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Children's Elicited Use of Pragmatic Language Functions: How Six- and Seven-year-old Children Adapt to the Interactional Environments of Story Scenarios

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Pragmatic language skill involves adapting to an interactional environment where a communicator must interpret and originate communicative acts. This study used an elicitation procedure to reveal how 80 six- and seven-year-old children adapted to the pragmatic context of a story and furnished a remark that would be pragmatically appropriate for a story character to utter. Children 'spoke for' characters in about 70% of the contexts and thus revealed facility in conceptual perspective-taking and attributing mental states to others. The use of self-generated extra-textual language reveals one way that pragmatic language skill is at work when young children comprehend and respond to text. Given these findings, a model of children's transaction with narrative based on interpretation of others' mental states, understanding of pretence and characterisation, and pragmatic language skill is proposed.

Introduction: Purpose, Background and Rationale

First grade (six- and seven-year-old) children demonstrate complex pragmatic language capabilities. They participate in lengthy discussions of a topic and produce messages that are contingent upon and logically related to one another. They are often aware of a listener's status and needs. They comprehend stories well and construct elaborate narratives, both truthful and imaginary. But are they able to take on the conceptual perspectives of others – including narrators and story characters? When transacting with story (Rosenblatt, 1978), can they ascribe mental states to possibly fictitious individuals who are known to them only in the fabricated conditions of the story?

The purpose of this paper is to explore whether children of this age will take on the perspective of a story character and 'speak for' a character in a given scenario. This task is intended to reveal children's awareness of the pragmatic language acts represented in narrative text. It appears that this capability is predicated upon pragmatic awareness during oral discourse; that is, the ability to adapt to an interactional environment where a communicator must both interpret and originate communicative acts appropriately and functionally in that situation (Mey, 1993). How children develop the ability to converge upon the pragmatic meaning of the language of a text is not yet well understood. Panther and Thornburg (1998) suggest that understanding a speaker's or author's intentions requires the ability to rapidly inference and generalise within a situational context. These inference patterns and their cognitive bases have been speculated

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cognitive, social, and linguistic conditions that contribute to the attainment of the complex set of capabilities under investigation.

Relevant Literature

Language awareness

Language awareness relates to how well an individual can explicitly and consciously talk about language. This capability allows a child to have more control over language and actualise numerous purposes, including language learning, self-expression, aesthetic response, and interpersonal communication (James & Garrett, 1991). It has been suggested (Nicholas, 1991) that a young language user may be aware of language even if conscious reflection has not been articulated. In the course of development, children become more able to describe their awareness of language. Earlier awareness is evidenced by use of conventional patterns of discourse, narration, morphosyntax, paralinguistics, and other message-organising devices. The potential for conscious awareness typically emerges at about age seven and coincides with the child's enhanced ability to produce discourse relative to his or her social identity. (Children in the present study were not asked to articulate pragmatic awareness. Use of the needed message function was evidence of situated, albeit unconscious, pragmatic awareness.)

Pragmatic language: Message function

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that explores the use, purpose, and intention of spoken or written communications. Pragmatic intention is generally driven by the circumstances under which a message is shared.

A message's syntactic form is dependent upon its pragmatic function (Hickmann, 1995; Smith, 1977). As Chomsky (1957) postulated, grammatic ability appears to be inborn. Pragmatic achievement, however, is both innate and socially conditioned (Kates, 1980). By experiencing both success and failure interacting in a social field, a speaker's pragmatic competence emerges from the ability to use linguistic elements to effectively meet social demands. Children learn how to 'fine tune' messages to fit the communicative needs of a situation (Bruner, 1978; see also Nicholas, 1991, on pragma-linguistic awareness evidenced by children's ability to manipulate discourse). Pragmatic competence is also cultivated when children read a variety of texts and thereby experience diverse interactional environments.

As Ninio and Snow (1996: 22) aver, 'utterance meanings do constitute discrete categories'. Austin (1962) developed an exhaustive classification of up to 10,000 pragmatic intents in English. Many researchers have proposed typologies of meaningful communicative acts that reflect the various linguistic, social, and cognitive skills necessary for intentional communication. Ninio and Snow (1996) provide a comprehensive description of codification schemes which serve to either isolate or synthesise the social-cognitive, procedural, cultural, and developmental properties of discourse.

Halliday (1973, 1975) detailed how seven discrete categories, representing the single-function vocalisations and gestures used by children before the acquisition of speech, develop into the early uses of language. Four categories of func-

imaginative functions that underlie the more complex interpersonal and intrusive pragmatic behaviours being executed.

