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Structures of Control

SUSAN ERVIN-TRIPP

In a program of research in families and through work with comprehension—interpretation experiments, we have recently been exploring the verbal strategies used by children for controlling the actions of others, which we call social control acts, and their ability to understand such acts. We have chosen to study strategies of control because they constitute a substantial proportion of interactional events in young children; their effectiveness is relatively easy to observe; they matter to speakers; and they are likely to be sensitive to social relationships since they impose on others.

What is the relevance of social control acts to the classroom? Teachers must of course accomplish rather considerable feats to control activities. Students engage in peer activity openly in activity-centered classes, as hidden agenda in teacher-focused classrooms, and on the playground. Differences between children in styles of interpersonal control probably affect both their acceptability as social partners and their effectiveness in getting what they want from peers and adults at school. Teachers, too, can be misunderstood by children whose family and peer experience are quite different. Teachers could easily misread such children as uncooperative.

In this chapter, I will discuss our research on the production and comprehension of social control acts by children in the age range of 2–8 years. Rather than treat this as a conventional data report, however, I want to raise

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supporting explanations, attention getters, vocatives, and polite markers; we indicated each of these.

Have you got a red marker?
Mine’s run out. It doesn’t work.
I really need one.

In this example, the first utterance is an implicit question or condition, which specifies an external obstacle to what the speaker wants the hearer to do. In the second utterance, a problem condition is mentioned. In the third utterance, an explicit statement occurs of the familiar I need variety. In such a sequence, if it occurred in one episode with no refusals between, the head act would be the third utterance because it is the most explicit. However, if the child had said Give me a red marker, I really need one, we would code the imperative as more explicit since it specified the desired act of the hearer.

We coded additional information of various sorts, such as whether it was a first or second try, whether refusing, complying, or ignoring occurred, whether gestural supports were used, and so on.3

Problems in the Analysis

Speaker’s focus. We assumed that control acts can be defined by activity sought in the addressee or in goal states. Thus we regarded a head act that was a directive as explicit if it was an imperative such as Bring me some water, or a desire statement I want some water, or mentioned the act that was wanted Can you eat some. Other forms were seen as either elliptical or not explicit. Yet such a view does not take into account the intent of participants. Sometimes the speaker’s interest is in the consequences of getting an object, not in the means, or in a problematic state, not in the solution. So if one says, My throat is really dry or It’s a dry day, one might not be making a tactful request at all, but simply indicating a problem. Such attention to aversive states may be due to several causes, not just discretion.

Multiple functions. Every social control act is potentially effective on several planes of change at once; our focus was on altering physical activity. These acts also always communicate social relationships and feelings. Thus, they can be considered, at a minimum, dual messages. Although we initially concentrated only on activity, it would be equally appropriate to consider the social message as primary since many children do.

Even when social control acts do not give new information about relative rank or age (e.g., adult—child, teacher—pupil), which are already known, they confirm that information. In the rare extreme, for instance, a shout for help when drowning is social nuance neutralized or subordinated to an activity goal.

But as Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) first pointed out, children may be primarily concerned with manipulating social face. They can use social control acts to manage social relations; thus, activity outcomes are secondary. The response to a social control act sometimes makes clear what is being addressed by the partner. For example, a brother may state, Stop sucking your thumb, and receive the reply, You’re not the boss of me. In adult speech, too, some social control acts, such as the cliché, Do you have a match, may be used primarily to establish attention and start talk or for other social goals.

To make action central is to betray a traditional bias of task-centered adults. It is quite likely that children are capable of juggling several agenda at once, such as schemas for physical activity, declaring rights, and power. Overlooking second agenda might result in missing major determinants of choice, both in the decision to issue a control act and in the form it takes. In the same way we could misconstrue success. If a child says, Don’t speak to me again, stupid, the insult may succeed even if the recipient does speak.

