POLITENESS AND PERSUASION IN CHILDREN'S CONTROL ACTS*

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It is theoretically possible to separate the study of politeness into the analysis of social indices, social tactics, and persuasion. The finely graded polite forms even in non face-threatening contexts in Asian languages and the form distinctions in children's role and doll play testify to the conceptual separability of politeness as a social index from intentional dynamics. In turn, tactics directed at persuading the addressee to comply can be distinguished from social tactics which are addressed to social relations. The present study is based on a corpus of 1369 acts intended to control the behavior of others produced by children aged 2 through 11. The children were videotaped in their homes repeatedly with family and friends.

By three, children in the study differentiated addressees and owners of desired goods by formal features; by four they tried to remedy failures by social tactics and justifications, and by five they increased politeness in correlation with intrusiveness or costs of demands as Brown and Levinson (1987) would expect. In older children these tactics diminished.

Since politeness resulted in a higher adult refusal rate, polite forms by the young children to adults cannot be considered to be directly related to, or learned from, success in persuasion.

1. Framework

1.1. Focus

Research on control acts such as requests in various languages has been stimulated by two features: (a) In all languages, even those with relatively impoverished social marking like English, control acts are varied according to features of the context such as the addressee's status. For this reason they constitute a favored setting for the study of social indices in language use. (b) When control acts are an intrusion, speakers may exploit the inferential abilities of hearers or hedge requests. Control acts and their interpretation by hearers have been studied as examples of conversational inference and indirectness.

The development of control acts in children is of interest because gradual development provides evidence regarding the separate social features and

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norms underlying form choices and justifications. Because there are developmental changes in inferential ability, children provide tests of theories of indirection and of inference-based interpretations. In this paper, we shall focus particularly on the difference between tactics for conveying social meaning and for persuasion to act.

1.2. Terminology

Control acts count as attempts to produce change in the actions of others. Control acts are any moves which could be interpreted either by the speaker or the hearer as an attempt to affect the behavior of an addressee or hearer. The terms ‘request’, ‘order’, and ‘command’ are used in everyday English to indicate types of directives to another person to act. While languages in complex societies typically have a large vocabulary for particular speech acts, we can simplify by conceptually distinguishing a family of control acts, of which the directive is just one type. In the family of control acts are prohibitions (e.g. ‘quit that’, ‘the boxes don’t go there’, invitations to joint action, offers (‘here’s a grape’), claims to goods or statuses (‘That’s my teapot’), and sometimes intention statements (‘I’m gonna use these in my castle’) and permissions (‘Can I use those green ones too?’) if they affect the addressee. In this paper, there are two subsets of data which will be discussed. The retry analyses were based on directives only, in order to maximize homogeneity in the data. The compliance or persuasion analyses excluded role play in order to have moves where compliance was always an issue, but involved a larger sample of control acts including directives, prohibitions, claims, and permissions since the data base of non-role play directives alone would be very small.

In context, it is often difficult to distinguish the types of control acts; the mother may think she is making an offer (‘have some juice’); the child can hear it as a directive. What is the difference between an offer and a directive? There are two. The beneficiary of an offer is supposed to be the addressee, not the speaker. Children tell us that offers allow refusal; acceptance is up to the recipient.\(^1\) Clearly, participants can differ in their views of benefits and of rights to refuse.

1.3. Problems for the speaker

Even a simple, single clause like ‘That’s MY place’ can simultaneously accomplish four moves: a control act, an expressive, an indication of status and rights, and an assertion of information.

\(^1\) Conversation analysts have noticed that in many cultures offers, like invitations, presuppose acceptance, as revealed in the special ‘dispreference’ indicators in refusals (Levinson (1983: 332–345)). Presumably these markers are absent in those cultures in which refusals are required to first offers.
In pre-requests of the sort that Levinson (1983: 347) has described, the information conveyed can alone set a pragmatically competent hearer into action. Ervin-Tripp et al. (1987) showed that children of three used information as a basis for action in instances like a bland 'Are you fighting?'; by five even remarks as irrelevant as 'My pen is white' resulted in some children handing an experimenter her pen.

A control act is successful if it (Ervin-Tripp (1982)):
(a) Attracts the attention of an appropriate partner if there is not already joint engagement.
(b) Helps the addressee know what to do. This involves either being explicit and specific, or relying on cooperative inference by drawing attention to the necessary information or to context.
(c) Is persuasive, and convinces the addressee to act. Persuasiveness may arise from prior commitments to joint activity, from social rights and obligations, from liking or other bonds, from necessity or from appropriate conditions.
(d) Establishes or maintains an appropriate social relationship.

These requirements may be cognitively demanding for young children. They may also be incompatible. As we shall see, keeping on good terms (d) by being explicitly polite may signal to the listener that an imposing demand is involved, and therefore be counter-persuasive (c). Going off record to avoid appearing to impose (d) runs the risk of another sort of imposition in making the addressee have to do the work of inference, an imposition so great that in some systems, such as Chinese, it is rude for an inferior to hint.

Vagueness about what is to be done, how much work is involved or who is to act can put addressees off guard and make them easier to persuade, even to volunteer (c), but vagueness interferes with effectiveness by giving so little information that the addressee doesn't know what the speaker wants done, or even that there is any request involved at all (b). While the pitfalls vary culturally, for children everywhere there are problems in integrating the four requirements above.

