
ASK AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN UNTO YOU: CHILDREN'S REQUESTS

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Introduction. 'Ask and it shall be given unto you'. Infants start seeking help from others before they are a year old. Like chimpanzees, they reach out to what they want. Then they reach while looking at you. In this way they point out two complements at once: the goal, and the agent or instrument for achieving it. How do children progress from primitive means to the diversity of adult speech? The children we have been studying are successful about half the time in getting what they want. How do they learn to succeed? If I say 'It's already noon', I can get adults to go to lunch. If I say 'I'm not through yet', I can stop you. Yet neither time am I talking about leaving or not leaving. This subtlety is characteristic of adult speech. To get a request across, one must be able to do five things: (a) get attention; (b) express clearly what is wrong or what is wanted; (c) keep on good terms with the addressee, to get cooperation; (d) be persuasive; (e) remedy failures.

Attention. For children, the first problem is to get the attention of others. It may not seem so, since they always seem to be interrupting. But that very fact is a symptom of the difficulty involved.

How does one know when it is appropriate to interrupt? One must be able to recognize when the standing questions have been answered, when the topic has been resolved. Since a young child cannot do this, jumping into a conversation, especially one among adults, is very difficult to do well.

For several years David Gordon and I have been studying requests in naturalistic videotapes taken in four families. We found that when other people were talking, 89 percent of the time the two-year-olds simply blurted out requests. But only 31 percent of the school-age youngsters did that. The older
children not only tried to get attention more often, but they used more effective attention getters, e.g. calling out 'Hey Joe' instead of just 'hey'.

But the youngest children remained with an insurmountable problem of inferior status. At every level of relevance, their interruptions were more often ignored (Ervin-Tripp 1979).

Clarity. Even when one succeeds in getting attention, one needs to be clear about what is wanted. Children's first requests seem to express pretty directly what their attention is fixed on, and they are clear because they are accompanied by gestures. These early requests include negatives or prohibitions, vocatives which foreground the agent, goal objects and states like more juice and up, problem statements like it's stuck, claims to possession like that's mine, and imperatives which focus on means. Ambiguity or lack of clarity becomes more of a problem as children begin to talk of absent objects, and as they become more devious in later years.

The delicate issue of balance between clarity and an ambiguity that leaves the listener options has not yet arisen. It is this problem that teenagers later solve by trying to have it both ways, as in (1).

(1) We haven't gotten our allowances yet. Hint hint.

Politeness. By the third year, differences that are socially based begin to emerge. First, the children recognize a right on their part to receive help. In the case of expected rights, children do not provide politeness markings. When they expect cooperation, they use the normal form I have described.

Mothers (and later, nursery school teachers) are told about problems.

(2) (4.3 to mother:) This won't stick.
(3) (To nursery school teacher:) Jean, we didn't have a snack.
(4) (To teacher:) Jason's trying to take my stuff.

Mothers and teachers are told what the child wants or needs, and are given blunt imperatives. In our texts, 99 percent of the requests to the mothers by two- and three-year-olds had no polite markers of any sort.

Fathers are treated somewhat differently. They receive significantly fewer imperatives than mothers. We think this may be because they serve the children less often. In the following example (from Lawson 1967), the same request is made differently to mother and to father.

(5) (Child (2) to mother:) 'Mommy, I want milk'
(Child (2) to father:) 'What's that?
My milk, Daddy.
Daddy, yours. Yours
Daddy? Ok, yours.
It's milk, Daddy.
You want milk, Daddy?
Milk in there, Daddy?
Daddy, I want some, please?
Please, Daddy, huh?

In this example, the politeness markers used are please, OK, and the repeated naming of the father. And, of course, there is the long, devious build-up.

In role play, Andersen (1977) found children represented the mothers as being given more imperatives both by their children and by their husbands. And Hollos and Beeman (1978), who studied elicited requests in Norway, commented that though Norwegian children generally favored indirectness, with the mothers they were not only direct but even rude. They pointed out that mother-child interaction is the wrong place in which to look for children's social discrimination.

