

Fundamentals of language Acquisition

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Week 10

Lecture 050

Lec 50: politeness, figurative language

Welcome back. We will start with Lecture 5 now. We are in module 10. We are discussing communication, the development of communicative capabilities, and conversational skills among children. So, so far we have looked at various perspectives like implicature and our understanding of implicature, how much children follow Grice's maxims in various domains, and we have also seen variables like turn-taking, timing, and so on. Now, we will move on to the last couple of variables that we will discuss in this course.

So, the variables are politeness and figurative language comprehension. Now, politeness, as we all know, is an important aspect of conversation. In any conversation, we need various degrees of politeness depending on the socio-cultural factors as well. So, this is an important aspect of conversation: no matter which culture you are in, there is a level of politeness that is expected in any kind of conversation.

So, in order to use this particular feature appropriately, children need to master more than just linguistic factors. Because politeness, as it is perceived in a community and as it is perceived in a culture, is different from one place to another and from one language to another. That is one, and secondly, how to signal politeness also differs. So, as a result, this takes us to two important variables within politeness strategy itself. One is the linguistic form for marking the degrees of politeness. So, we need to know that the child needs to know we are talking about children taking part in conversation. So, children need to know the linguistic forms that are important for signaling these different stages of politeness and different degrees of politeness. Now, this can be different from one culture to another.

Some cultures might have very complicated and layered forms of linguistic expression based on their understanding of politeness, while others might have less. So the child needs to know. Secondly, the pragmatic condition on greetings, requests, etcetera also needs to be understood by the child. So, how can those things be different? There are multiple factors, such as status, age, gender, sex, and so on, in a conversation. Many cultures have actually pretty elaborate systems of address terms, or how you can and cannot use certain terms in a conversation, and so on. So, these two things need to be mastered by children in order for them to signal politeness correctly. So, as I just said, this differs from culture to culture; let us just see how.

So, in Chinese, Japanese, and basically many of the Eastern languages, the child must learn to use the appropriate address terms for relatives for each occasion, as well as any honorifics required. What is an honorific? Honorifics are those grammatical aspects in language that signal the relative relationship between the speaker and the hearer. So, the same person addressing someone who is younger may use one term, but addressing somebody older can use another term for the same thing. So, in Indian languages, for example, you have a three-way use of pronouns. You have tu, tum, and aap.

Then "aap" is for somebody who is older; it can also be for somebody who is in a higher status, and it can be for various other factors. Now, in certain cases, "tu" means for friends and people who are closer to you, typically reserved for people who are younger or sometimes much lower in status with respect to the speaker. Now this is not always in such a linear form; sometimes there is a very complex interrelationship between these factors, including age, relationship status, and many other things. So, this is a complicated pattern. So, we have to know the child in these situations; in these kinds of cultures, they need to not only learn the address terms but also know exactly what to use where.

But in other cases in some Western countries, for example, we have data from Norway and Hungary. So, in Norwegian, one must learn to use hints in comments or remarks rather than a more elaborate request. So, in Hungarian, the practice is to use more elaborate requests, but in Norwegian, the practice is to use hints, and in Indian and other Asian languages, there is an elaborate system itself; there is a whole lexicon that needs to be understood and utilized properly. So, what do the findings say? The spontaneous requests in the speech of Italian children have been studied. There is a very interesting and important study on this. So, what they found with Italian children is that there are apparently a few stages through which children actually master this. So, up until the age of 4, children rely mainly on direct questions when they are very young; by age 4, they use direct questions and imperatives. As they get older, they use expressions like "please," then use you know, ask for, you know, give reasons, add softeners of various kinds, and then start to state their

wishes in generic form. So there are these particular types of changes that the researchers have found with respect to Italian children. Initially, they ask directly; as they get older, they start to use a more varied repertoire of different kinds. So, they can use request words like "please"; they sometimes give their own reasons, that is, they explain. They can also add softeners and so on and so forth. By age 6, they can produce a range of syntactic forms, but do not yet modulate their requests appropriately. By age 7 or so, they can vary both form and content in making politeness requests. So, you can see there is a trajectory that starts at 4 and then gradually they build upon their understanding, and as their language repertoire gets better, they use more and more complicated structures to signal politeness; that is basically the finding here.

So, this is also consistent with the children's judgment of politeness because understanding what politeness is also takes them some time. This is sometimes even taught in certain cultures; sometimes it is understood from the setting and so on. So, as their understanding grows and their language repertoire also expands simultaneously, they are able to create more and more complex patterns for achieving that politeness. So, some more pointers in this research are that children are politer when they produce positive requests. So, there is a difference between when they are using positive requests versus negative requests.

