

Making Requests: A Pragmatic Study of Chinese Mother-Child Dyads

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The purpose of this study is to investigate different types of requests made by either mother or child in their daily interactions within family environment. The study also aims at addressing how different grammatical structures are used in contextualized situations as well as how a certain pragmatic intent is expressed within a specific context. Data were collected from mother-child interactions in different daily routine activities which were audio-recorded within Chinese family environment. The descriptive analysis system is employed to describe the flow of mother-child dyads. The results show that mothers tend to make both direct and indirect requests, using a wide range of linguistic forms and communicative strategies in different contexts with their children. However, children use more direct requests than indirect ones when they communicate with their mothers, but they do use indirect requests with out-group members such as peers and other adults.

0. Introduction

The interactionist approach suggests that children acquire language through their attempts to communicate with the world around them. A number of researchers have investigated the characteristics of mother-child dyads, and a large number of quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted to examine the acquisition of different languages in the last two decades. According to Bruner (1983), there are three aspects of children's language acquisition: the first is in terms of well-formedness: that he or she is becoming able to make utterances that conform to the rules of grammar. The second aspect of language is its capacity to make references and to have meaning. The third is pragmatics. "When we say that a child is acquiring language, we must account for another aspect of what is being acquired—that is, its function or communicative intent or how to get things done with words" (Bruner, 1983: 18). Ochs (1988:14) described the relationship among these three aspects as "given that meanings and functions are to a large extent socioculturally organized, linguistic knowledge is embedded in sociocultural knowledge." There appear to be two factors that influence maternal speech: sentence structure and cultural variation (Lee and Nakayama, 2000).

However, very few studies have been done to investigate how Chinese is used in the interactions between young native speakers and their parents and teachers with an eye on its applications to foreign language education. The purpose of this study is to investigate different types of requests made by either mother or child in their daily interactions within a family environment. The study also aims at addressing how different sentence structures are used in contextualized situations as well as how a certain pragmatic intent is expressed within a specific context. In addition, the present study presents some linguistic forms as well as the underlining moral and social norms Chinese mothers would emphasize through the speech act of making requests.

1. Literature Review: the Speech Act of Making Requests

Among the numerous speech acts studied, requesting has continually been the focus for many decades because of both the complexity of the relationship among form, meaning, and pragmatics in requests, and the high social stakes involved for interlocutors when choosing among linguistic options. Bach and Harnish (1984: 48) define the term “request” as “a speech act expressing the speaker’s desire for the hearer to do something with the added proviso that the hearer takes this expressed desire as the reason to act.” In short, a request is basically a face threatening speech act which demands for action of some kind from the other person. Requests may contain the following components according to Zuraidah (1997): address terms, supporting moves, the request proper and internal modifications and the choice of what to include and exclude depends on sociological variables like social distance, power and degree of imposition.

Based on Bach and Harnish’s definition, Kuang et al. (2006) redefined requests as verbal instructions performed by the speaker expressing a desire for the addressee to do a particular thing and usually aim for the addressee to intend to do it and actually to do it. They examined the many varied forms that the speech act of request takes in children’s language use from 5 Malaysian families. They found young children are capable of employing different strategies when making requests in English, but the choice of strategies is dependent on the variable of the addressee, i.e. whether it is the mother, father, sibling (brother/sister) or maid. Their result illustrated that these five Malaysian children tend to be more direct when it comes to getting things done for themselves. However, it is clear that even young children are aware of power differentials and language used for solidarity as contrasted to language used to show distance and power.

Many studies have been conducted to investigate how children with various cultural backgrounds make requests using different forms from this perspective. Children have at their disposal a range of both direct and indirect forms for requesting (Ervin-Tripp, 1977), and although indirect requests increase with age, younger children have as many ways of expressing requests as the older children (Read and Cherry, 1978). It is believed that children use the imperative directives more frequently than requests in the form of questions or hints (Papafragou, 2000).

Zhang summarized (1995) that in the Western literature, requests have been defined as acts by means of which one attempts to get someone else to do something. Zhang (1995) categorized requests in Chinese into two types: direct and indirect. Even direct ones can be viewed at different direct levels. She described indirectness in modern conversation between Chinese as being “associated with information sequencing. . . . The more one beats around the bush, the more indirect one’s speech becomes” (1995:82). Zhang’s study focused on the strategies used by adult speakers driven by politeness concerns in order to redress face. Zhang claimed that in Chinese culture, requests are often regarded as signs of a good relationship and even respect.

