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# Linguistic Politeness at Different Age Levels

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AXIA, GIOVANNA, and BARONI, MARIA ROSA. *Linguistic Politeness at Different Age Levels*. CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1985, 56, 918–927. The general hypothesis is that to be as polite as the situation requires, children must be able to evaluate the “cost” of a request according to the social situation. In the first experiment it was hypothesized that although most studies show that children produce and understand polite sentences at about age 6, they use polite requests in order to circumvent obstacles in natural situations only at a later age level. Spontaneous requests of 58 subjects, half male and half female, divided into 3 age groups (5, 7, and 9 years), were recorded. The situation was structured into 3 levels of difficulty of request accomplishment. The second experiment, carried out with 64 subjects subdivided as before, aimed at examining their ability to attribute social roles according to polite register in a given scene. As expected, only 9-year-olds fully mastered polite register.

The object of our study is the genesis and development of a particular communicative ability: linguistic politeness. Basing her work on literature regarding speech acts and conversation (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1965), Lakoff (1973) identified two general rules of pragmatic competence. The first is “Be clear” and corresponds to Grice’s (1975) maxims. The second, “Be polite,” is specified by “Don’t impose,” “Give options,” and “Make A feel good—be friendly” (Lakoff, 1973, p. 298). These rules are used when the participants’ main aim is not only communicating something but also maintaining good interaction.

Many studies have been carried out on politeness in requests. Requests are governed by special conversational rules (Gordon & Lakoff, 1971; Labov & Fanshel, 1977) constituting preconditions for their validity. These rules involve the needs, abilities, rights, and obligations of the participants. In addition to the basic syntactic form (e.g., imperative), some mitigating expressions are also used (e.g., interrogatives), mainly in interactions between persons of different status, in order to avoid damaging personal relations.

According to Brown and Levinson’s (1978) model, orders and requests are speech acts that somehow threaten the addressee’s “face” in Goffman’s (1967) sense, since they tend to limit his or her freedom of action. A “redressive” action may take the form of linguistic politeness intended to assure the ad-

ressee that the speaker recognizes the addressee’s need for noninterference by others.

Another aspect of the use of politeness in requests comes from Clark and Schunk (1980, 1981), according to whom politeness formulas operate within a cost-benefit system: the higher the cost of the request, the larger the amount of compensatory politeness. A distinction must also be made between politeness and deference in linguistic interactions (Fraser & Nolen, 1981). Politeness is a complex linguistic means used to maintain good interactions with other people. Deference always implies reduction of speaker’s status and in some social situations is out of place and therefore may be impolite.

The use of polite register in requests has been studied widely in relation to the sex of the participants and also with regard to interlocutor status (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist, 1977). In both men’s and women’s speech, the degree of politeness is a marker of social status within a given interaction (Baroni & D’Urso, 1984).

Substantial agreement exists among developmental researchers that two factors affect the production and comprehension of polite register. The first is knowledge of the linguistic form of polite requests; the second is knowledge of pragmatic request rules within a given social and situational context (Ervin-Tripp, 1977). When children achieve mastery of both these abilities, they become capable of making situational inferences which lead in turn to mastery of highly indi-

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rect requests such as "hints" (Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977). Bates (1976a), for example, identified three stages in the development of children's linguistic politeness in requests. In the first stage, which ends at the age of about 4, children produce only direct questions such as imperative phrases. In the second stage, children aged 5–6 can produce all surface syntactic devices of their native language, but are not able to "mask" the content of their requests in order to reach their aims. In the third stage, 7- and 8-year-olds can vary both the content and form of their requests by producing very indirect requests. Prinz (1982) further suggests that politeness in requests is based either on linguistic aspects or content modifications, according to a given degree of directness. Becker (1982) proposes that the general social rules governing communication are also very important, because they are the contextual criteria judging a request as appropriate (see also Ervin-Tripp, 1976). Every request is actually a social act, and using politeness in making requests is a relatively sophisticated means of controlling social assessment. By means of polite requests people keep their interactions alive and also reach their aims. In this perspective, some authors have linked the development of polite requests to the recognition of an important aspect of social context, such as participants' status (James, 1978; Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977; Read & Cherry, 1978).

