

Direct and Indirect Requests in Pre- School Children's Speech

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Abstract

There is a growing belief in the field of language development that, in order to better understand children's discourse, it has to be studied within its social setting. It is important to know who is speaking, to whom he is speaking, and about what he is speaking. This belief led to an enormous body of research dealing with the different characteristics of children and the way these characteristics influence the language of those children. Concern also grew rapidly in the characteristics of the listener (familiarity, age, gender, social status, relations with the child and so on), and the way these characteristics affect children's language. This tendency resulted in a tremendous body of research during a limited period of time (no more than two decades).

Resulting from the concern in the speaker's characteristics and their influence on their speech, the present study aimed at studying two types of requests in the speech of preschool children: direct and indirect requests. Ninety-four preschool children participated in the study, where each was asked to request something or some information from a doll in three experimental situations.

The findings of the study showed that older children (5;9 Years) as well as younger preschool children (4 years) were able to produce both direct and indirect requests. Older children, however, significantly produced more indirect request forms than their younger counterparts.

The findings were discussed in the light of a sociolinguistic theory of language development, and recommendations for further research were suggested.

Introduction :

One function of language that has received considerable attention in recent years is the request, mainly the production of requests to obtain information and / or action from others (Garvey, 1975; Ervin-tripp, 1977; Gordon et. al., 1980; Bock and Hornsby, 1981; Read and Cherry, 1978).

Studying the production of requests can take many dimensions. One of those dimensions found in the literature is the study of children's production of direct vs. indirect forms of requests. Previous research on this matter showed that older children tend to use more indirect forms of request than their younger counterparts (Nippold et al., 1982; James and Seebach, 1982; Wilkinson et. al., 1982). Research also showed that older children can understand more indirect forms of request than younger children (Shatz, 1974; Carrell, 1981). Moreover, old as well as younger children were found to be able to adapt their request forms according to the characteristics of their listeners (James, 1978; Jacobs, 1973; Hollos and Beeman, 1978). Children around the age of five years were found to be able to form requests so indirect that the desired goal is not even mentioned (Ervin—Tripp, 1977).

Although the indirect forms of request start to emerge at these early ages, it must be noted that the direct forms are still the most common among preschool children (Spekman & Roth, 1985) Wilkinson et. al. (1982) provided evidence that children in the first grade are more likely to use direct forms in their requests. On the other hand, Read and Cherry (1978) found that preschool children are capable of using a variety of direct and indirect forms of requests. They also observed developmental differences in the greater tendency of the younger children to rely on gestures and other paralinguistic actions.

Many factors have been hypothesized that determine the choice of English directive forms. Some of those include the relative social rank of the speaker and listener, their ages, their familiarity, and the presence or absence of outsiders (Weigel and Wiegel, 1985).

Purpose of the Study:

The present study aimed at finding out the relative frequency of young and older preschool children's use of direct and indirect forms of request. It also aimed at discovering any possible differences that can be attributed to children's age in the use of different request forms. Specifically, the study aimed at answering the following questions:

1. Are there significant differences between young and older children in using direct vs indirect forms of request?
2. Are there significant differences in the use of different forms of indirect requests that can be attributed to the children's ages?
3. What different forms of indirect requests do Jordanian preschool children use?

Subjects:

The subjects were 94 preschool children divided into two groups: a younger group with a mean age of 4 years, and an older group with a mean age of 5 years and nine months. One half of the subjects was boys and the other half girls. All the subjects spoke Arabic as their first language and received no training in any other language. More over, all the subjects came from middle socio-economic backgrounds.

Procedure:

Requests were elicited from each subject by exposing him/her to three experimental situations. The three situations consisted of short stories in which the child has to ask for an object, sweets, or the way to school.

Each child was interviewed alone in a quiet room in his/her school. The story was read to the child by the experimenter, and the child was asked to state how he would get the object (a balloon), the sweets (candy) and information about the way to school.

Each child was asked to make two requests in each of the three experimental situations. This means that the maximum number of requests possible for each child is 6, and for each group is 282.

Report with children was established during the first few minutes of the interview through some routine questions (e.g. What's your name? How do you come to school? Do you love your school? How much? etc.).

In order to avoid the possible order-of-presentation effects, one third of the subjects listened to the first story first, another third listened to the second story first, and the last third listened to the third story first. The orders were randomly assigned.

Data Collection and Transcription:

The responses of all the subjects were tape-recorded, and notes were taken to cover any nonverbal acts (movements, gestures, etc.) To determine the reliability of the transcriptions, an independent judge was asked to transcribe 50 requests chosen at random. The agreement coefficient between the judge's transcriptions and those of the experimenter's was 0.94.

Coding:

There is no one particular way of distinguishing direct from indirect forms of request. One way to distinguish between these forms, however, is to consider the imperative (i.e. the command) the only form of direct request. In this case, the indirect

requests will include many types, like want/need statements, questions, hints, and imperatives followed or preceded by the word "please."

When a child asks another child "Will you give me a balloon?", he is not actually asking a question, but making a request. The same will apply when a speaker says at a dinner table "I want the salt", he is not expressing a desire or wish, rather he is making a request from another person sitting at the same table (Gibbs, 1981).

In the present study, direct request refers to any imperative (command) by which a speaker tries to get objects, actions or information from another person (the listener). Examples of this type of request are: Give me Candy! , Show me the way to school!, and Give me a piece of candy! Indirect requests refer to other sentences used by the speaker for the same purposes. Examples of this kind include: Show me the way to school, please! Will you please give me a balloon? and Do you mind giving me a piece of candy?

