The Structure of Children’s Requests

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Editors’ Note

This chapter provides an analysis of social and situational variables and a design for analyzing instrumental language. Instrumental language attempts to get a hearer to cooperate with or carry out a goal of a speaker. When formulating an instrumental move, speakers develop a plan or select a strategy that prompts the hearer to cooperate. If the hearer’s initial response is negative, a new strategy may be chosen. Social relationships and situational variables influence the choice of strategies, which in turn affects the type of instrumental act expressed—its form, nuances, and arguments.

Instrumental moves are either conventional (requests) or nonconventional (indirect or “strategic”). Indirect instrumental moves may be as direct, cognitively, as “direct” requests. Both types express the child’s concepts of social motivation and social interaction. Although children have apparent knowledge of many instrumental strategies at an early age, their use of indirect forms increases through the late preschool and school years.
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Instrumental language attempts to get a hearer to cooperate with or carry out a goal of a speaker. The speaker’s success or failure in getting such cooperation depends in part on the coordination of social and linguistic knowledge. The characterization of this coordination and the causal reasoning behind it are the topics of this chapter. We discuss the social and situational factors that prompt a child to choose one verbal means rather than another to request cooperation. We discuss development only incidentally; for more detailed descriptions, see Ervin-Tripp and Gordon (in press), Ervin-Tripp (1982), and Becker (1982).

Our discussion is organized into four sections. In the first two sections, we describe two required domains of knowledge: the social and the verbal. We begin by defining important social and situational variables—features of the context—that are likely to affect what is said. We then discuss the levels and types of choices that are involved in getting instrumental moves accomplished verbally. Here we describe various strategies, acts, utterance forms, nuances, and persuasive arguments. In the last two sections, we discuss how children might coordinate different strategies, acts, and so forth with particular social and situational variables. Observational data from videotapes of a 4-year-old are used to illustrate our approach.¹

SOCIAL AND SITUATIONAL VARIABLES

The choice of an instrumental move depends, in part, on the social relations between participants. Social relations involve power and familiarity/distance, among other factors. These determine “status” and are usually signaled in adult requests. Requests often confirm existing social relations. They can also remind partners of temporarily changed relations. For example, a child’s power can change temporarily when role playing or instructing a peer, and the form of requests will change accordingly. Requests can also be used to unilaterally change social relations by making moves that increase distance, power, familiarity, or deference. Finally, requests can express attitudes such as anger, helpfulness, or cooperation. By studying requests, we may find out what aspects of social relations are important to children.

The choice of an instrumental move also depends on situational variables such as the intrusiveness or routinility of the action requested. Questions here include: Does the speaker have the right to

¹ Except when otherwise indicated, the data reported in this chapter come from our studies of middle-class mainstream American families with children ages 8 and under. These studies were funded by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health (MH-26063) and the National Science Foundation (NSF-BNS-7826339).
expect cooperation? Is the hearer obligated to cooperate? If the goal is an object, who owns the object—the speaker, the hearer, or both? Who is currently using it? Does the request intrude on the hearer's conversation with someone else? Will compliance disrupt the hearer's plans? Will compliance be difficult? These situational factors can be seen as differentiating a routine from an unexpected, intrusive, or disruptive act (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Social relations and intrusiveness/routinility mediate the choice of instrumental language. Adults generally use more polite, formal, or indirect instrumental language as the status of the listener and the intrusiveness of the request increase. For example, if a person of low status wants a person of high status to do something that would disrupt the latter's current activity, asking for it will involve a high social cost, which may be "paid" for through an expression of deferential politeness. Asking for something that can be provided without serious disruption involves lower cost, and generally less deference. The following list illustrates how social relations and intrusiveness/routinility affect the selection of an instrumental move (see Ervin-Tripp and Gordon, in press, for a more detailed discussion of these variables).

Social Relations

What aspects of social relations are important to children? An examination of children's instrumental language may help us answer this question. We begin this section by citing instances of how variables related to status may affect children's use of polite instrumental moves. The section continues with a similar discussion of attitude.

Relative Status Status pertains to the relative power of speaker and addressee, and the social distance between them. Preschoolers as young as 2 years are sensitive to power and familiarity, judging from their instrumental language (Ervin-Tripp, 1982). They use significantly more imperatives to mothers than to fathers; siblings are given orders, but visitors receive polite requests.

1. Child (2;0) to father (after several questions about milk and who it belongs to):
   C: You want milk, Daddy?
   F: I have some, thank you.
   C: Milk in there, Daddy?
   F: Yes.
   C: Daddy, I want some, please? Please Daddy, huh?
   Same child to mother: Mommy, I want milk. (C. Lawson)

2. Brother to younger sister: Carrie, stop sucking your fingers.
   Sister to brother: David, you're not the boss of me. (A. Rogers)

3. Nursery school child (5;5) to adult visitor: Do you think you could put your foot right there? (B. A. O'Connell)
Formal politeness reflects not only power and familiarity; it also reflects social distance. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) found that, among grade-school children, polite instrumental moves to peer group members increased when the speaker was estranged from the peer group.

Finally, studies of role playing (Andersen, 1977) and elicited requests in experiments (James, 1978) have shown that, when there are no actual costs, children use the frequency, content, and form of requests to symbolically identify roles.

**Attitudes** Social relations include temporary attitudes concerning the situation at hand. Like status, attitudes affect the use of deference, joking, orders, and threats:

4. Last person to talk to me like that didn’t talk to me no more. (Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan)
5. S (12;0): Gimme that ruler.
   A (12;0): Huh?
   S: Gimme that ruler, girl.
   A: Huh?
   S: Will you please gimme that ruler before I knock you down. (Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan)

**Intrusiveness and Routinability**

The intrusiveness or routinability of a request also affects the type of instrumental language selected. This section begins with instances of how intrusiveness may affect children’s use of polite instrumental moves. We continue with a discussion of possessions, rights, and obligations. In general, children are sensitive to roles, rights, and possessions by age 2; however, intrusiveness and task difficulty do not come into play until school age.