Different from these studies which examined requesting as a speech act, Li (2000) advocated that requesting is not only a speech act realized in a single utterance or pair of utterances but should be a pragmatic activity that is achieved sometimes over a series of utterances or accomplished only after an extended period of time. Thus she adapted an ethnographic approach to collect data from the full context of the speech act, and drew heavily on self-reports or narrative accounts of speech acts, not just observed events. The contextualized examples provided in this research illustrated how, through exposure and participation in social interactions and with the assistance of experts or more competent peers, an immigrant woman came to internalize target language and cultural norms and developed communicative competence in ESL in the workplace. More specifically, she learned to make requests more directly than she had been accustomed to doing by adopting certain sociolinguistic strategies and expressions.

2. Research Method

Subjects

The participants were mothers and children from eight Chinese families. Seven Chinese mother-child pairs were from a university-based family-housing community of a mainstream American university. The community is established for students’ and visiting scholars’ families—undergraduate and graduate, Americans and international. Located in a sound area and having Chinese, Korean, Arabic, Indian, Russian and other ethnic groups, the community is internationally diverse and friendly. The Chinese represent one of the largest ethnic groups in the community. The other mother-child pair was from a Chinese community in a middle-size city in the Eastern United States. Four of the children were girls, and four were boys (Figure 1). The age range is from thirty-eight months to ninety-six months as shown on Figure 2 (mean=57). Two mothers were full time employees of the university. Four were full time graduate students with either Teaching Associate or Research Associate positions which require twenty hours of work per week. The other two mothers were housewives.

Four children were only-children, and the other four had siblings. Among these four with siblings were two first-borns and two second-borns. None of them had more than one sibling. Six of the children were born in the United States, and the other two were born in Canada and China respectively. Six children had the experience of living in

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China for more than six months before the age of three. One had only been in China for a couple of months during summer vacations, and one had never been back to China. All of them had the experience of living with their grandparents; six of them had such an experience for more than one year. All the children attend daycare for the whole day, starting at the age of two or three. Two children went to half-day kindergarten. All of the eight children had many Chinese classmates and friends, and seven of the mothers said their children spent a significant amount of time after school playing with Chinese friends. For most of their time at home, all eight children used Chinese to communicate with their parents. Two mothers said their children spoke some English with their siblings at home.

