

# An Analysis of the Ways Filipino Bilingual Children Initiate Conversation with Different Interlocutors

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## Abstract

This research sought to enumerate, describe, and analyze the initiation devices used by Filipino bilingual children with different interlocutors. A descriptive study was designed using as framework the interrelationship of Conversation Analysis, Register and Genre Theory, Communicative Competence, and Michael McTear's work on children's initiation devices. Forty (40) Grade Two students from the University of the Philippines (UP) Integrated School, who were exposed to English and Filipino at home and/or in school, were randomly selected and subsequently observed under controlled conditions: each child had to complete three simple puzzles in three stations, each with a different interlocutor—a peer, a teacher, and a stranger. The puzzles each had a missing piece, in order to facilitate interaction. The conversations were video-recorded, transcribed, tallied, and analyzed. The data showed that children used both non-verbal and verbal devices or in combination. They mostly used eye contact with a non-phatic function. Head and/or hand gestures

at the teacher were done. As for verbal devices, the children used statements the most, but with strangers, the preferred device was a question. Vocatives were used the least, except with the teacher. In these instances, vocatives functioned as to get attention. This research shows that Filipino bilingual children use different verbal and non-verbal initiation devices, which are shaped by their specific interlocutor. This suggests a degree of communicative competence on their part.

Keywords: Child language research, conversation analysis, initiation devices

## Introduction

In the 19th century, there was a handful of investigations regarding language development in children in naturalistic settings. This period saw the rise of baby diaries and, more importantly, the birth of Child Language Research (CLR) that had its researchers observe their own children, until age two (Hoff-Ginsberg 9). By the 1960s, CLR shifted its focus on linguistic forms of children's language and the "grammar" of children (McTear 7). CLR shifted from a structural study of children's language to a study of the situational use of language, as initiated by Dell Hymes who pointed out the importance of communicative competence—i.e., the abilities of speakers to use language at the right place, at the right time (Titscher, et al. 238). Though these studies featured conversational data on children, these were only used to interpret the utterances of children and did not dwell on the analysis of the conversation itself (qtd. in McTear 7).

Despite these developments, there still remains a dearth in CLR in the Philippine setting. Some studies undertaken are by Maria Corazon Castro (2000) and Gracita Pe Benito (1994). Castro's dissertation focuses on the pragmatic analysis of children's responses to questions while Pe Benito's MA thesis reaffirms the caregiver's involvement in the development of language in children.

Meanwhile, Michael McTear, observed that "people frequently experience problems when they try to start up a conversation" (75). In line with this,

this study endeavored to look into ways Filipino bilingual children initiate conversation with different interlocutors. It sought to investigate verbal and non-verbal initiations of children, their linguistic structures and functions, and the ways in which their different conversation partners shaped their initiation devices. It explored the level of communicative competence in children that allowed them not only to take part in conversation but also to undertake the difficult task of starting one.

To achieve these aims, this study drew on the interrelationship of language theories, concepts and methodologies, including Conversation Analysis, Register and Genre Theory, and Communicative Competence.

*Conversational Analysis.* Conversation may be defined as “people talking to each other [...] as a form of sociability, or it can be used to indicate any activity of interactive talk” (Have 3–4). McTear expands this definition by stating that conversation is an “interaction with the emphasis primarily on naturally occurring verbal interaction that involves more than talk between two or more persons, that is, it includes non-verbal behaviors” (6). Such interactions can be examined systematically using Conversational Analysis (CA) which refers to a fairly new tradition in sociolinguistics that stemmed from the works of Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. CA studies “the order/ organization/ orderliness of social action, particularly those actions that are located in everyday interaction, in discursive practices, in the sayings/ tellings/ doings of members of society” (qtd. in Have 41). As pointed out by Psathas, the work of analysts is “to discover, describe, and analyze the order or orderliness” (45).

This type of rigorous work is done in the context of the fact that through conversation, members of society unconsciously create a sense of order, since seemingly unstructured conversation is structured by its subjects. A fundamental evidence of this can be found in the basic structural unit of conversations which is the adjacency pair—the sequence of two utterances that are successively produced by different speakers (Coulthard 70). The first part of the adjacency pair provides a context from which the second part can take off, as in the example below:

Person 1: "Hey, somebody's looking for you?"

Person 2: "Who?"

Apparently, the utterance of Person 2 is expected, since the statement of Person 1 has provided a reason or context that has subsequently allowed Person 2 to make such an inquiry.