Pragmatic language: Coherence

Coherence provides evidence of information processing. Communicators recognise the intent of a speaker's message then respond in a manner that will build meaning over the entirety of a discourse. The speaker must have the ability to rapidly presume a degree of shared knowledge and access an applicable 'script' (Hickmann, 1995; Ninio & Snow, 1996). The goal is to produce contingent, logically sequential messages that cohere to a topic (Bruner, 1975; Roth & Spekman, 1984). This pragmatic skill is dependent upon sustaining attention and employing linguistic memory throughout a discourse. Mishler (1975) noted that awareness of roles and relationships also influences how successfully a child builds meaning. (Skill in coherence is demonstrated by the participants in the current study when they utter the contingent statements that might be said by story characters in the given communicative scenarios.)

Awareness of pretence

While there is a body of research on children's spontaneous pretend play, there is less research on children's understanding of the pretend actions of another person. By age three children generally understand the mental states of imagination, pretence, dreams, and truth-telling (Woolley, 1995). Joint pretend play, where the child comprehends the pretend actions of a play partner, emerges in the preschool years. Children preserve roles introduced by pretend play partners and interact in ways that perpetuate their partners' pretences. The child must apply real-world knowledge to the pretend world (Andersen, 1992; Walker-Andrews & Harris, 1993). Awareness of pretence is similarly in evidence when children comprehend a story's pretend circumstances (e.g. talking animals). (The children in the present study needed to become aware instantaneously of the pretence of each story scenario and perpetuate the given pretences.)

Narrative language

Research reveals that narrative structure is spontaneously employed by children when talking amongst themselves. Children first narrate what people do; by school age they narrate what they and other people think and feel (Bruner, 1990). The narratives of four-year-old children feature character dialogue and ascription of mental states to characters, such as thinking, planning, and knowing (Wolf *et al.*, 1984). Children develop the ability to narrate from a number of points of view and tell what has happened, what usually happens, and what ought to happen (Astington & Olson, 1995). Preece (1987) longitudinally sampled the informal talk of children aged five to seven to look for natural incorporation of narrative structure. Preece's subjects routinely produced anecdotes of personal experiences, fantasy narratives, and collaboratively constructed narratives.

Narrative discourse has its own conventions. The components of story scripts are often recognisable (Sleight & Prinz, 1985). Each scenario used in the present study could be classified as an *orientation*, a story element that provides information about characters, actions, setting, motivation, mood, or social context (Labov

(Brodmann's area 8) and in the posterior cingulate cortex during story comprehension tasks necessitating the attribution of mental states (Fletcher *et al.*, 1995). This decentring process is likely to begin when the child is about four, the age at which children develop conceptual perspective taking – the ability to infer what the beliefs, desires, and mental states of another person might be (Marvin *et al.*, 1976). Movement towards the decentring of the child's perspective may be achieved as the child is taught to appreciate an author's point of view or has the experience of identifying with story characters. (Children in the present study needed to ascribe mental states to the story characters in order to 'speak for' the characters subjectively.)

Recognising the multiple domains of research reviewed, this study rests upon the postulate that important aspects of social-cognitive-linguistic development can be observed when children 'speak for' story characters. The hypothesis of this study is that an elicitation task will reveal the degree to which six- and seven-year-old children demonstrate use of four language functions (Halliday, 1973) when 'speaking for' story characters.

Procedures and Results

An elicitation task, referred to as Eliciting Language in Pragmatic Scenarios (ELPS), was developed to assess children's ability to 'speak for' a story character. Target responses use the regulatory, heuristic, personal, and imaginative functions (Halliday, 1973). Creating the ELPS required the following procedures.

Step 1: Creating the elicitation items

To produce an instrument that resembles a picture book and which would presumably be appealing and comprehensible to six- and seven-year-olds, 44 black and white clip art illustrations were selected. Each picture features a boy or girl or adult posed in a common activity. There are pictures such as a boy riding a rocking horse, a boy patting a baby held by a man, a girl pitching a baseball, a woman working at a computer. An approximately equal number of pictures of each gender were used. Ethnically, the people illustrated appear to be Anglo-European, of African heritage, and Hispanic.

The illustrations appear one per page, at the top of the page, centred. Below the illustration is a statement meant to elicit use of one of the target language functions. There is a space for recording the participant's response, verbatim. Of the 44 items, 11 correspond to each function. No practice items are given. The directions read, 'I'm going to show you a picture and read you a little story. You're going to tell me what the people in the story are supposed to say. You say what they should say.'

For example, beneath the picture of the boy patting the baby, the item reads 'Daddy is going to give the little boy a direction. Daddy is going to tell him how to touch the baby. What will Daddy say?' Four levels of response quality are delineated for each stimulus item: 0, 1, 2, or 3 points. Points correspond to how well the subject encodes the target message function.