1.4. Building control acts in dialogue

While control act forms may appear to be single moves, and requests are often given in one-line examples, in practice they frequently emerge through interpretation in dialogue. This happens for three reasons:

(a) Problem focus. At the beginning of an activity, an actor may not yet have fully-formed intentions. A desire, need, or problem may be not fully specified in the mind of the actor; the means to its fulfilment or the solution to the problem may be unclear. A strategic analysis of the masking of intentions imputes too much to such a speaker. Problem statements by young children can simply reflect how far their awareness has gone - not tactful
deviousness. A hearer can retrospectively convert such problem statements or cries of pain into a control act by a response in another turn that appears to be compliance with a control act that never occurred.

(b) Negotiation. Many of the tactical moves in the domain of the request (Garvey (1975)) by competent speakers create the ground or support for cooperation. These include getting the attention of a hearer and discussion of what the situation is. The speaker may add information in later turns, which are construed by hearers as a justification of action, even in the absence of explicit control acts at any point. A goal may be realized and thus rendered recognizable only after several turns have been completed.

(c) Retries. In the event of failure of an exchange to resolve the problem, remedial moves can take place, ranging from repetition, to modification, to a complete reconstruction of context as in the initiation of role play. Self-repairs and changes on later turns may draw attention, make the control act more specific, provide justifications, or mitigate the social relationship.

For all of these reasons, it is important to see control acts which occur during ongoing activity as emergent from dialogue, not pre-planned and fixed. These changes through dialogue allow us to see tactical features of moves more clearly.

2. Formal variation

Why do control acts take so many forms? The most common explanation is politeness or, more generally, social meaning. Situated studies such as Ervin-Tripp (1976) revealed that form variations were correlated with such features as relative rank, distance, territory, presence of outsiders, and liking. In American English conventional requests such as 'could you open this, please?' both make explicit what is wanted (you open this) and index social meaning (could you, please). Form variations like the conditional and the modal in this example appear to convey social meaning, to be what Ochs (1988) has called social indices.

Brown and Levinson (1987) accounted for these correlations with the proposal that politeness (a particular kind of social meaning) occurs in these contexts because it is a remedy for the face threats of certain social acts. They specified that face threat would in turn be calculable from power, distance, and 'cost' of the act involved. They proposed that politeness would increase as threats to face increased. Their model also implied no need for politeness in the absence of face threat.

Politeness and persuasiveness to act are separable dimensions of control acts, as is evident from politeness in symbolic situations where compliance is not at issue, from the ineffectiveness of politeness for gaining compliance, and from pragmatic stylistic variation outside of contexts of persuasion, where
politeness cannot be seen either as an instrument to gain compliance or as a remedy for face loss.

2.1. Symbolic markers of status and rights

Polite address forms, permission requests, and please are all on-record and explicit forms of deference to status or power, which are noticed early by children. Studies of role playing (Andersen (1978, 1989), Corsaro (1985), Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977)) have made it very clear that children make use of the symbolic value of characters’ control act types and forms. In Andersen’s study, children of four and five were assigned specified roles through puppets, and she played a complementary role. This allowed her to see, within each child, the representation of contrasting roles, such as Father and Mother and Child, Doctor and Nurse and Patient. Fathers received fewer orders but gave them more, and received few imperatives, but gave them. Doctors were the same. The Child addressed six times as many imperatives to Mothers as to Fathers, and eight times as many ‘let’s’ forms to Fathers as to the Mothers. In recent work on the same corpus, Andersen (1989) reported that children showed these patterns most clearly in self-repairs, such as these:

(1) A Child to Father: Daddy, take – could you please take me to school?
(2) Nurse to Doctor: Look – would you like to look at the X-rays, Doctor?

In Andersen’s experimental situation, the children were given assigned puppet roles to play, so they were not engaged in action themselves. Self-selected and spontaneous role play such as we have in our data can be a child’s strategy for getting access to goods, activities, or power that they want. The battle for roles or goods during the negotiation and planning of role play makes this investment in role play as a method of control quite clear. In such cases, children are motivated to be persuasive even in role play, though less often in enactment than in negotiation. In the Andersen data this self-selection of role was absent, so the role playing was symbolic and had no instrumental motivation.

In the following scene from a study by Ervin-Tripp of second language learning, a seven-year-old anglophone learning French is playing Teacher with a French friend who plays Pupil. They finished a math lesson. Then the Pupil, whose role name is Stéphanie, ran off in the corner of the ‘classroom’.

The giggling made it clear that the Pupil’s running off in the corner was part of the scenario to evoke the Teacher’s reprimands, which can therefore not be considered her own tactic to persuade, but rather symbolic of what she saw as French teacher behavior.

In role play enactment both the initial control acts and their repairs are usually strongly oriented to ‘correct’ representation of the roles, to their symbolic properties, rather than just to persuasion. Players specify both roles (Daddy, Big Sister) and activities (‘I’m washing the dishes’) lexically. They correct each other: ‘You can’t say “honey”, I’m the mommy’. Acceptable representation is crucial to enactment of role playing, and even refusals are used as part of the dramatic story line, as is illustrated in (3). Role playing data, especially assigned rather than self-selected role play, thus can give us an insight into how children see the appropriate way to behave for particular social types, independent of the child’s own desire at the times of speech to be persuasive and gain compliance.