Level of analysis. This has proven to be a difficult problem in conversational analysis. If several agenda can coexist, it is because a longer sequence exists at several levels that affects not only what happens next, but how any event is realized. A child may be working to get a particular toy, and try various strategies such as demanding, pretending, or proposing joint play. The purpose of getting the toy may underlie each strategy without any obvious similarity among them. Or, at a deeper level, a child may repeatedly make moves to direct the activity of other children though surface activities may be quite different. These sequences can be interrupted and recovered—see for instance the examples in Garvey’s work on contingent queries (Garvey, 1977). They may be imbedded. The work of Labov and Fanshel (1977) revealed an almost infinite regress in the origins and consequences of particular events, if one chose to push the analysis. At each level one can see an act as a means to realize a move at a higher level. On the other hand, for the social versus activity analysis, a move may be codetermined at a higher level. Only in the youngest children do we see sequences that are rather headlike, lacking complex imbedding, so that act A occurs before act B, but is not projected as a means.

We are aware of this problem, but have not found easy ways to solve it. Most existing interactional codes are relatively shallow in the strata of analysis they address by not seeing moves as realizations of larger plans. Since the comprehension of speech acts depends critically on action schemata, we need to know more about activity contexts. We have not progressed far enough in finding out their properties to project expectations that will help develop theories of production or comprehension. A model of this kind of enterprise,

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3 Garvey (1975) has discussed some aspects of the sequential internal structure of request episodes.
many methodological issues along the way. The focus will be more on problems in doing this kind of research than on immediate results.

Methods

DATA SOURCES

Natural Family Interaction

We used three methods in the research to be discussed here. One was videotaping unstructured natural interaction in families. We chose five white, middle-class families because they were cooperative and came from a milieu familiar enough to allow us some initial methodological work. Each family had 2 or 3 children between the ages of 1.3 and 7.3 years at the outset: of the 14 children, 3 were over 5 years old, 6 were 3 and 4 years old, and 5 were under age 3. The study went on for varying periods in each family, ranging from 4 to 14 months, allowing some developmental changes to be observed. Our intention was to record natural conversation with siblings, parents, friends, and adults such as the experimenters. Because of our interest in natural conversation, we did not try to structure the scenes, but we did plan to include a range of partners. In retrospect, a more deliberate situation sampling and a wider search for families with a particular age and sex structure would have allowed better quantitative studies. The videotapes have been transcribed and coded.

Comprehension Experiments

Picture stories. We developed both picture-story and video-scene methods of assessing interpretive processes and getting judgments of appropriateness from children. The picture-story methods were used first because they were flexible and took less technical skill. We developed a narrative with pictures, using minimal simple language. The 10 picture sets showed family scenes in which a problem arises. For instance, a mother or child arrives at a closed front door with a load of groceries, while other children watch. Maybe nothing is said. Maybe the mother or the child says, Is the door open? This we will call the crisis point act. We can vary who speaks, whether silence occurs, what is said, and how it is said. In other stories, the children are committing a breach of family rules, by fighting or making a mess for instance. At the crisis point there may be a visible mother or child, or they may just hear a voice. A voice might, for example, say Are you fighting? We used verbal acts at the crisis point in which there was no explicit mention of the activity the speaker wanted.

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Having started a dialogue by the speech act at the crisis point, we asked the subjects what the children in the story would say and do. Then we questioned them about the events—what the speakers meant or wanted to say, why they spoke, how the child's own mother would have done it, and so on. We wanted to find out how the children interpreted the utterance at the crisis point, how much they relied on knowledge of context (hence the control group in which nothing was said), and what they thought was appropriate.

Realistic directives. During the picture stories, we have used realistic directives of various sorts to children, sometimes going to the extreme of mentioning desired objects in an anomalous way. For example, during an experiment, I might say Oh, my purse, which is not anomalous. Often with an older child, if the purse is nearer the child than me, this will be successful as a directive. Or I might say My purse is white, which is successful less often. It is anomalous as a directive since it is in full view of both of us, the only purse around. If I only want the purse, I have given too much information.

