

Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!: Object requests, ownership and entitlement in a children's play session[☆]



Sally Dixon^{*}

The Australian National University, Australia

Abstract

The exchange of objects is a ubiquitous feature of children's play. Yet we know little about how children choose amongst the plethora of strategies at their disposal for getting and maintaining control of objects in the play space. In the present study, the methods of conversation analysis are applied to reveal Aboriginal children in remote Central Australia relying heavily on two 'toy getting' strategies: 'gimme' requests and grabs. Both strategies carry with them an expectation of compliance. The analysis will reveal that in the play session, this expectation of compliance arises from two situational factors: who owns the toy at the time of the request, and the request-maker's 'entitlement' to have the toy. The former can be signalled by various in-turn design features such as assertions of ownership, possessive pronouns and a range of justifications which point to various ownership rights. Entitlement is justified with explicit or tacit reference to 'rules of the game'.

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1. Introduction

The study of children's language and interaction in its own right (without reference to purported adult norms or as a means to understanding development to adulthood) recognises children as competent social beings, intent on navigating their own agendas and concerns within the context of peer culture (see [Butler, 2008:1–18](#) for an overview). This study will reveal that Alyawarr English-speaking children have complex and nuanced strategies at their disposal for managing the transfer of toys in the play context. The present paper examines a 30 min recording of naturally occurring interaction among Alyawarr children in a small community in Central Australia. Over 9 min of the play time – roughly a third of the time – is spent dealing with the getting of objects. A useful interactional skill therefore includes both being able to get toys off other children and protect one's own. This study is concerned with elucidating the strategies used by children in their pursuit of objects in play. In particular, what local factors contribute to the use of the two most prevalent strategies: requests formulated with the imperative *gimi* 'gimme', and grabbing the object.¹ There is previous research relevant to the analysis of request formats, to which we now turn.

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^{*} Tel.: +61 261252894.

E-mail address: sally.dixon@anu.edu.au.

¹ Alyawarr English utterances have been transcribed using orthographic conventions developed for Kriol (see e.g. [Schultze-Berndt et al., 2013](#)). As with its English equivalent, *gimi* is a contraction of the verb *gip* 'give' and the 1st object pronoun *mi* 'me'. The form itself is interesting, since it dispenses with the verb final *-im* morpheme, which indicates transitivity on all other transitive verbs.

The question of how conversational participants choose among the range of request forms present in their linguistic repertoires has largely been explored with reference to adult interaction. The politeness literature, arising from the foundational work of [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), sees the different request forms in a given language as constituting varying degrees of directness. The choice of form is arrived at by consideration of specific contextual variables which dictate the amount of politeness needed to mitigate outcomes which may be threatening to the recipient's "negative face". The contextual variables brought to bear in this calculation are social power, social distance, and ranking of imposition. Because of the reliance on these static, global concepts, this approach is limited in its ability to account for variation that occurs when all these variables are held constant (as is the case in the present study). For more substantial discussion of the limitations of this approach see [Curl and Drew \(2008\)](#) and [Watts \(2003\)](#), and for an examination of object requests and directness see [Ogiermann \(2015\)](#).

Requests have also received treatment within the field of conversation analysis (CA). By contrast to the politeness work, CA has largely been concerned with the sequential management of requests in terms of two basic turn types: preferred and dispreferred (e.g. [Heritage, 1984](#); [Schegloff, 2007](#)). As such, the focus has tended to be on the response rather than the form of the request itself ([Curl and Drew, 2008](#)). However there have been several studies specifically focusing on turn design, or as [Curl and Drew \(2008\)](#) put it: "Why that (form) now?". These have shown that interactants also orient to local factors in the formulation of their requests. It is these studies that form the backdrop to the present analysis.

Entitlement has emerged as a strong theme in adults' requests for tasks or services. [Curl and Drew \(2008\)](#) compare two English request forms ('Would/Could you...' and 'I wonder if...') and find their use varies in terms of both the speaker's entitlement to make the request and the presence of contingencies which may impact on compliance with the request (the modal requests reflect a position of high entitlement and low contingency). Similarly, [Heinemann \(2006\)](#) compares positive and negative interrogative formats and finds the latter format displays a stance of entitlement to have a particular task completed in the institutional setting of Danish domestic care services. In studies which specifically address the imperative format, requests of this kind are associated with a display of strong entitlement. For example, [Lindström \(2005\)](#) finds a cline between requests formulated as imperatives, statements and interrogative such that, within the institutional context of a Swedish home-based caregiving service, imperatives signal strong entitlement to have the requested action completed, interrogatives signal that the requested activity might fall outside of mandated caregiving tasks, and statements sit somewhere in the middle; leaving interpretation as a request open for negotiation. Likewise, [Craven and Potter's \(2010\)](#) study of directives used in family mealtimes reveals a prevalence of imperatives, which the authors argue is because "the imperative formulation enables speakers to display *entitlement* to direct the recipient's action" (ibid:426, emphasis in original).

A question naturally arises at this point regarding how a request-maker might arrive at a stance of entitlement. Some focus in the aforementioned literature has been given to the role relationships between request-maker and request-recipient, and the attendant norms and expectations for what (and how) one can demand of another. The enactment of relationship dichotomies such as doctor/patient ([Curl and Drew, 2008](#)), parent/child ([Craven and Potter, 2010](#)), care-giver/client ([Heinemann, 2006](#); [Lindström, 2005](#)) entails knowledge of how one makes requests of the other. For example, [Lindström \(2005\)](#) and [Heinemann \(2006\)](#) present request forms as responding to institutionally ordained, shared understandings between care-provider and client about what tasks the former might legally perform for the latter.

Sometimes these roles are made explicitly relevant by conversational participants within the interaction itself. For example, [Curl and Drew \(2008\)](#) show that patients demonstrate their entitlement to request a home visit from the doctor by listing symptoms that are indicative of a serious medical problem warranting prompt attention. By doing so they are making available for the request-recipient the information required to see them as a 'very sick patient' who can legitimately use a more entitled request format. As such, roles themselves are not necessarily static, but may be a locally unfolding contingency.

A stance of entitlement may also be arrived at in response to another type of local consideration. Several studies have examined the distribution of imperative requests in relation to the display of joint alignment between request-maker and recipient. [Rossi \(2012\)](#) compares the use of two Italian request forms (one interrogative, one imperative) in informal contexts, and reveals that imperative requests are used if 'co-ownership' of some project is shared by the request-maker and recipient. By contrast, interrogative requests require the request-recipient to somehow become involved in an operation hitherto the remit of the request-maker alone. Similarly, [Wootton's \(1997, 2005\)](#) studies of parent-child interaction reveal children to be sensitive to whether the request is marking a deviation from an expected course of action, or is projectable from unfolding events; imperatives are used in the latter case, consistent with the findings of [Rossi \(2012\)](#).

While the studies so far reviewed focus on requests for services and tasks, we shall see that their findings regarding entitlement have strong echoes in the requests for objects discussed here. Previous work specifically addressing requests for objects has been less prolific. [Zinken and Ogiermann's \(2013\)](#) comparative study of object requests in Polish and English family mealtimes describes the 'home environment' of imperative object requests as "when compliance from

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