2.2. Efficacy

The second argument about the persuasive value of politeness derives from an earlier analysis of family videotapes (Ervin-Tripp et al. (1984)) in which it turned out that there was no greater compliance with polite requests by children compared to less polite ones. In that study, polite forms were defined to include deference markers such as please, permission requests, and conventional polite requests; justifications; and hints. Polite control acts to adults were in overall terms less successful, in the sense that they were less likely to gain compliance than less polite control acts. We found that children increased deference markers and justifications when there was a high likelihood of refusal (e.g. asking for goods of the hearer, making demands on the person in charge, interrupting). So it made sense that they were more often refused when they were polite. Then we held these factors leading to refusal, which we call costs, constant by making comparisons only between acts of the same cost. Adults were still no more compliant with polite control acts. Since this is the case, the reward for using polite forms to adults does not lie in persuasive efficacy but in sounding like a skilled speaker, and in getting attention.

2.3. Neutral contexts

The third argument about the separation of social tactics in persuasive contexts from standard social indices in other contexts can be most clearly understood through the Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese notions of face and of appropriate speech style (e.g. Clancy (1985), Ide (1989), and Matsumoto, (1988)). In these cultures, it is important to locate and acknowledge
your relation to others. Relational marking is not restricted to face-threatening contexts, but is obligatory in all interaction, no matter how routine or innocuous. A first exchange, for adult strangers, may consist in discovering the date of graduation, marital status, education, employer and job, and for a woman, number of children, as features to assess social location relative to the speaker. Social location must be identified to allow correct use of social indices. These customs of social marking are strongly retained in Korea and Vietnam. We have been told by Vietnamese parents that children who fail to use correct forms to a father or grandparent are punished.

Acknowledging relationship is done by a wide range of shared means, including bows, pitch modification, and a rich array of linguistic markers. These can be simple and optional, as in sentence particles, or pervasive and required, as in verb affixes for polite style, and they can be cognitively demanding, as in the choice of appropriate verbs for ‘giving’ relations, or referent honorifics. The important thing about such systems is that they provide continuous indexing of the ongoing relationship, with all the nuances such a well-marked system can imply. Japanese sociolinguists like Ide (1989) have insisted, however, that it is wrong to view Japanese social styles as just strategic responses to call on in face-threatening situations, though the changes in contemporary Japan may increase the tactical uses of social marking.

Matsumoto (1988), in addition, has pointed out that it may not be the case that requests to act are always ‘face-threatening’, since in certain relationships they can be symbolic indicators of lower status, and thus flattering, or face-raising.

The existence of such systems in many parts of the world suggests that verbal indicators of local persuasive tactics and of social relationships and roles must be analytically distinguished.

3. The development of social marking

In examining the development of social indices in a broader set of contexts, we have distinguished three processes in the creation of social meaning: (a) the development of obligatory, ‘definitional’ styles, honorifics, or other indices, (b) metaphoric extension of the core or defining cases to optional or strategic uses, (c) and social indices which are primarily affective or cognitive, but indirectly imply social categories (Ochs (1988)).

In many languages kin terms (‘Mommy’), pronominal choices, and titles are likely to directly index externally confirmable social features, with relatively little optional variation. These can be considered definitional for the social index involved. We do not ordinarily refer to people in English with pronouns in a gender different from the gender of the referent, or call kin by a different
kin term (though there may be variants in the same class). However, certain metaphoric extensions occur from the defining cases, such as the extension of features of baby talk to speech to animals or to old and ill people. On the other hand, as Ochs (1988) has pointed out, affective or cognitive markers whose core meaning is not social can imply or even establish social categories or situations. In these cases, the linguistic index only indirectly alludes to the social category. Gerhardt’s studies of English modal auxiliary choices as constitutive of children’s activity types are examples of the inference of social categories from cognitive or affective markers (Gee and Savasir (1985)). The formulas used to indicate conventional requests can be considered to fall in the (a) category in families for which they are obligatory to certain addressees. In families for which they are primarily affective indices, they come to index social categories secondarily by their frequent but probabilistic occurrence in those contexts, as shown by their use in role play. The difference between (b) and (c) is a subtle one. In the metaphoric extension explanation externally verifiable uses (a) appear first; in the case of (c) the affective uses appear first, and may never be extended to become indirect social indices. We propose this as a model for the acquisition of the symbolic use of conventional requests and polite markers.

4. Research on children’s control acts

4.1. Issues to be studied

We are proposing a distinction between social indices, which allude to an existing relationship or status, social tactics, in which social indices are added to mitigate or aggravate (as Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed) and thus to protect or alter social relations, and instrumental or persuasive tactics (such as justifications), in which actions, rather than status or relationship, are the primary concern. The child who says “Mommy, this is too heavy!” uses ‘Mommy’ as an attention-getter, as well as a social index. The child who says to her already attentive mother, “Mommy, this is too heavy, Mommy, Mommy!” has added a social tactic, mitigating her hint with an allusion to the maternal role. When relative status is being negotiated, as is often the case between children, the social goals may become more important than the action, as Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) found most vividly. In the research described below, we expect social tactics will be most frequent in interaction between children rather than between children and adults, where status is less ambiguous. For the same reason, we expect social tactics to be most related to compliance in control acts to children, since esteem is for children a more valued commodity. Persuasive tactics will be most apparent in tries after refusals.
4.2. Types of research on children