**Intrusiveness** Requests can intrude on listeners in three ways: making a request may **interrupt** an ongoing conversation; cooperating with a request may entail a **disruption** of plans or of ongoing activity; and requests may demand **valuable goods**, or **unusual or difficult services**. Direct imperative forms are quite normal in adult speech in situations where speaker and hearer are engaged in a cooperative activity, or where the action desired is routine, easy to carry out, or consistent with the listener’s present focus of attention. However, adults are generally careful to provide a justification or use extra politeness for requests that may be intrusive. Children are aware of roles, rights, and possessions by age 2, but sensitivity to interruptions, or to what might be disruptive or difficult from the hearer’s viewpoint, is generally not present until school age. Our own data indicate that, around the third grade, children begin to show verbal awareness of imposing on others when making requests (Gordon et al., 1980).
6. **Child (8;0) to adult experimenter engaged in conversation:** She told me to get a letter for my parents.
7. **Similar situation:** Do you have a green marker I could use?

**Possessions** By age 2, children show more deference when asking for other’s property than when asking for their own. Property may involve permanent possessions, or temporary rights of usage when ownership is communal, as in schools.

8. **Nursery schooler (4;0) to peers:** Can I drive your car? (C. Garvey)
9. **Sister (4;3) to sister (5;10):** Well it’s my turn after. Now it’s my turn.

**Rights and Obligations** Rights and obligations are often related to specific social roles. For instance, mothers are expected to provide help, and nursery school teachers are expected to enforce the school routine. Less deference is required when cooperation is expected than when it is not. For example, a request that a teacher perform some service related to the school routine requires less deference than a request for the same service from a classroom visitor.

10. **Child (4;3) to mother:** This won’t stick. (S. Isola)
11. **Nursery school child to adult:** Jason’s trying to take my stuff. (O’Connell)
12. **Preschooler to teacher:** Jean, we didn’t have a snack. (S. Isola)

As Brown and Levinson (1978) have shown for adults, a calculation of status and intrusiveness/routinability allows a speaker to select instrumental language of appropriate politeness, informality, and indirectness. At the same time, the language selected by the speaker enables the hearer to recognize the quality of social relations with the speaker and how the speaker has assessed the difficulty of the task. An analysis of children’s instrumental language needs to take both the hearer’s and the speaker’s “calculations” into account.

**INSTRUMENTAL LANGUAGE**

When formulating an instrumental move, speakers develop a plan or select a strategy that will prompt the hearer to cooperate; if the partner’s initial response is negative, a new strategy may be chosen. Social relationships and situational variables affect which strategy is selected, which in turn influences the type of instrumental act chosen—its form, its nuances, and the persuasive arguments employed, if any.

**Structure of an Instrumental Sequence**

We identify as the **domain** (Garvey, 1975) of an instrumental sequence all the speaking turns involved in it. The following dialogue has been constructed to exemplify the domain of a request.
Of course, the teacher could be more specific.

In this interaction, the teacher's question, "Where can I park?", was followed by the student's response, "Here."

As the preceding dialogue illustrates, many questions are often related to expected responses. The teacher usually expects a specific answer to their question, whereas the student may provide a different response.

However, if the teacher's question is not clearly understood, the student's response may not be as expected. In this case, the teacher might need to rephrase their question or provide more instructions.

In conclusion, interactions in classroom settings can involve a variety of dialogues, from questions and answers to more complex conversations. Understanding the expectations and communication styles within these interactions is crucial for effective teaching and learning.
Each of the above moves is optional. For example, a hint may involve just an adjunct without any explicit request at all. "I haven't got enough room" in Example 13 is interpretable without "Get behind!" Sometimes the context is so clear than an attention-getter alone is enough to serve as an instrumental act.

Conventionality in Requests

One way of obtaining cooperation is to simply ask for it. Children do this by age 2½. This can be done through the use of conventional request forms in which the form of the utterance makes explicit the call for cooperation or obedience. Thus, an utterance such as "Could you close the door?" may be expected to get its hearer to close the door (in part) because the utterance is recognized as a request to do so. Many utterances serve instrumental goals without explicitly signaling that they are requests. Although an utterance such as "It's freezing in here" may prompt the hearer to close the door, the hearer in this case may act not because of being asked to, but rather for some other reason suggested by the statement—for example, that the addressee doesn't want the speaker to be cold or uncomfortable, or because the hearer may feel cold too, and will act for the benefit of both.

An utterance such as "It's freezing in here" is often not an attempt to get the hearer to carry out any specific action that the speaker has in mind. It may be satisfied by any action that remedies the situation. How an utterance like this would be described depends on its context. Said by a customer to a sauna operator, it might be reported as a request or a command.

A similar utterance, such as "It's noon," may get a child to start working, or to stop working and run outside to play. In either case, we would not say that the speaker told or requested the hearer to start/stop doing anything. We would expect that whatever the hearer did after hearing "It's noon" would probably be a response to the information it contained rather than a result of being asked to do something.

The point that these two examples make is that speakers in many cases use language to achieve instrumental goals without using conventional forms that can properly be described as requests, and without intending their utterances to be interpreted as requests. We refer to instrumental moves of this type as nonconventional instrumental moves, or NCIs. Among the most important reasons for using NCIs is the goal of maintaining appropriate social relationships (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Ervin-Tripp, 1976).

In practice, at least in the case of older children and adults, the reason for complying with an NCI may not be so different from the reason for carrying out a conventional request. Expressions similar to
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“‘It’s freezing in here’ may be used so frequently that they are immediately interpretable as requests; and the conventional request ‘Could you close the door?’ may be complied with because the reason behind it—i.e., that it’s freezing—is immediately recognized. In many cases, of course, speakers combine such utterances to produce justified, socially appropriate requests: ‘Could you close the door? It’s freezing in here.’

However, conventional requests and NCIs are learned in different ways. Conventional requests can be learned as formulas. In fact, such formulas can be found in phrase books for foreigners. NCIs, on the other hand, cannot be mastered by learning formulas. If we want to teach someone how to produce NCIs like ‘It’s freezing in here,’ we have to teach them either to find an adequate reason for the hearer to act, or to state a problem that the act might solve. This is why the development of effective instrumental acts requires cognitive and social strategies that go beyond simply learning a fixed linguistic repertoire.

