

FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES. . . AND MOMS An Analysis of Mother-Child Interaction: Focus on the Mothers' Questions

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ABSTRACT

This study revealed the important role of adult input in the development of children's communicative competence. The results of the investigation showed that mothers asked more questions that were meant to gauge the children's linguistic and cognitive development. The mothers also used a variety of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies and techniques (i.e., repetition, extension, expansion, preformulation, reformulation, gestural support, use of deixis, and contingent queries) that help the children develop their pragmatic skills such as turn-taking, initiating, maintaining and closing conversations, noticing and responding to nonverbal features of the interaction, observing conversational principles and knowing how to respond to questions. In addition, this study also showed that the mothers' discourse styles strongly influenced the quality of responses from children. Variation in speech style often signaled to the children important aspects of the context which needed to be considered before formulating a response.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Children's Language, Discourse Analysis*

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES IN CHILD LANGUAGE STUDY

Over the last forty years, child language study basically followed two perspectives. One group moved toward a structurally based orientation — that is to say, the studies investigated the emergence of

grammatical features. The other concentrated on semantic-pragmatic frameworks. The studies, which followed these frameworks, highlighted children's communicative intentions, and the development of their communicative competence.

In the early 1970s, language studies veered away from a formal, context-independent system to a functional contextual perspective. As a result of this new direction in language studies, there was increased interest and demand for data derived from interactions in the natural environment (e.g., classroom, place of work, mother-child interactions). Child language study shifted its focus from the analysis of grammatical forms to the analysis of conversations between primary caregivers (usually the mother) and children.

ROLE OF ADULT INPUT IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Due to the shift in focus from structural to functional analysis of interactions between primary caregivers and children, researchers began to take note of the role that adults play in language.

Researchers also began studying child-directed speech (CDS), also known as *motherese*. Studies have shown systematic differences between the language adults use when talking to adults and that which they use when talking to children. Several common features are found in the language directed to children. CDS, or motherese employs a number of special discourse features intended to involve the child in interaction, and upgrade the child's own contribution to the interaction (Pine in Gallaway and Richards 15). These features include frequent self-repetition and repetition of what the child says. CDS has higher pitch, slower tempo, more exaggerated intonation, and clearer enunciation. It uses concrete nouns and words that are more closely tied to the immediate context of the child. It consists of short, well-formed utterances, few false starts, few complex sentences, and frequent questions. The CDS features have led researchers to argue that, in simplifying their speech, mothers and other caretakers are presenting the child with lessons in language learning that may result in swift progress in language development.

Motivated by the interest and the attention given to motherese, this study poses the question: what are the forms and functions of the questions mothers ask their children? This study will investigate the nature, types, and forms of questions that are addressed to children by their mothers. It will also determine the various communication strategies that mothers employ to assist their children in formulating canonical and appropriate responses. Furthermore, this paper will analyze how the mothers' speech styles influence the linguistic and conversational behaviors of their children.

THE CAREGIVERS'/MOTHERS' QUESTIONS

One of the most noticeable feature of adult-child discourse is a high frequency of questions. Holzman (1972) reported that 15 percent to 33 percent of mothers' utterances addressed to their children are questions. The result of Holzman's study is consistent with the findings of Nelson (1973) and Newport (1976) (cited in Bloom and Lahey 280).

There are a number of reasons why there is a high frequency of questions in mothers' utterances. Questions are more salient to children because they require answers. Ervin-Tripp (in Hayes 81) has suggested that children as young as 1;9 can already recognize questions, and respond to them differently than to other sentence types. They respond to questions by providing information albeit, sometimes, they provide the wrong type of information, especially if the question form is not yet part of their repertoire.

The frequent use of questions may also be associated with a particular kind of conversation-eliciting speech style which is conducive to rapid language learning. This form of discourse modeling is seen as an effective teaching tool (Hoff-Ginsberg 285). For instance, studies have shown that yes-no questions have positive effects on the auxiliary and copula verb growth of children (Newport 1977).

In terms of discourse, the frequency of questions in maternal speech can help train the child in conversational turn-taking — a very important pragmatic skill. Moreover, the use of questions,

which repeat or paraphrase the child's previous utterance, may be seen as an attempt to upgrade the child's contribution to the discourse. In instances when the mother feels a lapse or gap in the conversation, questions provide a means to maintain an optimum level of stimulation to enable children to maintain contact.

THE NATURE OF THE MOTHERS' QUESTIONS

Before discussing the kinds of questions found in the data, some clarifications about the nature of questions must be made.

Baumert (85-86) defines questions as verbal utterances which are directed toward verbal and nonverbal reactions. This definition excludes rhetorical questions, or those answered by the speaker himself.

Questions may be **wh** or **yes-no** questions. A wh-question involves a question word that specifies the kind of information needed. It has a wh word as the focus of the question. The question word may either be at the beginning or at the end, depending upon the degree of emphasis expressed by the utterance.

Ex: **WHAT** did mommy cook?
 Mommy cooked **WHAT**?

