

# *The Development of Directives and the Role of Input: A Case Study of a Chinese Young Child*

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**Abstract:** In the field of first language acquisition, research on pragmatics has received great attention, and the importance of it is undeniable. Many studies have paid special attention to the expression of directives, however, research on Chinese children is rare. In order to fill the research gap, by using quantitative method, the current study discusses the expression of requests and prohibitions of a Chinese boy, with specific stress on the role of input on production. Results show that Chinese children's acquisition sequence and expression of directives are significantly different from those of children whose mother tongue is other languages. Based on the study, it is hoped that special attention to Chinese culture can enrich the cultural diversity of studies in this area.

## 1. Background of the Study

For children, learning and using a language does not only mean learning the basic aspects like syntax and phonology, but also a range of pragmatic knowledge [1]. Pragmatics in first language acquisition is an aspect which receives continuous attention. As mentioned by Gleason and Weintraub (1976), children's performances in different situations are more crucial than their potential language skills.

One of the crucial aspects in language competence is knowing how to behave politely. The different ways of expressing directives reflect different levels of politeness. A directive is defined as an attempt to guide non-verbal actions of listeners [2], which includes different forms of expression used in various social activities, such as requests, suggestions, proposals, etc. [3]. Previous studies have shown that children's acquisition of directives has gone through a long process. Ervin-Tripp provided classifications of different directive forms appearing in children's discourses [4]. Eight stages from the age of 0:9 to 5+ are identified, ranging from the simplest to more complex ways.

Although the phenomenon that children's acquisition of directives has experienced different stages has been widely confirmed [5, 6], in reality, pragmatic development is context-sensitive, performances vary depending on interlocutors [7]. In addition, previous studies mainly examined children who speak English as their first language. Due to the cultural and environmental differences within different regions, cross-cultural studies emerge in recent studies. Huls and van Wijk explored

verbal and non-verbal expression when expressing requests by a Dutch-speaking girl at the age between 1;9-5;6 and provided 23 detailed classifications of the request speech act. The result shows that acquisition is not simply a sequence starting from the simplest direct expression, but a non-linear process influenced by contexts [8]. Chejnov á described the development of directive speech act of a Czech child from 2;8 to 4;1 and concluded that the child gradually acquired an appropriate communicative strategy, and the previously frequently-used expression would be replaced by a later new strategy [9].

Based on the focus on children's communicative strategies, some studies focus on the effect of caregiver-child interaction in promoting children's expression of directives [10, 11]. However, these studies focus on children's use of expression with specific cultural characteristics. There is no particular focus on the relationship between input and production among caregivers and children. In the field of language acquisition, input is regarded to be related to children's language development. Many studies paid attention to the relationship between input received by children and their production in specific aspects of linguistics, including vocabulary [12], syntax [13] etc., and generally concluded that there is indeed a complex connection. However, whether there is a relationship exist in acquiring pragmatics has not been fully confirmed.

In the field of intercultural pragmatic research, previous studies used the term "East and West" [14]. However, with the advancement of research, it has been discovered that more fine-tuned differences exist within each cultural group. For example, Chen, He and Hu highlighted the differences in the usage of requests between Chinese and Japanese speakers [15]. Currently, although there are studies focusing on eastern countries (e.g. Japan), no special attention has been paid to Chinese children's expressions of directives. Therefore, the study also aims to seek whether the language development of Mandarin-speaking children has its unique features.

In the study, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What is the longitudinal development process of directives (especially the expression of requests and prohibitions) of a Mandarin-speaking child?
- 2) Are the types of directives evident in the child-directed speech (CDS) also evident in the child's directive utterances?

## 2. Method

The present study examines the development of directives of a Chinese boy named Tongtong (pseudonym) who speaks Mandarin as his first language, using records available from the CHILDES database [16]. The chosen sets of data provide a long-term record of the child's language development (1;7-3;4) and include rich caregiver-child interactions. The database contains a 1-1.5 hours' session once a month. Records before 2;3 are audios, while after that are videos. Differences in data types will not influence the present study since it focuses on the child's verbal expression other than non-verbal behaviors (e.g. gestures). Eight recordings of daily family communications are applied, including the scenes of playing games, reading, and eating. Interactions occur mostly between Tongtong and his parents, while grandparents participated in several conversations.

Based on Ervin-Tripp's classification of child developmental stages of directives [4], Chejnov á's definitions of requests and prohibitions [9] and Bernicot and Legros' classifications of direct and indirect expression [17], definitions and classifications expressed by caregivers and the target child in this study are made as follows:

Definitions:

Request: The caregiver/ the child wants somebody to do something.

