

# Current Canadian Clinical Concepts

The evaluation of a client's language skills includes the evaluation of such parameters as content, form, and use. In the past, evaluation and remediation emphasized content and form, perhaps to the exclusion of use. Today there is a great deal more emphasis on the appropriate use of language - pragmatics. The clinical/educational management of clients with pragmatic disorders necessitates an understanding of this whole area. In this paper, Dr. Carla Hess presents an overview of pragmatic abilities associated with child language performance. Communicative and non-communicative functions of verbal and nonverbal symbols are discussed. Issues related to the pragmatics of discourse and conversation are also addressed. The nature of four contexts of language use and the implications of these contexts for child language performance are provided.

Comments, suggestions and contributed articles should be sent to the Coordinator:

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## THE PRAGMATICS OF CHILD LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE

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Communicative competence involves more than the mastery of syntax, morphology, phonology and semantics. The meaningful, context-appropriate use of language in varied personal, social and educational encounters--the pragmatic component of linguistic performance-- is yet another behavioral parameter of communication commanding the recent attention of speech-language pathologists. Numerous recent textbooks on child language written by speech-language pathologists have included at least one definition and a discussion of pragmatics (Carrow-Woolfolk & Lynch, 1982; Cole, 1982; Lucas, 1980; Lund & Duchan, 1983; McCormick & Schiefelbusch, 1984; Muma, 1978; Owens, 1984; Wiig & Semel, 1984; B. Wood, 1981 and M.L. Wood, 1982). In this paper,<sup>1</sup> pragmatic abilities

associated with the interpersonal and intrapersonal use of verbal and nonverbal symbols, discourse and conversation, and context-sensitive communication are discussed.

### Language Functions

The ability to use language for different purposes is one aspect of linguistic competence. Those purposes, variously identified as speech acts, communication acts, language functions and communication functions, are both communicative (interpersonal) and noncommunicative (intrapersonal) in nature and exist for both verbal and nonverbal symbol systems. Carrow-Woolfolk and Lynch (1982, pp. 179-188) discussed the communicative and noncommunicative functions of language which are a "consensus of a number of researchers" (p. 180): to

<sup>1</sup>This paper was abstracted from a three-hour workshop entitled "Pragmatics: Linguistic performance in context" presented by the author on May 24, 1984 at the Canadian Speech and Hearing Conference in Regina, Saskatchewan.

greet and to express various social routines; to regulate including to control, persuade, request, convince, nag, demand, etc.; to exchange information including to question, to inform, to describe, to assert, to explain, etc.; to imagine (the imaginative function) including language used in games and fantasy as well as figurative and artistic language; and to talk about language (the metalinguistic function) - i.e. the use of language to talk about language. These authors also identified the following noncommunicative functions present in monologue - "that form of speech that occurs when the speaker ignores the presence of another person and directs the speech to himself" (p. 185); concept formation including such learning functions as labelling, categorizing, and thinking aloud; self-direction including the use of language to control both internal and external personal responses; and magical function including the use of taboo words, euphemisms and curses.

#### Nonverbal Communication

The pragmatic component of communication encompasses more than what is said in words. Pragmatic abilities exist also in the domain of nonverbal communication. B. Wood (1981) explained "how children communicate by using their body, their voice, and the space around them" (p. 166). Three research directions that describe the existing body of knowledge about children's nonverbal communication were identified by Wood as the science of kinesics involving the analysis of gestures, movements and positions of the body; the scientific study of the prosody of speech involving the analysis of such vocal features as pitch and loudness; and the science of proxemics involving the analysis of interpersonal space, distance and touch in communication. Carrow-Woolfolk and Lynch (1982) identified one additional parameter of nonverbal communication - chronemics - the use of time. The timing of entrances, the rate of speech and the duration of silence

are three aspects of chronemics used pragmatically.

