

The method of comparative acquisition of Mayan languages as a basis
for documenting child-directed language

Barbara Blaha Degler Pfeiler
UNAM-CEPHCIS, Mérida

Based on the comparative acquisition method of Mayan languages, I will discuss how longitudinal studies can be used as a starting point for documenting the child-directed language. An analysis of phonological substitutions in the children's speech across six Mayan languages is the baseline to study the child-directed language in Teenek (Huastec Maya). Teenek baby-talk words fall into two main classes: those derived from adult vocabulary and those bearing no apparent similarity to the adult- vocabulary words (Larsen 1949). Based on Huastec acquisition data of three children aged 2; 2, 6, 3 and 3; 6, the baby-talk register is analyzed with regard to the following questions:

- Do adults recognize baby-talk belonging to a register?
- Which are the linguistic and social features of the baby-talk register?
- Do the caregivers repeat, question or correct the child's utterances that contain words with phonological substitutions?

A questionnaire of 20 mothers and the caregivers of three focus children was evaluated and shows that, according to the adults, a baby-talk register does indeed exist in Teenek. But acquisition data indicate that it rarely occurs in the child-directed language. However, as far as words with phonological substitutions in the child language are concerned, the caregivers react with repetitions, questions and corrections. This lecture will also discuss examples of caregivers who react differently to such statements from children.