The research presented in this paper deals with the child's linguistic awareness: in its largest sense, the ideas, thoughts, and judgments that children can make about language or various aspects of language behavior. Within this large area, the experiment reported concerns the comprehension and judgment of discourse in a naturalistic setting. Primary concern, therefore, is not with the context-independent literal meaning of sentences or their form, but with utterances in their context: that is, speech events and their contextual meaning, their effect, their social significance, and so forth.

To understand other people's utterances, listeners must match the utterance's meaning to the speaker's perception of the context in which it is uttered. Generally speaking, for successful verbal communication to take place, it is accepted that participants (and listeners who want to understand the dialogue) must share knowledge not only about the linguistic system, but must also have a socially shared view of purposive functions in the real world. The listener must possess knowledge about, or take into account (at least to some extent) a multitude of things: his interlocutor's general characteristics and viewpoint (for example: his position in space, his social knowledge, his intentions, his role in the situation, and so on), the aim of the interaction, how it may be achieved, etc.

Knowing how the child coordinates some of these aspects and links them to the utterances he actually hears will help us to define or describe better what his communicative capacities (or incapacities) are. More importantly, we may begin to consider questions like the following: To what components of the child's perception of the situation is his incomprehension or communicative
failure due? Does the child fail to understand because of over-reliance on extra-linguistic cues, because of incorrect ideas about the participant's view-points, intentions, or roles? Or does he have a completely different view of the situation as a whole? Obviously, we are far from being able to answer such questions. Nevertheless, it seems important to consider them, before ascribing the child's communicative failures to general developmental characteristics, such as "egocentrism", lack of centration, insufficient language development, and so on.

Within this general framework, and mainly to begin to define the various components and cues that play a role in the child's comprehension, we decided to present short dialogues in a situational context for judgment. Inserting violations is a traditional method for grasping the subject's comprehension or knowledge of the material presented, for reasons that I will not go into here. Generally speaking, in such a situation it can be supposed that the interactive aim of the discourse plays a central role in the child's perception, as do the key actions leading to that aim, and their result.

METHOD

We presented six short scenarios to the children. The scenarios were acted out by two adult experimenters and were all buying-selling transactions that took place in a shop. We chose the shop-situation as we wanted a setting where the interactive aim would be familiar to the children (Furth, 1980). The shop was a realistic toy shop, and was seen as such by all our subjects. Care was taken with all the details such as paper bags, amount of money exchanged, etc.

One or two inappropriate speech acts were inserted into each scenario. That is, throughout the scenarios C's (the customer) and S's (the shop-lady) utterances are linguistically perfectly correct, but are occasionally inadequate -- in various ways -- from a communicative point of view. We included in our scenarios both "script" violations (Schank, 1975) and speech-act violations which are not specifically linked to non-verbal components of the script (i.e. violations which do not affect the buying-selling transaction). The violations are based on speech-act conditions (Searle, 1969).

All the scenarios had brief suitable openings ("Good morning", etc.) and closings ("Thank you,...Goodbye", etc.). All the actions involved were performed in an ordinary manner (payment, etc.): stress, facial expressions and gestures were also as natural as possible. Short descriptions of the violations follow:

Scenario One. C orders ("One kilo apples"..."One kilo of lemons") but once the goods are presented to her, she seems to deny the sincerity of her request, as she says "What's that?" S replies: "Your apples and lemons" and C then says: "I don't have any apples