

Things That Infants Can Teach Us

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Introduction

Language teachers are lucky. We are between the cultural worlds of the languages we teach and those of our students. This in-between position allows us a special insider-outsider view of everything we think and do, including our assumptions about language, teaching and learning. Of course we don't have to take such a view: we can remain mentally in one world and adhere only to its assumptions. But we *can* take opportunities to learn from other worlds, our students' perspectives, and other ways of experiencing.

Parenthood – or any involvement with infants – also involves a meeting of worlds: an adult's and a child's. And like the meeting of worlds in the classroom, the results can be surprising or unsettling or – frequently when the implications would otherwise be very unsettling indeed – funny. For responding with laughter is often the way we deal with – or, rather, *avoid* dealing with - unsettling ideas.

Perhaps less often, unfortunately, we laugh for joy, or in moments of ecstasy. Ecstasy is a Greek word meaning 'standing outside oneself', and so combines notions both of joy and of the insider-outsider view. This article concerns some of the things my children have taught me, in the ecstasy of parenthood. I'm not going to suggest that you have to be a parent for such things to occur to you; it just happens that the experience of parenthood has brought these things home to me.

I've said that language-teaching and parenthood both involve opportunities to see things from another point of view. They also both involve disagreements between experts and between practitioners over how they should be done. So, no doubt, some of what I say here might strike you, the reader, as arguable, if not downright wrong. If that happens, please treat our disagreements as meetings of worlds, and as

opportunities to explore different perspectives further: my email address is at the top of this article.

Part 1: Learning our language

Words come after concepts

The first thing my children have taught me is that very little of how languages are taught in schools is useful in helping infants acquire spoken language at home. This does *not* mean that how infants acquire language at home has nothing useful to say for language teaching in schools. I'm sure that it does have things to say, and in a moment I'll say why. But for most infants, 'teaching' them to speak is largely a waste of time. As long as healthy babies are not systematically deprived of loving human company they will naturally acquire the language of whoever they grow up with.

You *can* teach an additional language to an older child or an adult. For example, with a class of beginner students you might successfully introduce the vocabulary to refer to items in the classroom: pen, book, teacher and so on. This is fine, but it relies on the students already grasping the concepts to which you are now giving labels. An infant who does not have the concept of a pen cannot refer to a pen. He or she might be able to *say* 'pen', but that is a different matter entirely. The infant might even say 'pen' on cue whenever presented with a pen or a picture of a pen, but that is not the same as referring to a pen either. What the infant is doing is making a sound that he or she has learnt is appropriate in a given situation.

My first son, Linley, revealed this distinction whenever at sixteen months he said 'Janet'. Janet is his mother's name, so it would appear, especially as he would often call 'Janet!' to gain her attention, that he understood that sound to refer to that person. However, it turned out that he only ever said 'Janet' when calling upstairs, and that he called it to gain the attention of whoever (me, for example) happened to be upstairs. He had learned, presumably from noticing me calling his mother from the bottom of the stairs, that this was the appropriate sound to make when there was someone upstairs that he wanted. The cry did not refer to any person or object, but was related to a situation (Presumably he did not learn to call 'Sarn!' because he rarely heard it, since Janet was not as lazy as I am, and would come upstairs herself if ever she wanted me. And he did not call 'Janet!' *downstairs* to gain anyone's attention because he had never encountered that either, since, lazy though I am, I could just about muster the energy required to take myself downstairs whenever I wanted her).

Before an infant can refer to something, she or he must have the concept. The same is true of anyone learning a language. The adult beginner very likely has the concept of a pen, and *probably* has a direct equivalent for 'pen' in his or her first language, but other concepts may be alien or differently defined. Depending on a student's cultural background, a lot of explaining may be required before, say, 'church' or 'vote' or 'omelette' can be properly understood. In English, 'book' may refer to either a textbook or an exercise book, whereas in some languages there are equivalents for 'textbook' and for 'exercise book' but none for 'book' in general. When first introduced to the word 'book', a student may wrongly learn to use the word *exclusively* either for textbooks or for exercise books, depending on which kind of book the teacher happens to point at in the lesson. 'Teacher', too, may not have a

direct equivalent, may cover a different range of uses, and the closest approximation in any given language may have quite different connotations.