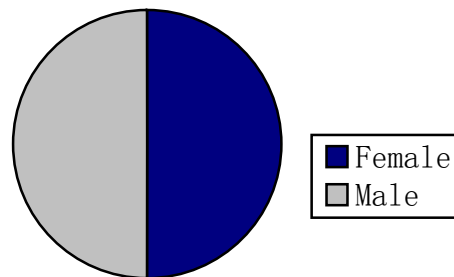


Figure 1 Gender of the children participants

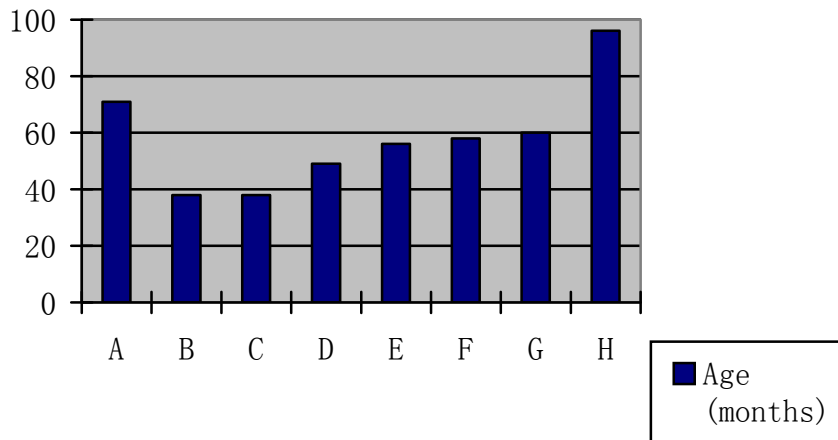


Figure 2 Age range of the children

Data Collection

Daily conversations between children and parents in five families were audio-recorded for a total of more than twenty-five hours. The age range of these five children is thirty-eight to fifty-eight months with the mean of fifty-six. Two were boys and three were girls. Two had siblings, but no conversations between siblings were recorded. The researcher conducted a 20-25 minute interview with each mother in their apartment about the family background and language use in their family. The researcher also explained the research purpose and audio-recording procedure to the mother. The audio-recording equipment, an MD HD digital recorder (model unknown) was set in their living room which is in conjunction with the kitchen, and the instructions of operating the recorder were given to the mother. Even though the recorder was sensitive enough to catch the sound when it is put at a distance from the child, mothers were told to move the equipment near the children and to try to forget about the recording since it was emphasized that the conversations that happened at home should be recorded in as natural a way as possible. The mothers were also told to explain the recording to the child and other family members so that they understood what was going on and did not pay much attention to the recording when they were talking. The mothers were asked to start recording whenever they were at home with their children and felt comfortable to do the recording. It could include any kind of interactions, parent-to-child, child-to-child, child-to-siblings, or child-to-other adults, and any event, from daily routine activities, such as eating dinner, getting ready for shopping, or story telling before bed, to special events, such as a birthday party or friends coming over. The memory card in the recorder has the capacity of about ten hours recording in high quality, but the mothers were asked to record as much as they liked. When the equipment was picked up after about a week, there was about five hours of recording in the memory card. The equipment was then sent to the multi-media studio where the recording was converted onto CD or DVD.

The interactions in the recording were transcribed roughly for the larger project, and for this study, only the speech act of making requests between mothers and children in the recording was selected and re-transcribed.

In the current study, microethnographic analysis is employed to investigate the speech act of requesting in mother-child dyads by examining the moment by moment unfolding of the event and how people build on each others' actions and language and literacy practices in order to achieve the research aims. The data is categorized following Zhang's framework in her study conducted in 1995. The descriptive analysis system, proposed by Green and Wallat (1981), is also employed based on theoretical constructs from the fields of sociolinguistics, conversational analysis, and the study of teaching. The microethnographic analysis help to describe the flow of mother-child dyads, to identify the social cultural ideologies which shape the conversation, to produce maps of the mother-child power relationship, and to provide insights from the basic message units for the identification of social norms and conversational contexts (Green and Wallat, 1981).

Data Analysis and Results

The data was categorized into four major types: mother-initiated direct requests, mother-initiated indirect requests, child-initiated direct requests, and child-initiated indirect requests.

1. Mother-initiated direct requests:

Wang (2005; 2001) proposes that Chinese mothers tend to use more didactic speech to help children regulate emotions and behavior, and focus more on conflict resolutions and moral lessons in order to establish social harmony and proper conduct. When asked what were the most commonly used utterances in daily conversations, six mothers mentioned how they asked their children to eat more at dinner: 好好吃饭 *hǎohǎo chīfàn*, to eat in an appropriate way (or to eat more). It seemed eating is very important for the Chinese mothers, and so is sleeping. Several mothers mentioned that children are likely to be told about consequences of not eating well:

不好好吃饭你就长不高
Bù hǎohǎo chīfàn nǐ jiù zhǎng bù gāo
 You cannot grow tall if you do not eat well.

赶紧睡觉了。
Gǎnjǐn shuìjiào le.
 Hurry up and go to bed.

An important underlining cultural value in Chinese is social harmony and group solidarity. Mothers constantly emphasize maintaining and keeping good relationships with others when they educate their children. To maintain a good relationship within the group, Chinese parents often tell their children to be polite and not aggressive or offensive. In the interview, most mothers mentioned that they educated their children not to fight or argue with other children at school or at the playground. They also tell their children to be modest in order to keep harmony in the group. For example, this is what a mother told her son before they went to the playground.

不要这样。要好好跟小朋友相处。
Bùyào zhèyàng, yào hǎohǎo gēn xiǎopéngyou xiāngchǔ.
 Stop that. You'd better get along with your friends.

要好好跟小朋友玩，不许打架。
Yào hǎohǎo gēn xiǎopéngyǒu wán, bùxǔ dǎjià.
 You should get along with your friends. Do not fight with each other.

