L'impact de la situation conversationnelle sur les acquisitions incidentes en syntaxe [Impact of the interactional setting on the acquisition of syntax]

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Introduction. In the study of language acquisition, some have focussed on phonology, lexicon, or syntax, others on language use (McTear, 1985). Only recently has any connection been seen between these perspectives (e.g., Berman & Slobin 1994). Pragmatics and discourse are typically presented as additions, and if they are included they are treated as late developments built on the foundation of earlier learning of linguistic forms. In this paper, pragmatic context is seen as enabling the acquisition of syntax. This paper will elaborate three features of their relation, and explore the pragmatic categories revealed in the research and the implications for second language learning.

Is there a relation between sentence-internal structure and communicative function? It could be the case that "formal problem-spaces" (Karmiloff-Smith, 1981) are organized in a modular fashion, with independent components. In such a model, features of the grammar develop independently of context and independently of pragmatic development, so that what happens within the sentence has its own program. Others have claimed that the fundamentals of syntax and pragmatics are interdependent.

The argument that the design features of language reflect its function as a means of communication has been made in terms of the diachronic development of languages (Givon, 1979; Sankoff and Brown, 1976). In these studies, changes in language form were shown to arise from changes in communicative uses. Such developments are most observable in languages currently undergoing rapid change, which do not already have the historic build-up of highly diverse structural resources, as in pidgins and creoles. Children's languages and second language learning provide other potential grounds for studying the impact of use and of discourse context on structure, since children and second language learners do not acquire the language full-blown but piecemeal in successive stages of organization. Unlike fully maturational bio-systems like walking, maternal language cannot develop without processing in interactive contexts.

Hypotheses. In this paper, three hypotheses will be examined as to the developmental relation between context and form, which would also lead to individual differences in the acquisition of language:
(a) **The Limited Context Hypothesis.** Early contexts of use are at first limited for each form and slowly expand to other contexts.

(b) **The Indexical Hypothesis.** Forms acquired in limited contexts acquire contextual meanings, and become available as indexicals to mark or sometimes to constitute contexts, as in the case of contextualization cues.

(c) **The Interactional Hypothesis.** Forms at first mark social/interactive features of linguistic communication more often than propositional categories and content.

**Defining contexts.** What is a context to a learner? One could come to this research with pre-formed categories; western science typically requires that we do so. These hypothetical categories of context have derived from three sources.

(a) From the **vocabulary** of modern literate societies for interactional and discourse functions, which contain many fine lexical distinctions for speech acts and discourse types, such as order, suggest, command, request, story, joke, drama, explanation, dispute. This vocabulary has developed culturally in the context either of commands to speak or of retrospective description. The clue that these lexical categories are culturally derived and may be irrelevant to ongoing speech production lies in the great diversity between languages in the elaboration of this domain of lexicon.

(b) From the categories used by **philosophers** to group cultural lexicon logically. Searle (1975) has grouped speech acts into five a priori categories for example.

(c) From **behavioral indicators** of categorization. Among the available empirical evidence are adjacency in discourse and accounts or excuses for deviations. The question of generalizability to other speakers or other cultural groups remains, as for the other hypothetical categories. The method developed below uses the learners’ forms themselves as a key to the learners’ categories, and each study mentioned illustrates multi-level analysis.

**Behavioral definitions.** If one of our goals is to discover the relation between the learner’s linguistic structure and the learner's context categories, we need a way to identify contexts from the learner's point of view. In the tradition of animal observers such as J. H. Fabre and modern ethologists, and of contemporary observation of conversation, we can rely on clues internal to the behavior of learners in natural interaction with each other. Budwig (1985, 1989), Gerhardt (Gee, 1983; Gee and Savasir, 1988) and Ochs (1986) concretized an interactive theoretical approach to children’s speech, and developed a novel methodology for research and analysis in this direction. They viewed the ways speakers interact as relevant to the development of grammatical categories. They
claimed that grammatical and interactive categories develop in an intermingled way with the help of a cluster of linguistic features. This cluster of linguistic features that co-occur with a particular syntactic form flags for the learner an emergent social/interactive category, from which the syntactic form acquires its content in the speaker's system. It is the linguistic features used in conjunction with the learner's interactive activity that enable the researcher to identify the social/interactive categories, including those at the level of what Gee and Savasir (1988) called an activity type (which will be called phase in this article). Gee and Savasir (1985) contrasted two English future forms in three year old use--gonna and will, which they found were used as markers of planning vs. undertaking, (or in role play, of emplotment vs. enactment). The French analog might be the contrast of the imparfait vs. the present in role play contexts. Budwig (1989) contrasted two English first person pronouns in two year olds, and found they contrasted two types of speech acts.

