

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S PRAGMATIC SKILLS: WHAT CHILDREN LEARN BETWEEN FIVE AND TEN

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This article presents data on linguistic and paralinguistic forms used by three groups of children aged 5:6, 8:6, 10:6 years in a situation of dyadic role play. The data were analysed in terms of speech act types and concordances were established documenting the surface forms associated with each speech act type (illocutionary force). The results show a diversification of linguistic forms and an increasing use of more complex forms with age. Paralinguistic forms of expression tend to decrease with age, while older children tend to be more selective in the use of these forms. The results are interpreted with reference to both pragmatic, linguistic and socio-cognitive theories of language development.

INTRODUCTION

The present study is concerned with the development of pragmatic competencies of primary school children from both linguistic and socio-cognitive points of view. Knowing a language implies the speaker's knowledge of a grammar (set of rules for characterizing language form) and the knowledge of rules for language use as well. As Fraser (1983: 30) points out: "When we use language, we characteristically do three things: (1) we say something; (2) we indicate how we intend the hearer to take what we have said; and (3) we have definite effects on the hearer as a result".

Theoretically, the present study is based on speech act theory, a branch of ordinary language philosophy. Essentially, this theory considers the facts of verbal communication as actions, that is, what the speaker does by saying something. Speech act theory defines success of linguistic communication in terms of the hearer's ability to determine what the speaker is saying and to recognize the speaker's illocutionary intent. Illocutionary intent refers to the interpersonal aspect of utterance meaning such as order, promise, request, etc.

Previous research in children's use of illocution indicates that this aspect of pragmatic functioning is present in children's communicative activities even before the emergence of linguistic behavior (Bates 1976, Bruner 1975, 1983, Dore 1985, Halliday 1976). Its development shows rapid extension during the preschool years, both in the variety of illocutionary force expressed and in the linguistic forms used. Thus, Dore (1977) reports a total of 40 categories of illocutionary force, observed in speech exchanges among 3-4 year-old children engaged in free play. Similarly, Feider and

Desautels (1981) found 39 subcategories in 5-6 year-old kindergarten children in a variety of free play settings. At present, no comparable data on the use of illocutionary forces are available for children in the early school years.

The present research was undertaken with the aim to ascertain development of illocutionary acts in children during the early school years. Questions of particular interest for teachers, parents and professionals working with school-aged children concern the nature and rate of growth of illocutionary acts as well as that of linguistic or other expressive means children employ for encoding these illocutionary forces. It has been proposed (Bernicot and Marcos, in press), that as children grow older and more skilled in communication, their ability to select appropriate formal devices for encoding illocutionary intent becomes both more diversified and adapted to the particular situation (not necessarily more complex in linguistic structure, cf. Carrel 1980). Hence, in addition to growth of types of illocutionary acts, we expected to find a parallel increase with age in the variety of linguistic forms used to encode each type of act.

According to Searle and Vanderveken (1985), the illocutionary force indicating devices are realized in the structures of natural languages in different ways: word order, mood, punctuation, intonation, stress, and modals among others. This does not imply that there is a one-to-one correspondence between speech acts and their linguistic form.

The aim of the present study is to document changes with age in the variety of illocutionary forces and the linguistic means used to convey these illocutionary meanings. Based on earlier research, we expect to find: 1) minimal increases in the variety of illocutionary forces, and 2) substantial changes in the types of linguistic forms used to convey these meanings.

1. METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-six dyads were videotaped in a standardized situation of role play representing a veterinarian and his assistant at work in a clinic. There were three groups of children aged five, eight and ten years ($\bar{X} = 5:6; 8:6; 10:6$) grouped in twelve dyads per age level.

Procedure

The data have been transcribed so as to respect the spontaneous speech of the children; a special code has been devised for the transcription of prosodic and discursive features as well as some non-verbal data relevant to the analysis of speech acts. The corpus comprises 8,000 utterances representing 65,000 words as well as a total of approximately 2,800 prosodic or discursive features (see Annexe for an example of a coded transcript).

Coding

As a first step in describing and summarising our data, we developed a taxonomy of illocutionary forces based on the theoretical work of Searle (1979), Fraser (1973) and Bach & Harnisch (1979). The problems inherent in such an endeavour are considerable, mainly related to the lack of well-established principles for determining the illocu-

tionary acts necessary and sufficient to describe oral discourse and the ensuing ambiguity as to the particular illocution present in any given utterance (Reeder 1983, Levinson 1983). Given the absence of such well-grounded theoretical principles, we adopted a more empirical approach similar to that proposed by Zaefferer (1977) which consisted in varying two principal dimensions of illocutionary force: 1) propositional content, 2) interpersonal intent ('illocutionary point' in Searle's terminology). Combinations of different values of these two parameters led to a classification scheme comprising six main categories, further subdivided along the same two dimensions into a total of 37 subclasses. Table 1 illustrates these principles with respect to the 6 main categories.

