, girls and women in different situations, e.g. home and playground. Their descriptions of the pictures were recorded verbatim. The Mean length of utterance (MLU) was calculated. A total MLU score of nine pictures indicated the verbal expressive ability of the child. An inter-coder reliability between two judges and investigator ($r = .77, p < .01$) indicated the reliability of the coding system. However, retest reliability could not be obtained as in a retesting situation; the children were too young to sustain interest. They refused to talk after two or three words.

All the tests were significantly correlated with each other.

Table 1. Inter-Correlation Among Three Measures of Linguistic Skills (N=84)

Correlation Measures Test	M	SD	Word	Expressive	Meaning Skill Test
Grammar Comprehension Test	24.26	3.55	.41**	.50**	
Word Meaning Test	81.77	21.54	-	.73**	
Expressive Skill Test	2.79	1.15	-	-	

** $p < .01$

Procedure:

The investigator visited the home of each child to assess whether the child and family fulfilled the general requirements for inclusion in the sample. If he/she met the criteria, data on the Linguistic Environment Schedule was collected. The mother, grandmother and other family members participated in this process. During this period, the child was called over there and attempts were made to establish rapport with the child. He/she was offered toffees and balloons and was encouraged to tell his/her name etc. When the investigator was assured that the child was ready to respond, a language test was administered the next day. Only one test was administered each day. The sequence of administration was GCT, WMT and EST. Since GCT consisted of toys, children interacted with the investigator easily, which helped in building relaxed sessions and ensured the spontaneity of responses.

Results

A Multiple Regression Analysis was performed on the scores of all five social agents, namely, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather and sibling/others on LEI, and the children's scores on three measures i.e. GCT, WMT and EST. Table 2 represents the multiple Rs related to five social agents in predicting the linguistic environment and skills. The results showed that approximately 90% variance in linguistic environment was shared by five predictors jointly indicating the importance of the quality and quantity of the linguistic stimulations provided to the child by these social agents. However, the examination of b weights revealed that the grandmother contributed relatively more ($b = 1.86$, $p < .01$) towards the linguistic environment of the home than other social agents i.e., grandfather ($b = 1.54$, $p < .01$), mother ($b = 1.30$, $p < .01$), father ($b = 1.26$, $p < .01$) and siblings ($b = .86$, $p < .01$).

Table 2. Relative Contribution of Social Agents in the Prediction of Linguistic Environment and Linguistic Skills

Predictors (Social Agents)	Linguistic Environment	Grammar Comprehension	Word Meaning	Expressive Skill
Mother	1.30**	-.03	-.15	.02*
Father	1.00**	.05	.63	.03*
Grandmother	1.86**	.11**	.81**	.01
Grandfather	1.54**	.01	.38	- 4.0006
Siblings	.86**	.05*	.04	.01*
R ²	.90	.40	.29	.52
F	141.78**	10.75**	6.56**	17.12**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

With regards to language measures, all the five predictors jointly contributed the greatest variance (52%) for expressive skills followed by grammar comprehension (40%) and word meaning (29%). The highest percentage of variance shows that whatever the child comprehends from situations or has a vocabulary, he/she requires an opportunity to express it verbally. Social agents facilitated their expressive skills by creating situations and having verbal interaction with the children. The grandmother, among all five social agents, contributed significantly greater variance in GMT and WMT ($b = .11$, $p < .01$ and $b = .81$, $p < .01$) followed by siblings ($b = .05$, $p < .05$). However, she had no individual significant contribution with regards to

EST where mother ($b = .02$, $p < .05$), father ($b = .03$, $p < .05$) and siblings ($b = .01$, $p < .05$) contributed significantly.