The difficulty often becomes starker with abstract concepts, and so remains relevant from beginner to the most advanced levels.

An abstract concept which was alien to our second son, Bede, at three years of age, was *danger*. Not realising this, we occasionally used to try to explain to him that the reason he was not allowed to, say, play with the bread knife, was that it was dangerous. What he understood from this was that when someone says a thing is 'dangerous', they simply mean that they do not want it to happen. And so he himself took to describing anything *he* didn't want to do or to happen (eating cabbage, or cleaning his teeth, for example) as 'dangerous'. It really had us puzzled until we worked out why.

Words and concepts come after context

Before you learn a word, you have to grasp the concept. But concepts do not exist in isolation, ready for just anyone to grasp. They arise out of, and contribute to, a shared experience and understanding. For example, Linley first understood that 'darling' was a name for anyone one is fond of, and so used it when addressing parents, friends and favourite adults. What he grasped arose from what he experienced at home. In that small linguistic community this usage then became accepted, and itself contributed to everyone's understanding and enjoyment of social relations in the household. After joining a toddler group Linley realised that 'darling' is not a word that children normally say. He refined his understanding in line with the prevailing conventions that he experienced, and stopped saying it. (Which was very sad.)

When students learn about modes of address in another language, they, too, need not only to get to grips with the concepts that words like 'Mr' or 'Miss' or 'Sir' refer to, but also the conventions of the people who use them. Whether or not you address me as 'Mr Rich', for example, depends on your grasp of the concept *and* on how you understand that the word 'Mr' is conventionally used. As teachers guiding students toward understanding unfamiliar language, we need not only to help them to grasp unfamiliar concepts but also to help them enter the world of the people who use it.

What comes after how

If one thing that language teachers too often overlook is the background to the language we teach, another is the immediate situations and the ways in which language is used. As situations and uses differ, the meaning of language differs – even if on paper the language looks identical. As a two-year-old, Linley showed this when he said 'like' followed by an object. On paper, when he said 'Like borbees [i.e. strawberries]' and 'Like onions', 'Like' should mean the same thing. In fact, Linley's body language in the first situation (smiling enthusiastically) was quite different from that in the second (frowning extravagantly), and so gave the word two opposite meanings. 'Translated' into adult English, what he said *plus how he said it* is 'I like strawberries' and 'I don't like onions'.

(In the English he heard, the primary stress in negative sentences (e.g. 'I don't like tea' or 'We didn't drive') would normally be on the object or on the infinitive, and the

auxiliary and ‘n’t’ seems to have gone unnoticed. It was not until several months later that Linley hit upon using ‘don’t’ or ‘didn’t’ to form a negative.)

What counts is not just what you say, but the way that you say it. Too often in language classes this is forgotten. On the page, the meaning of a sentence may be down to its syntax, but when spoken, body language, intonation or a sarcastic delivery can change everything.

Infants get to grips with intonation long before they tackle syntax, or produce a first word. You can have a good conversation with a preverbal infant by taking turns mumbling or cooing with a variety of questioning and answering intonation patterns. A few months before the end of this stage, Linley showed how well he understood the subtleties of intonation when he listened to his mother on the telephone. She had been chatting to her sister for several minutes and then said ‘Have a good weekend’. Linley, who was sitting and listening intently on his high chair on the other side of the room, immediately waved. Then Janet, who had not noticed Linley’s gesture, said ‘Bye’ a couple of times and put the phone down. Linley was three or four years away from knowing what a weekend is, but he had realised from the way in which his mother said ‘Have a good weekend’ that she was about to finish the conversation (In technical terms, she had made a ‘pre-closing move’), and so he signalled the end by waving goodbye. I suspect that many language learners, even at high levels, would be less adept than this at recognising when a telephone conversation is about to end, or at following many other social interactions, because they are taught to concentrate on the words they hear and their literal meanings, and overlook the ways in which the words are said.

