

Children's Reformulated Requests: A Developmental Study of Moroccan Preschoolers' Pragmatic Competence

Abdelfattah LAABIDI

Moulay Ismail University of Meknes, Faculty of Sciences, Laboratory of Applied Linguistics and Artificial Intelligence
a.laabidi@umi.ac.ma

Adiba BOUSFIHA

*Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah of Fes, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Sais-Fes.
Laboratory of Discourse Creativity, Society and Religions.*
adiba.bousfiha@usmba.ac.ma

Fatima Ezzahrae HILALI

The Afro-Mediterranean Research Laboratory for Discourse, Communication and Cultural Studies.
Fatimaezzahrae.hilali@usmba.ac.ma

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Abstract

This investigation explores the reformulation strategies utilized by Moroccan preschoolers when their initial requests fail to accomplish their intended perlocutionary outcomes. Through longitudinal examination of five female participants aged 4-6 years, we analyzed how children adapt their requests following non-compliance, investigating patterns of repetition, mitigation, and intensification. Data gathered across 34 months via naturalistic observation demonstrated that 81.8% of reformulated requests involved rephrasing rather than mere repetition. Children exhibited sophisticated recognition of social variables, modifying their reformulation approaches according to addressee characteristics and request categories. These findings enhance our comprehension of pragmatic development and cross-cultural diversity in children's communicative competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity to reformulate communicative acts when initial efforts prove unsuccessful constitutes a fundamental component of pragmatic competence. When children's requests fail to accomplish their intended perlocutionary outcomes—whether through non-compliance, rejection, or conditional responses—they must implement alternative strategies to pursue their communicative objectives. This process demonstrates sophisticated comprehension of social dynamics, interlocutor characteristics, and the relationship between linguistic structure and social significance.

Investigation of request reformulation has predominantly concentrated on Western contexts, with insufficient attention to cross-cultural variation in children's pragmatic strategies. The current study addresses this limitation by examining how Moroccan

preschoolers reformulate their requests, contributing to our understanding of universal and culture-specific dimensions of pragmatic development.

The theoretical framework incorporates speech act theory and politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of face-threatening acts and Fraser's (1980) research on conversational mitigation. We investigate how children navigate the tension between accomplishing their goals and preserving social harmony through strategic reformulation of unsuccessful requests.

The significance of this research extends beyond theoretical considerations to practical applications in education and clinical assessment. Understanding how children naturally develop reformulation strategies can inform pedagogical approaches and provide benchmarks for evaluating pragmatic competence in diverse populations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Developmental Pragmatics

The examination of children's pragmatic development has emerged as a vital field investigating how children acquire the ability to utilize language appropriately in social contexts. As Ninio and Snow (1996) note, "Since the potential for pragmatic violations is vast, coming to understand how it is that most adults end up abiding by most pragmatic rules most of the time is a considerable challenge." Documenting the emergence of these rules in children's pragmatic systems presents an even more complex challenge for developmental researchers.

Developmental pragmatics encompasses the description and explanation of age-related behavioral modifications in communicative competence. This field has garnered substantial research attention over recent decades, with studies examining specific abilities such as requesting (Ervin-Tripp, 1977; Garvey, 1975; Bates, 1976), conflict resolution (Brenneis & Lein, 1977; Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981), and metapragmatic awareness (Bernicot, 1991; Becker, 1988).

The theoretical foundation of developmental pragmatics rests upon the understanding that pragmatic knowledge differs fundamentally from semantic or syntactic knowledge. As Bates (1976) contends, pragmatics "occupies the interface between linguistic, cognitive and social development," requiring children to develop sophisticated understanding of social categories, interpersonal relationships, and contextual appropriateness.

Contemporary research has identified three critical knowledge types underlying

communicative competence (Foster, 1990): person knowledge (understanding others as intentional agents), social category knowledge (mastery of variables like age, status, and familiarity), and event knowledge (comprehension of structured exchanges and genre-specific rules).

