LANGUAGE AND POWER IN THE FAMILY*

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In family life, as in other face-to-face situations, the actions of other people sometimes aid and sometimes collide with ours. For this reason, we are inevitably led to perform acts of control: offers, requests, orders, prohibitions, and other verbal moves that solicit goods or attempt to effect changes in the activities of others.

Any analysis of control and manipulation through language must deal with the fact that virtually all "control acts" have a dual nature, both social and utilitarian. The specific content of a control utterance may principally be an assertion of power over another (Mitchell-Kerrnan and Kerrnan, 1977). "Can you change the channel?" may really mean "Comply with my wishes." "I'm cold" may mean "Show concern for me." Other acts may have companionship as their goal, as does, at bedtime, "Mommy, get me a cracker." Such requests generally require that the other person be in a better position than the speaker to fulfill the act requested, but their primary goal is social. Utterances such as these could be called person-centered control acts.

At other times we have specific ends in which the services of others are means to goals we cannot easily accomplish ourselves ("Forceps please" and "Hand me that dishcloth"). These could be called task-centered control acts. Since even such utilitarian acts are intrusive on hearers, they too have social consequences; Brown and Levinson (1978) have claimed that all control acts are face-threatening—potentially destructive to the autonomy or the self-esteem of the listener.

Although the distinction between task-centered and person-centered is an important one, it is a difficult distinction to make.

Task-related purposes are easier to identify, since their goals are usually conscious and explicit, but almost all control acts have social meaning as well. In this chapter we will not be delving into questions of the internal nature of control acts or the intent of speakers in using them. We will be focusing primarily on the development of power relations in the family as expressed indirectly, through the use of control acts, by children eight years of age or under, within the context of family interactions. As such, we will be talking about the externally observable aspects of linguistic control acts: the form they take, who uses them, to whom they are addressed, and what results they reap.

One might ask how the use of linguistic control acts is reflective of power. In some sense, all kinds of power have in common one factor: the ability of the powerful person to control the goals and behavior of others. Thus, although a parent appears to have absolute power compared to a three-year-old child, we can easily find examples of that child controlling the parent, exerting power in the form of demanding the attention and goods to which a helpless dependent is entitled. All members of a family exert power over other members in some way; we have tried to examine how their relative power is expressed through language use.

CONCEPTUAL BASES

Effective Power

In this analysis, we shall distinguish between effective power and esteem. Effective power in face-to-face interaction is the ability to get compliance from an addressee. A powerful person gets what she says she wants. Does the possession of power in the economical and political system guarantee more effective power in verbal interaction? Face-to-face power, or the ability to gain compliance in conversational interaction, may be enhanced by the capacity to give rewards or by rights and obligations of the social system involved. On the other hand, addressee compliance can be affected by factors involving personal relationships; for example, the possibility of compliance may be increased if the control act occurs within a network in which past experience has present consequences, such as reciprocity or personal feelings of fear, love, or esteem. To complicate matters further, there are individual differences in the effectiveness of various strategies. Additionally, we can find instances of local power, when an individual who is low in real-world power nevertheless holds a position within a

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smaller system and is able to base requests and control acts on her status within the system. For example, children may expect a high level of compliance from care-givers when requesting goods and services due them.

A prerequisite to compliance is attention. Part of our measure of effective power is how much attention is paid to a speaker. Speakers low in effective power are less likely to be noticed and, because their moves are ignored, have to make special efforts to get the floor.

Esteem and Verbal Deference

Effective power can be investigated separately from what we will call “esteem” (which constitutes another kind of power). Esteem can be measured by analyzing the type and degree of compliance achieved, as we do in this study. A speaker who is high in esteem has the right to receive verbal deference from others and can make control moves boldly, without offering deference to those who are lower in esteem. There are three kinds of deference expressions by which we propose to measure the power revealed through the commanding of esteem in face-to-face interaction: overt marking, justifying, and allusion or hinting. In Labov and Fanshel’s (1977) discussion of speech acts in a therapeutic context, these three types of deference are called “mitigations” because they seem to qualify the control act and soften its threat.

First is expressed deference, which indicates that the addressee is held in high esteem and is marked by the use of overt marking by conventional forms. These are often taught to children explicitly. It has been shown experimentally that when children are asked to be more polite, they add “please,” and then move to conventional control frameworks like “Could you” or “Can I” (Bates, 1976; James, 1978).

