

Acquisition of politeness strategies: a longitudinal case study of a child from one to nine years

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Abstract

The author, who is the child's mother, examined strategies taken from diary data, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness as a framework. The aim was to identify the ages when the child's most-used politeness strategies emerged. Three strategies were studied: conventional indirectness (negative politeness), hints (off-record politeness) and rapport-building (positive politeness), along with the politeness markers "please" and "thank you". The results of this naturalistic study were compared with those from previous experimental and observational apparent-time hypotheses focusing on other children. In the case study, politeness markers were found to emerge at around two years, as in the previous studies, despite less parental prompting. Conventional indirectness and hints were found to appear earlier than in the previous studies; the acquisition of these was found to begin at age two and be well developed by four years, compared with at least five years in previous studies. Development of rapport-building skills was tracked from "rehearsals" in pretend play at ages two and three, through to inviting people and showing appreciation, and finally metapragmatic awareness at age nine. Alongside rapport-building, contributing signs of mentalising were noted, along with growing skills in balancing face. Naturalistic studies of other children would reveal more about the influence of parental input, the development of conventional indirectness and the role played by pretend play in developing positive politeness. The unused strategies from the diaries, such as joking and irony, could be used in future studies to complete the picture of the child's politeness acquisition.

Keywords Brown and Levinson, child language acquisition, facework, indirectness, mentalisation, negative politeness, positive politeness, pragmatic language development, rapport-building

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1. Introduction

Brown and Levinson presented their finalised theory of positive and negative politeness in their work published in 1987. Their theory will be used as a framework for this longitudinal case study of my daughter's politeness acquisition, for which I will draw on diary data covering the first nine years of her life. The aim will be to ascertain the politeness strategies she uses, and when they emerge. The results will be compared with previous studies, and it will be interesting to examine how her strategies develop and to what degree they correspond to other researchers' findings. The diary data is naturalistic, detailed and written without any particular research aim. First of all, it is important to define the politeness theory and explain its foundations.

Brown and Levinson developed their politeness theory from Erving Goffman's (1967) study of interaction, grounding it in his fundamental concept of *face* as the public image every human aims to project (p.61). According to their theory, every human interaction has the potential to be face-threatening. They detail the reciprocal efforts people make to prevent, or at least mitigate, this threat and protect the faces of both parties in a conversation. Two overarching aspects of politeness are presented in their work: showing respect and building rapport. These are both vital for social cohesion and individual well-being (Brown & Levinson 61-62; Leech 2014: 27).

According to Brown and Levinson's criteria (p.129), "negative politeness" encompasses the "respect" aspect of politeness. It involves people defending each other's "negative face" – their need to go about their lives without imposition. They do this by being indirect and trying not to impose on their hearers, for example, by saying "please", "sorry", and "excuse me", or by giving a directive in the form of an interrogative instead of an imperative, such as "Can you ...?" or, even more indirect, using a subjunctive such as "Could you...?" or "I would like ..." (Leech: 151, 153).

Brown and Levinson's "positive politeness" (p.101) encompasses the "building rapport" aspect. It involves defending each other's "positive face" by being kind and friendly, for example, by paying compliments or showing sympathy. People help each other feel safe in society by mutually fulfilling their need to be acknowledged and appreciated. At the same time, they need to defend their own faces so that others do not take advantage of their good nature (Brown & Levinson: 67). The researchers emphasise (p. 245) that their model leaves room for cross-cultural variation.

Most academic studies on linguistic politeness are based on this theory, which is testament to the strength and endurance of its influence. No other major politeness theories have superseded it, despite various claims that it tends to be "culturally biased" (overview by Leech 2014: 111). It will therefore make an ideal framework for this study of politeness acquisition. The study will cover both positive (kindness, building rapport) and negative (respect, not imposing) politeness strategies.

Bruner (1983: 115) points out that when children are learning how to make polite requests (for example in interactions at mealtimes) they are not just learning language: they are also trying out negative politeness *strategies*, or ways to use language to get things done within that culture. This is the reasoning behind Brown and Levinson's (p.85) term "politeness strategies". In my study I will trace the development of these strategies. Although the strategies are not usually conscious, they still contain a rational element while covering both innovative plans of action ("Would you like to...?") and routines with a rational origin but an automatic application, for example "Please...", originating from the medieval "if it please you" (Culpeper & Gillings 2018: 40).

Acquiring positive politeness strategies is a longer-term process, beginning at birth when infants, born with a drive to communicate, attend to the human face and voice as the keys to reading emotion and intent (Murray & Andrews 2000: 47). Brown and Levinson (p.37) ask whether politeness acquisition can be “correlated with the growth of skill in handling social interaction in general.” As they develop, children come to understand how actions such as greetings or attention to another person’s wants (see Table 1) affect each person’s positive face. *Mentalisation*, also known as theory of mind, refers to the awareness that others have different feelings, preferences, intentions and perceptions from one’s own. It facilitates the understanding of other people’s inner states (Hughes and Leekam 2004). This study will briefly compare the development of positive strategies with mentalisation and facework development.

In section 2 I will discuss the rationale for my study and the literature published so far on the subject of children’s acquisition of politeness strategies. This will bring me to my precise research question and hypotheses. I will present the methodology used to answer the research question in section 3, and the results in section 4. My interpretation of the results will be discussed in section 5 and I will draw my conclusions in section 6.

2. Background

2.1 Rationale for the study

This study will be naturalistic and qualitative. Ambridge and Rowland (2013) make a comparison between naturalistic (usually qualitative) with experimental (usually quantitative) studies of child language acquisition. They give the advantages of experimental studies as facilitating researchers' control of variables and isolation of effects, particularly when investigating less frequent items and structures (p.151). But if the context is unusual, responses could be unrepresentative of the child's everyday language (p.16), for example in role play using puppets. In this case children might imitate family behaviours they have seen in movies, rather than imagining what they would naturally say in a family situation, as Andersen discovered in her (1992: 83) research.