In this "realistic" requesting, we systematically rotated the object requested and the form, including anomalous, elliptical mention, and various degrees of explicitness up to Can you get . . .

Structured Eliciting

A third method, developed by David Paul Gordon in our research team (Gordon, Budwig, Strage, & Carrell, 1980) involved giving children drawing tasks and building into the tasks occasions when they were likely to give warnings, make offers, make requests, and so on, with peers or adults.

ANALYSIS OF VIDEOTAPED CONVERSATIONS

Speech Act Types

We have been interested in a variety of methods of studying natural conversation. Ethnographic analysis of some of our material has been reported by Jenny Cook-Gumperz, who collaborated in this work (Cook-Gumperz, 1981). Another approach, leaning more heavily on coding categories, is in my view less revealing of the real structure of the episodes. But it will serve to summarize some of the contrasts we have seen. In one of our coding systems, we were primarily concerned with issues such as how the form of the speech varied with the social characteristics of the addressee, the speech event context, and the gestural accompaniments. A central feature of our coding was identifying control acts, that is moves in which there was a clear intention to influence the activities of the partner. In each such episode, we chose the most explicit form and called it the head act, which might be accompanied with
which relies on the ideal-typical analysis, was Sinclair and Coulthard’s (1975) work on traditional classrooms. Ethnological work suggests that in fact children do know something of this structure as described by Sinclair and Coulthard: that it is virtual and tacit implicitly in form, even if sequences do not fit the precise format described. Because tasks in homes are more complex, we cannot expect to find so orderly a scheme. But their work does provide an example of an attack on the problem of levels in terms of a phrase structure model in which each construct has systematic realizations at a lower level.

Speech acts are hypothetical constructs. A speech act is not identifiable by the activity or goal in view or by the words used. Yet the notion of a speech act comes from common language; the speech act is clearly a commonsense notion, a category in everyday thinking about what we do. The categories we used in coding were in part these commonsense categories, such as offering, warning, threatening, and giving permission, and in part combinations, such as directives, prohibitions, ownership claims, and intentions. But because these are inferred categories, we began to notice that the inferences are based on complex social factors.

If A says to B, Can I help you, most of us, out of context, would assume this was an offer. However, we have seen such utterances from adults after beginning the helping action, so the child had no chance to refuse. Children have told us that offers are different from other control acts because they permit you to refuse. Thus, although the utterance takes the overt verbal form of a typical offer, we coded it as a statement of intention or a directive, depending on circumstances, when the other could not refuse.

Further, if a small child comes to an adult doing a complex task and says, Can I help you? we might interpret it as a permission request, such as Can I cross the street? or Can I have a cookie? The difference between an offer and a permission request here lies in the assumed capacities of adult versus child in the task at hand. If the petitioner has greater or equal ability to provide help, we might think it an offer, if very little, an intrusion calling for permission.

This example is given to show that the same words, indeed the same ultimate action, can be considered different at the interpretive, speech act level by virtue of differences in assumptions about relative skills, power to refuse, and relative benefit. When we code and when we report past experiences

3 Other approaches to these problems include treating certain constellations of form and social features as central or normal and others as defective, an approach common in speech act analyses. We had to decide that form and speakers’ intention were analytically separate, in order to discover what was interesting about strategic choices of form. It is statistically true that certain forms predominate for certain acts.

3. Structures of Control in everyday life, we are making such assumptions. And of course, two conversational partners could very easily make different assessments of these social elements and therefore classify the same act differently, without the difference being visible in the interaction.

So our coding by speech acts, both those involving action by the addressee (warnings, directives, prohibitions, and ownership claims), and those involving action by the speaker (offers, promises, permission requests, and intentions), rests on complex social inferences. We did not know this when we began.