Prohibition: The caregiver/ the child wants somebody not to do something.

Classifications:

Directives are broadly divided into direct and indirect expression. On this basis, taking the characteristics of Chinese ways of expression, each category has been specifically divided (see Table 1).

Table 1: Classifications of directives

Direct directives		Indirect directives	
1. Simple	(1) <i>Request</i> : Gloss: I want eat lolly Transl.: I want to eat lollies.	3. Conventional	(1) <i>Request</i> : Gloss: why no lolly (complete marker) Transl.: Why are there no lolly? (meaning: I want to eat lollies.)
	(2) <i>Prohibition</i> : Gloss: don't sit at here Transl.: Don't sit here!		(2) <i>Prohibition</i> : Gloss: you can go other place sit (interrogative marker) Transl.: Can you go and sit somewhere else? (meaning: You cannot sit here.)
2. Politer	(1) <i>Request</i> : Gloss: please help me get lollies, ok? Transl.: Could you help me get some lollies, please?	4. Non-conventional	(1) <i>Request</i> : Gloss: that little child is eat what Transl.: What is the little child eating? (meaning: I want to eat lollies. →The child actually knows what the child is eating.)
	(2) <i>Prohibition</i> : Gloss: please don't sit on here Transl.: Please don't sit here.		(2) <i>Prohibition</i> : Gloss: there place view better Transl.: You would have a better view if sitting there. (meaning: You cannot sit here.)

(Children's acquisition sequence provided in previous studies should be 1-2-3-4.)

At each age stage, the number of requests and prohibitions used by caregivers and the child in each category is counted (repetitions and recasts are excluded), and the longitudinal developmental stages are summarized based on the child's discourses. Regarding the effect of input, considering that acquisition takes a certain amount of time, this essay considers whether the expression of caregivers in the previous stage is grasped by the child in the latter stage. Since it is claimed that children can learn a language naturally in the environment [18], conversations between caregivers are also counted if the child is within that situation.

### 3. Results

Table 2 shows whether different types of directives are expressed by the target child at all age stages. It can be noticed that from the beginning period of the record (1:7), the simplest way of expression has been acquired. It appeared in all eight records, indicating that it has been used continuously. The politer direct expression began to appear from the age of 2:7. It is worth noting that conventional indirective directives, considered as a more complex expression, appeared at 1:10, which is far before the appearance of politer direct expression. The expression of non-conventional indirect directives, as the theoretically most complex expression, emerged rarely in the final stage of the entire observed process.

Table 2: Appearance of different types of directives in the child's expression

Age/ (year, month)	Simple direct directives	Politer direct directives	Conventional indirect directives	Non-conventional indirect directives
1:7		×	×	×
1:10		×		×
2:1		×	×	×
2:4		×		×
2:7				×
2:10				×
3:1				
3:4				

Table 3: Number of times of directives expressed by the child

Age/ (year, month)	Simple direct directives	Politer direct directives	Conventional indirect directives	Non-conventional indirect directives
1:7	10	0	0	0
1:10	48	0	2	0
2:1	34	0	0	0
2:4	73	0	4	0
2:7	25	1	2	0
2:10	53	5	3	0
3:1	47	3	5	0
3:4	29	4	6	2

Table 3 records the specific number of different types of instructions used by the child at different ages. It can be seen that although the other three kinds of expression appeared occasionally, the most frequently used is still the simple direct expression. The most frequent occurrence is at 2:4. In that video, the child repeated countless times and expressed that he wanted something. The request appeared 26 times in a similar way, for example:

**L1505:** \*CHI: 我[]我还要喝一个.

*Gloss:* I [] I still want drink one bottle

*Transl:* I want to drink one more bottle.

**L1629:** \*CHI: 我想吃葡萄糖锌钙.

*Gloss:* I want eat glucose zinc calcium

*Transl.:* I want to drink a bottle of zinc gluconate solution.

When eager to expressing wishes, even if the child has acquired the knowledge of another expression, he still chose the most familiar and direct way to express his cravings. Even after being rejected, he tried several times by using the same way. Politer direct expression appeared in the middle of the entire stages and were used rarely. In most cases, the child does not actively use this expression, but under the mandatory requirements of caregivers. For example:

- L2568: \*MOT: 那 要不要 用 礼貌 用语 啊?  
 Gloss: then whether or not use polite diction (modal particle)  
 Transl.: Then should you use a politer way of expression here?
- L2573: \*CHI: 要.  
 Transl.: Yes.
- L2582: \*MOT: 你 应该 说 请.  
 Gloss: you should say please  
 Transl.: You should say "please".
- L2586: \*CHI: 请 妈妈 帮 我 讲 故事.  
 Gloss: please mom help me tell story  
 Transl.: Mom, please tell a story for me.