Understanding comes after perceiving patterns

The child trained to say ‘pen’ when confronted with a flashcard, or who works out when to say ‘darling’, or who can spot when a conversation is about to end, has observed, and perceived patterns. Without having perceived patterns beforehand, the child would have no idea how to respond, or what to expect, or what other language-users are driving at. There is a necessary powerful urge to find patterns, and another urge to fit whatever one encounters into the patterns one has already come up with.

These patterns can be misleading. They can make us mishear or misread things as what we expect to hear or to read, rather than what is actually said. As a toddler, Linley always perked up when he heard Alistair Campbell (the former UK Prime Minister’s Director of Communications) mentioned on the radio, convinced that the newsreader was talking about Alice the Camel, a character in a song he sang in his playgroup. Similarly, elementary-level English-language students almost invariably mistake ‘What is she like?’ for ‘What does she like?’, because they have encountered the latter construction in their learning but not the former. If you dictate a few sentences to your students you will nearly always find that where what they write differs from what you say, it is because they are forcing their sentences to comply with more familiar linguistic patterns.

As language teachers we try to help our students perceive patterns which are most likely to help them understand the language they need. Little children show how difficult this can be. Immediately after hearing me use the phrase ‘backwards and forwards’, Linley adopted it, and adapted it to familiar linguistic patterns, as

‘backwards and frontwards’. On another occasion I asked him to put something on the window sill; immediately he talked about having puttended it on the window *shelf*. He noticed that nouns can sometimes be turned into verbs, and so, to explain that his little brother had hurt him on purpose, complained ‘He idea-ed to throw the box at me. He idea-ed it.’ Later, he drew on the same pattern to refine his description of an illustration in a picture book: ‘The teacher is talking a- ... classing about numbers.’

Sometimes it is obvious what linguistic pattern has inspired an unexpected form of language, as when children insist they ‘willn’t’ do something, and when Linley referred to fire-fighters’ footwear, magnificently, as ‘protectical boots’.

At other times it takes some working out. Why did Bede at fifteen months refer to broccoli as ‘shhh’? Is it because he had learnt to associate things with the sounds they make (a cat with ‘miaow’, for example) and he had learnt that a tree makes the sound ‘shhh’ in the wind, and broccoli looks a bit like a tree?

Patterns are ways in which we organise experience, and as experiences differ so will the patterns people perceive in the world. Importantly, one part of experience is one’s own native language, which itself organises the things one encounters. One’s understanding of events in time, for example, may be shaped in part by the language one has grown up using to talk about them. The categories that seem commonsensical to the speaker of one language can seem alien to someone who speaks another. It is often only when we meet someone who perceives different patterns from our own that we realise that the patterns we are familiar with, far from being set in the nature of reality, are themselves constructions imposed by us and our culture onto reality.

Bede taught me this with how he used the word ‘picture’. For him, illustrations in a book or paintings on a wall were both pictures, but so were mirrors, and so was a visor on a helmet (a helmet with a visor was, according to Bede, a ‘picture helmet’). He apparently perceived a coherent category of flat or flattish objects one looks at intently or looks through, and so he used the word ‘picture’, which he had heard used for one such object, for everything in that category. To us this category is alien, but the reason it feels alien lies in our language and our culture, not in any mistake in Bede’s understanding of reality. Incidentally, after we explained to Bede that the more usual word for the thing on a helmet is a ‘visor’, he started calling headphones ‘visors’ as well...

Part 2: Learning their language

Beginning to learn their language

An obvious but important feature that teaching and parenting have in common - the most important, I hope you agree – is that as a teacher or as a parent one is dealing with a person – a student or a child – with a consciousness and a will of their own. It is obvious, but it seems to be often forgotten. How frequently have you heard a teacher talking about doing ‘the same lesson’ as a lesson they have done before with a different class, and seeming surprised that the students did not respond in the same way? If you have written the sort of minute-by-minute lesson-plans expected on many teacher training courses, you may have found yourself picturing the class as a kind of machine with buttons you can press, and with behaviour you can predict in detail and time in advance. Children, too, often seem to be regarded by their carers as

contraptions which either function properly as we expect them to, or else have something wrong with them.