On the other hand, a yes-no question solicits negation or affirmation of the stated proposition. A yes-no question may be asked in several ways, such as:

1. rising intonation at the end of the utterance
(ex: Mommy is here?)
2. inversion of subject and verb
(ex: Mommy is here — Is mommy here?)
3. use of do-support
(ex: Do you want a balloon?)
4. tag question
(ex: You are working on your assignment,
aren't you?)

Questions may also be analyzed as illocutionary acts. Tsui (in Coulthard 99-109) observes that, aside from eliciting information, a question may also be interpreted as a request, directive, clarification, confirmation, and agreement. De Villiers and De Villiers (64) have also noted that it is important not to neglect the function of questions in conversation, apart from their structure and meaning. Aside from finding missing information, questions are also actually used for a variety of purposes in discourse, such as requesting, soliciting, etc.

Pine (in Gallaway and Richards 26-29) categorized questions as **real**, **report**, and **verbal reflective**. Real questions are information-seeking questions to which the mother (questioner) does not know the answer. Report questions are prompt questions to which the mother is judged to know the answer. Report questions include test questions that are used by mothers to demonstrate their children's linguistic or other knowledge (Berko-Gleason 487). Report questions are also those which request a particular action — that is to say, to make the child respond to a comment or simply to expand the structure or to give added meaning. Verbal reflective questions repeat or paraphrase the child's previous utterance/s. This type of question is seen as the mother's attempt to clarify or modify the child's utterance/s.

METHODOLOGY

Three children (two girls [LRA and LRN] and a boy [JJ]) were chosen on the basis of their closeness to the researcher. The researcher and a colleague are the mothers of the children. The subjects had to be known to the subjects, so she could monitor and record data with minimal constraints. The children's conversations with their respective mothers were recorded on tape, while notes were taken to provide additional data on the context of the utterances. The recordings were done at home — the place considered by the subjects as the most comfortable and familiar setting. Complementary methods, such as observations and interviews, were also conducted to help put the data in perspective. The conversations were recorded between 1992 and 1995, and ran

for approximately for 1,080 recording minutes. Recording took place three to four times every month for three years. Each recording would last twenty to thirty minutes. At the start of the recordings, the children were about two years old. The recordings ended when the children (then aged four and five) became busy in their preschool activities. The three-year duration was suggested by Cartwright's observation that researchers could get more variety of situations, utterances, and behavior from longer periods of recording or observations (Bennet-Castor 68). Since significant data are believed to be collected when children are alert, the subjects were observed and their utterances were recorded when they were with familiar interactants (their mothers) during storytelling time, child play, and cooperative in problem-solving situations. To elicit as many utterances as possible, the mothers used certain techniques and procedures accepted in child language research, such as sentence completion, questioning, and retelling. The data were recorded and transcribed by the researcher, who majored in language studies, and who had taken courses in developmental psychology.

The data collected were then labeled accordingly, and transcribed following the transcription pattern adapted from McTear (1985). The running transcription used included the written version of the children's and the interactant/s' utterances. Extralinguistic information were enclosed in parentheses. Verbal productions of the children, which could not be translated in written form were written, using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECTS

In this research, the major concerns are the social inputs affecting the acquisition of communicative competence. As children mature, they begin to interact with different people, and their sociolinguistic experiences increase and diversify. The child's parents are basically the primary models and source of information of the child. They are instrumental in the development of the child's communicative behavior. From birth, mother and child engage in play sequences uniquely their own. In time, these play sequences develop into patterns of interaction. The quality of the child's interactive skills may be traced to the prolonged and intensive

contact with his parents; hence, it is also crucial to describe the family background of the subjects.

Subject 1 (JJ), an only child, comes from a middle-class family. His mother, a professor in language studies, speaks English and Filipino; while his father, a businessman, speaks English, Filipino, and Ilocano. At the time of the study, JJ's mother was in her early thirties. Both Filipino and English are spoken at home although for the first four years of JJ's life, he was addressed only in English. The other persons in the house (a grandmother and a ward) speak predominantly Filipino.

Subjects 2 (LRA) and 3 (LRN) are first-born twins who come from a middle-class family. Their mother, a professor of English, speaks English and Filipino; and their father, an engineer, speaks Ilocano, English, and Filipino. Like JJ's mother, the mother of LRA and LRN was also in her early thirties when the recording was done. Both parents learned English as their first language although they grew up in an environment, where other languages were also spoken. English has been and continues to be the language at the home of LRA and LRN.

TRANSCRIPTION

The utterances were transcribed in English orthography, following McTear's model. Certain substitutions for standard orthography were done to make distinctions in style and register. However, phonetic transcriptions were made, where utterances were inaudible or unintelligible.

CODING

Question-answer sequences were isolated from the data. Questions directed to children were classified according to structure — that is to say, whether questions were yes/no or wh-questions. The questions were also classified according to whether they were real questions, report questions or verbal reflective questions. Real questions are information-seeking questions to which the speaker does not have an answer. Report questions are those which comment

upon the world and provide new information. Questions, which repeat or paraphrase the child's previous utterances, are verbal reflective questions (Pine in Gallaway and Richards 26-27).

An analysis of the mothers' questions to children from the data collected yielded the following results:

Table 1		
Utterances of mothers	Total	Percentage
Addressed to children	4,707	100%
Questions addressed to children	1,558	33%

The table above shows that more than 30 percent of the mothers' utterances have been questions addressed to the children.