Instrumental Strategies

In this section we consider possible instrumental strategies for producing NCIs, and the way they are used by children. In general, young children’s strategies are based on their own focus of attention rather than the informational needs of listeners. Young children are not good at attending to the cognitive states of listeners. It is not until the middle of grade school that children gear their strategies to the states of their hearers. At the most general level there are probably three basic strategies for NCIs:

R: Identify a reason or cause for the hearer to carry out, or facilitate, the desired action and make the hearer aware of it (e.g., “It’s your turn”).

N: Anticipate an obstacle to the hearer’s cooperation and neutralize it (e.g., “I’ll give you a dollar for that”).

G: Make the hearer aware of the desired goal situation, or some aspect of it, and hope the hearer brings it about voluntarily (e.g., “Do we have any candy?”, asked when child knows “we” do).

It is unlikely that young children have general procedural rules of this nature, and it is certainly not evident that adults have such rules for NCIs either. We consider these to be descriptive frameworks under which the more specific instrumental strategies we give below may fall.

There are at least five strategies that seem to be related to the Reason approach:

R.1. Call attention to a problem: If the hearer’s action is needed to remedy some problem, or a problem can be identified that the
desired action would remedy, state the problem (e.g., "I can’t find my white marble"); "The macaroni’s boiling"; "This is too heavy for me").

14. Girl (7;10) to sister (5;10) dyeing Easter eggs: Well she’s going to mess yours up. Well you better take yours out. (S. Isola)

R.2. State an infraction: If the hearer is engaged in an activity that violates a norm or creates a problem, state the infraction (e.g., "You’re not supposed to do that").

R.3. Make a correction: If the hearer is engaged in an inappropriate action, make the hearer aware of the appropriate action (e.g., "That goes there").

R.4. Provide preconditions: If the hearer will carry out the desired act when specific preconditions are met, make the hearer aware that such preconditions have been, or will be met (e.g., "I’m ready now"; "The train’s leaving"; "It’s your turn"; "Is there any juice left?" "Is Mom there?").

R.5. Forestall intervention: If intervention in some activity is anticipated, identify or justify the planned activity. The effect is that of a prohibition (e.g., "That’s mine" said as speaker grabs toy; "I’ll get it" said as speaker runs out of room to answer phone or get some object). In a child, such verbalizations may show recognition that violation of another’s territory, crossing activity boundaries, or interrupting an activity must be justified.

There are also at least three strategies that seem to be related to the Obstacle Neutralization approach:

N.1. Anticipate counterarguments: If the hearer may have reasons not to cooperate with the goal, identify a way to mitigate such obstacles and inform the hearer.

15. If I can have a kitten I’ll take care of it all by myself. (Clark and Delia)

N.2. Modify cost: If the cost of a goal or activity is high, find a way of neutralizing it: 1) minimize cost (e.g., ask for small amount); 2) provide compensation (e.g., 42-month-old child to peer: "If you give me this for a while, you can have this for a while" [Ervin-Tripp]); or 3) increase cost of noncompliance (e.g., threaten hearer: "If you don’t give it to me, I’ll take my truck back").

N.3. Change activity context: If the framing situation or current activity is not favorable to obtaining the goal, invoke a different situation or activity (e.g., a child denied access to a toy may suggest a game or activity in which the use of the toy is routine).
16. A 4-year-old to peer (playing mommies): And we sit down and have a glass of orange juice. . . . And they sit on our lap with us. (J. Cook-Gumperz)

17. No, the train station is this. (B. A. O'Connell)

Successive remedies may reframe:

18. A 4-year-old to peer: Pretend this was my car. (B refuses)
   A: Pretend this was our car. (B refuses)
   A: Can I drive your car? (B accepts) (Garvey)

The major developmental changes in children's tactics result from the capacity of children over the age of 8 to take the perspective of their partners. This is illustrated in the examples below:

19. Girl (8:0) to brother (4:0): D'ya wanna be Santa Claus? Here, take these toys to the basement. (Girl ties her laundry in her nightgown, and brother carries it to laundry.)

In the next example, the brother had become whiny because he wanted to cram his tricycle into a station wagon already full of bicycles. He was wearing a Batman cape:

20. Girl to brother: Batman, you don't need a bike. You can fly over everyone faster than the bikes! (he accepts)

On both occasions, the request was part of a proposal for play in which the boy was given a desirable role. This method accommodates to his perspective, and uses a familiar pretense strategy.

Although some of the preceding strategies, such as reframing, can be realized through a variety of instrumental acts, many of the examples given would be called hints. They illustrate the use of NCIs that are neither clearly requests nor any other conventional instrumental act. In some cases what start off as hints may become conventionalized through repeated use in stereotyped contexts. In addition, as discussed in the next section, many conventional request forms in English appear to have their origins in NCIs.

Formal Variation in Instrumental Moves

The form an NCI takes depends on the instrumental strategy a speaker has chosen. Often the strategy chosen will be a direct outcome of ongoing activities. Thus, as part of an instrucional context in which a younger child is helping set up a toy town, "These go on the roof" provides general instructions and also directs the immediate behavior of the partner.

In adult usage, NCIs or hints often have social features not available in conventional requests. Conventional requests are explicit both about what the hearer is to do and about the amount of politeness paid.
They occur when the speaker wants clarity on either or both of these features. However, there are cooperative or informal contexts in which adults find conventional polite requests to be overly formal or cold; such requests may seem to imply inappropriate doubts either about the hearer’s willingness to comply or about the hearer’s ability to recognize a hint in the shared context. NCIs allow the speaker not to be seen as making a direct request; they avoid formality and avoid explicitness when the hearer can be assumed to know what is going on. They also make it possible to show humor and express other social attitudes. In this way they permit the speaker to save face when noncompliance is possible; and they may increase rapport by alluding to shared knowledge and by implying familiarity or common ground (Brown and Levinson, 1978).2

The desire to establish or maintain deference, or to avoid an appearance of control, is often important in the choice of an NCI. When the speaker knows whose turn it is, the use of an NCI such as “Whose turn is it?”—instead of the more direct NCI, “It’s your turn to make coffee, Joan”—illustrates two points. First, NCIs can be quite direct in context; second, the flexibility of NCIs allows speakers to choose strategies that serve a particular purpose, whether that purpose is to avoid the appearance of control or to address other social concerns.

