Social Adjustment and Politeness in Preschoolers

by Elizabeth Bates and Louise Silvern

Preschoolers' understanding of polite behavior was found to relate to their social sensitivity toward adult expectations.

Numerous studies have investigated aspects of language acquisition that are clearly social in nature. These include the child's use of language as a function of age and status of the listener (6, 9, 11), and the development of politeness in speech (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 12). An assumption in all these studies is that, because the content of these linguistic issues is clearly social in nature, their development must have important implications for more general aspects of social functioning in children. However, to our knowledge there have been no studies demonstrating the supposed link between sociolinguistic development and non-linguistic aspects of social functioning. We designed a study to test that link by examining the development of polite forms in children against several measures of social growth.

A relationship between age-appropriate development of polite forms and children's social adjustment could be expected on two grounds. First, adults may prefer children who meet their requirements for politeness. The child who is less proficient at social uses of language may meet more criticism, and may even be labeled as a "conduct problem," in some cases requiring mental health assistance. Second, the development of polite forms of speech (in both comprehension and production) may reflect a broader comprehension of social contexts and the expectations of listeners. That is, sociolinguistic development may be

Elizabeth Bates and Louise Silvern are on the faculty of the Department of Psychology, University of Colorado. A longer version of this paper, including details of scale construction and methodology, is available from the second author. The authors are grateful to Cathy Bento for assistance in data collection and analysis. They also thank the faculties of Sacred Heart Religious School and Boulder Day School for their effort and cooperation.

regarded as one reflection of the child's underlying cognitive competence as it is applied to interpersonal skills (see Shantz (10) for a review of the social-cognitive area).

This study examines the development of politeness in speech in preschool children as it relates to their IQ, chronological age, social adjustment and social class.

Ninety-nine preschool children from two preschools in Boulder, Colorado, participated in this study.[1] Forty-five of the children attended School 1, a daycare center designed primarily to serve single-parent families on welfare. Fifty-four of the children were from School 2, a predominantly middle-class, Roman Catholic preschool. School 1 provided a contrasting, primarily lower-class sample selected to lend information about the generalizability of findings relating politeness to social adjustment. Children in School 1 ranged in age from 31 to 68 months, with a mean age of 52 months. Children in School 2 ranged in age from 51 to 96 months, with a mean age of 76 months. Both samples were predominantly white, and no bilingual children were included.

Three types of measures were obtained for each child: a teacher rating of social adjustment, a test assessing comprehension and production of polite

[1] This study was based on a similar study by Bates (4) done with Italian preschoolers in the Rome area in 1975. Although IQ and social adjustment measures are not available from that study, on the whole the results support the data gathered from the American children.

speech in a game situation, and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test of Intelligence (Form A). The social adjustment measure consisted of a 12-item questionnaire of Likert-type ratings along a 4-point scale. (Details on the development of this measure, based upon Peterson (8) are available from the authors.)

The politeness task consisted of production and a comprehension section, with the production portion administered first serving in part as a training task for the rest of the experiment. In the production section, the child was introduced to "Mrs. Jones," a handpuppet of an elderly woman (manipulated by the experimenter). The experimenter explained to the child that Mrs. Jones was the owner of the candy and would be glad to give the child a piece of candy if he/she would ask "really nice." After the child asked the puppet for candy, the experimenter played at whispering with Mrs. Jones, and then told the child, "That was very good and Mrs. Jones has told me that she will surely give you a piece of candy, but she just loves to hear you ask her. So could you ask her again *even nicer*?" At this point, regardless of the child's response, he/she was given a piece of candy. The experimenter then said, "Now Mrs. Jones has told me that she will give you another piece of candy, but again she just loves to be asked. So think of the *nicest* way you know how to ask for a piece of candy and ask her for it." Again, regardless of the child's response, he/she was given a piece of candy and praised by Mrs. Jones for being "very nice."

After the child's responses were elicited in this manner, the comprehension portion of the experiment was administered. The child was introduced to two identical frog puppets with large gaping mouths. The child was told that this was a game in which he/she was now in charge of the candy "just like Mrs. Jones." The frogs would each ask the child for a piece of candy; the child was to watch and listen very carefully to both of them and then decide which frog had asked in the nicest way. Each time the child would give a piece of candy to the frog that asked the nicest.

