

# Discourse Competence in Children's Acquisition of Politeness among Selected Kurdish Children

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## Abstract

The present research is concerned with children's discourse pragmatic competence. It presents the results of an empirical study of Kurdish children's language in play, focusing on their use of politeness phenomena. The children belong to the same family background and they attend the same school. It is hypothesized that girls appear to be more polite than boys are when communicating during playing with each other. Girls as well as boys often used an assertive, unmitigated style in their play. This result is discussed in relation to different patterns of socialization in Ebril the capital city of Kurdistan Region in the north of Iraq. The emphasis is on the importance of socio-cultural context and peer group influence on children's language, as well as children's sensitivity of contextual norms, i.e., their pragmatic competence.

## Introduction: Background and Previous works

According to Holmes (1995:1), it is extremely difficult to answer the question: whether women are more polite than men. It depends on how we define politeness and whether or not we accept that the same norms or principals of polite behavior apply to men and women, such as the social class, ethnicity, and nationality of both men and women who are compared, also on the context in which they are talking. We should be careful not to assume that gender in sociolinguistics should always be treated as a priory social category. In spite of numerous examples in the literature of differences in men's and women's language, there is also evidence of no gender differences in sociolinguistic competencies and much overlap in usage (see, for example, Bergvall et al., 1996).

Nevertheless, Holmes (1995) argues that when all the necessary reservations are taken into account, then the answer to the question (whether women are more polite than men?) is in the affirmative. She argues that if we look at the evidence available in the sociolinguistic literature, the general picture is that, in; women's use of language appears to be more explicitly polite than men's use of language. For example, women are more likely to pay compliments (Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1990); they apologize more and do this more openly and explicitly (Holmes, 1989, 1990). They are less likely to interrupt their interlocutor, and consequently, show more respect for his/her right to take the floor, and keep it (West and Zimmerman, 1983). They often appear supportive in conversation, for example by providing positive minimal responses and thus keep the conversation going (Fishman, 1983). During conversations in general, they appear to be more concerned with their interlocutor's face and try to avoid face-threatening acts (cf. Goffman, 2005).

Various expressions of politeness are more likely to be found in women's preferred speech styles than in men's, if this concept is true then an interesting question can be asked: when this gender difference emerges in the language of young children, and how? When do little boys and girls start to behave like men and women, and how are gender differences incorporated into the language of boys and girls? Gleason (1987) argues that there is a strong link between children's language and the language of their same-sex parent. In her research, she found that boys and girls, by the age of four, were showing a preference for the same linguistic features as their same-sex parent; for example, a preference for direct imperatives in the language of fathers and sons, and a preference for indirect imperatives in the language of mothers and daughters.

Gleason and Perlman (1985) argue that violations of the sociolinguistic conventions that have to do with politeness are likely to be judged most severely and therefore, unlike the acquisition of, for example, syntax and semantics, parents do not leave it to their children to construct their own rules. Rather, they take an active part in explicitly instructing their children in the use of appropriate politeness devices and therefore, according to the authors, the pressure on children to speak politely usually starts early in their development. The pressure on children to be polite is so strong that being truthful—something which most parents value highly in their children—is considered of secondary importance. If, for example, the child is given a present s/he doesn't like, s/he is expected to hide his/her true feelings (and maybe even lie about them) and produce the appropriate politeness formula.

Greif and Gleason (1980) show in one of their studies that children, aged 2–5, were requested to come and play in a laboratory setting, once with their father and once with their mother. After each play session, an assistant appeared with a gift for the child. The assistant greeted the child, presented the gift and left, saying goodbye to the child, which would give the researchers a chance to study the child's ability to use polite social routines such as Hi, Thanks, and Goodbye. The results of this study clearly suggest that children at this age are unlikely to produce politeness markers of their own accord. Only 7% said Thank you spontaneously, and only 1/4 of the children said Hi and Goodbye of their own accord. The study also shows that prompting by parents is very common. If the child failed to produce the right politeness routine, parents would typically say something like Say Thank you, or What do you say? Parents did not insist that girls be more polite than boys, but in the parents' own speech there was an interesting difference in the use of politeness markers. Mothers were more likely to thank the assistant for the child's gift and to say goodbye: of the 15 parents who thanked the assistant, 11 were mothers, and of the 18 parents who said goodbye, 13 were mothers. Therefore, while boys and girls were expected to behave equally politely by their parents, parents themselves apparently provided different models of polite behavior. Consequently, the study confirms speculations that women's preferred speech styles are more polite than men's, and it also suggests that imitating the same-sex parent may have a stronger influence on the development of children's speech than differential treatment of boys and girls.

