

Effect of Listener Age and Situation on the Politeness of Children's Directives¹

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Received February 18, 1976

Twenty-one children between the ages of 4:6 and 5:2 years made a speaker doll address other dolls that represented an adult, a peer, and a younger listener in command and request situations. Analyses of the politeness of the elicited directives revealed that the effect of the listener's age was greatest in the command situations, with the adult listener receiving the politest directives, followed by the peer and the younger child, respectively. The listener age effect diminished in the request situations, where the child had to ask a favor of the listener. In these situations, the children were very polite to all three listeners. The results are discussed in terms of status relationships between the speaker and the listener.

INTRODUCTION

Little is known about children's knowledge and use of the pragmatic rules that govern what a speaker says and how he says it in different communicative situations (Bates, 1974; Cazden, 1970). The child, in order to use pragmatic rules, first must be able to notice the relevant characteristics of his listener and of the situation. He must then be able to adjust what he says and how he says it on the basis of this information. There is growing evidence that even young children adjust the speech they address to different listeners (Shatz and Gelman, 1973; Ervin-Tripp, 1974) and seem, therefore, to be

¹This article is taken from a doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, under the direction of D. K. Vetter.

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using pragmatic rules in their communicative interactions. The specific listener characteristics and other situational characteristics to which they respond are unclear, however. This lack of information suggests the need for studies in which listener and situational characteristics are either carefully noted or experimentally manipulated as independent variables. In the present study, the effect of the listener's age on the politeness of children's directives was studied in situations designed to evoke either commands or requests.

Politeness was chosen as a reflection of pragmatic knowledge because the principle *Be polite* has been proposed as a part of adult pragmatic competence (Lakoff, 1973). Lakoff argues that adults adhere to the rules of politeness, *Don't impose*, *Give options*, and *Make the addressee feel good*, in their communicative interactions. If Lakoff's proposal is correct, then the rules of politeness are part of the pragmatic knowledge the child will acquire on his way to adult competence. Support for this assumption is found in the results of a study by Bates (1974) which indicates that children as young as 3 years seem to have some notion of relative politeness in speech. Directives were studied for three reasons: they can be realized in several different syntactic forms, such as statements, interrogatives, and imperatives, which seem to reflect different degrees of politeness (Ervin-Tripp, 1973); they appear very frequently in the speech of young children (Bates, 1974; Ervin-Tripp, 1977); and they are relatively easy to elicit from children (Alvy, 1973; Bates, 1974).

The politeness of the directives used by a speaker appears to be affected directly by the status relationship between the speaker and the listener. Studies with adults have shown that polite request forms such as "May I please use your phone?" are more likely to be addressed to a listener whose age or professional position places him in a superior role (Pfuderer, 1968; Dikeman and Parker, 1964). For children, age tends to be one of the most potent factors in assigning status (Emmerich, 1959). It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that preschool children would assign superior status to an adult listener, equal status to a peer-aged listener, and subordinate status to a younger child. Results of work by Sachs and Devin (1976) indicate that the listener's age affected the kind of speech young children used. In addition, Ervin-Tripp (1977) has suggested, based on her observations of young children in natural communication situations, that the listener's age is one of the major variables influencing the form of children's directives.

The nature of the communicative situation also might be expected to affect the politeness of a speaker's directives. There are at least two distinctly different types of situations which will evoke directives. In one type, the request situation, the speaker wants or needs something from the listener, and he imposes on the listener by asking him to do a favor. In the other type, the

command situation, the listener infringes on the speaker's rights in some way, and the speaker orders him to stop the imposition.

It was hypothesized for the present study that preschool children would adjust the politeness of their directives on the basis of the listener's age status, with the most polite directives being addressed to the adult listener and the least polite to the younger child. It also was hypothesized that the nature of the situation would affect politeness, with the directives produced in the request situations being more polite than those produced in the command situations.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 21 monolingual English-speaking children, nine boys and 12 girls, who ranged in age from 4:6 to 5:2 years, with a mean age of 4:9. All were enrolled in either a private nursery school or a 4-year-old kindergarten which served a middle- to upper-middle-class community. With the exception of four of the children, all subjects had younger siblings.

