

MISREPRESENTATION IN THE LANGUAGE OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: IMPLICATION FOR HUMOUR IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Bola Shakirat Ijaiya

Abstract

In the amazing world of children, language plays a prominent role. As a communicative tool, language development is a gradual process consisting of stages/ phases through which the child passes. This study is, therefore, an investigation of these phases in under six-year old children when pragmatic performance is at its primary level. The use of a psycho-pragmatic model (Ijaiya 2007, 2012) as an analytic frame work established misrepresentation as a product of pragmatic failure arising from linguistic knowledge without contextual knowledge. The resultant effect of this gap is the humour created in the course of the children's performance. The paper concludes that linguistic knowledge appears in children before pragmatic knowledge and there is a psychological apparatus (theory of mind) that is responsible for pragmatic performance in children.

Keywords: Misrepresentation, Pragmatic Performance, Humour, Theory of Mind, Language Development.

Introduction

One form of speech interaction between children and adults is oral communication. Oral communication (often face to face) is usually influenced by factors such as context, age, gender and the place, where the conversation takes place etc. (Bulrout and Noach 2001). Through these factors, especially age, children's pragmatic behaviours (as the case with our study) are identifiable and can be pinpointed. Studies have shown that communicative intent appears in children before speech development. This means that the child expresses his/ her interactional

intention through a combination of gaze, gesture and other local behaviours (Clark 1977, Lock 1978, Ijaiya 2007). The communicative forms of behaviour change to word-like utterances as the child acquires the speech form of his/her environment. The capacity for acquisition of language forms and functions has also been acknowledged by various scholars (Clark 1977, Moss 2004) with clear definition of pragmatic functions in children as indicated below.

A. Using language for different purposes, such as greeting (e.g., hello, good bye)

1. Describing (e.g. I'm going to get a cookie)
2. Informing (e.g. I'm going to get a cookie)
3. Demanding (e.g. Give me a cookie)
4. Promising (e.g. I'm going to get you a cookie)
5. Requesting (e.g. I would like a cookie please)

B. Changing language according to the need of the listener or situation, such as

1. Talking differently to a baby and to an adult
2. Giving background information to an unfamiliar listener
3. Speaking differently in a class room and on a play ground

C. Following rules for conversation and storytelling, such as taking turns in conversation, etc.

All of the sub-categories have time frame with specific period of occurrence in children.

This study, therefore, examines the impact of misrepresentation as a developmental phase of pre-school children. It is also to establish humour as a product of misrepresentation that aids language development in children.

Theoretical Orientation

Pragmatic Theories and Principles

Knowing a language involves knowing its pragmatics. Therefore, the use of pragmatic parameters to judge communicative performance of individuals including children is germane to knowing their

communicative competence. Hence Children, right from infancy are expected to respond linguistically to their stimulating environment. This contextual behaviour is what this study is also about. The following theories/ principles are to be covered as part of our analytic tool: The Speech Act and Gricean Cooperative principles (1975).

According to Austin (1962), engaging in a speech act means performing the complimentary acts of locution, illocution and perlocution. A locutionary act is the act of saying, producing meaningful sounds and words with certain reference. A locutionary act therefore deals with formal meaning of an utterance without a pragmatic consideration in context.

An illocutionary act is the non- linguistic act performed through a linguistic locutionary act. In other words, it is about the communication of intention to speak to the hearer through the propositional content of an utterance. The intention expressed through illocutionary act can be questioning, advising, greeting, promising, vowing, etc. The perlocution has to do with the effect of the speaker's utterance on the hearer, e.g. fear, joy, anger, etc.

Relevant to our study also is the Searle's contribution in the area of direct and indirect speech acts. He describes an indirect speech act as one performed by means of another. Which means that there is no correlation between the structure and function of a linguistic act while the direct speech act, has a correlation between the structure and function.

Grice's (1975) Theory of Speech Acts centres on how an expressed meaning conveys conventional implicature while implied meaning is conveyed by conversational Implicature. Within this notion of cooperative principle, Grice suggests four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation and manner. By the quantity maxim, you do not make your contribution to be more informative than required. Quality maxim denotes, you do not say what you believe to be false, while manner means you should not be ambiguous in your expression. The maxim of relation deals with making relevant expressions. These maxims, when adhered to by a speaker, leads to conventional

implicature that portrays semantic knowledge and ability to understand the meaning of a sentence (truth – condition). The flouting of these maxims is what gives us a conversational implicature which relies on extra – truth conditions in an utterance's interpretation.

