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Metapragmatic competence and conversational strategies: Evidence from child-adult interactions in Spanish

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1. Abstract

The study of metapragmatic competence and conversational skills has been neglected in the literature of Spanish language acquisition. For this reason, we have analysed 23 transcriptions in which early age children participate in multiparty spontaneous interactions with peers and adults. Our research shows that children master the inherent dialogic structure of conversations and they display different conversational strategies in order to manage their contributions within the conversations.

2. Context

Children learn language within a conversational context. Almost everything the child learns as language in his early years derives from conversational context and the activities to which they relate. Studies have showed that children master the turn-taking system since early age. However, children's conversational skills will be refined during the school years (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979, 1983). In the present research, we are going to show to what extent children use their own conversational strategies in order to achieve a "successful" participation in interaction. We have analysed the metapragmatic competence that children display when they take part in a conversation, since these abilities contribute crucially to the generation and negotiation of meaning what is elemental in multiparty interactions (Verschueren, 2004).

3. Data and Method

Data
• 23 transcripts of multiparty conversations between Spanish early age children and adults included in Koiné corpus.

Participants
• 11 typically developing Spanish L1 children aged 3;0-4;5 years old approximately.
• 5 adults (researchers) .

Method
• Use of real data. We work with records of oral conversations in which researchers took an active part in the interactions.
• Qualitative analysis from an observational approach. Conversation Analysis methodology.

Procedure
• Semi-conducted children-adults conversations were recorded during approximately 20-25 minutes every 15 days during one and a half year in a nursery school in Galicia, Spain. Participants carried out several activities and games such as storytelling, cards, spontaneous conversations, etc.

4. Analysis and Results

We have found some evidences in our data that show how children display their metapragmatic competence in interactions. We have answered the following research questions in order to demonstrate this fact:

a) How do children behave when other participants overlap their turns?

Children verbally disapprove the fact that several participants speak at the same time in a conversational interaction. They react against this event explicitly demanding to be listened when another speaker overlaps their turns.

Transcript: Sus6_01. Participants: VIC (boy, age: 3;2.27), MRT (boy, age: 3;2.08), ANI(adult).

*VIC: y sabes que yo tengo un cuento de Bambi y [/] y vienen los <casadores [*] y matan a su mamá (.) push @o> [>] ?
*MRT: <miá [*] yo xx (.) yo tengo una cel> [?] [<] +/.
*VIC: eh@i (.) yo estoy hablando ! (Explicit demand of the turn)
*ANI: a ver (.) primero habla uno y luego el otro (.) sin pelearse .
*VIC: y [/] y tiene una escopetas [*] y mata a su mamá (.) a Bambi (.) y a su mamá (.) a Bambi (.) pum@o (.) y [/] y se muere .

b) How do children react when they make a first pair-part of an adjacency pair but they do not receive the expected second pair-part in the subsequent turn?

Children repeat the first pair-part of a question-answer adjacency pair throughout the subsequent turns. They carry out this action when they do not immediately receive the expected second pair-part of that adjacency pair –this process is what Gallardo (1996) labels 'relanzamiento' in Spanish–.

Transcript: Sus4_14. Participants: GUI (boy, age: 4;4.21), DAV (boy, age: 3;11.19), TIT (boy: 4;01.12), PIL (adult).

*GUI: pues entonces yo <no veo> .
*DAV: <quién> [<] huele a menta ? (**1st pair-part of a question-answer adjacency pair started by the child**)
*PIL: aquí .
*DAV: quién huele a menta ? **(Repetition of the 1st pair-part of a question-answer adjacency pair)**
*PIL: cámbiaslle (.) o sitio (.) para que poida ver (.) si ?
*ANC: claro (.) Tito (.) <ti (.) ti ves> [>] +/.
*PIL: <séntate alí> [<] ?
*DAV: quién huele a menta ? (**2nd repetition**)
*PIL: yo . (**2nd pair-part of a question-answer adjacency pair**)

c) What is the pragmatic function of the self-repetitions of children's utterances throughout the following turns within a conversational sequence?

(i) Repetitions might be intended to repair the conversational transgression that takes place when another speaker overlaps the speaker's turn.

Transcript: Sus6_02. Participants: MRT (boy, age: 3;2.22), CIA (girl, age: 2;11.30), ANI (adult).

*MRT: por la mañana <xxx> [>], vale ?
*CIA: ++ <Antía no llega> [<] : (Overlapped turn)
*CIA: eh@i ?
*ANI: dime.
*CIA: Antía no llega . (Repair of the previous conversational transgression)
*ANI: cómo que no llega ?
*ANI: sí [/] sí (.) Antía sale en la foto, a que sí ?

(ii) Repetitions might occur as a conversational strategy to request the speaker's turn and elicit hearer's attention when other speakers are talking.

Transcript: Sus4 _04. Participants: DAV (boy, age: 3;5.25), DRI (boy, age: 3;7.27), PIL (adult).

*DAV: cuándo jugamos a las cartas ?
*PIL: quién tenía pupas ?
*DRI: Marcos .
*PIL: ah (.) Marcos !
*PIL: y le curó las pupas el médico ?
*DRI: xxx á escuela hoy .
*PIL: ah (.) iba á escuela (.) xa lle pasaron as pupas .
*PIL: e quen é [//] quen é Marcos ?
*DAV: eh@i (.) cuándo miramos esto : ?
*DAV: y cuándo jugamos a las cartas ? (Repetition of the question)
*PIL: espera un segundito . (Adult's answer)

5. Conclusions

Despite their early age, children show evidences of metapragmatic competence when they use their own conversational strategies in order to communicate in an effective way:

● Children are aware of the rules that govern the turn-taking system from early age. They explicitly demand the verbal turn when the conversational rules are broken.
● They master the inherent dialogic structure of conversations. They repeat the first pair-part of a question-answer adjacency pair when they have not received the expected answer as a second pair-part.
● The self-repetitions of children's utterances have two main pragmatic functions in this type of interactions: repair the conversational transgression and / or request the speaker's turn and elicit the hearer's attention.

6. References

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