Materials

The stimulus materials consisted of six bendable plastic dolls and several other toy objects. The six dolls included a 12-inch "Ken" doll, which represented an adult listener; two 7-inch boy dolls and two 7-inch girl dolls, one of each sex to represent the speaker in all situations and the other to represent a same-aged listener in the peer-as-listener situations; and a 5-inch female toddler-type doll, to represent a 2-year-old listener. Other toy objects used were a dog, some wooden steps, a watering can, a ball, a carton of paraffin bottles representing soda pop, a TV set, and an ice cream cone. All objects were sized appropriately in relation to the dolls.

Experimental Task

Directive utterances were elicited from the subjects in various role-playing situations with dolls. Precedence for using a role-playing procedure involving dolls can be found in Sachs and Devin's (1976) study in which they required preschool children to role-play dolls representing different speakers. In the present study, the child was asked to role-play himself as a speaker

addressing three other dolls which represented three different-aged listeners (adult, peer, and younger child). The use of this role-playing procedure had two obvious advantages over the communicative interaction situation used in other studies of children's speech modifications (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Shatz and Gelman, 1973): it ensured that the types of utterances of interest were evoked and it allowed for control of confounding factors such as speaker-listener familiarity and differential feedback from the listeners. Therefore, the effect of only one listener characteristic and one situational factor was investigated.

There were eight role-playing situations used; four were designed to elicit commands and four to elicit requests. These eight situations were used for each of the three listeners. The following are examples of a command and a request situation.

Request Situation 1:

Your dog, [dog's name], has run away and is lost. You look everywhere for him. You would like for this [man/boy/girl/little child] to help you find your dog, wouldn't you? What would you say to [him/her]?

Command Situation 1:

Your ball is over here. This [man/boy/girl/little child] picks your ball up and is taking it away. Hey, you don't want [him/her] to do that, do you? What would you say to [him/her]?

Procedures

Each child was involved in three different experimental sessions, one session for each of the three listeners. Each session consisted of the same eight experimental situations; therefore, it was necessary to allow some time between the three experimental sessions in order to diminish possible carry-over effects. The least amount of time allowed between sessions was 5 days and the most was 9 days.

All experimental sessions were conducted in a quiet, private room located in the school facilities. Each subject was tested individually by the same white female experimenter. All experimental sessions were tape-recorded on a Wollensak tape recorder (model No. 1500 SS).

In the first experimental session, each subject was told that he/she was going to play a game with dolls and that one doll was going to be him/her. The child then was shown either the two girl or the two boy dolls, whichever was appropriate, and asked to choose the one he/she thought looked the most like him/her. Once the child had chosen a doll, that doll was called by the subject's name and was used as the speaker throughout all the experimental situations. Next the child was introduced to the dolls representing each of the

listeners. For each of the dolls, he was told what age person was represented. For example, for the adult doll, he was told, "This is a big grownup man. See how much bigger he is than you are?" For the peer doll, the subject was told that "This [boy/girl] is the very same age you are, so he is [appropriate age]. Look, he's just the same size as you are, too." The younger doll was assigned an age of 2 years, and the size difference between the dolls was pointed out again. The child was reminded again of the supposed age of each doll at the beginning of the session in which that doll was the listener.

The order in which the child spoke to the different-aged listeners was counterbalanced so that seven subjects spoke to the adult doll first, seven spoke to the peer first, and seven spoke to the younger child first. Following two practice trials to ensure that the child understood the task, the eight experimental situations were presented. The order of presentation for the experimental situations was randomized by shuffling the cards on which the situations were written. No two subjects received exactly the same order of presentation for the same listener.

The tape recordings of all experimental situations were transcribed by the experimenter. Reliability of the transcriptions was established by having an independent judge transcribe 25 randomly chosen responses from each of the eight audio tapes (200 out of 504 total responses). Agreement between the independent judge's and the experimenter's transcription of the 200 randomly chosen responses was 99%.

Scoring

Each of the children's transcribed responses was assigned a scale value representing the degree of politeness. The numerical scale of politeness was empirically derived by having 40 adults perform paired comparison ratings on 14 sentences which represented the types of directives produced by the children. Scale values were derived for each of the 14 representative sentences according to the method of transformation described in Edwards (1957, pp. 33-34). The 14 sentences, the type of directive represented by each, and the scale value derived for each sentence are shown in Table I.

