

## REQUEST RETRIES

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A sample of 663 requests, orders, and other moves to control behavior was taken from videotaped home interaction of children 2 to 6 years old. These were all parts of series in which a first move was retried with the same purpose. The youngest children increased specification and aggravation on the retries, whereas the older children changed the overall tactic used on the syntactic form, with the effect of often mitigating on later tries through the use of modal auxiliaries and permission forms. Evidence from the increase in mitigation after refusals suggested that mitigation was being used for persuasion.

### 1. [To Mother while making valentine greeting cards with older sisters]

- This is too *hard*.
- ... — It's too hard.
- ... — Too hard. [whiny voice]
- ... — Mommy, I want to paint.
- ... — [Gets paint] First the green.

3;11 CA11

Studies of pragmatics have recently been showing a relationship between the development of language structure and the learner's pragmatic system. In this study, we examine a particular part of pragmatics, the management of language used to convince others to act. This domain of language is especially interesting because it often involves social indices, like honorifics, and because it may require the production and understanding of information indirectly, through conversational inference. In the above example, the child made repeated complaints to her mother, hinting at the need for help, and finally became more direct.

Speakers often repeat their moves in conversation. Moves in conversation can include information statements and questions which elicit them, expressions of feeling, offers, requests, commands, and permission requests. The moves to be examined here are commands, requests and other moves (like offers) which have the intent of changing the behavior of others. We will call this whole class *control moves*. These include directing, prohibition, asking for permission, offering, and stating plans which affect others. These moves are interesting because they impose on the addressee, and therefore involve the speaker in various types of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) or other

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a revision of a presentation on children's repairs at the International Pragmatics Association meeting in Antwerp, August 12, 1987.

remedies to imposition, and in justification or persuasion. Because of the imposition of control moves, many of them fail in their goal—they are ignored, or the addressee refuses to comply. For this reason, a motivated speaker will try again. As parents, we know that the pleading of children can seem interminable.

Some speakers fix up their control moves within a turn, as if they were monitoring themselves and the move did not sound right. These could be called *repairs*. This would put them within the class studied by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks (1977) and by McTear (1985). Repairs that have been studied include those we might call *metalinguistic* in that they correct pronunciation or grammar so that they sound better. Other repairs correct semantic errors or misstatements, or provide clarifications of information.

In most cases, we see delays of such length that other turns have occurred before the speaker makes changes. These delays give the speaker a chance to see the reaction of the addressee. We shall call these *retries*. The presence of retries particularly reinforces the sense that the move was intentional, and that the speaker's purposes continue. What has happened in the intervening time can be a failure to respond, overt refusal or postponement by the hearer, or a change in refinement of intention by the speaker, manifested in self-correction.

Rational retries should reflect the speaker's assumptions about the reasons for prior failure to get attention and compliance with what s/he desires. We have proposed elsewhere (Ervin-Tripp 1982, Ervin-Tripp and Gordon 1985) that effective control moves such as requests involve getting attention, being explicit enough for action goals to be understood, communicating social relations through means such as politeness, and persuading the hearer to act. In some instances persuasion is subordinated to social relations, as in the cases where the primary goal is to manipulate status or distance. A speaker may command just to show power. On the other hand, in cases of urgency, social relations can be unimportant to a speaker. In an analysis of adult control acts between airline personnel, Linde (1988) has shown that mitigation decreases in emergencies, but that before some airplane crashes there was indirection or mitigation by airline subordinates, who were therefore ineffective in getting attention and influencing behavior.

People who make requests are trying to get something done. When the request fails, we expect them to try again. But as rational actors, they should take into account why the first attempt failed. So if the addressee refuses to comply with a request, or postpones compliance, the speaker's new moves should add persuasion and justification. If the addressee ignores the speaker, the speaker should try to get attention before a retry. If the addressee was already cooperating in an activity with the speaker, on the other hand, ignoring can be seen as tacit refusal or postponement, therefore requiring persuasion.