Studies of children’s control acts can be divided into four types:
(a) Experimental studies of children’s ability to interpret the information in control acts, such as the social identity of addressees guessed from the form used, or the implied action message, in the case of indirectness (Becker (1982), Bernicot and Legros (1987), Ervin-Tripp et al. (1987)).
(b) Experimental studies of children’s knowledge of politeness, either in judgment or in production (Bates (1976), Liebling (1988), Nippold et al. (1982)). In these studies, children are asked to speak politely or judge politeness. They are thus quite specific in focus.
(c) Structured studies of children’s speech in special eliciting contexts or stories (without instructions to be polite), which reveals knowledge of norms (Andersen (1989), Axia and Baroni (1985), Gordon et al. (1980), Hollos and Beeman (1978), Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977), Montes (1981)).

Few comparative studies have been done though cultural differences in permitted request tactics have been found (Goodwin (in press), Hollos and Beeman (1978)).

Wood and Gardner’s study (1980) is perhaps the closest in relevance to our own. They set up brief free play settings for nursery school children paired by dominance (teachers’ ratings) to allow contrast of equal and unequal dyads of the same age, either 4½ or 5½. They contrasted 160 orders and requests by criteria which seem to contrast aggravated and neutral directives, and they contrasted directives with and without polite markers like ‘please’, interrogatives, and conditionals – which increased with age. Their findings showed that the dominant speakers gave most orders and were least polite, and that they were by far the most successful in gaining compliance. The compliance statistics showed an advantage from politeness only for the younger children when they were subordinates in their dyad, and for the older children when they were equals.

4.3. Age changes in forms

The earliest forms of politeness are primarily on record and reflect forms taught by others as conventionally polite. Children’s intuitions about politeness are not, however, quite identical to adults’ judgments. Studies of chil-
Children's comparative ratings of politeness have shown that at first permission requests ('can I') are judged more polite than conventional modal requests for action from the other ('can you help me') which still contain an imperative sequence (Nippold et al. (1982)).

These forms are all types of 'on record' politeness. We found relatively few hedges or downgraders in children below six. In request contexts there are problem statements which look like hints. We think they are there for the reasons outlined in section 1.4, because the children have not yet worked out what action will remedy their problem. In judgment studies, young children do not regard hints from adults as requests intended to provoke action (even though they act, when led to notice the context (Ervin-Tripp et al. (1987)), so perhaps children do not regard their own hints as directives.

Montes (1981), in an eliciting experiment, showed that in a situation of low cost, reclaiming their own possessions, there was a considerable age increase between nursery school and eight years of age in hints, mitigators, justifications, and aggravated voice. Conventional polite requests were at a maximum in first grade in the eliciting context, which tends to bring out normative forms.

When five- and six-year-olds were told that they have an art task and must get supplies from busy adults, they chose forms which presupposed adult compliance (Gordon et al. (1980)):

(4) Where's the pen?
(5) The marker's broken. I need a new one.
(6) I need a blue marker.

In this study, there was a change in middle childhood (7–8) in the addition of concern with the perspective of the hearer. In part this change was revealed in the types of hints and justifications children chose.

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

This is a hint which is a justification shifting the onus of blame for the intrusion. There was also a type of regular syntactic form in elicited requests to outside adults like these from Gordon et al. (1980):

(8) Are there any more markers?
(9) Do you have a pen I could use?

These two questions address a potential obstacle to addressee compliance and thus are polite and reflect formal norms. Syntactically, the older children revealed elaboration of means of distancing or mitigating, such as past tenses and conditionals. Perhaps the most interesting development in the later time
period is the growth of rich and inventive strategies for reframing the situation, typically through pretense.

(10) [trying to get 2;8 year old into car during play]
K: Hurry up, sister. [opens door] Get in, please [pushy voice] (6;8)
S: There’s a wolf. There’s a wolf out there! (7;0)
K: Get in! Get in! [close to screaming] (6;8)  (NI18B)

4.4. Data source

Over several years, we have videotaped peer and family interaction in a variety of naturalistic contexts in local San Francisco Bay Area households having children of three or four years of age with siblings, transcribed the speech, and coded the control acts from the videotapes. The data discussed in this report are from 31 American children of a median age of 4.5 (1369 control acts). We identified control acts as any moves which could be interpreted either by the speaker or the hearer as an attempt to affect the behavior of another person present. Thus both explicit moves and those that were control acts only by inference were included.

5. Results

5.1. Choice of control act

What determines which of these types of control act is selected to change the behavior of others? Activity context is a major factor for both adults and children. We observed children’s control acts in three setting types – role play, eating contexts (meals and snacks), and activities with objects – either construction (painting, making cookies, building a castle) or games or play involving objects. We found that children in our observations gave directives from 51% to 65% of the time – clearly the dominant type of control act, regardless of context. However, in object play, the next most frequent type (24%) was prohibition of other’s actions (‘don’t do it that way’). In eating contexts the second most frequent type (18%) was the offer, and in role play the statement of intent (16%) (‘I’m gonna be the mommy’; ‘that’s gonna be my chair’).

Likewise, the phase of the activity is consequential; in our sample, directives and intentions dominated during negotiation of the activity and during its planning, but in enactment directives dropped from 64% to 48%, and prohibitions increased from 8% to 25%.