*Register and Genre Theory.* Just as one part of the adjacency pair shapes the other, the initiation signal is shaped by the contexts of culture and situation—key concepts embodied in the Register and Genre Theory. The Register Theory revolves around the context of situation. Coming from Malinowsky's notion of "the environment of the text" (Halliday and Hasan 6), Halliday sees the context of situation as having three dimensions—the mode, the tenor, and the field. Eggins stretches the definition by saying that "register theory describes the impact of dimensions of the immediate context of situation of a language event on the way language is used" (9). The three dimensions of context of situation are also the variables in describing the register of a text. These are: field, tenor, and mode (Halliday and Hassan 12). The Field of discourse is realized by the experiential meaning. Experiential meaning accounts for how we represent experiences in language. Eggins explains, "Whatever use we put language to, we are always talking about something or someone doing something" (12). The Tenor of discourse, meanwhile, is realized by interpersonal meaning. Interpersonal meaning accounts for the "meanings about our role relationships with other people and our attitudes to each other" (Eggins 12). Finally, the Mode of discourse is realized by the textual meaning. Textual meaning accounts for how pieces of information tie-up or are organized.

Whereas Register Theory focuses on the context of situation, Genre Theory involves the impact of the context of culture on language. Context of culture accounts for the institutionalized ways through which people in a community achieve certain goals (Eggins 9). It serves as a blueprint for how people should act in a given situation. Eggins notes that "describing the staged, structured way in which people go about achieving goals using language is describing genre" (10). Thus, genre provides a framework for how people should go about

the interaction or situation that would take place. For example, a particular genre which is 'telling a story' applies not only to one situation but to a variety of situations. It differs in a lot of situations because the story, subjects and storyteller vary. However, the process of telling a story remains the same. All the parts of a story, e.g., orientation, character, goal, are present. It is in view of this that context is considered important, because it shapes the use and function of language and the possibilities of meaning that language can create.

*Communicative Competence.* As mentioned earlier, Michael McTear notes that it is often difficult for people to begin a conversation (75). One possibility that could account for this difficulty is the absence of the first part of the adjacency pair which serves as the beginning of the conversation and the foreground of the response of the other subject. This highlights that the act of initiating a conversation necessitates competence on the part of the "initiator" that enables him to take into consideration different factors, such as the other interlocutor, the degree of closeness that he shares with his conversation partner, and the particular situation that they are in. This kind of competence falls under what Hymes calls 'communicative competence'. Titscher provides an expanded definition of this concept:

[It] refers to all those abilities of speakers which enable them to communicate appropriately in a speech community. This knowledge includes rules of linguistic and sociolinguistic communication, rules of interaction, and also those cultural rules which determine the context and the content of communicative events and processes of interaction." (238)

## Method

A descriptive study was designed in order to determine the initiation devices of children and the function of these devices. Forty (40) Grade 2 students from the University of the Philippines (UP) Integrated School, who were exposed to English and Filipino at home and/or in school, were randomly selected. For data collection, they were observed under controlled conditions:

each child had to complete three simple puzzles in three stations, each with a different interlocutor—a peer, a teacher, and a stranger. The age group was chosen based on studies that show that by this age, children will have fairly developed their pragmatic skills, specifically conversational skills. For instance, according to Roger Brown's stages of development based on Mean Length Utterance (MLU),

three-and-one-half years and beyond (Stage 5) sees continued growth at all levels: vocabulary expands enormously; grammatical morphemes are still being learned steadily; language functions change and expand, developing new sentence structures and stylistic patterns appropriate to new speech situations. (qtd. in Kies)

Thus, by this age, children would have been able to adjust without difficulty to the methods that the researchers used to elicit data from them.

The selected students were asked to participate in a game in which they had to put together three jigsaw puzzles on three tables. They were briefed and informed that for each puzzle, a person would be there to assist them. The three persons in the room were the interlocutors: a stranger, i.e., a person whom they had never met before; a teacher, who was a guidance counselor known to them; and a peer, who belonged to the same age range and section as the subjects. These three interlocutors were instructed to keep one piece of the jigsaw puzzle in order to facilitate conversation. Additionally, the interlocutors were briefed that they were not to say a word to the child. To ensure that the children would not be overwhelmed by the task, the activity was set up in such a way that they would have to work on the puzzle first with the peer, then with the teacher, and last with the stranger. The conversations were video-recorded, transcribed, tallied, and analyzed.

## Results and Discussion

The initiation devices that the subjects utilized are categorized as non-verbal and verbal. The non-verbal initiation devices are subcategorized into

the following: eye contact, pointing and other physical devices such as looking, standing, tapping, standing, the use of hand gestures, shaking (the puzzle box), picking up the tape recorder or a pile of paper, and leaning forward. The verbal initiation devices in the data include vocatives, questions, and statements.