After much work using experimental techniques, the psychologist Bruner (1983), decided to change tack and carry out his investigations amid "the clutter of life at home" (p.9). He chose to go to the child's own setting for learning, where they learn language by using it communicatively (p.119), rather than observing them in a "contrived video laboratory." This sounds like the perfect solution. However, researchers attempting to carry out a naturalistic study in a child's home normally visit them for one or two hours a week, and their presence inevitably incurs observer's paradox¹.

Diaries kept by parents who are *in situ* overcome this problem and capture more naturalistic data. In the ultimate naturalistic study, Roy *et al.* (2006) carried out the Human Speechome Project, in which Roy installed recording equipment in his home and made audio-video recordings of nearly every waking moment in the first three years of his son's life. He was able to

¹ Where the presence of the linguist exerts an influence on the way people talk (Labov 1972: 209).

observe “the birth of a word” in detail, for example how his son’s first attempt at “water”, which was “gaga”, gradually evolved into the recognisable word “water”.

I kept records of my daughter’s language acquisition for an even longer period: from infancy to age nearly 10. I was aware that the various stages of a child’s language development are lost over time if unrecorded, so I decided to preserve them in note form and on audio tape. Like a traditional journal, they also incorporated details of how we spent our days. The result was seven A4 files of daily handwritten diary notes, and eight hours of random audio recordings up to the age of six. Some of the audio recordings were made at mealtimes, which presented many opportunities for interaction. Observer’s paradox was not an issue, and when she was old enough to become aware of my note-taking I explained that I was writing a diary about “the special things we do together”.

Although I could not note all the interactions she was involved in, I made a detailed record of her utterances and gestures along with contextual information, particularly if these were novel, humorous, or salient in some other way. As such, this study is uniquely placed to contribute to the acquisitional field, as it presents a longitudinal account of the acquisition of politeness strategies in a naturalistic environment. We should be able to see when her strategies emerged, and if or when they evolved, stabilised or were abandoned.

My daughter is now 21 and able to access examples of how she discovered “what worked” when learning to get along with other people and become a member of the speech community. As her mother, I am able to open one of the diaries at any page and be taken back to how she was at that particular stage of development. Because I have a dual role in this study as both mother and researcher, I am writing both from the point of view of her mother - to introduce the project and

to explain the methodology - and from the point of view of the researcher, to present and evaluate the results. My use of the first person wherever appropriate in the introduction and methodology feels genuine, and allows me to keep my agency (Brennan 2024). I will use the third person to present and evaluate the results, as this allows me to take an objective view of my findings without my personal views distorting the results.

2.2 Literature review

It seems that no longitudinal case studies of acquisition of politeness strategies have yet been published. Studies so far have been in the form of apparent time hypotheses and have focused on politeness markers and negative politeness requests. In this section I will give an overview of three studies focusing on politeness markers, and then three studies focusing on negative politeness requests. In the absence of studies investigating positive politeness as such, I will then consider studies focusing on mentalisation and facework, and how these relate to social skills in general.

Clark (2024: 98) quotes “bye bye” in her reproduction of Fenson *et al.*'s (1994: 93) table of early word production, as the first routine word children produce - often as early as age 1;1. In the same table, “thank you” emerges next, at age 1;6. These words were taken from a survey of diary studies and were uttered by at least 50% of the monthly sample of children. This data offers a useful overview of typical development.

Wotton (2007: 171) found the marker “please” to be part of a child’s lexicon very early on - by the age of two years. He carried out a cross-sectional study of one child using video recordings. In one example he gives, the child (aged 1;11) is in her highchair, and at first accepts the offer of more food from her father by simply saying “mm” for “yes”. She then responds correctly to his

conventional repair initiator “*what do you say?*” – by saying “please”, to get what she wants. Children are often prompted to use this “magic word” by their parents.

In their group observation study, Gleason *et al.* (1984) observed eight American families in their own homes with their three- and four-year-olds at mealtimes. They discovered that 58% of the children’s politeness expressions were elicited by the parents, who prompted them constantly.

They wanted to be seen taking account of others’ feelings and teach politeness markers such as “please” as soon as their child could articulate them (p. 494). My case study child had to acquire these expressions with limited parental prompting.

Al-Abas (2023) investigated the development of politeness strategies in childhood by testing groups of Jordanian six- and 10-year-olds, whose task was to politely request gifts from a puppet. The six-year-olds used mainly direct strategies such as “Give me ...(please)” or “I want...”. The 10-year-olds, on the other hand, were competent in their pragmatic skills and used politeness markers such as “Is it possible/okay to give me a gift please?” (p.7) with confidence. The children became competent within a space of four years, but the results do not reveal the progression during that time.

Axia and Baroni (1985) tested groups of Italian five-, seven- and nine-year-olds, whose task was to plead with an adult controlling access to objects they wanted. The five-year-olds were direct, the seven-year-olds showed an emerging ability to be indirect and the nine-year-olds showed they had mastered politeness strategies and were able to be indirect. When encountering resistance, the older children increased the politeness level of their requests and became more indirect and deferent, rather than simply asking again in a more determined way as the younger ones did (p.923). Like Al-Abas, the researchers identified an age gap between when the children

first produced polite sentences and when they understood how to use them to balance the potential loss of face for the hearer. Once they reached this stage, they used mitigators like “please”, or interrogatives like “will you ...” or even a conditional such as “I would like ...”