The result of this study is consistent with earlier findings that 15-33 percent of the mothers' utterances addressed to their children are questions.

Table 2		
Type of Question	Total (1,558)	Percentage
Report	843	54%
Real	585	38%
Verbal reflective	86	6%
Undetermined	44	3%

Table 2 reveals that most of the questions that the mothers addressed to the children have been report questions meant to test the children's linguistic and cognitive skills.

REPORT QUESTIONS

The preponderance of report questions may be explained by the fact that motherese has been observed to be basically didactic.

Parents ask questions mainly to test children's comprehension, and to ensure that they stay focused and engaged in the conversation. The conscious effort on the part of the parents to monitor the feedback they receive during interaction will help them determine the children's maturation (linguistic and, to some extent, cognitive) and current level of their linguistic skills. Although minimal research has been done to determine the specific correlation between cognition and communicative competence, recent studies suggest that some aspects of communicative competence depend on cognition (Foster 179-180).

One of the first things that mothers teach their children is the referential function of language which involves labeling entities that children experience physically and sensorily. This learning process coincides with Piaget's (1956) sensorimotor period — a phase in development when children are observed to act on their environment. They reach out for things, grab, bite or hold any object in sight. Mothers usually take the opportunity to complement this stage of cognitive development by helping the children label the objects. As children go through this process, mothers provide constant testing through report questions, as shown by the following examples:

Example 1

Mother what did you see at the back of the house?

(M): ... you saw pigs

JJ: pigs

M: pigs

JJ: there *Ate* Vicky

M: what did *Ate* Vicky do huh?

JJ: huh?

M: use your microphone

JJ: pig, pig

M: yeah pig

oh what else?

JJ: pig pig

M: what did the pig say?

JJ: (grunts)

M: what did the dog say?

JJ: / away /

M: and the cow?
JJ: / mu /
M: / mu /
and the goat?
JJ: / me /
M: / me /
and the cat?
JJ: / miao /
M: and the
JJ: dog
M: dog
JJ: / awau /

Example 2

LRA: nam nam nam
not nam nam nam
/ miao /
H: what does the doggy say?
Bow wow wow bow wow wow
LRN: (giggles)
H: Laraine finds it funny
LRN: du du du na no
H: what does the cow say?
moo moo
LRN: he he he mi ya
H: cow that's a cow
LRN: bi bi
H: cock a doodle doo cock a doodle doo
LRN: badu badu

In example 1, the child just came back from the province, where he saw different kinds of animals. The mother took the opportunity to check if the child remembered the names of the animals he saw in his grandfather's house. Apparently, he learned his lesson well, for he was able to contrast the sounds made by the animals. In example 2, the animals were also differentiated by their sounds; only this time, the children were shown a picture book of animals. In both examples, the mothers are able to test their children's knowledge and awareness of the things found in the

environment through the report questions. At the same time, the interactions proved to be instrumental in the children's learning to formulate semantic properties which distinguish one object/entity from another.

Clark (1983) hypothesized that children learn the "semantics" of their language by means of two principles — the principles of conventionality and contrast. As children experience language in various context, they also learn meaning and conventional labels from the people around them. These conventional labels are further refined by their own observations of how other people use particular words. For instance, most children initially call a four-legged animal a "dog." However, by observation or explicit training (usually manifested by mother-child interactions similar to the examples given) from their parents or other members of the family, they will discover the distinct features of the dog. In the examples given, the animals are contrasted by the sounds they make. Other contrasting features include color, texture, smell, etc.

In example 3, a more specific kind of contrast is highlighted by the report questions.

Example 3

M: and what are the names of the dogs of JJ
JJ: / awau /
M: / yes / awau /
the names are Jessica
JJ: / ika /
M: who else?
Who else?
JJ: doggie
Lola
Turko
M: Turko
JJ: Guppy
M: who else?
JJ: Turko
M: who else?
JJ: Pia Pia

- M: Pia
Who else?
JJ: / ika /
M: Jessica
who else?
JJ: Ginger
M: Ginger OK

Confident that the child was already aware of the distinction between dog, cat, cow, goat and other farm animals, the mother tested the child's concept of ownership by requesting the names of the child's dog. The child mentioned /ika/ "Jessica," but clearly said "lola" before stating the names of the other dogs. The term "lola" signaled the child's recognition that there were other dogs, but these were his grandmother's. He did not qualify "Ginger" because this dog, like Jessica, happened to be his.

Although the above examples of conversations, illustrating report questions, are seen as basically pedagogical/didactic, they are far from being static. The mothers constantly adapt their expectations to their assessment of their children's ability to maintain the conversation. In instances where they sense difficulty in comprehension and production on the part of the child, the mothers readily repeat or modify their utterances, as shown in the following examples.

