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Young children's embodied pursuits of a response to their initial assessments

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger study that looks at the interactive competences young children (2–3 years) deploy in everyday family life. Based on an audiovisual corpus of naturally occurring parent–child interactions, it offers a multimodal analysis of the ways children produce assessments, and how they repeat them if a (satisfactory) response from the recipient is not (immediately) forthcoming. The detailed examination of ten fragments shows that the immediate interactive context provides small children with essential resources for locating recipients' possible problems in responding to their initial assessments, and organizing their pursuit of a response accordingly. When producing assessments within everyday interactions, children treat them as fundamentally social activities – that make a response from the recipient relevant – instead of dealing with them as mere expressions of their private stance toward an object, an activity or an experience.

Keywords: Parent-child interaction; Childrens' assessments; Pursuits of response; Conversation analysis

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, Garfinkel et al. (1982) worked on a research project on 'kids' culture' whose aim was to investigate and render visible children's interactive competences. On the basis of a small number of cases, the author remarked that young children (around two and a half years of age) might already use the adjacency pair organization as a resource for coordinating their own activities with those of others, and seem to orient toward the central property of adjacency pairs: *conditional relevance* (Garfinkel et al., 1982: 49). An adjacency pair is composed of two parts/utterances by two speakers, while conditional relevance refers to the fact that speaker A's production of a first pair part (FPP) – e.g. a question – makes a type-fitted second pair part (SPP) – e.g. an answer – by the recipient of the FPP unavoidably relevant (see Sacks, 1992 II: 17–31; Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff and Sacks, 1974: 238). Firstly and prospectively in time, the adjacency pair organization provides for a mechanism through which one interactant "can get another to do something" (Heritage, 2008: 12). A, by addressing a question to B, makes a type-fitted response – an answer – from the intended recipient (B) normatively relevant: if the answer is not forthcoming, it is noticeably absent and has implications for the further interaction, e.g. A might repeat his or her question in order to obtain an answer from B. Secondly and retrospectively in time, adjacency pairs, and their central property constitute a sequentially organized interactive architecture through which understanding can be displayed, checked and repaired, and through which intersubjectivity, i.e. shared understanding, can eventually be achieved: B, by answering A's question, displays his or her understanding of the latter (Heritage, 1984a: 254ff; 2008: 10ff.).

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In everyday family life, young children recurrently produce *initial assessments*, such as ''yuck'', ''that is beautiful'', ''[the man] is tall'', ''that's difficult'' etc. (Keel, 2012). Through the deployment of assessments, speakers display their normative ''position'', and express their ''affective involvement'' toward the object, activity or person being referred to (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987: 9). As Goodwin and Goodwin (1987: 7–10) argue, in order to make assessments understandable for others, speakers might deploy a whole array of resources, ranging from embodied ones (facial expression, posture, or intonation), to more or less complex linguistic and syntactic constructions. Depending on the embodied, sequential and linguistic resources speakers mobilize when producing initial assessments, a whole range of social actions, such as noticings, announcements, informings, complaints, compliments, requests etc., might be achieved (Keel, 2011; Lindström and Heinemann, 2009; Mondada, 2009a: 352; Mondada, 2009b; Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori, 2006; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984a: 63).

Systematic studies of assessment sequences produced by adults suggest, moreover, that the production of an initial (first) assessment by speaker A makes relevant a response by the intended recipient (speaker B) (Pomerantz, 1975, 1984a). The response by B often comes in the form of a second assessment that might be upgraded or downgraded with respect to the initial one, and thus respectively expresses B's strong agreement or disagreement with it, or it might take the form of a 'same evaluation' and thus manifest B's weak agreement or even indicate his or her incipient disagreement with the initial assessment (Pomerantz, 1975: 22). Furthermore, it has been argued that to produce an adequate second assessment, the recipient requires access to the assessed object, person, etc. in order to verify the claim being made by the first speaker (Pomerantz, 1984a: 61–63). The examination of interactively produced assessment sequences thus reveals how evaluations of the surrounding world are interactively negotiated, how issues of alignment/disalignment are handled and how shared understanding might eventually be reached. As such, their occurrence constitutes a privileged moment for investigating the articulation between cognition, talk and culture (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1992: 181–184).

This paper focuses on situations in which the young child (between 2 and 3 years old) produces an initial assessment and pursues a response from the intended recipient if the latter does not spontaneously respond to it. Recently, the question of how very young children interacting with others organize *(proto-)adjacency pairs*[1] has regained increased interest within conversation analysis and ethnomethodology (see: Filipi, 2009, 2013; Forrester, 2008; Jones and Zimmerman, 2003: 178; Lerner et al., 2011; Lerner and Zimmerman, 2003; Wootton, 1997, 2007). In these studies, it is well documented that very young children, while not fully mastering natural language, are able to produce recognizable proto-first pair parts and seem to orient toward conditional relevance. When interacting with adults (parents, caregivers), very young children (around 12 months) treat their proto-requests (for an object or a labeling action) as making relevant a particular response from the intended recipient (handing over the object, proffering the label). Indeed, when confronted with the absence of a (satisfactory) response, they might maintain/repeat a pointing and combine it with the repetition of a vocalization, possibly getting a response from the adult (Filipi, 2009: 127, 146; Jones and Zimmerman, 2003: 178; Wootton, 1997: 27–31). These studies demonstrate that young children's and adults' interactive organization of (proto-)adjacency pairs and orientation toward its sequential implications stand in need of an analytic approach which takes into account all the multimodal resources (gaze, pointing, vocalization, body posture) that interactants deploy in order to produce a contextual configuration in which their (and the intended recipient's) respective expectations (of what comes next) become observable and intelligible for the interactants themselves, and thus for the analyst (Goodwin, 2000: 15; 2003: 218).

The studies referred to above focus on interactions involving children that are younger (or older) than those of our study (see Butler, 2008; Filipi, 2009; Filipi and Wales, 2010; Goodwin, 2006), and/or primarily analyze children's productions and (embodied) repetitions of so-called *canonical action types* (Stivers and Rossano, 2010: 5–6), such as offers, questions or different types of requests (Butler and Wilkinson, 2013; Filipi, 2009; Jones and Zimmerman, 2003; Wootton, 1997, 2007). In our study, young children's deployment of assessments serves to achieve a whole range of *non-canonical actions* (Stivers and Rossano, 2010: 9), such as noticings, informings, complaints, announcements, etc. In their paper on the mobilization of a response, Stivers and Rossano (2010: 9) argue that *canonical action types* make relevant a type-fitted response, whereas *non-canonical action types* do not have as powerful normative implications. On the basis of 50 h of English and Italian everyday conversations, the authors examine the normative implications of canonical and non-canonical actions and provide three different types of evidence to back up their argument. Their first evidence refers to frequency distribution: canonical actions routinely and reliably receive a type-fitted response,[2] whereas it is easy to find instances in which a non-canonical action is not responded to. The second and third arguments refer to treatment of non-response by speakers and recipients, respectively. Indeed, when producing canonical actions, speakers and recipients treat the intended recipient's omission of a response as a failure (Stivers and Rossano, 2010: 6–9). In contrast to

[1] The notion of the *proto-adjacency pair* was introduced by Jones and Zimmerman (2003: 178). According to them, it might be premature to describe very young children's use of repeated pointing for requesting, for example, as equivalent to a FPP. However, since it has the same interactive consequences as a FPP, they suggest calling it a *proto first pair part*.

[2] With regard to the examination of canonical actions, the authors do not provide precise frequency distributions. However, they refer to other studies, such as Stivers et al. (2009), in which requests for information are responded to with a type-fitted response in 90% of the cases.