In order to study the development of politeness in children's requests, therefore, at least two factors must be taken into account. First, theoretical considerations suggest relating ability to produce indirect requests to development of general social skills such as maintaining verbal interactions, overcoming obstacles in communication, and so forth. On the other hand, methodological techniques must be found allowing the phenomenon to be studied in natural social situations. Many studies have indeed investigated requests produced by children in natural and free situations not manipulated by experimental conditions (Bates, 1976a; Dore, 1977, 1978; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Sachs & Devin, 1976). Other studies deal with more structured situations, such as role-playing with dolls or puppets (Bates, 1976b; Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977; Read & Cherry, 1978). Both these methods have produced many interesting findings and useful suggestions for further research. Nevertheless, they seem to be lacking in one point: neither method considers spontaneous speech and the introduction of experimental variables in the same setting. The various social situations

in which children produce requests must be controlled as far as possible to create "natural" settings, that is, spontaneous speech between persons and not with puppets or dolls. It is also possible to introduce controlled variations.

The main hypothesis of the present research is that being polite when making requests is a complex ability because it requires a combination of both linguistic and social skills. To be as polite as the situation requires, children must master the form and content of their requests as well as comprehend their listeners' signals, recognize reciprocal status, and so forth. Although developmental research indicates that by about age 6 children are able to produce indirect requests, it is suggested here that only at a later age can children master polite requests in a natural situation, with social constraints. A time gap is expected between the ability to produce polite sentences and the capacity to use them to balance the social cost of the request. Most studies in sociocognitive growth (Deutsch, 1981; Flavell, Botkin, Fry, Wright, & Jarvis, 1968; Higgins, 1981) indicate that children begin to know the social world adequately when concrete operational thought is well assessed, and that this phenomenon occurs at about 8–9 years of age (Piaget & Inhelder, 1955). According to Damon (1981), social knowledge is of two types: the construction of a network of interpretative categories of social relations, and the ability to understand the messages of the interaction that occurs.

Our hypothesis is that children fully master the use of politeness when they are able to recognize the "cost" of a request with reference not only to the status of both speaker and addressee but also to the interlocutor's reactions to the request. The former capacity is based on processes through which social reality is adequately classified, the latter on the understanding of the interaction that occurs. Therefore, two experiments were carried out. In the first, spontaneous requests uttered by children of different ages interacting with adults were examined. In the second, children were presented with graphic representations of real scenes showing interactions between children and adults. They then were asked to attribute polite and impolite requests to the different characters. In a natural situation children over ages 5–6 were expected to use different degrees of politeness depending on their interlocutor's reactions. Production (Experiment 1) and comprehension (Experiment 2) were expected to appear at the same age level.

## Experiment 1

### Subjects

After a pilot study with 20 subjects of different ages, three age groups were formed: (a) 18 children of mean age 5-1 (range 4-8 to 5-9); (b) 20 children of mean age 7-1 (range 6-0 to 7-10); (c) 20 children of mean age 9-3 (range 8-7 to 9-10). Half the subjects in each age group were male, the other half female. All the children lived in the same area of Padua, a large town in northern Italy.

### Materials and Procedure

Materials were two plastic pegboards, and a bag containing pegs of four colors. The subject was asked to sit at a table in a quiet room of his or her own school. The experimenter sat opposite. After a short conversation intended to put the child at ease, the experimenter introduced the materials and asked if the child wanted to use the pegs to make a figure on the pegboard. If the answer was affirmative, the experimenter said she would make a figure on her own pegboard at the same time, adding, "I'll keep the pegs—when you want one, ask me." The experimenter's status was thus higher than the child's because of both age and control of the pegs. At this point, the experimenter began to concentrate on her peg figure but was prepared to respond to the child's requests. When the subject appeared to have become familiar with the situation and the spirit of the game, two "resistances" were introduced. Their purpose was to signal to the child that his or her request could have been interpreted as a threat to the interlocutor in some way (in the sense used by Brown & Levinson, 1978, pp. 70-73). In the case of "deaf ear" resistances, the experimenter simply behaved as if she had not heard the child's request. If the child made the request again as a way of checking whether he or she had been heard correctly, the experimenter continued the same behavior. Further requests normally were satisfied.