Within this format, eight pairs of requests were administered to each child. The eight paired comparisons we constructed included contrasts of conditional vs. indicative mood (e.g., "will you" vs. "would you"), presence and absence of please, harsh vs. soft intonation, formal vs. informal address, (i.e., "Miss Jones" vs. "Jane"), "may I" vs. "can I," and direct vs. implied requests (e.g., "Would you give me some candy?" vs. "Do you have any candy left?").

To check our own intuitions concerning which alternative in each pair would typically be considered "more polite," the same items were administered in written form to 20 adults. There was 100 percent agreement on most items in the expected direction. With the exception of the last item, which specifically tested harsh vs. soft intonation, the experimenter (who delivered the items orally while manipulating the puppets) was extremely careful to preserve identical intonations across all item pairs, varying only the specified verbal elements.

After each item pair, the child was always asked "Why was this one better? Why did he say that was nicer?" This served two functions. First, it elicited useful data concerning the child's ability to perceive, recall, and explain the elements that were varied in the requests. Second, it served repeatedly to focus the child's attention on the verbal aspect of these requests.

The requests elicited from the child were scored for the total number of linguistic elements used to achieve politeness. One point was given for each device used, including marked softening or "singsong" intonation, contrastive stress on polite words, lexical items like "please," use of modal verbs (e.g., "can I," "will you"), use of conditional mood (e.g., "could I," "would you"), interrogative as opposed to imperative form, and use of the formal title "Mrs. Jones" as a vocative. This type of politeness index was calculated for the child's first request, for the total number of polite forms used in subsequent requests, and for the total number of devices used across all requests.

The total was not simply an addition of the elements used in requests one, two, and three. For example, if the word "please" appeared in all three requests, it appeared only once in the total score. This was, then, a "type" rather than a "token"measure. Finally, a score was calculated for the *difference* in the number of polite elements in first vs. subsequent requests, to detect the amount of increase in politeness the child could produce on demand, regardless of his/her starting point on the first request.

For the second, comprehension portion of the politeness task, a comprehension score was derived by a simple frequency of the number of correct choices out of eight paired comparison items. In this case "correct" means the request which the sample of 20 adults was most likely to select when presented with the same pairs.

Finally, a score was calculated for the number of correct *explanations* a child gave for the various items no matter which item he or she chose. For example, if a child incorrectly chose "will" as nicer than "would," but explained his/her answer by saying "This frog said 'would,' and I don't like that word," the child received an incorrect score for comprehension, but a correct score for explanation. In a sense, then, the comprehension score reflects the degree to which the child's understanding agrees with adult judgments, while the explanation score reflects his/her ability to perceive and reproduce the relevant linguistic variation regardless of his/her judgment of it.

The results of the study revealed differences in performance on the three measures of politeness.

Differences between schools. Although on a series of t-tests on comprehension, production, and explanation there were significant differences between the schools in favor of School 2 on all measures, t-tests also indicated that children at School 2 were significantly higher in chronological age and IQ. A one-way analysis of covariance removing the effects of IQ and chronological age removed all the differences between the schools suggesting that differences in politeness may have been related to cognitive development factors rather than to social influences.

On the teacher ratings of social adjustment, there were also systematic differences between the two schools. T-tests yielded significant differences on 9 out of 12 items, again more favorably for School 2. These differences may have reflected the difference in IQ and chronological age of the two schools or there may well be real individual differences in social adjustment for children at the

two schools. A third possible explanation is that, whereas the politeness and IQ measures were all obtained by the same experimenters, the teacher ratings were made by different teachers with potentially very different philosophies concerning the nature of social adjustment. Hence, if the teacher rating forms were interpreted and applied in systematically different ways at the two schools, combining the data would be questionable. Therefore, relationships between teacher ratings and other variables were analyzed separately for the two schools.

Sex differences. T-tests were performed on the means for comprehension, production, and explanation for boys vs. girls. There were no significant differences in performance on any of the measures.

Relationships among politeness ratings. When neither age nor IQ was partialled out, the three politeness measures all correlated very strongly, ($p < .001$ for all inter-correlations). However, in a second analysis removing the effects of mental age (effectively combining both IQ and chronological age), the pattern of results changed markedly. Comprehension and explanation continued to be related to one another very strongly, at +.34 ($p < .001$). But the relationships of these two measures to production were no longer significant.