The second type of expressed deference is justifying. The requester explains why the control act is necessary or is based on common norms (and is not just a power-grab): “Dad I’m gonna take your car because I might get mugged on the subway.” Such justifications are also used by addressees in refusing control acts. If the addressee feels that the speaker is someone who must be held in high esteem, then an excuse or justification is called for: “I can’t work late tonight. It’s my husband’s birthday and his mother is coming over, and . . .”

The third type of expressed deference is allusion or hinting, in which the goal of the control act is not made explicit. “It’s really chilly in here” can be a polite, covert way of asking someone to shut the window while still expressing esteem for them by giving them the choice of ignoring the implicit request. According to Ervin Tripp (1976), hints are very common in some American solidarity groups that share assumptions.

Both the ability to gain compliance with one’s expressed wishes and the ability to elicit deferential behavior (or expressions of esteem) are evidence that a speaker has power of some sort. Of these two reflexes of power, should we consider the ability to command esteem the less important? It is a secondary consequence of real-world and effective power? We have all observed the kind of deference offered to those who wield a lot of social and/or economic power.

On the other hand, we have also probably observed the use of forms of deference to distract from economic inequity—a woman who has doors held open for her by male peers who earn fifty percent more than she does may become suspicious and resentful of the symbolic power that is being imputed to her. Such social behaviors as deus and other fanatic defenses of honor or face remind us that in some cases, mere symbols of prestige, honor, and group membership can command deep allegiance. What we do not know is whether the internal dynamic of real and effective power is regularly affected by symbolic relations such as expressions of esteem.

In this chapter we will examine how the development of effective power is related to the manipulation of expressions of esteem. By exploring early development in the family, we can see some of the background assumptions regarding status, sex, and deference that are learned very early.

Compliance and Resistance

In order to use compliance as a measure of effective power, we need to determine what factors will feed into a speaker’s decision to comply with or refuse another speaker’s control act. We can expect that compliance will not just be a result of the verbal control act or “asking nicely.” Other factors may determine the outcome of an attempt at control to a greater extent than politeness will. These include the activity context, the nature of the request, and the relationship of the speakers.

The activity context within which the control act is performed will often determine how successful a speaker is in achieving compliance. When children are engaged in types of activities that require cooperation, as do cookie-making or role-playing, for instance, then compliance will be common. In other activities, such as choosing objects, roles, and territories for play, where they are competing for scarce
resources and expressing dominance, the frequency of refusal will rise. When the speaker and the addressee have not been engaged in joint activity, or when the addressee is otherwise occupied, we can also expect the frequent refusal or ignoring of control moves. So we can expect that cooperative joint activity will facilitate compliance, and competitive joint activity or separate engagement will reduce compliance.

We have organized these and other factors that are likely to lead to resistance or noncompliance into a list of analogous categories called "cost." The four components of cost are joint involvement of speaker with addressee in activity or talk; trajectory of addressee's current activity (is the request of speaker going to fit with the plans of the addressee?); possession of objects in question (Does the request refer to an object that is the addressee's?); and authority (is the control act aimed at someone who has authority over the speaker in the current activity?).

Control acts are more likely to be resisted or have a "high cost" in the following circumstances:

(a) The control act interrupts the addressee's conversation.
(b) Compliance would undo the addressee's present or planned activity.
(c) The proposed good is expensive or the activity is difficult.
(d) The possessions at issue are owned by or in use by the addressee.
(e) A subordinate is trying to control someone of authority, beyond normal rights.

We expect that compliance will also be related to social factors such as solidarity and rank. In our study, age difference is the chief determinant of rank. We expect younger children to comply with older children more than the reverse, and we expect older children to have more power to capture attention. Since males have more power in the larger society, we expect that fathers may refuse more than mothers. In addition, mothers have the traditional family role of servants to their husbands and children. If this family role affects cooperativeness, we can expect mothers to respond more than female researchers to children's requests. Predictions from solidarity would also favor maternal cooperation, especially with girls. If mothers are expected to be helpful, will girls perceive females as agreeable, or docile, and therefore be more compliant than boys? Female roles would also lead to the prediction that in order to avoid explicit refusal, girls—and possibly mothers—would hedge, favoring passive aggression or the ignoring of requests.