Example 4

- M: dad is taking a bath
come here come here
I want to talk to you
pick up the pillow c'mon
coconut come here
we sing coconut and count
one two three c'mon
JJ: / kikiki / one two / ki /
M: **one two?**
JJ: / ki /
M: **three** four c'mon
JJ: c'mon c'mon c'mon
M: say one

JJ: two
M: **three**

Example 5

JJ: that's my mama
let's read
M: again?
Dad (D): what are the people doing?
JJ: **teasing coffee**
M: **aha drinking coffee**
JJ: **drinking coffee**

In the examples above, the child clearly had production problems - that is to say, he has difficulty producing the correct sounds (/ki/ for /ri/) and had mispronounced some words (teasing for drinking). The mother was quick at modifying the pattern of discourse, so that the child was able to pick up the corrections suggested by the mother.

REAL QUESTIONS

Aside from pedagogical purposes, the mothers' questions must be viewed as a genuine effort to communicate with children. The real questions allow a less adult-controlled conversation. For some children, this kind of interaction may be more challenging because it calls for greater production/performance on their part. A genuine call for comprehension on the part of the adult (e.g., what?, huh?, you have what?,) signals the child to adjust his speech in order to repair any impending breakdown in communication. Studies have shown that children are sensitive to the needs of their interlocutors, and will adjust their speech accordingly (Corsaro 1979). Adjusting their speech style may involve higher lexical production and longer structures.

Example 6

H: what about Laraine
who's with you in the chorus?
who are the other members?

LRN: Reggie Paul Ela Ela Nicole Gabby Kyla
no Kyla's not there ha
it was
I saw Felix yesterday
Felix was there in the program
LRA: he's there at the back?
LRN: u um you saw Emmanuel?
Manuel and Avia um Felice Felice Jake
Paul Rogie Ericson
LRA: Chester yes Chester
H: what did you learn in school today
what was your lesson?
LRA: the lesson the lesson the lesson
what mommy?
H: what?
LRA: lost your mittens you naughty kitten
I was the storyteller
I said the three little kittens they bow like that
then I said again that three little kittens they
lost their mittens and they began to cry
oh mother dear said the three little kittens
it was Jake and Felice and Paul
LRN: you said you're the kitten?
LRA: he was crying about the kitten yesterday
H: why?
LRA: but she was the three the
three little kittens now
LRN: because I went out eh
Chester went out

Example 7

M: why?
No it's not
why was she absent?
JJ: because she forgot to go to school
M: maybe she's sick
JJ: coz she's sick

- Sick and then *ano*
he just late
M: why?
JJ: why ano eh
M: *bakit?*
JJ: coz there's happening in the car
M: what happened to their car?
anong nangyari?
JJ: the gasoline's *baliktad*
M: *baliktad?*
JJ: yeah it's inverted
the gasoline the gasoline

In both examples, the mothers were genuinely requesting more information from the children who tried to provide them with what they believed were “adequate” information. In example 6, we find a child-dominated interaction, where both children took turns in asking and responding to each other's questions. The children's questions to each other were actually meant to further qualify their previous responses to provide the mother with a better background of what happened in their school that day. In example 7, the child resorted to another strategy – translating – to explain better to his mother why a classmate was absent.

The examples highlighted the fact that children are sensitive interlocutors. If they sense a possible breakdown in communication, they take the initiative to repair it. To achieve this goal, they modify their speech styles, and use other strategies. From the usual short utterances manifested in their responses to report questions, children expand the structure of their sentences. Moreover, they bring in other information that they feel can provide a better context for the topic being discussed at the moment. In fact, research has shown that children, as young as two years old, are able to make appropriate repairs in conversation, and have the ability to elaborate their utterances and adjust their speech accordingly (Barton and Tomasello in Gallaway and Richards 121).

The data gathered also appear to bear on the findings of McDonald and Pien's study (cited in Lund and Duchan 1988) regarding the two styles of motherese – the directive and the

conversational styles. Directive motherese tends to have more report questions (test questions), attention-getting devices, comments, and corrections on the child's verbal production. On the other hand, conversational motherese has more real questions and briefer conversational turns. An examination of the questions in the data revealed that the mothers, who are both teachers, asked more report questions — an indication that the orientation of the mothers had influenced the type of questions they asked. Cazden observes that baby talk (another term used to describe motherese) is similar to teacher talk. Both are characterized by higher than normal pitch, exaggerated intonation, careful enunciation, more repetitions, and more questions to which the mother invariably knows the answer (59). In fact, the studies by Lieven (1984) and Ripich and Panagos (cited in Lund and Duchan 73) revealed that professional enculturation could determine motherese style. Teachers, the studies found, tend to be more directive — a characteristic also reflected in the interactions between the mothers and the children in this study.

Many of the report questions found in the data occurred when the children were younger and during storytelling time. Storytelling is one of the first uses of language that children between two to ten master (Kemper in Kuczag 99). Mothers usually use the storytelling time as a context for asking test questions focusing on establishing referents and specific topics — aspects of storytelling which are clearly pragmatic.

The stories' characters are usually the topic of conversations between the mothers and children. Joint attention, the state in which two people are attending to the same objects (Owens 460), is initially achieved by the mothers' test questions about the stories' characters, after which the mothers also ask questions about the setting and plot of the story. There are instances when the mothers ask reflective questions (those which probe further the children's responses), hence allowing for longer dialogue sequences.