They are generally found to be more polite when using positive requests, like asking someone to do something, such as "Can you get me this?" You know, like that when you want something. So, positive requests. A negative request is when you are asking somebody not to do something. So, "do not take my toy away", or something like that; in that case, they are found to be less polite. So, more polite in positive requests and less polite in negative requests. So, these are the two types. Also, their politeness has a pattern; it depends on who the addressee is, and their politeness actually has degrees. So, when the addressee is older, they are more polite; they are less polite to their peers and even less polite to younger children. So, this is how the pattern goes. It is not like one size fits all; they do figure out politeness as a construct, and they actually use it in a very productive way as well, depending on all these factors.

Now, how do you actually measure this? This particular study that I am referring to used the number of times the word 'please' was used. So, they found that it occurs in 84 percent of requests in the case of adults, but only 37 percent of requests were to 2-year-olds. So, that is the difference between the older addressee and the younger addressee. So, thus far we have figured out that children do acquire the conversational tricks; it takes them a little bit of time as they find their way through the social norms, the linguistic norms, their linguistic repertoire, as well as their understanding of certain complex social norms regarding what politeness is and the relative position of the older addressee versus a

younger addressee, and so on. So, some of the conversation rules are culture-specific, and hence we see different patterns; that is one domain. The last domain that we will be discussing is called figurative language acquisition. Now, figurative language is something that is quite common in conversation. Figurative language refers to using non-literal language, non-literal as in whatever you are saying does not have the exact literal meaning. So, I might use, you know, the same sentence can be used in an assertive way; also, as sarcastic, in a sarcastic way it can be an irony, it can be a metaphor—various ways. So, what happens in figurative language is that the speaker's intentions go beyond the semantics of the utterance. The speaker's intention is what I want to convey. When I am speaking, if I want to convey something, I can use the same sentence, the same simple sentence, but I can use it to convey a different intent beyond the stated meaning. That is what figurative language is. Now, this is intertwined with a number of things, like contextual information, conceptual world knowledge, and so on and so forth. Just to give you an example of a figurative language use, we often say that, you know, "I am at a crossroads".

Being at a crossroads is a very common way of talking about a life stage. So, I am in a position where I have many options, and I have to decide where to go. Now, what is happening here is that we are trying to talk about life in terms of a journey. So, when are you at the crossroads? When you are on the road! So, you are on a road, and you have now arrived at a position that you are calling crossroads. So, life is understood in terms of a physical journey, a road journey, let us say.

So, this is an example of a metaphor. What is a metaphor? Metaphor is a scenario where you are trying to use a concrete domain to understand an abstract domain. So, in order to talk about an abstract domain, you use the parameters or, let us say, certain aspects of a concrete domain to make your case easier or more tangible. So, when I say I am at crossroads, you immediately understand because everybody has had some experience of a journey, smaller or bigger, complex or simple, but a journey as an experience is an embodied experience; everybody understands that. So, when you talk about life in those terms, it is understandable. So, that is how figurative language works. And, similarly, irony is another where my intention is more important than the actual meaning of the sentence. So, metaphor is one such figurative language that is often used in conversational setups. Now, what has been studied is whether children are able to produce and comprehend metaphor in sentences in a conversational setup, which is what we are interested in. So, as I just said, what is a metaphor? Metaphor is a common type of figurative language in which one idea is understood through another. Often, the abstract idea is understood through the concrete ideas. So, you need an embodied experience, a concrete, tangible experience in order to talk about it. For example, time is often understood in terms of space. So, you

know "the meeting has been shifted two days earlier", like this. So, ahead and behind are spatial terms.

Similarly, you can also have something like this: "she is a warm person". So, you can say he is a very cold person. So, what we are trying to say here is that the nature of the person we are trying to understand through the domain of temperature. So, cold is someone who is not very accessible and not very emotionally available. So, something like that. On the other hand, warmth is something that you associate with being connected to somebody who is nice, and so on. So, basically, some characteristic features are something tangible that is a metaphor. So this is also another kind of implicature, by the way, and as per Grice, metaphors arise out of a violation of the maxim of quality because we are violating certain things here; we are violating the maxim of quality. So, children in their preschool ages often show that many studies have looked into this and found that before they go to school, they actually seem to use some metaphorical language. Metaphors seem to be used because there is a debate as to whether this kind of utterance can actually be considered a real metaphor or if it is just some kind of extension.