It can be inconvenient when our students or our offspring demonstrate that they have minds of their own, and do not behave as we want them to. It can slow us down. It can stop us getting important things done, perhaps things of benefit to our students or our offspring themselves. There is a long tradition in childrearing which advocates suppressing or destroying the child's will for this very reason. Violence in various forms, from beating to withholding of physical contact or feeding, has been used to turn the 'wilful' child into a 'good' one, i.e. one which behaves in a way the parents feel is appropriate – for the child's own good.

As I mentioned before, I am lazy. As a rule, opposing or trying to suppress a child's will, or forcing my students to stick to a meticulously timed lesson-plan, looks too much like hard work. But, very occasionally, I have to get something done, and have to take the child or my students with me. When teaching, I used to move from one activity to the next by announcing it was time to change, by clapping my hands, by switching the lights on and off, by banging on the table, by insisting the students shut up or put down their pens or stand up and sit somewhere else ... Whenever I was observed by a trainer or a manager these sudden transitions were commended: they maintained a 'good pace'. Certainly they kept the students – and the observer – awake, but, by the end of each day I was exhausted.

Then my children taught me what I think is a better, gentler way. First, however, can I comment on the common belief that little children have a short attention span? It is nonsense. Left to their own devices, babies or toddlers can be absorbed, staring, meditating, studying objects, repeating noises or actions, or crying, for far longer than most adults would find bearable. No doubt with enough exposure to television or other frantic stimulation these powers of concentration can be trained out of children, but they do not have to be. An infant rapt in its crying or deep in a game can be quite oblivious for a very long time to any inducements to snap out of it.

Realising this, and being lazy, I learned that before taking a child to where I wanted them to be, I had first to join them where they already are. Then, once adult and child are tuned in to one another, the adult can start guiding the child in another direction by their own example. For instance, if the adult is carrying a howling baby, the adult can enter the grief alongside, keeping step with the rhythm of the sobs and making a gentle sound which resonates with the child's; when the two are in sympathy, the adult can gradually calm the child by slowing the rhythm and changing the note. If the adult wants to dress a child who is absorbed in pushing toy cars along the floor, the adult can begin by taking up a car and driving it along, too; as the adult takes on the child's world and the child finds his or her will expressed in the actions of the adult, the child can become content to accept the adult's subsequent actions as an expression of their shared will. Once the two are tuned in, each can be guided to accept the other's intentions as if they were their own.

My children showed me that I do not need to abruptly wrench students' attention whenever moving from one activity to another. By first tuning in to where they are, it is possible to feel one's way to more sympathetic transitions, to take them with you by first letting them take you with them. It is an instinctive process we all follow with people we feel an affinity with: we unthinkingly adopt their mannerisms, speech

patterns and vocabulary. It can be a more conscious process, too; we may be aware of what is going on and study techniques for understanding people and winning people round. Maybe they will not be won round, of course, but the process provides a window to where they would be happier to go. Tuning in to another person treats their will as something to respect and to learn from, instead of as an obstacle to struggle against.

Words and worlds

So far I have talked about infants learning *our* language. Now I want to look at theirs. This might seem absurd: infants have no language (the word 'infant' itself means 'without speech'); it is their job to learn our language, not ours to learn their meaningless babble. The objection seems commonsensical, but, having got to know my children, I think it is wrong.

The commonsensical position is one that is embedded in our language and is part of our culture. This makes it difficult to suggest an alternative understanding, unless we first identify and uncover the unspoken assumptions that surround us.