Researchers in our data received 60 percent polite conventional requests from the two- and three-year-olds. This exemplifies the general pattern of treating outsiders differently. The simplest forms, such as please, are used by the two-year-olds. By nursery school much more complex embedded polite forms appear, as shown in (6).

(6) (Nursery school child (5.5) to adult visitor:) Do you think you could put your foot right there? (B. A. O'Connell)

We believe one reason for the special treatment of 'visitors' is that one cannot assume their cooperation.

A second general case leading to use of conventional polite forms is the 'request for the goods of another'. The only instances of two- and three-year-olds' polite speech to the mother involved possessions. When two- or three-year-olds wanted a younger sibling's toys, they chose polite forms 44 percent of the time; in other cases, 9 percent of the time.

A common choice in this case is the permission request, as in the 'Can I' frame, shown in (7).

(7) (Nursery school child to peer:) Can I have one of the reds (whedling tone)? (B. A. O'Connell)

A request that presumes on any territory of the addressee gets a conventional polite form, as example (8) illustrates.
children were polite in only 12 percent of those cases where the listener was already cooperating; but in 54 percent of cases where the activity proposed would interrupt the listener, imperatives decreased from 60 percent to 27 percent under these conditions of interruption. This seems to be a clear case of the growth of social perspective-taking.

Deference vs. persuasion. One could argue that the kinds of conventional politeness just cited are aspects of being persuasive. Yet the evidence on this point is ambiguous. For instance, on second tries after refusals, children become less polite. In one study in nursery schools by Wood and Gardner (1980), it was found that children used conventional politeness much more frequently to dominant partners. In pairings of equals, requests that were more polite were more successful. But in family data, where the speakers tend to differ in age and rank, our findings were quite different. We were surprised to see that the most polite requests were the least successful. And when the different levels of 'cost' were controlled according to rights, intrusion, and so on, no significant advantage to being polite was noted, except that adults ignored the children less. From the point of view of family experience, politeness is learned from modeling, not from the reinforcement of efficacy (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor, and Rosenberg 1982).

Table 1. Adults' responses to polite and nonpolite control forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ignore</th>
<th>Refuse</th>
<th>Comply</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polite form</td>
<td>.04%</td>
<td>.50%</td>
<td>.46%</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpolite form</td>
<td>120%</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference p < .001

Polite: Polite questions, permission forms, explanations or justifications, implicit questions or statements, or consequences.

Nonpolite: Imperatives, cries, gestures, ellipsis, I want, I need.

The role-playing data clearly show that children regard these formal contrasts as a way to identify social rights. They used both the frequency of directives and the percentage of direct blunt forms to identify superior status, e.g. parent vs. child, doctor vs. nurse, father vs. mother. This seems to show that, beyond any attempt to be persuasive, such forms may have acquired a symbolism of deference (Andersen 1977; Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan 1977).

Are these politeness forms merely arbitrary markers or do they have any semantic content? Clearly, some, such as please, are formal markers. Eventually, this becomes an urgency indicator when combined with aggravated voice.
(11) Give it to me please!

But many of the formal politeness markers are analyzable, and have to do with the reasons for refusals, as (12) through (14) show.

(12) I can't help, I'm busy.

vs. Can you help?

(13) I don't want to.

vs. Do you wanna?

(14) You can't go out, it's too cold.

vs. Can I go out?

Probably most of the cases of use of these forms are idiomatic routines. But their continued survival in unreduced forms suggests that sometimes speakers attend to their literal meanings. Garvey (1975) has shown that nursery school children's excuses have the same semantic range as their requests—dealing with features of willingness, ability or permission, and reasons and rights.