The Development of Deference

In adult use of language, higher-cost requests often display more politeness in the form of deference, flattery, or allusions to solidarity between speaker and hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Ervin-Tripp, 1976); in short, the petitioner pays for the higher cost in terms of symbolic power. Just as low-status persons in society must have more experience or education to get the same pay, so in face-to-face interaction, the petitioner's status can require that higher symbolic payments be made in order to get compliance. We can ask several questions about the expression of deference on the part of children in the family. First, we can ask how children eventually acquire the system: What factors are important in provoking the use of deference or the expression of esteem? We can expect developmental differences in the types of forms learned and in the social features to which the children are sensitive.

We expect that of the three forms of symbolic payment, formal marking will be learned first, both because it is explicitly taught and because it is conventionally correlated with social features. Justifying and explaining, which involve analysis of the addressee's motives, will be learned second. Finally, indirectness or avoidance of mentioning the goal of the control act will become deliberate in the child's development.

In being more polite in making high-cost demands, we expect that younger children will be more sensitive to the cost factors of relative authority and possession rather than to trajectory and involvement, since the latter two call for more awareness of the perspective of the conversational partner. In terms of social features, we anticipate that the obvious features of relative age and familiarity will be important. As adults, researchers and parents will be high in esteem, and deference to them will be greatest; older children will receive more deference than younger ones. On the grounds of distance versus familiarity, we expect fathers and researchers to receive more deference than mothers.

Further, we can ask why children learn to be more deferent to their seniors and to be more deferent in framing higher-cost requests. They could learn to express deference and esteem through positive or negative reinforcement. If the child learns by reinforcement, then it is likely either that the child succeeds more often by being deferent for higher-cost requests or that the child is praised or rebuked for the form used. Family instruction is usually limited to "please" in English-speaking families, and occasionally to "May I" and other idioms that we consider to constitute formal marking. Thus, the other forms of deference—justifications and implicit suggestions—are not explicitly taught. These must be learned either by positive reinforcement (by being more effective) or by modeling (the child identifying with and imitating the others). In the theory of modeling and identification, learning occurs because of secondary reinforcement or the
pleasure of sounding and acting like loved, admired, or powerful models. We can test the hypothesis of greater effectiveness by examining our data. If we find that learning cannot be explained by greater compliance with or attention to deferential forms, then we are left with implicit modeling as an explanation, for which we cannot—from these data—provide further tests.

Research on Deference

Two recent studies of children's role-playing illustrate that children are aware of symbolic power and manipulate the forms associated with high- or low-status roles in order to establish dominant and submissive relationships between the "characters" in their role-play. Mitchell-Kernan (1969) asked Black American children, aged 7 to 12 years, to role-play scenes using puppets. The only constraints were provided by the puppets available. In the role-playing, the symbolic contrast between superordinates and subordinates was clearly marked linguistically, both in the frequency of orders given to subordinate characters by their superiors and in the form selected for these orders. Addressees who were lower in rank than the speaker received over five times as many directives as those who were higher in rank. Within this set of control acts, the children directed imperatives to Subordinates eight times as often as to Superordinates. Subordinates did use imperatives to Superordinates, but only in circumstances of pleading, high emotion, or tension.

A more structured role-play study by Elaine Andersen (1977) asked white, middle-class children, aged 4 to 7, to enact family scenes using puppets. The roles of Father, Mother, and Baby gave us role-play analogues of our family scenes. As in the Kernan's study, one indication of relative power was the frequency of directives. As the age of the participant children increased, and presumably their sensitivity to the power relations in the family increased, they had the puppet Mothers produce fewer directives when addressing the Fathers. In the play of the oldest group of children, the Husband gave more than twice as many directives to the Wife as the reverse.

Besides reflecting status through different frequency of speech-act types, Andersen found that the children were sensitive to and used formal variations, as well. There were more imperative commands from puppet Parents to Children than from Children to Parents. The Children's directives to Parents took the form of statements of desire ("I want a cookie") and used explicit mitigating markers such as question forms ("Could you get me a cookie?") and Let's forms ("Let's play" versus "Play with me"). Interestingly, the Mother and the Father—though both high-status adults—were treated differently, and this difference was reflected even in the role-play of the earliest age group. The Child puppet addressed six times as many imperatives to Mothers as to Fathers, and eight times as many "Let's" (solidarity-evoking, mitigating) forms to the Fathers as to the Mothers.