Because of earlier work on the social nuances of requests, I had assumed that social information about role, rank, distance, cost of task, and so on would be manifested in two ways. One would be in the major verbal form chosen for the head act. An example would be, Bring me a drink versus Could you bring me a drink?. A second way would be through nuancing by markers, such as saying please, using slang, address forms, minimizers, conditionals, or past tense. For instance, Could you lend me a little sugar? or I wanted to ask you . . .

By opening up our analysis beyond requests to other forms of social control acts, we found that exactly the same activity goals might be served by different speech acts: A child might drink juice after an offer or a directive. But we are not sure of the importance of this difference. We are not sure whether the social classification of acts that we make as coders, as observers, corresponds to a major level of decision making by participants. And we are not sure whether it makes any difference that we have included both natural-language categories such as offer and invented categories such as directive. We are calling attention to the problem of the analytic status of speech acts since it is bound to affect research until a successful theory of action is developed.

Summary of problems. The methodological focus of this work makes it important to be candid about problems. I have explained reservations about the observational work, because many of these are general issues affecting classroom observations as well. To summarize, in our analysis and coding, we concentrated on sequences of social control acts, which made activity consequences primary and social information secondary. We assumed a common—and indeed a single—focus on the action of the other. We have not solved the problem of the larger contexts, sequences, and options within which the speech act level is imbedded. We found that the speech act was hypothetical, resting on social assumptions by the coders at least.

Having classified a speech act type, we identified an event context and verbal form, and various accompanying characteristics of each social control act. The results of this analysis are indicated in the following.
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Table 3.2
Form of Head Control Act by Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal form of act</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explicit forms</td>
<td>Get off me!</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperatives</td>
<td>Do you want some?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit questions and tagged forms</td>
<td>Could you lift this?</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bring it, will you?</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit statements</td>
<td>I want some too.</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That's mine.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permission questions</td>
<td>Can I have your brush?</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permission statements</td>
<td>You can play with that if you want.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellipsis (no verb)</td>
<td>No. Here. Mine.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit forms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cries and gestures only</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit questions</td>
<td>Where are your shoes?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aversive state</td>
<td>I'm cold. John hit me.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions or consequences</td>
<td>I finished.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data base 911 acts in families.

family samples totaling 10,000 lines (911 child control acts), in 4 white, middle-class families in California.

Context

We improvised activity context categories for our work. It became obvious that there were major differences in every way between activity settings, which was hardly surprising.

Context categories (in boldface). Meal times differed a great deal from family to family. In some cases there was a considerable amount of activity management. In the control acts, more permission requests occurred than elsewhere, even though directives to act dominated the control acts, especially in statement form such as, I want more ice cream.

The construction of play illustrated more interesting differences. Others have observed stages in play, such as negotiation, stage setting, and enactment. These of course can be recycled any time. Negotiation was typically verbal, so prohibitions were rare, but future-oriented acts such as intent statements, offers, and requests for permission were increased.

M2 Let's play choo-choo train.
F4 No.
M2 Yeah.
F4 No. I don't want to.
3. Structures of Control

knowledge of a language. In the following text recorded in France, playing with a French child a child who had spoken French about 3 months set up a classroom scene with herself as “maitresse.” This 8-year-old child was sophisticated at role-playing behavior. Although the sequences are often strange for a classroom, the phrases alone clearly have the intonation of a teacher (T = “teacher”; C = child).

1. T: *Les enfants! Tu viens ici! [both giggle]* Oui! Et quoi, c’est quoi, toi le c’est le c’est quoi le nom à toi? (Children come here! Yes! And what, what is it, you- it- what is the name of you? ...)

2. C: Sylvie [giggles] ... .

3. T: Sylvie quoi! ... Allez. Vit. (Sylvie what? Hurry up.)


5. C: Oui. (Yes.)

6. T: [as she writes on slate] *C’est trois comme ça. C’est comme ça. C’est... Bon, alors c’est sept francs. Bon alors, c’est sept francs. Sept. Sept francs. Sept. Bon alors, sept francs.* (It’s three like this. It’s like this. It’s, good, then it’s seven francs. Okay, it’s seven francs. Seven. Seven francs. Seven, okay seven francs.)

