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IN MEMORY OF PROFESSOR GRACE WALES SHUGAR:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUES ON  
“CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIVE KNOWLEDGE”

This paper is an outline of Grace Wales Shugar’s research approach and some of her main theses in the field of language acquisition and children’s discourse. Her idea of dual agentivity of adult-child interaction shows how to best support children’s communicative skills: It is only when children can show what they know in their own way, and when that child knowledge is received and used in a discourse process, that we can expect a child’s inner motivation to acquire knowledge from others to be maintained and to become a driving force of the child’s further development (Shugar, 1995, p. 233).

*Key words:* children’s language, meaning potential, action discourse, topical discourse, action situation, reference situation, dual agentivity situation

This past summer, on August 19, 2013, Professor Grace Wales Shugar passed away in Warsaw. Although Canadian (born on May 10, 1918 in Montreal), she spent almost her entire research career in Poland, where she lived from 1952. She was founder and leader of the Warsaw School of Developmental Psycholinguistics, and lectured at many universities in different countries. She was invited to deliver a plenary lecture at the 4th International Congress for the Study of Child Language in Lund (Sweden) in 1987. The subject of her lecture was “The nature of peer discourse: Participant structures for and by children”.

For many years Grace Shugar was the English language editor of two journals published in Poland: *Polish Psychological Bulletin* and *Psychology of Language and Communication*. Her commitment to the work of language editor was appreciated in Poland and beyond. Her help with editing scientific texts in English for many years contributed significantly to the international dissemination of results obtained by researchers from Central and Eastern Europe.

A year after Professor Grace Wales Shugar's passing, we wish to dedicate to her memory two complementary issues – Children's Language and Communicative Knowledge (Part One and Part Two) – of the journal *Psychology of Language and Communication* (vol. 18, No. 2 and No. 3), and to express our gratitude for all that we learned from her as a person, and as a researcher of children's discourse. Grace will remain in our memory as a kind and creative person who knew how to make life meaningful despite adversity.

Below is an outline of her research approach and some of her main theses.

Grace Shugar's research focused on the process by which children acquire language skills through discourse. She underlined that we need to think of **children as potential co-creators of discourse in structured social systems** in which they interact with other people. Such situations can be considered a "natural place" for discourse (or "home", to use the terminology of Goffman, 1972).

Child development is a social process in which children acquire discursive competence, i.e. the ability to co-create language events in communication situations. The main concept of Shugar's approach is the notion of **participation** as applied to a child's involvement in discourse. The condition for a child's active, effective and creative participation in discursive processes is for other participants to accept the child's contribution to the discourse (Shugar, 1995), and on the other hand – for the child to have some kind of meaning potential (in the approach of Halliday, 1975) that is ready to be realized in the form of discourse. The source of such potential's development should be sought in the child's activity in the early stage of language acquisition.

Grace W. Shugar assumed that **meaning potential develops chiefly in pragmatic relations between a young child's utterances and that child's activity**. She was inclined to consider children as agents of their own activity, an approach rooted in Piaget's child development theory. She also favored Szuman's concept of development, highlighting the view that experience and knowledge are both the source and the effect of the agent's activity. A child's ability to express in words the knowledge acquired through his or her own activity reinforces the experience of causal effectiveness and efficiency, which form the basis of an **orientation towards agentive activity**. Children discover their own realization of their activity through its representation in speech. This enables them to lend stronger distinctness to their activity, with regard to both themselves and others, thus building a foundation for shared activity (Babska & Shugar, 1986).

