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## Introduction: early pragmatic development\*

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The idea of creating a Special Issue of *First Language* to present some recent research on early pragmatic development was motivated by the fact that communicative development during the first three or four years of life poses a number of specific questions.

During the earliest phases, the main questions concern the emergence of the intent to communicate and the appearance of the attribution of communicative intentions to interlocutors. In addition to these fundamental aspects of communication, there are other questions which, at a more general level, are the same as those addressed in pragmatics in general, but which must be posed in a different manner for this period. These specific questions concern the relationships between the forms, functions and contexts of communication.

The communicative forms in the repertoire of devices available to children include nonverbal behaviours (some of which disappear as language develops) and vocal or linguistic behaviours, which do not yet display the structures of the adult language. Among the functions (irrespective of the theoretical framework and resulting taxonomy used to analyse them), some are present at first, while others appear as development progresses. As for the relationships between communicative behaviours and the communication context (both in production and in comprehension), their acquisition depends not only on the mastery of the various devices, but also on the development of the child's capacity to grasp the different social and physical components of the communicative situation.

The pragmatic approach to early child communication also looks at certain language acquisition processes. Indeed, the child must learn language usage in order to request, inform, explain and participate in

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conversations in an appropriate way. In addition to studying these developments at the functional level, the pragmatic approach examines some of the mechanisms that contribute to language acquisition at the structural level, in particular the lexicon and syntax.

The study of early pragmatic development seems to have first appeared in the mid-seventies. Halliday (1975) was one of its forerunners, along with authors who began to analyse early child communication in the framework of Speech Act Theory (Bates, Camaioni & Volterra 1975, Bruner 1975*a*, Dore 1975). Several co-authored books devoted partially or fully to this period of development were published around 1980 (Ochs & Shieffelin 1979, Feagans, Garvey & Golinkoff 1983, Golinkoff 1983). Since then, important advances have been made in different directions. The book by Ninio & Snow (1996) is noteworthy for its substantial contribution to the entire field of early pragmatic development.

Let us briefly examine the main areas where advances have been made, although limiting our discussion to the topics addressed in the papers that make up this Special Issue.

#### PRAGMATIC SKILLS

The question of the appearance of intentional communication has been widely debated, and disagreements still persist on certain points. An example is the very definition of intentional communication, where no consensus has been reached. We shall not dwell on this question, however, since it is not addressed in the papers in this issue.

An understanding of the communicative intentions of others (and even the attribution of intentions to one's addressee) appears to emerge very gradually. Social referencing can be regarded as an elementary form of the ability to take these intentions into account. Research in this area (a recent example<sup>1</sup> is Mumme, Fernald & Herrera 1996) deals with the behavioural cues produced by speakers and used by very young children to adjust their own behaviours accordingly.

In the early 1990s an important debate on the topic of genuine communicative exchange took place between Golinkoff (1993) and Shatz & Watson O'Reilly (1990). While the former author interpreted her own results on the reformulation of failed requests by 1- and 2-year-olds (Golinkoff 1986) as a testimony to children's attribution of

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[1] For most of the areas in question, a large number of studies could be cited. Only some are mentioned, with the indication that they are only examples.

intentions to the mother, the latter authors argued that mere conversational routines were at stake, explaining reformulations as the children's response to having made the connection between their mother's reaction to their initial request and the behaviour which, in the past, had most often led to satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Since then, a large body of data showing that children adapt their communicative behaviours to their addressee's attitude (e.g., Marcos & Bernicot 1994, 1997) or knowledge state (O'Neill 1996) has been obtained in support of the idea that children are capable at this age of attributing the addressee with intentions or, more generally, mental states (granted, rudimentary ones). Moreover, these findings quite obviously reveal that children are capable of relating communicative behaviours to the social context.

Similar skills have been found for comprehension, especially in the case of indirect requests. Babelot & Marcos (1999) showed that, during the second and third year, children's responses vary according to whether the interactive context favours an interpretation of the adult's statement as a request or, on the contrary, as an assertive (literal interpretation). This study also shows the child increasing capacity to relate the context of an utterance with its linguistic form.

These pragmatic skills are supplemented by communicative tuning to the addressee's more stable characteristics. For example, some studies have shown that the speech-act distributions of 2- to 3-year-olds differ according to whether the child is communicating with the father or the mother (e.g., Kornhaber & Marcos 2000).

At later ages (approximately age 4 or older), child speech has also been found to vary with the child's status relative to that of his/her interlocutors. Andersen (1990), for example, studied this phenomenon in children over 4 years in pretend play. We shall see, however, that this behaviour has been detected even before that age in 'real' interactive settings.

#### PRAGMATICS AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

While the development of pragmatic skills partly depends on linguistic abilities at the structural level, the pragmatic approach can shed light, in return, on the processes through which those skills are acquired. In fact, the pragmatic perspective explicitly or implicitly underlies all studies on how interactive communication affects the acquisition of the lexicon and syntax. Granting a role to interaction in this way implies

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[2] In fact a similar stance was already held by Shatz in 1983 (Shatz 1983).

considering that language is acquired in the principal framework where communication is in operation, namely, the conversation. As Snow (1994) indicated, the impressive number of references in the book *Input and Interaction in Language Acquisition* (Gallaway & Richards 1994) clearly illustrates the expansion of work on this topic in recent years.

