

The acquisition path of expressing social meaning in the morphosyntax of requests

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Background. The question of how humans process social information is one of the biggest topics in cognitive science (Frith & Frith 2023). This paper focuses on the morphosyntactic reflexes of processing social information by looking at how requests are performed depending on different social scenarios and by taking into account the acquisition path of expressing social meaning. There is a long tradition to investigate the variety of requesting forms in different languages (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), but what kind of role this variation plays in an acquisitional perspective is mostly investigated with a focus on functional typologies and competencies (Cameron-Faulkner 2014; Zufferey 2016)—not with a focus on form (see Kilani-Schoch 2021 for a recent exception). We follow recent work in the processing literature that doubts the distinction between direct speech acts (e.g., the imperative for requests) and indirect forms (e.g., *Can you VP?* for requests); see Ruytenbeek et al. (2017); Trotzke & Reimer (2023). We adopt a theoretical position according to which forms such as *Can you VP?* can in fact be viewed as the direct/canonical version of a request (Trotzke 2024). This view casts new light on investigating the acquisition of requests.

Methods. We conducted a free-production task on German requesting forms with 57 adult students (mean age: 23.9) and 16 children (8 kindergarten children/mean age: 4.8; 6 school children/mean age: 9.2). We elicited utterances that they would use to request something from an addressee in different social situations that varied in SOCIAL DISTANCE to the addressee and in the URGENCY of the request. (1) below presents two examples from our materials: 'X' was replaced by either 'your sister', 'fellow student', or 'stranger on the street' for adults and by 'your mommy', 'your best friend', or 'stranger on the street' for children. (1a) exemplifies low urgency, and (1b) illustrates high urgency. Contexts were slightly adopted for children. Children were tested in-person, and adults were tested online. We created six different items, and each item was embedded in six different contexts (2 URGENCY x 3 SOCIAL DISTANCE), leading to sextets. The sextets were allocated to six lists so that each participant saw each item only in one condition.

Results. We coded the data with respect to two morphosyntactic features that captured best the variation in this free-production task. The features were: \pm interrogative(polar) and \pm addressee orientation. The latter feature concerns the variation between forms such as *Can I please have X?* [-addressee orientation] vs. *Can you please give me X?* [+addressee orientation]. The results generally show a high number of interrogatives (88% adults, 92% school children, 94% kindergarten children), and an increase in addressee-oriented expressions (kindergarten children 29.2%, school children 41.8%, adults 78%). There was no effect of URGENCY, but of SOCIAL DISTANCE: For adults, talking to an acquaintance ($\beta = 1.7$, SE = 0.9, $t = 1.89$, $p = .0584$) or a stranger ($\beta = 2.5$, SE = 0.96, $t = 2.57$, $p = .01$) led to more addressee-oriented expressions than talking to the sister (Fig. 1), and talking to an acquaintance ($\beta = 1.9$, SE = 0.96, $t = 1.93$, $p = .053$) or a stranger ($\beta = 2.3$, SE = 1.01, $t = 2.32$, $p = .02$) led to more interrogatives than talking to the sister (Fig. 2). For school children, talking to a friend led to more addressee-oriented expressions than talking to mommy ($\beta = -6.2$, SE = 2.39, $t = -2.6$, $p < .01$) or a stranger ($\beta = -3.63$, SE = 1.60, $t = -2.6$, $p = .02$) (Fig. 3). The same tendency was observed for kindergarten children.

Discussion. The results indicate that requests are mainly performed by polar interrogatives and that so-called 'direct' requests (imperatives) play a vanishingly small role across all social settings and across all age groups. Even the feature of high urgency could not elicit more direct forms of requesting. While interrogatives are thus the default form of performing a request in all groups, adults vary their use or non-use of interrogatives depending on social distance whereas children do not. Where we did find more variation in the data is whether adults and children use \pm addressee-oriented expressions: The increase of addressee-oriented means on the acquisition path is a morphosyntactic domain that goes along with the inventory of modals in requests (*May I...? #May you...? vs. Can I...? Can you...?*)—a systematicity that has not been looked at before.

References

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- (1) a. Du hast Schnupfen und Dir läuft die Nase. Was sagst Du zu X, um ein Taschentuch zu bekommen?
‘You have a cold, and you’ve got a runny nose. What do you say to X to get a tissue?’
- b. Du hast Schnupfen und Dir läuft die Nase. Du versuchst schon ganz lange, ein Taschentuch zu bekommen, aber niemand reagiert. Du wendest Dich noch einmal an X. Was sagst Du, um ein Taschentuch zu bekommen?
‘You have a cold, and you’ve got a runny nose. You’ve already been trying hard to get a tissue, but no one is reacting. You’re approaching X again. What do you say to X to get a tissue?’

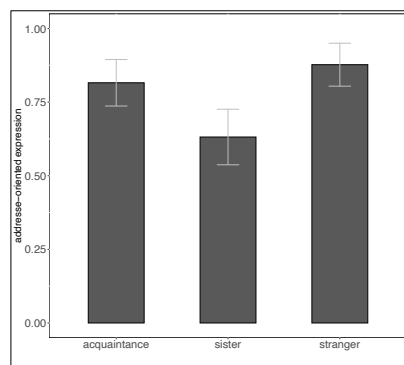


Figure 1.

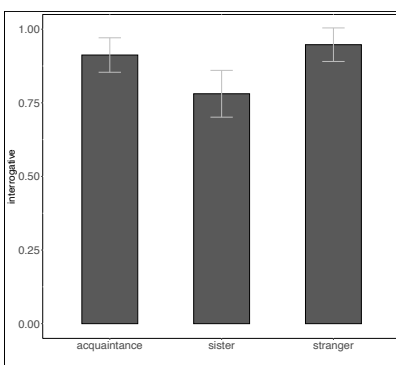


Figure 2.

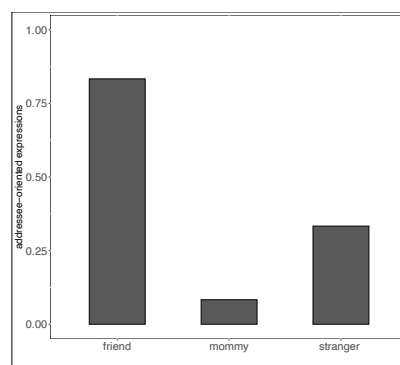


Figure 3.