For example, many studies have looked into it; they talk about calling a toy car a snake. While twisting it around his mother's arm, a child is referring to the toy as a snake because he is playing with his mother with the toy in his hand and trying to twist it over her arm, and they are calling it a snake. Now, does it qualify as a metaphorical language? There are debates, but children do use such kinds of constructs in their conversation. Also, sometimes they will use something like a cardboard or anything else to put in their ear and pretend that it is a phone, and they will talk on it and also call it a phone. So, basically, they are comparing things; they are comparing one thing to another; that is what a metaphor is all about.

So, as a result, some scholars have called it metaphorical use, while others do not agree. However, this kind of language use is quite common among preschool children. Now, the initial finding with respect to whether this understanding, whether this kind of use of language, also translates into children actually understanding real metaphors or not, has also been carried out. So, the older studies go back all the way to 1976; this was a very well-known study. So, early developmental studies found that children's metaphor comprehension is, in fact, a late achievement. They do not understand metaphors, irrespective of whether they use their own kinds of metaphors; when the real metaphors are tested on them, they do not seem to do very well. So, in this particular study by Winner et al. (1976), they looked at two types of metaphor. One they called psychological physical

metaphor, and the other they called cross-sensory metaphor. So, these examples I have taken from this work. For example, the psychological physical metaphor was that "the prison guard was a hard rock". Meaning, it was not very easy to, that he was a very tough person; he was a very tough guard. So, here the psychological aspect was compared with the physical property of a rock. So, as hard as a rock. That was one. The cross-sensory metaphor, for example, uses sentences like "Her perfume was bright sunshine." So, here you have two different sensory domains that are mapped onto one another. So, perfume basically has to do with the sense of smell, but they are using bright sunshine, which is a visual term. So, there is this mapping of cross-senses. So, this kind of example they had used, and the task was for the children to tell what the sentence meant; in some cases, they had to choose between four options.

So, this was the task. So, they were given this kind of sentence, and sometimes they had to answer what it meant, and sometimes they had to choose between the options given. So, what did the results show? Children under 10 years old could not understand the metaphorical meaning. This is quite a late stage; by 10 years, they understand language pretty well. So, what happened was they gave a literal interpretation involving magic. So, when they were asked what the sentence meant, they gave a literal interpretation, sometimes using the concept of magic. For example, "the king had a magic rock, and he turned the guard into another rock". That is how they explain it. Sometimes, they also changed the sentence altogether. "The guard walked in a prison that had hard rock wall". So, basically, they interpreted it in many ways, but not in metaphorical ways.

Eight-year-olds use what they call a primitive metaphoric interpretation. The guard had hard, tough muscles because that is what they interpreted the rock as symbolizing. And even 10-year-olds could not interpret the metaphor accurately, so this was the finding. Now, based on this and many other findings that children do not actually interpret metaphors properly until very late, they are not able to explain them; they are not able to interpret them metaphorically. Because of these factors, there have been many theories as to when and how children actually acquire metaphorical understanding.

So, one theory is called the literal stage theory, and the other is the early onset hypothesis. The literal stage hypothesis basically takes care of the finding that children are not able to interpret sentences metaphorically. So, the literal hypothesis is based on the observation that children tend to use apparent metaphor during preschool age but stop using them later; because we have already seen that whatever can be considered a real metaphor may not be considered a real metaphor; however, they do seem to use some non-literal language. However, the experiments show that by the time they go to school, they do not understand them properly; they are not able to interpret them correctly. So, notably during their

elementary school years, they have difficulty comprehending metaphors.

Hence, the proposal is that children have a literal phase in their figurative language acquisition development; they call it a literal phase, meaning that they start with some amount of understanding, but then they go to a stage where they interpret everything literally, and then, when they are older, they again understand metaphors properly. So, there is a stage called the literal stage, and hence the name. So, after a creative phase, children enter a literal phase characterized by a tendency towards literal interpretation and a decrease in the use of figurative language. Eventually, in early adolescence, a more sophisticated level of figurative language skills is attained.

So, it takes a lot of time around early adolescence. Until then, children use, and I quote, "a piece-by-piece elaboration of the linguistic input. Children process language literally, even when it does not make sense in the linguistic context". So, that is how they have been talked about in this theory. However, later studies actually pointed out that children's poor performance may not be due to their lack of understanding but to many other factors. One of the factors that has been pointed out by a number of researchers is the task-related problem.