Indirectness. Eventually, speakers rely on shared knowledge for clarity. Consequently, this type of indirect request is most frequent with adults, particularly people who have worked or lived together for a long time, and are compatible. To be explicit in these situations, even when politely so, seems rude, since it could imply that the other person does not know what is going on. Typically, the content of these types of indirect requests can refer to an expected obstacle or provide a reminder, such as it's noon. In adult speech, they can even be couched as jokes about obstacles or inaction, as in (15) and (16).

(15) (To someone blocking passage through a door:)

You make a fine door, Sal.

(16) (To someone who has not passed the menus around the table:)

Are you collecting those?

We have seen that even two-year-olds speaking to adults often focus their attention on obstacles rather than specifying means. Thus their utterances may seem indirect. Later, we find them making corrections or calling attention to norm violations, as in (17) and (18), spoken by a four-year-old.

(17) No, I said THREE spoonfuls.

(18) That doesn't go there, it goes THERE.

Preschool children can do a great deal of effective organizing of each other's actions through structuring games. Pretend that's our car can accomplish a shift in rights, just as I'm the mommy and you're the baby can give the speaker prerogatives to order. Consequently, many of the control moves of children make use of the normal trajectory of this play and do not require explicit formulation. That is, the children draw on prior shared knowledge.

In school-age children, less explicitness occurs on the second or third round of requests when children expect the addressee to be awaiting a request. In these cases, inexplicitness or indirectness is based on shared knowledge and seems a kind of economy.

We have found that, by the age of seven or eight, children resort to the indirectness of adults. This development seems to be social in origin. Requests are addressed to the partner's 'point of view' and leave him options. In one experiment children were asked to obtain marker pens or letters from adult strangers who were busy and give them to their parents. We meanwhile observed how the children who were either younger or older than seven years of age (that is, before or after second grade) framed their requests (Gordon, Budwig, Strage, and Carrell 1980).

The indirect speech of the younger children included the examples given in (19) through (21).

(19) I need a blue marker.

(20) Where's the marker?

(21) The marker's broken. I need a new one.

The older children focused on obstacles, as adults do. Theoretically, this focus allows the listener to deny the request gracefully. Or they displaced responsibility and hence did not seem to be demanding.

(22) Are there any more markers?

(23) Do you have a green marker I could use?

(24) She told me to get a letter for my parents.

By the time a child reaches teenage, these forms can be combined in complicated ways to deal with uncomfortable situations. In example (25), a 12-year-old was a guest in the household of friends of her parents.

(25) Do you have any water I could drink?

In this case, an explicitly polite permission request, Can I drink water? is embedded in an obstacle question which seems a little odd since it has no realistic foundation: Do you have
any water? By avoiding commitment for the person who will get the water, and by displacing to the conditional, an even more delicate politeness is achieved.

Thus, our data does not reveal such indirectness, which is socially based on taking the perspective of the hearer, until around the third grade. We may find, however, that there is a good deal of cultural variation in encouraging children to avoid explicitness. For instance, Hollos and Beeman (1978) found that four- and five-year-old Norwegian children would use their mothers as intermediaries to strangers, whereas the nine- to ten-year-olds, like the older children in our own study, could say to a storekeeper: Have you chocolates? or to a neighbor: That cake is very good when they wanted some.

Persuasion. To be persuasive is the fourth requirement. We found that two- and three-year-olds give justifications for the specific request in only 6 percent of their control moves. The older children added them to 14 percent of theirs. For the older children justifications, to some extent, seemed to replace the formal polite rituals since they decreased. In Garvey's study of requests between four- and five-year-olds, justifications outnumbered polite forms almost two to one. This change suggests that a justified specific request is believed to be legitimate and its social cost goes down.

There is an important cognitive basis for this rise in justifications. Around the age of three, we see children begin to 'question' adult refusals and directives with why? (DeCastros Campas and DeLemos 1979), and then supply explanations or justifications for adult refusals and directives with because. Eventually, the children justify their own moves. But this history shows that justifying stunts in the child's search for rationality in the moves of others. This in turn may be derived from adult modeling of justifications. If so, a good deal of social variation, depending on adult customs, would be expected.

