Mothers’ Control Strategies in Dyadic Mother/Child Conversations

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Accepted September 1978

Conversations combine the exchange of messages with the interchange of the speaker/listener role. These discourse features were reflected differentially in the language used by mothers and children engaged in dyadic play situations. Differences in the speech patterns of the mothers and children indicated the type of reciprocity engendered by the mothers’ social and didactic control strategies. Mothers tended to ensure the maintenance of the conversation and the interchange of the speaker/listener role. The children showed a stronger interest in topic in various ways. The interval of 12 months between the two recording sessions produced certain changes in discourse patterns. These included a decline in the tendency to initiate new topics, and a move toward greater cohesiveness was postulated. Relationships between aspects of mothers’ and children’s speech were also examined.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations are common events, and it is easy to underestimate the subtle interplay that they involve. The young child acquires language in a social context, generally talking with his mother, and more needs to be learned of how he copes with the two basic aspects of discourse, that is, the introducing and maintaining of topics while interchanging the speaker

Some of the work reported in this article was undertaken while the author was in receipt of a postdoctoral award from the Social Science Research Council, London.

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327
and listener roles. Adults adjust the length and complexity of their speech to meet the needs of children of different ages (Snow, 1972; Fraser and Roberts, 1975), and the question arises as to how adults adjust their speech to facilitate speech exchanges when talking to young children. By providing a broad description of recorded conversations between mothers and their children, this study examines variations in adults’ and children’s speech exchanges and the ways in which mothers encourage and maintain conversations.

Children as young as 4 have been found to talk in ways which are appropriate to the different needs of younger children and adults (Shatz and Gelman, 1973; Sachs and Devin, 1976). However, this awareness of the needs of the listener, and the young child’s ability to act on this awareness, is constrained (Flavell et al., 1968; Glucksberg et al., 1975). Even if the child under 5 recognizes a conversational need of inviting the listener to speak, he may not be aware of the ways in which opting in and out of the conversation can be manipulated. This is not to suggest that the child is a passive recipient of a flow of words. He will readily talk of what is of immediate interest to him and so have no difficulty in introducing topics into the conversation. What is more difficult is to contrive to give the speaker role back to the listener or even for him as listener to follow on from a previous utterance. Following on constrains both the form and content of utterances that he can formulate. In a study of discourse in four children aged 21–36 months, Bloom et al. (1976) noted a developmental trend in the frequency of utterances which were directly connected with what the previous speaker said. They suggest that even at 3 years it is easier for children to produce spontaneous rather than contingent speech.

Accounts of adults’ and children’s discourse patterns for children under 5 are few. Bloom et al. (1976) give a limited description of adult speech in that they classify children’s utterances as responses to questions or nonquestions from adults. Reichle et al. (1976) looked at responses in mother/child verbal interactions in terms of expansions and imitations. But fuller descriptions of adult/child discourse have been largely undertaken with older children in the classroom environment (Bellack et al., 1968; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1976). These have examined the ways in which turn taking is achieved and topics are initiated, responded to, and commented on within the proscribed arena of the classroom. A similar three-unit approach is adopted by Mishler (1975) in his analysis of adult/child interchanges in the elementary school. His locus is questioning behavior, which he divides into three types. One of these, chaining, shows how control of the conversation is maintained by