The task was probably designed in such a way in the older studies that it made it difficult for the child to interpret the metaphor. So, if we change the task conditions, we might find something else. So, the reasons they provided were two or three main reasons. One reason was that children do not necessarily have the conceptual difficulties, because the interpretation of the previous result was that children do not understand that difficulty; they do not have the conceptual ability to parse the literal and the metaphorical meaning. So, the counter to that is that children actually do have the abilities. So, there are many studies in this regard. So, in one of them, three-year-olds could distinguish meaningful comparisons, such as literal or metaphorical, like "rain is like snow" or "tears" from a nonsensical comparison. There have been many kinds of studies trying to figure out whether children actually understand the differences, or let us say, layers of differences in meaning, or not. Hence, they created these kinds of possibilities: "rain is like a dog", "rain is like snow", "rain is like tears", and they tried to see whether children could actually understand the differences in these meanings, and they found that they could; children actually could, at 3 years. After 4 years, children understood the difference between literal and metaphorical comparisons. Now these findings have pointed out that the children do have the basic prerequisites in place by the time they are 3 years of age, which is pretty early, and it goes entirely, you know, opposite the findings of the previous studies.

Secondly, comprehension of metaphor depends on familiarity with a conceptual domain.

One of the serious criticisms against the initial findings was that the metaphors were used, you know, abruptly, without familiarizing the children with the conceptual domain. If they do not have it, it is because small children may not have familiarity with multiple conceptual domains that adults have. So, we have to keep that in mind. So, the idea is that understanding or deciphering metaphor relies on the understanding of that entire domain.

So, it is possible that the world knowledge required was missing in the previous experiments. That is the counter. Also, it was found that once children comprehend a metaphor within a certain conceptual domain, they can interpret other metaphors in the same domain. This is the second counter. Thirdly, researchers have pointed out that the studies included a heavy meta-linguistic load and that metaphors were presented out of context.

So, there was not much contextual information within which the child could interpret the metaphor. So, they needed to understand a lot of metalinguistic aspects of those utterances, which were probably adding to the cognitive load. So, to counter that, the other letter studies have looked at various kinds of methods, like the act-out method, simple questions, and embedded metaphors in stories. A lot of later studies have used stories. So, the children will be told a story, and at the end of it, they will be given a metaphorical sentence to either interpret, understand, or complete whatever different kinds of tasks are there.

So, using a different method by reducing the cognitive load, which means not giving the context and not presenting the metaphor out of context, they have actually found much better results. So, many studies have found that children actually do pretty well. One of them, for example, is that they use stories, and then at the end, they ask the children about some things concerning the main character. For example, what the main character felt after a whole story was that something was happening to one character, and at the end of it, what do you think the character is feeling? What does, let us say, the rabbit feel? So, they gave options between a bouncing bubble and a sinking boat: does the rabbit feel like a bouncing bubble or does the rabbit feel like a sinking boat? So, both of these figurative expressions had opposite mental states, and the children were given this kind of option; even 5-year-olds could do well in this task. However, only older children could explain what is happening, but younger children could get it right. They could not provide a proper explanation, but they understood it. Thus, children performed better in a forced-choice experiment. This is called a forced choice because you have only two options. Either of them is correct; one of them is correct. So, this is forced, not some open-ended conversation. So, what do you think the rabbit felt? Instead of, you know, asking them that; rather than giving a forced choice, children typically did better in a forced choice experiment.

Similar to many other studies, stories have also been carried out. So, they also found a similar kind of result. So, wherever stories have been used, children have been found to do much better. For example, in one such story, the children were asked to help a puppet answer various kinds of questions. So, even a 5-year-old could explain their answers in this case because the more elaborate the story is, the better the contextual information is, the better the child's performance in this task. So, we see that even 5-year-olds could do well in this; they could get the metaphor, and they could even explain it.

Hence, there was another theory that was proposed, which is called the early onset hypothesis. This basically means that children are able to understand metaphors much earlier than was considered before. So, as a result, there is an early onset of metaphor competence. This ability emerges in the early preschool years and develops throughout childhood. Children can be both literal and non-literal at the same time. They can be in both stages at the same time. So, this theory, the early onset theory, actually takes into account both the cases where some children are not able to grasp the metaphorical meaning, whereas others are able to; they try to explain it as the existence of both stages as a possibility. Because these might depend on various other factors, such as conceptual knowledge, world knowledge, how you have used the tasks in a given experimental setup, and so on. So, based on that, results can differ. However, children do understand; children do have metaphorical conceptualization much earlier in life.