**Contextual categories from several perspectives.** Context for purposes of the learning of language could include:

- the physical and social setting,
- the activity or event that occurs in that setting,
- the local topic,
- discourse that can be recalled, at least the preceding turn.

The relation of context to the key forms we study can occur at many levels. Below is a discussion of axes or levels in talk which have been confirmed by internal evidence in prior studies, but of course one cannot assume that every learner shares the same categories. Many analysts, including (e.g., Halliday, 1975;Schiffrin, 1987), have identified from linguistic contrasts separate axes of contrast in conversation. These axes involve categories which in some cases have subordinated units, such as topics/propositions, or activities/phases, or speech events/episodes. Outside the talk itself we have the physical and social setting, or the situational axis which includes settings, participants and activities. Within the talk, we find several axes or levels, which can be called the levels of choice in talk: the levels of participation, of actions, of ideation of social meaning, and of text, in which surface cohesion occurs. That makes five levels of choice within talk which have been identified in various studies, plus a sixth if we treat speech event as another level and separate speech events from other activities because of their organized verbal structure. Contrasts in the situational context affect each of these levels of choice. In turn, choices within talk can either reveal or alter what the situation or speech event is believed by the participants to be; that is, forms in talk can have constitutive or contextualizing effects and change interpretations and activities. Linguistic contrasts within learner's talk help us locate these structural features as seen by learners.
The following chart is a framework to show that there are usually several dimensions or levels for the analysis of every learner's talk, and that the units of organization in certain levels can eventually be layered, from local to more global.

**Levels in speech activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speech event</td>
<td>Episode; local discourse</td>
<td>Telephone conversation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal level of linguistic choice</td>
<td>Participation in the episode</td>
<td>Turn</td>
<td>Hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Exchange of speech acts</td>
<td>Request-refusal</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideation</td>
<td>Topics/propositions</td>
<td>Who won yesterday?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social meaning</td>
<td>Social markers</td>
<td>Please, Mr. Reilly...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>language/register</td>
<td>Code-switching</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The most important feature of any system of analysis of discourse is that every example from a conversation can be located within the scheme, as in the following example.

(1) Child patient speaking to "nurse" in role play:
   Give me a crutch. I need a crutch. Could you please give me a crutch, nurse?

Ervin-Tripp Family Data: Bowyer02
**Social context.** All talk occurs in social contexts, which include the *settings, participants, and the activities* in which they are engaged. Because adult participants play such a large role in structuring and scaffolding children's talk, in studying children's language learning, our research group looked at peer talk in both first and second language learning situations. Thus we have sought settings with peer friend participants primarily. In studying second language learners it is of primary importance to control the identity, social familiarity, and perceived language skills of the participants in talk during the course of learning and in 'test' situations. These can be part of the *limited context* which affects the meaning and use of linguistic forms.

**Activity** types for young children might be block-building, painting, sand play, pretense play, book-reading, jump rope. Talk occurs within types of activities, and the properties of talk change according to those activities. Non-verbal activities co-occurring with talk are especially salient with young children, who are rarely in a situation of pure talk unless adults instigate them.

Some activities are culturally taught such as talking on a telephone, reading a story-book, or playing soccer, some activities are conventionalized by peers, such as doctor play, and jump rope, and some activities are relatively loose and occur in prop-based situations which are less socially predictable, like block play (Cook-Gumperz & Corsaro, 1977).

Each activity context has its own speech-demand properties, for example puppet play and doll-figure play differ in the amount of enactment speech, including commands by the characters in pretense. A spontaneous conversational story by a child is structurally different from an elicited story, where the partner prompts for expected narrative components. And, from the linguistic standpoint, we have found that both contain more temporal clauses than early picture-book talk. Some activities, such as soccer, involved predictable talk, others, like role play, require more inventive and varied language.

