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Brief Note

A Pragmatic Description of Early Language Development

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Language acquisition involves more than learning the abstract structures of linguistic competence. The child also has to learn how to use linguistic structures appropriately. In this paper, the speech act is proposed as the unit of analysis for studying the pragmatics of early child language. The results of a study of children's uses of single-word utterances are reported, and the data are analyzed in terms of "primitive speech acts."

INTRODUCTION: SPEECH ACTS AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Although the term has never been exhaustively defined, Searle describes *speech acts* as

> acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises and so on; and more abstractly, acts such as referring and predicating . . . these acts are in general made possible by and performed in accordance with certain rules for the use of linguistic elements. (Searle, 1969, p. 16)

Searle divides the speech act into two parts–the proposition and the illocutionary force of an utterance. For example, the proposition "John eats an apple" has the force of an assertion; the same proposition can have the illocutionary force of a question ("Is John eating an apple?") or the force of

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a command ("Eat an apple, John!") and so on. In other words, the proposition contains the conceptual information (expressed as a predicate taking one or more arguments) of the utterance, while the illocutionary force indicates how the utterance is to be taken or what the speaker's attitude is toward the proposition.

Thus we may take the philosopher's definition of *speech act* to be a unit of linguistic communication, consisting of a proposition and an illocutionary force, which is expressed according to grammatical and pragmatic rules, and which functions to convey a speaker's conceptual representations and intentions. Although philosophers have not supplied an operational definition of *speech act,* we will provide operational definitions for each primitive speech act we postulate for early child speech.

Assuming that the child eventually acquires the repertoire of speech acts in his native language, it is appropriate to ask how he acquires this repertoire. The infant, of course, produces something considerably less complete than conventional speech acts. Nevertheless, the child apparently does express some primitive intentions before the onset of language (*cf.* Bruner, 1966). If we assume with Searle that the performance of speech acts is a matter of the speaker's intentions being expressed according to the conventions of his language, we can obviously ask how the child acquires linguistic conventions to express his intentions. Dore (1972, 1973) describes what the early stages of speech act development might look like in terms of the cognitive and affective inputs to a language acquisition device. Some of the data reported in Dore (1972) are reanalyzed below from a different point of view. The purpose of the present paper is to provide some initial support for the hypothesis that *before the child acquires sentential structures, he possesses systematic knowledge about the pragmatics of his language which is best described in terms of "primitive speech acts."*

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

In an observational study, one boy and one girl were videotaped, in 30- to 45-min sessions, every 2 weeks over a span of several months during which they uttered only one word at a time. The methodology employed for collecting the data follows that established by Brown and his colleagues (Brown and Fraser, 1963) and elaborated by Bloom (1973). The videotaping began when each child was 1:3 years old. The boy had just begun to use words in a consistent (though semiconventional) way, while the girl had been using words for at least several weeks before the sessions reported here. The

videotaping ended when the children began to spontaneously produce two words within a single prosodic envelope (except for a few rote forms and repetitions); the boy was 1:7 and the girl 1:5. Therefore, we have more tapes on the boy, whose one-word stage lasted longer, but we have the same quantity of data in terms of primitive speech acts for each child. Thus the data represent a great portion of each child's one-word utterance period of development, and it is only this period about which claims will be made below.

Each child was recorded while engaging in natural communication with his or her mother and with a nursery school teacher with whom he or she was quite familiar. All of the child's intelligible linguistic utterances were phonemically transcribed, using International Phonetic Alphabet symbols for segmental phonemes and an adaptation of IPA symbols for suprasegmental terminal intonation contours. Adult utterances were recorded, descriptions of each participant's nonlinguistic behavior were made, and the salient features of the context were noted.

With regard to analyzing the data, we isolated the "primitive speech acts" the child produced in speech events. A primitive speech act (henceforth abbreviated PSA) is defined as an utterance, consisting formally of a single word *or* a single prosodic pattern, with functions to convey the child's intention before he acquires sentences. The single word is either a *rudimentary referring expression,* such as the names of people, objects, or events, or a specifically *expressive* word like "hi," "by-bye," or "nighty-night." The utterance of a prosodic pattern counts as a PSA if (1) it contains a consistent prosodic feature produced without the segmental phonemes of a word, and (2) it communicates the child's intention. Prosodic patterns, with or without lexical content, convey the primitive force of the PSA; that is, they indicate how the child intends his utterance to be taken. The two marked prosodic forms we found operative in our children were a rising terminal intonation contour and an abrupt rising-falling contour.