Andersen (1992) studied children’s acquisition of the sociolinguistic rules governing register variation in “controlled improvisation” role plays, taking place in a pretend family home, doctor’s surgery or classroom. The children, aged between four and seven, were given puppets and asked to “do the voices” for the role they had chosen. In the family role play, she found that the younger children used direct requests (p.106), especially to their “mothers” who they seemed to think more likely to comply than the “fathers” (p.134). There are examples of five- and six-year-olds revealing their awareness of status through syntactic repairs, such as one child (aged 5;3) asking her “father”: “Daddy, take- could you please take me to school?” (p. 170). Of the three studies reviewed for negative politeness, these children were the youngest to show such awareness. In Axia and Baroni’s study the seven-year-olds were not yet reliable with this skill.

Andersen points out that her experiments represent the children’s register skills as they were at the time of the study, but (in common with the above-mentioned researchers) she cannot track when or how their register knowledge started or developed over time (p.172). She explains (p.173) the cognitive limitations of running her role play experiments with children under the age of four. They found it difficult to remain “in character” for the role play. She recommends that less demanding research procedures be developed to investigate when children first start showing awareness of the sociolinguistic rules governing register variation (p.173). I am proposing my longitudinal case study as one of these procedures because of its naturalistic nature, the length of time it covers, the detail in the interactions and the variety of settings and relationships involved.

There seems to be no published study of positive politeness acquisition (building rapport). This

social and linguistic skill is so wide-ranging that there is even more reason to assess it longitudinally and observe children interacting in their natural, ever-changing environment. Where rapport-building is evident in the diary extracts, it will be interesting to examine signs of the case study child's awareness of face. Gerholm (2011) investigated children's facework by making video recordings of children at home, between the ages of one and six. She established the starting point (not the subsequent trajectory) for their awareness of their own face at around the age of three, when they tried to hide feelings of embarrassment (p.3109).

The child's positive politeness development will also be compared with her mentalisation development, as suggested in the introduction. Mentalisation starts to emerge at age two, develops further at three and four and helps with the navigation of social situations. The findings of Wellman *et al.* (2001: 655) confirm that "[The] understanding of belief, and, relatedly, understanding of mind, exhibit genuine conceptual change during the preschool period." They explain that by age four, children have developed a sophisticated understanding of mental states, especially emotions. This skill in mindreading transforms their social interactions and enables them to share jokes and deceive others. After age four children begin to understand mistaken beliefs, moral dilemmas, white lies and mixed emotions (Hughes & Leekam 2004: 595-596). Their subsequent understanding and use of irony (an off-record politeness strategy) and jokes (a positive politeness strategy) builds on their earlier mentalisation mastery (Peterson *et al.* (2012: 2).

2.3 Research question

The above studies prompt the question of which negative politeness strategies emerged in my daughter's development and at what ages, and whether these correlate with the published research. I have the unique opportunity of tracking the real-time change in my daughter's

positive and negative strategies in a longitudinal study. To add another dimension, both Wotton and Gleason *et al.*'s findings raise the question of how much politeness my daughter learned from being directly taught, especially at mealtimes, and so I will investigate this briefly.

The results of the above experimental studies, together with reflection on the real-time nature of my records, prompt my research question for the study:

Which politeness strategies emerge during this child's language development, and at what ages do they appear?

2.4 Hypotheses

- Simple politeness markers will emerge before the age of two (Fenson *et al.*: 93; Wotton: 171).
- In terms of indirect (negative politeness) strategies, the child will be using some indirect strategies at age five at the earliest (Andersen: 170), and be competent in linguistic politeness at age nine at the earliest (Axia & Baroni: 923).
- In the case of building rapport (positive politeness), we will be able to detect the age when the strategies emerge and compare this with the contributory signs of awareness of face and mentalisation development. We will see signs of mentalisation developing from age two (Wellman *et al.*: 655), and awareness of face from age three (Gerholm: 3109).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participant

I based the study on the diaries I kept from the first few weeks of my daughter's life until nearly age 10, and the audio recordings I made from age 1;4.0 to 6;0.0. Ten years is a suitable age limit for my study, as this was the age limit for the previously published study results. The child was raised in South London, with English as her first language. We used a system of "baby signs" to support her communication from the pre-verbal stage onwards (Doherty-Sneddon 2003: 58-59). She learned French and German from the age of 10 months, and this data was included in the diaries but not in this study, due to the difference in stage of acquisition. Until the age of five she was based at home with her parents, attending toddler and preschool groups part-time. She started school at age 5;0.2. She and I travelled around and explored London on public transport, which brought the advantage of increasing our opportunities to observe and engage with other people.

3.2 Method

The politeness strategies found in my diaries and on my audio tapes were used in the home environment, with family and friends, and outside the home, on public transport and with other children. Contexts were noted, and any signs of parental prompts. The stress placed by the child on certain words was indicated by underlining. The audio recordings were made whenever we were at home and an interesting conversation might be imminent. The interactions were handwritten verbatim.

Table 1 depicts a comprehensive overview of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies, which form the framework for my study. The criteria in bold are the specific strategies that I identified in the diaries and on the audio tapes.

Table 1 Overview of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies

<p>1. Positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 101-129) Being friendly, building rapport.</p>	<p>2. Negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 129-211). Being respectful, not imposing.</p>
<p>1. Notice/attend to hearer's wants</p> <p>2. Exaggerate interest/approval</p> <p>3. Intensify interest</p> <p>4. Use in-group identity markers</p> <p>5. Seek agreement</p> <p>6. Avoid disagreement</p> <p>7. Presuppose/assert common ground</p> <p>8. Joke</p> <p>9. Assert knowledge of hearer's wants</p> <p>10. Offer, promise</p> <p>11. Be optimistic</p> <p>12. Include both speaker and hearer in the activity</p> <p>13. Give (or ask for) reasons</p> <p>14. Assume/assert reciprocity</p> <p>15. Give goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation</p>	<p>1. Be conventionally indirect</p> <p>2. Hedge</p> <p>3. Be pessimistic</p> <p>4. Minimize imposition</p> <p>5. Give deference</p> <p>6. Apologize</p> <p>7. Impersonalize</p> <p>8. State the imposition as a general rule</p> <p>9. Nominalize</p> <p>10. Go on record as incurring a debt</p>
<p>3. Bald on record (Brown & Levinson, 95-96). Being direct.</p>	<p>4. Off record (Brown & Levinson, 211-227). Being unconventionally indirect/ambiguous</p>
<p>In conformity with Grice's Maxims (Grice 1975), for achieving maximally efficient communication:</p> <p>1. Quality (be truthful)</p> <p>2. Quantity (do not say less or more than needed)</p>	<p>Flout Grice's Maxims (Grice 1975).</p> <p>1. Hint</p> <p>2. Give association clues</p> <p>3. Presuppose</p> <p>4. Understate</p>