Table 1
MAIN CATEGORIES OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACTS

Illocutionary force (<i>F</i>)	Propositional content (<i>P</i>)	Illocutionary point (<i>I</i>)	Example
Assertive	P may be either true or false	To present P as representing a true state of affairs (S.A.)	J'ai fini. Son coeur bat vite.
Directive	P refers to some future action (<i>F.A.</i>)	To get listener (<i>L</i>) to perform <i>F.A.</i>	Prends sa température, Jacques.
Suggestive	Same as Directive	To get <i>L</i> to take part in <i>F.A.</i>	Nous allons vérifier son coeur.
Commissive	P refers to speaker's (<i>S</i>) <i>F.A.</i>	<i>S</i> commits self to carry out <i>F.A.</i>	Je vous téléphonerai demain.
Expressive	P refers to some state of affairs (S.A.) involving <i>L</i>	To express a feeling or attitude regarding S.A.	Merci. Bon.
Declarative	A result produced by utterance act	Bring about P by uttering P	Dring! ¹ L'ours est guéri.

¹This act occurred in our data mainly in the form of verbal play, onomatopoeia, humor, etc., rarely as an institutionalised act.

All utterances including certain non verbal acts (700 of a total of 6500 acts transcribed) were coded by three observers trained in the use of the coding scheme. Intercoder agreement varied between 80% and 95% using the formula: Number of agreements divided by total number of codes.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Methods of analysis

The results reported here were obtained from 20 dyads, six at each age level, and two additional dyads for the 8-year-old children (two of the dyads at this age level did not reach the criterion of 200 utterances). These data were submitted to a text-statistical, computerized analysis, S.A.T.O. (Système d'analyse de textes par ordinateur). In addition to a number of quantitative indices such as frequencies of certain lexemes, overall complexity (Flesh scores), frequencies of speech act categories, prosodic and

paralinguistic features, this programme produced concordances of speech act codes with utterance forms making it possible to tabulate all utterance types associated with each of the speech act categories. In this article, we limit ourselves to reporting the major speech act categories with their associated surface forms (Tables 4 and 5).

Relative frequencies of selected speech act categories and pragmatic markers

Table 2 reports the absolute and relative frequencies of six subclasses of assertive acts; these are among the categories occurring most frequently, representing about one fourth of all illocutionary forces identified in our corpus (1/3 for the 8-year-old group). Inspection of this table suggests several significant age trends: 1. The subcategory 'informative act' increases monotonically with age; this increase can be explained by the children's growing ability to appreciate their partners' informational needs (Lefebvre-Pinard 1982). 2. Two subcategories decrease with age. The first, assertions with imaginary propositional content, which represent utterances addressed to imaginary characters: clients addressed by telephone in the case of the older children, animal patients in the case of the 5-year-old group.

Table 2
ASSERTIVE ACTS AT THREE AGE LEVELS

Subcategory	5 years		8 years		10 years		Total N
	N	% ¹	N	%	N	%	
Simple assertion (ex.: <i>J'ai oublié le numéro</i>)	85	5,4	99	7,7	46	3,8	230*
Imaginary event (ex.: <i>C'est rendu le matin</i>)	30	1,9	12	0,9	5	0,4	47**
Self-directed assertion (ex.: <i>Bon, ses oreilles...</i>)	26	1,7	9	0,7	36	3,0	71
Evaluative assertion	46	2,9	107	8,3	22	1,8	175*
Descriptive assertion	35	2,2	39	3,0	41	3,2	115
Giving information	127	8,1	148	11,5	161	13,7	436***
Total:	349	22,2	414	32,1	311	25,9	

¹Percentages calculated over all utterances in corpus analysed

* $p < .05$, 8 > 10 years

** $p < .05$, 5 > 8 years

*** $p < .05$, 10 > 8 > years

The greater use of the telephone made by the older children may be seen as an instance of the growing decontextualisation of language (Snow 1983). The second category decreasing with age represents the simple assertive acts performed without discernible informative intent, usually commenting a situational element. Examples are:

"J'ai fini" (I'm finished).

"Je l'ai échappé" (I dropped it).

"Moi je prends ça" (I take that one).

"Voilà, le quatrième de fini" (That's the fourth one finished).