With the exception of highly structured and conventionalized activities or speech events, we have found that what an analyst judges the activity is, or what phase of activity is occurring, depends on which participant's view is taken, and at what moment in the interaction one makes the judgment. One participant's motor trip is another person's intimate conversation. This fluidity is another reason for using linguistic indicators of speaker categories.

What makes the activity context relevant to language learning is that contexts vary in the kinds of roles they require the learner to play, in the kind of speech events which occur, and in the functions language serves. As a result, activities change not only the content but the linguistic structures the learner hears and is expected to use.
Phases of organization. During the undertaking of play there is less
claiming of property and less disputing than during the negotiating of an activity
choice, or during organizational exchanges. By observing a range of types of
scenes, we can establish activities that will ensure the naturally high frequency of
certain kinds of syntactic structures. If one seeks disputes with possessives,
negatives and emphatic stress, ensure organization of peer play, especially if there
are too few objects, or with incompatible objects that lead to different play
schemata, and set up dyads of boys.

Undertaking is a very cooperative activity-type in which the child transacts
an interpersonal negotiation with her partner such that an obligation to act
is effected; and in fact, based on this interpersonal commitment, children
tend to do what they say they WILL do. Planning is a much more cognitive
activity-type -- where children linguistically organize/represent activities
without any commitment to acting. Moreover, this mode is completely
non-negotiatory: children talk-at each other unilaterally; no negotiation is
effected. Given this absence of interpersonal cooperation, no commitment
is set up: thus, when children plan, they typically do not do what they say
they're GONNA do. In short, PLANNING is more a mode of saying, and not
doing - a mode of telling, but not sharing. (Gee, 1983, p. 2)

The contrastive evidence for phase categories comes, for example, from the
Gerhardt study of future forms in English in 3 year old girls, showing a striking
difference between planning and undertaking phases. Planning might be for
joint activity or just the speaker's activity, such as I'm going to make a garbage
can when I'm all through with the train lid. In the undertaking or enactment
phase the children become committed to actions and move to will, as in I'll give
you some juice. In an analysis of family talk, we found that young children also
used different types of complex forms according to phase. There were more
temporal clauses than causal clauses in planning or organizing play but more
causal clauses than temporal clauses in undertaking role play and play with
objects.

Amy Kyratzis (1992, 1993) has shown that causal clauses differ in joint
planning and in disputes in four and seven year olds. In employment voices in
role play, the speakers more often use subordinate causal clauses. In disputes,
they are less likely to use complex clauses, and simply assert causes in main
clauses. She found these contrasts were related to gender. The young boys she
studied were more likely to dispute toys and territory. In the same settings, girls
established collaborative activities and moved into joint planning phases, in
which through subordinating the causal in a single intonation contour, the girls
presupposed the information in the main clause. The boys rarely presupposed
shared agreements. These differences in activity choices by boys and girls even
when given the same props were related to their syntax. The boys' assertions of
causals and of desires constituted challenges and made the exchange into a
dispute. However, when constrained by the researcher to story-retelling as a
speech activity, these boys also used fewer causals. Either the differences in customary play activities had had an impact on their syntactic development, which appeared in the unusual activity of retelling, or else they were less willing to presuppose shared information.

**Speech events** are activities that can be coterminous with or overlap other activities. The term speech event refers to activities where talk is a central focus and the structure and style of the event become recognizable. Many speech events are culturally identified by names. Children have a rudimentary sense of speech event structure very early. An eighteen month old may say "Hi fine bye" on the phone, thus reflecting the three most predictable episodes or segments of phone conversations—the greeting, opener and initial exchange, and parting. Early speech events tend to be gesture- or prop-related, such as bye-bye, phone talk and story book talk. By five, children can even talk about the norms of telephone talk, as shown by this conversation of a native speaker to a foreign peer on a play telephone at school:

(1) Spanish speaker: Hello, come to my house, please.
English: Nora, you’ve got to say ‘What are you doing?’
(Ervin-Tripp 1986)

The critical element here is the opener, "what are you doing?" which we found these children used in place of "how are you" in adult speech. Nora knew the appropriate structure of the speech event, a conventional child phone conversation.

