A Longitudinal Study on the Development of Pre-request Practices by a Four Years Old Girl

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Requests and requesting language have been a popular topic for researchers from a wide range of fields including linguistic philosophy, pragmatics, social-pragmatics, and discourse analysis since 1960s. Requesting is a dynamic process which is the combination of requests and pre-requests, as well as request negotiations. By now, studies mostly focused on the study of how request was initiated and what were the factors lying behind specific choice of one request form over others, and how request-makers pursued their demands when grants were not given as expected. However, limited studies have been published about the development of the strategies children took to avoid predictable refusals. This paper aims to make a contribution to this topic by conducting a longitudinal study lasting for approximately one year with a four-year-old Chinese girl as the subject. By contrasting and comparing the subject’s natural linguistic performance, the author tried to reveal the developmental procedure, and profound cognitive and cultural factors.

Keywords: requests, pre-requests, request negotiations, predictable refusals, natural linguistic performance

Introduction

Language can be used to perform various acts and to achieve different goals such as giving orders, making requests, expressing disagreement, conducting threats, performing greetings, etc. (He, 1997). Among these, acts of making requests appear the earliest in children’s communicative behaviors. Long before children become competent to ask for concrete items like food and other objects, and abstract things including helps and care through intelligible linguistic forms, they produce incomprehensible sounds and use gestures, tones, and expressions to have their wishes come true. For example, a six months old infant would point his finger at an apple and make some non-word sounds like “eh, eh” to ask for the apple. These sounds, gestures, expressions, etc. are extralinguistic communicative acts. Extralinguistic communicative acts must be interpreted within certain context; otherwise, it is impossible to make clear the exact communicative meaning of those acts. In the previous example, several interpretations can be achieved. To name but a few, (1) that is an apple; (2) that apple is more delicious; (3) the baby wants to eat that apple; and (4) the baby asks his parent to give him that apple. Under common situations where a baby sees an apple on a table, nothing else happens, and his gestures and sounds are most likely to be perceived as a request for someone nearby to give him the apple.

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As children grow older, they gradually combine gestures with words, phrases, and even sentences rather than discarding gestures totally as their language ability and pragmatic competence enhance along with children’s cognitive abilities and life experiences (Han, 2020). A child aged over one year old is generally able to express its request of “give me the apple” by a pointing gesture + “apple”, or simply by a single word “apple”, and its caregiver can successfully figure out its communicative intention, of course with the help of the context under which the communicative act occurs. Older children have more flexibility in handling all possible modalities to transfer their requests: Gestures are only used to improve accuracy if necessary; conventional and unconventional structures continue to increase in children’s speeches; and children start to apply various communicative strategies when they sense impacts from factors such as politeness, social status, power relation, etc.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

**Theoretical Framework**

As the most frequently seen speech act in children, the development of requests has been extensively studied across a wide range of research areas, such as pragmatics, politeness theory, conversation analysis, language acquisition, and language socialization (Ogiermann, 2015). Despite different perspectives provided by researchers applying distinct methodologies and theoretical frameworks, it is noticed that a variety of forms can be used to make requests and that these forms are context-dependent, not interchangeable (Ogiermann, 2015).

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1978/1987) offered a systematic explanation of the choice of forms and governing factors. According to their theory, requests pose threats to recipients and the degree of face threat can be calculated on the basis of three broad variables, namely social power, social distance and imposition (Ogiermann, 2015).

Brown and Levinson’s accounts of requesting acts have inspired a great number of studies on requests. Studies taking a quantitative approach accumulated a vast amount of data that had enriched descriptions of requests (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Rossi (2012) contrasted interrogative requests and imperative forms. Heinemann (2006) further divided interrogative requests into positive and negative forms, explicating their differences and applying conditions. Curl and Drew (2008) compared “Can you” with “I was wondering if” constructions. All these studies revealed different assumptions about entitlement to have the requests granted (Ogiermann, 2015).