Control moves contain several elements. They contain propositional information about the problem or what the speaker wants, and they often contain indications of social relationships such as mitigators or aggravators, and they may be accompanied by justifications or persuasion moves. I have argued elsewhere (Ervin-Tripp 1982) that social indices in requests are separate from persuasion. These social indices have direct forms like titles, and indirect forms like politeness routines ("please"), interrogative or softened intonation, syntactic forms for creating conventional requests ("will you..., can I have..."), and the use of conditionals or past tense ("I wanted to ask you...").

If social relations are treated by speakers as separate from persuasion, we would find that self-repair of social relations may occur in the absence of refusal or postponement—in the same turn, or after the addressee's compliance, or after being ignored because the addressee is not paying attention. In an Italian experimental study, Axia and Baroni (1985) proposed just such a contrast. In the experiment, children were doing a task requiring materials from an adult. The adult either ignored requests of the children ("deaf ear"), or gave a reason to refuse. If the children were ignored, the five-year-olds most often repeated and some became more aggravated. The five-year-olds were rarely deferent on retries, even to adults. With seven- and nine-year-olds the most frequent cases of deference occurred in these retries after the children were ignored; when they received refusals, the seven- and nine-year-olds either altered the content of the request or negotiated.

We can certainly expect age change. Newcombe and Zaslow (1981), who examined form changes in retries after refusals by adults to 2 1/2-year-old children, found that there was mitigation in only 8% and aggravation (e.g. to imperatives) in 12% of the retries; the rest were unchanged. In examining retries we will include a wider age range, and examine tone of voice as well as formal changes, in particular looking for the emergence of distinctive tactics towards being ignored and refused.

*Data.* This study is an examination of retries in 663 control moves by children in 3 families in natural conversation. The data were collected over a period of months in each family. Participants in the interaction reported here were mothers, researchers, siblings 2-6, and visiting children in the same age range. The data were videotaped, and the speech was transcribed into the computer, control acts were identified and each was coded for 62 features, including whether it was a retry. It proved necessary to start with a qualitative analysis of interaction and move afterwards to statistical explorations. The child speech results will be reported grouped by age: 2-3 years, 4, and 5-6. These groupings reflect major differences in children's pragmatic skill.

*Frequency.* In the family data recorded by Gordon Wells (1985) and his team in Bristol, England, in which short time samples were drawn randomly in the day by radio from 112 children with transmitters, it appeared that control acts have about 25% frequency at two and rise to above 30%, where the frequency remained stable. Thus control acts constitute a substantial sample of texts of child language.

The probability of compliance obviously varies a good deal with circumstance. Our recordings were always made in situations where there were two to four children and two or three adults. Because this social complexity made for multiple conversations, the possibility that an addressee might not even hear control acts was substantial.

In the context of requests and other control acts, success means getting the addressee to comply. In the texts analysed here, the overall success rate of the youngest children was 37%, of the four-year-olds 51% and of the older children 38%.

Table 1  
OUTCOMES OF CONTROL ACTS BY AGE  
OF SPEAKER

Age	Comply	Refuse	Ignore
Two and Three	37%	15%	37%
Four	51%	9%	23%
Five and Six	38%	19%	22%

The younger children were more likely to try again than were the older children. The children kept trying through many turns. The longest series of repeats in this sample was eleven turns. For each try in a series, we looked at the likelihood that the child would stop or shift goals. The decision to quit trying was slower for the two- to three-year-old children than for older children. That is, the younger children both made a second try more often, and continued to try more than the children of five and older, on the average. When we looked at the proportion of tries that were retries, the youngest children clearly were the most persistent. Though 82% of the youngest children's control acts were retries, less than a third were retries in the oldest group.

Table 2  
PROBABILITY OF ANOTHER RETRY  
(DIRECTIVE CONTROL ACTS)

Age	Try	Retry	Second	Third	Fourth	Total*
Two and Three	73	.33	.54	.62	.75	.82
Four	193	.18	.57	.50	.60	.41
Five and Six	175	.22	.34	.70	.56	.31

\*Percent of control moves for the same goal which are retries.