Grace Wales Shugar sought correlations between children's speech and their actions, using the activity stream analysis method. She spent one year observing the activity streams of two-year-old children (Małgosia, Mikołaj) in natural social situations in the presence of adults. This material was analyzed using a modified version of Barker and Wright's method. The analysis involved identifying episodes, i.e. units comprising the subject's behavior, and the situation in which such behavior developed. Each of the three distinct types of episodes (nonverbal, verbal-nonverbal, verbal) created different conditions for the development of the child as the agent of an action and initial language user, including the development of the informative function of language. Grace W. Shugar distinguished three stages in the development of the informative function of language:

- 1) First, the child producing an utterance introduces information that does not go beyond the situation of the action being performed. These utterances do not have a specific purpose or addressee, they "accompany" the child's activity;
- 2) Next, the child adds something new to the information he or she produces, something related to the current status of the child's activity and not directly accessible to the listener, but which could catch that person's attention and lead to participation;
- 3) In the third stage, the child expands the information in his or her multifunctional utterances that now have a specific purpose, making the utterances better suited to the child's intentions (Shugar, 1995, p. 33).

Another major topic in Shugar's research involved studies on **children's operations performed on the texts of adults** (Shugar, 1987, 2005). Before the child is able to combine two or more words in spontaneous utterances, he or she is already placing these utterances in meaningful relations to those of other speakers. This appears to be a general strategy by which to express the child's knowledge. The meaningful relations in question reveal the existence of systematized knowledge of states of the world, which can be described in relations between conceptual categories such as: Agent, Action, Object of Action, Location, Destination, Possession ... However, limitations upon possible realizations of these meaning structures are defined by the limitations in the range of references accessible to the child. Yet within this range, the child manifests, on the linguistic plane, a freedom and versatility characteristic of his or her stage of intelligence development (Shugar, 2005, p. 42).

In the model of child discourse, Shugar distinguished two types of discourse: **action discourse** and **topical discourse**. The main criterion for differentiating between these two types of discourse is the type of relation between the **action situation** and the **reference situation**. The action situation triggers discourse, while the reference situation is the one to which the discourse refers. The former represents the situational context in which the speakers find themselves, and in

which they are involved. A text is produced as a source of directive for the acting subjects. The latter situation (reference situation) is that about which information is provided during the discourse. The two types of situation are mutually dependent: they can overlap, respond one to the other, or replace each other. In the case of action discourse, the action situation functions together with the reference situation. The state of action determines not only the production of utterances but also their functions. In the case of topical discourse, the reference situation goes beyond the situation of acting on objects, the reference situation is distant in time and space from the current action situation: the child refers to an action situation that happened earlier, or to one that has not happened yet. Thus, the reference situation is one in which the child has been or will be a participant (Shugar, 1995).

Once reference situations were conceived as mental representations of an event nature, they could be understood as having a structure corresponding to the given event. In **narrative discourse**, for example, reference situations represent events by their sequential ordering of changes of states of reality. Thus, in narration, unitary reference situations can be linked together in chains that reflect the temporal and/or causal relations between changes of states comprising the narrated event, as well as their agentively goal-directed character (Shugar, Bokus, & Smogorzewska, 2013). Furthermore, chain structure reflects changing reality interpreted by the narrator, as revealed in the character of the linkages within the chain. Hence, the role of the reference situation concept was grasped by G. W. Shugar in terms of its instrumentality – a way of interpreting reality.

Several research programs were carried out in Warsaw under Grace Wales Shugar's direction. One of them involved a dyadic design adapted from Garvey and Hogan (1973) for observations of a minimal social situation. Videotaped recordings were made of 15-minute free play sessions without or with adult presence. The analysis focused on **ways of initiating and maintaining interaction in child-child dyads, and also in child-adult dyads**. The underlying principle was to follow the activity stream for each partner separately and identify the moments of contact and divergence. On the basis of empirical criteria, a unit of interaction was taken to comprise coordination of both partners' activity stream around one action line.

Four types of interaction were distinguished, based on different ways of coordinating the action line:

- The interaction's initiator draws the partner into his or her own action line (Own Action);
- The uninvited initiator joins in the partner's action line (Partner Action);
- The interaction begins with a shared action line that both partners accept (Shared Action);
- An exchange of utterances on a jointly accepted topic (Dialogue).