Such highly contextualised utterances occur at all age levels, but less frequently in the ten-year-old group. Like the changes observed for imaginary assertions, this decrease can be seen as an indicator of a developmental trend towards greater freedom from situational constraints.

Descriptive assertions appear stable across age levels, while evaluative assertions show a temporary and rather spectacular increase at 8 years: It could be that this group is particularly sensitive to the evaluative dimension as a result of a first contact with teacher and pupil feedback. Finally, the subcategory 'self-directed assertion' appears to stay stable across age levels, but undergoes a qualitative change: while the younger children use these speech acts to simply comment an ongoing activity, either using expressions such as "bon", "hum", etc. or lexical fragments such as "comme ça", "de même", older children use them explicitly to guide their actions (e.g. to spell out the digits of a telephone number, etc.).

Table 3 presents frequency of use of expressive emotive elements such as prosodic or paralinguistic markers and the use of speech act categories V (expressive acts) and VI (verbal play). We expected these features to be more frequent in the preschool group, with the older children preferring more linguistically coded means for expressing emotion. This expectation seems to be borne out by the data, with four of the categories and the total number of expressive elements decreasing significantly over the three age levels. In addition, we find some support for the assumption that older children tend to use linguistic means to express emotions: while the relative frequency of expressive acts diminishes with age (from 10,2% to 1,5% of all illocutionary acts used), that of "complex", i.e. linguistically coded expressive acts increases with age from 15% to 55% of all

Table 3
EXPRESSIVE ELEMENTS IN SPEECH ACTS

<i>Expressive device</i>	<i>5 years</i>		<i>8 years</i>		<i>10 years</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Conventional act	207	13,2	206	16,0	150	12,5
Expressive act						
— non linguistic	160	10,2	80	6,2	18	1,5**
— linguistic	29	(15) ¹	16	(16) ¹	23	(55) ¹
Verbal play (onomatopoeia)	129	8,2	30	2,3	30	2,5*
Voice:						
high-pitched	47	3,0	56	4,3	14	1,2
loud	29	1,9	15	1,4	15	1,2
chanted	43	2,7	18	1,4	2	0,2**
whispered	25	1,6	21	1,6	14	1,2
drawn-out	53	3,4	135	10,6	48	4,0
simulated	306	19,5	56	4,3	85	7,1*
All voice modulators	503	32	301	23	178	14,9**
Total utterances	1566		1313		1197	

¹Percentage relative to expressive acts

* 5 > 8, 10 years

** 5 > 8 > 10 years

expressive acts (see Table 3). The three remaining categories showing a decrease with age are: 1) verbal play, mostly in the form of onomatopoeia (imitating animal voices, instrument noises, etc.); 2) related to this, the use of the vocal qualifier: simulation of voice characteristics (i.e. speaking like a "doctor", "a nurse", "a sick animal", etc.); 3) syllabic lengthening, used as an expressive marker to convey emotional involvement. It is of interest to point out that the oldest group seems to make a slightly greater use of expressive means, particularly simulation, than the middle group. We interpret this as an indicator of a greater freedom of expression, a move away from stereotyped behavior and conformity, which seems to characterise development in the early school years (Costanzo and Shaw 1966). In fact, the overall impression we derive from observing the three age groups in our standardized situation is that of high conventionality in the 8-year-old group, which contrasts with greater spontaneity in both the youngest and the oldest subjects. Would a more flexible approach to early school education produce different results? Only further research can answer this question.

Relationships between linguistic forms and illocutionary acts

a) Directives

The results show some degree of concordance between a set of linguistic structures and three types of directives. Tables 4 and 5 show the types of linguistic forms used by the children for accomplishing requests for information, requests for action and orders. Not surprisingly, the interrogative structure of the *wh* or the *yes-no* types are produced to

Table 4
INFORMATION REQUESTS FOR THREE AGE GROUPS (I.R.)

Type Linguistic form	Example	Age	5:6	8:6	10:6
1. [Qu+est-ce que+P?] [Qu+c'est+que+P?] [C'est qu+X?]	Qu'est-ce que vous avez? Où c'est qu'elle est notre horloge? C'est quoi ça?		■	■	■
2. [Qu?]	Quand? Hein? Qui?		☒	□	□
3. [S+V-tu+X?]	Y est-tu malade beaucoup?		□	□	□
4. [Est-ce que+S+V+X+?]	Est-ce que t'as bientôt fini?		□	□	
5. [Qu+S+V?]	Lequel tu veux?		□		□
6. [S+V+X]	Y en fait beaucoup?		□		□
7. Interrogative+[P]	Toi, le sais-tu qu'est-ce que je vais faire?		□		□
8. Truncated	Le nom de l'animal?			□	□
9. Subject pronoun inversion	L'as-tu faite dormir?				☒
	<i>Total number of I.R.:</i>		61	30	64
	<i>Percentage:</i>		4%	2.3%	5.3%