Discussion

The findings suggest that all the social agents contribute significantly to the linguistic environment of the family, but grandparents had a major share in providing linguistic inputs to the child, followed by mother, father and siblings. As regarding linguistic skills, only the grandmother was a potential predictor for the grammar comprehension and word meaning skills of children whereas parents were significant only for expressive skills. These results have certain pointers towards the nature of the role relationship

in a joint setup. The grandmother, who was relatively free from household works, had more time to play with and talk with her young grandchildren. The story-telling sessions for which grandmothers are known and the affection and warmth expressed in these speech events and experienced by the children provided them the opportunity to understand various syntactic rules and to comprehend the meaning and concepts of new objects in their home and social surroundings. It was observed during testing sessions that grandmothers exhibited more zeal in encouraging their grandchildren to come forward and answer researcher's questions. The parents, who are generally engaged in jobs, household work and other physical arrangements, had a different kind of verbal interaction with children. They facilitated the development of expressive skills in children but were not as beneficial as the grandmothers were for vocabulary and grammar comprehension. Frequent verbal and social interactions and the sensitivity and responsiveness shown by grandmothers in the present study seem to have an impact on the development of the linguistic skills of young children. The dynamics of the role relationship and its impact on the acquisition of linguistic skills observed in the present study is supported by Sachdeva and Misra (2008), who found—in a study on changes in parenting—that grandparents placed more emphasis than parents did on social and cultural facets, teaching children values to make them good citizens. The relevance of teaching by the grandmother can be attributed as contributing more towards the linguistic environment of the child. These findings are in line with Seema and Nanda (2004), who observed that 3-6-year-old children scored higher on language development under grandparents' care in comparison to mothers' care, domestic care and day care.

Considering the grandfathers role in language development in the present study, it appears that as the head of the family, he has an overall influence but does not provide specific and direct stimulations as compared to the grandmother who has a special place in the heart of children. Since elder siblings are also around the grandparents and their younger siblings, they have a significant influence—next only to the grandmother—on the

development of comprehension skills and expressive skills. No sooner than they acquire a younger sibling, that they acquire the role of 'teacher' too. The findings also confirm the earlier study (Hamilton & Stewart, 1977) that there is difference in adult and peer speech models; adults modify their linguistic inputs while talking to children. Thus, siblings do have an impact on the language acquisition of children, though in a limited way. These findings support Chaudhary (2004) that in the second half of the first year of life, the expanding physical world of the baby is actively mediated by various adults for exploration, warmth, reassurance and security. Children hear and speak about people, the self and others in particular ways that could be understood as being part of the larger cultural fabric of the Indian community.

The conceptual model of culture and language context proposed by Mohanty (2000), which emphasised the importance of culturally mediated practical activities and human interactions vis-à-vis children's interaction with adults in different situations, support the present findings. It is not only dyadic communication involving mother and child or child and grandmother as such, but it is more of a situational context where speech events occur, creating a particular linguistic environment. A growing child in the Indian family participates in verbal interaction and learns not only the syntax and semantics but the sociolinguistic features also—how to speak with whom, considering their age, status and hierarchy in the family. There is only one word in English 'you' to address the second person but in Hindi, there are two words '*tum*' and '*aap*,' the later being for a person who is older to you and hence addressed respectfully. The socialisation of language includes these considerations and the grandmother was found to play a very crucial role in creating an environment in the family.

An acceptance in Western studies regarding the linguistic environment of a child having exposure to more than one adult or sibling is a recent phenomenon (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002; Ito, 2007). With the increase in mothers in the workforce, the number of children going to day-care centres in the West is increasing (Kagan,

Kanerz & Torrent, 2007). There is a growing awareness, therefore, of the contributions of grandparents. Policy makers and officials are considering making payments to grandparents; otherwise, children might end up in foster homes (<http://www.npr.org>, April 26, 2008). A review of studies in the last two decades, conducted to understand the role and experiences of grandparents in the West (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003) reveals that there is a variety of reasons, ranging from emotional satisfaction to economic ones, where they chose to alleviate the burden of the cost of childcare. The difference in socio-cultural perspectives i.e. individual autonomy and economic aspects are predominant in the West, whereas in Indian culture, often ascribed as 'collectivistic', the grandparents and other family members automatically assume the childcare role as their duty.

In contemporary India, though nuclear families are emerging, grandparents are still the first preference of working class parents for childcare. However, there are children who don't have any grandparents. It would be pertinent to conduct a comparative study of the language development of children reared in a purely nuclear family. We cannot generalise the present findings in totality, considering the multi-lingual and multi-cultural social milieu of India. With the rapid social change and multi-media exposure, family structure, function and intra familial interactional patterns are also changing. Using socio-linguistic and anthropological approaches, there is a need to investigate various other dimensions in greater detail.

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Received: March 09, 2012

Revised: July 11, 2012

Accepted: August 30, 2012

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