We used four types of behavioral evidence to characterize each of the PSAs we postulated: (1) the child's utterance; (2) his nonlinguistic behavior, e.g., gestures, and facial expressions; (3) the adult's response, both verbal and nonverbal; and (4) the relevant, salient aspects of the context of utterance, such as objects attended to, location of objects, and people. Using these four observational criteria, we classified all of the child's linguistic utterances into a set of eight distinct PSAs. Table I characterizes each type of productive speech act that our children performed (where productive means occurred more than four times).

Each PSA is differentiated from the others by at least one formal or

Table I. A List of the Primitive Speech Act Types Performed by M and J

Primitive speech act	Child's utterance	Child's nonlinguistic behavior	Adult's response	Relevant contextual features
Labeling	Word	Attends to object or event; does not address adult; does not await response	Most often none; occasional repetition of child's utterance	Salient feature focused on by child; no change in situation
Repeating	Word or prosodic pattern	Attends to adult utterance before his utterance; may not address adult; does not await response	Most often none; occasional repetition of child's utterance	Utterance focused on; no change in situation
Answering	Word	Attends to adult utterances before his utterance; addresses adult	Awaits child's response; after child's utterance, most often acknowledges response; may then perform action	Utterance focused on; no change in situation, unless child's response prompts adult reaction
Requesting (action)	Word or marked prosodic pattern	Attends to object or event; addresses adult; awaits response; most often performs signaling gesture	Performs action	Salient feature focused on by child and adult; change in condition of object or child
Requesting (answer)	Word	Addresses adult; awaits response; may make gesture regarding object	Utters a response	No change in situation
Calling	Word (with marked prosodic contour)	Addresses adult by uttering adult's name loudly; awaits response	Responds by attending to child or answering child	Before child's utterance, adult is some distance away; adult's orientation typically changes
Greeting	Word	Attends to adult or object	Returns a greeting utterance	Speech event is initiated or ended
Protesting	Word or marked prosodic pattern	Attends to adult; addresses adult; resists or denies adult's action	Adult initiates speech event by performing an action the child does not like	Adult's action is completed *or* child prevents action
Practicing	Word or prosodic pattern	Attends to specific object or event; does not address adult; does not awaits response	No response	No apparent aspect of context is relevant to utterance

functional feature. Thus the PSAs described constitute a contrastive set in at least this minimal sense. The complete characterization of each PSA of course requires a description that goes beyond the child's utterance. But this is exactly what is necessary in any study that attempts to determine how the child's utterances function for him. The set described in Table I is not meant to be exhaustive—a study of other children might well yield PSA types which our children did not perform. Also, in a finer analysis, one might wish to distinguish between, say, different kinds of labeling (for example, labeling an action vs. labeling an object), in which case a different set of PSAs would emerge. Finally, as is often the case, certain categories are less clear-cut than others. "Greeting," for example, in our study included utterances which typically end conversations, such as "bye-bye" and "nighty-night"; "practicing" is the least satisfactory PSA insofar as it operated as a catch-all category whenever we could not clearly assign an utterance to any other category.

Although the description of PSAs is not without its problems, we

Table II. Examples of Each Productive PSA Type Performed by M and J

Primitive speech act	Description of example
Labeling	M touches a doll's eyes, utters /aIz/, then touches its nose, utters /noUz/; she does not address her mother and her mother does not respond.
Repeating	M, while playing with a puzzle, overhears her mother's utterance of "doctor" (in a conversation with the teacher) and M utters /datə/; mother responds "Yes, that's right honey, doctor," then continues her conversation; M resumes her play with the puzzle.
Answering	Mother points to picture of a dog and asks J "What's this?"; J responds /baU waU/.
Requesting (action)	J tries to push a peg through a hole and when he cannot succeed he looks up at his mother, keeping his finger on the peg, and utters /ʌʔʌʔʌʔ/ (with constant contours and minimal pause between syllables); his mother then helps him push the peg, saying "Okay."
Requesting (answer)	M picks up a book, looks at her mother, and utters /bUk↑/ (where arrow indicates a rising terminal contour); mother responds "Right, it's a book."
Calling	J, whose mother is across the room shouts /mama/ loudly (where ⌒ indicates an abrupt rising-falling contour); his mother turns to him and says "I'm getting a cup of coffee. I'll be right there."
Greeting	J utters /haI/ when teacher enters room; teacher responds "Hello."
Protesting	J, when his mother attempts to put on his shoe, utters an extended scream of varying contours, while resisting her; M, in the same circumstance, utters "No."
Practicing	M utters "Daddy" when he is not present; mother often does not respond.

maintain that the set in Table I represents an efficient system for classifying the functions of the one-word utterances produced by the two children in our study. As an initial check on the reliability of our classification system, we had two judges (who were not familiar with our theoretical orientation) independently categorize each of a 20-item sample of the children's utterances into one of the PSA types in Table I. The judges agreed on 17 (or 85%) of their choices, which occurred with our classification. Both judges later reported a difficulty in categorizing the same two items because of an intelligibility problem; and on the remaining item there was genuine disagreement (each judge chose a category different from our original classification of "practicing").

