

# The Learner of Language: Communion, Resonance and Pedagogical Practice

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*ABSTRACT:* This paper focuses on the process of language acquisition in childhood. Departing from accounts—such as that of Jean Piaget, which considers cognitive development as the main condition of language acquisition—Taylor shows how deeply our linguistic capacity is rooted in a prior socio-affective realm of social spaces or communion. Beyond Taylor, the question arises as to whether one can identify different normative consequences for pedagogical practices, as well as for the status of childhood in social theory. The implications of Taylor's language theory for the relation between human and world will be suggested by connecting the intrinsic dimensions of linguistic communication to the theory of resonance.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Ce commentaire traite du processus d'acquisition du langage pendant l'enfance. À la différence de Jean Piaget, qui considère le développement cognitif comme la principale condition permettant l'acquisition du langage, Taylor montre combien notre capacité linguistique est ancrée dans un espace socio-affectif, ou une communion, qui lui est antérieur. Au-delà de Taylor, cette différence soulève la question de ses conséquences normatives sur les pratiques pédagogiques ainsi que sur le statut de l'enfance dans la théorie sociale. En reliant les dimensions intrinsèques de la communication langagière à la théorie de la résonance, je proposerai certaines implications de la théorie du langage de Taylor pour la relation de l'être humain au monde.

**Keywords:** language theory, Charles Taylor, philosophy of education, resonance, learning theory, Piaget

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### 1. The Misconceived Seven

How do we acquire language? Charles Taylor's recent book *The Language Animal* deepens not only his explications of his neo-romantic or expressivist account of language theory but also gives an insight into his ideas about the development of language in childhood. In this paper, I will examine some differences between the acquisition and usage of language in childhood, as opposed to the 'normal' speaking of adults. But focusing exclusively on these differences leads to a deficit model of language development with negative consequences for the quality of our linguistic self-world-relation, as captured in the concept of "resonance."<sup>1</sup> Instead of differences, Taylor, along with other authors such as Axel Honneth and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, reveals aspects of continuity in the linguistic capacity in childhood and adulthood. These continuities help us to get a broadened and less deficit oriented model of language acquisition. My argument draws on Chapter Two of Taylor's work, "How Language Grows," and on parts 1 to 3, in particular.

One main step *The Language Animal* takes in advancing the philosophy of language is that it expands and transforms the notion that language is a mere instrument or 'tool' for coding, transmitting, and decoding information, a notion that is dominant in theories that follow in the tradition of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Étienne Bonnet de Condillac (HLC). One reason that the tool-account of language is so plausible is that it describes so precisely an essential domain of the life of adults. With support from Alison Gopnik,<sup>2</sup> one can attribute such a usage or awareness of language to a planning and organizing adult who strives to communicate effectively and efficiently. Such an adult needs language for instrumental reasons. However, in childhood another mode of language awareness is dominant, a mode that does not aim to act or communicate effectively but, rather, to initiate intrinsic connections and touching resonances by entering, or gaining access to, the "linguistic dimension."<sup>3</sup> Taylor's *The Language Animal* can be read as making a great effort to show that the intrinsic dimension, that I attributed to childhood, remains an essential part in adult speech.

An examination of the acquisition of language in childhood can help us to understand the full shape of the human linguistic capacity. First, I want to examine some main traits in Taylor's language theory that will later help us understand the process of language-acquisition, as well as clarifying the conditions of the human linguistic capacity. Second, I want to discuss Taylor's concept of "communion"<sup>4</sup> as a condition of language acquisition and compare it

<sup>1</sup> For the concept of resonance, see Rosa, *Resonanz*; Rosa, *Aliénation et accélération*; Beljan: *Schule als Resonanzraum und Entfremdungszone*.

<sup>2</sup> Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, pp. 9-12.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 55.

with Jean Piaget's concept of "ego-centrism."<sup>5</sup> While Taylor points out the affective dimension of language acquisition, Piaget focuses on the cognitive dimension of the linguistic capacity. Both accounts can lead to different normative orientations towards the language mediated learning of children. Third, I want to outline some consequences of cognitive and affectual accounts for social theory. Finally, I will connect the intrinsic linguistic dimensions Taylor identifies with the theory of resonance to show that the linguistic capacity in childhood remains essential throughout our whole lives as language beings.