2.2.Theoretical Perspectives on Social Development

Two contrasting theoretical perspectives have influenced our understanding of children's social and communicative development. Piaget's (1948, 1976) biological individualist approach emphasized children's egocentrism, proposing that preschoolers are "encased in their own thoughts, insensitive to their listeners and to the context of interaction." According to this perspective, children under seven think and speak egocentrically even in social situations, with 44-47% of their speech being egocentric in nature.

Conversely, Vygotsky's (1986) socio-cultural collectivist perspective maintains that children's earliest speech is inherently social. Vygotsky argued that development follows a progression "first social, then egocentric, then inner speech," directly challenging Piaget's sequence. This perspective emphasizes that language serves as the principal motor of development by mediating children's participation in intellectual and social life.

Contemporary research has largely supported the anti-Piagetian position, demonstrating children's remarkable social sensitivity from early ages. Studies by McTear (1985), Camaioni (1985), and Keenan (1977, 1983) have shown that behaviors previously labeled as egocentric actually serve important communicative functions.

2.3.Request Reformulation Strategies

Research has identified two primary reformulation directions: mitigation (softening) and aggravation (hardening). Eisenberg and Garvey (1981) demonstrated that children use reformulation to manipulate their social position, with aggravation raising one's status and mitigation lowering it to encourage compliance.

Mitigation strategies include shifting from direct to indirect forms, adding redressive devices (politeness markers, address terms), providing justifications or offering hearer benefits, and adopting softer tone and manner. Aggravation strategies include shifting from indirect to direct forms, dropping redressive devices, using threats, pressure, or insults, and adopting louder, more forceful delivery.

Cross-cultural research reveals significant variation in reformulation patterns. While American children often become more direct in subsequent attempts (Read & Cherry, 1978), Hawaiian children risk punishment for repeated requests with increasing emphasis (Boggs, 1977; Hazhar, et al., 2021; Al-Ghamdi, et al., 2019), leading to withdrawal strategies instead. Hungarian children intensify requests when repeating them (Hollo & Beeman, 1981).

2.4. Factors Influencing Reformulation

Several variables affect reformulation strategies. Request type influences patterns, with information requests typically receiving different treatment than object or action requests, reflecting varying cost-benefit calculations (McTear, 1985). Addressee characteristics also matter, as children adjust reformulations based on interlocutor age, status, and expected compliance (Bernicot & Mahrokhian, 1989).

Cultural context shapes reformulation patterns, reflecting broader cultural values regarding directness, hierarchy, and social harmony. Situational factors such as urgency, audience presence, and ongoing activities all influence strategy selection. Additionally, the child's emotional state affects reformulation choices, with frustrated children more likely to employ aggravation strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a longitudinal naturalistic observation design to examine the development of request reformulation strategies in Moroccan preschoolers. The longitudinal approach was selected to capture developmental changes over time and document the emergence of new strategies as children mature. Naturalistic observation was chosen to ensure that communicative behaviors occurred in meaningful social contexts where children had genuine motivations for their requests.

The research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative elements, allowing for statistical analysis of reformulation patterns while preserving rich contextual information about individual cases. This mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive view of children's reformulation strategies and their development over time.

3.2. Participants

Five female Moroccan children participated in this longitudinal study: Ihsane (2;2 at onset, observed 26-82 months), Ikrame (2;0 at onset, observed 24-82 months), Meriam (2;0 at onset, observed 24-82 months), Sara (4;0 at onset, observed 48-82 months), and Yousra (4;0 at onset, observed 48-82 months).

All participants were native speakers of Moroccan Arabic from educated, middle-class families residing in urban areas. The children had normal developmental histories according to parental reports and had attended kindergarten programs. The study focused on ages 4-6 years, when children demonstrate sophisticated pragmatic abilities while still developing adult-like competence.

The decision to focus on female participants was made to control for potential gender effects in pragmatic development. The inclusion of sibling pairs (Yousra and Ihsane; Sara and Meriam) provided opportunities to examine reformulation strategies in sibling interactions.

3.3.Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through naturalistic observation in home settings every two months over 34 months. Each session involved 60 minutes of audio recording during spontaneous play interactions. The researcher employed participatory observation, taking detailed contextual notes while maintaining minimal interference with natural interactions.