It turned out that, both in situations with adults and in situations with peers, preschool children initiating interaction with a partner prefer their own action line as the axis around which to build the interaction. In these situations, however, the child meets with a partner who might prefer a different way (pattern) of initiating interaction. Whereas in the peer situation the partner shows a similar preference (drawing the partner into one's own action line), in the situation with an adult the partner usually chooses other ways of initiating interaction: either by launching a dialogue exchange with the child, or choosing a pattern enabling him or her to enter the child's action field (uninvited). The different contributions of the partner (peer or adult) result in two different pictures of the way interaction is built. In the child-adult situation, the tendencies are mutually complementary, because the action line initiated by the child dominates. Different forms of joint construction of the interaction according to the Dialogue pattern also appear.

In the child-child situation, the picture changes noticeably with the children's age. Younger children display the strongest tendency to build interaction according to the axis of their own action line, whereas in older children there is a shift toward initiating interactions by means of building a shared action line. Regardless of age, children also have a tendency most often to build dialogue on topics linked to the action field. However, the source of topics for child-child dialogue changes with age. Whereas in younger children the topic is most often linked to the action field of the interaction's initiator, in older children it is related to the action field of the partner or the action field shared by both partners (Shugar, 1982, 1988).

The results of studies on children's participation in social interactions, in both free play situations and play task situations, showed that coordination of the action line can occur at **three levels of activity organization**:

- authorship and co-authorship of the action line,
- realization and shared realization of the action line,
- control and shared control of the realized action line.

These three levels of activity organization correspond to three types of child **subjectivity**: author, doer and controller (Shugar & Bokus, 1988, p. 138). Hence, according to Shugar, important elements for the development of subjectivity include a child's experience of participation in the kind of social situations in which the child would have the same chance as the partner (including an adult) to contribute to the interaction as a co-author of the action line, a co-agent of the action line, and a co-builder of the realization of that line (the idea of dual agentivity of child-adult interaction, see Babska & Shugar, 1986). A young child's own activity thus assumes a subjective dimension and takes on subjective functions in certain conditions, namely in interaction with another person. These conditions are defined with the help of the notion of a **dual agentivity situation**. In this situation, language is an essential mediating link

in the processes by which partners arrive at shared meanings and agree on a shared perspective (Shugar & Bokus, 1988). Grace's idea of dual agentivity of adult-child interaction shows how to best support children's communicative skills: It is only when children can show what they know in their own way, and when that child knowledge is received and used in a discourse process, that we can expect a child's inner motivation to acquire knowledge from others to be maintained and to become a driving force of the child's further development (Shugar, 1995, p. 233).

In conversations with other people, the exchange of meanings becomes a source of new content. The creative output of discursive processes, however, is more than just the generation of new language information. The dynamics of these processes, stemming from the dialogical form (a constant switching of language roles) means that these processes constantly generate new states of the intersubjective reality. The **structure of participation** in discourse emerges as the realization of the possibilities contained in the **participant structure**. It cannot be predefined or fully predicted, because it is the effect of the correlations between the contributions of the communicating partners (Shugar & Kmita, 1990). Grace Shugar supported the idea of Shields and Duveen (1986) that the effort to find the meanings of another mind is reflected in the ability to create one's own meaning (Shugar, 1995, p. 38).

Collecting video material from observations of children aged three to seven years, in social situations with different participant structures (child with same-sex peer, with other-sex peer, with adult), is an important achievement of Professor G. W. Shugar and the Team for Research on Child Cognitive-Linguistic Processes at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw, which she headed for many years. This material has been, and still is, the subject of many different analyses on the structure of child participation in different types of discourse (Bokus, 2005). It constitutes a lasting achievement of the Warsaw school of developmental psycholinguistics established by Grace W. Shugar. This achievement is comparable in some aspects to the child speech diaries gathered by another Polish psycholinguistics center, namely the one in Cracow (Kurcz, 1995).

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With Grace Wales Shugar's passing we have lost a distinguished scholar in the field of language acquisition and children's discourse. In this, and the next, issue of the journal *Psychology of Language and Communication*, researchers from different centers (in Poland and other countries) offer their contributions in memory of Professor Grace Wales Shugar.



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