<p>3. Relevance</p> <p>4. Manner (be clear)</p> <p>Maximum efficiency is more important to the speaker than satisfying the hearer's face – in urgency or desperation, or when the speaker has higher status than the hearer.</p> <p>This also applies to young children, when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • their syntactical skills do not yet allow for indirectness (Clark 2024: 216) <p>and/or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • they are not yet aware of the potential effects of face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Gerholm 2011: 3109) 	<p>5. Overstate</p> <p>6. Use tautologies</p> <p>7. Use contradictions</p> <p>8. Be ironic</p> <p>9. Use metaphors</p> <p>10. Use rhetorical questions</p> <p>11. Be ambiguous</p> <p>12. Be vague</p> <p>13. Over-generalize</p> <p>14. Displace hearer</p> <p>15. Be incomplete, use ellipsis.</p>
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I used Excel to organise examples of interactions which conformed to Brown and Levinson's criteria for positive and negative politeness, as well as those which could be categorized as "bald on record" (following Grice's efficient communication maxims; see Table 1) or "off record" (flouting Grice's maxims, see Table 1).

The interactions were classified by:

- date
- age
- interlocutors
- interaction
- context
- overarching politeness code – e.g. NP for negative politeness

- specific politeness strategy within the code – e.g. conventionally indirect (within NP)

The overarching codes used were:

- PP for positive politeness
- NP for negative politeness
- BOR for bald on record
- OR for off record
- M for signs of mentalisation

In addition to the above overarching strategies, other aspects relevant to communication development, such as protection of the child's own face (e.g. making excuses), and taboo words, were coded for possible future study.

Within the codes chosen for the present study, I narrowed my focus to address the research question. I chose the specific strategies which produced the most examples and which started developing the earliest, to gain the maximum range of acquisition. Other strategies started developing mainly after the age of four, such as the positive politeness strategies of avoiding disagreement, and joking; the negative strategies of apologising, and impersonalising; and the off-record strategies of overstatement and irony. These were saved for possible future studies, which means that they will not be included in face or mentalisation comparisons.

With reference to Table 1:

(1) Within Positive Politeness I examined development of:

- **Basic rapport-building.**

- The positive politeness markers "**Thank you**" and "**You're welcome**" along with any **parental prompts**.

(2) Within Negative Politeness I examined development of:

- **Conventional indirectness, and hedging.**
- The negative politeness marker "**please**" along with **any parental prompts**

(3) Within Bald on Record I examined the use of **directness**, when maximal efficiency overrode consideration for the hearer's face. These examples are not categorized separately – they are included for contrast within my examination of the other politeness strategies.

(4) Within Off Record I examined development of:

- **Hints (e.g. "I wish...")**

The chosen strategies were then filtered using the Excel "filter" function, to show the progression of each politeness strategy separately, over time. This progression was compared with the results of published cross-sectional research and, in the case of positive politeness, with typical development of mentalisation and awareness of face.

4. Results

In this section, examples of each of the selected politeness strategies will be given in chronological order, tracing its development over time. The interactions will be quoted verbatim and commentaries added below them. The different stages will be summarized in a table. The abbreviations in the interactions are M = mother, F = father, C = child. The child's age is given in brackets in the format *years;months.weeks.*, e.g. 2;3.1.

4.1 Negative politeness strategies (showing respect)

Conventional indirectness

Requests are potentially a *face-threatening act* (FTA) to the hearer's negative face, i.e. to their freedom of action (Chalfoun *et al.* (2025: 68), and the speaker can mitigate this threat by being indirect. The level of face-threat severity increases in direct relationship with the social distance between the interactants, their status relative to each other, and the potential degree of imposition of the action, as perceived by the actors (Brown & Levinson: 74). Snow *et al.* (1990: 303) point out that in interactions with family members, social distance and status are static, so potential degree of imposition is the only factor the child needs to bear in mind. This is an aspect to consider when interpreting examples of some of the interactions from the diaries.

An indirect request offers the hearer an "out" and they feel less pressure to comply than when a direct imperative is used. The indirect request can be formulated as a modal interrogative such as "Can I have ...". A subjunctive such as "Could I have ..." or "Would you like ..." adds an extra layer of indirectness (Wichmann 2004: 1525).

Diary entries tracking acquisition of conventional indirectness:

In the early stages of language development children simply declare their requests in the form of imperatives. This is the limit of their syntactic skills, and adults are so charmed by their progress that they respond in a supportive way (Bruner 1983: 105, 115). The diaries show that at age 2;0.1, the case study child was still limited to bald on record directives such as “Cheese please!”. Three-word utterances had begun to emerge at age 1;10.2 and four-word utterances at age 2;0.0. There followed a period of rapid language development, with the child making inferences, for example:

- (1)² M: Mummy’s little treasure ...
C (2;2.0) and Daddy’s nuisance [family joke] ... Daddy’s treasure too [reality].

The occasional utterance even consists of as many as seven morphemes, e.g.:

- (2) C (2;2.0) I’m sitting on my chair [hint = waiting for my food].
- (3) C (2;0.1): K for key - pray ou’side! Daddy fishy. (= Get key for back door. Play outside – F finished eating.).