One way to start is to see what words are available to describe things, and how they are typically used. In English there are three verbs available which refer specifically to a parent's relationship with a child: *to raise*, *to rear* and *to bring up*. There is no verb which refers specifically to a child's relationship with an adult. There is the verb *to grow up* which typically takes a child as its subject, but it is intransitive so cannot take a parent as its object. The particle *up* suggests completeness (as in 'eat up') or movement to a desirable state, upward movement being culturally associated with ascent to civilisation, insight or heaven, away from barbarism, ignorance or earthbound existence. Of course children do grow up, in the sense that they get taller, so the upward movement might seem simply to describe this physical process, but I think there must be other reasons why 'up' is the idea that the language seizes on. We do not talk of parents doing anything like *enlarging* their children, for example.

With these linguistic features in mind, it looks as though embedded in English there is an assumption that parents have a particular role to play in the life of a child, but not vice versa, and that that role involves moving a child from a state of relative inadequacy toward a state of desirable, adult, completeness. The adult has much to teach the child; the child is not expected to contribute anything to the adult.

Part of this ideology, I think, is the significance our culture attaches to a child's first spoken word, marking transition from preverbal and verbal stages. I would argue that although this notional boundary is easy to spot, that does not of itself mean that that is where we have to say that language begins. In fact, the notion that 'in the beginning is the word' suggests that what the child conveys before that time is irrelevant, and dismisses what has already passed between mother and child over many months. Up till this point, traditionally, the father has had little to do with the child; perhaps partly for this reason a male bias in our culture treats verbalised language as the only kind that really counts.

My view is that there is language before the first word: what I have called 'their' language. With words comes the child's potential to command *another* language: 'our' language.

The nature of their language and of ours is – as is the case with all languages – bound up with the worlds of those who speak them. The differences between the world as experienced by a small child, and that experienced by you and me, are perhaps more stark than those encountered in any clash of cultures in the classroom.

For the newborn infant the world is an inseparable whole. There is no separation, and no conceivable distinction between parts of the infant, or parts of the world, or of infant and world from each other. The nervous system is such that feeling in any part of the body is experienced as occurring throughout the body, and so saturates the child's experience. Pain, pleasure, comfort and discomfort cannot be located as originating or as impacting at any specific point on the child or in the world. There is one indissoluble existence.

In the infant's experience there are complete sensations, which are indissoluble and unanalysable, but momentary. They come and go, without an origin or a destination that can be discerned or even thought about. They simply are, and their completeness precludes any possibility of the infant seeing an end to them or consciously remembering anything before. Though momentary (from our point of view), each sensation is the entirety of the infant's world.

Immediately after birth the process begins whereby this world gradually gives way to ours. It disintegrates into multiple analysable parts. The body separates into limbs and organs, with distinct impressions and senses, and becomes notionally separable from the world itself. Sensations come to occupy just a part of the mind, which dwells on their causes and effects. We are then compelled to seek to reintegrate the world, to comprehend it, by seeing patterns in experience, by rationalising, planning, telling stories and theorising.

With the transition from world to world comes the transition from their language to ours. An infant's language involves every sense and limb. Whether absorbed in a howl of misery or an explosion of leg-kicking, arm-flailing excitement, or grasping the toes and staring up in contented, suckling, cooing wonder, the small child speaks with the entire mind and body. Infants cannot use this language to lie or to misrepresent their experience, since their language is inseparable from themselves.

Whereas an infant's language embodies experience, ours describes it as if from a vantage point outside the world and outside ourselves. We can conceive of language as words we produce which take on a separate existence, in speech bubbles detachable from the speaker. Our language aspires to objectivity, to truths that are independent of the transitory sensations of those who produce or hear it. It takes some time for a child to learn that in our language what we say is separable from what we happen to feel or believe. Children have to learn to understand irony, falsehood, secrets and deceit.

Also, still absorbed by momentary sensations, a small child does not share our craving for explanations, is not distracted by causes and effects. Even after five or six years of immersion in adult language it is normal for a child to have difficulty discriminating between 'That's why ...' and 'That's because ...'

Here are two interactions between Linley and his mother, which show a child getting to grips with our language in the gradual transition from infancy to the world of adults.