*Non-verbal Devices.* Eye contact was the most common initiation device used by the subjects. They used eye contact the most when they interacted with the teacher, followed by the stranger, and lastly with their peer. Eye contact was usually found at the beginning of the conversation. It was primarily used with a non-phatic function, which means that it serves a function other than contact maintenance, as in the following example:

Subject 26 (with Peer)

Sb 26:           (eye contact, tapping the puzzle)  
(0.05)

Sb 26:           merong kulang (eye contact while pointing at missing part)  
[Something's missing.]

Pr:               (gives missing puzzle to subject)

Eye contact usually appeared with other initiation devices, although there were instances in which it occurred without any other device. This showed that eye contact, by itself, could be an effective initiation device:

(With Teacher)

Sb 5:           (eye contact)  
(1.52)

Sb 5:           (teacher moves recorder to reveal the missing piece)  
(0.01)

Sb 5:           (smiles and grabs the piece)

Interestingly, the data showed when the subjects conversed with the stranger, they *never* used eye contact for its phatic function. The context of the conversation could help explain this: there was no obligation on the part of the subjects to acknowledge or maintain contact with someone they did not know, in contrast with their interaction with the peer and teacher with whom they had a pre-existing relationship and with whom they would continue to interact.

Meanwhile, looking/searching for the missing piece under the table/chair or inside the puzzle box was the most common physical device that accompanied eye contact. As observed, more subjects used this physical device with their peer. A plausible explanation for this is that they were most comfortable with their peer. On the other hand, the teacher was someone older and a person of authority. The stranger was unknown to them so it could be impolite to be looking/searching for the missing piece without establishing a connection first with this interlocutor. In other words, the subjects' familiarity with their peer could have given them more freedom to use other physical devices, such as in this example:

(With peer)

Sb 37: (smiles, eye contact) (looks around) kulang (in lip synch)

(Then smiles and eye contact with peer again)

No response from peer, so when he is about to leave the peer calls him back.

At the same time, the use of physical devices also showed that the subjects had learned from previous experiences and applied them in their interaction with the stranger:

(With stranger)

Sb 30: saan kaya <'yung isa> nito? (smiles; makes eye contact; picks up tape)

[where could this one be?]

recorder; taps puzzle)

Sr: hmm?

Sb 30: asan po isa? (still tapping puzzle)

[where is this one?]

Sr: asan 'yung isa? (hands over missing piece)

[where is this one?]

thank you

In this case, Sb 30 had done the same exercise with the peer and then with the teacher. By the time Sb 30 interacted with the stranger, the child would



have already known that the missing piece was hidden somewhere and that his conversation partner knew where it was.

*Verbal Devices.* In terms of verbal devices, subjects used statements most frequently when they communicated with their peer and teacher. Vocatives, which they used in their interaction with their teacher, ranked second in terms of frequency. Vocatives are a deictic device, which can be calls, greetings, gesture addresses and titles, used symbolically (<<http://www.ling.gu.se/~biljana/stl-97/pragmalect2.html>>). When talking to the stranger, questions were their preferred initiation devices. These results could be explained by the familiarity of the subjects with the peer and the teacher. Being able to use statements may be a sign that they were comfortable with their interlocutor. Regarding the interaction with teacher, there was also an added recognition of authority; hence, the use of vocatives in their interaction with her. Notably, because the subjects were not familiar with the stranger, they did not rely on statements; rather, they preferred to use questions.

A noteworthy finding is that the statements were mostly used for indirect request for action, such as in this case:

(With teacher)

Sb 19: (looks under the table)  
(0.02)

kulang  
[it's missing]

Tr: hmm?

Sb 19: kulang  
[it's missing]

Tr: kulang ng isa (looks for missing piece) yun  
[one piece is missing]  
[there]

Sb 19: (puts puzzle) (and is about to leave the room)

Tr: no ... dun pa 3 puzzles  
[over there are 3 puzzles]

The statement “kulang” does not only signify a fact—that a piece of the puzzle was missing—but it could be understood as an indirect request for action in light of the specific context. In this situation, Sb 19 would have already communicated with a peer at the first table; he would have already been aware that the setup was similar at the next table. The only difference was that the person sitting there was a teacher. When the subject, therefore, made the statement “kulang,” he was signaling to the teacher to show him where the missing piece was.

Indeed, the data showed that indirect request for action is the most common function of a statement. Only Subject 19 was noted to use a statement that was a direct request for action, and this was directed at the peer:

(With peer)

Sb 19: okay na 'to (addressed to researcher)  
[this is okay]

Pr: okay na  
[it's okay]

Sb 19: ang hirap nito (no eye contact, probably saying to himself,  
smiling)  
[this is hard]

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Sb 19: tulungan mo ako  
[help me]

Pr: ha?