7. C: Regarde. (Look.)


9. C: Quatorze. [giggles] (Fourteen.)

10. T: Oui. (Or.)

11. C: Sept fois sept. (Seven times seven.)

12. T: Sept fois deux égale quatorze. [long pauses between words as she says them while writing them on slate] Tu comprends? (Seven times two equals fourteen. Understand?)

13. C: Oui. (Yes.)

14. T: *C’est ça et c’est ça. [writing] C’est quatorze. Bon, c’est à toi. (That’s it, and that. It’s fourteen. Good, it’s your turn.)

15. C: *C’est pas comme ça. (That’s not it.)

16. T: *Sylvie mais tu comprends, eh? (Sylvie, but you understand?)*

17. C: Oui. Comme ça. [goes toward corner of room] [giggles] (Yes. Like this.)

18. T: *Non, tu viens là! Tu tu tu es pas là! Sylvie! [crossly] Sylvie! Allez, vit. [giggle of Sylvie as Maîtresse pursues her with a
little stick] (No, you come here! You- you- you don't go there! Sylvie, Sylvie! Hurry up!) [both giggles]

In Turn 4 the teacher tries, in her primitive French to explain that her partner should pretend to be more ignorant. She has the pupil sit in front of her on the floor while she sits on the bed, up front like a traditional teacher, writing on her blackboard. She arranges what presumably is a traditional demonstration of commutation. To liven the proceedings, the "pupil" rebels, giggling to show she is still cooperative, but having a joke of the game, which gives the "maitresse" a chance to use a cross tone of voice and threaten her with a stick. (On her first day in the French school the "maitresse" had been very disturbed by the tears of a classmate who was struck by the teacher.) Her representation of a French maitresse contains information on how the teacher gives orders, how she teaches, and how she punishes.

Role playing provides evidence of children's representations of "proper" roles. They can be at considerable variance with individual experience with such roles in the family, for example, in cases where a child's culture teaches a norm. There may also be some evidence of a personal experience because of the lack of exposure to French play norms. The role playing displays the child's beliefs about activity structure in classrooms.

Social Meaning

By the time they were of school age, the children in our sample could deploy a full range of verbal means to express control wishes toward others, including implicit acts or hints. There are a number of determinants besides social meaning, such as expression of solidarity or politeness, as discussed in the literature on speech acts and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Ervin-Tripp, 1976).

Frequency and social relations. Children do not choose randomly among potential partners. The frequency of moves to control specific others may be a result of possession of the desired resources, familiarity, cooperativeness, submission to coercion, or importance to the child as a potential partner for social needs.

Factors affecting verbal form of control acts. Choice of form for a control act can be determined by both nonsocial and social factors. These include:

1. The attention or concern of the speaker of the moment. The speaker may focus on the problem condition: I'm hungry. The speaker may focus on the goal object: I want an apple. Or the speaker may focus on the partner's projected activity: Hand me an apple. Although these changes in focus may be strategically selected so that focus on a problem may be more subtle than

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focus on the partner's act, they may also arise from attention. These two sources may be indistinguishable.

2. Projected contextual factors or probable external obstacles. An imaginative or well-practiced partner knows what obstacles there are to achieving a goal. A focus on these obstacles can be a spontaneous concern, or it may be a device to relieve the addressee of responsibility. For example: Are there some blue markers? Is Mrs. Nellermoe there?

3. Formal status marking for high rank addressees or strangers. Some speakers use this routinely and conventionally even for easy requests. For example: Pardon me, could you . . . ?