In many studies, the effects of the surrounding environment have been examined in terms of its input and, more precisely, of the formal or functional characteristics of child-directed speech produced by more competent conversational partners. Added to these studies are those dealing with the role of adult gestures accompanying speech and their impact on word and sentence understanding (e.g., Moore, Angelopoulos & Bennett 1999, Zukow-Goldring 1996). Other studies focus on the insertion of the child's linguistic (or prelinguistic) behaviours in the interactive and conversational contexts that make it meaningful. Some authors have conceptualized these contexts in terms of formats, scripts, or routines (e.g., Bruner 1975*b*, Lucariello, Kyratzis & Engel 1986, Snow, Perlmann & Nathan 1987). Still other studies look at the linguistic environment of young children in various non-Western cultures (e.g., de León 1998, Ochs & Schieffelin 1984, Rabain-Jamin 1998). They have shown that communicative routines in these cultures have different features from those described in the West: a large majority of the conversations take place in multi-party contexts, and mothers rarely speak directly to their infants before they are about 18 months old. After that age, when they do talk to their child, it is especially to control the young one's behaviour. Thus, the modes of support supplied by the environment for language development appear to depend in part on the customs and values specific to each culture.

The pragmatic point of view also provides insight into the relationships between prelinguistic communicative intentions and the acquisition of vocabulary and syntax. Radical functionalist positions like Halliday's (1975, 1985) were first utilized to devise formal grammars based on functional principles, with the idea that language acquisition is intrinsically a question of the development of the different functions of communication. Development nevertheless leads to the mastery of the relatively fixed grammatical structures of language. Recent studies tend to explain these developmental processes in terms of mechanisms that do not depend on an 'innate grammar' or on a solely functionalist principle. An example of this is Tomasello's (2000) point of view proposing a 'usage-based' theory of language acquisition wherein imitation, guided by the child's 'reading' of the adult's communicative intentions, take effect along with other cognitive mechanisms to ensure the acquisition of syntax. According to Tomasello,

the young child's syntax does not have the features of a fully fledged adult grammar.

The papers presented in this issue provide some new insights into these now long-standing issues.

#### THE PAPERS

The first four papers focus on nonverbal communication, whether alone or in conjunction with language. The papers by Friend and by Thoermer and Sodian concern children's understanding of the addressee's intentions.

*Friend* draws upon recent research on social referencing (Lawrence & Fernald 1993) to study the understanding of messages produced by an adult to control the child's behaviour in novel situations. The paper is aimed at determining how language development (here, the number of words the child understands) affects the transition from the stage where the child takes the message's paralinguistic or 'affective' components into account (facial expressions, intonation) to the stage where linguistic content is grasped. The children observed are 15 months old, an age when there are considerable interindividual differences in the number of words understood. The results show that, for the population as a whole, it is primarily paralinguistic cues that guide the children's behaviour. However, for those children who are more advanced in their understanding of words, linguistic components have a greater impact than paralinguistic ones. Apparently, then, the turning point between 'affective meaning' and 'linguistic meaning' is located at this age.

*Thoermer and Sodian* study the understanding of referential gestures (looking and pointing) and reaching behaviour in 1-year-olds and younger. Their aim is to determine whether, when children's eyes follow the direction of a gesture, they actually make a connection between the 'looker' and the object. Such a connection would be a testimony to their understanding that the pointing gesture is meant to indicate an intentional relation (reference) between the agent and the object at which the pointing is directed. The results indicate that, at the age studied, children do not encode communicative gestures in a relational way. These results are discussed in relation to the different findings obtained in a similar study by Woodward (1998), and to the work by Zukow-Godring (1996) on the uses of gestures by adults when they talk to young children. This leads the authors to entertain the possibility that, in order for children at this age to grasp the meaning of

referential gestures, the gestures must occur in interactive contexts which are themselves meaningful.

*Yont, Snow and Vernon-Feagans* look at the appearance of communicative intentions or functions in 12-month-olds suffering from chronic otitis media (OM). The primary question concerns the extent to which the hearing deficit associated with this disease affects pragmatic development. Pragmatic development is assessed in terms of the number and types of communicative intentions produced by the child in the gestural and linguistic modalities. Communicative intentions are classified according to the taxonomy proposed by Ninio, Snow, Pan & Rollins (1994). Only gestural communication seems to be affected in OM children, both in the quantity and variety of communicative acts produced. The deficiency is thought to be due to the fact that the reception deficit or poor input usability affects all communicative exchanges, which at 12 months occur mainly in the gestural modality. The verbal communication impairment would appear later. In addition to informing us about the features of communication in children with OM, this study supplies some indirect arguments in favour of an interactionist perspective on the development of communicative functions and the functional continuity between gestural and verbal communication.