Sheldon (1990), who analyzed disputes in same-sex triads of boys and girls and found that boys use a more adversarial style, which leads to extended conflicts and disruption of play, also provides evidence; the girls, on the other hand, are much more likely to compromise, resolve their conflicts, and strive to maintain harmony within the group. However, there are also studies which show that girls as well as boys can use language in a highly assertive way. In her study of conflict talk in American middle-class pre-school children's pretend play, Sheldon (1992, 1996) found that the girls frequently use what she calls a "double-voice discourse". This assertive negotiation style allows them to "confront without being confrontational; to

clarify without backing down; and to use mitigations, indirectness, and even subterfuge to soften the blow while promoting their own wishes.” (Sheldon, 1996: 61). Goodwin (1980, 1990), who took the research on children’s play outside of the white, middle-class context, found that although the Afro-American working-class girls in her study used more mitigation overall than the boys, the girls were also capable of using a more assertive, unmitigated style when they were arguing or playing in mixed-sex groups. Likewise, Goodwin’s (1998) research among Spanish–English working-class girls playing hopscotch questions the traditional notions of girls’ mitigated, co-operative language styles, and Cook-Gumperz and Szymanski (2001) conclude that in mixed-sex group work, Latino girls as well as boys use powerful assertive strategies.

Other researchers on children’s language and gender have also analyzed non-American contexts and emphasized the need to question girls’ co-operative, mitigated language use as a cultural universal. Kyratzis and Guo (1996, 2001), for example, compared conflict strategies among Mandarin speaking pre-school children in China and English speaking pre-schoolers in the USA. They found that while the American girls preferred indirect, polite conflict strategies, the Chinese girls were very direct and highly assertive. Farris (1991, 2000), in her research on Chinese pre-school children in Taiwan, found a complex pattern of conflict styles. The boys’ conflict styles were direct: they frequently used physical action, teasing, insistence and directives. The girls, on the other hand, used direct as well as indirect conflict strategies: they simultaneously enacted the role of “the virtuous wife”, where silence and modesty is required, and “the good mother”, which requires verbal and behavioral assertiveness.

The evidence presented above allows us to draw at least two preliminary conclusions. First, that research on gender marking and indexing in children’s language will have to take into account the variability that may arise because of cultural and contextual factors (see Ervin-Tripp, 2001). Secondly, that in the majority of studies, irrespective of cultural context and socio-economic group, there is evidence that girls are more likely to prefer— but do not always use—a more indirect, polite speech style.

The present research offers an analysis of the language use in children’s play in the context of Kurdish children from one family. The socialization of young children in Arbil is in many ways quite unique as it is the case in every other language. Even though the number of families with both parents working outside the home is on the increase in most Western countries, traditionally, the overall pattern has been that one parent—usually the mother— has looked after the children until they begin school. This is not the case in the families of the children selected where the vast majority of children are placed outside of the home at a very early age. Different patterns of socialization are likely to have an effect on children’s linguistic behavior, and the aim here to analyze the selected children’s language in play situations, focusing on possible gender differences, or similarities, in their use of various linguistic features of politeness. The paper will focus on the importance that increased peer group influence may have on children’s language, particularly in relation to the notion of pragmatic competence (cf. Corsaro, 1997).