All recorded sessions were transcribed with contextual information included. A total of 2,668 request utterances were identified across all participants and sessions. These were classified according to achievement of intended effects, request type, reformulation strategy, addressee characteristics, and sequential position.

Reformulated requests were analyzed using decision rules adapted from Ervin-Tripp's (1977) indirectness scale, categorizing strategies as repetition, mitigation, or aggravation. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding by two trained researchers, with agreement rates exceeding 85% for all major coding categories.

4. RESULTS

4.1.Overall Reformulation Patterns

Of the 2,668 total requests identified in the corpus, 496 (18.6%) required reformulation due to failure to achieve their intended perlocutionary effect. This

reformulation rate remained relatively stable across age groups, suggesting that the tendency to persist with unsuccessful requests is established early in development.

The distribution of reformulation strategies revealed interesting patterns:

- **Repeated requests:** 90 cases (18.1%)
- **Rephrased requests:** 406 cases (81.8%)
 - Mitigated: 189 cases (46.5%)
 - Aggravated: 217 cases (53.4%)

The predominance of rephrasing over repetition indicates that children understand that identical reformulations are unlikely to succeed where initial attempts failed. This suggests sophisticated metacommunicative awareness and strategic thinking about communication effectiveness.

4.2.Repeated Requests

Repeated requests maintained the original form with minimal modifications, representing the simplest reformulation strategy. The distribution within this category included same form (22.2%), addition of attention-getting devices (40%), and addition of address terms (37.7%).

Example of repetition with attention-getting device:

Ihsane (4:6): [wahdri mzjan] (Do it well)

Yousra: [o was sawt mzjan] (O, the voice is nice)

Ihsane: [hdri mzjan yusra] (You speak well

Yousra)

The addition of attention-getting devices and address terms suggests that even simple repetition involves some strategic modification. Children appear to recognize that drawing the addressee's attention to the repeated request may increase its effectiveness by reinforcing the illocutionary force in some cases and showing persistence from the part of the speaker.

4.3.Mitigated Reformulations

Mitigated reformulations employed various softening strategies to make requests less threatening or more appealing to addressees, to protect the listener's face, to adapt to the listener's reaction, to reduce the strength of an imposition or a command, to show empathy and relational sensitivity, and to repair or clarify meaning. The distribution of mitigation strategies included shift to indirect forms (15.3%), offering hearer's benefit (19%), use of redressive devices (38.6%), and justifications (26.9%).

Example of mitigation through indirectness shift:

Sara (6:6): [tlqili jddijja] (Let go my hand) Yousra: [jddik ha jddik] (Hand? this is your hand)

Sara: [ah bit jddi daba] (Yes, I want my hand now)

The prevalence of redressive devices in mitigation strategies reflects children's understanding that politeness markers can soften the impact of requests and increase compliance likelihood. Justification strategies demonstrate sophisticated understanding that providing reasons for requests can increase their acceptability.

4.4.Aggravated Reformulations

Aggravated reformulations involved hardening strategies to increase the force or urgency of requests, to express frustration or impatience, assert power or authority, make the message unmistakably clear, emphasize emotional involvement, and defend or reinforce one's position. The distribution included shift to imperative (26.2%), shift from hints to direct forms (17%), dropping redressive devices (19.3%), pressure to comply (13.8%), threats (18.8%), and insults (4.6%).

Example of aggravation through threat:

Ihsane (4:6): [arali biba arali Ikura] (Give my dear, give me the ball)

Soukaina: (Refuses)

Ihsane: [wa arali biba ba manaik ddah] (Give me my dear so that I won't beat you)

The use of threats and pressure tactics indicates that children understand these

strategies can be effective in certain contexts, particularly with peer addressees. However, the relatively low frequency of insults suggests awareness of social boundaries and appropriate behavior.

4.5.Request Type and Addressee Effects

Reformulation patterns varied significantly by request type, supporting theories about differential costs and benefits. Information requests (23.5% of reformulations) were more likely to be repeated, while object requests (37.5%) and action requests (38.9%) showed higher rates of mitigation and aggravation.