In the second case, the experimenter did not satisfy the request but supplied some motivation such as, "I can't give you a red peg, because I'm using the red ones." The motivation was rather arbitrary since the child knew very well that there were plenty of pegs. This kind of resistance did not lead to an evident break in social relations and was called "motivated refusal." These two resistances are respectively similar to the "unaccounted" and "accounted" refusals of Labov and Fanshel (1977, pp. 87-88). Each type of feedback was aimed at eliciting a new request. Thus, subjects were not asked directly

by the experimenter to increase the level of politeness of their requests, as Bates's (1976a) subjects were. In fact, children were presented only indirectly with the need to change their previous requests and had to make social inferences about how best to do so from contextual information.

Verbal expressions were recorded. We considered three samples of request: the first sentence opening the "game" by the subject and the first requests after each of the two resistances. As regards "deaf ear" resistances, we did not take into account first re-requests if they were the exact repetition of the unfulfilled request, since we considered these to be cases in which children wished to ascertain whether they had been heard.

The order of resistances was counterbalanced across subjects. The experimental design included three comparisons among data: between first requests and requests after the first resistance (within subjects), among age-level groups for requests after "motivated refusals" (between subjects), and among age-level groups for requests after "deaf ear" resistances (between subjects).

### Results

Classifying requests according to a politeness scale presents serious methodological problems. Ervin-Tripp (1977) proposes the use of a general scale based on directness. In our case this could not be used because requests were not free; rather, they were induced experimentally by communicative obstacles. Also, we wished to evaluate not only requesting but also re-requesting, considering "the initial requests and re-requests as part of a larger unit of discourse—the request sequence" (Becker, 1982, p. 25). We therefore used a scale very similar to that proposed by Eisenberg and Garvey (1981). First, we classified subjects' first requests into two categories:

1. *Impolite*: very direct requests, such as imperatives.
2. *Polite*: less direct, mitigated requests, such as interrogative or conditional sentences.

Requests were rated by two independent judges who knew neither the sex nor the age of the subjects. Agreement between judges was 94.8%. Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Requests made after resistances were classified into five categories:

1. *Silence*: Subjects interrupted interaction.

2. *Maintenance*: Subjects either formulated the request in the same way or reinforced it by raising the voice or adding new words. For example, "Rosso" (red). Resistance. "Uno rosso voglio" (I want a red one).<sup>1</sup>

3. *Reduction of request*: Subjects lowered their voices or only modified the *content* of their requests, that is, asked for a peg of a different color while maintaining the same surface linguistic structure. For example, "Dammi un chiodino verde" (Give me a green peg). Resistance. "Dammi un chiodino blu" (Give me a blue peg).

4. *Expressions of deference*: Subjects modified the surface linguistic structure of their previous requests but maintained the same content. As Labov and Fanshel (1977) point out, the identical repetition of a request may be interpreted as a challenge, but the introduction of "mitigators" (p. 95) changes the form of the request. In our case, mitigators could be inserted in the form of courtesy formulas: "Il giallo" (The yellow one). Resistance. "Il giallo per piacere" (The yellow one, please). Or mitigators could appear with the introduction of an interrogative form, for example, "Uno rosso" (A red one). Resistance. "Me ne dai uno rosso?" (Will you give me a red one?). Or they could include a conditional, for example, "Uno verde" (a green one). Resistance. "Uno verde vorrei" (I would like a green one).

5. *Negotiations*: Subjects produced requests that, although not necessarily deferential, took into account the interlocutor's behavior and also assured her that her refusal to satisfy their requests had not caused any problems. This is the case of bargaining. The children did not change the content of their previous requests but tried to maintain a good interaction by producing very indirect requests, such as: Resistance. "Qual'è quello che ti serve che non mi ricordo?" (Which one do you want, I don't remember?). "Un altro blu" (Another blue one). Resistance. "Allora basta—un altro me ne serve e basta" (That's enough then—I just want one more, that's all). This category included requests in which the children modified the content of previous requests but also tried to reassure their addressee. For example, "Dammi un chiodino verde" (Give me a green peg). Resistance. "Ah, be', non importa, dammi un chiodino blu" (Oh well, it doesn't matter, give me a blue one). This last kind of request is completely different from "reduction" requests

(category 3). In this case, a kind of "face-oriented end" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 63) was satisfied, in the sense that potential damage to the addressee's "face" (in this case freedom of action) is limited.