‘A lion on the stairs’

Linley aged three and nine months

Mother (calling from the kitchen) Can you go upstairs and get your trousers, please, darling?

Linley No, I can't.

Mother Why? What's the matter?

Linley (earnestly) There's a lion on the stairs.

Mother Oh, is there?

Linley (nods)

Mother (looks at Linley) Alright. Just a minute. I'll get them.

The lion on the stairs was not a joke, nor a mistaken use of language, but a serious expression of Linley's predicament at that moment. In the adult world of objective truths distinctions are made between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary. In the child's world these do not apply: the lion on the stairs expresses the subjective reality of Linley's immediate experience.

People have momentary or prolonged anxieties attached to places, people or things, which as adults we suppress, or disguise, or fail to acknowledge because they do not 'make sense'. Nevertheless they exist, and small children, oblivious to the demands of a rational universe, see them. In this interaction, rather than trying to impose conventional adult reality, Linley's mother tuned in to what Linley was saying, read his words, voice and body, and understood. His reluctance to go upstairs involved some anxiety, momentous but explicable for Linley only in symbolic terms, and perhaps inexplicable to an objective adult on any terms. There was a lion on the stairs, so his mother went up to fetch Linley's trousers. (The lion has since left.)

‘For yes reason’

Linley aged five (His friend Jack was about the same age.)

Linley Jack pushed me over today.

Mother What? For no reason?

Linley For yes reason. Because he wanted to.

As far as most adults are concerned 'because he wanted to' does not count as a reason for pushing somebody over, but for a five-year-old it does. In adult English 'reason' is so understood as to exclude spontaneous, unprovoked wants. But in the child's understanding a spontaneous, unprovoked want *can* constitute a reason. In our (adult)

culture reasons for actions are assumed to concern goals, or to lie in chains of events or settled states of affairs. They look forward to something or they have a history. But for Linley, aged five, an action need involve neither a future goal, nor a past. The urge to act simply happens. Wants and actions are momentary and absolute. There is no need to consider where they come from, no compulsion to refer to causes or intentions.

What their language can tell us about ours

Here are three ways in which the fact that other people are different from us can teach us about ourselves:

1 By seeing what is different about them we can identify what is particular or distinctive about us

Linley's 'lion on the stairs' and 'yes reason' reveal particular features of adults' everyday understanding. Unlike infants and small children, we resist acknowledging irrational, inexplicable anxieties and urges, and we demand that actions and events fit into reasonable chains of cause and effect. As a matter of course, the experience of the present moment is related to, or interpreted through, how we understand the future and the past. Our language aspires to describe a world that is independent of our momentary impressions or points of view.

2 By considering how we are seen from their perspective, we can think about ourselves in a new way

Infants scrutinise the adults and older children around them. Obviously we cannot know exactly what they make of us (even if we could understand it), but I think the ways in which children first use our language can provide clues to how they think it is used by us. An interesting example is the way in which a small child first uses numbers. The child will sit on your knee observing carefully while you count to ten and point in turn to each of ten items in a picture; after a while the child will also point and say 'one, two, three, four ...' but will not take any trouble to relate the pointing to the numbers. The normal sequence of numbers may also become quite jumbled. The reason for this divergence is not, I think, that the sequence of numbers is too difficult to remember; if so inclined, at the same age, a child can memorise far longer stretches of text from books adults have read to them, or lines they have heard on television. The reason is that they have no idea that the aim of the activity is to practise counting. The child sees you repeatedly, ritualistically, intoning sounds as you poke at the picture, and then joins in the game, using the same sounds to assert the same kind of authority over it. The order of the sounds, and the order of the pointing do not really matter. The language is seen as an instrument we use, like an incantation, to establish a relationship with what we are referring to.

A similar case is the use that Linley, aged two, made of the phrase 'fell over'. Whenever he stumbled and started to cry he could be reminded of the phrase, which he then repeated as if casting a joyful spell: 'FEVOVAH!' The cry transformed his relationship with what had occurred, from a source of pain to one of excitement. From what he had seen of adult language practices, Linley gathered that our language does not simply describe experience; it reconstitutes it.