Example 8

- M: ok let's continue
umm what do we see in the picture?
JJ: the same the same

M: yes it's the portrait of the three bears
ok what are these?
JJ: bed of
M: of?
JJ: of?
mama bear
M: yes and this one?
JJ: bed of?
M: of?
JJ: baby bear
M: no
JJ: da papa bear
M: this one is?
JJ: bed of?
M: of?
JJ: Goldilocks baby bear
M: yes and Goldilocks soon lie down on the bed
JJ: baby bear
M: then?
JJ: its baby bear's porridge is mama bear's porridge
is daddy bear's porridge
M: yes
Who ate the porridge
JJ: baby bear
M: no it's not baby bear
Who ate the porridge?
JJ: daddy bear
M: Goldilocks ate the porridge
JJ: Goldilocks ate the porridge
Goldilocks

Example 9

H: o what did she say?
Cinderella
LRN: Sindelela / susus /
H: Give me my shoes
what else what else
Cinderella
Ah there's

LRN: / adun ap / in sindelela si sindelela
H: what else did the stepmother say?
LRN: no no going party
H: no no no you're not going to the party

In both examples, the characters and the things or actions associated with them were the main topics of the interactions. The dialogues were maintained not only by the questions raised by the mothers but also by their constant comments on and corrections of the children's utterances. Sometimes, the mothers also modify the children's responses before asking the next question.

As the children mature, they take a more active part in the interactions; on the other hand, the mothers become more adept at using the children's responses to ask real questions, and to listen more to the quality of the children's responses. The real questions gradually move away from an interaction dominated by adults to one where the children are able to practice soliciting, responding, and reacting. In the example below, the mother and her child took turns to ask questions. Sensing that his mother genuinely did not know the answers to her questions, the child provided her with more information.

Example 10

M: you tell me something JJ
what colors did the teacher show you?
JJ: different colors
Neon
M: neon?
JJ: neon maroon
M: maroon
come here you might fall
did you recite?
did you raise your hand?
what color did she show you?
JJ: neon only ma and maroon
M: maroon
JJ: what's that maroon
M: M-A-R-O-O-N
Maroon

JJ: neon
M: N-E-O-N
neon
what else?
What other colors
JJ: a lot of colors
21 colors
M: 21?
JJ: no 31 colors
M: 31
you were able to name all the 31?
JJ: 31 and 13 colors
M: you were able to name all the colors?
JJ: yeah
M: very good
JJ: ma you're glad and?
M: I'm happy
JJ: and?
M: well I'm so proud of you
JJ: and glad
M: of course
JJ: because?
M: because you know the colors and
you know a poem

VERBAL REFLECTION QUESTION

In mother-child interactions, the mothers rely heavily on solicitation to get the children to take their turn. In most cases, the verbal repetitions or verbal reflection questions are meant to serve as contingent queries — requests for restatement, clarification or additional information on some unclear utterances of the children. Mothers use both nonspecific queries (what?) and specific queries (what is lost?) as forms of request for clarification, as shown in the examples below.

Example 11

LRN: you're not the chorus ha?
The three little kittens the three little kittens

lost their mittens
H: lost again?

In the preceding example, the verbal reflection question *lost again?* was the mother's way of showing surprise, and of requesting the child to confirm what she just heard. In the next example, there could have been a breakdown in communication, were it not for the mother's verbal reflection questions.

Example 12

M: what's that huh?
JJ: I like the speaker mom
M: ouch!
JJ: (humming) it's the customer service
M: where did you get customer service?
In Liana's?
JJ: it is talking
M: yah
JJ: there is no or there is?
M: what? (*nonspecific*)
JJ: in the customer service of Liana's
M: what? (*nonspecific*)
JJ: it is no or it has?
M: what does it have? (*specific*)
JJ: coffee
M: coffee?
JJ: talking
talking in the customer service
the aircon lang
M: huh?
JJ: I like the aircon not the customer service
M: um (pauses)

The continuous queries of the mother served to signal to the child to make some adjustments in his speech to continue the conversation. He tried his best to repair the conversation by providing the mother with additional information *talking-talking in the customer service, the aircon* — *I like the aircon not the customer service*. Unfortunately, the mother could not decipher the child's meaning, so she paused and consequently changed the topic.

What is significant is the fact that, in both instances, we observe the children using expanded structures to respond to contingent queries — proving once again their developing sensitivity to the needs of their interlocutors. Their ability to respond to contingent queries is indicative of their developing discourse skill, and their desire to make their responses appropriate to their interlocutors' questions, albeit sometimes, unsuccessfully, reflects their developing pragmatic skill.

In some cases, the verbal repetitions are attempts to correct production errors, without sounding negative. By repeating the part that is problematic, the mother guides the child in adjusting his speech, where repair or corrections must be done.

Example 13

- H: what else did she do?
she made a new dress for Cinderella and
then Cinderella
was able to go to the party remember?
- LRN: / pababu /
- H: she **bumped her head?**
- LRN: *** (inaudible) / /
- H: (laughs) what other stories do you know?
- LRN: / bjutipip /
- H: **beauty and the beast**
O what happened to beauty and the beast?
- LRN: as well as well / budibis /
- H: who fell down?
- LRN: the ba
- H: who fell down?
- LRN: hoys hoys
- H: who fell from the **horse?**
- LRN: / haishais /
- H: the daddy of beauty

Example 14

- H: what did the stepmother of Cinderella say?
- LRN: *** (inaudible)
- H: o what did she say?