## Children and the use of Language

Sachs (1987) argues that the first possible source is that children learn gender appropriate behavior by observing how adults talk to each other, and to their children. This explanation would be supported by research done by Gleason and her colleagues (for example Gleason, 1987; Gleason and Perlman), argue that children's linguistic behavior may be accounted for if we look at the verbal behavior of their caregivers, most notably their parents. The second possible source is that boys and girls have been treated differently by their parents. This means, for example, that using an assertive, unmitigated (even aggressive) style is acceptable—maybe even encouraged—for boys, but not for girls. Most people would probably agree that the notion of 'a nice girl' and 'a real boy' is more than just a theoretical construct and has something to do with different constructions of identity in boys and girls (see Ladegaard, 1998, 2000) – something which is encouraged by parents treating boys and girls differently, and by having different expectations of them. To assess the feasibility of this 'Different treatment' hypothesis, Sacks refers to research by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1982), who explored which consequences various types of speech would have for boys and girls in a family. They looked at children's compliance gaining with their parents and found that generally, children of both sexes were more successful when they used a more direct, assertive style, as opposed to a more indirect, polite style. Based on these results, the authors argue that children are not being polite in order to get their way but because politeness is an important part of the linguistic systems they are being exposed to.

The third possible explanation source is that differences in boys' and girls' verbal behavior may simply reflect other, more fundamental differences between the sexes. For example, numerous studies report that boys are more physically active than girls and are more likely to engage in 'rough and tumble play' (see, for example, DiPietro, 1981). Playing rough in bigger groups outside, we could argue, is more likely to encourage a verbally aggressive style in the boys, as opposed to playing in smaller groups inside, which may be more likely to lead to a linguistically more tentative style in the girls.

## The Selected Children

The selected children in this study are (6) in number: (4) girls and (2) boys. The children come from the same social background families. Their age are between (4) and (8). The children are well acquainted close to each other. The children are observed in many different situations while they were playing at the house of one of the children's parents in order to be at the same environment.

The selected children's parents are always eager to direct their children to use polite words when communicating. The mothers of these children, being sisters or cousins, use the same strategy in guiding their children how to use language. The children attended the same pre-school and are attending the same school. The language used in the pre-school and the school is English. That is why they mix English and Kurdish in their conversations.

The children are observed and notes were taken while playing whenever they gathered whether all of them, some of them, or even two of them. They were observed each time they were playing with conventional toys. The conventional toys consisted of typical boys' toys (such as miniature cars, motorbikes, and airplanes), typical girls' toys (such as miniature dolls and doll's house equipment like tables, chairs, beds, china), as well as more gender neutral toys (such as various animals, building blocks and a magnifying glass). The children were asked to sit down at a table and were given the toys in a bag. An experimenter opened the bag and told the

children that they could play with the toys in whichever way they wanted; no particular play theme was explicitly suggested or encouraged. Each observation lasted about 20 min; after that most of the children— particularly the younger ones—became impatient and bored with the toys. The children were engaged in various kinds of play during recordings, most commonly pretend plays. The miniature dolls (both male and female, grown-ups and children) and the doll's house equipment were frequently used in a sort of family-pretend-play, and a lot of the time was spent negotiating, and indeed arguing, about roles, and who was allowed to play with which toys. The animals, and to some extent the cars and airplanes, were often used as well in the children's play. Interestingly, there was no clear correspondence between the children's sex and their use of 'gender appropriate' and 'gender-inappropriate' toys, i.e., the boys were just as likely as the girls to play with the small dolls and the doll's house equipment, irrespective of age, and the girls would frequently include the cars, motorbikes and airplanes in their play. In 14 out of the 16 play scenes that were analyzed, girls and boys were engaged, at some point, in play involving 'gender-inappropriate' toys. The typical pattern was that the girls would play with the dolls and the doll's house equipment first, and then play with the motor vehicles and airplanes second; the boys would play in the exact reverse order.