Here, the child is at the two-word stage but about to progress to the multiword stage, as apparent at age 2;3.0 below, in interaction (4). Her directive in (3) is still limited to bald on record. The unnecessary reminder about how to access the garden, and the reason why her father should cooperate, adds force to her directive.

- (4) C (2;3.0) (mealtime, to M): Can I have the sticky spoon?

² Interactions are numbered in one continuous count throughout the study, as the use of subheading numbers plus added numbers could be confused with the child’s age, e.g. 4.1.2 could be confused with 4;1.2. This means that the number is the reference for each individual interaction, and the child’s age is the reference for overall chronology.

The child has acquired the inversion rule for forming questions, a structure scaffolded by the increase in length of utterance seen in (2) above. She has progressed from two-word imperatives to multiword interrogatives in less than two months. Indeed, Clark (2024: 246) also gives examples of typical rapid development of syntactical skills at just over two years.

(5) C (3;0.1) (on toy phone): Heyo, can I order some toys please?

She has added a greeting – a positive politeness marker to acknowledge the existence of the (pretend) shop assistant (Culpeper and Gillings, 2018: 4) and show good intentions towards them (p.11). She adds the softener “please”, and is rehearsing these markers in the context of pretend play on her toy phone.

(6) C (3;0.3) (playing with toy tea set): Would you yike a drink, Jane?

(7) C (3;9.1): I would like to ... (frequent use)

By now, the use of the conditional “would” is established, especially in the phrase “I would like ...” The child has acquired these phrases as units, but it is difficult to ascertain whether she is aware of the indirectness (and therefore politeness). She is also exploring role names and status by calling her mother by her first name.

(8) C (3;9.1): I’d like to go back there sometime (to friends’ house)

Here, the child uses the conventional contraction of “I would”, but it is not clear whether she knows this or has acquired the phrase as a unit and has not yet analysed it.

(9) C (4;7.1) (examining Pink Rabbit, a soft toy, using her toy doctor’s kit): Put your ears up – that’s it, good boy.

This directive is bald on record because it is addressed to a toy – a “hearer” she knows to have lower social status than herself, especially as she is playing the high-status role of a doctor. She

goes on to praise the rabbit for his cooperation. Clark (2024: 382) reproduces a table drawn up by Sachs and Devin (1976: 86) which shows a girl aged 3;9 similarly using imperatives to talk to a baby and baby doll, and more indirectly to her mother.

(10) C (4;7.1) (to M, re speaking to F on phone): Please could I have a speak?

Here the child is asking to talk to her father on the (real) phone. She is likely to associate the phone with more formal speech than she normally hears around the home, and so she addresses her mother with both “please” and a conditional. The expected collocation would be “have a word”, but instead she has inserted “speak” from the formal phrase “speak to him”.

From (9) and (10) it is clear that the child can now accurately judge when to use bald on record for directives and when to use conventional indirectness, making a judgement about status, formality and potential degree of imposition.

(11) C (4;11.0) (to M, discussing what to do that afternoon): Can we play tennis?

This is an interrogative, so still indirect, but the choice of the indicative is an indication that she expects her mother to be happy to comply. There is no perceived need to mitigate the request.

(12) C (5;10.0): When are we ... (going back to Devon, etc.)?

The child frequently used “When ...?” for any experience she was eager to repeat. She does not want to give her mother an “out” here - her question is urgent and therefore bald on record.

(13) C (5;11.1) (to dolly): When we go out you need to wear a nappy, ok? Good.

This directive is bald on record, a forceful statement, because it is again addressed to a toy – a “hearer” the child knows to have lower social status than herself, so there is no need for indirectness. The tag “ok?” turns the statement into an interrogative, and would normally soften

it, but the child knows the doll has no choice and takes advantage of the opportunity to issue a command and be “obeyed”.

(14) C (8;7.3) (to M): It would make me feel better to have some soup for lunch (heavy cold).

This is a request in the form of a statement introduced by a conditional clause, appealing to her mother’s empathy to strengthen her case. She has even more reason to expect compliance than in (11), because she is unwell, so this is effective as a bald on record statement.

Hedges

Brown and Levinson define hedging as a way of “disarming routine interactional threats” by not assuming that the hearer can or wants to do what you are asking for (p.146). It is a step further than conventional indirectness, whose forms have become so conventionalised that there has been some semantic bleaching (Beeching 2005: 156). Therefore, softeners such as “please”, “maybe”, or “by any chance ...” are frequently added to sound even more indirect and thus more polite.

Diary entries tracking acquisition of hedges:

(15) C (2;10.1) (to M, in cot a.m.): I wonder what we’re doing today?

The child is hoping to hear about exciting plans for that day. “I wonder ...” makes this a tentative question and the mother needs to be willing to accept what is being implied for the question to be felicitous³ (Brown & Levinson: 147). The child is merely stating the uncertainty, the lack of information, in her current state of mind – using the most indirect end of the politeness scale (Leech 2014: 163). She has likely acquired this phrase from her mother, who said it often when out with the child to encourage her to be curious about her surroundings. Its emergence here

³ i.e. for the speech act to achieve its purpose.

could be connected with lack of a satisfactory answer to the direct question “What are we doing today?”, which she has probably been asking every morning.

(16) C (4;5.0) (with M, painting garden hut with water): Maybe you could paint the roof, too.

This is a directive addressed to the mother as a statement, using the hedge “maybe” and the subjunctive “could” for indirectness.

(17) C (6;1.1): Mummy perhaps you can get me a bit of cheese. I’m hungry.

The initial word “Mummy” is an attention-getter, and mitigates the request with an allusion to the maternal role – in this case, provider of food (Peterson et al. 1990: 314). The directive is quite forceful, as it is a statement backed up with a reason, but it is mitigated with the addition of the hedge “perhaps”. The overall impression is of an urgent suggestion.

