

Mandarin-Speaking Children's Request in Mother-Child Conversations

Abstract

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As an endeavor to better understand Mandarin-speaking children's pragmatic development, this study aims to explore Mandarin-speaking children's request in interactional contexts based on dyads between two three-year-old children and their mothers. Three aspects about children's request in conversations are concerned: First, the means or strategies that children depend on to convey their request intents are investigated. Second, the linguistic elements they employ to realize their request intents are explored. Last, the conversational or interpersonal knowledge they may have acquired are discussed.

With a careful examination over the collected conversations, it is found that children at the age of three tend to express their request through the following means (as summarized in Table 1 on the additional page). First of all, children may indicate in their utterances a specific action they intend their interlocutors, or their mothers, to do. When performing request through this means, they tend to choose imperative constructions or sometimes imperative sentences with sentence-final particles or with A-not-A tag questions. Secondly, children request for a desired object by literally and directly indicating in their utterances the target objects or information about the target objects; i.e. they use adjectives or quantifiers to refer to the target object. Thirdly, they indicate their self-want to have their mothers fulfill their desire. Through this means, they can direct what their mothers have to do in reply. They may ask for agreement or permission, ask for objects, or ask their mothers to fulfill their physical desire, like thirst, hunger etc. The formal element adopted is usually invariably the *Wo yao...* (我要...) 'I want...' construction, with the desired action or object filled in the slot (cf., Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984). A last means children employ to request is hinting. They indirectly convey their request intents. They may hint their mothers what to do by indicating the causal link underlying an event or verbalizing the mothers' current action or state in the immediate context.

In addition, children sometimes use different formal elements to manifest their request. For example, their request for a specific action is found to be conveyed with imperatives, imperatives with sentence-final particles, or imperatives with A-not-A tags. Further investigation on the formal variations of their request seems to disclose a systematic pattern and reveal that some conversational or interpersonal factors may play a role in how children convey their request intents, e.g. cooperativeness, social status, conversational topic, and politeness. Take cooperativeness for example. When children are confident of their mothers' cooperativeness, they are inclined to request with plain imperatives. If not, they tend to adopt imperatives with sentence-final particles or A-not-A tags (cf., Gordon and Ervin-Tripp 1984). Moreover, politeness also influences children's request forms. Different imperative forms convey different interactional forces and hence show different degrees of politeness. Ordinary imperatives are thought to convey a stronger force and to be less polite, while imperatives with mitigators are less forceful and with greater politeness (cf., Brown and Levison 1978, Shih 1998). Children observed in this study tend to use the former in a highly cooperative situation, and they use the latter when they have no confidence in their mothers' cooperativeness and when their previous request move does not prevail. This formal selection of the children is very likely determined by their awareness of politeness.

In a nutshell, the findings in this study may suggest that children at the age of three recruit various formal elements and strategies to perform their request and that they have probably been aware of some conversational or interpersonal knowledge, which may influence their performance of request in conversations (Hsu 1996 and 2000).