To expand the picture of language capacity (not only in childhood), Taylor launches, throughout the whole book, seven major strikes against some core aspects of modern language theory. The *first* strike is a rejection of the *monological* account of language theory. Taylor rejects the idea that language acquisition is a purely inward process that occurs *in* the subject. Pure inwardness presupposes a separation between an inner and an outer world. In his book, *Sources of the Self*,<sup>6</sup> Taylor shows that such an inner/outer separation is the result of a certain cultural interpretation of the world and the self. But this argument can also be transferred to child development: Taylor's concept of "communion" (to which I return below) implies that the outlook of a child is characterized by a diffusion of the inner and outer worlds. Inwardness is more likely to follow the acquisition of an interpretative language and does not exist before we acquire such a language. In Taylor's words: there is a "primacy of communication, of the dialogical,"<sup>7</sup> and "[l]anguage comes to us through exchange."<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, a *second* strike is against the *psychological* account. Meaning, Taylor argues, arises within a space of 'shared attention,' "without which learning would not take place."<sup>9</sup> If one sees children as 'learning experts,' their expertise in learning is deeply defined by the motivation to enter such spaces of shared intention. A *third* strike is against an *instrumental* account. For Taylor, we do not only and in the first place acquire linguistic communication to solve tasks or to gain control over the world or over ourselves, but also for constitutive and intrinsic reasons: "acquiring language involves not just taking hold of a new tool; it also changes our world, and introduces new meanings into our lives."<sup>10</sup> Adding to Taylor's thoughts, the rejection of the tool-thesis also becomes clear in the context of childhood. The widely discussed phenomena

<sup>5</sup> Piaget, *Le Langage et la Pensée chez L'Enfant*. Taylor refers briefly to Piaget's concept of ego-centrism: see *The Language Animal*, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, part 2.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

of child amnesia or other forms of child regression that appear when children enter a more intensive mode of language mediated world-relations around the age of four years, marks a deep qualitative transformation of being in the world, that cannot be explained by the instrumental tool-thesis.<sup>11</sup> A *fourth* strike is against the *atomistic* account. For Taylor, mastering a language cannot sufficiently be explained as the intellectual ability to connect separate and independent elements, such as words or syllables, in the ‘right’ way. The intellectual insight in the descriptive meaning of a word is not given before we learn to communicate linguistically, as Piaget tended to argue, when he studied the cognitive conditions for language speaking (to whom I will return soon). Moreover, as Taylor shows, intellectual meaning *follows* a preceding bodily enactment of meaning; we learn as children by participating in rituals. A *fifth* strike is against the *autistic* account of language acquisition. Learning to communicate linguistically is not a neutral or merely cognitive process but is grounded in affective and emotional experiences. The acquisition of language is primarily grounded in the desire for emotional intimacy, a need that is essential for the survival and development of children. The linguistic capacity is, thus, deeply rooted in affective and emotional engagement with others and with the world. A *sixth* strike goes against the *ahistorical* account, as language must be understood as a web of interlocutions formed by historical contexts. Again augmenting Taylor’s account, one can attribute this condition to the love of children for narration and storytelling. Finally, a *seventh* strike goes against an *acultural* account of language acquisition. A culture is shaped by the normative structure that is provided and enacted by an interpretative and evaluative language. In childhood we learn to communicate by adopting this evaluative language from our caretakers, along with the strong evaluations that are expressed in it. Let us call these views Taylor opposes the ‘misconceived seven.’ With his strikes against the misconceived seven, Taylor can redirect the focus from a given single subject as the learner of language to social spaces as the primary place or ‘agency’ of language mediation out of which the subject initially arises. These strikes converge in his concept of “communion.”

## 2. Communion

Entrance to the linguistic dimension is conditioned by the ability to enter social spaces and to participate in shared rituals of “joint attention.”<sup>12</sup> Taylor borrows the concept of joint attention from Michael Tomasello, who has shown how children, before they use language productively, already establish routines of non-linguistic social communication and interaction with their parents or caregivers.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion of child regression in: Merleau-Ponty, *Keime der Vernunft*, pp. 36-39 (*Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne*).

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, pp. 54-57.