This difference ties in several of the parameters we've discussed so far. One explanation for the high number of nonpolite imperatives to the Mother is that the Mother's real-life role is typically one of providing for all the daily needs of the Child. As a result, requests for her will be lower in cost, at least with respect to the trajectory of her action. Since her role is one of care-giving at all times, requests for care cannot be considered a major intrusion or unusual demand, as they might be toward the Father. In addition, in Andersen's data, the puppet Husbands were less polite and ordered the Wives around more than the reverse, so children using parents as role models evidently see the mother as being held in lower esteem (Andersen, 1977: 99).

Other studies, summarized in Ervin-Tripp (1977) and Becker (1982) have shown that by the age of 2½ years, children are sensitive to variation in social features governing the use of polite forms. But none of the researchers has controlled cost by closely analyzing age, sex, and familiarity as factors affecting compliance and deference in naturalistic settings.

DATA BASE AND METHOD

We chose four cooperative middle-class families with 2 or 3 children between the ages of 2 and 8 for videotaping naturalistic interaction over a period of more than a year. Table 6.1 shows the age and sex distribution of the children in the families. Since the families were not selected for distribution of sexes among peers, there is an imbalance in the sample, which limits the number of utterances that can be compared with respect to differences balanced for age and sex. In addition to interaction with siblings and parents, we included child visitors and researchers. The transcripts coded for this chapter were chosen for the diversity of the interactants' ages. From 10,000 utterances transcribed in this sample, 891 control acts by children were coded. These were unambiguous attempts to alter the behavior of one or more addressees. For purpose of the cost analysis, we had to remove some ambiguous cases; in analyses of compliance we also removed unclear-results cases (for example, when the response was
TABLE 6.3 Sex Differences in Response Strategies at Ages 3 and 4 (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Strategy</th>
<th>Female Addressee</th>
<th>Male Addressee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignore</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comply</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

requests. Girls refused only 35 percent of the requests directed to them, ignoring 33 percent (compared with the boy's use of this strategy, which amounted only to 16 percent).

Age Changes in Forms of Deference

Deference is expressed in different ways by children of different ages. We predicted that there would be a change in the use of different forms with increasing age; first explicit markers would be learned, then mitigating explanations, and last, hints.

1. The earliest common deferent forms were "please," permission questions, and polite requests, such as "Can I" or "Could you" followed by a specification of the goods and services wanted. Permission questions accounted for about the same percentage of control utterances at all ages, but polite requests and the use of "please" decrease with age. In all, these politeness markers, which adults explicitly teach their children, dropped from 78 percent of mitigated forms at ages 2 and 3, to 39 percent at 4, and 43 percent from 5 to 8.

2. Children aged 2 and 3 provided explanations or justifications for only six percent of their control utterances, whereas older children added them to about 14 percent of theirs. Only 22 percent of the deferential control moves of the children aged 2 to 3 included explanations, whereas 52 percent of the older children's deferential utterances did. Functionally, explanations seem partially to replace formal politeness markers for the children aged 4 and over.

3. Although hints may convey the same information as justifications, they omit the explicit request or order. Overall in our sample, the children's speech was highly explicit. Unlike adults, they rarely used hints or inexplicit control acts as a major part of their control methods; in only 7 percent of their acts was the purpose hidden. In the age range we sampled, the percentage of hints among all deferial forms did not change, remaining at around 14-17 percent.

Deference, Status of Addresssee, and Cost.

To whom were the children deferent? At ages 2 and 3, they deferred mainly to the researchers, who received polite forms 60 percent of the time. For parents, the ratio dropped to 10 percent, while for other children it varied from 14 percent to 24 percent. The children aged 5 to 8 displayed a conventional pattern of differentiation; adults received more polite forms than children, and other children more than younger ones. As a group, the 4-year-olds displayed no consistent pattern of contrast, although some individual ones followed the older children's patterns. When we grouped together all moves toward parents, we found that children used significantly more imperatives to mothers than to fathers. In addition, more mitigating explanations were added to requests addressed to fathers (p < .01, N = 109).

But were they sensitive to the cost? We had argued that some aspects of cost, such as the consideration of whose property was at stake, would be reflected in deferent forms. Even 2- and 3-year-olds made such a distinction. If they wanted a child addressee's goods, they chose polite forms 44 percent of the time, but these forms were chosen only 9 percent of the time when neutral goods were involved. They were rarely polite to parents, with requests involving the parents' possessions being the only incidents occasioning deferent usage. They were much less sensitive to the cost of a request in terms of the hearer's proposed activities and present actions, and they seemed oblivious to whether or not the hearer was already engaged in conversation.