(Extracted from recording: 030110)

- L3525: \*CHI: 把 它 拿 过 来.  
 Gloss: put it take over here  
 Transl.: Take it over here.
- L3529: \*MOT: 你 要 客 气 点 啊.  
 Gloss: you should polite a little bit (modal particle)  
 Transl.: You should be politer.
- L3532: \*CHI: 请 妈妈 拿 过 来.  
 Gloss: please mom take over here  
 Transl.: Mom, please (help me) taking (it) over here.

(Extracted from recording: 030409)

Indirect expression, as a more complicated way of expressing, almost did not appear in the child's discourse.

In summary, the longitudinal developmental rule is concluded as: the child expressed a direct-indirect alternately pattern in acquisition of directives, to be more specific, the target child's directive expression shows a developmental stage of simple direct directives- conventional indirect directives- politer direct directives- non-conventional indirect directives. At the same time, he acquired a more complicated way of expression earlier than we have expected. The age of acquisition are as follows in Table 4:

Table 4: Age for acquiring different ways of expression

Ways of expression	Starting age
Simple direct directives	1:7
Politer direct directives	2:7
Conventional indirect directives	1:10
Non-conventional indirect directives	3:4

Table 5 and Table 6 record the age and number of times that the caregiver presented different directives. It can be seen from the comparison between Table 5 and Table 2 that although expression appeared in CDS (e.g. polite direct directives), it took a long time for the child acquiring a similar pattern, which means that in terms of directive forms, input is not a good indicator of production.

Table 5: Appearance of different types of directives in the CDS

Age (of the child)	Simple direct directives	Politer direct directives	Conventional indirect directives	Non-conventional indirect directives
1:7				×
1:10				×
2:1				
2:4				×
2:7				×
2:10				
3:1				
3:4				×

Table 6: Number of times of directives expressed by caregivers

Age/ (year, month)	Simple direct directives	Politer direct directives	Conventional indirect directives	Non-conventional indirect directives
1:7	69	8	1	0
1:10	63	11	8	0
2:1	44	3	5	1
2:4	64	5	8	0
2:7	77	3	9	0
2:10	81	4	9	3
3:1	30	5	5	1
3:4	37	12	2	0

#### 4. Discussion

From the result of the current study, it has been noticed that unlike the order in child's acquisition of directives summarized in previous studies [4, 6], the developmental sequence of the Chinese child's expression of directives is different. Moreover, contrary to the conclusion of previous research [9], the child did not give up the familiar expression after acquiring new ones. One possible reason for this is that directives are context-specific [19]. The contexts in the video only exist between the child and caregivers, and the communication is carried out in a casual way. The child may not think too much about whether it is appropriate to say so because the caregiver is intimate with him and will not be dissatisfied because of his inappropriate expression. Moreover, language is the embodiment of culture [20]. Different countries represent different cultures, and have their own characteristics in expression. Due to the particularity of Chinese culture, people tend to express their wishes in a less direct way. That could be a possible explanation of why indirect expression appeared much earlier than expected.

When thinking about the relationship between input and children's production, although it is not the case that the expression evident in CDS is also evident in the child's discourse, it would be too absolute to claim that input is useless for the development in expressing directives. On the one hand, children's production lags far behind their comprehension [21]. The interval of two stages is just three months, which would be short for the child in ready to produce. On the other hand, the study only focuses on the type other than the frequency of input. Studies focusing on other aspects of linguistics concluded that frequency of input is a good indicator for children's production [22, 23]. Through a cursory observation of the data used in the current study, less-used expression in CDS is also not common in the child's expression. Meanwhile, caregivers' prompts seem to have a positive effect on children's production. Even if it has not been discovered in the child's discourse before, when forced to use a politer way, he was sufficient in using it properly, which means that the child might actually know how to express, but did not want to or think it is unnecessary to use this kind of expression.

There are some limitations of the study. Firstly, focusing on only one child and limited contexts would thread the generalizability of the result. Moreover, the whole stage is too short, language development has not fully shown within less than two years, and the effect of non-verbal expressions is overlooked. Follow-up research could consider the above aspects for more systematic research.

#### 5. Conclusion

Considering the importance of pragmatics in language development, focusing on a Chinese boy's directive speech act, the current study summarizes the developmental sequence as well as the impact of input on this specific aspect. Further study could stress more on different contexts and examine the



role of input from other perspectives to make the conclusion more comprehensible.

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