(18) C (7;0.1): (chatting to neighbouring woman on a plane): I like to meet new people.... This might seem a strange question but are you a teenager?
Neighbour: I’m 22.

Here, the child is curious and her aim is to find out the age of her neighbour. At age four she would probably have used the bald on record “How old are you?” but by age seven she has realized that, although advancing age means higher perceived status for a child, it can be a sensitive topic among adults. In this case, she has chosen a conservative estimate of the woman’s age, as she turns out to be 22. The child’s suggestion that her question might not be acceptable – almost an apology - is the ultimate mitigator and in theory gives the woman a good reason to avoid answering it. This is a hedge which actually gives notice of a violation of face and suggests that what follows might be better left unsaid (Brown & Levinson: 172).

Please

“Please” is the shortened version of the older, more formal “if it please you” which originates from before the year 1771 (Culpeper & Gillings 2018: 40). Leech (2014: 75) argues that this gradual reduction from a polite phrase into a “single invariant pragmatic marker” has reduced its pragmatic force into a mere convention. Nevertheless, it is still an agreed device for showing respect, a negative politeness strategy, and a routine way of softening the force of requests (Wichmann 2004: 1524). In their study, Gleason *et al.* (1984: 494) describe politeness routines such as “please” and “thank you” as “frozen, prefabricated units”, which are important in that they help mark the speaker as a polite person.

The word “please” is most likely to be used, according to Chalfoun *et al.* (2025: .67), in “an inhospitable interactional environment” – that is, where the requester is not assuming compliance (p.68). Ervin-Tripp *et al.* (1990: 319) found that two- and three-year-olds used far fewer politeness markers when addressing their mothers than anyone else in a video study. They hypothesise that this could be because the mother is usually the provider of food and the person from whom the children can most reliably expect help – so they are assuming compliance.

Diary entries tracking acquisition of please:

- (19) M (receiving stones from C): Thank you.
C (1;10.1): Yes please. [emerged; but confused meaning]

The child has realised that “please” and “thank you” are an exchange of utterances associated with giving and taking.

- (20) C (1;11.1): Bebe pease bi'cuit [can baby/I have a biscuit please – incorrect order as syntax too complex]

One month later, she has understood the correct use of “please” but not yet its correct place in the sentence. She is in the two-word phase, with utterances such as “off stwaps” (take my straps off), so the syntax for this attempt is too complex for her and causes cognitive overload.

(21) C (2;1.0): Cheese please!

Two months after that, the use of “please” is established in two-word phrases and is probably understood as a habit of convention rather than a politeness device.

(22) C (2;4.0): Grandma get off the chair now - please! [established]
Throw the ball! [now Grandma is standing up, there is no need for please]

Interaction (22) shows not only that she has progressed onto multiword utterances, and the use of “please” is established, but that she knows to use it for reinforcement in a situation where her request is less likely to be complied with. The word “please” mitigates the loss of face for Grandma in getting off her chair to play with the ball. Once Grandma is standing up, she is ready to play ball whether she wants to or not, so the child is half way to achieving her objective and a bald on record imperative will suffice.

(23) C (5;2.1): Mummy please can you put the light on?

This is a conventional polite request using both an interrogative structure with a modal verb, and “please”.

(24) C (5;4.0): I said please 100s of times! [it still didn’t work]

The child has fully understood the social power of “please”.

Parental prompts for please at mealtimes (taken from the audio tapes):

(25) C (2;4.2): Some mango.
M: What about some mango and the special word?
C: Pwees

- (26) C (2;10.3): Mu' get some yogurt.
M: What's the other word you say?
C: Please.
M: Please, that's right.
F: Ask nicely.

An example of no prompt, when there could have been one:

- (27) C (3;9.0): I want some mango before we go.
M: Well, you can have some mango, as well.
C: I'd like some mango.
M: You can. You can have some mango in a minute.

Gleason *et al.* (1984) found (p.496) that some parents of three- and four-year-olds were, ironically, quite rude when insisting on politeness markers from their children. By way of contrast, Andersen (p.73) reminds the reader that there are cultural differences in politeness strategies. She relates how Kaluli parents in Papua New Guinea concentrate not on deferential politeness but on teaching their children to stand up for themselves.

The case study child's parents used only occasional prompts for politeness markers. Out of eight hours of audio recordings, of which many were made at mealtimes, (25) and (26) are the only examples of prompts. The mother's reluctance to refer to the "magic word" is perhaps indicated by her referral to it as "the special word" and "the other word". Nevertheless, the child was using both "please" and "thank you" before the age of two, which corresponds to Wotton's observations of other children (2007: 171).

Interaction (27) shows the mother *not* prompting the use of please, but simply responding positively to the phrase "I want ...". Despite this success, the child then softens her request by replacing "I want" with "I'd like". It is not obvious whether she is aware of the softening effect

of this conditional, or whether she is just trying a different way of asking. With the phrase “in a minute”, the mother is deliberately not too obliging, being reluctant to comply immediately with the child’s every request. The child even picks up this well-used phrase “in a minute” and uses it to her own advantage, for example below in **Hints** (28).

4.2 Off record strategies (ambiguous)

Hints

If the speaker says something that is not explicitly relevant, they are inviting the hearer to search for an interpretation of the possible relevance themselves (Brown & Levinson: 213). This is even more indirect than hedging. The hearer is left to infer what the speaker wishes to be carried out, and they have the choice of whether to comply or ignore. The hints often involve stating reasons for doing something, e.g. “It’s cold in here” means “Shut the window”.

Alternatively, the speaker asserts or questions the conditions for something to be done, e.g. “You didn’t open the window” (Brown & Levinson: 214). Leech (2014: 158) describes such hints as “not particularly polite” and asserts that the speaker needs to show a reluctance to impose on the hearer – such as “Excuse me ...” or “Oh dear...” (shifting the blame) if they want to avoid causing face threat.