By ages 5 to 8, these children were aware of the listener's activities to a greater extent: They were polite only 12 percent of the time in the context of activities in which the listener was already cooperating, but 54 percent of the time when the request would interrupt the listener. Higher cost led to more deference, to a reduction from 60 percent to 27 percent of the use of impolite imperatives, but also to an increase in statements of desire or need, which the children may consider explanatory or persuasive justification.

Deference and Compliance

Finally, we examined the question of the interaction between the use of deference and addressee compliance (Table 6.4). We considered
TABLE 6.1 Ages of Children During Study Span

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Family A</th>
<th>Family B</th>
<th>Family C</th>
<th>Family D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7.3-7.8</td>
<td>Female 6.3-6.9</td>
<td>Female 3.1-5.0</td>
<td>Male 4.2-4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5.7-6.9</td>
<td>Male 4.6-5.0</td>
<td>Male 2.9-3.10</td>
<td>Female 2.4-3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.9-4.2</td>
<td>Female 2.2-2.8</td>
<td>Female 1.3-2.4</td>
<td>Female Infant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

off-camera or ambiguous). As a result, the numbers vary on different tables.

RESULTS

Getting Attention

The first problem to be solved in a successful control maneuver is to get attention. We found that younger children were more often ignored when they attempted to get the attention of someone who was already engaged in talk with another person. When children over 4½ interrupted for reasons considered to be irrelevant by the addressee, they were ignored 79 percent of the time; when younger children did the same thing, they were ignored 94 percent of the time. Even when they interrupted for reasons considered to be relevant, the younger children were ignored 83 percent of the time (Ervin-Tripp, 1979).

The tendency of older speech partners to ignore children is exacerbated by the children’s failure to seek the floor before speaking. As children get older, their strategies for breaking into a conversation change. They use a wider range of verbal attention forms (“Hey Sandy!”; “Lookit!”), and they use more of them. Of 2-year-olds’ control moves to already busy addressees, 89 percent were made without getting the attention of the addressee first. This ineffective behavior decrease with age: 78 percent of the children at age 3 and 31 percent at ages 5 to 8 failed to use an attention form to seek the floor when the addressee was not attending to them.

Getting Compliance

The major factors in gaining compliance, which are shown in Table 6.2, are the cost of the request and the status of the addressee. These factors interact. The parents—chiefly the mother—cooperated regardless of cost; even for high-cost requests they complied over half the time. Researchers and the children themselves were highly sensitive to the cost, to the nature of the act requested, and to its fit with ongoing activity.

The most important determinant of compliance besides cost was relative age. Older children were significantly more likely to refuse or ignore the control acts of younger children than the reverse ($p < .001$, $N = 528$). Overall, younger children complied with 47 percent of the control moves of children of different ages, while the older children complied with only 27 percent of such moves. We can see this difference in effective power even more clearly if we look at elliptical control acts: those consisting of only a noun or an adverb. In these cases the speaker is clearly not trying to be carefully persuasive, but the younger children complied with 60 percent of these moves, compared with 27 percent compliance by the older children in response to younger ones.

In examining effects of sex on compliance, we restricted the set of utterances used to those performed by children aged 3 and 4. This was the age group with a relatively balanced sex ratio, so that age was not a confounding factor in our results (although, of course, the sample is smaller). First, we found that in their tendencies to comply with control moves, mothers were biased by the sex of the speaker. Although they ignored requests from both boys and girls at roughly the same rate—about 15 percent of the time—mothers complied with the control acts of girls 55 percent of the time, while boys got compliance for only 10 percent of their utterances. They boys were refused 73 percent of their requests. (See Table 6.3.)

It was also the case that male and female children used different strategies in response to control moves by other children. Although their noncompliance rates were similar, boys almost always chose either to comply or to refuse—refusing to comply with the control acts of others 53 percent of the time and ignoring only 16 percent of the re-
TABLE 6.4 Adults' Responses to Polite and Nonpolite Control Forms (percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ignore</th>
<th>Refuse</th>
<th>Comply</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polite form</td>
<td>.04*</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpolite form</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Difference p < .001.

Polite: Polite questions, permission forms, explanations, or justifications, implicit questions or statements of consequences (N = 80).
Nonpolite: Imperatives, cries, gestures, ellipses, "I want, I need" (N = 168).