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不许 *bùxǔ*, together with 别 *bié*, 不要 *bùyào* and 不能 *bùnéng*, are often used by the mothers when they prohibit children from doing something. In the following example, the mother thought her son talked too much during dinner, so she started “table etiquette” education.

别说话，吃饭的时候不能说话。
Bié shuōhuà, chīfàn de shíhòu bùnéng shuōhuà.
Don't talk. Don't talk while eating.

Chinese children are expected to be good at various aspects. Their parents want them to follow their way for their being good: eating a fair amount of vegetables, going to bed on time, and being good in class. There are many stories in the recording in which mothers make requests in order to set the schedule for children, and arrange the sequence of the actions by telling them to do this first and then that. For example:

今天吃完饭睡觉。
Jīntiān chīwánfàn shuìjiào.
You will go to sleep after lunch today.

One of the important criteria of judging if a child is good or not within Chinese families is if he/she is obedient. The following request appeared several times in the recording made by different mothers.

乖，听话。
Guāi, tīnghuà.
Be good. Do what you are told.

The other important theme emphasized by Chinese parents is to recognize hierarchy in the group. They teach their children to use the appropriate term of address in order to recognize the hierarchy among people. The most common type of didactic speech mentioned in the interviews and found in the recordings was to ask their children to greet others using appropriate terms of address. For example,

叫叔叔好
Jiào shūshu hǎo
Say hello to Uncle.

2. Mother-initiated indirect requests:

As mentioned above, Chinese mothers make requests to coach their children how to address people appropriately. In another example, the mother made her request

indirectly by checking if her son had said hello to his grandmother during a videoconference when they tried to correspond through the internet. Her son responded negatively using the sentence-final particle 呢 *ne* to soften the confrontation.

妈妈：你跟姥姥打招呼了吗？

Māma: Nǐ gēn lǎolǎo dǎ zhāohū le ma?

Mom: Did you say hi to your grandma?

儿子：没有呢。

Érzi: Méiyǒu ne.

Son: Not yet.

Mothers use 好吗? *hǎoma?* OK? or the sentence particle 吧 *ba* to make their requests indirect. The following two examples sound like suggestions, but they are the indirect requests mothers made to have their children wash their hands and eat dinner. In the second example, the mother was making a request to eat dinner by adding a sentence-final particle 吧 *ba*, together with the first person plural 咱们 *zánmen*, to “achieve the effect of soliciting the approval or agreement of the hearer” (Li and Thompson, 1981: 307).

先去把手洗了好吗？

Xiān qù bǎ shǒu xǐ le hǎoma?

Go wash your hands first, okay?

走吧，咱们吃饭去吧。

Zǒu ba, zánmen chīfàn qù ba.

Come on, let's eat dinner.

For many cases, there is no clear distinction between suggestion and request. However, the indirect requests made by mothers sound more like suggestions because of the power relationship between mother and child. For example, in the following example, the mother was stating using the collective pronoun, which indicates both the listener and the speaker will go to school together, but actually it was the son who was going to school.

妈妈：儿子咱们要上学了。

Māma: Érzi zánmen yào shàngxué le.

Mom: Let's go to school, son.

In the following example of the interactions between mother and daughter, the mother used an “A-not-A” question with the sentence-final particle 啊 *a*, to request her

daughter to draw a picture. “啊 *a*”, unlike “吧 *ba*”, used in this kind of question, has the semantic effect of softening the query.

妈妈：那你现在想不想画画啊？

Māma: Nà nǐ xiànzài xiǎngbùxiǎng huàhuà a?

Mom: Then do you want to draw a picture now?

3. Child-initiated direct requests:

Children often make their “intentional” statement directly, which fosters a communicative world that is much simpler than that of adults. The verbs 想, *xiǎng*, and 要 *yào* “want” are often used when children make direct requests. For example:

妈妈我要吃冰激凌。

Māma, wǒ yào chī bīngjīlíng.

Mom, I want to eat ice cream.

我要吃酸奶。

Wǒ yào chī suānnǎi.

I want to eat yogurt.

吃完饭我要出去玩，和文文一起玩。

Chīwánfàn wǒ yào chūqù wán, hé Wénwén yīqǐ wán.

After I eat, I want to go out to play with Wenwen.

