



SEMINARIO

“The Biopolitics of Baby Talk”



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This presentation considers speaking as a bodily experience (Agamben 2007, Heidegger 1977, Merleau-Ponty 1962), and the speaking body as a site of surveillance and discipline across the life span (Agamben 1998, Foucault 1984, 1988, 1994). Beginning at birth, if not before, speech is a primal locus of biopower: an infant is vulnerable to vocal modes of morally limned discipline, along with touch, and gaze. Caregivers guide infants' bodies to selectively notice their environment, and therein the groundwork of language socialization and cultural apprenticeship is interactionally constituted. Speaking brings the world into being for infants in ways that become part of their taken-for-granted understandings and practices. Cultivating natural attitudes towards ways of speaking in childhood is a cultural axiom (Duranti 2009, Husserl 1931). Yet, these natural attitudes are perennially subject to political and moral regimentation that attempts to form normative self-world relations. This analysis offers a biopolitical perspective on the latest incarnation of the developmental import of linguistic input to young children: an impassioned debate between psychologists and anthropologists over a “language gap” between children in low- and middle-income US families (Avineri and Johnson 2015, Fernald et al. 2013, Hart and Risley 1995, Hirsh-Pasek et al. 2015).

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