Cinderella
LRN: sindelela sus sus
H: **give me my shoes**
LRN: / adunap / in sindelela si sindelela
H: what else did the stepmother say?
LRN: no no no going party
H: **no no no you're not going to the party**
ah I see

Early in the language development of the twins, LRA and LRN, it was observed that they exhibited minor atypical forms of the spoken language. In the examples given, the mother used repetition to serve as model for the child LRN to take note of and to follow.

Since children have a rather short attention span, verbal repetition with modification also serves to remind them not to lose their focus on the topic of the conversation. Verbal repetitions aid the children not only to keep track of the conversation, but also to teach them discourse coherence through the introduction of deictic terms.

Example 15

M: can you hold this please?
it's a big bird and little bird big
and little dog
JJ: ma without sound
M: I like big things Big Bird said
I like little things Little Bird said
so where's big bird?
there's Big Bird *and this one who's this?*
who's this?
JJ: birdie
M: Little Bird
JJ: Little Bird
M: can you read?
JJ: I like big balloons
M: very good

- JJ: I like little balloons
M: **who likes big balloons?**
JJ: Big Bird
M: **who likes little balloons?**
JJ: Birdie
M: **Little Bird**
Sabi ni Big Bird I like big balloons
JJ: This Big Bird is riding the balloon?
M: **the big balloon**
JJ: he's riding?
M: yah
JJ: this one is
M: **Little Bird**
JJ: this one's holding riding
M: holding and
JJ: this one?
M: riding the big
Little Bird likes little balloons ok?
JJ: mine is medium balloon

In the above example, the mother was telling the story of Big Bird and Little Bird, but the child was apparently distracted by the balloons. To direct the child's attention to the topic, she asked wh-questions referring to the birds and to the things associated with the birds. In addition, while pointing out to the child the two birds in the picture book, the mother used the deixis "this" so that the child could see from her perspective, and, thereby, reestablish joint reference. Finally, she ended this particular exchange by reiterating the relationship between the balloons and Little Bird to maintain the focus of their interaction.

WH-QUESTIONS VS. YES-NO QUESTIONS

The data also indicate that the mothers asked more wh-questions (1,207) than yes-no questions (351), as shown in the table below.

Type of question	Frequency	Percentage
Wh-question	1,207	77%
Yes-No question	351	23%

Among the wh-questions, the **what** questions occurred most frequently. The preponderance of the wh-questions is easily accounted for by the basic goal of motherese, that is, to activate the children's predisposition to learn language by presenting them with particular challenges provided by the various types of wh-questions. Unlike the yes-no questions, the wh-questions look for different kinds of information; hence, they are more demanding in terms of cognition and verbal production.

The table below shows that the mothers asked more *what* questions which required the children to name, label or identify objects in the environment.

The high frequency of *what* relative to the other questions is also consistent with the general observation that questions asked by the parents predominantly serve didactic purposes. Moreover, the *what* questions encourage what Nelson (1981) calls the *referential style*. In a study of one to two-year-old children, Nelson observed that some children were referential — that is to say, learning and using words which label objects. The others, on the other hand, were observed to be expressive children — those who learn words for personal desires and for social interactions. The vocabulary of the referential children had a high proportion of common nouns, while that of the expressive children had more words used in social expressions, such as *bye, thank you, want*, etc. The assumption here was that these two groups of children were “tuning in” to the language around them. Consequently, mothers who spend more time pointing out objects and properties to their children tend to have referential children, while those who use language primarily to direct their children's behavior tend to have expressive children. This distinction, however, is not absolute as children change their

verbal style according to their preference, their interlocutors and other factors, from one developmental phase to another.

Table 4		
Types of Wh-questions	Frequency (total 1,207)	Percentage
What	790	65%
Who	168	14%
Where	102	8%
Why	82	7%
How	37	3%
Which	27	2%
When	1	.08%

For some mothers, naming objects is the basic step toward verbal production. Learning the referent is believed to gradually and, consequently, result in the child's being able to comment about it. The mothers in this study seemed to be more word-oriented and to view labeling and commenting as primary language functions, at least, during the early part of language development.

The incidence of *who* questions, as second most frequent, is consistent with the findings of studies on children's acquisition and comprehension of wh-questions. Wootten, Merkin, Hood and Bloom (1979) found that *what, where and who* are the first questions asked by children, presumably because these are the first questions asked of them by their parents. Studies of children's comprehension likewise disclosed that the children find the said questions easier to respond to correctly, because they do not require lengthy responses (Ervin-Tripp, 1970). Children are able to answer questions that require parts of sentences they can easily use or express. Young children's sentences reflect agents, objects and locations. We therefore find children able to answer *what, who and where* more readily than the other wh-questions (De Villiers and De Villiers,

1994, p.63). Furthermore, the focus of the questions is less semantically and cognitively complex compared to *how, when and why*. The concepts of manner, process, time, purpose and causality involve more coding time and more complex structures. It has been noted that, in many instances, where the children are asked *how, when or why*, they produce inappropriate answers. It is assumed that, at this stage, the children may have yet to incorporate the questions in their speech, and may not be ready in terms of their cognitive ability as borne out by the next set of examples.