A moment’s reflection reveals why context has such powerful effects. The cultural norms for eating involve sharing, hence offers. In role play, children
alternate between enactment of roles and planning, or acting as director of the scene; the statement of intentions plays a major role here. But in enactment, partners are already busy with objects, and the control of their acts may entail prohibition or constraint of ongoing actions. These shifts reveal the strategic knowledge of children in responding to contextual changes.

In turn, the linguistic forms preferred for these types of control act were different in our data: claims contained more possessives, prohibitions contained more negatives (74% of 256 prohibitions), permissions more ‘can’ and ‘could’ (61% out of 96 permissions), and intentions more ‘wanna’, ‘gonna’, and ‘will’ (53% out of 133 intention statements with controlling features). We can expect that everywhere contexts will have consequences for the control act type and form, but the cultural specifics will vary.

5.2. Social differentiation

Children show awareness of addressee as a form differentiator by two and a half. In our sample, there is a contrast between directives to parents and to experimenters. These differences show up in the proportion of ‘want’ forms, imperatives, and both conventional polite requests and permissions (see figure 1).2 In our sample the ‘want’ forms decreased markedly with age. At each age, they were much more often addressed to the mother, perhaps reflecting her role as supplier of goods and food. Experimenters received more imperatives.

![Graph showing percentage of control acts with 'want'.](image)

**Fig. 1.** Percentage of control acts with want.

2 Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 are based on all child directives, including role play.
In an earlier analysis of these data we found that 90 percent of the requests to mothers by two- and three-year-olds had no polite markers of any sort (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon (1986)). In a comparative context, however, it should be recalled that ideology about maternal roles may differ; mothers do not uniformly have low status relative to children as they do in American mainstream families.

When we looked just at directives, we noted that the children at each age used please occasionally to experimenters, fathers, and older children. From two through four, modal and permission forms were addressed more to experimenters than to parents (table 1).

Table 1
Percentage of modal/permission form directives by addressee categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Outside adults</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-3:6</td>
<td>23.0% (61)</td>
<td>0.0% (16)</td>
<td>4.3% (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:7-4:6</td>
<td>9.8% (51)</td>
<td>9.1% (11)</td>
<td>3.4% (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:7-5:6</td>
<td>11.6% (43)</td>
<td>20.0% (15)</td>
<td>0.0% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:7-11</td>
<td>4.0% (25)</td>
<td>0.0% (0)</td>
<td>11.3% (71)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Past tense showed up as a mitigator addressed to experimenters (8% of directives to experimenters at four, 15% at five). The major cue children of three and younger gave about the social relation to the hearer was tone of voice: aggravated voice was least frequent to fathers (12%) and experimenters (5%), more frequent to mothers (22%), and most frequent to younger children (64%). But voice does not have to be used for aggravation; a soft voice can be a mitigator. Children learned to control their voices as well as their words by four. Mitigated voice worked much like polite requests, being addressed to fathers more than mothers. At four 27% of the directives to fathers had soft voice, 3% of those to mothers; at five, 27% to fathers, none to mothers.

In general, children seem to differentiate persons from whom they can expect to receive help, and do not provide polite speech to such addressees for low-cost requests. Instead, wants, needs and problems are reported, as in these nursery school examples from B.A. O'Connell, cited by Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984):

(11) To teacher: Jason’s trying to take my stuff!
(12) To adult visitor: Do you think you could put your foot right there?

5.3. Rights

A second feature which calls for differentiation is the right to goods or services. If the addressee owns the goods the situation is very different than if
the speaker owns them. The children in our sample very early distinguished who owned goods, and used distinctive speech to owners of desired goods, even to mothers or younger siblings. 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 (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon (1986)).

5.4. Costs

We have noted that both status and rights affected the forms children use in directives. Some control acts are more intrusive than others for a number of reasons, and are less likely to be successful. We controlled for level of cost on the basis of four variables: authority or being in charge of the ongoing activity, rights to goods and territory, joint involvement vs. interruption by the speaker of another conversation, and potential intrusiveness of compliance into the partner's trajectory of activity, as judged by how demanding it appeared or by prior refusal. For each control act, we coded the assessed 'cost' on each dimension. It turned out, in a study by Jose Feito, that the pitch of costly directives was higher, the softening of the voice being a distinctly tactical move to mitigate high-cost directives.

In another, more complex analysis we did not add up cost factors, but counted as low cost all cases in which all of the four factors were at a low or medium level of intrusiveness, as medium cost the cases in which all factors were neutral, and as high cost any situation with at least one high intrusion and low rights factor. An example can be seen in possessions. A high cost or high intrusion directive demands goods both belonging to and being used by the addressee; a low cost directive demands goods owned by the speaker and not being used by the addressee. Neutral goods are owned by neither, and are equally available to both. Since some costs, such as intrusiveness and joint involvement, are not noticed by the youngest children, their inclusion in assessing high cost somewhat obscures the younger children's sensitivity to rights and authority by some 'false highs' in the younger samples.

| Table 2 | Percentage of polite control acts by cost categories. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age | Low cost | Medium cost | High cost |
| 0-3:6 | 35.8% (67) | 41.6% (36) | 27.0% (89) |
| 3:7-4:6 | 22.1 (68) | 40.8 (49) | 24.1 (116) |
| 4:7-5:6 | 13.3 (45) | 39.1 (23) | 49.3 (23) |
| 5:7-12 | 15.9 (88) | 18.9 (37) | 7.2 (84) |

Table 2 shows that when we consider all types of cost at once, the increase in politeness, which is expected as a social tactic to compensate for cost in the Brown and Levinson theory, only appeared in the five year olds. The school-
age children in our sample had deserted politeness as a way of dealing with high-cost control acts in their home, at least to their mothers and familiar outsiders.

