

## **Foreword**

Virginia Volterra and Carol Erting have made an important contribution to knowledge with this selection of studies on language acquisition. Collections of studies clustered more or less closely around a topic are plentiful, but this one is unique. Volterra and Erting had a clear plan in mind when making their selection. Taken together, the studies make the case that language is inseparable from human interaction and communication and, especially in infancy, as much a matter of gestural as of vocal behavior. The editors have arranged the papers in five coherent sections and written an introduction and conclusion. No introductory course in child and language development will be complete without this book.

Presenting successively studies of hearing children acquiring speech languages, of deaf children acquiring sign languages, of hearing children of deaf parents, of deaf children of hearing parents, and of hearing children compared with deaf children, Volterra and Erting give one a wider than usual view of language acquisition. It is a view that would have been impossible not many years ago – when the primary languages of deaf adults had received neither recognition nor respect. Yet such is the advance of knowledge that it has become impossible now to consider the processes involved in child development without looking at the progression from gestures to sign languages in addition to that from vocal noises to speech languages.

The problem for those unfamiliar with the different conditions imposed by deafness in child or parents or both is to find what of lasting significance has been done in this special area. The problem for those totally immersed in studies of sign languages and deafness is to relate their observations and findings to the body of knowledge developed by study of the majority, hearing, condition. Volterra and Erting have gone a long way to solving both these problems with this selection of studies and with their clear, no-nonsense commentaries.

The studies selected and the editors' overview of them raise another problem, however. There is wide variety in the studies in this volume: variety in method, from case studies to large subject populations, from short term to longitudinal observation; variety in theoretical foundations; and variety in terminology.

The editors recognize this – in fact it may have been one reason for their undertaking this collection in the first place; and they offer eminently sensible solutions. Based on Volterra's earlier work is their suggestion that a progression in both hearing and deaf children needs to be recognized and clearly denominated: at first, infantile *movements and sounds*; then, a clear attempt to communicate with *gestures and vocalizations*; later, a truly symbolic use of *signs and words*; and still later, genuinely linguistic combinations of symbols in *sign language* and *spoken language*. The papers in the collection amply justify this parallelism in word and sign acquisition and the conclusion that language is acquired by deaf and hearing children in comparable stages.

Volterra and Erting also see a deeper problem that must be addressed before their clear distinction of modalities and stages can be appreciated and their suggested terminology adopted. If greater understanding is to be gained about language acquisition, the central need (perhaps not sufficiently appreciated by some of the authors represented) is to establish strict and widely shared criteria for making the distinction between behavior that is only generally communicative and behavior that is truly symbolic, between behavior depending on context and behavior that transcends context, as language does.

Having selected papers that reflect the state of the art in assessing language acquisition (not just speech language acquisition) and pointed out ways that this state can most surely be advanced, Volterra and Erting continue as they began, looking always at real data and leading the advance.

May 1989

WILLIAM C. STOKOE