The point system provided a categorical means of classifying responses. The ELPS Scoring Guidelines can be found in the Appendix. For example, responses

the researcher. The children's ELPS packets were independently scored by the researcher and two speech-language pathologists. These raters (referred to as Rater D and Rater J) were trained during a four-hour practice session during which they independently rated Participant 35's packet (44 items) then collaboratively critiqued their scoring decisions relative to the researcher's scoring guidelines.

Raters D and J each scored 17 packets. Of the 34 packets, 17 had been randomly marked with a star (*) by the researcher. The raters exchanged packets then scored only the starred packets. Thus, including packet 35, Rater D and Rater J scored 18 packets in common. The researcher scored all 35 packets. No one saw any other person's score sheets.

Table 1 compares raters' scores and details percentages of item agreement. There were five packets (27.7% of the sample) on which Raters D and J were in 100% agreement. A significant level of agreement was reached for all configurations.

Table 1 Comparison of ELPS raters' scores

	Mean score awarded		*Range*	
Rater D	98.00/132		76–122	
Rater J	102.64/132		85–122	
Researcher	95.71/132		72–121	
	No of packets scored in common	*Percentage of item agreement*	*Correlation (Spearman's rho, 1-tailed)*	$p \leq$
Rater D and Rater J	18	86.09%	0.92	0.0001
Rater D and Researcher	27	67.63%	0.87	0.0001
Rater J and Researcher	25	73.54%	0.88	0.0001

Note: $p \leq 0.05$.

The children's responses to the imaginative items were often difficult to score. Some children's remarks were convoluted, fragmented, or self-contradictory. The considerable variations in response that can be the product of childlike reasoning had not been anticipated when the scoring guidelines were written. During training the researcher informed the raters that some imaginative responses would not match scoring guidelines. The researcher advised the raters to make note of unanticipated responses so that response types that occurred more than once could be scored with consistency. Although the raters were consistent across packets, they tended to award many threes and a number of zeros on the imaginative questions. The examiner awarded a greater variety of zeros, ones, twos, and threes.

Step 4: Reliability and statistical item analysis of ELPS

As the ELPS was administered once to each child, its reliability was measured by the Spearman-Brown split-half formula for internal consistency. Half of the generally agreed-upon items were assigned to Form A and half to Form B. The generally disagreed-upon items were also assigned to Forms A and B.

The internal consistency (Spearman-Brown formula) for the remaining 33 test items, representing only the imaginative, regulatory, and personal functions, was calculated to be 0.80 ($p \leq 0.0001$). Although additional attempts were made to increase reliability, this remained the highest level that could be attained. Items on which the raters had the greatest number of scoring disagreements were removed. With one regulatory, one personal, and one imaginative item excluded, agreement remained 0.80 ($p \leq 0.0001$). Table 4 shows the correlation of function subscores with scores for the entire test after elimination of the items that were not agreed upon consistently and/or were not discriminatory.

Table 4 Correlation of language function subscores with ELPS total scores, when 14 items were eliminated

	Correlation to overall score	$p \leq$
Imaginative	0.43	0.005
Regulatory	0.47	0.002
Personal	0.92	0.0001

Note: $p \leq 0.05$.

Step 5: The ELPS II

This shorter, more stable version of the instrument featured 30 items: 10 regulatory, 10 personal, and 10 imaginative worth up to 3 points each. Twenty-three male and 22 female additional children (selected from the same pool and according to the same selection criteria) were assessed by the researcher four to eight weeks after the ELPS group.

The ELPS II was scored only by the researcher. Of the 90 points possible on the test, the mean score was 63.22 (70.24%), with a range of 39 (43.3%) to 81 (90%). The average score was approximately 2% poorer and the range of scores was slightly lower on ELPS II, at 43.3% to 90%, as opposed to 54.5% to 90.9% on the ELPS. Median and modal scores were 71.1% (ELPS were 71.2%). Overall scores were slightly lower, possibly because the easier, non-discriminating items had been removed. Comparison data are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5 Comparison of ELPS and ELPS II results

	ELPS	*ELPS II*
Sample size	35 subjects	45 subjects
Number of items	44 items	30 items
Mean score	95.71/132 (72.5%)	63.22/90 (70.24%)
Score range	72–121(54.5%–90.9%)	39–81 (43.3%–90%)
Median score	94 (71.2%)	64 (71.1%)
Modal score	94 (71.2%)	64 (71.1%)