6. Efficacy

What produces compliance? The interpretation that politeness is a strategic move is based on the assumption that it will produce desirable effects. The first factor affecting compliance is undoubtedly power, which in our family contexts is most clearly identified with age. We found higher compliance to older speakers. In nursery schools, two factors matter. Wood and Gardner (1980) found that nursery school children differentiated dominant and non-dominant peers, complying with the former (note there is some circularity here, since teacher dominance ratings may come from observation of success in eliciting compliance). Wood and Gardner found that between peers, compliance was greater to polite requests.

6.1. Analytic categories for efficacy

We examined compliance and refusal in our samples in response to different features of control acts, including signals of urgency, simple explicit forms (direct), and mitigated (polite) forms. We excluded cases with mixed features to maximize differences. We defined as urgent control acts those with pushy or whiny voice, with intensifiers or name-calling, but only if they had no mitigating factors. The neutral direct cases were imperatives and statements of obligation, want or need. The category polite contained hints, permission forms, conventional request forms, and neutral direct forms with added mitigation routines like please, naming after the move, hedges, or softened voice. So we had three levels of politeness or mitigation in this global analysis: urgent, neutral direct, and polite. In addition to three levels of global mitigation, we identified justifications added to each of these types, and will discuss their effect separately since they appear to be directly persuasive in purpose. In the analysis of the effects of aggravation and mitigation, justified and unjustified moves are combined.

6.2. Compliance, aggravation, and mitigation

An aggravated, urgent voice increased refusals by most addressees. But

---

3 Role play speech is adapted to norms about a category of person, the role being played, and therefore is different from non-role play speech. In this analysis of social tactics and persuasion in authentic conversation in relation to compliance, we excluded the enactment of role play, and kept only those control acts most likely to be marked for politeness (directives, claims, prohibitions, permissions). Excluded were intention statements, offers, and proposals of joint action (let's play).
mothers were more likely to comply with their own children if the voice was distressed or angry. An urgent voice can be considered both a social feature and a persuasive tactic because it communicates how strongly the speaker cares about the outcome. Before speech it is the loudness and intonation of the voice which the infant finds effective in controlling the behavior of caregivers, so it is not surprising that urgent voice continues to accompany young children's requests and prohibitions to mothers, or that mothers are responsive.

For low-cost requests, in which the speaker is likely to presuppose success, politeness was counter-productive with respect to getting compliance. Politeness reduced success and increased refusals for most listeners. There was 65.4% compliance with neutral direct control acts, only 47.5% with polite forms, 17.3% refusal to neutral direct forms, but 32.2% to polite control acts (see table 3). In cases of low cost, there was no evidence that formal mitigation of any sort was effective with any partners. Basically the best tactic for achieving cooperation in these cases of low cost appears to be a simple, explicit, direct form.

Table 3
Percentage of compliance for low-cost moves by politeness levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Aggravated</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Polite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complied</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(82)</td>
<td>(127)</td>
<td>(59)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For high-cost moves, where compliance is less likely, the speaker's relation to the addressee played a strong role in the success of the control acts used, and in the effects of different tactics. To younger addressees, aggravation was more effective in producing action than politeness (see table 4).

Table 4
Percentage of compliance for high-cost moves to younger addressees by politeness levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Aggravated</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Polite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complied</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(47)</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In attempts to control adults, politeness reduced compliance. Compliance was most likely in the case of direct and simple acts. Adults complied with 42.6% of neutral direct control acts, but only 26.8% of polite control acts (table 5).
Table 5
Percentage of compliance for high-cost moves to adult addressees by politeness levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Aggravated</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Polite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complied</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(57)</td>
<td>(47)</td>
<td>(41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was one circumstance in which it appeared that formal mitigation was effective in bringing about action. Children addressing control acts to peers or older children were successful only 23.8% of the time with neutral direct forms, but 52.6% of the time with polite forms (table 6). When speaking to peers or older children, politeness brought more compliance.

Table 6
Percentage of compliance for high-cost moves to peers and older children by politeness levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Aggravated</th>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Polite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Complied</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(25)</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This result is consistent with the finding of Wood and Gardner (1980) in nursery school peer interaction, who found that politeness was effective, especially to peers or child superiors. Children's status, like their group inclusion, is constantly negotiated, as Wood and Gardner (1980) and Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) have shown. For them, the social indicators of status and solidarity may be more important tactical instruments vis-à-vis other children than they are for negotiation with familiar adults.

6.3. Persuasive justifications

In Garvey's (1975) work on requests between four- and five-year-olds, children's persuasion in the domain of requests involved supporting justifications. She found that justifications outnumbered polite forms almost two to one. In our data, justifications developed with age. They imply changes in notions about what was required to persuade, and they reveal children's developing views of the perspective of the addressee.