Expressions of deference and negotiations were considered to be categories of linguistic politeness. In contrast, maintenance was considered typically impolite. Silence and reductions showed that subjects were aware of some obstacle in the interaction but were unable to cope with it by linguistic means. For this reason categories 1 and 3 were considered linguistic impoliteness categories.

Requests after resistances were rated by two independent judges with the same procedure used for rating subjects' first requests. Agreement between judges for requests after "deaf ear" resistances was 84.3%; for requests after motivated refusals it was 82.7%.

Nonparametric statistical tests were used: McNemar's Test for dependent samples and the chi-square test for independent samples. The rejection region for these analyses was  $\alpha = .05$ . The first result was that the first request almost always tended to be impolite in all age groups, but the occurrence of a resistance significantly increases politeness for higher age levels (see Table 1). Five-year-olds almost never increased politeness level after resistances; however, 7-year-olds did (first request compared to requests after resistances for two politeness categories: McNemar Statistics = 7.11,  $p < .01$ ). Nine-year-olds also increased politeness (first request compared to requests after resistances for two politeness categories: McNemar Statistics = 7.36,  $p < .01$ ). These data show that it is only from the age of 7 that children can use the polite register to overcome interaction difficulties when the interlocutor raises the cost of request accomplishment. In the following tables the groups are slightly smaller than those in Table 1, because six subjects were not able to continue the interaction after the first resistance, showing reactions of silence and embarrassment.

A second result illustrates ability in reacting verbally to motivated refusals (see Table 2). There is a significant difference among age groups in the use of politeness after motivated refusals (three age groups compared for two politeness categories:  $\chi^2[2,52] = 14.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Each age level was dis-

<sup>1</sup> Children's answers were not always morphosyntactically correct in Italian, but the translations in parentheses do not necessarily reflect this.



TABLE 1  
DIFFERENCES IN USE OF POLITE REGISTER AT DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS IN  
FIRST REQUESTS AND IN REQUESTS AFTER RESISTANCES

AGE LEVELS	REQUESTS	
	First	After Resistances
5 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	2	3
Impolite subjects .....	16	15
7 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	4	13
Impolite subjects .....	16	7
9 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	5	16
Impolite subjects .....	15	4

TABLE 2  
DIFFERENCES IN USE OF POLITE REGISTER AT  
DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS AFTER THE TWO  
RESISTANCES

AGE LEVELS	RESISTANCES	
	Motivated Refusal	Deaf Ear
5 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	3	1
Impolite subjects .....	12	11
7 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	10	9
Impolite subjects .....	8	10
9 years old:		
Polite subjects .....	16	9
Impolite subjects .....	3	11

tinct from the next one (5-year-olds compared to 7-year-olds for two politeness categories:  $\chi^2[1,33] = 4.31, p < .05$ ; 7-year-olds compared to 9-year-olds for two politeness categories:  $\chi^2[1,37] = 3.61$  with Yates corrections,  $p < .10$ ).<sup>2</sup> In general, there were hardly any polite requests in the 5-year-old group; they began to appear in the 7-year-old group and became predominant in the 9-year-old group.

There was also a significant difference among the three age groups in the number of polite requests after “deaf ear” resistance (three age groups compared for two politeness categories:  $\chi^2[1,47] = 6.22, p < .05$ ) (see Table 3). Here too, although 5-year-olds

did not increase their politeness, 7-year-olds did (5-year-olds compared to 7-year-olds for two politeness categories:  $\chi^2[1,31] = 3.49$  with Yates corrections,  $p < .10$ ).<sup>3</sup> Nine-year-olds behaved like 7-year-olds.