*Attention.* Young children are much more likely to be ignored than older children. In an earlier study of children's interruptions, when we controlled for the relevance of the child's intervention to the ongoing activity, we found that the younger the child was, the greater was the likelihood that addressees would ignore the speaker (Ervin-Tripp 1979). This age difference in gaining attention was true of this sample too, as can be seen in Table 1. Our earlier analyses have shown that in addition to starting with a handicap, young children are less likely than other speakers to monitor the attention of others. We have found that when the speaker was not engaged with a partner, two- to three-year-olds launched their moves 86% of the time without a prior attempt to gain attention. This was true of 57% of the moves of four-year-olds. In addition to increasing in frequency at appropriate times, the moves changed in focus. Younger children had generalized tactics like calling out "Hey!" or shouting a control move; older children more often named the addressee, which is both a more demanding tactic for a speaker and much more likely to be effective.

In most of the situations we observed, successfully competing for attention was basic to getting compliance. A solution to being ignored is to call out for attention.

Older children were far more likely to call the name of the addressee when they had been ignored; 54% of their retries after ignored control moves started with vocatives, whereas only 10% of the two- to three-year-olds and 6% of the four-year-olds retries started by calling for the addressee.

Table 3  
NAMING THE ADDRESSEE PRECEDING OR  
FOLLOWING A CONTROL ACT

Age	After Refusal		After Ignoring	
	Precede	Follow/With	Precede	Follow/With
Two and Three	—	38%	10%	10%
Four	—	—	5%	9%
Five and Six	34	6%	36%	18%

In 10% of the cases, when the youngest children were ignored, their request was followed by a vocative. The vocatives following control acts are, we believe, quite important for another reason. They may be used to persuade by identifying a social relation which makes claims. Children commonly use postposed vocatives as role names when doing role play, and we propose that they serve this function in address to parents. Thus, it seems that “Help me, mommy” or “I can’t do this, mommy, mommy, mommy” is more than an attention bid—it is a move to call on the proper helpful behavior of mothers, so it is just as good after as before the utterance. We find such naming most often after refusals, as Table 3 shows. (There were very few refusals to four-year-olds so the data are poor here).

*Clarity.* There was greater specification in second tries. Most of this specifying seems to be an evolution in the child’s own clarity, rather than just a response to a failure, though it occurs somewhat more after refusal, especially in the youngest children. These children are not yet old enough to be well-oriented to the point of view of hearers; we have evidence that after seven or eight there are radical changes in this respect. Unless the increase in specification identifies more clearly the object a child seeks, or the act of the hearer, it does not contribute to increased explicitness to the hearer.

2. [valentine making session]

- I want a valentine.
- ... — I want to make a valentine.
- ... — Help me, Mommy! (= marks overlaps with another speaker)
- ... — Mommy, I want to draw a valentine.

3;11 CA11

- 3. — Hey, wanna see me make something?
- Wanna help me make something? [compliance]

4;11 to adult BO1

*Social relations.* We had found in prior analyses of these and other family data that by 2;6 the children displayed sensitivity to aspects of the request situation which altered the

probability of compliance: distance and rank or temporary power, possession or rights to the goods at issue, intrusion of the request into ongoing conversation, disruption of the addressee's action trajectory by the proposed act (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor and Rosenberg 1984, Ervin-Tripp and Gordon 1985). We found that young children are more sensitive to the first two features than the last two. The first two concern rights and obligations, the last require taking the perspective of the addressee to some extent. Since we were not sure of the precise conceptual status of the first two categories, we generalized them as the presupposition of compliance.

The forms of mitigation, we found, changed with age. Conventional politeness, such as using permission forms of 'please' when asking for property or speaking to fathers and outsiders, appeared quite early. Giving reasons was a later development (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon 1985).

When we compared the children's responses to being ignored and being refused, we found that the youngest children used extremely unmitigated forms in their retries: "want" and ellipsis predominated after being ignored, imperatives after being refused. The four-year-olds mitigated after being ignored, using more modals and permission requests; the few refusals merely were retried with "want". In the five- and six-year-olds, on the other hand, there are permission requests and "will you" modals to refusals.