The youngest children rarely justified directives; those reasons that they gave were addressed to experimenters and siblings, not parents, like the justifying of older children. Overall, 12% of the directives to experimenters
included reasons, 11% of those to younger children, but between 2 and 7% to other types of addressees.

The earliest cases of justifications were in instances when a child tried to stop another's activity. In cases of invasion of rights, the speaker is obliged to legitimate the move. Justifications were offered in 28 percent of directives when an owner was using the desired object, in 14 percent only if not using, and in 8 percent if the speaker had rights to goods being used by the addressee.

(13) (4 to 2;11) Get out of my space. This is MY space.  (FL3A)
(14) (7 to 4) We only have a little more, OK? So don't use one on every one [making valentine cards].  (CA11)

Justifications by older children reflected children's sense of social rights, desires, and abilities.

(15) (4 to researcher) OK, we don't know all these pages, so you read 'em.  (FL8A)
(16) (4 to mother) Well, Gina wants to see the sprinklers, don't you Gina?  (JA6)

Example (16) was an attempt to broaden support for the speaker's own constant desire to go to see the sprinklers himself.

Complementary to the high rate of 'want' requests to mothers is this justification offered to a mother by an older child:

(17) You have to give it to me now or I won't want it later.  (NT7)

Though justifications improved the rate of compliance with low-cost requests, they had little apparent impact for high-cost requests where relationship factors seemed to be more important in determining success.

7. Retries

The most revealing data about the persuasive tactics used by children is from retries. Some retries occurred after success, but typically retries followed being ignored, being refused, or getting a temporizing answer. Retries can imply an attempt at more persuasion or correcting social tactics, as in this role play example:

4 The analysis of retries included only directives in order to increase the homogeneity of the sample of control acts, but role play enactment was retained.
(18) K: Put on my cast, nurse. (4;11)
   J: Put your leg up. (4;3)
   K: I need a cast. Can you get me two casts, nurse, casts? (4;11)  (BO5)

In our family data, children were successful in gaining compliance between 37% and 51% of the time, depending on age, participants, and activity type. After a first try, around a third of the youngest children tried again, and fewer of the big children.

7.1. Retries after being ignored

We separated cases where the child was simply ignored. In multi-person scenes, ignoring had a relatively high frequency because of the amount of concurrent activity. Younger children had a higher probability of being ignored. In part this was because listeners expected their speech to be irrelevant. But young children were more often ignored even when their contributions were highly relevant (Ervin-Tripp et al. (1984)). In addition, they were incompetent in attracting attention by calling names when someone is pre-occupied. This is not surprising; children’s ability to assess states of mind in hearers, such as where attention is directed, increases with age. When retrying after being ignored, the usual tactic of the youngest children was to simply repeat (61%). They might add aggravation (39%). When we compared the children’s responses to being ignored and being refused, we found that the youngest children chose extremely unmitigated forms in their retries. Elliptical and ‘want’ requests predominated just as in their first tries.

Fig. 2. Feedback effects on directive retries: percentage of directives with address forms.
After being ignored, calling the name of the addressee was common in older children (figure 2). Of retries after being ignored, 54% of the older children's retries started with vocatives, whereas fewer than 10% of the children of four and under began with vocatives. What is interesting is a pattern in some of the younger children of using vocatives following rather than preceding the control act, as if they were appealing to a relationship rather than calling attention, a practice that occurs also when the child is already engaged with the adult.

The four- and five-year-olds, on the other hand, added syntactic mitigation to directives after being ignored, using more modals and permission forms. The data used in the retry analysis included role play enactment, so some of these repairs are to improve role play. The following examples show a Patient speaking to a Nurse and repairing a directive:

(19) (speaking about mouth/ear probe)
Do that again. *Can you do th(xxx)?* Jinny, can you do it with this? [picks up probe] ... can you ... ca ... please, can you um do it for my mouth (whiny). (4;11 to 4;3) (BO5)

Notice here the combination of whiny voice with syntactic mitigation.

![Graph showing feedback effects on directive retries](image)

**Fig. 3.** Feedback effects on directive retries: verbal and vocal mitigation.

### 7.2. Retries after refusals

We included temporizing answers with refusals, assuming the children might
consider them failures. In the case of failure, the youngest children were relatively incompetent in identifying and repairing the case. Compared to younger children, four-year-olds offered more specification and justifications in repairs. These are remedies oriented to explicitness and persuasiveness. Mitigation increased after refusals until children reached school age. In figure 3, role playing is included, somewhat inflating the mitigations after refusal in the five-year-olds. When we removed role-playing and broadened the range of control acts to include prohibitions, claims, and permissions, we found that on first tries there was 33% mitigation, and after refusal 48% mitigation in the four-year-old sample. The frequency of mitigation to mend refusals declined somewhat in school-age children, both absolutely and relative to first tries. Older children (6-11) in our home samples did not mitigate directives as much through softening of the voice or changing their request forms in speech, even in speaking to adults (figure 3). On the contrary, they frequently aggravated their directives, speaking with urgency especially after being ignored. Justifications increased following refusals of directives (figure 4), showing an age pattern similar to mitigations.