The inability of young children to attain this level of interpretation (Pragmatic) is actually a function of their psychological state of mind. This is what the next review entails.

Theory of Mind

This is a form of physiological development that has been linked to language acquisition in the child. The theory of mind enables the child to build, intuitively, social cognitive skills for language performance. The cognitive knowledge facilitates the understanding of an utterance beyond the literal meaning and children are able to perform pragmatically; responding appropriately to situational contexts. Anyone can link the theory of mind to LAD (Language Acquisition Device) that innately activates the mental process for pragmatic performance. According to Astington (2001:10), the theory of Mind is the ability that facilitates understanding people as mental beings, each with his/her mental (thoughts, wants, motives and s). Describing it further, Astington refers to it as the ability of the child to 'tune -in' and 'get -along' with adults.

As a gradual mental process, the theory of mind emerges with different operative tasks for language performance. By the age of two, children are able to interact with their teddy bears in a pretence play by pretending to babysit in a series of child's play. The linguistic engagements of the child at this stage have been highlighted in our introduction.

In summary Astington (2001:10) concludes that social skills appear in infancy; and then reflective social cognition develops during the toddler and pre-school years. Hence, a three year- old knows that different people want, like and feel different things. By the age of 4 or 5 years, children know that people may think different things. They understand that a person may believe something that is true but say something else based on false belief.

The foregoing knowledge practically indicates that age 5 children can sense misrepresentation in communication and get along with it depending on certain variables accessible to them in the situational environment (such as interaction with siblings, story books, and pretend play among others). The outcome of these interactions in the child is the development of sound, social/ academic functions. Consequently with the development of theory of mind, children's language and cognitive control abilities are activated and enhanced thereby making them (Children) to perform pragmatically in situations.

Misrepresentation and Humour in Children's Language

According to empiricists, meanings entail the possibility of errors, as representation presupposes the possibility of misrepresentation Peelman (2000 in Ijaiya 2007:80).

Pragmatically speaking therefore, it is possible to present falsehood against truth (flouting the Gricean maxim) for a purpose. This act, called misinterpretation is used in different fields (politics, law, business, entertainment, etc.) on purpose for their professional goals. This is what is referred to as intentional misrepresentation. The purpose of misrepresentation in situations has also been stressed by Carl Gutwin and Gordon Ma Calla (2000 in Ijaiya 2007:90) stating that: "many models of the real world are extremely complex and misrepresentations are often used as useful, comprehensible approximations of complicated systems". They further state that there are many instances where falsehood is a legitimate behaviour. Realizing that misinterpretations often occur as legitimate behaviour of children in language performance, the present study provides us with a pragmatic context for investigation.

Unlike adults, we discover that the act of misrepresentation in children is actually psychological and maturationally motivated. Children show their awareness of conventional implicatures in their linguistic behaviours without recognizing the pragmatic imports. For example, the child's response in the following conversation conveys misrepresentation resulting to humour:

Teacher: how old is your father?

Child: He is six years

Teacher: why?

Child: He didn't become a father until I was born.

The response of the child even though it is an expression of the truth in line with conversational Maxim of quality, is incongruous in this context and infelicitous

Humour on the other hand is described as a mental ability to discover, express or appreciate something funny or something really absurd (Semua, Man and Glass (2010:8),state that humour assists as lubricant.... And in children it is inextricably tied to their development and serves a social and developmental purpose. And as a developmental process, humour in this investigation occurs as a result of children's inability to resolve Incongruity based on the inadequate knowledge of the language due to age factor.

They also see humour as an expression of incompatible elements which are caused by absence of theory of mind skills .According to (Moss 2004:4), pragmatic conversations that elicit humour do not often occur by design but happen spontaneously as we also found out in our present investigation.

In essence, humour is generated in children's language as an outcome of their inability to understand adult's perspective. But by the age of six, the ability to understand People's Perspective (theory of mind skill) is expected to be in place efficiently (Ijaiya 2007:50). Humour therefore, is an important aspect of the language learning process in children and tendency to reveal that ability (adapt and comprehend humour) enhances their performance. Below are the findings from our investigation and they clearly show how humour is being motivated by misrepresentations.