4. Social marking addressed to anticipated internal resistance by the addressee. The form the marking takes varies. The anticipated resistance itself can be focused on by conventional forms such as, can you, would you, would you mind, would you care to. There may be payments by vocatives, please, and minimizers and grammatical devices for diverting directness. These include passives, past tense, and conditionals (e.g., If you wanted to Xerox these.). The social factors stimulating these payments have been described as recompense for face-threatening acts by Brown and Levinson (1978). They were found by Ervin-Tripp (1978) to include physical distance, territory, rank of addressees, high cost or effort called for, and preoccupation of the addressee with other activities. Formal status marking may arise from the assessment of anticipated internal resistance, or it may be independent.

5. Emotional tone of the speaker. This can affect intonation, increase explicitness, or produce sarcasm. And, of course, there is ample evidence that social factors such as rapport can be signaled, for instance, by humorous allusion through hints, which imply shared assumptions.

6. Abbreviation or conventionalization from common use. When a particular constellation of circumstances occurs often, it becomes possible to index the speech act very economically. There can be ellipses, or such allusions as, It's noon. Because certain external obstacles are recurrent, reference to them can become the conventional directive and lose the social advantages of not being explicit. In Brown and Levinson's (1978) terms, Is the boss in? ceases to be off-record since its purpose is obvious. The inferential process is abbreviated by common use.

7. Activity. The activity context indirectly affects the forms of social control acts, because the context changes (a) the focus of the speaker; (b) probable external obstacles; (c) roles and rights expected, and therefore what is seen as an infringement or cost; and (d) what is frequent from repeated use, hence abbreviated or conventionalized. Activity contexts lead to differences in the kinds of speech acts children address to peers as compared to adults. For example, stage setting is a characteristic of young children's peer play that is not usual in interaction with adults. Stage setting is marked by a high
frequency of both ownership claims and prohibitions. Both of these speech acts are rare in children's speech to adults, perhaps as a result of the types of activities in which they are partners.

**Formal variation in conversation.** Do children use formal variation for social purposes? As I have shown, formal variation can arise out of attention or concern. However, I pointed out in an earlier study (Ervin-Tripp, 1977) that by the age of 2.5 years children employ indirect requests in the form of explicit questions or embedded imperatives such as Can you help me? to their seniors, more than to peers. (And clearly, of course, they understand such forms by that age.) What we found rare then was evidence of the use of hints or implicit forms that do not mention the desired act, which are of course quite frequent in adult use.

Our data from the 911 social control acts in this sample indicate the two types of acts that are strongly differentiated by addressee are explicit questions (polite requests or permission requests) and hints (conditions or consequence statements and questions). Controlling for speech act by looking only at directives, we find that 3- and 4-year-old children do not hint to younger children, but do hint (implicit requests) to adults. The children also differentiate between parents and researchers, asking more explicit questions (polite requests) to the researchers, giving more hints or explicit statements of desires or needs to parents (Table 3.3).

Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) reported that in peer speech, polite requests seemed to be used to disarm resistance to different tasks, or to maintain social distance or coolness. If this is the case in our sample, we might explain our findings that polite requests are overall the least effective in getting compliance. If polite requests are particularly used on occasions when internal resistance is expected, they would be least successful. Compliance is higher when older children address younger children than the reverse; that is, compliance directly reflects social power. The polite request as a social marker of age and rank implies expected failure.

**Formal variation in elicitation experiments.** How are these social effects on form reflected in speech in more controlled conditions? In an experiment described earlier (Gordon et al., 1980), children made requests to an unfamiliar adult for marker pens or for a letter to take home to parents. We found that the children in K–2 and those in Grades 3–5 differed in the forms selected. None used either direct or imbedded imperatives to solicit from unfamiliar adults. Instead, the younger children expressed needs (as they did to the mother in the family study) or asked locations (Where's the letter?) more often than the older children. The older children asked permission (Can I have . . . ?), identified obstacles to compliance (Are there any . . . ?; Do you have . . . ?),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3-year-olds</th>
<th>4-year-olds</th>
<th>5- to 8-year-olds</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ellipsis</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impasitive</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit question</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit statement (need or want)</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 Form of Directives by Age of Speaker and of Addressee (in percentage)
or displaced responsibility (She told me to get...) more often than the younger children. They often combined several of these strategies. For instance, Do you have a blue marker I can use? (obstacle plus permission). The older group used strategies that are more other-centered. They conventionally give to the listener the right or the excuse not to comply.