Preschool children rarely use NCIs for the kind of tactfulness indicated above. By school age, however, hints are used in some contexts. Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan’s (1977) school data indicate that hints may initially be most common in situations involving corrections or conflicts. They found that the use of hints instead of conventional requests was closely related to group norms about children’s behavior to adults:

Children do not arrogate supervision when adults are present (e.g., 11-year-old to 8-year-old: “It’s peanuts all over the floor”).

Children are not supposed to beg (e.g., child to adult: “You gave Jimmy a nickel!”).

Children do not request things that have already been denied them (e.g., 11-year-old to adult [after child mishandled microphone, and adult took it back]: “I like to talk on the mike”).

Speech Acts

Conversational texts from adults and children show that NCIs may have the appearance of many other types of speech acts. Speech acts

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2 There are major cultural variations both in adult preferences for conventional requests/NCIs and in how early children are trained to understand hints (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon, in press).
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formal contexts in which
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Children show that NCIs may
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are categories of social action that are recognized by members of a
group and identified by terms like request, offer, and ask permission.
The description of an utterance as a particular speech act in indirect
accounts (e.g., "And then they offered/prompted/refused to help with
the expenses") reflects social as well as formal properties. For in-
stance, offers implies that the hearer has to give permission and there-
fore controls the completion of the exchange; permission requests ex-
plitly recognize that the hearer has control over desired resources or
the speaker's behavior. In identifying children's instrumental acts we
often find NCIs that look like permission requests ("Can I use your
car?''), claims to possession ("That's my car''), offers ("Do you want
to trade this for your car?''), warnings or threats ("I'm gonna drive
that!''), and other speech acts.

Conventional Requests

The boundary between what is an NCI and what is a conventional
request is not always clear. Conventional forms, with the exception of
syntactic imperatives, appear to have developed from NCIs that were
particularly susceptible to formulaic expression. Such NCIs make
possible fixed syntactic frames containing specific lexical items that iden-
tify either the instrumental action or the goal. This can be seen in the
list of conventional request types given below:

Imperatives: "Gimme that!''; "Don't!'" Any form with imperative
syntax.

Imperative ellipsis: "More milk''; "Right here.'" In certain contexts
(e.g., eating, shopping, joint enterprises, second tries), naming
what is wanted without a verb is heard as a request with the social
force of an imperative. ³

Imbedded requests: "Can/Could/Will/Would you . . . ?''; "Why
don't you . . . ?'" Imbedded requests make explicit the desired
action, agent, and object. By age 2½ English-speaking children
begin using auxiliaries and start to mark social contrasts with the
use of imbedded requests.

Permission requests: "Can/May I (have/do) . . . ?'" Requests for per-
mission to have goods are very similar to imbedded requests and
are used equally early to mark social contrasts. "Can I have
. . . ?'" usually implies an action on the part of the hearer, and
therefore is more than simply a request for permission.

Explicit need or want statements: "I want . . . '" "I need . . .'³

³ We include these forms in our list, but leave open whether, or to what extent, they
are truly conventional.
Conventionalized hints: "Is there any juice left?"; "Have you got my ball?" The production of conventionalized hints is rare in preschoolers, but increases during elementary school (Liebling, 1981; Montes, 1981). Conventionalization is specific to each social group or family, of course, as is the social meaning of the form.  

It is striking that conventional polite requests, with few exceptions, are interrogatives that appear to offer the hearer options in responding. Even polite noninterrogatives (e.g., "I wonder if you would/could . . .") are likely to imply questions. Conventional polite forms appear to derive from NCIs that express uncertainty and avoid the appearance of imposing claims or controlling the hearer. Of particular interest here are permission requests that ask for an object ("Can I have . . .?") and imbedded requests that ask about volition ("Do you wanna pass that bucket over here?"). True permission requests imply that the addressee has control over the speaker, and that the speaker’s wishes are subject to the hearer’s approval. This is precisely the opposite of the status relations in a command. As a result, borrowing the social implications of a permission request in asking for something is a very marked way of avoiding the appearance of trying to control or impose on another. Such forms leave it up to the hearer to decide what the actual social realities are. A "Do you want to . . .?" request is very similar in form to a conventional offer. By asking about the hearer’s wishes in an offer, the speaker signals the hearer’s power to choose, which again is the opposite of the roles in a command. A "Do you want to . . .?" request appears to leave matters to the hearer’s volition, and avoids the appearance of control.  

These two examples illustrate the way in which the social implications of different instrumental forms may be "borrowed" for use in request contexts. As NCIs they are particularly careful and polite moves, and this may be part of the reason they were conventionalized. When NCIs become fully conventional, they may lose some of their original implications; the more conventionalized they become, the more their social meanings shift to fit the social implications of the new contexts in which they are used.

Formal Nuancing  

All of the above forms can be varied or nuanced in many ways. Very young children express politeness only through the use of imbedded requests, "please," and a change of intonation. The following list illustrates different ways of nuancing requests:  

Conventional politeness forms such as "please" and terms of address, which have their own range of social meanings.
21. **Two-and-one-half-year-old to father:** Daddy, I want some, please. Please Daddy, huh?

Politeness can be expressed through post-posed modals and other tags (e.g., “Open the door, would you?”).

22. **Four-year-old to 2½-year-old sister:** Addie, why don’t you show Gina what you wore, OK?

Expressions can be intensified or mitigated through prosodic variations such as shouting, rising versus falling pitch, angry voice, and whee-dling tone.