Piagetian tasks

While the main task of this study was related to conceptual perspective taking, Piagetian measures of perceptual perspective taking were administered (see Marvin *et al.* (1976) for a discussion of the two related capabilities). This was done

characters, such as parents, doctors, teachers, and children. However, the characters that one might intuitively suppose that children would readily portray, such as a mother, were not easily assumed. Participants were sometimes able to issue the character's 'I'-statements or similar self-statements. Clearly the use of personal language, as compared with the awareness of how a character must use personal language, is a somewhat different skill. Lower scores are evidence of participants' inability to project themselves into the narrative, take on the role of the speaker, and offer self-description. Perhaps developmental 'theory-of-mind' considerations make it difficult for children to assume the role of another individual who is speaking about himself or herself (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995). Andersen (1992) surmised that children do not 'speak for' adult characters because the actual social roles of parent, doctor, teacher, etc. have never been available to them.

Using the imaginative function was the most complex for participants. Although the imaginative use of language is noted in four-year-olds' and kindergartners' play (Pellegrini, 1984; Pinnell, 1975), participants' responses were often unclear, self-contradictory, and idiosyncratic. The imaginative function differs in some important ways from the other three functions under study and analysis of outcomes requires some detail.

Some of the imaginative items required the participant to provide a statement that a character would make to express his or her mental state during a make-believe scenario. (Example: A boy is shown riding a rocking horse. The item reads, 'Nicholas rides his horse to imaginary places. Where does Nicholas pretend that he rides? What does he say?') Other scenarios asked children to discuss their knowledge of wizards, space creatures, Halloween creatures and the like – fantasy beings that anyone may hold in mind. A child could ride his toy horse and imagine and pretend; this scenario could be represented in the real world. However, the wizard, winged horse, etc. have no real-life counterparts (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). It has been suggested that, for children, thinking *of* something that only exists in the mind (e.g. a wizard) is not very different from thinking *that* something exists or has occurred but is simply not present in the here-and-now (e.g. Nicholas riding). The latter, too, only exists in the mind at the current moment (Woolley, 1995). There is other evidence that perhaps children are able to maintain both real and imaginary modes of thought simultaneously (Leslie & Thaiss, 1992; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Pretending simply means acting as if a certain situation existed (Lillard, 1993). Flavell (1995) relates that children know that thinking is a global mental activity that represents both real and unreal events. Yet a distinction between thinking about the probable vs. thinking about the improbable may have mattered in the present study. In some cases the children had to 'speak for' a character who is imagining; at other times the task was to 'speak for' a character who is strictly imaginary. The children did not respond well to either of the two types of imaginative items.

This aspect of the instrument may have been flawed. None of the purported methods by which children 'test' reality were available to participants in the present case. For instance, Walker-Andrews and Harris (1993) surmise that children's comprehension of pretence arises from their general understanding of goal-directed joint actions during pretend play rather than from their understanding of others' mental states. Montgomery (1997) reports that children talk

The current investigation posed questions about one small fraction of the elements that contribute to transaction with narrative and to generalised social-cognitive-linguistic development. Study of these elements both separately and in conjunction with one another may provide an understanding of how children adapt to the interactional environments of story scenarios.

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Appendix: Examples of ELPS Stimulus Items and Examples from the ELPS Scoring Guidelines

Scoring reflects 3, 2, 1, and 0 point answers. Scoring is based on proper use of pragmatic function. As long as the content is plausible, the response is scored solely on function. In the event of an implausible answer, the rater must decide whether the functional intent of the answer is still acceptable or not. (It did not happen that any child's answers reflected a complete lack of understanding of the question or a completely implausible response.)

Regulatory

Daddy is going to give the little boy a direction. Daddy is going to tell him how to touch the baby. What will Daddy say? (Picture of man holding baby, boy is near)

3 (He will say) 'Pat the baby gently'; 'Don't hurt the baby'; 'Be nice'
2 'He will say that you have to pat the baby gently'; 'To hold the baby gently'
1 'Nice baby'
0 'He's gonna pat the baby gently'

(Other scenarios depict persons giving directions in the following settings: a police officer speaking to a masked bandit, a dad reading to a daughter, a teacher talking to a girl who is not doing her work, a doctor giving a child an injection, a man carrying a large stack of papers that keeps falling down, a boy and his dad playing a game, a toddler in a high chair trying to feed himself with a big spoon, a referee preparing runners for a race, a little child about to touch a hot stove and an older child nearby.)

Heuristic

Katie doesn't know where Daddy is taking her now. What can Katie say to Daddy to find out where they are going? (Picture of little girl and man holding hands, walking)

3 (She will say) 'Daddy, where are we going?'
2 'She could ask where they are going'
1 'She doesn't know where they are going'
0 'He is taking her _____'