Diary entries tracking acquisition of hints:

(28) C (2;2.2) (has asked in vain for M to stop talking and get her tea, so calls to her from the kitchen): I’m sitting on my chair!

The child's intention is not to simply inform her mother of where she is – she leaves it to the mother to infer what she means. At first it seems surprising that this hint emerges two weeks before conventional indirectness, as hints are even more indirect. However, both these strategies coincide with rapid syntactic development around the age of two (see Conventional Indirectness above), and this hint could be cognitively easier to formulate than “Can I have ...?” Moreover, Ervin-Tripp (1976: 42) finds that children often use such “statements of condition” when they are easier to articulate and their caregiver is likely to find a solution.

- (29) C (2;2.3) (wants M to leave her to dance by herself): Mummy back in a minute.
M: (no response to this hidden instruction)
C (gives up hinting and is direct): I don't want it [M to stay here]!

The child has acquired a frequent statement used by the mother and reproduces it now as a hint calling for action (Leech: 158). She seems to be developing an awareness of indirectness versus directness, as she chooses this hint over bald on record, which is the strategy she then resorts to when her mother does not comply.

- (30) C (2;10.3) (re passing dog – interested in dog's names): We don't know what he's called [= you ask, M].

Here, the child is hoping that her mother will take the hint and ask the owner for the dog's name: we do not know the name, and the child is interested in names. She does not have the confidence to ask the owner herself.

- (31) C (3;10.0) (bored at relative's house, to M): Where would you like to go next?

The mother is left to infer that the child is not happy and wants to leave. Rather than admitting this in the presence of the hosts, which would threaten their face, the child shifts the focus onto

her mother. The child formulates her request to sound conventionally indirect, and therefore superficially face-saving, but hides her true motive.

(32) C (4;2.3) (time for F to get up): It's morning, Daddy!

The child wants her father to get up, so she provides him with the reason why he should do this. This is an implied accusation (Leech: 158) and, in the absence of any sort of mitigator, such as "I know you're tired, but ..." is more likely to annoy her father.

(33) C (5;7.1): I wish I could see you more often (Gran)

The child conveys a potentially face-threatening message, unlikely to be fulfilled, while providing the hearer with an opportunity to save face by ignoring or not acknowledging the intended meaning. This statement is also an attempt to appeal to Gran's positive face.

(34) C (5;11.1): Mummy I wish we had a baby. Do you wish we had a baby too?

This starts off as a hint, but the child decides to assess the likelihood of a sibling, so uses the follow-up question to remove the "out" she offered to her mother in the statement.

(35) C (6;2.1) (At dentist: told him about friends eating sweets after school, and adults eating "millions of chocolates"). Afterwards: Mummy, why did the dentist spend more time operating *your* teeth? It will take him even less time with *mine* now I've lost two teeth.

The implication is that the mother eats too many chocolates and that is why she needs so much attention at the dentist's compared with the child. The child is asserting the conditions for something to be done, and knows the answer to her own question. At the same time she is boosting her own positive face.

(36) C (8;1.0) (uncle going to work): I wish I could go with him. I wish ... is a good way of asking for something [it worked].

The child's uncle is within earshot and she finds a way of asking to go with him while giving him an easy "out". Paradoxically, it is effective. The adult hearer confirms her theory: he appreciates the lack of pressure, and happily complies. The subsequent comment shows quite advanced metapragmatic awareness.

4.3 Positive politeness strategies (building rapport)

Building rapport

Building rapport entails being friendly and showing appreciation to other people, thereby boosting their positive face. The child has already formed some idea of this concept at age four, when she refers to a cartoon drawing of a crocodile playing with some children as "a *polite* crocodile". More realistically, Brown and Levinson (p.103) describe positive politeness strategies as "a kind of social accelerator" which indicates that the speaker wants to "come closer" to the hearer. The child's strategies make hearers feel valued, and their friendly response encourages her to continue to use them. Signs of mentalisation and awareness of face are indicated where they are apparent in these interactions.

Examples from the diaries tracking acquisition of strategies to build rapport:

(37) C (1;5.2): (Unprompted, and frequent – "ba baa", plus smile and wave at people from buggy, and enjoyed the response)

This first unprompted "bye bye" emerged four months after the child's first word, which was "di", referring to any furry animal. "Bye bye" became an everyday routine. The word had been prompted by the mother frequently, as this was about making connections with people on an

equal level, was fun, especially with the repeated plosive, and had meaning to the child – unlike “please” and “thank you”.

(38) C (2;2.2 (by lake, eye to eye with Canada goose) Heyo goose!

First unprompted “hello” – it had not been frequently prompted by the mother, and it emerges later than “bye bye”. To the child, it feels less threatening to try this out on an animal first.

(39) Shop assistant (as we go into the shop): Hello.

C (2;3.1): Heyo, how are you?

This is the child’s first “hello” to a human, and first “hello” as a response, as she realises the greeting is reciprocal. “How are you?” is also being tried out by the child. She does not realise that this convention is reserved for familiar hearers. She abandons the phrase later, perhaps because of a mildly bemused reaction.

(40) C (2;4.1) (on country walk, near sheep) Heyo sheep, nice to see you!

The child has acquired this positive politeness phrase and again, is trying it out on a non-judgmental animal first.

(41) C (2;7.2) (pressing 2 soft toys’ noses together): That’s Foxy, Monty.

This is a rehearsal for the social skill of introducing friends to each other. Another example of pretend interaction with toys is shown above, in the Conventional Indirectness section: interaction (9) with the soft toy rabbit.

Hashmi *et al.* (2020) measured the brain activity of children aged four to eight during live, natural play with dolls. They found (p.6) that the brain region associated with social processing was activated as they played. They were in fact rehearsing social perspective-taking

(mentalising), even when playing with dolls by themselves. There is no fear of rejection in these rehearsals (p.7).

