BOOK REVIEWS

Language as Public Construction

Language in Cognitive Development. Emergence of the Mediated Mind. KATHERINE NELSON. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996. xiv, 432 pp., illus. $44.95 or £35. ISBN 0-521-55123-4.

One could perhaps formulate the basic developmental question in descriptive terms: how exactly do young children differ from adults? An answer that has achieved some degree of recent popularity in psychology is, simply, "they don't." Why then do children perform so differently from adults in the domains of language and cognition? Proponents of the precocious-cognition perspective argue that these differences are accounted for by lack of knowledge, not by any intrinsically childlike way of thinking. They argue that even very young children operate according to the same rules for drawing conclusions, making inferences, and categorizing as do adults, and that their conclusions, inferences, and categories deviate from adults' only because they have acquired less information relevant to these tasks.

In this book, Katherine Nelson firmly rejects this view, arguing instead that intellectual functioning changes with development in qualitative ways and that language plays a major role in potentiating the changes that occur. She contends that the sort of highly constrained, preprogrammed, innate developmental process that many have proposed as an explanation for category formation, understanding of objects, lexical acquisition, and grammatical acquisition is inconsistent with the adaptability and expansiveness of human intellectual functioning. Further, she argues that language is the medium through which the "mediation" of mind occurs, enriching individual cognition with the capacities developed through history and passed on through participation in a culture. As she says, "language (and logic) are public constructions with private ramifications" (p. 19). Specific examples of cognitive accomplishments in which she implicates language crucially include developing taxonomic category structures with a hierarchical organization of superordinate and subordinate levels of classification, understanding time in at least those perspectives on it that go beyond the simple sequencing of events, establishing stable autobiographical memories, and coming to understand others' cognitions and emotions.

Nelson stakes out a position that she differentiates from both universalist views and from sociocultural, interactionist views of development, while accepting aspects of both these perspectives. Perhaps the strongest influence on her model of individual development is Merlyn Donald's *Origins of the Modern Mind* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), charting a reconstruction of the evolution and emergence of human cognition. Donald's book provides Nelson with a useful organizing scheme for presenting information about the development of cognition in children, despite the divergences in some details. One important insight she draws from Donald is the conceptualization of human intelligence as intrinsically social—a capacity that, he argues, emerged in order to enable early humans to negotiate the difficulties of living in groups and coordinate individuals' activities with those of other group members. This social view of intelligence can be contrasted to views influenced by Piaget, in which intelligence is conceptualized as primarily designed for solving physical, logical, or quantitative problems, though it might of course be applied to social problems like perspective-taking.

Donald's model of the evolution of intelligence defines a stage of "mimesis" before true language emerges. Nelson's boldest claim in this volume is that the preschool period of language development can be similarly characterized as mimetic, that is, as focused on the social sharing of signs and thus the capacity for a novel internal representation of those externalized, communicative behaviors. Of course language is learned during this mimetic period, and is made possible through the shared interaction that mimesis creates, but it is language still tied to social participation. Nelson argues that the first few years of language development, the period that has been in the center of researchers' attention for the last 35 years, actually represents the prologue—the acquisition of language as a system of practice, the purposes and potential of which only emerge around age four with true, representational narratives. After the child's basic participation in the language system is assured, then language becomes the tool for mediation of mind, or expansion of cognitive capacities through access to and participation in culture.

If one accepts Nelson's perspective on language and cognitive development, then certain methodological consequences follow. One is that the individuality of development must be acknowledged, by using methods such as case studies that allow us to see the course of development for individual children. Another is that the researcher must decenter sufficiently from an adult perspective on events and information to try to describe them from the child's perspective. If children really do think differently from adults, then the developmentalist's task is to understand precisely how they think—an approach Nelson calls experiential.

The development of mimetic capacities and of language is built, within Nelson's (and Donald's) model, on the establishment of stable event representations. The event is, in this view, the basic organizational unit of memory. Very young children can demonstrate quite good memories for the recurrent features of common events, and indeed recurrent events often become the context for early mimetic activity, such as requesting repetition of a bouncing game. These events are the structure into which adults can place language, thus ensuring its acquisition.

The introduction of the notion of mimesis makes it possible for Nelson to put cognitive and language development into the social context that mimesis creates. Her proposal of a mimetic stage is not as novel as the name; Bates, Bruner, Ninio, and other social-interactionists have argued for years that language emerges from the communicative activity of the child and that the social-pragmatic capacities of the infant constitute the organismic preparation for language. What Nelson has done, though, in a readable, accessible, but very thorough way, is put children's communicative development into relation with their prior understanding of and memory for events and with their later emerging capacity to produce autonomous discourse and to enter into the worlds of knowledge that it makes possible. Developmental psycholinguists have acted as though the three-year-old represents the endpoint of language development; Nelson makes clear that the three-year-old is still swimming next to the water. Language is the channel through which culture is recreated for every generation, through which knowledge is transmitted, and through which the autobiographical self is established. The three-year-old is just getting started. This book by Nelson brings together the fields of linguistic and cognitive development by describing how acquiring language makes possible massive changes in the scope of cognition.

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