**Participation structure.** Within the speech event or activity, a child can select a type of participation and produce a turn in the sequence. Turns are the relevant unit in children’s speech which are most noticeable to them. Change of turn markers are among the earliest types of linguistic markers in child speech (Pak, Sprott, & Escalera, in press; Pak 1994; Sprott, 1992); global episode markers are the latest, especially topic boundaries (Sprott 1994). Escalera studied tags like OK, Pak several question tags, and Sprott (1992) connectives like but and because, which were common in disputes.

**Action and ideation.** Many analysts have contrasted two axes or planes in talk, what Schiffrin (1987) calls action vs. ideation (see also Halliday 1975; Redeker, 1990). A causal clause related at the action level is *take the gloves off/ because they’ll get dirty* (4;09) because the causal clause justifies the request in the speech world. A causal clause related at the ideational level is *I sprained my ankle ’cause I was hitting my father’s shoe* (7;05) since the causal clause explains the outcome in the main clause, in the event world talked about. (Kyratzis 1991). The plane of ideation is fundamentally referential, involving such features as conversational topics, naming, deixis, and propositions. The plane of action involves getting things done in the situation of speaking. This contrast appears to be modelled on a contrast between acts themselves that is recognized very
early by children, between describing and demanding. The fact that the same marker can be used indifferently for one plane and the other (e.g. because, as described below, or OK to shift episode either on the plane of action or of topic, as in a classroom) suggests that this contrast of planes is an analytic contrast that does not correspond to a speaker category. On the other hand, the distinction may be done through a different speech level; continuous intonation between the matrix and subordinate clause is a characteristic of ideation-level but not of action-level causal clauses by three years of age (Kyratzis 1991).

An episode is a sequence of related turns in an activity or structured speech event. From the standpoint of the plane of action, episode boundaries could involve changes in the type of exchange such as phase changes between emplotment and enactment, or shifts to a different part of childrens' play scripts with markers like OK, now, or so. Certain types of exchanges, such as disputes, can arise in a variety of activity or speech event contexts, whenever a challenge occurs to another's move.

From the standpoint of the plane of ideation, change of topic may be the major indicator for episodes. But of course topic shifts can be gradual and not marked in any way. It is only when topics are named or topic shifts are marked (e.g. by anyway that marks return to an earlier topic) that we can be sure that speakers categorize them as the analyst does. Recognizing and organizing topical episodes involves subtler processes than marking a change in speaker. It is not surprising that episode marking occurs later in development than turn marking, and according to Sprott (1994) ideational global marking (e.g. by initial so, by initial topic shifting OK, or in British English right) is later than action marking as in now. Many linguistic features reflect episode. For example, in the ideational marking in language learner's stories, both pronominal use and in German the choice of the preterite vs. the past perfect depend on position in a narrative episode (Bamberg, 1987; Berman and Slobin, 1994)

Local discourse. Within episodes, or as isolated exchanges, adjacent related turns can be considered to be local discourse. Regularities at the local level develop from the beginning of language in both first and second language learning. Before two, we find that replies are shorter than initiations, and that we must characterize them as having a separate system. Sally M. at 22 months had the following possibilities for replies in her system of local discourse. She had just three response patterns which could be differentiated:

- To "How are you?" or "Where are you?" she replied "Fine."
- To "Hm?" she repeated what she had said before.
- To rising pitch in any other type of question she either replied "Yeah" or repeated her previous turn, with a stress shift.

(Ervin-Tripp, 1977)
It was impossible to get new information from her by content questioning. Nor did she ask questions herself. In such a case, it is necessary to describe a special system for responding since at this stage replies were not just transformations of initiation structures but were systematically limited. Indeed many replies continue to be formulaic for years, like "I donno," or "I don't want to," or "I know." We know that second language learners often begin to construct such local discourse routines early, as described by Lily Wong Fillmore (1976). These become the basis of syntactic elaboration and variation.

By the period between three and four, an elaborate set of syntactic and semantic regularities is evident in local discourse involving replies to questions in all the learners we have studied. These include connectives, ellipsis, emphatic stress, tense matching to questions, pronominalization of nominal referents (Ervin-Tripp 1978). These features of second turns in local discourse are all remarkable syntactic advances, which are especially easy to learn in short replies. They make it clear that the learner is sensitive to the text level, just as does code-maintenance in bilingual speakers.