These routines provide the background of reference for later linguistic communication.<sup>13</sup> But Taylor widens the concept of joint attention when he treats it as a crucial part of “communion.”<sup>14</sup>

Taylor conceptualises communion as an intense and pure mode of social sharing, wherein we enter a common world in which “we are at first immersed in a view on things that is unattributed.”<sup>15</sup> Within these spaces of communion, we, as children, experience bonding and learn certain ritualized forms of proto-conversations by using gestures and noises. For Taylor, we start to participate in communication, not because we want to describe an inner or outer state or to exchange information, but primarily because of the essential social motivation to participate in these rituals of communion. In my eyes, this is the core insight that is enabled by the rejection of the misconceived seven. But how do we enter these spaces? It is the gestures and noises that are the keys or the vehicles for entering these communal rituals. Taylor appears to call these spaces of shared attention and emotions “communion” because he wants to emphasize the inversion of the classical Cartesian thesis that the access to an intersubjective world is conditioned by the appearance of self-awareness:

What the child is first inducted into is first understood not as the parent's view, or her own view, but what for her is ‘the’ view of the world, which is being imparted along with the language, the view developed within the ambit of an emotion-infused joint attention, which I have been calling ‘communion’.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor deepens the understanding of language acquisition with his concept of communion. In contrast to Piaget, who studied the relation between cognitive development and language, Taylor emphasizes the emotional and affective condition of the linguistic capacity. For Piaget, ‘object-permanence,’ the ability to realize that an object is still there when it is no longer perceived, is the crucial cognitive condition for the creation of symbolic representations and, thus, for the use of words. One can suggest, with Taylor, that object-permanence is then again conditioned by joint attention. It is, then, the affective and emotional equipment that is prior (or at least equally important) to the cognitive condition for using words or sentences in the acquisition of language. This difference is reflected in a subtle difference in how we look upon the child's self: for Piaget, the self of the child is an egocentric self, a self that is centred in herself because it attributes the world around her to herself. In contrast, Taylor follows Merleau-Ponty in holding that the self of the child is not centred but is

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Tomasello and Farrar, *Joint Attention and Early Language*.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

located in a diffuse sociality. Within this sociality the child encounters herself in the other and the other in herself.<sup>17</sup>

A similar argument is made by Axel Honneth in his book *Reification*. For Honneth, the primary world-relation, which is given in childhood, is one of ‘recognition.’ Recognition has parallels with Taylor’s concept of communion: the assumption that recognition is a fundamental affirmation and an existential approval of the other, which comes before the clear separation of subject and object and is different to mere sympathy and perspective taking also applies to “communion.” In contrast to Taylor, Honneth does not study the roots of our linguistic capacity but, rather, the conditions of knowledge. But Honneth agrees with Taylor that the ability to develop a perspective of one’s own and to realize the perspective of others, and, later on, to have a neutral and objective perspective, arises out of the basic social and affective experiences of recognition—and Taylor could complete: within spaces of communion. When we lose this footing in affective social recognition, our thinking, and perception becomes reifying.

Setting the point of departure at the socio-affective dimension has practical and normative consequences as well as theoretical consequences. From the perspective of Piaget’s model of cognitive development, one can easily come to see the child as a deficient adult. Piaget’s theory says: To become a fully rational being, capable of using language in a logical way, we must overcome our childish world-relation and leave behind our ingenuous egocentrism. As a result, in the 1970s, when Piaget’s model dominated theories of learning, in Germany at least, practitioners as well as theorists demanded to overcome the childish egocentrism. For example, in natural sciences, pedagogues developed principles of teaching that aimed at cutting off affective and emotional attachments to the natural world and to the world of things that children have when they go to school. These emotional ties should, the theory went, be cut off in favour of a more objective and neutral take on the world.<sup>18</sup> The overcoming of this childish outlook was supported with the desired outcome being a more neutral, rational, and adult outlook that is free or, better, distanced from its affects.

In contrast, focussing on the affective conditions in communion (or recognition), the childish world-relation cannot be understood as merely deficient. In contrast to egocentrism, communion remains a crucial mode of relation throughout our whole lives, even if it is supplemented or transformed by cognitive abilities that allow us a more rational and neutral perspective. My intuition is that more recent accounts of child development, such as Taylor’s model of language acquisition, can explicate and widen the meaning of childhood for modern societies.