Research Methodology

Sources of data for this study were mainly the internet, the social media (WhatsApp) Children's Magazines and books. A total of ten (10) samples were purposively chosen from our research subjects who were under the age of six years.

The purposive samples were analysed using the Psycho-Pragmatic Approach earlier developed by the investigator in 2007 but modified for this present study. This theoretical frame work, (Psycho - Pragmatic Model), enabled us to cover a very crucial psychological apparatus (theory of mind) in our analysis. A combination of this theory with our pragmatic principles, such as implicatures, misrepresentations, and Gricean maxims, were employed for the resultant outcome (humour).

Data Presentation / Discussion

Based on Ijaiya's Psycho-Pragmatic Model of Analysis (2007) which suitably relies on theory of mind as a principal component to pragmatics as our analytic tool in this investigation, the study arrived at the link between misrepresentation and humour. The model adopted in this study enabled us to deploy some pragmatic elements such as context, implicatures, Grice's, maxims and misrepresentation alongside with selected psycho- social parameters (cognition, perception and maturation) to achieve our goal.

Note that the data below were actually collected as jokes linked to children under the age of six and added to them were those collected by this author through interactions and observations.

Example 1

Teacher: What is red and smells like a blue colour

Child: A red paint!

Here, the child is unable to see the teacher's locutionary act as a riddle that needs interpretation beyond the literally level. This is so, because the child lacks cognitive power to recognize the expression as a riddle and then respond to it accordingly. With his literal response, the child interlocutor demonstrates semantic knowledge which causes misrepresentation on his part by flouting the maxim of quality (Not expressing the truth)

The misrepresentation here, (between blue and red) which is perceptive, generates humour on the of part adults but not so to the child.

Example 2

Child: (in a chat with an adult). Where is your ‘Sunkanmi (The child’s referring to his younger brother)

A little background knowledge of who/what is Sunkanmi is needed here. Sunkanmi is the child’s brother and expectedly they are always together and like them, the adult interactant had always been seen together with his wife (as a couple). Therefore, at this occasion where the child did not see the man and wife together, he innocently asked: “Where is your Sunkami”? Indicating your partner (here, the child interlocutor generalizes and equates every partner as Sunkanmi). This misrepresentation (cognitive error) is borne out of the experience of the child.

The illocutionary force of the message can only be seen only with the background knowledge who Sunkanmi is (younger brother), thereby making the speech act an indirect one with the conversational implicature: where is your wife? The misrepresentation between wife as a partner and brother as a partner here is caused by the child’s immaturity in his intellect due to age. In his own world, every closeness like that of his brother and himself is perceived and labelled as ‘Sunkanmi’ to the amusement of the adult hearers.

Example 3

Teacher: What do you call a gorilla with bananas in its mouth?

Child: Anything you call it, it can’t hear you!

The response of the child in this exchange gives an insight to the tendency for the truth conditional meaning to hold sway before the implied meaning. To go beyond this expressed meaning, the child needs representational capacity to be able see the expression beyond the literal interpretation but perhaps as a figurative expression or riddle for proper inference that involves other contextual information.

Example 4

Teacher: why does a giraffe have a long neck?

Child: Because it has a smelly leg

Here, the child's respondent missed the illocutionary force (intent) of the teacher's question by drawing meaning from the immediate context (Conventional Implicature), which is that the giraffe smelly leg is responsible for its long neck. The implication of this is that the child interlocutor has totally relied on his perception to draw inferential meaning which is not available at the immediate linguistic context.

Example 5

Teacher: How do the bees brush their hair?

Child: They use honey comb!

This is yet another interesting performance that is characterized by intuitive reasoning arising from the world knowledge of 'comb' for brushing of hair and so the bee by semantic analogy, would use his own comb to brush its own hair. The incongruity in this exchange certainly elicits humour and brings out the child's lack of capacity for inferential interpretation.

Example 6

Adult: He is a dark horse (adult referred to another adult in the presence of the child). The child: knowing the adult in question responded he is not!

Adult: why?

Child: he is not dark (referring to his complexion).