Compliance

Do children learn polite requests and hints because they are more successful? Do they learn by reinforcement? In the natural conversations we videotaped we were strongly impressed that the major determinants of success were grossly unrelated to form. They seemed to depend on many other variables. For instance, many demands were inconvenient or impossible to carry out. Some children kept asking to go outside the camera range, for instance. A major factor in success was the relative age of the speaker and listener. Older children complied only 27% with control acts of their juniors, whereas compliance was 60% in the reverse case (rejecting ambiguous cases).

Older listeners were less attentive to the interventions of little children. As children mature, their contributions become more relevant, but even when relevance is controlled, older speakers have an advantage in gaining attention (Ervin-Tripp, 1979). Younger children are more restricted in their means of expressing purposes. On second tries, they simply repeat what they said before, which turns off listeners. School-age children are more likely to try new tactics, or change the addressee to seek the most effective means. Older children more often figure out what the opposition is about and provide supporting explanations; these are needed primarily when persuading junior partners.

The most telling evidence, however, that compliance is related to social power rather than to the means deployed, is that polite requests are the least successful form in terms of total figures. We also found that there is no increment in success probability for the same difficulty of demand, when hints or polite requests are offered (Ervin-Tripp, O’Connor, & Rosenberg, in press).

Comprehension Experiments

If 3-year-olds begin to use hints when speaking to adults, then hints might also be intelligible to them. We have been studying children’s interpretations of experimentally situated directives that are merely hints. We used pictures and real-life situations as described earlier. The clearest finding was that as soon as children have a strong sense of action sequence and right and wrong behavior, any mention of a prohibited act suffices, if it comes from the mother. When it came from peers it was less effective. Children regarded hints as odd. For instance, if children were pictured painting all over the living room, Are you painting on the walls? seemed a somewhat weak way for a mother to talk. However, the children, as early as age 3, knew what was to be done, even when no one spoke or said something so silly.

In cases where real help was needed, the youngest children were less used to helping adults and less informed about what should happen next. In getting them to help, explicit forms such as, Can you get me my purse? were needed, at 3 years old, though less so later. We found that for school-age children, any mention of a needed object, except the most anomalous, got cooperation—even Oh, my pencil.

One interpretation of these results is that children develop pragmatic intelligence. By calling attention to a problem situation, the speaker sets off a train of inference to correct the situation. For example, Oh, my purse calls attention to the separation of the purse from its owner. The door’s closed calls attention to an obstacle in getting the groceries into the kitchen. Pragmatic intelligence can be used with relatively little linguistic information, if the situation is familiar.

In our recent work we have tested second-language learners in order to separate pragmatic sophistication from linguistic skill. We used the same picture stories and real requests for help described earlier, with a group of English-speaking children of primary-school age, who were in French schools. Although the full study is not yet completed because we are compiling control group data, we have observed some results that differ from our American samples. In the case of hints to help such as Is my purse there? a surprising number of Swiss seemed to be attentive just to the literal processing of the sentences. They answered questions, but did not offer help.

We also introduced a new procedure. For the “forbidden act” pictures such as fighting and making messes, we experimentally proposed sarcastic remarks by the mother. A common maternal strategy in Europe is a rebuke such as Oh that’s really great or Go right on, keep it up. European children recognize such phrases as criticism.

We introduced such sarcastic remarks to second-language learners to see if their pragmatic intelligence would override the opposite literal meaning. In many cases it did not. The children in such cases found the sarcasm confusing. Some said the mother was lying. The children who heard the sarcasm as rebuke reported that their teachers talked that way too. The children had relatively little access to French families, so if they had not heard sarcastic teachers they were puzzled. We have not yet analyzed all the French data, so we do not know why pragmatic reasoning takes priority in some children and linguistic processing in others, in the artificial conditions of experiments.