#### Presumptions

McCormick and Schiefelbusch (1984) stated that "there are basically three types of related pragmatic knowledge-skill domains: performative, presumptions and conversational postulates" (p. 26). The pragmatics of language performance involves more than the ability to produce speech acts (performatives) thereby employing the communicative and noncommunicative functions of language within a single utterance. Pragmatic competence also encompasses the presumptions that a speaker makes based on listener and context variables. McCormick and Schiefelbusch (1984) described presumptions as . . . judgements about the capacity and needs of listeners in different social contexts. Competent communicators decide which of the many possible forms for a message will best serve the desired function, considering the participants and the context of the particular exchange. The speaker must know how to take into account information about what the listener already knows and does not know about the particular topic of exchange, as well as information about the context (p. 27). M.L. Wood (1982) also discussed several bases for presumptions: shared knowledge including prior knowledge, world knowledge and listener-specific knowledge; shared experiential context of the moment when the utterance is expressed; preceding utterances; assumed listener biases; and nonverbal cues to speaker intentions.

#### Discourse and Conversation

The comprehension/production of discourse and conversation require abilities to relate utterances to each other over time (discourse) and to relate utterances between and among speakers (conversation). McCormick and Schiefelbusch (1984) identified several aspects of the pragmatics of discourse and conversation: temporal spacing of pauses; asking questions;

handling digressions; shifting topics; taking turns, entering and initiating conversations; and leaving or terminating conversations. Several other pragmatic abilities required for conversational competence involve the comprehension/production of shifting reference, deixis and ellipses (Bloom & Lahey, 1978); the selection/interpretation of codes (Simon, 1981; Wiig & Semel, 1984; M.L. Wood, 1982) and the indication/revision of communication breakdown (Rees & Wollner, 1981).

### Context

The pragmatic abilities associated with performatives, presumptions, discourse and conversation include the processing of context-related variables. Lund and Duchan (1983) discussed the dramatic effects of four contexts on the ways language is used and interpreted. The situational context requires responsiveness to the physical setting, the speech event itself, the relationships between speech events and topic. The intention context requires knowledge of both possible speaker intentions and the agenda. The listener context requires a physical perspective for deictic purposes, the background perspective associated with presuppositions and knowledge of role relationships which impact the linguistic code selected. The linguistic context requires knowledge and abilities with linguistic cohesion devices, ellipses, and contrastive stress; and use of meanings established in previous utterances. These contextual variables influence the pragmatics of selection/production and comprehension/interpretation of content (what may/should be said in a particular situation) as well as form and style (how something is said in a particular situation).

In conclusion, a perspective underlying the preparation of this paper is that the clinical/educational management of children with language differences, delays and disorders is enhanced when services are formulated out of an understanding of the pragmatics of child

language. Certainly the pragmatic abilities identified in this paper can be translated into behaviors to be targeted for evaluation, intervention and consultation purposes.

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HEAR HERE

## We Get Letters

Virginia Martin, Editor  
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Dear Virginia:

As helping professions, a major role of speech pathology and audiology is to provide services to children. As such, we have an obligation to be alert to those rare and often professionally peripheral conditions that may signal very real dangers to the kids we serve. For this reason, a recent article requires our attention. It concerns an uncommon phenomena, yet ignorance of it is the greatest danger.

The danger concerns hearing aid battery ingestion by children. Kenna and Stool (1983) present a case report of a deaf child with a history of eating hearing aid batteries. They discuss the difficulty of removing batteries by endoscopy, and they discuss the possibly fatal complications of caustic ulceration and metal poisoning. In most instances the batteries pass through the system with no complications. But the button battery registry of the National Capital Poison Center in Washington, D.C. (Tel. 202-625-3333) has records of two toddlers dying of battery ingestion and of several children who are now unable to swallow food because of esophageal injuries.

Prevention is better than a cure. Several recommendations are offered: 1) Batteries, new and used, should be treated as poisons. Put them away and keep them out of reach. 2) Hearing aid batteries should not be changed in the presence of children. 3) If a battery is missing, a thorough search should be made for its recovery. 4) If a child does swallow a battery, take him to a doctor and urge the doctor to use the "hot line" number of the National Poison Center. (When I brought this problem before the board meeting of the local Canadian Hearing Society, one member suggested that hearing aid batteries be coated with one of those awful tasting solutions that are used to discourage thumb sucking and nail biting.)

### Reference

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Sincerely,  
Floyd Rudmin

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