Politeness and chronological age. Because the children at School 2 were both older and brighter, the relationships of all measures to chronological age were calculated after removing the systematic difference in IQ. Table 1 presents the correlations between chronological age and the various politeness measures, with the effect of IQ removed, for the two schools combined and for each school considered separately. In the combined sample, comprehension, correct explanation and total production were all strongly related to age. Within schools, however, a somewhat different pattern emerged. In School 2, all three measures related significantly to age. In School 1, however, the relationship between chronological age and comprehension was not significant.

Within the production measure, subscores were available for the number of polite elements used in the first request vs. the number used in subsequent requests (i.e., after the child had been instructed to "ask again nicer"). Also, by

Table 1: Relationships between chronological age and politeness indices with IQ partialled out

	School 1		School 2		Both schools	
	r	p	*r*	p	*r*	p
Comprehension	−.15	n.s.	+.24	<.04	+.28	<.002
Correct explanation	+.52	<.001	+.58	<.001	+72	<.001
Total production	+.27	<.05	+.21	<.05	+.41	<.001
Production on request 1	+.52	<.001	+.34	<.001	+.55	<.001
Production on request 2	+.31	<.02	+.30	<.01	+.44	<.001
Difference between first and later requests	+.08	n.s.	+.05	n.s.	+.06	n.s.

subtracting the first request score from the score for subsequent requests, another measure was obtained reflecting the amount of increase a child can produce on demand. In both schools combined, the number of elements in Request 1 and the number in subsequent requests were each significantly correlated with chronological age. However, the mean *difference* between first and later requests did not correlate with age. This failure to find a developmental effect on amount of increase might simply indicate that the manipulation did not work, i.e., children ignored the instructions to "ask again nicer." However, a t-test comparing number of elements in first vs. later requests revealed large, significant increases in politeness ($t = 5.55$, $p < .001$). Hence, the manipulation did work, but the net amount of increase in politeness produced "under pressure" did not develop with age, at least not between three to seven years.

Politeness and social adjustment. Initial analysis yielded two subscores from the adjustment measure: "immaturity" and "conduct problems." Table 2 represents the correlations between the two teacher ratings subscales and the politeness indices, with the effect of mental age partialled out. For the conduct problem subscore, the only politeness measure to correlate significantly was comprehension. There was a non-significant tendency for production to relate to conduct, but in opposite directions in the two schools. In School 1, conduct problems were positively related to production at $p < .10$, while in School 2 the same relationship was in the negative direction at $p < .10$. There was a slight negative relationship between the immaturity subscale and production in School 2 ($p < .06$). Otherwise, the immaturity scale did not relate significantly to politeness at either school, on any of the measures.

These findings revealed that comprehension of politeness was related significantly to individual differences in social adjustment, while production and explanation were not.

On the other hand, explanation and production were strongly related to age in both schools. The comprehension measure bore a lower relation to age in the middle-class setting and no significant relationship at all to age in the lower-

Table 2: Relationships among teacher ratings and politeness indices with mental age partialled out

	Teacher ratings							
	Conduct problem				Immaturity			
	School 1		*School 2*		*School 1*		*School 2*	
	r	p	*r*	p	*r*	p	*r*	p
Comprehension	−.44	<.002	−.28	<.02	−.04	n.s.	−.12	n.s.
Total production	+.21	<.10	−.17	<.10	−.26	<.06	−.05	n.s.
Correct explanation	+.11	n.s.	+.04	n.s.	−.06	n.s.	−.14	n.s.

class setting. This pattern suggests that social factors and cognitive developmental factors had a different but complementary influence on sociolinguistic development. The comprehension measure was more sensitive to social influences (at the individual and the group level), while it was less reflective of cognitive developmental factors. Explanation and production were primarily related to general mental development and were less sensitive to social variation.

The notion of complementary distribution of influence is intriguing. But why should these indices of politeness divide up in this particular fashion? At face value, one might predict that production would be more related to social adjustment measures and to group differences than would the seemingly more "passive" comprehension measure. What is it that distinguishes the comprehension index from the other two politeness measures? One explanation is that the comprehension measure reflected specific aspects of adult content, while the other two indices permitted the child to operate in a more idiosyncratic and/or creative fashion. A child received a correct score on a comprehension item only if he/she chose that request from an item pair that corresponded most closely to specific adult linguistic standards. By contrast, on the production measure a child could have received a reasonably good score by following a "theory" of politeness that was only loosely related to the adult model. The child could, for example, have multiplied "pretty pleases," whispered his/her second request, or (as occurred more than once) he/she could have kissed Mrs. Jones on the cheek. None of these elements for softening requests are likely to appear in a mature adult request.