LEGEND
 ■ High frequency (75% and +)
 ☒ Frequent (50 to 75%)
 ☒ Medium frequency (20 to 50%)
 □ Low frequency (less than 20%)

accomplish request for information. The *wh* is the most frequently produced by children of the three age levels (types 1 and 2 of Table 4). Similarly, the *yes-no* French-Canadian interrogative structure [S + V - *tu* + x], which is used in spontaneous and vernacular speech and the [*Est-ce que*] type are used by all three age groups. Two characteristics seem to be related to age level: the form #9 of Table 4, syntactically more complex, was produced by the 10-year-old group only. On the other hand, the youngest children seem to use the type of question #2, a single *wh?*, more often. Categories 4 to 7 are relatively rare, hence the "accidental gaps" in the 8-year-old group do not call for any particular comment, except that they illustrate the principle of linguistic variability (Chomsky 1959); with increasing sample size, these "gaps" would probably disappear, while others may arise as the range of forms expands.

Table 5 presents a comparison between two subtypes of directives, requests for action and orders, and the linguistic forms produced at each of the three age levels with

Table 5
ACTION REQUESTS (A.R.) AND ORDERS FOR THREE AGE GROUPS

Type Linguistic form	Example	Age	order			request for action		
			5:6	8:6	10:6	5:6	8:6	10:6
1. [Imperat, 2nd pers.]	Prends-la. Couchez-vous là monsieur		■	■	■	□	☑	□
2. [Qu-Imperative]	Veux-tu me donner le thermomètre?					☑	■	■
3. Truncated	Pas avec mes miens.		□	☑	☑			
4. [Pron. 2nd pers.+ V<fut>+X]	Tu vas le coucher là.		□	□	□	□	□	□
5. Coordinate or paratactic structure	Appelle-le, tiens. Tu prendras ça pis tu viendras me voir chaque jour.		□	□	□			□
6. [Imperative+[P]]	Va voir quelle date y est.			□	□			□
	<i>Total:</i>		37	42	35	11	15	40
	<i>Percentage:</i>		2,4	3,3	2,9	0,7	1,2	3,3
<i>Illocutionary modifiers:</i>								
Prosodic intensifiers	Accélééré, forte allongement, lento		□	☑	□			
Lexical intensifiers	awaye, donc.		□	☑	□			
Lexical mitigators	oh, ah, euh, là, un peu, donc, ok, voilà, etc.					■	■	☑
Prosodic mitigators	pause, lento, piano, chuchotée, montante, allongement					■	■	□
Politeness markers	vous, s'il vous plaît, monsieur, madame					☑	□	■

their frequencies of use. From an illocutionary point of view, the difference between a request and an order rests on the speaker's relative power status. In general, this is the relationship between the veterinarian and the assistant in the role play.

The data show a general tendency to use the imperative type of sentence to perform orders whereas the requests for action are performed more frequently with the *wh*-imperative (interrogative with modal like *pouvoir* or *vouloir*) of type #2. The negative forms used to prohibit an action have been classified as orders and they often are elliptical as illustrated by the type #3 form. It can be seen that only the oldest group made use of type #6 imperative forms, which are relatively complex syntactically.

In addition to the 6 types of morphosyntactic devices, children also use various types of illocutionary modifiers to intensify or soften an order or to perform more polite requests. Table 5 includes examples of each of the two kinds of modifiers. These can be either prosodic or lexical. Children use both prosodic and lexical intensifiers with orders with the same relative frequencies at each age level. As for requests, three types of markers were identified: lexical and prosodic mitigators and politeness markers (including the social deictics, titles, etc.). These mitigators are used very frequently by the 5-year-old group. On the other hand, they use less often the standardized *wh*-imperative request than the older children do; as was shown in Table 3, the younger children tended to use prosodic markers more often than did the older children, who tended to use syntactic and morphological means instead.

In sum, these data show a fairly systematic correspondence of linguistic structures with particular illocutionary acts. In addition, these linguistic means or illocutionary force indicating devices change in two ways from 5 to 10 years of age: 1) in terms of quality (diversification of forms for the same illocutionary force), and 2) in terms of relative frequencies, the different age groups use the same forms but with different relative frequencies. In general, the older children tended to use a greater variety and more complex syntactic structures in similar contexts for the performance of the same illocutionary acts.