The children's responses were classified as one of the 14 types of directives described in Table I, or they were placed in a fifteenth category labeled "unscorable." Out of 504 responses, only three were judged unscorable. Those responses which could have been placed in more than one category were placed in the category with the highest politeness value. For example, a response which was an imperative containing both *please* and an explanation was placed in the category *Imperative-Do something + please*

Table I. Paired Comparisons Stimuli and Derived Scale Values

Sentence	Type of directive	Scale value
May I have that magazine, please?	Interrog.—May I + please	4.070
May I have that magazine?	Interrog.—May I	3.134
Would you give me that magazine, please?	Interrog.—Would/Could/Will you + please	3.113
Can you give me that magazine, please?	Interrog.—Can you + please	2.742
Can I have that magazine, please?	Interrog.—Can/Could I + please	2.728
Would you give me that magazine?	Interrog.—Would/Could/Will you	2.459
Can you give me that magazine?	Interrog.—Can you	1.886
Can I have that magazine?	Interrog.—Can/Could I	1.755
Give me that magazine, please.	Imper.—Do something + please	1.688
Don't take that magazine, please.	Imper.—Don't do something + please	1.562
Give me that magazine because I have to read an article in it.	Imper.—Do something + explanation	1.206
Don't take that magazine because I have to read an article in it.	Imper.—Don't do something + explanation	1.081
Don't take that magazine.	Imper.—Don't do something	0.161
Give me that magazine.	Imper.—Do something	0.000

rather than in the *Imperative—Do something + explanation* category because the former had the higher scale value. Reliability of classification was established by having an independent judge place half of the 504 responses, randomly chosen, into the 15 categories. Agreement between the experimenter's and the judge's classifications was 94%. When a response was placed in a particular category, it was assigned the scale value belonging to that type of directive. The three responses placed in the unscorable category were not included in the analyses of the data. For each subject, the four commands per listener were averaged and the four requests per listener were averaged together; each subject then had six mean politeness values to be analyzed statistically.

RESULTS

In order to determine if sex of the subjects and/or the listener which they addressed first were factors affecting the politeness of the responses, a two-factor analysis of variance for unequal *N*'s (Bruning and Kintz, 1968) was

computed. No significant differences were found for either sex ($F < 1.00$) or listener addressed first ($F = 1.120$) or for the sex \times listener interaction. Since neither factor affected the politeness of the children's directives, the data were collapsed across these factors.

Figure 1 shows the mean politeness of the directives addressed to the different listeners in both the command and the request situations. Note that, generally, the mean politeness values for directives increased according to the listener's age in both types of situations. Note, also, that the mean politeness values for the request situations were higher than those for the command situations. The politeness values assigned to the children's responses were subjected to a treatments \times treatments \times subjects (listener age \times situation \times subjects) analysis of variance (Lindquist, 1953). Significant effects were found for the listener age, $F(2, 40) = 53.445$, $p < 0.001$; the situation, $F(1, 20) = 218.25$, $p < 0.001$; and the listener age \times situation interaction, $F(2, 40) = 6.232$, $p < 0.005$.

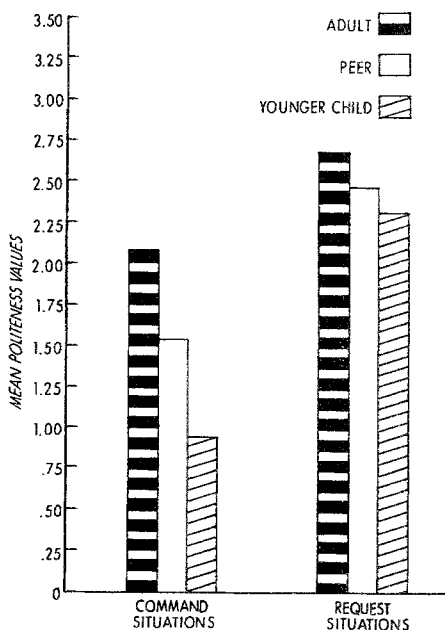


Fig. 1. Mean politeness values for directives addressed to different-aged listeners in command and request situations.

In order to evaluate the significant interaction between listener age and situation, components analyses (Hays, 1963) were computed. In the command situations, a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) was found between the politeness of the directives addressed to all three listeners, with the adult receiving the most polite speech, the peer next, and the younger child the least polite (see Fig. 1). In the request situations, there was no significant difference ($p > 0.05$) between the politeness of the directives spoken to the adult and the peer or between those addressed to the peer and the younger child. However, there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the request situations between the politeness of the directives addressed to the adult and the younger child. The requests spoken to the adult were more polite (see Fig. 1). Thus there were differences in the politeness of the directives addressed to all three listeners in the command situations, but differences only between the directives addressed to the adult and the younger listener in the request situations.