The first cases of a high use of justification are in instances when the child is trying to stop another's activity. Here, the context does not supply a clear reason for compliance, and the child may be asking for a favor. The kinds of explanations may refer to rights, or to reasons. Reasons are intensified on second tries, in order to persuade.

These justifications are reasonably oriented to the child's view of social rights. For example, I want it or I need it are common on second tries. They seem to be viewed by children as self-contained and sufficient explanations, as are the wants of others. Four-year-old Tommy loved to see the sprinklers turned on and kept on trying to get everyone 'off camera' to see them, as shown in (26).

(26) (Tommy to mother:) Well Gina wants to see the sprinklers, don't you Gina?

Example (27) quotes another, older child's threat to his mother.

(27) If you don't give it to me now, I won't want it later.

Thus, the mother is seen as motivated to answer the child's wants.

The reasons supplied by the time the children are four are already oriented to the expected addressee roles. To an adult, the child would use supporting information that evoked the caregiver role as in (28) and (29).

(28) (Beth, 5, to mother:) Mommy, I want you to open all of them, the paint, so I won't have to have trouble.

(29) (Lisa, 4, to researcher:) OK, we don't know all these pages, so you read 'em.

The statement of contrast in abilities seemed enough of a justification to mitigate the request to adults.

For younger speakers, on the other hand, the emphasis was on rights, norms, or facts. The children seemed to socialize the younger partners.

(30) (Age 4 to age 2:) Get out of my space. This is my space.

(31) (Age 8 to age 4:) We only have a little more, OK? So don't use one on every Valentine.

Eventually, older speakers have learned to use the justifications or preconditions alone as requests.

Indirectness is part of the system of keeping on good terms, not part of the art of persuasion. Yet at the same time that questioning obstacles appears, we find the development of much more artful persuasion. By reframing activities the persuader accommodates to the purposes and viewpoint of the hearer. Examples (32) and (33) are paraphrases of events which were not tape-recorded, in which an eight-year-old seeks to influence her four-year-old brother:

(32) (Sister to brother:) D'ya wanna be Santa Claus? Here, take these toys to the basement. (She packs her laundry in her nightgown and he carries it downstairs.)

In example (33), the boy had been becoming increasingly whiny because he wanted his tricycle to be taken along in a station wagon overloaded with bicycles for a family bike trip. He was wearing a Batman cape.
On both occasions, the request is disguised as a proposal for play in which the boy has a desirable role. This method both accommodates to his perspective and is drawn from strategies normally used by children among themselves, such as 'pretends'. Reframing is a method which makes cooperation flow out of the natural trajectory of the new activity. It is successful if one takes into account the recipient's motives and if the recipient feels cooperative.

Summary. Our studies have shown that children can appear indirect at any age. But at first the basis is attentional focus. Only by mid childhood does deliberate deviousness come to the fore.

We have found that by the age of two or three, children have some sense of rights and obligations. They make direct and simple requests when they have a right to cooperation. But they make conventionally polite requests when they think they do not have such a right.

By four years of age or a little earlier, we find children making this reasoning explicit. They call on rights, norms, and reasons for action when trying to persuade. It is not until age eight or older that we find children able to understand well the perspective of the listener. They question the obstacles to the listener as an available excuse, to save the listener's face in refusing. Conventionally polite forms become relatively less important then, being reserved for cases where explicitness is necessary. Their artful persuasion can reframe the request in terms desirable to the hearer.

We have argued that persuasion to act and the control of social relations are not identical. Persuasion has to do with manipulating activity contexts or bringing to mind needs, rights, norms, threats, and promises related to the desired act. The control of social relations is done through two mechanisms: at first, by the use of conventional polite forms, and later, in mid childhood, going 'off record' and considering the addressee's point of view. While the data base from which we have worked is European and American, we suspect that some of the developmental limitations will prove universal.

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REFERENCES


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