Requests can be mitigated through displacements and minimizers, which include: utterances with displaced tense or aspect (e.g., “Would you?”), “Could you?”), “I wanted,” “Did you want?” and “If you would”); utterances with displaced agents (e.g., “We have to take our naps now” and “Someone needs to clean his room”); and minimizations (e.g., “Give me a little of your juice”).

The formal complexity of a request can be increased through a combination of conventional forms, or through forms derived from expressions frequently associated with other speech acts (see Example 3 above). Complex forms often appear to be particularly polite, as in the following teenage example:

23. **12-year-old to hostess at a party in a house:** Do you have any water that I could drink?

**Persuasive Arguments**

An important part of the domain of an instrumental act is the collection of supporting material, which Garvey (1975) has called “adjuncts.” Adjuncts reflect the speaker’s awareness of the state of mind and the motives of the addressee. They provide conditions, reasons, and justifications for a request. For example, children sometimes try to justify requests to an adult by appealing to the latter’s role and obligations. This is illustrated in Examples 24 through 26, where children appeal to adults’ caregiving roles.

24. **Beth (5;0) to mother:** Mommy, I want you to open all of them, the paint, so I won’t have to trouble.

25. **Lisa (4;0) to researcher:** OK, we don’t know all these pages, so you read ‘em.

26. **Eight-year-old to mother:** If you don’t give it to me right now, I won’t want it later on.

Children may appeal to norms, goals, or facts about the world when addressing younger children:

27. **Eight-year-old to 4-year-old:** We only have a little more, OK? So don’t use one on every Valentine.

28. **Four-year-old to 2-year-old:** Get out of my space. This is my space.
For our purposes, the classification of persuasive adjuncts depends less on linguistic criteria than on a recognition of the reasoning and social skills the adjuncts imply. We have classified children’s adjuncts as instances of reasons such as external conditions (“It’s lost”), internal dispositions (“I like that”), states (“He hurt himself”), plans (“I’m making another one”), history (“I chose them”), and norms (“It’s lunchtime”). In addition, excuses (“I’m all messy”), threats (“I’ll tell Mom”), clarifications (“The blue ones are best”), and different types of expansions and explanations occur. We find that 2- to 3-year-old children typically do not enrich their requests with extra persuasive material. By age 4, however, persuasion and justification appear, especially when stopping another’s activities or making a second try in order to remedy a failure or denial.

Because there is no way to define possible persuasive adjuncts in terms of linguistic form, one cannot simply list them as part of a verbal repertoire. They can only be categorized in terms of general, context-sensitive strategies.

THE MEANING OF FORM AND
THE “CHECKLIST” MODEL OF SPEECH

Our discussion of the development of instrumental language has shown that by age 5 children attend to a wide range of variables, both social and situational, and can coordinate them with a considerable variety of instrumental strategies and moves. The major issue remains, How does a child arrive at these coordinations? What social understandings do children have that make them choose one form rather than another for their instrumental moves? What, in other words, does the child’s choice of form mean?

Research on instrumental language has rarely looked at the concepts behind children’s choices of instrumental moves or use of social and situational variables. As a result, most findings can be accounted for by what might be called the “checklist” model of speech. According to this model, the child has a general category such as “Request” that is routinely invoked when the child’s communicative goal is instrumental. Under this category, there is a list of request types each of which is paired with a set of contextual specifications. When producing speech, the child: 1) checks the current social and situational variables (e.g., addressee is younger, lower in status, familiar, not in control of desired resource, difficulty is minimal); and then 2) finds the request form that corresponds to that particular cluster of variables (e.g., an imperative). When interpreting speech, the child: 1) looks up the utterance form in a kind of mental “dictionary”; and 2) if the utterance
has more than one meaning, the child compares the social/situational variables of the current context with the "dictionary" specifications for contextual features, and chooses the interpretation with matching variables. The mechanism of form choice in this view is just a matching of arbitrary forms to contextual features. The checklist model is fundamentally idiomatic and attributes no power of inference or construction to the child. In such a model, a request is hardly more than a ritual incantation that is produced according to a simple formula.

It is, of course, possible that conventional requests are sometimes selected in this way. NCIs, however, are not likely to be mere incantations because they cannot be generated formulaically, and must be adjusted to meet the demands of a given situation. Without imputing active causal reasoning and social understanding to children, it does not seem possible to account for the variations in the form and content of their NCIs. As we see it, a child who has an instrumental goal will try to cause or motivate another person to cooperate. Simple incantation might be one such means, but evidence from the earliest ages (e.g., Bates, 1976; Carter, 1974) indicates that the child relies on causal reasoning more than on word magic.

THE INSTRUMENTAL LANGUAGE OF FOUR-YEAR-OLD T

A case study is presented here to illuminate the way in which children's social reasoning may be reflected in their use of instrumental moves. We consider the instrumental language of T, a 4-year-old boy from our video study of four families. T was videotaped in naturalistic interaction with others in his home over a period of 7 months. Twelve hours of videotaping during this period yielded over 600 examples of instrumental language.

The basic distribution of T's requests, covering 90% of the examples collected, can be summarized in terms of three types of instrumental goals:

W—Self-oriented "wants": In situations where T wanted an object or wanted to carry out an action himself, he said: 1) "I want . . ." or "I want to . . ." when he assumed he would get what he wanted on the basis of established routines or expectations (nearly 80% of the examples); and 2) "Can I . . .?" or "Can I have . . .?" when compliance could not be assured or was urgently desired (almost 20% of the cases). T was more likely to use the latter forms if he had reason to expect that what he was requesting would not be granted, was clearly part of another's domain, or if the urgency of his desire—as we could tell from his voice—made him fear
risking failure. A justification or reason for self-oriented wants was rarely given (5% of examples) regardless of the request form used.

C—Corrections (rule- or norm-oriented concerns): In situations where T wanted to change what was going on, not for direct personal gain but on normative grounds, he either stated a reason for discontinuing what had been started, or gave a reason or correction indicating the correct or appropriate act. These control moves often contained expressions such as “should,” “supposed to,” “have to,” or “goes,” which directly refer to the existence of rules or norms (e.g., “You should . . .,” “You’re not supposed to . . .”).