![Fig. 4. Feedback effects on directive retries: justifications.](image)

Our analysis of retries shows that the youngest children increased specification of what they wanted on retries, but they also became more annoyed, and expressed frustration vocally. What our data suggest is that after $3\frac{1}{2}$ children learn slowly to suppress the expression of anger, and indeed to express its opposite, mitigation, when they have been frustrated by a refusal or by continually being ignored. The mitigation of the children of four and five is both vocal and verbal and in our data reaches 35% of the retries to refusals. The forms of syntactic mitigation developed gradually, starting with the most obvious conventional means, such as *please* and conventional permission
requests. In dealing with older siblings, these forms of mitigation were effective as persuaders, probably because they symbolically reinforced status, which is an important issue in the lives of children. The oldest age group in our sample had changed its tactics. On retries after refusals the oldest children rarely tried to mitigate or explain.

8. Discussion

Young children are concerned at the age of two to four with learning to act and talk like others in their community. Their success in acquiring language with the speech style of parents and peers testifies to their close attention to features of language going well beyond communicative adequacy. In addition, they want their demands satisfied. What is the relation between these two goals? They may believe, and some are told, that asking politely is more effective. However, it can't take much experience with the realities of family life to show them what we have found, that children's politeness persuaded adults in these families to be even less compliant with control moves.

This being the case, why do children become more polite between the ages of two and five, as our results and those of others have shown? Why do they know so much, as shown in role play, about the system of social indices in their language? By five, they have differentiated who to be polite to, have a sense of rights and costs which is reflected in increasing politeness for high cost requests, and use politeness as a persuasive tactic, which is reflected in a higher percentage of mitigation after refusals than on first tries.

We propose two explanations for the bell-shaped curves we have found, with politeness dropping in the oldest group. One is that young children believed that politeness was persuasive, but in the family context then learned it was not. Another is that politeness from the start is a social index, not a persuasive device. The youngest children identify on-record polite forms as appropriate to control act contexts for certain hearers. In some cases, we have found that the first use of modal auxiliaries was in requests, suggesting they are learned as formulaic social indices. By four and five, children reveal their knowledge of the social distribution of different control act types in role enactments. These show us that the children regard forms like 'please', and permission requests as appropriate to and symbolic of particular social relationships - that is, they have become social indices.

In this interpretation, politeness starts as a social index, and its use is motivated by young children's desire to appear competent. The children in the five-year-old sample had added a higher degree of mitigation, including higher voice, according to the degree of intrusion and the rights of the addressee. The five-year-olds alone appeared to conform to Brown and Levinson's (1987)
proposal that social tactics to maintain relationship should increase with the cost or intrusiveness of acts.

Why did the older children drop their concern with maintaining relationship? In fact their politeness for high-cost control acts was lower than any other age group. In the context in which we saw them, at home with younger children and with familiar adults, they appear to be unconcerned with social tactics.

Another interpretation of the drop is that the younger children had believed that politeness was compatible with persuasion, perhaps even that it might be a means of persuasion through displaying social competence. The children over six returned to urgency as a persuasive move. It was highly effective with younger children and mothers (there were no fathers in the oldest group data). By later childhood, the children may have learned that politeness was counter-productive for persuasion and if they lacked motives to ingratiate themselves socially with younger children and with adults in their homes, they displayed relatively few conventional polite forms or mitigators. In the family context, they may already have learned that it was more effective to escalate pressure, to persuade with urgency. It is important to add, of course, that the culture of these families may not be the same as those in other regions or ethnic groups with respect to the effects of mitigation on compliance of adults.

9. Summary

In this study we were concerned with children's learning of social indices for such categories of addressee as outside adult, with their tactics in dealing with increased cost and rights, and with their repairs after failures to get attention or to persuade.

(i) We found that the first social indices used by the youngest children by two and a half were permission requests and 'please' which are taught forms. These were primarily directed to outside adults such as the experimenters. The youngest children were incompetent in repairing being either ignored or refused, primarily repeating earlier moves. However, they did use naming as a mitigator in repairs.

(ii) In the next three years we found an increase in variety and frequency of mitigation, including more vocal softening, and raised pitch for high cost requests and in repairing refusals. In the pre-school period the children appeared either to assume that politeness would mitigate high-cost requests and repair social relationships, or was persuasive, since by five they increased politeness with cost.

(iii) The problem with being ignored was remedied in the older children by the use of vocatives before control acts, an effective way to get attention.
Children of four and five remedied refusals with persuasive reasons or justifications. These were highest in frequency when the child’s control act invaded the rights and property of the addressee.

(iv) The school age children did not increase politeness with cost or in repairing refusals: instead, they increased vocal urgency. In the context in which we saw them, at home with younger children and with familiar adults, they appeared to be more concerned with persuasion than with social tactics.

(v) We found a striking result with respect to the persuasive power of politeness: it only worked towards peers or older children, for high-cost requests. With younger children aggravation was effective, and with adults politeness decreased compliance regardless of cost. For low-cost control acts direct, simple forms were most effective.

(vi) While it is clear that there was an increase with age in persuasion and in social tactics through five, the most surprising finding in the study was the drop in the school age children’s use of polite forms and mitigators. For this we had two explanations: discovery that politeness is not persuasive, in fact it reduces compliance, and the setting in which the child had younger siblings present only, rather than peers and older children who are interested in negotiating status. In this study we separated three features: social indices which identify social relationships and statuses in contexts such as role play where persuasion is not at issue, social tactics such as mitigation and aggravation, and persuasion, and showed differences with age in their relationship.

References