So, to summarize, it is now understood that children might be able to understand a metaphor if presented with a forced choice. So, the conditions under which children might do better in metaphor-related tasks are that they might be given a forced-choice task where the context is made predictable and the metaphorical domains correspond to the child's world knowledge. So, in these cases, the child will be able to do so, basically giving a very conducive condition; if you give a conducive condition, then the child will be able to comprehend metaphor much better; if not, they may not. So, there are a couple more domains within figurative language usage. For example, there is metonymy, there is also irony, but the data from these domains are much less compared to metaphor-related studies, and there have been few. So, let me just refer to a couple of studies. In a semi-structured elicitation task for children aged 3 to 5 years old, it was found that metonymies were prevalent in the production of all age groups. So, children can use metonymy. Metonymy, as opposed to metaphor, is a way in which, in metaphor, you use one domain to understand another entire domain. So, one domain could be concrete; the other is abstract.

In metonymy, a particular object is called the vehicle. For example, a famous instance is "the ham sandwich spilled beer all over itself". It is a well-known example from the textbooks. So, what we mean by that is that the person eating the ham sandwich spilled

beer. But rather than saying 'the person', we use 'ham sandwich' to mean that person, vehicle and target. So, children are also found to use such constructions when they are very young. So, children were first shown a context picture in this particular task; they were given a picture and told a story again, a story-based elicitation task. About the two characters in the picture. One of whom had salient properties like a large nose, bicycle, helmet, and so on. First, there was a story in which there were two characters, and one of them had a salient feature. Typically, in children's stories, we have something that stands out as important. So, one character might have a large nose, another character might be wearing a bicycle helmet, and so on. In the target sentence, the salient property of this character is used as a subject. For example, as I just said, the ham sandwich, like that, so they can use a helmet as the subject. Because one of the characters had a bicycle helmet, which was a prominent feature in the target sentence, they used that particular feature and created a sentence like "the helmet rides home." They do not mean the helmet went on its own; they mean the person wearing the helmet went home.

What was the task? Children had to select a matching picture from a set of three similar pictures. So, one was a close-up of each individual in the story, and the other was each individual as the metonymic referent and the other character. So, when they said that the helmet went home, what did they mean? So, the children had to pick from three pictures. One of the pictures was the person wearing the helmet, the other was the other person, and the third was the salient property by itself. So if you are talking about the salient property by itself, and if the child picks up this third reference, it will mean that they have taken it literally.

But if they are able to point out the person who was wearing the helmet, then they have gotten the metonymic meaning of the sentence. And after they have chosen, they also had to explain the choice; that was the task. By age 3, children were found to understand metonymy in context, which is quite interesting because, by age 3, many studies have shown that they do not understand metaphor at that stage. But based on a story-based elicitation task, they actually tend to do well in this case as well. Some studies have also found an interesting pattern that older children tend to pick up a literal explanation in a metonymic condition, but younger children do better; they actually pick up the metonymic aspect of the sentence.

They have tried to explain it through the development of other communication-relevant abilities affecting the understanding of figurative language. Because they are still developing other communicative abilities, that probably has an impact. Some eye-tracking studies have also been done on this, and they show a similar pattern: older children tend to take the literal meaning rather than the metonymic meaning, but we need more data in order

to know for sure. Some studies have been carried out, and this is what they say.

The last pointer we are talking about is irony. Irony in this domain also data is not very rich. However, some available information suggests that children have a later development of comprehension and production of irony as well. This emerges around the age of 6. And before this age, children tend to interpret even ironic utterances as literal utterances. So, they do not understand the irony. This delay is often understood as being attributed to the speaker's intention and distance from the literal interpretation.

So, for the child to understand that the speaker is distancing himself from the literal interpretation, and you know all of that takes a little bit of time. So, children younger than 6 years of age do not do very well in interpreting irony. So, to sum up, conversation skills are a domain that seems to develop in children through stages, and depending on what kind of aspect we are talking about, the stage might be different. So, some aspects might develop earlier as opposed to others. However, the pattern seems to be that they do take some time to completely master all the aspects of conversational skill; older children typically tend to do better in terms of a number of parameters, and some of these conversational practices are dependent on social variables like cultural practices and the environment in which the child is living, and so on. Because metalinguistic abilities often have to do with the exposure and world knowledge of the child. So, those are important variables as well. As a result, we might have differences not only in terms of the within-domain parameters but also in terms of social and cultural differences, and so on. So, this is where we will end this module. Thank you.