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<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty: *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne*.

<sup>18</sup> See Gebhard, *Kind und Natur*, pp. 58-60.

### 3. Traces of Childhood

Most theories in the social sciences explain social order from the perspective of the adult by simultaneously underestimating the meaning of childhood for this order. Let us consider two very influential theoretical paradigms. One paradigm explains social order through the actions of rational beings or groups. Because we cannot attribute such rational or coordinated action to children, 'order' is understood as something that arises when we overcome childhood. Another paradigm explains 'order' in terms of the processing of supra-individual systems. The political, artistic, and economical systems socialize and create the adults in order to sustain and renew social order. Again, the socialized rational being must overcome the world-relation of the unsocialized child. In contrast to these theories, I want to propose that the life-form we call 'childhood' has a much more constitutive importance for social order and for our cultural self-understanding.<sup>19</sup>

Can *The Language Animal*, and especially Chapter Two, be read as a contribution to a social account 'ab infantia'? From a pragmatic perspective, one could argue, as Merleau-Ponty did, that adults and children generally use language in different ways. For Merleau-Ponty, adults use language conventionally: often we communicate linguistically in order to code, decode, and transmit information. By doing this, we sometimes initiate intellectual and instrumental relationships in order to make plans, organize our daily life or get things done. Merleau-Ponty is convinced that children in general do not have an understanding and practice of linguistic communication in this way. Rather, they have an understanding of language that is more participative, intimate, quasi-magical, and constitutive. Children do not start to communicate for instrumental reasons but for intrinsic reasons, that is, for the purpose of connection itself. Later on, when the connections are established, we learn to use language conventionally. But for Merleau-Ponty the non-conventional way of using language remains important for the relations in our lives.

Such traces of childhood also appear in Taylor's work on language acquisition. By 'traces' I mean capacities and abilities that are given and formed in childhood that are continually stable, present, and essential for our lives as adults. As we saw earlier, children are, for example, natural experts in entering spaces of communion, a relational mode that remains crucial throughout our whole life: "one of the crucial 'uses' of language is to establish and maintain the various forms of human contact or relationship, for their own sake, from casual conversation over the back fence, through various forms of belonging and solidarity, reaching right through to the most intimate communion."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For support for this thesis, see Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, pp. 9-15.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 93.



#### 4. Language Mediated Resonance

The designative-instrumental HLC-theories naturally follow the deficit model of the child, because they focus on language as a medium for encoding and decoding information and/or they tend to see language as an instrument to describe the inner and outer worlds. But this mode is dominant and distinctive just for 'adult' speakers. If it is conceived as the 'normal' language usage, the child must be in a deficit language mode. But, as Taylor shows, these theories fail to grasp other intrinsic aspects of language that make their appearance and are primary when we acquire the ability to communicate linguistically as infants. This point becomes clearer when we consider the 'dimensions of rightness' Taylor analyses in *The Language Animal*.

Higher animals can learn how to use words correctly in respect to *task-rightness*:<sup>21</sup> The ape presses the button for 'banana' correctly because he wants to have the banana. The sign is not intrinsically connected to a descriptive feature of the thing called 'banana.' For the ape, it appears to be a mere instrumental relation, mediated by a sign. In contrast, the human capacity for linguistic communication is, for Taylor, not just a more complex and advanced system of task-rightness. If it were, humans would enter into merely instrumental world-relations. What is missing here is a form of intrinsic connection or 'resonance.' As the sociological theory of resonance shows,<sup>22</sup> merely instrumental self- and world-relations tend to be 'mute' or 'cold.' A life-form that is entirely based in instrumental world-relations can be described as 'alienated.' In contrast to animals, for Taylor, human beings enact other forms of rightness inherent in language, dimensions that do not connect us merely instrumentally but, rather, intrinsically to others and to the world. The motivation to get it right and to master linguistic communication arises for the purpose of social connection and resonance itself. If it is plausible that the linguistic capacity of children is more than just a merely transitional stage, then the intrinsic dimensions Taylor identifies can be understood as forms of linguistic motivations and communicative forces that are genuinely present at the beginning of our lives and that build what I have called 'traces of childhood.'

