

THE CHILD'S SPEECH.

II. THE MOTHER'S TONGUE.

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1. The rudest provision which living creatures make for their young is the supply of food. In certain low forms this is the only recognition which the offspring receives. Among the higher organic types arise personal care and protection against danger, but this is at first a simple instinctive reaction and commonly of short persistence. In human life a third element is added which raises man incomparably above his fellows. This is membership in a community, which is mediated by the possession of speech. The mental solitude in which beasts live is inconceivable to men, because they have always been participants in a spiritual culture. The traditional dogma that the individual antedates society is wholly untenable. An organized group awaits the birth of each human child and at once receives him into its care. The infant finds himself a member of a trinity—father, mother and child. It is the common life of the social group which molds as well as nourishes him, and upon its vital atmosphere he is continuously dependent so long as he lives.

2. Within this community one member is of unique importance. The mother is the fountain and center of the child's life. She gives the babe food, she relieves him of pain and comforts him, she quiets him when disturbed, and is a playmate during his happy hours. Spiritually as well as materially the child's existence revolves about that of the mother, and everything connected with her person, receiving significance through its associations, is loved and prized by him.

Among the qualities which the child associates with his mother's presence the voice is pre-eminent, for it symbolizes

as perhaps nothing else can the intimate and manifold relations which ally them. The voice radiates farther than any other attribute the mother possesses. It assures the child of her nearness in the dark and runs before her as she approaches his room. It is not their only bond; many other things, because they help to establish a strong and tender connection between the two lives, become part of this ideal complex in the child's imagination—the affectionate glance which dwells on him long and lovingly, the soothing and caressing touch, the strong hands always ready to bear him up—nevertheless the voice swiftly becomes the most intimate and thrilling medium between their two spirits, before speech as such has attained any significance.

Thus out of the elementary relation of mother and offspring arises the early and profound influence of the voice upon the child. It is the first personal bond which is established between him and the world. The voice appears as a beneficent power, cheering, comforting, consoling—at once a solace and a delight. Above all, its perpetual song is an activity into which the child himself can enter. It is not a mere identifying mark of the mother's presence, objective and inimitable, to be recognized or dwelt on in imagination; it is a possession which the child shares with the mother, and through it her spirit increasingly penetrates his life and becomes a part of his own personality.

Such participation in the activities of others is the characteristic form of evolution in the individual self at large. Through it comes all later sense of community and upon its existence rests the very structure of society itself. This sympathetic interpretation of other lives receives its first clear embodiment through the medium of the voice, which gives mother and child community in the spiritual world.

3. The power thus to reproduce the tones of his mother's voice, and so not only to respond to her approaches, but also to supplement her presence, affords the child keen delight and soon becomes a solace to which he has constant recourse. What is so intimately connected with the presence of the loved one—song, speech, laughter—he can reproduce through his own activity. It is not only taken over from the objective

world into himself, but is voluntarily reproducible at any moment, and the delight which the child has in hearing the speech of his mother is continued during her absence in consequence of this use to which his own voice can be put. The pleasure which the young child takes in cooing and babbling is in part referable to the associations of these sounds with the comforting presence of his mother. Love and activity are the twin sources of his early delight in the voice and of his constant employment of it before the actual imitation and use of articulate speech-forms has been begun.

Throughout the child's experience the tones of the human voice are knit up with care for his wants, with relief of his pain and with participation in his pleasures. The mother's fondling as well as her tendance issues in speech—in crooning and lullaby, in soft whispers and hushing sounds, in bright and happy song, in sympathetic and pacifying words. In distress the child turns to it for comfort; when he has been left alone, it is the earliest signal of his mother's return; no occasion in the daily routine of experience is complete without it. Everywhere speech looms large in the happy associations of the child's world, and in literal truth he can now scarcely be happy unless his mood be ratified by the mother's voice.

The sound of the voice, loved and prized for its associations, becomes a constant recourse of the child. He is happy in its use as well as in hearing it. Laughing, cooing and babbling, which are called the natural and universal expressions of a joyful mood, take on a new value from their happy associations. The use of the voice is no longer merely the reflection of a mood independently originated; it has become the medium by which a happy mood is established. Its employment in a sort of wild music now constitutes a conscious part of the child's means to happiness, and he gives it incessant practice. His life becomes an echo of the mother's speech, faithful through all its shortcomings in its reflection of hers. There you may catch her tones and inflections, her laughter and whisper, even the very melody of her speech repeated.

4. It is this fine though unconscious faithfulness of the child to the model he imitates which makes good speech in the home imperative. The vice of impoverished utterance, into

which most of us have fallen, arises not so much from a defect of school training as from unhealthy home surroundings, in which the thought of the child is cramped and his feeling allowed to stagnate through the lack of a rich and flexible medium of expression. It is in the intimate life and conversation of the family circle that the child not only acquires the rudiments of speech, but also receives his first impressions, unconscious but lasting, of its values and beauty. As a vigorous intellectual activity can be stimulated and sustained only in the medium of a highly cultured speech, so can the ear be tuned and a sense for fit and noble diction fostered only where good speech is prized and daily striven after.