But something else is happening at the local discourse level of great importance. That is the elaboration of what conversational analysts call adjacency pairs, frequent exchanges involving action. What we see as adjacency pairs can often imply speech act exchanges, for example, of requests and responses, greeting and greetings, inquiries and answers, offers and acceptance or refusal. While they are called adjacency pairs, in competent speakers they are are not always adjacent. They probably develop first as local discourse, but because of the strong expectations they involve, they can be interrupted by insertion sequences such as repairs, asides, and clarifications. What follows is a fragment of jeu de famille in which E is a native speaker of English.

(2) Jeu de famille. E is native speaker of English.

E: Tu as des familles des cerfs?
F: Le quoi?
E: Cerfs.
F: Cerfs?
E: Oui
F: Le combien?....
F: Non

Ervin-Tripp, 1986

It took seven inserted adjacency pairs before E had the answer she wanted. F's remedial questions were inserted because E was not understood, and she did not use the conventional format for the question, which requires identifying both number and family.
Exchanges involving action, or **speech acts**, are an important domain of complexity in child language. Although there is some conventionalization, there is no direct map between some feature of the utterances and the conversational demand that must be understood, for an appropriate non-verbal and/or verbal response to occur. In the case of speech acts which involve imposition, the mapping is likely to be masked. Then the problem of interpretation includes the action level meaning and the social meaning. Since control moves account for about forty percent of children’s talk in some samples, the acquisition of this level of speech construction and interpretation is not trivial.

Speech acts analyzed retrospectively are usually based on isolated examples, but in the stream of exchanges including context and response, it may not be possible to isolate a single utterance which can be called the speech act. In addition, we can raise the question, is there any evidence that speakers are sensitive to differences at a presumed level of speech acts, using the criterion of linguistic marking? The first of the studies which showed a contrast in markers was Deutsch and Budwig (1983) who looked at what was coded by the contrast of the child’s name vs the possessive pronoun in possessive constructions. They had shown that in possessives also, the child if named Anne contrasted desire with description, she used *my chair* for the former and *Anne chair* for the latter. Nancy Budwig (1985, 1989) went on to find that children’s pronominal forms sometimes indexed contextual features like whether an act was a request or report. In particular, she found several two year olds whose first person pronouns made this contrast though there is no model for the contrast in adult speech. These are examples from her data:

(3) [Jeffrey and his mother were playing with dried peas.]

Researcher: Do you wanna play with the blocks soon?
Jeff: No.
Researcher: You like those peas, huh?
Jeff: I like these peas.

(4) [Jeffrey and his mother are filling bowls with peas and pretending to eat ice cream]:

Mother: What flavor would you like?
Jeff: My like vanilla.
Mother: Vanilla, OK. You want one scoop or two scoops?
Jeff: My want two scoo.

(5) [Mother tells a story while she and Jeffrey build together.]

Mother: Maybe with this house here a fire occurred.
And so the firemen had to come and rescue.
They were building the house.
[Jeffrey’s house collapsed]
Jeff: {No! My build tower! [whiny]}
In the first case, *I* occurs as a reply to an information question about his experience. In the second *my* occurs as an elicited request, and in the third *my* occurs in a protest. In general, *I* was used when the focus was on the self as experincer, and *my* when the self was an agent bringing about change, as in boasting about achievements. Budwig found that the contrast in these units was regular and significant.

In family talk data, we found clause choice also was related to the general contrast between types of speech acts involved. The first causal clauses often appear with control acts, because speakers either try to explain and justify such acts or to explain or justify refusals (Kyatzis, Guo, & Ervin-Tripp, 1990) as in *Take the gloves off, because they’ll get dirty.* Causal clauses also confirm the hypothesis that interactional concerns precede ideational concerns. Subordinating terms like *before, after* and *because* appeared first in clauses in directive acts before they were found in reports, before three years of age. In a sample from the Ervin-Tripp Family Corpus of all utterances containing either subordinate (*before, after, when, while*) or coordinate (*and then*) temporal conjunctions, 63% were in planning or directive moves in the two and three-year olds, and 54% in the four year olds (Ervin-Tripp, 1989).