The following forms to be polite or deferent: any request that was accompanied by an explanation or justification; explicit question prefixes such as "May I" or "Can you"; and implicit questions and statements, whose indirect, hinting character renders them deferential.

When factors such as relative age and cost were held constant, we found no increase in compliance in response to deference. For example, in the group aged 5 to 8, who appeared most socialized to the issue of cost and to the conventional patterns of deference, all the polite requests from peers were ignored or refused, regardless of costs. The more polite requests used by 4-year-olds to researchers (including those that were explicitly polite and those that contained justifications or explanations) were refused more often than they were successful.

Although we found no significant increase in compliance with the use of polite forms, we did find a behavioral result that we consider extremely important. In virtually all cases, adults did not ignore requests that were polite in form.

**DISCUSSION: COMPLIANCE**

**Getting Attention**

The first problem of a successful control maneuver is to get attention. Younger children were ignored more often than older ones when they attempted to get the attention of someone who was already engaged in talk with another person. Some of the problem can be attributed to the younger children's inability to follow conversations. Although we found that young children can appropriately alternate turns when talking with peers, they do not recognize the appropriate points at which to interrupt older speakers because these conversations are not adapted to their level. Thus they miss the gaps and topic changes in the conversation where they could successfully break in, and their interruptions are often delayed replies to what went earlier.

Even when young children's interruptions were relevant, they were ignored at a rate greater than that for older children. At least part of this effect is due to their lack of control over attention-getting devices. However, no matter how pertinent or well-timed a younger's point may be, the odds are greater that the young will be seen and not heard. In terms of power to gain attention, the effects of age are very strong.

Other researchers' findings can augment our conclusion about the correlation between power difference and age. Wood and Gardner (1980) have found that in addition to power based on age, power based on social dominance is a consistent determinant of compliance in the interactions of children. They asked nursery school teachers to make judgments about the relative social power of the children in their classes. Using these judgments, they established dyads and observed the ensuing interaction. They found that fewer than one-third of the responses by dominant members of a dyad were compliant. The compliance rate between equals was 50 percent, but the most interesting finding, for our purposes, was that the subordinate members of the dyads complied at a much greater rate than the dominant members, when age was held constant. In older pairs, subordinates complied with 74 percent of the dominants' control moves, while in younger pairs, subordinates complied with 91 percent.

**Cost and Status**

The major factors in compliance, as shown in Table 6.2, are cost of request and social distance of addressee. These factors interact. For example, parents in these observations are very compliant, regardless of our estimate of the cost of the demand. Mothers, who constitute the bulk of the parent audiences, may have been sensitive to the demands of their care-giver role. They were expected by the children to collaborate in the child-organized role-play scenes, and they were perhaps more cooperative because they were before the camera. However, our finding of high compliance in the mother's case seems to be more than an observational artifact. The children recognize and use the fact that mothers in their culture are supposed to be responsive to their wants and discomfort, since they routinely use their assertions of helplessness or of their wants as means of getting mothers to comply, even under conditions of high cost. This assumption—that mothers are there to provide for one's needs—may explain the following at-
tempt by a seven-year-old to gain his mother’s compliance with a request: “If you don’t give some now, I won’t want any later.” This strange utterance would function as a threat only in a social situation where the mother is assumed to derive benefit from fulfilling the caregiver role. In some sense, this makes our dimensions of cost irrelevant in some cases of mother-child interaction. A request that would be high-cost if addressed to a researcher may be part of a mother’s normal trajectory of activity. (The researchers complied less than the parents. Since they were often confronted with requests to use their camera equipment, they refused at a high rate.)

Our analysis of cost—our expectations of how it would contribute to the rate of compliance—was borne out to some extent by these data. Both adults and children gave behavioral responses that seemed sensitive to whether or not the control move they were responding to involved their possessions or disrupted their ongoing activity. The children’s own views of cost became apparent in their justifications and excuses. Possessions, as we expected, were an important element. Children’s inclusion of minimizers such as “just a little” in their requests suggests an awareness of cost in terms of difficulty. Our evidence suggests that the notion of intrusion, which involves awareness of what the other is doing or planning, is acquired later than sensitivity to possessions.