Example 16

JJ: don't cook
M: why?
JJ: don't cook almond jelly and fruit cocktail
M: why?
JJ: wanna cook?
M: why?
JJ: wanna open it?
M: what will you open?

In the example above, the child clearly did not understand the question *why* although he tried to offer possible answers based on his previous utterances. His counterquestions to his mother's queries, however, suggested tentativeness on his part — an indication that he did not yet understand *why*.

In general, the children in this study gave more canonical responses (56 percent) than noncanonical responses (42 percent). Canonical responses are the simplest standard forms of responses — the most expected, predictable, and grammatically matched forms, given the form of question (Dore in Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan 149). Many of these canonical responses were actually the result of the different interactive strategies both the mothers and children used. These strategies include preformulating and reformulating questions (French and McLure 1981), and the use of deixis.

Preformulating questions is a strategy used by mothers to preface or introduce the question they want their children to answer. It orients the children to the more important part of the conversation or to the part the adult would like to focus on. The

next set of examples illustrate how the mothers preformulate their questions to subtly signal the kind of response they expect from the children.

Example 17

M: yah
you remember the characters in
Sesame Street in the viewmaster?
JJ: yah
M: **they have their individual letters like**
who's that holding the umbrella?
Bert or Ernie?
JJ: in the viewmaster?
M: yah
JJ: what's inside the video?
M: ah film
JJ: film
M: uhum
JJ: viewmaster
M: yah
JJ: **that's letter W**
M: uhm
JJ: not uhum
say yes

Example 18

H: May
what day is it today, honey?
May 16, 1993
9:00 in the evening
my first book of sounds
what does the kitten say?
miao miao
LRA: nam nam nam
H: not nam nam nam
miao
what does the doggy say?
Bow wow wow bow wow wow
LRN: (giggles)

H: Laraine finds it funny
LRN: du du du na no
H: **what does the cow say?**
moo moo
LRN: he he he mi ya
H: cow that's a cow
What does the rooster say?
LRN: bi bi
H: cock a doodle doo cock a doodle doo
LRN: badu badu badu
H: what does carhorn
what sound does a carhorn make?
LRN: beep beep
H: yah that's good Laraine bi beep

In example 17, the mother and the child were talking about the letters of the alphabet. Apparently, the child had some difficulty recalling certain letters, so the mother resorted to giving additional information (shown by the highlighted parts of the exchange) which would help the child recall or orient him to the focus of the mother's question (the letter W). In the next example, the mother set the tone in so far as the kind of information she wanted. She announced that she had the children's book of sounds, and, actually, made the sounds of the different animals. It took some time, though, before the child LRN was able to give the expected answer.

A very essential pragmatic device used by the mothers to help their children give canonical responses is deixis. It is a reference mechanism that directs the listener's attention to the spatial or temporal domain, where the referent is located. It shows how sentences are grounded in their context that usually includes the participants, their roles and their location in the speech event. Deixis, which includes expressions such as demonstratives (e.g., this, that, there, here) and pronouns, is a linguistic means of focusing the attention of the participants to what is being talked about.

The use of deictics is common in mother-child interactions. In fact, a number of studies have looked into the possible use of deictics in the understanding of language acquisition, because they have been observed to be prominent in children's one- to two-word expressions. In addition, the mothers's and children's utterances have

also been shown to use 80 percent of deictic expressions, with gestural support (e.g., pointing with fingers). The data generated by this study yield similar observations.

Example 19

- M: with sound
yes with sound
very good
what did you watch **last night?**
- JJ: Little Mermaid
- M: Little Mermaid
did you like **it?**
did you like Little Mermaid?
- JJ: daddy's TV
- M: yah in daddy's TV
whose tape is that?
- JJ: daddy mommy's tape
- M: mommy's tape

In the example above, the child was able to give canonical responses because the mother used deictic expressions that specified her focus at the moment of utterance. She asked about the ownership of the tape but made her question specific by using *that* to qualify or identify the tape. There seemed to be several tapes in the immediate environment of the child but the mother's focus to which the child was directed was on a particular tape. The child initially said "daddy" but changed his response to "mommy's tape" when he recognized that *that* as referred to the *Little Mermaid* tape.

Example 20

- M: ok what do you see here?
(points to picture book)
- JJ: cat elephant
- M: uhum
- JJ: *******(inaudible) has ribbon
- M: um yah it has ribbon then?
- JJ: has blue ribbon
- M: this one has blue ribbon
this one has?

what color is that?
JJ: pink
M: yes very good very good
 then look at this
 these are these are?
JJ: three little friends
M: yah they're friends
 they're three little friends

In the example above, the mother and child were going through a picture and storybook. As the mother asked about things found in the book, she used deictics and pointed at the referents in the book. By doing this, the mother not only established joint attention with the child but also provided him with precise locational information and gestural support (pointing to the referent/s in the book) to ensure the child's appropriate responses.

As children mature, their performance in comprehending spatial and temporal locations improves. They are able to respond appropriately to questions with deictics, even without gestural support as illustrated by the following examples.