In all great and vital literature the child will find such stimulation and discipline, but his independent approach to this source of training comes only at a later period, when the example of home usage has already had its effect for good or ill. When that epoch is reached the child should find himself already at home with the spirit of good writing and possessed of that bias in its favor which only hourly contact can give.

For this illuminating and refining contact with good speech the child should be indebted to his home environment. Long before he can choose and read for himself, even before he is acquainted with his letters, he should know much that has a place in this high field. The great stories and noble poems of every literature are written in words so simple that a child can understand them, and his first acquaintance with the songs and tales of his own people should be made in the nursery as he listens at his mother's knee.

5. In this phase of the child's development it is not chiefly a question of vocabulary, nor even of grammar, though from the beginning a flexible vehicle and good usage are important. It is the quality of voice and articulation which are now most subject to modification. The organs of speech grow to the mode in which they are exercised, and the development of that multitude of defects which commonly marks the later voice receives its first stimulus in infancy from the harsh and slovenly speech which the child hears about him.

In the period just preceding intelligent speech the voice is near the height of its plasticity. It has developed a wide

range of modulations, in force, inflection, and even tone, of which more generous and spontaneous use is made than perhaps at any later date. It is extraordinarily sensitive to modifying influences and eagerly engaged in extending its own activities. The child delights in sounds, and imitates all kinds of noises, incessantly repeating, varying and combining them. In this imitative and experimental process the voice is taking shape, though it is still far from any condition of finality, and its range of tones, richness of modulation and general compass and flexibility as a medium of speech are receiving their first determination. That long process has already begun which is necessary to bring any human voice to its full perfection as an instrument of musical and expressive speech. In its earliest stages this development is unreflective and unsystematic. The child aims at no ideal end, nor is any technical voice training afforded him. Unconsciously, by daily and hourly contact, the quality of the voices he hears and the use to which they are put are molding his speech in vocal character and inflection as really as in vocabulary and pronunciation. If these voices are harsh and thin, his will lose something of its natural sweetness; if they are strident from long abuse, his will become coarsened through reflex strain; if they are stiff and lack dramatic variety, those subtle modulations of the young voice in which lies much of its charm will be gradually subdued to the dominant monotony.

The question is not one of teaching, but of habit and ideal. No formal instruction nor even stated drill will offset the effect of perpetually repeated example. The habits of speech prevalent within the family are the most potent factor in molding, for better or worse, the child's conception and use of language.

6. The forms of speech which daily intercourse presents to the child are abundant and varied. The mother tongue is whispered and murmured, crooned and sung to him. It appeals directly to his attention in all his occupations and forms a part of every response to his needs. It is heard in the common intercourse of the family circle when not directed to him as an individual. It reflects every shade of feeling on the part of those who use it, and presents manifold variations on the

lips of father, mother, brother and sister—in pitch, volume, timbre, rate and dramatic inflection. The child has the whole range of terms which family discourse comprises set before him, and the interest which attaches to the situations in connection with which speech is used stimulates a close attention to it.

The training in speech is thus no intermittent process, but one which is renewed day by day and hour by hour in the life of the child. Language is the spiritual medium in which he lives and moves from the outset of life.

7. In his attempts to master this medium needless difficulties should not be set in the child's way. For its slovenly and impoverished speech, it may be said, the family is not responsible. The habit is a social inheritance fixed by early example and training which the parents cannot now alter. But the older members of the home circle often seem to go out of their way to interpose obstacles to the child's progress in the use of normal human speech. Each word in any language is a precise sound-form which is mastered most quickly when it is presented without variation in form. In his attempts to pronounce the words of his mother tongue the child inevitably introduces modifications in these sound-forms because of the imperfection of his own organs and the inherent difficulty of the movements which their production involves. But the process of learning cannot be simplified by interposing a system of modified word-forms for the child to imitate, no matter how much easier they may be than the words they replace. The impulse which leads the mother to transform the words of her speech into baby-talk is at best the reflection of an absurdly misguided logic. It is these precise word-forms which must be mastered in the end, and every such procedure is a psychological complication which the child should not have to endure. So far as understanding is concerned, the simplification is uncalled for. The child apprehends the mother's speech, and it is the words as she utters them which he is trying to reproduce. As for articulation, it merely confuses the child and distracts attention from his true aim. In so far as the substitution is successful the task of learning to speak, instead of being lessened, is simply doubled and the child's

progress sensibly delayed. In most cases, indeed, no great harm may be done by baby-talk, but its use is always an unwise concession to the mother's weakness, and in exceptional cases its employment has proved disastrous in fixing the child's physiological stammering as an obstinate habit of speech. The child has a right to the best that home speech can offer, in purity of form no less than in richness of cultural content.

The double significance which human speech possesses, both as the instrument of all future intellectual activity and as the medium of human intercourse at large, makes every phase of its development in the individual a subject of interest to the student no less than of importance to the teacher. The earliest stage in this formal evolution will be taken up in the next paper of this series.

(To be continued.)