Taylor argues that we, as children, enter social spaces of intimacy, love, or communion by participating in rituals of shared attention. I would add that within these spaces we have our first experiences of being meant, addressed, affirmed or seen and heard, and we also experience the other as someone who can be addressed, affirmed, or heard. This form of resonance, of reciprocal touching and being touched by gestures, sounds or movements, appears within a diffuse social atmosphere and can be described as 'proto-conversations,' a bodily and tonal attunement between the child and her caretakers. When we get the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 7-9.

<sup>22</sup> Rosa, *Resonanz*; Rosa, *Aliénation et accélération*; Beljan, *Schule als Resonanzraum und Entfremdungszone*.



ritual right, we can experience this *ritual-rightness* as a flow of affective resonances in which the participants answer and touch each other. Not only can we find evidence that this resonance process in rituals influences the later cognitive ability of the child, as Taylor mentions,<sup>23</sup> but even if we have already learned how to use language, we never stop participating in personal or collective rituals to enact ritual resonance—a phenomenon that can be described as ‘traces of childhood’: “From the very beginning we seek communion, intimacy, love, and we never grow beyond this need, even though later a host of less intense, and less personally engaging relationships also arise in our lives.”<sup>24</sup>

Another dimension of rightness Taylor analyzes is *expressive-rightness*. As language beings, we don't just enter social spaces of communion. On the contrary, “we also need to make sense of these relations” and we use words like “love, friendship, links with compatriots, brother- and sisterhoods, churches, parties,” without which these relations “each with their demands and norms” would not exist.<sup>25</sup> As linguistic beings, we try to express and articulate their meaning for us and, if we find an adequate expressive material that fits or gives us an affirmative feedback and that can result in a feeling of being authentic, we may experience it as a form of ‘expressive resonance.’ Children seem to have an enormous potential for such expressive resonances. Their openness for the demands that are objectified in conceptual words manifest, for example, when they transform into a ‘cowboy,’ a ‘princess,’ or a ‘knight.’ A form of *normative-rightness* is also involved here that resonates in us as a demand on our behaviour. But because there is always more meaning to articulate, we go on as adults to reach for expressive resonance and we seek for expressive rightness in order to enact new meanings, purposes, needs and aims that involve new ways of being in the world. The expressive capacity is also, crucially, formed in childhood.<sup>26</sup>

The adult form of *descriptive-rightness*, “which is backed by awareness of criteria,”<sup>27</sup> must be learned on the basis of the prior forms of rightness (ritual, expressive, normative). For Taylor, we never leave behind these prior forms of intrinsic rightness, which is why I have described them as ‘traces of childhood.’

## 5. Conclusion

What I have tried to outline is the intuition that, through the overcoming of the misconceived seven—the monological, psychological, instrumental, atomistic, autistic, ahistorical, and acultural accounts—in *The Language Animal*, Taylor

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<sup>23</sup> Taylor, *The Language Animal*, pp. 52, 54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

shifts the process of language acquisition from a self-centred learning process to a process that appears in social spaces. This difference was discussed in the example of Taylor's concept of communion and Piaget's concept of 'object permanence.' While Piaget focuses on cognitive development as a condition for language acquisition, Taylor focuses on the affective conditions for the linguistic capacity. It was argued that Taylor's affective condition, reflected in the concept of communion, was prior to the cognitive condition Piaget called 'object permanence.' Each authors' theories lead to different orientations to childhood, with a different effect on pedagogical practices. While Piaget (but also the HLC-theories) tends to promote a deficit model of linguistic child development, Taylor is able to support a continuity model in which the linguistic capacity of childhood is not a merely transitional stage. This led me to the wider question of whether Taylor's theory of language acquisition in *The Language Animal* could facilitate the thesis that childhood has a much more essential and constructive meaning for social order than is normally recognized. I followed some traits of childhood bringing together the intrinsic dimensions of linguistic communication with the theory of resonance.

In respect to pedagogical practices, childhood is not a phase we have to overcome completely. Rather, we should recognize it as a unique rational form of being in the world, a life-form where unique linguistic forces are accessible, intrinsic connections of resonance are dominant, and resources of language are available elements that remain essential throughout our whole lives as language animals.

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