29. No, I said three spoonfuls.
30. That doesn’t go there. It goes there.

T initiated almost 50% of these instrumental moves with a one-word exclamation such as “Wait!”, “Don’t!”, or “No!”

A—Activity- or external goal-oriented requests: In situations where T’s goal was not to correct something on normative grounds (C) or to obtain a self-oriented goal (W), he used: 1) a simple imperative that usually was not accompanied by reasons or justifications (persuasive adjuncts appeared in about 15% of the examples); or 2) an imbedded request form such as “Can you . . .?”, “Why don’t you . . .?”, etc. (see Example 22 above). As with self-oriented requests, the imbedded forms were used when T had reason to think that his basic request form would not be complied with or when he was asking for something that was clearly in another’s domain. Persuasive adjuncts rarely accompanied imbedded requests.

At first glance, it might seem that T’s requests were rather stereotyped, and accord well with a checklist model that simply pairs forms with relevant social and situational variables. In support of this position, one might argue that: 1) T’s “I want” statements are conventionalized request formulas; 2) except for rule- and norm-oriented requests, he infrequently elaborated his requests or gave reasons; and 3) he attended to simple social and situational variables that prompted him to choose the imbedded forms for self-oriented wants and external goal-oriented requests. As we argue in the next section, we think such an analysis does not go far enough.

Self-Oriented Requests (W)

Let us consider the self-oriented requests of T. It is highly unlikely that T’s basic “I want” request is simply a conventionalized formula without any literal significance. First of all, the majority of T’s “I want”
self-oriented wants was of the request form used.

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requests were responses to direct or implied denials of something he desired. They usually could not be fully distinguished from reason ad-

juncts, especially since there are clear instances of T using expressions such as "But I want it" not as a conventional request, but as a reason for compliance in response to a denial. In addition, T certainly was aware that the "wants" of others are motivations or justifications for compliance. In a situation where his mother would not allow him to turn on the sprinklers, T said:

31. Well, G [visiting adult] wants to see the sprinklers—don't you G?

Thus, T often used "want" literally and correctly to express a state of desire and to motivate others to comply with what he, or somebody else, wished. Furthermore, T rarely supplied other reasons for wanting something, or for why a listener should go along with his requests for objects and activities. He acted as if his wanting something were a basic, and sufficient reason for compliance. In general, it often seemed to be the only reason he was aware of, both for himself and for others. T's "I want," then, is not just a conventionalized form, however automatic its use. When T said "I want," he meant it.

T's understanding that certain people were oriented to his concerns was not limited to "I want" requests; it also accounted for his use of "I need" and "problem" statements:

32. Mommy, I need some cold medicine.
33. I can't see it.

With the preceding analysis of T's use of "I want," we can now look at T's self-oriented "Can I?" requests. These were clearly conventional in form, but by no means devoid of meaning. T asked "Can I?" in a tone of voice that usually indicated either uncertainty about compliance or an urgent appeal for acquiescence. This usage indicates that "Can I?" requests probably were made in anticipation of a "You can't (have) . . . " response. In general, "Can I?" requests may be learned early because denials of other forms, such as T's "I want" statements, often contain the phrase "You can't."15

On the basis of tone of voice and context, it appears that T used "Can I?" in situations where what he was asking for either was not routine, and therefore might not be readily granted, or was sufficiently

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4 That this view might not be unique to T is suggested by Example 26: "If you don't give it to me right now, I won't want it later on." Here, the mother's assumed solicitude for the child's "wants" makes possible a rather unusual threat.

5 Similarly, the use of "I want" for requesting is probably facilitated by parents asking very young children questions such as "Do you want. . . ?" or "What do you want?" We do not know of any input studies that have looked at question-answer pairs or other structural aspects of dialogue as a basis for the acquisition of linguistic forms.
routine but so urgently desired that he was afraid of possible noncompliance. Thus, the two situations in which T used "Can I?" were externally very different, but they produced similar psychological states—concern over the possibility of denial. These states were dealt with in a way that reflected T's focus of attention, and fully invested a conventional request form with meaning.

"Can I?" requests were rarely accompanied by reasons. This may have been because T considered his "want" to be a sufficient reason for self-oriented requests. In routine circumstances, T could focus on his state of wanting, and simply state "I want" to motivate compliance. In other cases, where he was attending to the possibility of "You can't," he had no further reason for compliance, and simply asked "Can I?"

In sum, the forms "I want" and "Can I?" occurred in contexts defined by T's psychological state of wanting to possess, use, or do something. The forms were "meaningful" to T, and were used against a background assessment of whether an individual was likely to be oriented to his concerns. Seen in this light, T's choice of request forms reflects a simple concept of the causes or motivations for behavior in another.

Requests Oriented to Rules and Norms (C)
Request type C, which contains mostly corrections, reflects T's sense of right and wrong, or correct and incorrect, and was directed at external matters. Many of the control moves in C contained expressions such as "supposed to," "have to," and "goes," which imply norms and obligations. T seemed to assume that others were oriented to doing what is "right" or "expected." An exclamation such as "Hey!", "Don't!", or "Wait!" often was used to get an immediate halt in activity; but T's basic means of getting others to do what was correct or to stop what was not correct was to simply tell them what was right or wrong. The underlying strategy here was very similar to T's use of "I want." In both cases, the willingness to act in accord with a general orientation was assumed. Only the need and goal of the activity was verbalized. Once again, then, T's choice of form was meaningful rather than ritual, and demonstrated an active concept of social causality.

Activity- or External Goal-Oriented Requests (A)
The requests of type A generally are oriented to cooperative or routine actions by others in which T's goal is not to correct something on normative grounds or obtain something for himself. T's basic form here is a simple imperative. In our transcripts of T, imperatives occurred
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more often than any other request form, and most of these imperative forms occurred during shared or routine activities.

A third of T's imperatives were given during imaginative game play when he was directing others in the activities that were to go on. In addition, T often used imperatives to direct activities in other contexts that he assumed were cooperative, such as the placement of video equipment or the positioning of objects that he wanted to have videotaped.