In the following examples, the child corrected the form of requests to be more in tune with the role she is playing, that of patient speaking to nurse. This mitigation served as a corrective to social status symbolism, or politeness.

4. [nurse role play]

K: Put on my cast, nurse. 4;11

J: Put your leg up. 4;3

K: I need a cast. Can you get me two casts, nurse, casts? 4;11

BO5

5. [concerning mouth inspection device]

— Do that again. Can you do that?

... — Jinny, can you do it with this?

... — Can you, please, can you do it with my mouth? (whiny).

4;11 to 4;3 BOW5

*Persuasion.* To our surprise, we found on an earlier analysis of all control acts, not just of retries, that "polite" requests which contained mitigators were *less* likely to result in compliance than were unmitigated forms (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor and Rosenberg 1984, Linde 1988). However, when we compared acts which we thought had the same probability of compliance with the request (that is, we controlled for 'cost'), we found that there was no greater compliance with mitigation, but just fewer instances where the child was ignored. Parents may tell their children that being polite will bring more cookies to them, but in these families it was not true. Politeness just brings attention.

In judging the overall type of change on retry, we found that the youngest children simply repeated what they did before, or they sounded more annoyed. They rarely mitigated their retries in any way. They did sometimes name the addressee; the names as often followed as preceded the control act.

The chief tactic available to the youngest children for alteration was a change in voice tone. The children became increasingly aggravated with each retry. On repeated tries, their vocal tone was pushy or whiny 80% of the time, and they almost never used a 'mitigated' vocal tone. However, as we move down to later and later tries for the same goal, the percent of vocal aggravation increased in the older children, too, especially when they were ignored.

Table 4  
MITIGATION AND AGGRAVATION IN RETRIES

Age	Refused*			Ignored		
	Same	Mit	Agg	Same	Mit	Agg
Two and Three	54%	8%	38%	52%	10%	38%
Four	9%	45%	45%	70%	19%	12%
Five and Six	40%	31%	29%	50%	9%	41%

\*As shown in Table 1, the number of refusals is relatively low.

We can see in Table 4 that in the five- and six-year-old children, mitigations were particularly likely in response to refusals. Whereas 8% of the youngest children used a gentle voice following a refusal, 45% of the four-year-olds and 31% of the older children's instances of repairs following refusal were mitigated. What we see, then, is that mitigation appears with the older children precisely where we expect to find persuasion. The children did not, however, use lexical mitigators like 'please' in such cases.

*Threats.* Negative persuasion involves threats of consequences of non-compliance. In the following case, we can see that threats can be accompanied by mitigated rather than aggravated tone.

6. [playing in a car]

— I have to drive. I have to drive. [polite voice] 7;00

— No, I have to drive. [pretends to be driving] 2;08

— I'm the mother. Elly, I'm not gonna play if you do this. [polite voice] 7;00

NI18B

*Reasoning.* Adding explanations or reasons did not occur before four. One might expect reasons to be most persuasive, and therefore to typically be added after refusals, but that is not so; they even occurred after compliance.

In the following series, the instances were separate, but represent different ways of addressing the same situation, with increasing reasoning.

7. E: Come on =puppy=. [patting toy puppy] 2;08

K: =Don't= hit him. 6;07

... K: This is only a little puppy, so don't be rough. 6;07

E: I don't hit him! [howls] 2;08

[interlude while other children play with puppy]

- ... E: He wants to sleep. [slams down top of box with her hand] 2;08  
 K: No, Elly, that's gonna hurt her. [to puppy] It's gonna hurt you.  
 [closes box gently] 6;07

NI17A

In the next example, the child added a reason on his second request, using a purpose clause.

8. [To adult researcher while child prepares pretend airplane]  
 A: Hey, get this propeller ready for me! You put it in here!  
 [R fixes]  
 A: I can't get it in there, so you put it in there.  
 R: [complies] Here, lazy.

4;11 BO4

The researcher, despite the reasons given, reacted to the sense of being ordered about.