In each age group, polite and impolite requests after the two resistances were also compared. In order to have two independent samples, each age group was subdivided into subjects who had received a “motivated refusal” first and those who had received a “deaf ear” resistance first. The reduction of the number of subjects made Fisher’s exact probability test preferable to the chi-square test. The rejection region for these analyses was  $\alpha = .05$ . Results show that the 5-year-olds hardly ever used polite register. Seven-year-olds also did not show different reactions when the experimenter’s resistance changed, but they used polite register in about 50% of their requests. Nine-year-olds used polite register according to the type of resistance by the interlocutor indication (two resistances for two politeness categories: Fisher’s exact probability test:  $p < .05$ ).

The data were subjected to post-hoc analysis to see if the types of polite (category 5 vs. 6) and impolite (category 2 vs. 3) request varied with the different types of resistance (“motivated refusal” and “deaf ear”) (see Table 3). The two politeness categories (“expressions of deference” and “negotiations”) appeared to be used in different ways according to type of resistance. Nine-year-olds tended to use “expressions of deference” if no

<sup>2</sup> In order to evaluate this result with greater precision (see Lehman, 1970, p. 62), the critical level corresponding to the value obtained by statistics was calculated:  $\hat{\alpha}(\chi^2 = 3.61) = 0.05778 > 0.050 = \alpha$ . The difference between  $\alpha$  and  $\hat{\alpha}$  is clearly very small.

<sup>3</sup> In this case, too, the critical level was calculated:  $\hat{\alpha}(\chi^2 = 3.49) = 0.06149 > 0.050 = \alpha$ .

TABLE 3  
PERCENTAGE OF RE-REQUESTING FALLING INTO FIVE CATEGORIES OF RESPONSE

AGE LEVELS	CATEGORIES				
	Silence	Maintenance	Reduction	Deference	Negotiation
5 years old:					
Motivated	6.6	6.6	66.6	6.6	13.3
refusal . . . . .	(1)	(1)	(10)	(1)	(2)
Deaf ear . . . . .	8.3	75.0	8.3	8.3	...
	(1)	(9)	(1)	(1)	
7 years old:					
Motivated	...	...	44.4	11.1	44.4
refusal . . . . .			(8)	(2)	(8)
Deaf ear . . . . .	...	26.3	26.3	31.6	15.8
		(5)	(5)	(6)	(3)
9 years old:					
Motivated	...	...	26.3	5.7	68.4
refusal . . . . .			(5)	(1)	(13)
Deaf ear . . . . .	...	20.0	35.0	35.0	10.0
		(4)	(7)	(7)	(2)

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are numbers of subjects in each cell.

answer was given to their first request and “negotiations” when faced with a motivated refusal (“expressions of deference” and “negotiations” for two resistances: Fisher’s exact probability test:  $p < .01$ ). Though less strongly, 7-year-olds were oriented in the same way. Yet, 5-year-olds hardly ever used polite requests but tended to maintain the same request after “deaf ear” resistance, only modifying it after motivated refusal (“maintenance” and “reduction” categories for two resistances: Fisher’s exact probability test:  $p < .025$ ).

### Discussion

The most important result of this experiment shows that children master polite register to overcome difficulties in natural interaction at about the age of 9. It is only at this age that they can grade linguistic politeness according to type of resistance to satisfy an interlocutor. In contrast, 7-year-olds always increase their politeness whatever the cost signaled by the interlocutor, either when the interlocutor pretends he or she has not heard or when the interlocutor gives a motivated refusal. Five-year-olds hardly ever use polite register, even after resistances.

Second, we observe that requests addressed to an interlocutor “turning a deaf ear” as well as to one expressing refusal verbally and motivating the refusal are qualitatively different for all age groups. In fact, although in an extremely impolite way, even younger children tend to modify either the content or the tone of their request when faced with a

motivated refusal, thus showing their ability to react to their interlocutor’s behavior, which signals an increase in the cost of request accomplishment. The “deaf ear” response is a clumsy, ostentatious way of not satisfying a request; younger children are incapable of coping with this difficulty and merely ask again with more or less determination. Seven- and 9-year-olds choose to increase the deference of their language. In contrast, “motivated refusal” requires children to use a much more sophisticated reply, and, in fact, after motivated refusal, “negotiations” predominate among polite requests. However, it is only at about 9 years of age that children show complete mastery of the situation by increasing the politeness level of their requests.

These data may be summarized as follows:

1. *Impoliteness level*: characterized by impolite requests, with qualitative distinction among different resistances (5-year-olds).