Studies in the area of conversation analysis (CA), on the other hand, have paid more attention to the sequential environment of requests. While earlier CA studies on requests focused on preferred and dispreferred responses they received, more CA studies are shifting their attention to other sequential parts in complex request sequences. Henceforward, the study of requests breaks out from the frame of request acts per se, and the strategies taken in order to obtain preferred request responses come into the spotlight. Even though these strategies should be realized in linguistic forms, they are also the results of the development of children’s cognitive abilities, socialization and interactional competence. In 2016, Nguyen and Nguyen conducted a longitude study on a four-year-old child and documented the development of the child’s request negotiation practices after his requests were turned down. The results show that as the child grew increasingly sensitive to the recipient, the sequential context, his entitlement, and the request’s contingency over time, he learned to negotiate a preferred response more tactfully.
When collecting data, except for pursuing their request when immediate grants were not given, the author discovered that children would make pre-requests basing on their predictions about request responses with the help of knowledge about the request recipient, the context, their entitlement expectation, and the recipient contingency. While request negotiations have attracted increasing attention in the past decade (H. Nguyen & M. Nguyen, 2016; Han, 2020), little is known about the strategies children take prior to the base request. To fill this gap, this paper aims to investigate the development of pre-request abilities by a young child in conversations with family members in natural settings. In particular, this paper tries to answer the following questions: When do pre-request practices emerge? What’s the developmental order of different request forms and strategies? What does it mean when children set groundwork for principal requests?

Methodology

Our data come from natural language performance of a four years old girl (alias: Dabao), born in a middle-class Chinese-speaking family in Shanghai, China. Since the girl got easily shy in front of the camera, the author collected data by keeping diaries and making regular audio recordings. Diaries helped to document unexpected yet excellent request sequences, and recordings were conducted at least once a week: usually on the weekend, with each recording lasting from 20 minutes to 60 minutes. This attempts to maximize data capability because it was unpredictable when the child would make requests and when conversations would go to the end. The author started recording in the presence of more than two family members or peers where conversations were more likely to happen. Therefore, the materials we collected were truly natural without any guidance. At the start of data collection (2022-03-12), Dabao was 4;0; by the end of the collection (2022-06-28), she turned 4;4. Chinese was the predominant language in Dabao’s family, Xuzhou dialect was used in the communication between Dabao and her grandparents, and she also knew a little English because her mother taught her some simple English words and sentences since she was three years old.

Adopting a developmental pragmatics and conversational analysis research methodology, this paper transcribed audio recordings into written formats, from which the child’s request sequences were extracted and ordered with request sequences according to their dates. By comparing all the request sequences, we aimed to make a contribution to revealing the developmental order of request sequences, request strategies, and pragmatic competence. This paper also attempted to account for the role that contexts, social distance, power relations and cultural factors played in the child’s shift among various request strategies.

Case Analysis

According to previous research on sequence organization (Kendrick, 2016), a fully expanded request sequence should consist of pre-expansion, an insert expansion, a base adjacent pair, and a post-expansion (see Figure 1). FPP refers to the first part of the pair, while SPP the second part of the pair. All expansion components are composed of one or more adjacent pairs. This sequence organization reveals how a simple adjacent pair is developed into a complicated sequence. Inspired by the classification of pre-sequences in sequence organization, Liu and Yu (2018) put forward the concept of goings-in-front-of-an-action and further categorized it into generic and type-specific goings-in-front-of-an-actions. After all, a new model specialized for Chinese request sequence can be illustrated as pre-sequence + insertion expansion + base sequence + post-expansion (see Figure 1).
Hereinafter, the authors would like to categorize all requesting materials according to this request sequence construction. Then, by comparing and analyzing the contexts where each construction was used, we aim at revealing the underlying factors that can explain children’s preference for one construction, not others. We also want to know when and how children will expand their request sequences with pre-requests or post-requests.

**Request-Response Sequence**

Based on the data we have collected and the findings of other researchers, we find that even though children gradually expand their request sequence by affixing post-expansion, pre-expansion, and insert expansion, the simplest request sequence composed of request-response pervades throughout the whole childhood of the young and is even frequently used by adults in different contexts. This request-response sequence is also likely to be sub-categorized into four types basing on how requests and responses are expressed: direct request + direct response; direct request + indirect response; indirect request + direct response; and indirect request + indirect response. Since our focus is children’s development of pre-request, we are not to spend too much space on this sub-categorization.

