

Ramona Kunene Nicolas

Pragmatic Speech Acts development in French, isiZulu, and Sesotho oral narratives

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Conventional forms in oral discourse are later acquired than the structure (phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics) of language. Children are socialised in line with their environmental conventions to produce culturally appropriate formulations. Contrastive linguistics aids us in understanding what is language specific and what is universal.

In this study, we investigate the pragmatic behaviour of two Bantu languages (isiZulu and Sesotho) spoken in South Africa and neighbouring countries, and French, in storytelling. In particular, we look at how pragmatic speech acts are expressed and if there is a developmental trajectory. We employ a multimodal perspective where we study oral and non-verbal cues in the form of gesture production during the oral narration.

Previous research on oral narratives (see, Berman 1997; Bruner 1993) has highlighted their pragmatic heterogeneity; we know that telling a story involves not only narrating the events but also commenting on them or on the narration itself. Oral discourse is a complex form of language built at the textual level. The adult use of language relies on the ability to understand and generate linguistic information based at this level (Austin 1975; Cameron-Faulkner 2014; Hickmann 2002). Discourse displays specific properties of cohesion and coherence which have no equivalent in the course of dialogue built out of the sequencing of short speech turns (Halliday/ Hasan 1976; Searle / Searle 1992). All these pragmatic features define the written use of language, so that later speech development is directly related to the acquisition of writing and reading abilities (Reilly 2004).

As in all forms of speech acts and spoken discourse, narratives involve the use of both auditory (linguistic + prosodic) and visual (gesture) communicative means. How is this manifest in children? A previous study on spontaneous narratives of events experienced by 6- to 11-years old children in the francophone context (Colletta 2004) showed an evolution of multimodal narrative performance with age. From 9 years onwards, narratives gain in linguistic complexity and children make more frequent use of gestures to represent the narrated events and characters, to maintain the internal coherence of the narrative, and to mark the transitions between the account of events and the commentaries.

In order to study the multimodal (speech and gesture) of narrative development and investigate its underlying linguistic, cognitive and social factors, we used a quasi-experiment where we elicited the production of oral narratives. We asked three groups of French, isiZulu, and Sesotho-speaking participants: 24 six-year-olds, 24 ten-year-olds, and 24 adults respectively, to narrate from a short cartoon that was previously shown to them. For this presentation, we focus on the pragmatic speech acts and co-speech gesture produced during this oral narrative task.

We will focus on the findings that illustrate language-specific (local) cues as well as universal trends. The two South African languages show a highly similar index while the French language shows a slightly different trend. We also find a universal developmental trend across all three languages, that further contributes to the literature on the developmental milestones that can be more attributed to cognitive development rather than the language spoken.

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Contact information

Ramona Kunene Nicolas

The University of the Witwatersrand

Ramona.KuneneNicolas@wits.ac.za