

Children's responses to questions in peer interaction: A window into the ontogenesis of interactional competence



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Abstract

What is it about children's interactions that is distinctive from adults' interactions? This article relies on a conversation analytically informed quantitative analysis of video recordings of child–child interaction to address this question. We examined 2000 questions and their responses in spontaneous conversation among three-party groups of same age children between 4–8 years of age to investigate the frequency and distributional patterns related to norms governing question–response sequences. We show that school-age children exhibit similar frequency distributions to adults but respond to questions less often and are slower than adults, with minimal age-related differences. Still more important, we argue, is that children's responses show a lack of reflexive awareness of the underlying norms. We propose that it is children's turn designs that lead child interaction to feel distinctive because children at these ages are not differentiating their norm-following from norm-departing responses.

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As children grow and participate in interactions with others, they come not only to acquire the language(s) they use but also the social norms of interaction. Social competence in interaction involves both an awareness and use of relevant social norms but a “reflexivity” of use that allows them to be deployed communicatively in conversation. Conversing with a school age child, one cannot help but notice significant differences in their communication as compared with that of adults, but what is it that makes their conversation child-like? On the one hand, by the age of 3, typically developing children have gone a long way toward acquiring the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and phonological features of their native language (cf, [Berko Gleason, 1993](#); [Clark, 2003](#)). On the other hand, children are slower in conversation than adults. We ask whether slowness is sufficient to account for what constitutes child-like conversation and propose that it is not. Instead, we argue that to understand the ontogenesis of interactional competence across childhood, we must consider both aggregate patterns of response including timing and frequency of response types but also qualitative patterns of turn design that display a reflexive awareness of conversational social norms.

In *On Facework*, [Goffman](#) argued that actions are understood in terms of what he calls a “line”. “Lines”, he observed, are inescapable: regardless of an individual's intent, others will understand him/her to be communicating a “view of the

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situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (1955:213). Within this view, social norms in interaction can be understood less as shackles constraining our communicative possibilities but rather as part of our communicative armament.

If we inevitably communicate by constructing our social actions either as in accordance with or as departing from the relevant social norm(s), then norms can be exploited for more strategic communicative ends. Critical to this perspective is Garfinkel's view that interactional norms are “reflexively constitutive of the activities and unfolding circumstances to which they are applied” (Heritage, 1984:109). In this view, the norm “provides both for the intelligibility and accountability of ‘continuing and developing the scene as normal’ and for the visibility of other, alternative courses of action” (Heritage, 1984:108). No action can be done without respect to a normative field. Consider the social norm that greetings should be reciprocated. A “norms as constraints” view would see a response greeting as “required”. Yet, Garfinkel's (1967) and Goffman's (1955, 1983) approaches permit us to see the norm as introducing more communicative possibilities than the action (e.g., silence, *hi*, or gaze withdrawal) itself offers. Thus, whatever the individual who has just been greeted does next will be evaluated by the greeter in light of the reciprocal greeting norm. Not greeting will be understood as a departure from the norm with understandings ranging from “She didn't hear me” to “She's ignoring me” or “She's angry with me”. Conversely, greeting in response will communicate an “all is normal” stance. Either way, adult greeters hear and deliver greetings in a context of being reflexively aware of the social norm to return a greeting (Heritage, 1984).

We propose that what makes North American children's conversations child-like is not only that children are slower and somewhat less responsive than North American adults but also that they show less insight into whether their responsive behavior is norm-following or norm-departing – they are not displaying reflexivity in their communication. For instance, when children decline an offer or disconfirm a request for confirmation, they may simply say “No.” whereas an adult would more commonly mitigate that answer and/or account for it.

Research into developmental pragmatics enjoyed a period of significant growth and elaboration, particularly with respect to turn-taking, during the 1970s (e.g., Bates, 1976; Ervin-Tripp, 1979; Gallagher, 1981; Garvey and Berninger, 1981; Lieven, 1978; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1979; Reeder, 1980; Shatz, 1978; Snow and Ferguson, 1977; Wellman and Lempers, 1977), largely occasioned by the publication of a new model of turn taking among adults (Sacks et al., 1974). Recently there has been renewed interest in children's pragmatics. Current work has examined turn-taking in infants of less than a year of age (Hillbrink et al., 2014; Stephens and Matthews, 2014) and very young children (under the age of 4-years) (Casillas, 2014; Filipi, 2009; Forrester, 2015; Lammertink et al., 2015). Research also acknowledges that pragmatic development extends past the age of 3 (Astington, 1988; Bernicot and Lavel, 2004; Bucciarelli et al., 2003; Clark, 2003). Although children have been shown to have some knowledge of the normative structures of, for instance, statements and commands (Rakoczy and Tomasello, 2009), we do not yet know whether their conversational behavior exhibits a reflexive awareness of the differences between when their turns are norm-following versus norm-departing.

In this paper we add to the re-emerging interest in developmental pragmatics by focusing on how North American four to eight year old children respond to one another's questions in spontaneous naturally occurring social interaction. We ask, broadly, what is most child-like about children's conversations? In order to address this question, we focus on two more specific questions about these school age children: (1) Do they exhibit North American adult-like patterns of responsiveness in aggregate frequency and timing?; (2) Do they exhibit an adult-like orientation to norm-following and norm-departing responses such that they design these two classes of responses differently? We show that by the age of 8, these children's response to questions reflect broadly similar frequency and timing patterns to adults; however, children show less reflexive awareness of differences between norm-guided and norm-violating ways of designing their responses to questions. Instead, children's responses are characterized by greater directness and less reflexivity regarding these norms. This suggests that the ontogenesis of conversational competence progresses first to aggregate adult-like response patterns and only later reflects an orientation to the underlying interactional norms.

1. Introduction

We focus on questions and responses for a number of reasons. First, questions are a fundamental structure in children's early interaction: They are already part of children's repertoire in the first year of life (Chouinard, 2007); children are sensitive to their design by 18 months (Wootton, 1997); and parents use questions with toddlers to teach them that responses are required (Filipi, 2009). Second, questions are relied on to perform a wide variety of different actions from requesting information to proposing activities to requesting objects, asking for clarification and more (Forrester, 2015; Schegloff, 1976; Stivers, 2010). Third, much is known about how and when questions are responded to in adult conversation both in terms of social norms that guide interaction and other non-norm governed regularities (Stivers et al., 2009). Finally, constraining our examination of interaction to question–response sequences provides a window not just into how children respond to questions but how they take turns since the asking of a question allocates the next turn at talk (Sacks et al., 1974). Restricting ourselves to question–answer sequences allows for a stable comparison of the time it

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