Sb 19: tulungan mo ako (no eye contact)  
[help me]

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Sb 19: ano yung ginagawa? Ang tagal mo na dito (with eye contact)  
[what is being done? You have been here long]

Pr: (no response)

Sb 19: (continues to do puzzle)

Meanwhile, the data showed that questions were also a common initiation verbal device used by the subjects in the study. As can be expected, they were used in order to ask for information, such as in the case below:

(With peer)

- Sb 40: dito ba? (with eye contact) pertaining to puzzle  
[here?]  
(2.37)
- Sb 40: (Physical, removes the hands of peer so she can put the piece)  
(0.31)
- Sb 40: (looks under the table) then (eye contact with peer, lip synchs)  
<may nawawala>  
[something is missing]

However, questions were also used for indirect request for action:

(With Teacher)

- Sb 13: asan po yung nawawala? (Eye contact)  
[where is the missing part?]
- Tr: yung?  
[what?]
- Sb 13: nawawala po  
[the missing part]
- Tr: nawawala, hanapin natin yun ... very good ... okay  
[the missing part, let us look for it ...]

The questions cited above were attempts of the subjects to elicit a certain action from their interlocutor inasmuch as they were requests for information about the location of the missing piece. In this case, a question which functions as a request for action—and also, as in the examples above, a statement as a request for action—is an example of an indirect speech act. According to John Searle, “an indirect speech act wants to communicate a different meaning from the apparent surface meaning; the form and function are not directly related” (qtd. in Cutting, 19).

The data also showed the subjects' exchanges with their peer were lengthier and more varied than those they had with their teacher and the stranger. This is illustrated in the following case:

(With peer)

- Sb 22: ay teka ... teka ano ba 'to ... ay dito dito ... ay baliklad baliklad  
[while trying to complete the puzzle]  
[oh wait ... wait what is this ... oh here here ... oh it's upside down upside down]
- Pr: [ignores Sb and continues to complete the puzzle]
- Sb 22: tapos ... eto dito ... bat kulang isa pa ... san ba 'to? dito  
[and then ... this one is here ... why is it lacking one more ... where does this one go? here]
- Pr: di dyan  
[not there]
- Sb 22: dito ba 'yun?  
[here?]
- Pr: mali ... baka dito  
[wrong ... maybe here]
- Sb 22: eto yata 'yun e ... san ba 'to? ... wala bang nahulog?  
[I think this is it ... where is this one? ... nothing fell over?]
- Sb 22: baka jan ... [indistinguishable murmur] ... tapos  
[maybe it's there] [and then]
- Sb 22: (laughs softly) baka ...  
[maybe]
- Pr: Ahh 'to  
[Ahh here]
- Sb 22: baka may kulang  
[maybe something is missing]
- Pr: san 'to  
[where is this]
- Sb 22: dito yata 'yan  
[maybe that one is here]

- Sb 22:           eto ... ayun, ayun ... (1:08:05) kulang ng isa (then looks under the table  
                           [here ... there, there ...]    [it's missing one piece]  
                           then scratches her hair while softly laughing, and while shaking the box)
- Pr:               (Brings out the piece)
- Sb 22:           ayun (eye contact at peer with soft laugh)  
                           [there]

With all these findings, a remarkable observation is that despite the fact that the subjects were bilingual—that is, they were exposed to English and Filipino in school and/or at home—the exchanges were mostly in Filipino, except for expressions like, “hello” and “thank you.”

## Conclusion

Based on the presented findings, it was seen that the subjects shaped their initiations depending on the person to whom they were talking. These differences in their conversational exchanges with their peer, their teacher and the stranger manifested in various ways. Consequently, these affirm the role of the interlocutors in shaping the conversations of children in general, and their initiations in particular. Furthermore, the data showed the ability of these children to use appropriate forms of language, such as the use of indirect requests, questions, and statements in order to communicate their purposes to the interlocutor. In the same manner, they were also able to employ strategies or techniques to start a conversation through the use of various verbal and non-verbal initiation devices. The data gathered in this research showed a certain level of communicative competence in these children in the context of conversations.

To further expand this field of study, it is recommended that research on the different parts of conversation be conducted. One interesting area that could be explored is the use of Transition Relevant Places (TRP). These TRP's are points in conversation where a change of turn is possible (Cutting 29).

To be able to examine how children are able to determine when to take their turns in conversation with different interlocutors can possibly complement the findings of this study. Although these TRP's are also present in the current data, they are predictable because the methodology was closely structured. Hence, it is recommended that such studies be done using conversations with a fluid or free-flowing nature as main sources of data.

Finally, studying the sequential organization—that is, looking at the entire conversation and all its parts—is equally important, since it would allow the analysis of other devices which give structure to the conversation. It should be underscored that parts, such as initiation, are related to other parts of the conversation in that it shapes a particular kind of response; hence, initiation devices also shape other devices used in conversation such as turn-taking signals or repair signals.

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