In examining the syntax of various speech acts in children, I have noticed that the prototypic cases differ remarkably. In fact there is very little overlap between the types. Claims for territory and objects call for possessives. Boasts call for verbs. Naming and ostensives may include demonstratives or locatives, but not verbs. The speech acts typical of two year olds like requests, refusals, prohibitions, acknowledgements, claims and boasts, have fairly predictable structure. Even some later forms like contradictions, replies, permission requests, intention announcements, and joint plans have a lot of common features. By five, we find more variability, in persuasion, joking, praise, and explanation.

The variety of speech acts increases markedly with age during childhood. We find for instance, that five year old second language learners can be contrasted to two year old first language learners in that they persuade, joke, praise, warn, plan, announce intentions, elicit complex information, contradict, explain (Ervin-Tripp 1981). All this they do in their second language. Although formally their language is still primitive, although they are still beginners, their knowledge of the uses of language is different, just as their semantic knowledge is more advanced than that of a two year old. The consequence of this much greater range of acts, and exchanges—as well as the greater complexity of speech events—is that they try different kinds of syntax than younger speakers in an effort to accomplish more complex acts and express more complex ideas.

**Social meaning.** What’s the evidence that children understand or convey social meaning? We have found that by the third year children begin to
distinguish how they make requests for the same goal. The distinction they make can most simply be stated as a contrast according to whether they can expect compliance. They distinguish between rights and favors, between requests for the goods of others and their own goods. So in trying to get the toys of a younger sibling, they used mitigating markers like modal auxiliaries 44 percent of the time, otherwise 9 percent. They distinguished requests from mothers who normally serve them from requests from fathers and outsiders. At first these distinctions were made by overt forms as in Can I have some rather than I want some or Could you tie my shoe contrasted with Tie my shoe, (Bernicot & Marcos, 1990; Bernicot, 1992; Ervin-Tripp, 1993; Ervin-Tripp & Gordon, 1986;). The various complex changes in requests were not, we found, based on differential success in gaining compliance, but like the learning of syntax, seem to be due to modelling of examples which are available to the learner's pattern-forming abilities (Ervin-Tripp, Guo & Lampert, 1990).

In older speakers the distinctions become more subtle, and include more complex tactics, like alluding to the obstacles to compliance facing the other person (Do you have a pen I could use?). Because languages differ in the linguistic indices used for social marking, and because the social features that matter vary, the second language learner can have many problems with social marking. For example, German uses particles for mitigation which don’t exist in French or English, so German speakers may sound rude in these languages.

Role playing plots give the best indicators of the fine-tuning of children's sense both of speech event structure, such as a class or a doctor's examination, and of the social meanings conveyed by speech. Children use activities, objects, and address terms like Big Sister, and Baby, to convey roles, but Elaine Andersen (1990), in a study of puppet voices, has shown that every child makes role distinctions by speech features. These begin with phonological markers like deep or high voice in the youngest children, then lexical markers like baby talk or medical words, and mitigated requests. Then beginning by five and in all by eight, discourse markers like the OK now well of the teacher introducing new topics, the bon alors maintenant of the dentist or parent displaying power, and the um or et puis of the child or subordinate. In French also the children varied the form variant by role, contrasting bon versus ben, oui versus ouais, alors versus eun um. Only in the child roles did the ouais variant appear, and occasionally spouses to one another.

(6) Role playing doctor-patient

Doctor (Child)*well I think ya have a *hernia
Patient (Adult) what's a *hernia/
Doctor (Child) it’s a *sickness like a *disease/
    *well **she’s dead.
(7) Role-playing mother-child

Child (S) um et *puis je vais *dormir et *puis...
Mother (S) bon oui d’accord alors vas dormir, okay.

Andersen 1993

Discourse markers were more frequent in the higher status roles, the mother and father roles, the doctor or dentist role, than in the child role. Role-played Parents used well two and a half times more in than the Children did, and they used well twice as frequently in speech to a Child as they did in speech to one another. Clearly, children consider that well is a marker of authority used by a high status person interacting with a lower status person.

While all speakers make use of categories of the sort we have discussed, the rate of learning and complexity of sensitivity to the structure of discourse, and especially about social indicators, probably varies greatly between learners. These individual differences could well be related to social development not just cognitive and linguistic skills. This is the claim of Ioanna Dimitracopoulou (1990) who found correlations between measures of social development and marking of social features of discourse. There is every reason to believe that even larger differences would contrast second language learners.

We began with three hypotheses about learning.