However, one question that must be kept in mind is that why these requests are propose directly without laying any groundwork if our purpose is to find out why and when pre-requests occur in children’s requesting practices. The possible answers are probably that when children do not have enough information or knowledge to make assumptions about the final response; when they have not made efforts to figure out whether the response is positive or negative, they tend to initiate requests directly.

**Example 1.** X = Dabao; M = mum

X: 再给我倒一点吧！

(Give me more juice!)

M: 好的。

(Ok!)

**Example 2.** X = Dabao; M = mum

X: 妈妈，我们下次再来吧？

(Mom, can we visit here again?)

M: 嗯。等下次你凑满了30个星星我们再来吧。

(En. When you have collect 30 stars, we can come to play here again.)

X: 好吧。

(All right!)

In Example 1, Dabao and her family were having dinner at the table. After she had drunk up her juice, Dabao wanted more. She handed her cup toward her mum and asked directly “再给我倒一点吧”. Dabao made
a direct request and her mum positively responded by saying “好的” which means ok. Because orange juice is not a kind of normal drinks for Dabao, Dabao did not have enough information to well predict whether her mum would allow her to have more juice. Therefore, she simply put forward her request in a direct way.

Example 2, however, happened out of a theme park where Dabao and her parents had just had a wonderful day. Dabao liked the park very much and hoped strongly that they could come to the park again in the future. However, she was not sure whether her parents would give her their contingency. So, she put forward an indirect request with a question. Compared with a directive or imperative request, the interrogative request showed Dabao’s growing sensitivity to context, social distance, and power relations. She knew that her mom had the power to decide whether she could visit the park again, and she chose to show more respect to her mom, giving her more face.

By far, we can conclude that children are capable of making prediction about whether granting to request will be given or not. And on the basis of their prediction, they decide whether pre-requests are necessary.

**Request + Response + Post Expansion Sequence**

When a request is immediately granted, the request sequence is relatively short. However, immediate granting sometimes is not given, under which condition children would try to negotiate an ideal outcome by constantly adjusting their requesting sequence as their language ability and pragmatic competence are enhanced. This negotiation is part of post-expansion.

Example 3. X = Dabao; M = mom

X: 妈妈，带我出去玩一会儿吧！
(Mom, take me outside and play for a while!)

M: 你要跟奶奶出去吧。妈妈还要看书呢。
(En. You want to go with grandma. Mummy still need to read for a while.)

X: 可是，可是，现在不是已经五点了吗?
(But…but…, isn’t it already 5 p.m. now?)

M: 唉。但是还没有看完啊。
(En. But I haven’t finish my reading yet.)

X: 那你什么时候可以看完?
(Then, when can you finish your reading?)

M: 还要看一会儿哦。
(For a while.)

X: 看到几点钟? 我想跟你玩一会儿嘛！
(Until what time? I really want to play with you for a while!)

M: 嗯……那我再看一个小时好不好? 再看一个小时，然后带你玩会。
(Eh… how about for another hour? One more hour, and I will play with you.)

X: 唉。一个小时哦！
(En. Just one more hour! Ok!)

At age four, Dabao’s self-awareness developed quickly and she wanted her willingness to be satisfied. So, if her request was turned down, rather than giving up, she would make the best of language resources and her knowledge about the world and people around her to find out the best strategy to win a grant for her request.

In Example 3, Dabao was tired of playing with her little brother at home and she wanted her mom’s
accompany. So, she came to her mom’s bedroom and requested directly by saying “mom, go outside and play with me for a while!” However, her request did not win a grant from her mom, who indirectly expressed her unwillingness: Her mom explained that she must do more reading and suggested Dabao go out with her grandma. This actually was against Dabao’s prediction: She did not expect her request to be refused. Instead of giving up instantly or breaking into tears as she had done when she was younger, she pursued her request, starting with a denial marker “but, but”, and told her mom “it is already 5 p.m.”. This constitutes an indirect request that her mom should stop reading, take a break, and go outside with her. But her mom still insisted to read more. And Dabao chose to continue her pursuit by asking for an exact time until she got a promise from her mom to go out with her one hour later.