34. To researcher: Okay, now put that other one . . . Where should we put that one?

Other imperatives occurred when a hearer had already begun helping him. Thus, when his mother was putting lunch on his plate, he directed: "Put—Mix it."

Because imperatives usually occurred when cooperation was assumed, supporting reasons were rarely necessary. Most of T's initiating imperatives (85%) were not supported by reason adjuncts that could be interpreted as attempts to gain compliance from the listener. Rea-

sons for compliance apparently were considered superfluous in these contexts. Deviations from this finding were generally limited to: 1) situations in which, for personal reasons, T wanted to stop someone from doing something or warn them; 2) responses to denials; and 3) situations in which the context did not make clear his reason.

35. Wait a minute, A. I'm putting this somewhere.
36. Go ahead and sit down, or you might fall.

Thus, Type A requests were usually imperatives, and usually oc-
curred in cooperative contexts. T used conventional imbedded requests in situations when there was not an established context of cooperation and he was asking for a favor or for action under the control of another.

37. Inviting a peer to play "airplane": Oh, K, do you wanna be by the pilot? [no response] Why don't you sit by the pilot?

In respect to self- and rule- or norm-oriented requests, we said that T's control moves were typically carried out by providing reasons for an act that, based on simple assumptions about others' motivations, would be adequate to elicit compliance. With goal-oriented requests, however, the reasons for compliance were usually situated in the type of activity and only the relevant action needed to be made clear. This often was done directly with an imperative form. Conventionally polite requests forms were used on occasions when an established context
of cooperation was not present. In this respect they were similar to the "Can I?" requests that T used for self-oriented goals.

Summary of T's System

We have maintained that T's instrumental moves involved more than simple formulaic pairings of forms with contexts. According to our findings, the primary determinant of the form for T's instrumental acts was the goal or type of action desired. Subordinate to this was T's anticipation of compliance by the addressee. T's form choices cannot be accounted for simply on the basis of the social attributes of the speaker, the hearer, or the immediate situation. T's three basic request types—self-oriented, rule/norm oriented, and external action—did not correspond to familiar social contexts as adults might define them; they were T's own constructs. Within these request types there was generally a basic form used when compliance could be expected. Conventionally polite forms were used when T was concerned about the possibility of denial. This system of form choices was based on T's understanding of social motivation and social relationships. It was imbued with meaning, but very different from the system of adults.

Comparison with Adult Requests

T, at age 4, had all the basic request types used by adults, including hints such as "Okay everybody, the airplane’s starting" (so come and play "airplane"), and, to his mother, "The macaroni’s boiling." His social perceptions, however, differed from those of adults. For example, T often assumed compliance and used "I want" without giving a reason when an adult would use a more polite request or offer a reason.

Adults usually do not assume that others are at their beck and call. Outside of cooperative contexts, people are to be treated as free agents. Consequently, unelaborated forms like "I want" and imperatives generally appear only in special contexts of joint activity, cooperativeness, and presupposed services (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Gibbs, 1981).

38. Salesman or fast-food clerk: What'll it be?
Customer: I'd like two . . . ; I want a couple . . . ; Gimme a couple . . .

In contrast to adults, T only infrequently gave reasons in support of imperatives and "I want" statements; however, he did use conventional polite requests in context where he had particular doubt about compliance.

T's use of imperatives and type C rule-oriented requests implies that T often assumed that he was in a position of authority, even when addressing adults. T may have been able to assume this because his
They were similar to tenses involved more than a social context. According to our ordinate to this was T's form choices cannot the social attributes of the T's three basic request external action—did not might define them; they est types there was general could be expected. Con was concerned about the hoices was based on T's I relationships. It was im-the system of adults.

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be? couple...; Gimme a cou-have reasons in support of ever, he did use conven-

- oriented requests implies on of authority, even when to assume this because his mother and the experimenters were routinely cooperative, and, like many Americans, did not expect respect. In similar contexts, adults generally try to avoid any appearance of claiming authority by using mitigating explanations or paralinguistic behaviors indicating uncertainty or hesitation. T, at age 4, had not yet learned the necessity of making it clear verbally that one respects the decisions and actions of others, and does not seek to impose ones own wishes or values upon them. In any case, as with most young children, T's requests contained little tactful deviousness; in general, they directly reflected his focus of attention. Evidence from other research (e.g., Gordon et al., 1980) indicates that it is not until the third grade, or upward of age 8, that American children begin to systematically incorporate considerations of face (Brown and Levinson, 1978) into their instrumental language. This is, of course, very much in line with Piaget's claim that the child moves from egocentrism to concrete operations at around 7 or 8.

T's use of polite forms was infrequent and limited to situations in which he doubted that his request would be successful. However, he probably did not choose 'polite' or conventional forms because they are more effective than other forms. Our family videotape data (see Ervin-Tripp, 1982) strongly suggest that simple efficacy was not the basis for T's, or the other children's, use of conventional politeness. In fact, to our great surprise, polite forms were overall the least successful in gaining compliance. In our data, when we controlled form and response according to cost, rights, intrusiveness, etc., we found that there was no significant advantage to being polite, except that adults were less likely to ignore the child. From the point of view of family experience, politeness seems to be learned through modeling rather than through reinforcement.

Turning to the instrumental strategies used by 4-year-old T and comparing them to the strategies of older children, it appears that T differed from older children in that he did not anticipate counterarguments or minimize costs, unless prompted by a denial or temporizing. After denials, he sometimes changed the setting or activity. However, T did employ all the remaining strategies without prompting. Thus, developmental changes probably pertain more to the content of these strategies and to the social considerations that prompt children to choose one strategy over another than to children's strategic repertoires.