## The Procedure

The analysis involved 16 play scenes, including (6) children. In 13 of the play scenes, the children were playing with the conventional toys, in the other 3 they were playing with Lego/Duplo. These scenes were selected because of the following reasons:

1. The children had the most amount of pretended play for the researcher to be able to pick the linguistic features, which were suitable for an analysis of linguistic politeness.
2. While the children were playing with Lego/Duplo, they were talking with each other about their activities. So, there was more parallel play, but usually not negotiating and arguing to the same extent as in the conventional toy scenes. Consequently, more play scenes with the conventional toys were selected.

Approximately 15 minutes of each play scene were transcribed, including detailed notes about the children's movements, posture and other non-verbal behavior (such as facial expression, pointing and gazing, and acting with the toys), in order to allow an almost complete reconstruction of the actual events. This has been important in many cases in the coding process where the children's movements, or other aspects of their non-verbal behavior, might help us interpret the exact meaning of a particular utterance. Stress, intonation and loudness were also considered in order to establish the communicative intentions as accurately as possible.

In none of the play scenes were the children interacting verbally all the time: part of the time they would either play in silence, or, more frequently, produce the sounds of cars or animals, or they would be singing or humming to themselves while playing. The data was coded using the framework proposed by Sachs (1987) and DeHart (1996).

## Results

1. The present study focuses on the use of language in Kurdish children belonging to families of the same social class. It was found out that assertive language was a predominant characteristic of the language of these 3–7 year olds, irrespective of their gender.
2. The present study also re-emphasizes the importance of considering the sociocultural context in research on children's language.
3. It also argues that children have a high degree of pragmatic competence because they know the contextual norms of the public context where peer group influence is the predominant force of children's play and interaction and where assertive behavior, not politeness, is being rewarded.
4. The study also speculates that the selected children are aware of a different set of norms applying to the home context where, presumably, parents will expect their children to act politely, and consequently reward them when they do (cf. Gleason and Perlman, 1985).
5. However, this dichotomy between private and public context has not been documented in the present study and will have to be the object of further research.

## Summary and Discussion

1. Contrary to our expectations, we cannot conclude that the use of politeness phenomena increases with age. Only a few number of the utterances showed significant difference according to age. Furthermore, the tendency (reported in some of the previous research) for girls to soften their obliges, to seek compromise and strive to maintain harmony in the group, and to be more concerned with the other child/children in the play, has also not been confirmed in the Kurdish data.
2. The analyses have failed to reproduce the picture of boys being more assertive and preferring an adversarial style which would more often lead to a disruption of the play. The most assertive and the least polite utterances showed that the girls in this sample have more of these features in their language than the boys—although the differences are not statistically significant. In fact, if we look at just a few examples of the children's play, we see numerous examples of girls using a controlling and adversarial style, something which has been referred to in the literature as typical of 'boys' language' (Holmes, 1992). The girls use a very direct and assertive style, but also those they can be in some situations both assertive and controlling (cf. Sheldon, 1992, 1996). The data reported here tell us something about children's pragmatic competence, and about the importance of seriously considering the context of the play situation (cf. Sheldon, 1996; Ervin-Tripp, 2001).
3. If we relate the evidence from the presented study to the way the selected children use language, we may argue that these children do not display any gender differences in their use of politeness phenomena because:
  - a. the adults who are acting as role models for these children do not display any gender differences in their language;