Example 21

LRA: Damnit
 I forgot to give this to dad (shows the mother a
 homemade *miss you* card).
H: Oh Lor
 what did you just say?
LRA: I forgot to give this to dad
H: no honey **the one before that?**
LRA: damnit?
H: ssh don't say **it** anymore
LRA: di ba in the movie
H: **what movie?**
LRA: **the one** where the daddy was running after the
 bad man
H: uh, okay
 but Lor it's not nice to hear
 don't say **it** na lang okay?
LRA: okay

In cases where the children are unable to provide appropriate answers despite previous orientation to the topic, the use of deictics and gestural support, the mothers use reformulation of questions which involves modification of structures or lexical items. Reformulation of questions increases specificity of questions and, conversely, decreases the cognitive task given to children.

Example 22

- M: now the part which has the leaves is called the
branch of the tree
ok these are the?
JJ: parts of the tree?
M: no these are the what? (points to the leaves)
what part of the tree (modification 1)
the green one (modification 2 specifying the
color)
JJ: leaves

Example 23

- H: what did you learn in school today?
what was your lesson? (modification)
LRA: the lesson the lesson the lesson
H: what?
LRA: lost your mittens you naughty kitten
I was the storyteller

In example 22, the child responded to the mother's questions with the contingent query *parts of the tree?*, indicating that he was unsure of either his answers or the information that the mother wanted. The mother specified the referent by pointing to it in the book, and by modifying her question in such a way that the color green, a semantic property of leaves, was foregrounded. In the next example, the mother reformulated her question by specifying *lesson* as the focus of her question, because the child could have learned other things in school. In many of the situations found in the data, the children were able to give responses that were expected and grammatically matched, because of the prompting and elicitation strategies that the mothers utilized in their interactions.

By and large, the contribution of adult interaction to a child's language acquisition cannot be ignored. Not only do adults expose children to grammatical forms, but they also train them in the social and pragmatic uses of language. Aside from being a source of knowledge for children, adult-child interactions also expose children to social routines necessary for their social and emotional development. More important, these interactions train them to observe turn-taking, a very important discourse and pragmatic skill. Needless to say, the mothers' conversations with their children provide adequate support for the children to develop their communicative competence.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the important role of the mothers' input in the development of the children's communicative competence. While certain aspects of the linguistic development can only be explained by an internal mechanism, by and large, the communicative competence of children is aided and honed by the training provided by the adults in the environment.

The results of this study show that mothers asked a lot of questions (33 percent) — many of which were report or test questions designed to check the children's level of comprehension, and to aid them in staying focused on the topic of conversation. Most of the questions were within the experiential and conversational range of the children, and were meant to gauge their linguistic and cognitive development. However, more was gained from the interactions.

The mothers employed a variety of communication strategies and techniques which helped in making their intents clear to the children. These strategies and techniques, which guided the children in formulating canonical or appropriate responses, included expansion, extension, preformulation, reformulation, gestural support and contingent queries, and the use of deixis.

This investigation also shows that the mothers' discourse style strongly influenced the quality of responses from children. Variations in speech style often signaled to the children important aspects of the context which needed to be considered before formulating a response. Authority, rank, change in topic, distance,

familiarity were often suggested through the mothers' changing discourse style. The recorded data revealed that when the mothers were testing the children, they set a more serious tone and, more often than not, became more directive and demanding in terms of the quality of the children's responses. During more relaxed modes, however, they tended to be playful as they occasionally switched codes.

The study of child language has developed new perspectives, and taken new directions in the past three decades. From inquiries that highlighted the role of imitation and conditioning as the primary learning mechanism, recent studies have shifted their focus to the internal mechanism that enables the child to acquire his native language. From the 1970s onwards, studies have been designed to take into account conversations between adults and children, and between children in both experimental and naturalistic contexts. These conversations are believed to reflect salient aspects of the language development of children. Whereas child-adult conversations used to provide data that researchers used to determine the grammatical development of children, adult-child interactions are now used to determine the role of adult input in language development and the significance of context in discerning the meanings and intents of children's speech.

This research reaffirms that language acquisition cannot be divorced from the social context of meaning and intention. The essence of communication cannot be derived solely from linguistic structures, but also from the interplay of forms and factors in the environment. Due to their limitation in knowledge and experience, children need as much exposure and training from others to discern meaning and, consequently, express their own intentions clearly and appropriately. The observations regarding the mothers' behavior during interactions reflect ways in which adults help children overcome their limitations as conversational partners.

This study reinforces the finding that negotiated interaction (one in which the mother deliberately engages the child in conversational interactions by employing different methods of elicitation) does have an effect on the communicative development of children. Through interactions, children develop pragmatic skills, such as knowing how to answer questions, being able to participate

in conversations by observing turns as well as changes in perspective, noticing and responding to nonverbal features of the interaction, being able to initiate, maintain and close conversation, observing the conversational principles, etc.

Because of the pragmatic nature (focus on language use) of this study, it is difficult to determine the specific contribution of adult training in the syntactic development of children. Social routines and conversational skills, however, are clearly evident in the utterances of children studied here, and this observation gives credence to Foster's (1990) claim that adult-child interactions have more significance in the development of children's communicative skills than previously known.

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