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**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 2**

Series Editor: David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

# **Learning to Request in a Second Language**

## **A Study of Child Interlanguage Pragmatics**

Machiko Achiba

**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS LTD**

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# For Yohji and Yao

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# Summary

This volume examines the acquisition of requests in English by a seven-year-old Japanese girl, over a period of 17 months from the beginning of her second language learning experience, during her residence in Australia.

The principal purpose of the study has been to determine what strategies and linguistic devices a child second-language learner uses in order to make requests in English and what developmental path the learning process follows.

The data were collected in the child's home in Australia during her natural interaction with three different types of interlocutor: a peer, a teenager, an adult neighbour; and with the child's mother, who conducted the research. The child's interaction with each addressee was both audio- and video-recorded. These recordings were supplemented by diary data.

The study focuses on the development of the child's requestive repertoire, as well as how this aspect of her language use varied in relation to goal and addressee.

A developmental profile resulting from this study demonstrates that strategies, linguistic exponents and modifications show a steady developmental pattern. The results also indicate that the developmental patterns of request realisation varied substantially according to goal. This strongly suggests that requests for goods, for the initiation of action, for the cessation of action, and for joint activity emerge as distinct areas of learning and behaviour. Differences in relation to addressee were remarkably subtle. The child's request behaviour seemed to be shaped significantly by the play situation. While not distinguishing greatly between her peers, the teenager and the adult, she did make readily observable distinctions between her play partners and her mother, who was outside the context of her play. The child showed a sensitivity to the social context that overrode the age-related influences imposed by the addressees.

This study has attempted to clarify our understanding the pragmatic development of a learner's interlanguage, about which we yet know very little.

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# Chapter 1

## ***Introduction***

### **1.0 The Background of the Study**

This study was occasioned by my coming to Australia with my daughter, Yao, in May 1992. During our stay, I observed her pragmatic development in a variety of contexts over a period of 17 months, as she gained command of English. For the purpose of this study, which was begun when Yao had had no prior learning of English, I gathered data in the particular context of play situations so that I was able to control the data gathering using both audio- and video-tape recording. The quantified data of the study comes from these recordings. In order to document her process of learning, I also kept a diary with notes on her utterances in English and the comments she made with regard to her language learning.

### **1.1 Interlanguage Pragmatics in Second Language Acquisition Research**

Interlanguage pragmatics has been defined as ‘the study of nonnative speakers’ use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language’ (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993: 3). A growing interest in interlanguage pragmatics over the last two decades is reflected in the substantial body of research that has been undertaken (see Ellis, 1994; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Kasper & Rose, 1999; and Thomas (in manuscript) for review). However, the bulk of the studies have focused on second language use rather than pragmatic development. That is, the great majority of research has been on the ways in which and the extent to which learners of a second language use pragmatic knowledge differently from native speakers of the target language. Consequently, the greater majority of the research has been cross-sectional and focused on adults. (Not surprisingly, the bulk of the studies with children have concentrated not on second language but first language acquisition.) There are only a few longitudinal studies that have investigated L2 pragmatic development (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993, on 10 adult learners of English; Ellis, 1992, on two child learners of English; Sawyer, 1992, on 11 adult learners of Japanese; Schmidt, 1983, on one adult learner of English). In

contrast, among the mainstream second language acquisition studies, which are primarily concerned with the formal linguistic properties of the learner's interlanguage, there have been a great number of longitudinal studies on developmental patterns and sequences of specific syntactic features. This rich literature commences with Cazden *et al.* (1975), Hakuta (1976), Wong-Fillmore (1976), Itoh and Hatch (1978) and Pienemann (1980), and is continued by more recent studies such as those by Nicholas (1987), Liu (1991), Tarone and Liu (1995) and P. Clark (1996). Thus, we know a great deal about the development of a learner's linguistic features. But as pointed out by Ellis (1994), Kasper (1996), Kasper and Rose (1999), Kasper and Schmidt (1996) and Schmidt (1993), we know very little about how a learner's pragmatic aspects develop. What we need now are longitudinal studies that unravel pragmatic development by observing learners from the onset of their language acquisition process. It is the purpose of this study to contribute to the fulfilment of that need.

## 1.2 Speech Acts

As a means to investigate pragmatics, the speech act approach has been used effectively for both in first and second language acquisition research. This approach finds its origin in linguistic philosophy (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; 1975; 1976). According to speech act theory, speakers perform *illocutionary acts* by producing utterances. An illocutionary act is a particular language function performed by an utterance. That is, through their utterances speakers convey communicative intentions, such as requests, apologies, promises, advice, compliments, offers, refusals, complaints and thanking. The study of speech acts provides a useful means of relating linguistic form and communicative intent. An utterance, here, is treated as the realisation of a speaker's intention and goal in a particular context.

Because there is no easy way to map the literal meaning of an utterance into its function, both the performance and the comprehension of an illocutionary act is a highly complex matter. One utterance can have a multitude of functions, and the speaker's intent is not always clearly perceived. For instance, an utterance like 'Can you reach that book?' can count as a request to pass the book when addressed to a person sitting close to it. However, when Yao broke her collarbone and was visiting the doctor for the second time, he used this utterance as an information question to determine the extent of her recuperation. The literal meaning of 'can you ...?' in both contexts is 'are you able to ...?' but only in the

utterance in the latter context is this literal meaning central. Another example of this complexity is an utterance such as 'I'm hungry'. This can be a simple statement of fact but only rarely is. It can, on occasion, even be an attempt to be excused from piano practice when produced by a child who has been told by her mother to practise. As Fraser (1975: 189) suggests, a single utterance can and often does serve a number of illocutionary acts. An addressee has to draw pragmatic inferences to know why the speaker said what she or he said. This calls for considerable pragmatic as well as linguistic ability on the part of the addressee, especially when he or she is a learner.

### 1.3 The Choice of Speech Act for Research

The illocutionary act of requests has been chosen for the present study for several reasons. First, and most obviously, requests are useful and occur frequently, especially among learners of a new language. Learners may get along without performing other illocutionary acts, but without requests it would be difficult to function effectively. Secondly, among the different types of speech acts that have been studied in second language research, the illocutionary act of requests has been studied most. Therefore, there is a firm framework upon which to base further study. Thirdly, requests occur in particularly useful contexts for the investigation of the development of a learner's pragmatic competence. Because requests are realised by a variety of linguistic forms (e.g. imperatives, declaratives or interrogatives), express a variety of functions or intentions, and encode the relative status of the speaker and the addressee, they create an environment in which there is substantial opportunity to examine how linguistic forms are related to intentions. Fourthly, they make use of various direct and indirect forms in accomplishing successful communication. Fifthly, a request constitutes a *face-threatening act*, a term introduced by Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987), and so a speaker, in order to reduce the threat and to minimise the potential face damage, will need to make use of strategies and modification. Finally, it has been said that 'requesting is close to being the prototype case of a social transaction' (Bruner *et al.*, 1982: 93). Requests thus provide insights into many different aspects of a learner's acquisition of pragmatic skills.

### 1.4 The Purpose of the Study

The present longitudinal case study investigates the developmental process of one illocutionary act – requests – in a child second language