Children demonstrated sophisticated sensitivity to addressee characteristics. Child-child interactions showed higher aggravation rates, more threats with peers, and flexible strategies reflecting unstable peer relationships. Child-adult interactions showed more mitigation with fathers and acquaintances, more aggravation with mothers (presumed compliance), no insults toward adults, and increased politeness markers.

4.6.Developmental Patterns

Clear developmental progression emerged across age groups. Four-year-olds showed high aggravation rates (48.1%) and limited strategic flexibility. Five-year-olds demonstrated balanced mitigation (38.7%) and aggravation (39.8%) with increased strategic variety. Six-year-olds preferred mitigation (50%) with sophisticated use of indirectness and reduced reliance on threats.

This developmental trajectory reflects growing pragmatic competence and cultural socialization. Older children demonstrate increased understanding of politeness norms while maintaining the ability to use aggravation strategies when appropriate.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1.Pragmatic Sophistication

The findings reveal remarkable pragmatic sophistication in Moroccan preschoolers' reformulation strategies. Children demonstrated clear awareness that failed requests require modification and deployed diverse strategies to achieve their communicative goals. The predominance of rephrasing over repetition (81.8% vs. 18.1%) indicates understanding that identical reformulations are unlikely to succeed where initial attempts failed.

This sophistication challenges traditional views of preschoolers as communicatively

limited or egocentric. Even the youngest participants demonstrated metacommunicative awareness and strategic thinking about communication effectiveness. The variety of reformulation strategies employed suggests that children possess considerable flexibility in their pragmatic repertoires.

The early emergence of sophisticated reformulation abilities supports contemporary theories emphasizing children's social-cognitive competence from early ages. Children's ability to assess communicative failure and select appropriate modifications demonstrates understanding of the complex relationship between linguistic form and social function.

5.2.Social Sensitivity and Cultural Patterns

Children's differential treatment of various addressees reflects sophisticated social awareness and internalization of cultural norms regarding social hierarchy and appropriate behavior. The distinction between child-child and child-adult interactions, with appropriate adjustments for age, status, and expected compliance, demonstrates early understanding of power dynamics and register variation.

The absence of insults in child-adult interactions contrasts sharply with their use in peer interactions, suggesting clear boundaries regarding appropriate behavior with different addressee types. This pattern indicates that children learn not only specific reformulation strategies but also the social contexts in which different strategies are acceptable.

The reformulation patterns reflect broader Moroccan cultural values emphasizing directness within intimate relationships while maintaining respect for authority figures. The high rate of aggravation with mothers versus mitigation with fathers illustrates culture-specific expectations about family dynamics and the special relationship between children and their mothers in Moroccan culture.

5.3.Developmental Trajectory

The developmental progression from predominantly aggressive reformulations at age 4 to more balanced and sophisticated strategies at age 6 reflects growing pragmatic competence and cultural socialization. This trajectory suggests that children initially prioritize effectiveness over politeness but gradually learn to balance these competing demands.

The increased use of indirectness, justifications, and redressive devices among older children demonstrates developing understanding of politeness norms and social

appropriateness. However, the persistence of aggravation strategies even among older children suggests that effectiveness remains an important consideration throughout the preschool period.

The developmental patterns observed align with broader theories of pragmatic development, including growing perspective-taking abilities, enhanced understanding of social hierarchies, and increased strategic thinking about communication. The progression reflects not only linguistic development but also social-cognitive growth and cultural learning.

5.4. Request Type Considerations

The differential treatment of information, object, and action requests supports cost-benefit theories of politeness and reformulation. Higher mitigation rates for object and action requests reflect understanding that these impose greater costs on addressees, requiring more careful social negotiation.

The patterns suggest that children develop sophisticated understanding of the social implications of different request types and adjust their reformulation strategies accordingly. This understanding appears to emerge early and remains stable across the age range studied.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical Implications

These findings contribute significantly to our understanding of pragmatic development and cross-cultural variation in children's communicative competence. The early emergence of sophisticated reformulation abilities challenges traditional views of preschoolers as communicatively limited and supports contemporary theories emphasizing children's social-cognitive competence.

The balance between mitigation and aggravation strategies observed in this study suggests that pragmatic development involves learning to deploy multiple strategies appropriately rather than simply progressing toward increased politeness. This finding has important implications for theories of politeness development and the relationship between effectiveness and appropriateness in children's communication.