Similarly, on the explanation measure a child could have had his/her own idiosyncratic notion of what is or is not polite, and still have obtained a high score. All the child needed to do was to perceive and reproduce the relevant linguistic variation (e.g., "Because he said 'want' and he said 'would' ") regardless of the "correctness" of his/her own preference for one or the other of the two requests. Hence, the comprehension measure reflected sensitivity to specific adult content for politeness. The explanation measure reflected a more general ability to attend to and remember linguistic variations that may or may not be viewed as polite.

And the production measure reflected yet another dimension, the child's ability and willingness to use *whatever* means are at his/her disposal in a situation that demands politeness without specifying content. It is possible, then, that the production and explanation measures tapped general abilities, less tied to specific social situations, while the comprehension measure required a specific series of social experiences with particular content.

The relationship between social behavior and social understanding appeared to be rooted in deeper levels of cognitive development.

According to the social-cognitive approach, social adjustment is affected not only by environmental influences, or reinforcements, but by the child's level of understanding of such social factors as the difference between his/her own per-

spective and the point of view of others. Our findings on the relationship between politeness indices and adjustment cannot be explained simply in terms of teachers' approval of children's use of polite speech, since production was not strongly related to teacher ratings. Instead, it is likely that both the teacher ratings and the politeness indices (in particular comprehension) reflected some more general difference in social sensitivity in young children.

The failure to find sex differences on any of the politeness measures was also somewhat surprising. Cultural stereotypes suggest that girls are more sensitive to both linguistic and social factors in the environment. Our results suggest that, at the very least, the ability to understand and produce politeness in a forced choice or demand situation is the same for both sexes.

One last point should be made about the relationship between certain aspects of sociolinguistic development and the social adjustment measure. School conduct problems, the aspect of the adjustment measure which did correlate with comprehension of politeness, has been found in other studies to be a strong predictor of mental health referrals for the same children later in their lives (7). This is, then, not a trivial aspect of social development. It seems clear that sociolinguistic development is tied not only to general cognitive and linguistic factors in development, but also to important differences in social sensitivity and competence in young children.

REFERENCES

1. Aksu, A. "Request Forms Used by Turkish Children." Unpublished manuscript, University of California at Berkeley, 1973.
2. Bates, E. "The Development of Conversational Skill in 2, 3 and 4-Year-Olds." *Pragmatics Microfiche*, Cambridge University, 1975.
3. Bates, E. "Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics in Child Language." In D. Morehead and A. Morehead (Eds.) *Directions in Normal and Deficient Child Language*. Baltimore: University Park Press, 1976.
4. Bates, E. *Language and Content: The Acquisition of Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 1976.
5. Ervin-Tripp, S. "Wait for Me, Roller Skate!" In C. Mitchell-Kernan and S. Ervin-Tripp (Eds.) *Child Discourse*. New York: Academic Press, 1976.
6. James, S. "The Effect of Listener Age and Situation on the Politeness of Children's Directives." Paper presented to the Stanford Child Language Forum, Stanford, April 1976.
7. Kohlberg, L., LaCrusse, and Ricks. "The Predictability of Adult Mental Health from Childhood Behavior." In B. Wolman (Ed.) *Manual of Child Psychopathology*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1972.
8. Peterson, D. R. "Behavior Problems of Middle Childhood." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 25, 1961, pp. 205–209.
9. Sachs, J. and J. Devlin. "Young Children's Knowledge of Age-Appropriate Speech Styles." Paper presented to the meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, December 1973.
10. Shantz, C. "The Development of Social Cognition." In E.N. Hetherington (Ed.) *Review of Child Development Research*, Vol. 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
11. Shatz, M. and R. Gelman. "The Development of Communication Skills: Modifications in the Speech of Young Children as a Function of the Listener." *SRCD Monographs 5*, 1973, p. 38.
12. Shatz, M. "How Young Children Respond to Language: Procedures for Answering." Paper presented to the Stanford Child Language Forum, Stanford, 1975.