An analysis of the form and content of the directives was done to provide a description of the kinds of changes the children made in adjusting politeness. The percentages for each type of directive are shown in Table II. The children used interrogative forms almost exclusively in the request situations, regardless of listener, and most frequently in the command situations when they were addressing the adult listener. They used the direct imperative most often with the younger child, while the peer listener received modified imperatives most frequently. The lexical item which showed the most consistent pattern of differential use was *please*. Across both types of situations, *please* was used about 84% of the time with adult listeners and only 37% with the younger listeners.

Table II. Percentage of Directive Types Addressed to Different-Aged Listeners in the Command and Request Situations

Type of directive	Commands (%)			Requests (%)		
	A	P	YC	A	P	YC
Interrogative	49	20	14	93	92	87
Modified Imperative	50	61	38	7	8	12
Direct imperative	1	19	48	0	0	1

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that, in the command situations, the children adjusted the politeness of their directives on the basis of their listener's age status. The fact that the commands directed to the peer-aged listener were less polite than those directed to the adult, but more polite than those to the younger child, indicates that the children were not adjusting politeness simply on an adult-child basis, but on the basis of age status relative to the speaker. This finding supports the suggestion by Ervin-Tripp (1977) that age status is one of the listener characteristics which young children perceive and which affects the kind of speech they use.

The effect of the listener's age status on the children's directives is very similar to the previously reported effect of listener status on adults' directives (Pfuderer, 1968; Dikeman and Parker, 1964). The preschoolers in the present study were most polite to the adult listener, who had superior age status, and least polite to the younger child, who was subordinate in age status, in both the command and request situations.

The children's adjustments in the politeness of the directives addressed to the different listeners were affected by the nature of the situation as well as by the age status of the listener. The directives produced in the request situations were more polite than those produced in the command situations. Thus, in those situations where the children had to ask a favor of the listener, they became more polite.

The results indicate, however, that the children did not simply increase the politeness of their directives additively in the request situations; rather, they increased politeness differentially for the three listeners (see Fig. 1). In the command situations where the children had to assert their own rights and tell the speaker what to do, the age status of the listener seemed to determine how polite the directives were. However, in the request situations where the children had to ask a favor of the listener, they became very polite to all three listeners. The effect of age status diminished so that the only difference in politeness was between directives addressed to the adult and directives addressed to the younger child.

One explanation for the interaction between the situation and the listener is that the status of the peer and the younger child increased in the request situations where the children had to ask a favor. The children placed themselves in an inferior position and their listeners in a superior position in the status relationship by giving the listener the power to grant or deny a favor. The status relationship resulting from the request situations evidently took precedence over the status relationship based on age differences.

Although age is a listener characteristic which affects children's perceptions of listener status, it appears that situational factors have a direct influence also.

The high percentage of interrogatives addressed to the adult listener and imperatives to the younger listener is consistent with the pattern of directive use that Ervin-Tripp (1974) found in natural communicative situations. She reported that 3-year-old children addressed imperatives more often to children than to adults and that when 3-year-olds used interrogative requests they usually were adult directed. By 4 years of age, she found that nurseryschool children were addressing embedded imperatives and interrogative requests to adults fairly frequently.

It could be argued that the children's differential use of imperative and interrogative directives reflects their reliance on at least one of the rules of politeness proposed by Lakoff (1973). One could argue that the children were adhering to the rule *Don't impose* when they used interrogative forms almost exclusively in the request situations. Since the nature of the request situations involved imposing on the listener by asking a favor, the children's use of the more polite forms could be interpreted as an attempt to lessen that imposition. In the command situations, the children were not imposing on the listener when they used a direct or modified imperative, because the listener had violated the children's rights in some way. On the other hand, the use of an imperative in the request situation would seem to constitute an even greater imposition on the listener. Thus adherence to the rule *Don't impose* could explain the low incidence of imperatives and high incidence of interrogative forms across listeners in the request situations. Such an explanation, however, involves the assumption that preschool children rely on rules which have been suggested as part of adult pragmatic competence (Lakoff, 1973). It is not clear from this study that the kinds of speech modifications the children produced would have required knowledge of such sophisticated pragmatic rules as those proposed by Lakoff. Future research should seek to determine to what degree, if any, children are aware of and use these politeness rules.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Robin Chapman and John Saxman for their helpful comments during the preparation of the manuscript and to express her appreciation to the teachers and children at St. Andrews nursery school and at Edgewood kindergarten for their invaluable cooperation.

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