The cultural specificity of certain reformulation patterns supports theories

emphasizing the role of cultural socialization in pragmatic development. Children learn not only linguistic forms but also the social meanings and appropriate contexts for different strategies, highlighting the importance of cultural context in understanding pragmatic competence.

6.2.Educational and Clinical Implications

Understanding children's natural reformulation strategies can inform educational approaches to pragmatic instruction and social skills development. The findings suggest that children possess sophisticated intuitive knowledge about communication that can be built upon rather than replaced through formal instruction.

Educational programs could focus on helping children expand their repertoire of reformulation strategies and develop greater sensitivity to contextual factors that influence strategy selection. This approach would build on children's existing competencies while promoting more sophisticated pragmatic skills.

The developmental patterns identified provide important benchmarks for assessing pragmatic competence in clinical populations. Difficulties with reformulation strategies may indicate broader pragmatic impairments requiring intervention. Assessment of pragmatic competence should include evaluation of reformulation abilities, as these reveal aspects of communicative competence that may not be apparent in initial request formulations.

Intervention programs could focus on teaching children to recognize when reformulation is needed and to select appropriate strategies based on contextual factors. The natural developmental progression observed in this study could guide the sequencing of intervention goals.

6.3.Cross-Cultural Considerations

Comparison with studies from other cultures reveals both universal patterns and culture-specific variations in children's reformulation strategies. Universal patterns include sensitivity to addressee characteristics, request type effects, and developmental progression toward increased strategic flexibility.

Culture-specific variations include acceptable levels of directness, use of threats and pressure tactics, and the balance between effectiveness and politeness considerations. These variations reflect broader cultural values regarding social hierarchy, interpersonal relationships, and appropriate communication styles.

The findings suggest that while basic reformulation abilities may be universal, the

specific strategies employed and their developmental trajectories are shaped by cultural values and practices. This has important implications for cross-cultural research on pragmatic development and for understanding the role of culture in language socialization.

7. CONCLUSION

This longitudinal study demonstrates that Moroccan preschoolers possess sophisticated abilities to reformulate failed requests using diverse mitigation and aggravation strategies. Children show remarkable sensitivity to social variables, adjusting their reformulation approaches based on addressee characteristics, request types, and cultural expectations.

The developmental progression from predominantly aggressive strategies at age 4 to more balanced and sophisticated approaches at age 6 reflects growing pragmatic competence and cultural socialization. The findings contribute to our understanding of universal and culture-specific aspects of pragmatic development while highlighting the importance of naturalistic observation in capturing children's communicative abilities.

The predominance of rephrasing over repetition indicates that children understand the need to modify unsuccessful requests rather than simply repeating them. The balance between mitigation and aggravation strategies suggests that children learn to deploy both approaches appropriately based on contextual factors rather than simply progressing toward increased politeness.

The sensitivity to addressee characteristics demonstrates sophisticated social awareness and understanding of appropriate behavior with different relationship types. The cultural patterns observed reflect broader Moroccan values regarding directness, hierarchy, and social relationships.

These findings have important implications for theories of pragmatic development, cross-cultural research on communicative competence, and practical applications in education and clinical assessment. The sophisticated abilities demonstrated by these young children highlight the importance of recognizing and building upon children's existing pragmatic competencies.

Future research should continue to explore reformulation strategies across different cultural contexts and examine the relationship between reformulation abilities and broader social-cognitive development. Additionally, investigation of individual differences in

reformulation strategies could provide insights into factors promoting pragmatic competence.

The study's limitations include focus on a single cultural group and reliance on audio recordings without visual information. Future studies incorporating video data and cross-cultural comparisons would enhance our understanding of children's reformulation strategies and their development across diverse contexts.

Understanding how children learn to navigate communicative challenges and adapt their strategies in response to feedback is crucial for supporting their social and academic development. The sophisticated strategic abilities demonstrated by the children in this study suggest considerable potential for pragmatic learning and adaptation, highlighting the importance of providing rich communicative environments that support the development of these crucial skills.

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