Pre-expansion + Request + Response (+ Post Expansion)

As children’s requests had been denied several times in a similar context, they gradually developed some ideas about their entitlement toward certain objects and actions, and requested recipients’ contingency, as well as other contextual factors including social status, power relation, etc. However, this does not mean that they are ready to follow those rules and spontaneously suppress their desire. In sharp contrast, to have their desire met, they would take advantage of what they’ve known to bargain for greater granting and permission. This is well exemplified in the pre-expansion of a request.

Below is a well example of pre-requests: how children attempt to win more ground before they officially bring out their requests.

Example 4. X = Dabao; M = mom

X: 妈妈，是不是家里没有的东西就可以买？
(Mom, is it true that we can buy whatever we don’t have at home?)

M: 嗯，家里没有的，需要的就可以买。
(En. If we don’t have them, and if we really need them, then we can buy some.)

X: 但是，但是，我们家没有果冻，对不对？
(But, but, we don’t have any jellies, right?)

M: （笑了）你这小坏蛋，想吃果冻了。你可真行。
(You little wretch! You want jellies. Oh, girl!)

The dialogue in Example 4 happened in a supermarket. Because Dabao was restrained from buying too many snacks such as sweets, cookies, and fried chips for the reason that these snacks contain excessive additives and preservatives, Dabao anticipated that her request of buying some jellies would not be easily accepted. So she chose to win her permission step by step. Firstly, she asked if it was sensible to buy something that her family did not possess. This was obviously an effective tentative question. The answer should always be a “yes” because we only go to market when we are in need of something. Also, her mom knew very well that Dabao might want to buy something. In order to remind Dabao to not ask for things not permitted, mom said “if we don’t have them, and if we really need them”. Then, standing on her mom’s grant that they could buy things in actual need, Dabao gave her second shoot by stating that they did not have any jelly that she wished to buy. At this point, her final intention was perceived by her mom and her indirect request was successfully delivered. Obviously, Dabao’s mom was surprised and amused by her little trick, and this renders a greater chance for her mom to grant her request.
Conclusion

Following our inspection of natural requesting talks between a four-year-old girl and other family members, we can find that children about two years old usually make direct and indirect requests, as well as conventionalized requests. At this stage, they begin to become more sensitive to context, social status, and power relations, making an appropriate choice among direct, indirect, and conventional ways to put forward their requests. However, their request sequences are still as brief as two to three turns without tactful strategies before or after requesting pairs. By the age of three, children’s awareness of factors such as context, social status, and power relations keep growing. They are also learning to pursue their requests step by step after they have received blocking responses, not just crying or yelling, or giving up directly. And this request negotiation expands a brief request-response exchange to a much longer sequence where sub-request and other functional sequences could be inserted. Except for post-request negotiations, three to four years old children are also developing another strategy: They produce pre-requests to pave the way for their final requesting purposes. This is, in fact, the result of the fast development of cognitive abilities, language and interactional competence, knowledge about family rules, their entitlement and their parents’ contingency. When deciding on how to propose their requests while ensuring their requests to be granted, children would combine all previously mentioned factors and knowledge. If they do not think their requests will probably be turned down, they are more likely to be engaged in a base request-response practice; otherwise, they tend to prefix the base sequence with a pre-request expansion.

A limitation of this study is its focus on only one child. This consequently leads to an incomplete picture of the child’s development. Further, even with our efforts to categorize the situation when and how the child makes use of pre-requests to lay ground for her actual requests, her pre-request strategies still differ in how they relate to the local context, the social status, and power relations between the child and her family members, and the family’s evolving social ecology. While these contextual variations are practically unavoidable in naturally occurring data, they may attenuate the generalizability of the findings.

References