4. Child-initiated indirect requests:

In order to maintain good relationships within a group, Chinese children are often educated to be polite when making requests. They also imitate the requests made by their mothers: the strategies and the linguistic forms. Here are three examples:

妈妈你跟我一起打车标呗。

Māma nǐ gēn wǒ yīqǐ dǎ chēbiāo bei.

Mom, let's play chebiao together, will you?

我用这个行不行啊？

Wǒ yòng zhègè xíngbùxíng a?

Can I use this?

Without the power, the indirect requests made by children sound more like suggestions. However, children know when, how and to whom to use power in order to make such requests. For example, a girl was asking if another girl wanted to play at her house, but she made it an indirect request by adding the term of address 姐姐 *jiějiě*,

older sister, which indicates she was requesting the other girl to come because she is older. In the other examples, one girl was assigning roles in a pretend game, using very simple statements. But with the imbalanced power between the addressee, her play date, and her, she was requesting him to play the role of Daddy and arranging everything in the scene for him without any negotiation. Her play date, understanding her intentions very well, did not say anything and followed her request.

甜甜你要不要到姐姐家来玩呀?

Tiántián nǐ yào bú yào dào jiějiě jiā lái wán ya?

Tiantian, are you coming to play at my (your older sister's) place?

我来做妈妈，你来做爸爸。

Wǒ lái zuò māma, nǐ lái zuò bàba.

I will be the mother, and you'll be the father.

这是商店。这是你的书包。好了，走吧。

Zhèshì shāngdiàn. Zhèshì nǐde shūbāo. Hǎole, zǒu ba.

This is the store. Here is your bag. OK, let's go.

3. Conclusion

The results show that mothers tend to make both direct and indirect requests, using a wide range of linguistic forms and communicative strategies in different contexts with their children. However, children use more direct requests than indirect ones when they communicate with their mothers, but they do use indirect requests with out-group members such as peers and other adults. The results of this study illustrates what Kuang et al. (2006) found that even young children are aware of power differentials and language used for solidarity as contrasted to language used to show distance and power. They know how to choose the appropriate strategies and linguistic forms based on different situations recognizing sociological variables like social distance, power and degree of imposition.

Children learn linguistic forms and communicative strategies from their mothers by imitating the way they make requests; more importantly, they are educated about the sociocultural norms which shape people's behavior in daily interactions with their mothers. Therefore, language acquisition is also a language socialization process. Language socialization theory considers language learning as the simultaneous acquisition of linguistic knowledge and sociocultural knowledge (Ochs, 1993). As Li (2000) advocated, because sociocultural information is encoded in the organization of conversational discourse, language learners acquire tacit knowledge of principles of social order, systems of belief, and sociolinguistic conventions through exposure to and participation in language-mediated interactions. Language-in-use, then, is a major tool for conveying sociocultural knowledge and a powerful medium of socialization.

In addition, as discussed in the data analysis section, there is no clear distinction between suggestion and request. When speech acts of suggestion or request is examined, social variables such as power relationship, social distance, and age have to be considered and analyzed.

4. Discussion

As language teaching professionals, we must therefore deepen our understanding of contexts of language use, developmental pragmatic processes, and ways in which second language learners can be equipped to use language both appropriately and strategically. Teaching them useful linguistic forms within context is as important as teaching certain types of behavior, communicative strategies and sociocultural norms. Therefore, in teaching Chinese as a foreign or a second language, it is important to present the authentic models in the context to the learners. In addition, learners should be trained to recognize the context, and be able to choose appropriate forms, strategies based on the contextualized cues; and teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice using what they have learned. So it is crucial for the teachers to set up the context for the practice, assign roles, and explain the relationship between the roles students are playing.

As for the limitations, first some mothers use English from time to time, or code-switching and code-mixing when they talk to their children, especially when they tell stories. It would be better if the research is done in a pure Chinese environment, such as with families in China. Second, the audio-recording keeps the records of the sound of what has happened, but sometimes there are not enough cues for the context. The researcher has to depend on the linguistic elements and background noise to figure out what was going on when transcribing the recordings. It is always difficult to record what the children are doing since they keep moving around and making all kinds of noise. Some of their talking is only comprehensible for their parents within a specific context. In this sense, audio-recording is not as good as video-recording in terms of keeping records of performances. It would be better if future studies examining the language use in children's interactions or child-adult interactions use video-recording to collect data.

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