- b. these children are not treated differently by adult caretakers when they act in an assertive manner; or
- c. the boys in the presented study are not more physically active, or engaged in rough and tumble play, than the girls.
4. If we consider (c), there is evidence in the literature that boys in the selected Kurdish families are indeed physically active and more likely than the girls to engage in rough and tumble play, such as playing war-games, which are perceived as violent, and an undesirable activity for children, by their (predominantly) female caretakers (see Mouritsen, 1999). Mouritsen argues that many boys may have a problem because female norms of appropriate behavior apply, which means that boys are sometimes not allowed to express this assertive, or even aggressive, side of their identity, but are being encouraged to engage in more quiet, typically 'female', activities such as drawing, painting, and sewing.
5. Considering (b)—whether a somewhat aggressive behavior is perhaps more acceptable in girls—there might, at least indirectly, be some support for that hypothesis in the present data. We do not know what happens in these children's homes, but in their kindergartens and pre-school classes, they are in a social context, which is characterized by a high degree of peer contact. Consequently highly influenced by peer group norms— and a relatively low degree of adult contact, at least compared to children who spend most of their time at home with one of their parents. Therefore, in the context of the kindergarten and pre-school class, there is little doubt that assertive behavior, including assertive linguistic behavior, is probably more accepted in girls as well as boys. This point is to the importance of reconsidering socio-cultural context in our attempts to interpret children's linguistic behavior. We could argue that these observations which are made about the selected children lead to the conclusion that these children have a high degree of discourse pragmatic competence. They know that they are in a social context dominated by peer interaction where politeness does not pay off. With their parents, this might be a different story because in that context, the use of various politeness phenomena are likely to be rewarded, and the lack of these features, possibly rebuked.
6. In the public sphere where so much time is spent with peers and the interference from adult caretakers is minimal, children quickly learn that they do not need politeness in order to be successful in getting their way, but that they need to be assertive. Therefore, the researcher would argue against the conclusion drawn by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1982) who maintain that children do not learn to be polite to get their way but because politeness is part of the linguistic system they are exposed to. The data presented here suggest that children— irrespective of their gender— will apply the linguistic system, which, in the particular context and circumstances they find themselves in, is likely to give them most success in terms of being heard, getting their message across, and getting their way.

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### پوخته

#### چالاکى ئاخاوتن له وه رگرتنى ناسكى زمان له لايه ن چه ند مندالتيكى كورد هه ئبژيردراو

ئه م تووژينه وه كه ده رباره ي چالاکى پراگماتيكي له لايه ن چه ند مندالتيكى هه لبژيردراو له كاتى ياريكردن. تووژينه وه كه بابه خ به ديارده ي ناسكى زمان ده دات له كاتى ئاخاوتن له لايه ن هه موو منداله كان كه له هه مان بنه ماله كه لتورى دان.

گريمانه ي تووژينه وه كه وايه كه منداله كچه كان له منداله كوره كان ناسكتر قسه د كه ن له كه ئ وه شدا هه موو منداله كان (كچ و كور) به زه برو به تووره ي قسه ده كه ن له كه ئ يه كتردا له كاتى يارى كردندا.

ئه م ئه نجامه به په يوه ندى گفتوگوگوراوا بو نموونه جياوازه كانى كوومه لايه تى و كه لتورى له شارى هه وئير پايه ته ختى هه ريمي كوردستانى عيراق. به گرينگى پيدانى به م جياوازيانه بابه خپيدانياو به وردى سه بيركردنيان له ناو گرويدا و كارتيكردنيان له سه زمانى منداله هه لبژيردراوه كان له كه ئ چالاکى پراگماتيكيان.

### المستخلص

#### كفاءة الكلام في اكتساب لغة الكياسة لدى مجموعة مختارة من الاطفال الكورد

البحث يتناول موضوع الكفاءة الدلالية لدى المجموعة المختارة من الاطفال الكورد اثناء اللعب البحث يركز على استعمال هؤلاء الاطفال لظاهرة الكياسة في الكلام. اطفال البحث من نفس الخلفية العائلية ويتعلمون في المدرسة عينها. فرضية البحث هي ان الاطفال الاناث اكثر كياسة في الكلام من الاطفال الذكور عند تحدثهم مع بعض اثناء اللعب. كذلك البنات والاولاد سواء يستعملون اسلوب التاكيد والغير اللطيف عند الكلام اثناء اللعب. النتيجة تناقش مجموعة مختلفة من الانماط الاجتماعية في مجتمع اربيل عاصمة كورستان العراق. التركيز على اهمية البيئة الثقافية - الاجتماعية وتأثير اقران المجموعة في لغة الاطفال وكذلك حساسية الاطفال نحو نموذج سياق الكلام وهي الكفاءة الدلالية.

ومن الله التوفيق