**Compliance and Sex Differences**

We found a sex difference in parent responsiveness: mothers were more cooperative with the demands of girls than of boys. We are dealing with a small group—four mothers only. But if this difference is confirmed in larger studies, we may be seeing evidence of sexual alliance formation in families.

What can we make of the sex differences in children’s behavioral responses to others? At first glance, the finding that boys refuse more requests than girls do might lead us to expect that the girls were being more compliant in general. However, the real importance of the finding lies not in the fact that boys refuse more than girls, but that girls ignore others as much as they refuse or comply, thereby using a wider range of response strategies than boys, while not complying any more frequently than did the boys. Again, our sample is small, but if it is confirmed, we may see early evidence of the contrast Sutton-Smith (1979) and others have noted in play groups. He comments that boys’ groups involve more struggles for dominance and explicit arguments (corresponding to our refusals), whereas girls are more concerned with inclusion/exclusion (in our sample, attention versus ignoring).

**DISCUSSION: ESTEEM AND DEFERENCE**

**Age Changes in the Form of Deference**

Our predictions as to the order of acquisition of different polite forms were partly borne out. Explicit permission questions and polite forms were used by even the youngest children. The use of justification as a mitigating device increased markedly in children after the age of four. Hints, or inexplicit control acts, are used infrequently and may just reflect children’s lack of focus on problems or goals rather than on explicit means.

**Use of Deference Determined by Addressee**

We confirm that children are, from a very early age, sensitive to social features of their relationships with their addressees. Two findings in particular support this hypothesis. First, children address significantly different forms to mothers and fathers. Children use the less polite imperative to their mothers, while using more mitigating explanations to fathers. Interestingly, this finding parallels Andersen’s 1977 role-play results, in which children had the Child puppet use more polite forms to the Father puppets than to the Mothers. At the time of Andersen’s study it was not clear whether this pattern was a reflection of the child’s conception of role stereotypes or of a pattern of use found in real family interaction. However, the results of our study show that the mother and father may, indeed, elicit different types of control-act behavior from children.

The second finding that bears on the question of children’s awareness of the social features of their addressees concerns their use of justifications. All the children used justifications, although their use definitely increased with age. Although the form of the justification was the same in all cases (a supporting statement issued right before or after the control act), we noted an interesting difference in the content of the explanations, depending on the relationship to the speaker. When addressing an adult, either a parent or the researcher, the child would use supporting information that evoked the care-giver role in the adult. Beth, 5 years, to mother:

Mommy, I want you to open all of them—the paint, so I won’t have to have trouble.
Lisa, 4 years, to researcher:

OK, we can't know all these pages, so you read 'em.

By referring to their own inadequacies, the children were clearly appealing to the superior abilities of their caretaker, and they clearly considered the statement of the contrast in abilities enough of a justification to mitigate the request.

Explanations or justifications used by younger speakers, on the other hand, centered on a reason for the addressee's compliance that did not refer to the addressee's role vis-à-vis the speaker. Instead, reference was made to a behavioral norm that must be satisfied, a goal the child may expect if she complied, or a fact about the world that should guide her decision. As such, these justifications serve an informing, socializing function. Ellen, 8 years, to Beth, 5 years:

Beth? Don't do that. That water is too fast to water those plants. And don't pee on the grass.

Ann, 8 years, to Caren, 4 years:

We have only a little more, OK? So don't use one on every Valentine.

Ellen, 8 years, to Beth, 5 years:

Catch that fly so we can squish it up.

Lisa, 4 years, to Saul, 2 years:

Get out of my space. This is my space.

Thus, by the age that justifications are used, children have internalized nuances of social structure that go beyond simple status categories to norms and expectations for their occupants.

The Use of Deference and the Cost of a Control Act

The following exchange is between Saul (S), 3 years, and an adult female researcher, Patty (P), during a morning taping session. It illustrates how forms and strategies can be influenced by cost, relative status, and perceived role.

S: Hey, I'm hungry.
P: Didn't you eat your breakfast?
S: No, I didn't. I just go to bed, and I want to eat. I'm hungry.
P: You're hungry.
S: Could you get me something to eat?
P: No I can't. You have to ask your mom.
S: Well, Momma won't give me something.
P: (Laughing) Well, why not?
S: Because he ... he ... won't fix me anything.
P: Doesn't she usually?
S: No. Do you have a lot of cake at your house?