He was right. A young man who boasts to his mates how wasted he was the night before replaces a miserable hangover with a cheerfully remembered thrill. A mother relating a traumatic birth experience turns it into a slapstick comedy. When politicians speak, they magic haphazard achievements into miracles, or their opponents' mild incompetence into disasters. We all transform or confirm our understandings of the world through how we speak of it.

The effect is achieved not only by what our words 'mean', but more fundamentally by the ritual of language-use itself. This is evident in children, who (unlike most adults when they study a new language) do not worry about the meaning of every word they encounter. They enthusiastically repeat song lyrics or radio jingles or lines from a story, unconcerned about 'understanding' them. They respond to the fact, and to the way, that words are spoken, not merely to what the words literally refer to.

Seen from this perspective, maybe many adult language practices make sense. Taken literally, 'wasted' would not suggest much to enjoy, but the young man uses the adjective, and perhaps a peppering of expletives, ritualistically to celebrate a devil-may-care relationship with the world. Taken literally, a politician's speech need not be enlightening; it is given weight by the conviction with which it is delivered, regardless of – or even in inverse proportion to – its literal significance. In a formal context – a courtroom, for example – are we impressed more by the words we thoroughly understand, or by the rituals and the language which we do not? In an academic paper, do technical terms serve more to effect precision, or more to convince the reader (and the writer) that the piece is well-researched and important? In a religious gathering, how much does the response of devotees to invocations and chanting in an ancient language differ from an infant's thrill at the ceremonial recitation of one, two, three, four ..?

English lessons tend to focus on the descriptive function of our language, and to overlook the way in which we use language ritualistically, or to interpret and to order experience. This does our students a disservice. Thoroughly to understand what they hear and read they need to see that when we write or speak we present our selves and our situation in a particular way, that we make choices in the words we use and how we use them, and that these choices are bound up with what we make of the world. The relationship between words and world is not simply descriptive. The power of language need have little to do with literal, dictionary meanings.

3 By reappraising features that seem distinctive about them, we come to recognise the same features in ourselves

I have characterised infants' language as drawing on the whole nervous system, and adults' as something separable from ourselves. On closer consideration this distinction may be too clear-cut. If you stub your toe on a table leg, or receive a shock or wonderful news, or see something hilarious, you are likely to respond with your entire body and mind, with language embodying your experience in that moment, just as children's language embodies theirs.

At times we may speak in the manner of 'our' language and of 'theirs' simultaneously. Lovers may say one thing with their voices, and something else with their eyes. Somebody in the throes of a row may produce an objectively verifiable

sentence while embroiled in violent, all-consuming rage. We can engage in precise, detached argument, and laugh for joy at the beauty of it.

Infants into adults

Language embodies, reconstitutes and describes experience. These are all forms of enactment through which we bring out experience, and bring understandings of experience into being. They are not distinct functions, for one leads to the next. We reconstitute experience to make sense of the world, because we must. A tiny infant knows nothing of before and after, or of divisions between one thing and another: the world is one, and does not demand or admit of explanation. By adulthood, this world has thoroughly disintegrated, and so we seek to tie it back together, by seeing and imposing patterns, by telling stories and finding rules.

Unlike tiny infants, we know how very small we are. So that this smallness will not tarnish the rules and explanations we find in the world, we try to reconstitute experience through the language of objective description, language which does not depend on small, individual points of view or momentary sensations. When we invoke the authority of impartial, immutable rules, we try to recapture the wholeness of experience that we lost when we emerged from infancy.

With all the generalisations and stabs at ordering my thoughts, which you have now almost finished patiently reading, I have been making that attempt myself. But while I write, and watch my baby daughter playing with her toes in rapt absorption on my knee, I cannot help feeling how inadequate this attempt is bound to be. I wonder what she will teach me, if I stop writing, and listen.