What is most striking to us about the discussions with the children following the English experiments, is that they do not necessarily think about motives. When we asked what the mother wanted in the picture stories, the
children went back to look, as if they considered motive for the first time. In many children, estimations of the consequences of various responses and the learning of effectiveness of different strategies do not depend on imputing purposes. What takes on much greater importance is the child’s understanding of patterns of events. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) implied such a control method; they pointed out that any mention of a required or prohibited act could function as a directive in a classroom. We might call this control by routine. However, it applies very broadly, since it seems to explain why 3-year-olds open the door to the mother with groceries even when they do not think Is the door open? means she wants it opened. Compliance in such cases is not cooperation with the speaker’s intent. Children take action to keep a situation normal, to make an event follow an expected course.

Discussion

MUTUAL COMPREHENSION IN CLASSROOMS

Communication in a school or family that depends heavily on cooperation and on an understanding of routines in the normal course of events can easily be disrupted. The teacher may consider children who fail to do what is expected uncooperative, but there may be other causes. A newcomer unfamiliar with routines, or an unattentive child who does not notice abbreviated cues, or a child who expects a social style with more explicitness would have trouble appearing cooperative. Teachers may find it irritating to have to call the children’s attention constantly and to develop explicit control forms for such children. Among adults, explicitness implies distance or unfriendliness (Ervin-Tripp, 1976). We can only surmise that ethnic and social class differences in social control styles could lead to misunderstanding whenever there is ambiguity about the normal course of events.

Some ethnic groups rely on explicit polite requests to mark status differences. Some use them upwards, but not downwards in rank and age. Some groups rely heavily on allusion and hints (e.g., Greek-Americans studied by Tannen, 1979) and some carefully train children to understand hints from infancy (e.g., the Japanese). We might expect an easier enculturation into a classroom relying on hints and allusions for Japanese children than for children from families relying on explicitness in adult speech to children. On the other side, of course, children taught to hint may not be understood by their teachers or their peers from other ethnic groups.

Summary

Our work has focused on the understanding of the development of children’s strategies for getting other people to do what they want and for interpreting the speech of others. Such a focus puts activity at the center and makes information of interest only when it serves to persuade. We have developed several methods of studying these processes, which include analysis of natural conversations, elicitation, and structured interpretation experiments. These experiments differ from earlier work on speech evaluation in that they put the critical item in a context of activities and of people with social properties, so that we could find how social factors affect understanding and judgment.

The findings regarding comprehension indicate a heavy reliance on routine and knowledge and pragmatic intelligence. They imply that young listeners are more attuned to proceeding with the normal action than with trying to figure out speaker’s intentions—unless something unusual or discordant occurs.

Our work on family interaction has uncovered some serious conceptual difficulties in the analysis of speech acts. These include multiple functions, levels of analysis, and, in the role of the hypothetical construct, the speech act itself, in language use. In examining speech acts, we saw that confirming or altering social relationships can be done simultaneously with conveying information about desired activities through social control acts. The argument has been made that social meanings such as rapport and deference are conveyed by the frequency and type of control act chosen, the verbal form of the act, and nuances by various markers.
Children make use of the possibilities of form variation appropriately very early. The growth in their flexibility and ability to supply supporting arguments continues in the school years. Between early and late primary school, social control acts to strangers shift focus from being ego-based on what is wanted to being other-based on potential obstacles, permission, and responsibility. We have argued that the development of competence in social control acts may depend only partially on direct reinforcement, but may, like grammar, come from close observation of others. Polite requests were more often ignored or refused than other forms, so they were not, on the whole, rewarded. Social differences between groups in the explicitness of social control moves influence the success of classroom communication.

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References