Table II provides typical examples of each productive PSA type performed by the two children. As can be seen from the examples, the same PSA often had more than one formal expression. "Requesting," for example, had four different formal manifestations–the most complex involved the use of a word accompanied by a marked prosodic contour; more often either a word *or* a prosodic pattern was used; and the least complex form of requesting (in terms of linguistic structure) was a nonconventional but consistent intonation pattern accompanied by unambiguous signaling gestures. "Protesting" occurred most often in this last form. It should be pointed out that there were a few utterances in the corpus which were somewhat ambiguous or anomalous (to the investigators or the mothers), just as adult utterances occasionally are.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In terms of specific results, Table III is a summary of the PSAs our two children, named M (a girl) and J (a boy), performed during their one-word stage. The table divides primitive speech acts into two types–nonconventional and conventional forms. Nonconventional PSAs do not contain linguistic features that are typically used by adults. (In the case of practicing forms out of context, although they are conventional forms, adult users of the language do not typically produce forms for practice, so in this sense "practicing" is not conventional.) Conventional PSAs contain at least one formal feature of the language.

As far as differences between the children, M produced far more words than J did. About 98% of M's utterances contained words. Most of her "labeling" and "repeating" occurred in verbal routines; that is, M's mother set up routines in which she would pick up an item, label it, and encourage her

Table III. A Comparison of the Primitive Speech Acts Performed by M and J During the Videotaped Sessions of Their One-Word Stage Development[a]

Primitive speech act type	Child	
	M	J
Nonconventional forms		
Requesting (staccato cry; constant terminal contours)	7	9
Practicing (word-forms or prosodic patterns)	13	5
Protesting (extended scream; varying terminal contours)	–	6
Conventional forms		
Requesting	6	21
Repeating	32	23
Labeling	28	14
Answering	12	8
Calling	–	9
Greeting	1	5
Protesting	2	–

[a]Numbers in the right-hand columns represent total occurrences of each primitive speech act type.

daughter to imitate the label. There were animal-naming routines in which the mother would pick up a toy animal, or point to a picture of one, and repeat the word until M imitated her; utensil-naming and people-naming routines also occurred frequently.

J, on the other hand, produced far fewer words but he used prosodic features in more ways than M did in the sense that he communicated more kinds of PSAs. For example, more than half of J's utterances were prosodically marked. All of his nonconventional PSAs were wordless (compared to M's dominant nonconventional act, which was "practicing" words–she did not practice prosodic patterns). J did not practice words out of context. However, he did produce conventional prosodic patterns in seemingly inappropriate contexts. Also, J and his mother did not participate in word-learning routines.

This contrast between the two children in the formal aspects of their early speech (that is, word-forms as opposed to prosodic features) suggests that there may be two partly separate lines of development. And if, as is suggested by the data, children progress at different rates along each of these developmental lines, this may account for the apparent differences among children in their styles of language acquisition. In other words, there may be predominantly "word-babies" compared to predominantly "intonation-babies." Furthermore, these differences among children may provide them with the basis for different strategies for acquiring the syntax of their language.

But apart from the contrast we found in the children's linguistic forms, there was an even greater contrast in terms of linguistic functions. Although M produced more words, J performed more types of PSAs; and only six of M's acts were productive insofar as they occurred more than four times, while all of J's PSAs were productive. Moreover, 63% of J's acts involved other people in some way—acts such as requesting and answering a question. Only 26% of M's acts involved others. And more than half of J's acts had a direct influence on other people, whereas only 14% of M's acts directly influenced others. By direct influence is meant such PSAs as "calling" someone or "protesting," and especially "requesting," all of which typically evoke a response from the listener.

We can view the children's PSA performance in terms of what the use of these acts accomplished for the children. Viewed in this way, it seems plausible to assume that most of M's acts were representations of the world to herself, since the vast majority of her acts were labeling, repeating, and practicing words (acts which are not addressed to other people). The majority of J's acts, on the other hand, were instrumental in nature; they were generally attempts to accomplish something. Thus M appeared to use language at this stage primarily to declare things about her environment, while J appeared to use language mainly to manipulate other people. We labeled these the "code-oriented" style vs. the "message-oriented" style, respectively.

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