Results

A total of 504 requests were elicited from the children: 240 (48% of the possible requests) from the younger group, and 264 (52% of the possible requests) from the older group. This is due to the fact that more children from the younger group than the older group were shy, did not produce requests in some situations, or used non-linguistic means to express their requests. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of direct and indirect requests produced by the two study groups.

Table 1
Frequency and Percentage of Direct and Indirect
Requests Produced by the Two Age Groups

	Younger group		Older group		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Direct requests	205	85	170	64	375	74
Indirect requests	35	15	94	36	129	26
Total	240	100	264	100	504	100

Table 1 shows that the older group surpassed the younger group in the production of indirect requests: 94 and 35 requests respectively. Moreover the two age groups produced more direct (375) than indirect requests (129), about 74% of all

possible requests produced by the two age groups were direct requests, while only 26% of those requests were indirect.

The two age groups also differed in the number and percentage of the different forms of indirect requests they produced. For instance, the older group produced twice as many question forms as the younger group. It is obvious from Table 2 that while the older group produced 26 questions, the younger group produced only 13.

Table 2
Frequency of Indirect Forms of
Request Produced by the Two Age Groups

	Younger group	older group	Total
Question	13	26	39
Need Statement	5	4	9
Please Statement	17	61	78
Softened Command	—	3	3
Total	35	94	129

Table 2 shows clearly that the most common form of indirect requests in the speech of preschool children is the "please" statement (78), followed by the question form (39). On the other hand, need statements and softened commands are comparatively few: 9 and 3 respectively.

A careful look at Table 3, however, will show that the percentage of question forms produced by the younger group is actually higher than that of the older group. The number of questions produced by the younger children divided by the total number of indirect requests produced by those children is 37%, while it is 28% for the older children. Moreover, the younger group produced a higher percentage of need statements than the older group (14% and 4% respectively). On the other hand, the older group surpassed the younger group in the production of "please" statements (65% vs. 49% respectively). The frequency of "please" statements in the older group was also higher than that in the younger group (61 vs. 17 respectively). The table also shows that none of the younger group's requests was a softened command, while 3 of the older group's requests were so.

Table 3
Percentages of Different Forms of Indirect
Requests Produced by the Two Age Groups

	Younger group	Older group	Total
Question	37	28	30
Need Statement	14	4	7
Please Statement	49	65	61
Softened Command	0	3	2
Total	100	100	100

In order to determine whether the differences between the age groups in producing direct and indirect requests were significant, t-tests were used for the means of the two groups. Table 4 shows the means and standard deviations of direct and indirect requests produced by the children and the t-values for testing the differences between the two age groups.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations of Direct and Indirect Requests Produced
by the Two Age Groups and the t-values for Testing the Differences be-
tween them

	Younger group		Older group		df	t-value pooled variance
	n=47		n=47			
	M	S	M	S		
Direct requests	4.38	1.8	3.43	2.32	92	2.26*
Indirect requests	.74	1.5	2	2.4	92	3.07**

* significant at $p < .05$

** significant at $p < .01$

Table 4 shows that the older group produced significantly more indirect forms of requests $M = 2$ than the younger group ($M = .74$), $t(92) = 3.07$, $p < .01$.

A similar finding can be seen concerning the production of direct forms of requests. The younger group used significantly more direct forms of request ($M = 4.38$) than the older group ($M = 3.43$), $t(92) = 2.26$, $p < .05$.

Discussion

The present study provided evidence for a well established finding about the production of direct and indirect request forms. It showed that young children produced more direct request forms than their older counterparts. On the other hand, older children were found to produce more indirect request forms than younger children. The present study was consistent with many previous studies in this respect (James and Seebach, 1982; Gordon et al., 1980; Garvey, 1975).

Moreover, the study showed that young children can produce the same forms of indirect requests as older children, but the difference between the two took the form of frequency rather than request type. A brief look at Table 3 shows that the younger group was able to produce questions, need statements, and "please" statements. This finding, too, is consistent with some previous research. For instance, Read and Cherry (1978) provided evidence that 2 1/2 year — old children already possess as many directive strategies to manipulate their environment as older preschool children. Nippold et al. (1982) also found no qualitative differences between different age groups. Every type of request used at the older ages was observed in the younger ages as well. The differences between the age groups took the form of the frequency of high politeness requests.

The findings of the present study are best interpreted in the light of a sociolinguistic framework, which stresses the importance of other people present during the occurrence of the speech act. There is no doubt that language is influenced by the social setting, i. e. by what other people say and do.

One possible explanation of why younger children used more direct forms and older children used more indirect forms of requests could be attributed to two principles of learning and socialization: modeling and reinforcement. Parents, and other agents of socialization, do not start to shape the social behavior (including language) of their children or to reinforce their correct practices before school age. In our culture, this is usually observed when parents start directing their children by saying: "How can you do/say this? Do you not know you're in school now?"

However, many other issues are still in need of further investigation, the most important of which is a thorough and extensive classification of request forms in the Arabic language. Classifying request forms has already been done in other languages. For instance, Ervin - Tripp (1976) worked on classifying the request forms in American English, and Blum-Kulka et al. (1985) classified the forms of request in Hebrew.

Another issue that still needs further investigation is the effect of the socio-economic background of the subjects. While the subjects in this study belonged to middle socio-economic areas, other research may be directed toward older children that come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and younger children from higher socio-economic background.

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