In this exchange, we can see a total misrepresentation on the part of the child because of his disregard for idiomatic meanings. The child's perceptual capacity cannot yet accommodate idioms inferentially to him, a person who is dark in complexion can be simply likened to a dark horse. To him, referring to a non-dark person as dark is incongruous and has no place in his lexicon.

Example 7

Teacher: Joseph! Go to the map and find North America

Joseph: Here it is

Teacher: (to the rest of the class) correct! Now class who discovered America?

Class: Joseph!

Even though the response of the class may seem like an intentional misrepresentation in order to create spontaneous humour, it also signifies contextual felicity arising from its propositional content (the assumed pragmatic incompetence of the class is explored to facilitate humour).

Example 8

Teacher: George Washington not only chopped down his father's cherry tree, but also admitted it. Now peter, do you know why his father did not beat or punish him?

Child: Because Gorge still had the axe in his hand.

Logically speaking, peter (child) obeys the maxim of quality (truth) by deducing that nobody would dare another person with an axe in his hands. But pragmatically speaking, peter is guilty of misrepresentation by assuming that his teacher demands what Adegbija (1985) describes as 'primary layer of meaning' which is simply the literal interpretation based on the lexical item of the expression. The lack of cooperation on his part (flagrant flouting of quality maxim) is predicated on the absence of extra linguistic knowledge thereby resulting in production of humour.

Example 9:

Adult visitor: Is your mother at home? (1)

Child: Yes, but she said that she is not at home! (2)

This child actually obeys the Gricean maxim of quality by saying, yes (being truthful), but what follows immediately (2) is a violation of manner maxim making the whole utterance ambiguous on the surface, but with an Implicature that 'my mother is at home'. This Implicature can be recognized by all adults including the enquirer. The child participant could not say otherwise because he is psychologically deficient to be able to present lie as truth.

Example 10

Adult visitor: Shouldn't you tell your mother that her phone is ringing? (1)

Child: she's in taking a bath! (2)

Adult visitor: You better answer it! (3)

Child: I can't, it might be a stranger (4)

Adult visitor: What difference does that make? (5)

Child: I'm not supposed to talk to a stranger (6)

Adult visitor: (commanded) you answer it! (7)

Child: (picked up the phone) hello (8)

Caller: Hello, may I speak to your mother please! (9)

Child: She is not HERE (10)

Caller: When do you expect her home? (11)

Child: She is HOME right now! (12)

Caller: But you said she wasn't there! (13)

Child: I didn't say she wasn't there! I said she wasn't HERE! (14)

The misrepresentation here is that the child misinterprets his mother's directive act (not to speak to a stranger) and assumed it is inclusive of electronic voices. The inability of the child to differentiate electronic persona and real life person is a function of imperceptible faculty present in the child at this stage.

Similarly it is the child's perceptible problem that is responsible for his misconception of 'here and there'. 'Here' to him is the immediate space in his environment (where he is presently), while 'there' to him does not mean any other part of the house because it is outside his concept of space. To the caller, the adverb 'here' covers every part of the house and therefore interprets the child's 'Here' to mean his mother is not anywhere in the house. Hence, her response: 'when do you expect her home?' suggesting the mother of the child absence from home. The child's corresponding response signifies unintentional misrepresentation leading to his emphasis: 'I said she is home right now! 'Sounding misinformed to the caller (the flouting of maxims of relation and manner by the child), the caller explicitly remarks "But you said she wasn't there! This utterance triggers provocation on the part of the child as seen in (14). This is because the child misconstrues the

illocutionary force of the adverb ‘there’ from the caller to mean a location other than here.

In sum, the entire telephone conversation demonstrates the gradual process in acquiring semantic knowledge of adverb ‘there’ as a location outside the child’s vicinity but part of his immediate environment. The emergence of this knowledge is predictable and systematic in children.

Conclusion

The study identified the link between pragmatics (misrepresentation) and psychology (theory of mind) by establishing that pragmatic competence in children is largely dependent on their developmental cognitive / perspective capacity. The interaction between the two processes generates humour by way of pragmatic failure arising from violation of cooperative principles by the children participants.

The implication of our findings in this study is that misrepresentation is actually a learning process in the child. Through this process, language capacity of the child is built and developed.

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