2. *First politeness level*: characterized by polite requests, with qualitative but not quantitative distinction between the two resistances (7-year-olds).

3. *Second politeness level*: characterized by polite requests, with qualitative as well as quantitative distinction between the two resistances (9-year-olds).

Although the ability to distinguish among the interlocutor’s reactions occurs rather early, reacting politely to an inter-

locutor signaling the cost of request accomplishment comes later. The younger child has an inventory of polite sentences as well as the ability to distinguish interaction difficulties but cannot combine the two abilities suitably. The use of linguistic politeness implies not only an evaluation of the feedback by which the interlocutor shows the cost of a request but also sufficient capacity to categorize the two statuses in the interaction.

It could be hypothesized that children master politeness when they clearly understand the social setting of the interaction, even though they are not aware of it. Only within this context are they able to match their interlocutor's reaction with their polite inventory. In order to test this hypothesis, we prepared a second experiment, this time dealing with the understanding of linguistic politeness as a signal of hierarchy in a given interaction. In this case the situation was not natural as in Experiment 1. Social interactions were represented through pictures, and subjects were asked to identify the addressee of a request among the characters illustrated.

Experiment 2

Method

*Subjects.*—Subjects included 64 children, half male, half female, divided into three groups: (a) 25 subjects of mean age 5-4 (range 4-4 to 5-10); (b) 20 of mean age 7 (range 6-2 to 8-0); (c) 19 of mean age 9-6 (range 9-0 to 10-0).

*Material.*—The materials included one picture showing an adult and a child sitting on a two-place sofa in front of a television. One of two other pictures showing an adult and a child, respectively, could be inserted into the principal scene. All characters were male.

*Procedure.*—Subjects were presented with one scene and asked to say what it represented. This was done in order to make sure that they had correctly understood the roles of the participants (adult-child) and the purpose (watching TV). At this point one of the two other characters (adult or child) was inserted and, through the experimenter's voice, spoke one of the following sentences: "Spostati!" (Move over!) or "Vorresti spostarti, per favore?" (Would you move over, please?)

Although these two sentences are evidently polarized, we checked their position on an 18-degree politeness scale with an adult Italian sample (Baroni & Axia, 1984). The chosen polite sentence falls at a high level of politeness but is not the most polite possi-

ble—we did not want to vary other factors such as social distance and familiarity by using an over-polite expression. Nevertheless, in an Italian speaker's mind, no doubt could arise regarding the polarization of the two sentences. Sentences such as those used here with different politeness values had to be chosen, partly because we could not completely control another important politeness variable, that is, intonation.

Immediately following the request, the experimenter, pointing to the character who had spoken, asked: "Who is he speaking to?" After the subject had answered, the experimenter asked why the child had given that answer by saying: "What makes you think that?"

Every subject was presented with one character uttering one request. The four experimental conditions included adult impolite, adult polite, child impolite, child polite. Each subject was asked to indicate the addressee (adult or child) in one of the above situations.

Results

Because the aim of this experiment was to check children's comprehension of polite versus impolite register as influenced by addressee's status, results were ordered according to this variable only. Fisher's exact probability test was used. The rejection region for these analyses was  $\alpha = .05$ .

No difference was observed in the attribution of polite and impolite requests at the age levels of 5 and 7. The first significant difference occurred at the age of 9 (see Table 4). At this age the polite sentence tended to be spoken to adults and the impolite one to chil-

TABLE 4

DIFFERENCES IN ATTRIBUTION OF POLITE AND IMPOLITE REQUESTS ACCORDING TO SPEAKER'S AND ADDRESSEE'S STATUSES AT DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS IN EXPERIMENT 2

AGE LEVELS	ADDRESSEE	
	Adult	Child
5 years old:		
Polite request . . . . .	8	4
Impolite request . . . . .	7	6
7 years old:		
Polite request . . . . .	6	4
Impolite request . . . . .	4	6
9 years old:		
Polite request . . . . .	8	2
Impolite request . . . . .	3	7