Indirect Speech Acts
The discussion of instrumental strategies brings us to the topic of direct versus indirect speech acts. This issue was originally raised within the field of linguistics (e.g., Gordon and Lakoff, 1975), and it has been
treated extensively in the literature on the development of requests. Direct requests are conventional and "on record." Indirect requests are inferential. "It's cold in here," used to get somebody to close the door, is an example of what has been called an indirect request. It is indirect because it does not have the identifying form of a conventional request, it does not literally specify that any action is desired or requested, and in order to be explicitly recognized as a request it must go through some process of logical inference. Imperative and other conventional request forms are direct requests. Hints and other NCIs are indirect requests.\(^6\)

Indirect speech acts might seem to require a good deal of logical reasoning in order to be understood or produced as requests. For a hearer to recognize "It's cold in here" as a request to close the door, it might appear that he has to go through the logical process of figuring out that the speaker is cold, that this is a state the speaker does not want to be in, that closing the door would remove the cause of this state, and that the speaker must have wanted the hearer to recognize all of this in saying "It's cold in here." Research on the development of requests has focused on the ages at which indirection and hinting can be understood and produced rather than on the logical or psychological processes that may be involved. However, general developmental principles indicate that the production or interpretation of an utterance like "It's cold in here" in the manner given above involves more than most children under 5 can routinely accomplish, yet they do produce and understand many indirect speech acts. How is this to be explained? The answer, as our preceding discussion has suggested, may lie in the way language is embedded in activity, everyday routine, social interaction, shared norms, values, and institutions of the culture or social unit.

We would agree that adults are capable of the kind of reasoning given above, and no doubt sometimes employ it when producing and interpreting indirect requests. However, in most cases for adults, and in all cases for young children, we think that the process is far simpler, and just as "direct," as that associated with the direct imperative. Consider NCIs such as:

39. I want my special straw. (Because I want it, bring it.)
40. I can't see [it]. (Because I can't see the picture, adjust the camera.)

\(^6\) Some writers consider request forms such as "Can you ... ?" to be indirect because they are ambiguous between requests and information questions, and may require inferential reasoning in order to be interpreted in context. Other writers consider them to be direct requests because they are formulaically recognizable as requests and they make explicit what action is desired. Experimental research by Gibbs (in press) indicates that conventional request forms are often treated as request idioms requiring minimal inferential processing.
41. The macaroni’s boiling. (*Mother: What?) It’s boiling over. (Because the macaroni’s boiling over, do something about it.)
42. Okay everybody, the airplane’s starting. (Because the game is starting, come and take your places.)

Each of the above utterances represents an NCI that was spontaneously produced by T as a cause for somebody else to carry out some action. In each case, we would expect that T’s desire for the signaled action was evoked by his awareness of the cause. When T produced the preceding NCIs, he apparently believed that whatever caused him to want the activity would also cause another to want, and therefore produce, the activity. This pattern appeared in many situations. As noted in our discussion of types W and C requests, T often assumed that others were oriented to his wants and to his evaluations of right and wrong. Thus, T simply verbalized the cause for an action, a cause of which he was well aware because it was the basis for his wishing the act in the first place.

If cause and act were connected from the start in T’s mind, and T had only to mention the cause, then the mental processes involved would be quite straightforward. Indeed, the processes would be as direct as those involved in choosing an explicit imperative form because the latter requires the “selection” of a specific linguistic request convention that is distinct from the causal connection already established. Furthermore, adults often use NCIs or “indirect” forms when they are not asking for any specific action, do not have a specific action in mind, and simply want any response that removes or resolves a problem. Because imperatives necessitate specifying what the addressee must do, they may involve an added step for the speaker and they may be even more indirect in a cognitive sense than an NCI such as a hint. This suggests that requests that do not explicitly or literally specify desired actions may be formally defined as “indirect,” when at the same time they are “logically” direct. T’s “I want” statements, for example, may be formally “indirect” but logically “direct.”

In arguing that our examples of indirect requests were really direct expressions from the point of view of the child, we implied that cause-action links form functional units in the child’s mind. These links are formed on the basis of general experience and are not limited to requests. They are implicit in T’s three basic instrumental types because the forms T used depended on his assumptions about the causes for an action. Even the imperative requests that were not accompanied by reasons seemed to be based on the assumption that the causes for compliance were already present in the current activity, or the routine nature of the request.

We think that causal links are also active when a hearer responds to instrumental language, regardless of whether the hearer is a child
or an adult. If a hearer of any age receives an imperative to do something, it may be recognized as a direct order to carry out a specified action, but compliance with the order may require an additional assessment of the cause for the desired act, or a reason for compliance—which in some cases is just the authority of the speaker. If responses to an instrumental move involve the formulation of a cause-action link, then NCIs such as those in Examples 39 through 42 should be directly understood and responded to when the causal link assumed by the speaker is shared or recognized by the hearer.

Our experiments (Ervin-Tripp and Gordon, in press) on the use of situated directives with children indicate that children who respond appropriately to hints or indirect request forms do not need to know they are being asked to do something. All that is necessary is that they understand a situation in terms of its characteristic events and typical cause-action links. That is, a child does not have to assess the motives of a particular speaker at all in deciding on what action is called for. The child can go directly from an NCI to a recognition of the behavior that is typical or appropriate in the situation.

We have taken the position that indirect request forms may not be indirect, because they focus on precisely that information that may be most decisive for spurring action. Our purpose throughout has been to indicate the importance of looking beyond form to the nature of children’s instrumental strategies, and to the relationship between strategies and underlying concepts of social motivation and social interaction.

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an imperative to do something or carry out a specified action. If responses require an additional aspect to the speaker's intention, a reason for compliance—such as the speaker's need to maintain control or influence the listener—should be directly addressed by the requester.

On the use of questions by children, research has shown that questions are more likely than requests to be accompanied by a direct statement of the action desired. This suggests that questions are used to elicit information or to confirm expectations, whereas requests are used to make demands or to ask for compliance.

Rectangular request forms may not always indicate the desired action clearly, and this ambiguity may increase with the use of indirect requests. In such cases, the relationship between the request and the contextual information provided may vary, influencing the likelihood of compliance.

In summary, both requests and questions play a crucial role in communication, allowing for initiation, negotiation, and cooperation. Understanding the modalities and functions of these forms in different contexts is essential for effective communication and social interaction.