Concerning the divergence seen in the production of polite requests, it may be related to socio-cognitive development in the sense that older children might have a more acute perception of the social phenomena implied in politeness (Axia and Baroni 1985). The relatively infrequent use of type #2 forms by the youngest group and its replacement by other markers suggests that the politeness dimension of type #2 forms may not be fully apparent to younger children.

b) Suggestives

In contrast to the directive acts, which are produced by all ten age groups with similar frequencies, suggestives are proportionally more frequently performed by the 8 and 10-year-old children. This corresponds to a developmental level where cooperation between partners begins to predominate over expression of personal needs (Piaget 1926).

Table 6
SUGGESTIVE ACTS FOR THREE AGE GROUPS

Type Linguistic form	Example	Age	5:6	8:6	10:6
1. [1st pers.+V<fut or present>+X]	Nous irons le porter à son maître dès ce soir. On se couche.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2. Falloir+V<infinitive> Falloir que P	Faudrait l'nettoyer par exemple. Il faut qu'on soigne ça.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. [2nd pers.+modal <condit.>+V+X]	Tu devrais lui mettre un pansement.		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4. Coordinate or paratactic structure	On va mettre les outils puis on va partir. Nous donnerons à son maître les pilules, il lui donnera à chaque quatre heures.		<input type="checkbox"/>		
5. Imperative 1st pers.	Bon, maintenant arrangeons-y ses yeux.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. [Je pense que P]	Je pense qu'on devrait lui donner une piqûre.			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. [Nous/On+modal +V+X]	Nous devons l'opérer. On peut aller le reporter.				<input type="checkbox"/>
	<i>Total number:</i>		35	125	98
	<i>Percentage:</i>		2,2	10	8,1

3. CONCLUSION

As expected, the results presented here showed that there was no difference between types of illocutionary acts used. However, the subjects tended to use different acts with different relative frequencies. In general, it seems that as children grow older, their illocutionary acts tend to be of a more socialized nature, e.g. informing your partner, suggesting a collaborative activity, etc. Secondly, the data show that the formal means used to convey illocutionary force undergo certain systematic changes: 1) the older children seemed to have a more diversified repertoire of formal devices than did the younger children, with certain linguistically more complex forms appearing only with the older children; 2) the older children tended to use linguistically coded forms where younger children had recourse more often to prosodic and paralinguistic means of expression; 3) the older children had a wider and more stable repertoire of devices to mark the politeness dimension, thus reflecting growing awareness of the social aspect of communication.

These data agree with observations made by Baudichon (1982): "No difference in kind appeared in the behaviors that can be described using identical terms... Nevertheless, some developmental tendencies exist and are marked in increasingly diversified ways in different children". The implications for the teaching of mother tongue skills in elementary schools reside in the possibility to better appreciate the social aspects of speech and the abilities children possess at varying age levels to produce, comprehend and negotiate interpersonal meanings and intentions. The pragmatic approach might thus suggest considering language and its acquisition by children as a socio-cognitive ability that conjugates formal linguistic and socio-psychological dimensions of children's functioning.

Annexe
EXAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPTION AND CODING*

speaker	role	act	code	utterance (+ind. prosodic marker)
2	2	3b	d	On (slt) va y donner un remède.
1	6	4d	d	Oh non, non. (inc)
2	2	3b	d	On va y mettre dans la piqûre puis on va y donner.
2	2	0y	c	Il prépare la piqûre.
2	2	5b	d	Voyons. (p)
1	6	0y	c	Il simule que c'est l'ours qui parle. (slc)
1	6	1p	d	Ey je veux pas me faire donner une piqûre. (sim slc)
2	2	0y	c	Il donne la piqûre.
1	1	1c	d	Bon, y est correct là.
1	6	0y	c	Il simule que c'est l'ours qui parle. (slc)
1	6	1p	d	Médecin, je me sens mieux. (sim slc)
1	1	1i	d	Ok y se sent mieux.
1	1	0y	c	Il rapporte l'ours sur les tablettes.
1	1	4a	d	(inc) je vas aller rappeler.

LEGEND

0y	non codable	3b	recommendation
1c	descriptive	4a	promise
1i	assertive	4d	refusal
1p	inventive	5b	expressive act
d	discourse		
c	non verbal act		
(slt)	simultaneous speech	role: 1	veterinarian
(slc)	simultaneous act	2	assistant-veterinarian
(inc)	incomprehensible	6	animal (simulation)
(p)	low intensity voice		

*This example is taken from dyad 17 (8:6 years).

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