TABLE 5  
PERCENTAGE OF ANSWERS FALLING INTO FOUR CATEGORIES OF MOTIVATION AT  
DIFFERENT AGE LEVELS IN EXPERIMENT 2

AGE LEVELS	CATEGORIES			
	No Answer Egocentric Motivation	Incidental Aspects	General Social Rules	Register
5 years old . . . . .	36 (9)	44 (11)	20 (5)	...
7 years old . . . . .	20 (4)	60 (12)	20 (4)	...
9 years old . . . . .	...	78.9 (15)	10.5 (2)	10.5 (2)

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are numbers of subjects in each cell.

dren (polite requests compared to impolite requests for two addressee's statuses: Fisher exact probability test,  $p < .05$ ). Children's explicit motivations for their choices ranged among the following categories:

0. *No answer*: Children gave no motivation, or only answers of the type "Non so" (I don't know).

1. *Egocentric motivations*: Children gave motivations referring to themselves, for example, "L'ho capito perché ci ho pensato" (I understood because I thought about it); "L'ho capito da sola" (I understood it by myself).

2. *Incidental aspects*: Children referred to incidental aspects of the interaction, for example, "Perché il papà era troppo vicino" (Because his daddy was too close) or made inferences which were not justified immediately, for example, "Dice al papà di spostarsi perché deve parlargli al bambino" (He tells his daddy to move over because he must speak to the child).

3. *General social rules*: Children referred to some general social rules without any reference to request content, the most common being the following: children generally speak with children, adults with adults. Some examples include, "Lo dice al bambino perché è amico del bambino" (He says that to the child because he is a friend of his); "Lui è un bambino e si rivolge a un bambino della mia età" (He is a child and is speaking to a child of my age); and "Perché questo è un signore e quello è un signore, e allora i signori parlano con i signori" (Because this one is a grown-up and that one is a grown-up, and grown-ups speak with grown-ups).

4. *Register*: Children gave motivations referring to request register. This category

contains only two examples, both referring to "Spostati!" (Move over!): "Perché non si può chiederlo ai genitori, perché i genitori sono grandi e si deve portare rispetto" (Because you can't ask parents, because parents are grown-ups, and you must be respectful); "Perché sono tutti e due bambini. Non poteva dirlo al papà, non era a casa sua" (Because they are both children. He couldn't say that to the daddy, he was not in his own house).

No statistical difference was found among the three age levels. In general, children of all age levels tended to give category 2 motivations. Egocentric motivations decreased from 5 to 7 to 9 years, and motivations referring to linguistic markers of the addressee's status began to appear at age 9 (see Table 5). Because the task required good awareness of the metalinguistic rules of requesting, it was not surprising to find a very small number of motivations that took request register into account.

## Conclusion

The aim of this research was not to establish at what age children produce and understand indirect requests, but to start an investigation of the conditions under which they are able to resolve communicative problems using language. The accentuation of the interactive aspect of requests in Experiment 1 showed that the capacity to react to the cost of the request in relation to the interlocutor's behavior is quite an early acquisition. On the other hand, the capacity to maintain good interactions by increasing the politeness of the request occurs at a later age. The results of Experiment 2 reveal one aspect of the development of the capacity to formulate requests using polite register. Only from the age of 9

do children use linguistic politeness as a criterion in judging the appropriateness of a request according to the addressee's status.

In conclusion, handling the politeness of requests in context is a complex ability going beyond the simple "deferent" formulation of requests. In daily situations, requests are often reformulated since various types of obstacles intervene in the interaction. In other words, there are various extralinguistic factors that modify the way in which requests are formulated or reformulated. In this research we studied the development of the capacity to take two factors into account: (a) cost of request accomplishment as signaled by the interlocutor; (b) appropriateness of register according to addressee's status. Many other factors are being studied for further information on the capacity to use linguistic politeness in natural settings. For example, interlocutor's status versus that of the speaker (subsets of this factor are age, sex, role, and other situational variables); cost of request accomplishment, which must be counterbalanced by the degree of politeness; aim of maintaining the interaction, that is, the general aim of politeness rules; linguistic competence, that is, possession of an inventory of indirect request formulas; and social distance, that is, degree of acquaintance, familiarity, and so forth. Our results suggest tying study of the development of polite discourse with that of knowledge of social realities.

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