1. The limited context hypothesis predicts that learners acquire linguistic forms in highly constrained environments, such as

- adjacency pair discourse formats (e.g., question-answer),
- speech events (e.g., disputes),
- social routines (e.g., gaining access to interaction)
- speech act routines (e.g. request formulas).

There is ample evidence from our work to support the limited context hypothesis, as we have shown above. Limited contexts become less characteristic over the course of acquisition, indicating that a decontextualization process is occurring (Sprott 1994). In Pak’s study, interrogative markers like the tag yah in we're playing doctor now yah tended to be used more heavily for interactional functions by the younger children than the older children, suggesting that the younger children had a more limited range of uses of markers than did the older children. There is also evidence that the older children rely less on routines and specific forms embedded in routines, and that these older children also have developed more powerful linguistic and non-linguistic strategies for accessing and structuring interactions (Pak 1994). We can see good examples during an dispute of 5 year old Chinese immigrant children, who began in English with the insult
formula *my fadda bigga your fadda* ‘my father’s bigger than your father’, and in Chinese made a semantically and syntactically elaborated insult *when you grow up and you steal, your wife isn’t going to like you.* (Ervin-Tripp 1986).

What are the implications of the limited context hypothesis for second language learning?

(a) Second language learners, like mother tongue learners, are likely to begin with frequent and predictable social formulae.

(b) Routine local discourse as in frequent adjacency pairs should be easy to learn.

(c) Using forms in a context where the meaning is obvious, such as in a familiar activity, will lead to mapping meanings.

(d) Varied contexts, and those with little clue in the setting as to meaning, will slow learning in the early stages. (Ervin-Tripp 1986).

(e) The fact that a learner may know a pattern very well in one setting can give no clue about the generalization beyond that setting. Teachers commonly find that pattern practice in the classroom may not facilitate use when meaning is important. Immediately after a drill class on English question inversions, I was asked by a foreign student, *Sir what means obscene?*

(f) Students whose acquisition contexts differ are not likely to learn the same structures and meanings, producing the wide range of variation in learning we find in natural language acquisition outside the classroom.

2. The *indexicality hypothesis* has been confirmed by several studies. Gerhardt (1990, 1991) has pointed out that forms acquire meanings from the limited contexts so their use in unexpected contexts has constitutive implications. The latter uses could be said to be metaphorical extensions based on the situated prototypic, defining, mapping, uses. In the new use, the language creates the situation. In a study of the learning of Chinese modal auxiliaries, Guo (1993, 1994, in press) found that discourse functions provided a major source of motivation for change in the semantic content of the modals in acquisition, identified as the process of semanticization of discourse functions. One example was Mandarin *nèng* 'can', which at first had a ‘capacity’ meaning but was used in discourse context of challenge. Later, this challenge meaning was incorporated into the semantics of the word *nèng* so that children used *nèng* as the sole carrier of challenge meaning. These indexical meanings can be fragile and subtle. John Gumperz’ (1982) work on contextualization cues shows that they are often the source of intercultural misunderstandings.
The Interactive Hypothesis predicts that interactive or action meanings precede ideational meanings for forms. We found this to be true for a number of discourse markers, for interrogatives, and for causal connectives. Guo (1994) found this to be the case in the development of Mandarin modal auxiliaries. How will the interactive priority affect second language acquisition?

(a) Social, interactive motives often drive the opportunity to speak and hear the second language. The fact that learning of social routines is easy for beginners may make it possible for the learner to enter into interaction.

(b) It has been noted in studies of second language learning that an interactional focus of learning can provide early motivation to take learning beyond the minimum necessary for utilitarian exchanges.

(c) Learners who use the second language with native speakers in familiar activities have the advantage of beginning by knowing the situated meanings and being able to guess their mapping to forms from what they hear. In these social exchange settings, they can find models to imitate, and speakers whose new forms can be a challenge to understand. (Ervin-Tripp 1986).

Above all, (d) they need cooperative partners, either peers or teachers, who will help to clarify, remedy misunderstandings, and instruct. (Wong Fillmore, 1991) As Meisel (1983) and Dittmar and von Stutterheim (1985) have pointed out, social isolation can result in damage to the immigrant’s learning of forms. Our studies of the relation of formal acquisition to pragmatic context help make clear why this is so.

References


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