Saul starts out the exchange as though Patty were a regular care giver and, thus, should be expected to fulfill his needs. He simply states his need: "I'm hungry." To make sure that she attends to his request, he prefaces the need statement with the attention bid of "Hey." When Patty does not immediately provide him with food, he responds with a justification for the implicit request, centering mainly on his needs: He wants to eat, he is hungry. If she is to respond to this sort of request, she will be responding as a care giver who is attuned to his needs. She evades the issue. Saul responds with a direct, but more polite request ("Could you . . .?"). It is obvious that this request is higher in cost than he thought, or else Patty is not a member of the same class of care givers as is his mother. She refused his direct request and redirects him to the real care giver, who is obviously in charge of food. Saul answers this by claiming that his mother will not fulfill his needs in this area. Patty laughs at this attempt to cast aspersions on his mother's ability or willingness to fulfill the care-giving role, and in the next few utterances probes Saul on the issue to get him to spell out his improbable argument. Finally, Saul retreats to an indirect, hinting form. Although this is a matter of interpretation, the formulaic utterance "Do you have any (cake, cookie, M&M's)?" often brings a positive response from adults who are primary care givers, whereas it is not likely to work with Mom.

Deference and Compliance

What can we conclude about the acquisition of politeness from these data? Surprisingly, the polite requests were the least successful at each cost level. This suggests, at least, that politeness cannot be learned from immediate reinforcement of the type that we might expect—that is, from a higher rate of compliance with one's requests.
One of the ironies of politeness is that it can be heard as an admission of speaker’s evaluation of the request. Seen from this angle, we might expect that an assertive stance would succeed more frequently and would, therefore, predict a functional decoupling of deference and compliance. However, children do continue to produce more polite forms (as well as more types of polite forms) with age; Bates (1976) shows that children from an early age believe polite forms should be more effective.

One explanation is suggested by our finding that polite control acts are virtually never ignored by adults. They thus differ significantly from other utterances in terms of the attention paid to them by adults. This must explain at least part of the motivation for using polite forms, and it may represent the principal force toward the acquisition of politeness.

It is possible that peers’ greater compliance with polite requests (Wood and Gardner, 1980) outweighs inefficacy in the family. Another alternative is to propose that deference is learned, at least partially, because it sounds appropriate, despite its lack of efficacy in getting one’s way. There are long-term and subtle payoffs to sounding like a member of one’s group, at whatever level. Adults may not be more likely to grant a high-cost request, even if the child “asks nicely,” but in the long run their estimate of the child’s social knowledge and level of maturity will be affected, with consequences that may not appear in specific day-to-day interactions such as these.

The proposal that sounding like a competent speaker is highly motivating is not new; it has been the most favored explanation for the mastery of nuances of correctness in first and second language learning. In this domain, as in the area of politeness, differential effect alone does not seem to account for learning (Brown et al., 1969).

CONCLUSIONS

We have examined power and deference displays in the natural interaction of family members by isolating children’s attempts to control others—researchers, parents, siblings, and friends. Effective power and esteem were related to age in this sample. Children aged 2 and 3 had learned formal politeness markers and were selectively deferential in addressing requests to unfamiliar or older people and for borrowing possessions. The older children (who received more deference and compliance from younger children) began to take into account the preoccupations of addressees, gaining attention before proceeding, scaling up deference to those who were busy or would be disturbed by cooperating, tuning justification to the hearer’s beliefs and knowledge.

What brings about these changes? Though the adults, especially the mothers, were more attentive to polite control moves, neither they nor other children were any more compliant with them. We propose that the learning of deference in families such as those in our sample may be based on identification with models and social attention rather than on efficacy.

The mothers in our sample were an important exception to the pattern of power and esteem correlating with age. In their role as care givers, they received nondeferent orders, suggesting that the children expected compliance and believed their desires to be justification enough. They were right; the mothers cooperated, even when the tasks were difficult or intrusive.

One might expect that because of this pattern, girls (in copying their mother’s behaviors) would be more cooperative than boys. In our sample, this was not the case. Instead, girls used the strategy of refusing less openly, ignoring rather than refusing outright to comply with requests. Interestingly, the mothers cooperated more with their daughters than with their sons. Though based on a small sample, these findings suggest many areas of family interaction that provide the training ground for later patterns of social behavior. In many respects, the structure of power and deference in adult life is prefigured in the families.

NOTE

1. We have capitalized the referents to puppet characters (Mother, Father, Subordinate) to differentiate them from real-world referents throughout this chapter.