The paper by *Franco and Gagliano*, which pertains mainly to the use of pointing, brings us to the question of variations in communicative behaviour as a function of the social situation. The focus here is on the ability of 18- to 36-month-old children to direct the attention of an adult toward an object that is either within the addressee's visual field or is partially or totally out of sight. The child's efforts to attract the adult's attention are assessed in terms of the number of gestures and their association with visual checking and vocal productions. The results show that throughout the period under consideration children do more pointing and visual checking when the addressee cannot see the referent; this also appears to be true for the oldest children, despite the fact that they also produce more speech in this situation. The implications of these results are twofold. Firstly, as the authors stress, they provide evidence at the social-cognition level of the fact that children at these young ages already establish a relationship between 'seeing' and 'knowing'. But they also point out, secondly, that children are able to adopt different communicative strategies depending on whether the addressee is attributed with 'knowing'.

The next two papers deal with the child's learning of the different uses

of language, and more specifically with how more competent partners contribute to this learning process.

*Veneziano* studies maternal speech and looks for the presence of different forms of displaced discourse, distinct from discourse about the *here and now*, often reported in analyses of caregivers' speech at the early stages of language acquisition. The author considers not only temporal displacement but also other forms of discourse about entities that are not present, such as absent objects or events, and subjective or imperceptible properties or relationships among events. The children were observed longitudinally with their mothers during the second year and the beginning of the third year of life. The results confirm that mothers introduce displaced referents into their speech and that, to do so, they rely on the present situation as a contextual support. The study also points out the mothers' sensitivity to development of their children: as the young child produces more and more references to past events and justifications, we find an increase in displaced discourse by the mother. Thus, while many studies have evidenced the importance of the caregiver's context-linked talk, especially for acquisition of the lexicon (e.g., Tomasello, Mannle & Kruger 1986), *Veneziano* emphasizes the positive role of displaced speech in helping children learn how to use language to fulfil the informative function.

*Rabain-Jamin* makes a cross-cultural contribution by analysing the role of interaction in the development of language skills in children from the Wolof culture of Senegal. As recalled above, in many non-Western cultures, dyadic mother-child conversations are rare. The author's observations show that this does not mean that young Wolof children are on their own when it comes to language support. On the contrary, the conversational routines instigated by adults, which include third parties, are geared at encouraging the child to assume a social and conversational role in group relations. Also, in situations where the young child is playing with older siblings (3 to 5 years), we find the older children, among other things, addressing many directives at the young one about what to do during the play. This brings the child into the play and makes him/her into a social – and thus conversational – partner. An analysis of the different types of conversation in which the young child takes part shows how much successful communication in this society requires following the rules for speaking based on social status, even for the youngest children.

In Western cultures, children also acquire the conventions of communication which are in keeping with their social status relative to

that of their interlocutors. The paper by *Kyrtzis, Marx and Reder Wade* is precisely about these aspects of language usage in 3- and 4-year-old boys and girls. Their linguistic forms are characterized by their degree of assertiveness or deference and mitigation of assertive acts (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor & Rosenberg 1984), seen as markers of the social hierarchy. The aim is to determine whether the use of these forms depends on contextual factors, and in particular, on the child's expertise in the activity the group is carrying out. In the girl and boy groups alike, the use of different markers of social rank appears to vary within each child according to the type of play, and these variations depend upon the child's expertise in the various games. In other words, children can shift between different types of control acts to fit the social context. It is interesting to note that, overall, no features of the children's language were indicative of their gender.

*Ninio's* paper looks at the functional bases of syntactic structure acquisition, and more specifically at how verbs are combined with other terms (object, subject, vocative, etc.). Her hypothesis is that the best candidates for entry into syntax are the constants (or 'keywords') of communicative intentions, which are combined in a single utterance with variables of the same intent. The idea is that there exists a system of rules for combining terms that is pragmatic in nature. In past studies the author had established which combinatory verbs were used first by children in Hebrew. On these bases she notes here that, for both transitive and intransitive verbs, the first to appear in combinations are ones that express a wide variety of communicative intentions, as defined in *Ninio's* taxonomy (for the different versions of this taxonomy, see *Ninio & Snow 1996*). According to the author, this is a transitional phase in language development: on the one hand, the child leans on an earlier system, that of the expression of pragmatic intentions by means of one-word utterances; on the other hand, we observe the emergence of syntagmatic relationships which can serve as perfect models for later learning. Pragmatic and syntactic development thus appear to form an inseparable whole.

The papers brought together in this Special Issue certainly do not offer a comprehensive coverage of the state of the art in the area of early pragmatic development. However, they clearly show how this research trend is evolving toward approaches which integrate the structural and pragmatic components of language development, along with cultural, interactive and/or cognitive factors, in such a way that early pragmatic competence is being studied in an increasingly fine-grained way. We hope that, while extending the previous research conducted by the same

or other authors, these studies will open up some new pathways of investigation.

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