In some very long sequences, the older children engaged in arguments with the addressee. In the following series, the child throughout the session tried repeatedly to get her mother's help in making valentines on the grounds she had too many. Her tactical manoeuvres included providing arguments which her mother shot down.

9. [three sisters making valentine greeting cards]  
 C: Mommy, I don't want to make 18, so why don't you help me. I mean 28 I have to make.  
 M: You can do that.  
 C: Mother!  
 M: You have a whole week.  
 C: I know, but we're supposed to all make 'em today.  
 M: You don't have to make them all today.  
 ...  
 C: Somebody, help me make the valentines.  
 ...  
 C: Mother, would you take over? [whiny]  
 ... C: Mommy, would you take over my valentine cards?

7;05 CA11

*Tactical changes.* The most interesting procedures in retrievs are those involving a radical change in tactics. For the young children these included bargaining, fantasy, and compromises.

10. [J has small stethoscope, K has larger and more effective stethoscope]  
 J: I wanna have the big one. 4;03  
 K: Jinny, I hafta listen to your heart. 4;11  
 J: Katrina can use this one.  
 K: Jinny, I hafta listen to your heart. I hafta listen to your heart, Jinny.  
 J: You can have this one—

BO5



This attempt to bargain failed, and J ultimately got the stethoscope only because K became interested in crutches.

11. [wants pretend crutches made of tennis rackets]  
 Let me use those crutches.  
 - Let's- let's pretend I have to use them.

4;11 BO5

This tactic eventually worked.

12. [trying to persuade to get in the car]  
 K: Hurry up, sister. Get in, please. [pushy voice] 6;08 to 2;08  
 S: There's a wolf. There's a wolf at the door. 7;00  
 K: Get in! Get in! [voice almost screaming] 6;08

NI18B

In this scene, the conversion from a scene of sibling coercion into a fantasy about wolves was accomplished by a helper; the older partner reinforced the move by a remarkable accommodation to the fantasy tastes of young children<sup>2</sup>.

A final example of ingenious accommodation occurs in the doctor play episode.

13. [K is still interested in using crutches, having finally gotten them]  
 A: Wanna play mother and daddy? 4;11  
 ... A: Wanna play mother and daddy?  
 K: OK, let's pretend I was the sick sister. 4;11  
 A: OK.  
 K: And I hafta use the crutches.

BO5

The notion that the only repair for requests is mitigation is clearly wrong. The younger children's retries are almost entirely repeats with aggravation. We do not find mitigation until four, and even then it is one of many possible changes. Mitigation in this sample seems to occur more in response to refusals, rather than to being ignored.

There has been a considerable argument about the commonsense view that politeness is adopted to be persuasive about compliance. In Bates' study (1976) of children's corrections, when the children were told to ask more nicely, even very young children could mitigate. However, she specifically suggested that they make a more polite or nicer request. The evidence against the proposal that politeness is learned in order to be persuasive is that in the families of our study, politeness had no effect in improving compliance, and that some of the most striking examples occur in role play when compliance is not at issue (Andersen 1978). The suggestion we made then (Ervin-Tripp 1982) was that that politeness is primarily symbolic and is used by children to mark

<sup>2</sup>For other examples of the skill of seven-year-olds in fantasy accommodation to younger children see Ervin-Tripp 1982.

status/role relations. This proposal fits with the suggestion that there be a separation between routine symbolic status signals (which are, for example, obligatory even on everyday statements in Japanese and Javanese) and instrumental tactical signals (Ervin-Tripp in press).

The analysis of retries in these data have shown that the youngest children increase specification on retries, and become more aggravated and express frustration and emotion through their voice tone on retries. In addition, they call out to the addressee, often after the control act as if insisting on their relationship to the hearer. The older children change the syntactic form by mitigating or aggravating through formal means. In this sample, mitigation was especially common in response to refusals, and included the use of modals and permission forms. Looking merely at syntactic form does not reveal the complex tactical changes which lay behind many of these changes. These data certainly indicate that for children in this age group, in natural situations, mitigation occurs in persuasion. The data presented here suggest that by school age mitigation is used for persuasion as well as for marking relationships.

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