(42) C (3;9.3) (on toy phone): Oh I see ... well ... see you later. Bye!

The child has acquired these phone conventions, including the positive politeness phrase “see you later”, from listening to her mother’s phone conversations. She is practising them with a toy before she gets real life opportunities.

(43) C (3;10.2, to playmate): You’ve got a lovely dress on, like me!

The child compliments the other girl, but manages to compliment herself at the same time. In this way, their positive faces are balanced.

(44) C (4;1.1): (very interested in names: recited names of all 6 children in play group)

Social awareness is extending rapidly outside the family. The mother has emphasised people’s names and the child has realized their importance.

(45) C (4;4.1): The man driving the rubbish lorry waved at me and I waved back.

The child is proud of making connections with people.

(46) C (4;4.1) (Introducing self to children in playground): What’s your name? I’m (name), I’m four (holding up 4 fingers).

Again, she realizes the importance of names. New social connections are being made. Children are very concerned with age as an indicator of status at age four (Andersen 1992: 54).

(47) C (4;8.0): Mummy/X, I picked you a bouquet (wildflowers).

She has noticed people giving flowers and now wants to emulate them. She has learned another important social tradition.

(48) C (4;8.0) (on the phone to Gran): Hello, it's (name) [giving context – mentalisation].

She realises that Gran does not know who it is, so introduces herself after the first greeting.

(49) C (4;8.2) (Playing in cousin's garden): I'll see you down at the chickens, (name), ok? Let's ... (repeated frequently). Come on! (repeated frequently).

Here, she is taking control of where the two children play and adding “ok?” as a softener. The following two positive politeness phrases, repeated as they play, emphasise their togetherness. Andersen (1992: 130) finds that children often used the “Let's ...” imperative in her family role plays to equalize the status of the participants and appear friendly (positive politeness).

(50) C (4;11.1) (To man at farm kiosk): We've had fun here.

This phrase is at least as valuable as a “thank you”: it shows genuine appreciation.

(51) C (5;0.2): Mummy, the point is, what are *you* going to do while I'm at school?
[mentalisation]

The day before starting school, she is able to consider how her mother might spend the day without her.

(52) C (5;0.3): Have a nice day at work, Daddy!

She has acquired this formula to convey conventional good wishes.

(53) C (5;1.2): Where's *your* dinner, Mummy?

She is showing consideration for the hearer's wants.

(54) C (5;1.3) (to M after school): I said hello to Mrs W [favourite teacher], and she smiled and said hello back!

She is proud of having the courage to do this, as the teacher has a higher status, and she enjoys Mrs W's response, as it shows the teacher's approval of her.

(55) C (5;2.0): I'll miss you Daddy (going on work trip).

She is showing that she appreciates her father being at home.

(56) C (5;3.0) (took a long time to say bye bye to classmates after school) See you on Monday!

(By contrast, on bus – met older, unknown girl from same school – said own name, asked hers, then:)

Bye bye, nice to meet you (when she got off the bus).

Saying goodbye is fraught with positive face threat because it implies that the speaker no longer wants to share the hearer's company. Adding "see you" reduces the threat – and especially when committing to a specific day. It implies that the speaker has enjoyed the hearer's company (Leech 2014: 213). Here, the child and her classmates are reluctant to say goodbye because they have already formed a friendship. It is easier for the child to say goodbye to her new acquaintance on the bus. They have no friendship and their interaction has been limited to positive politeness formulae. This encounter of just a few minutes seems like another rehearsal of politeness rituals.

(57) C (5;4.3) (to F, building snowman): You're a rubbish snowman-builder too!

Here, the child is learning about joking and building camaraderie by exchanging mock-insults with her father. The joke is that being "rubbish" at snowman-building is not a major problem, so the insult is fun and does not carry much weight.

(58) C (5;4.3) (note to neighbour): Would you like to come to our house for something to eat and something to drink?

She has been discussing getting to know neighbours with her mother and is learning how to issue an invitation to show that she would like to get to know them.

(59) C (5;7.3) (note to friend): I hope you have a lovely holiday if you go somewhere or not it does not matter if you go or not. [mentalisation]

She extends her good wishes to her friend, then realises that this could be a threat to her friend's positive face if she has to admit to staying at home all summer.

(60) C (5;7.1) (at bus stop, whispers) Look at that man's *old* broolly!

She whispers a comment about somebody nearby for the first time; until now, her comments about people nearby on trains or at bus stops have been out loud. Now she is more aware of face threats, and able to contain her curiosity.

(61) C (5;8.1) (introducing friends, prompted by M): X, this is Y.

She rehearsed this valuable social ritual at age 2;7.2 with two soft toys (41).

(62) C (5;9.2): Girls have a more charming smile. Girls are together more.

She shows growing social awareness.

(63) C (6;5.3): ... but we shouldn't *tell* her [disabled friend] that (that we appreciate what we can do). [mentalisation].

This would be a positive face threat to the disabled friend.

(64) C (6;8.1) (tennis club social): Let's go and say hello to X!

She includes her mother here and knows that saying "hello" will mean starting conversations with other people we know.

(65) C (6;9.0) (On train, nudged M to look at neighbour's palm tree extension fingernails).

Now she realizes that whispering could also be a face threat, so silently draws her mother's attention if she sees anything unusual.

(66) C (7;6.3) (note to friend): I hope you've enjoyed playing at my house as much as I enjoyed playing at yours.

She is extending good wishes to her friend and showing appreciation for the time she spent at her friend's house.

(67) C (7;8.3) (note to neighbours when we moved house): Dear neighbour, sir or madam, I would like to have some friends around here so if you see me please do not hesitate to say hello.

This is an attempt to get to know the family next door, with an overall message of positive politeness. It includes conventional indirectness (negative politeness) to avoid face threat and some phrases she has read in formal letters. She assumes the formal phrases will be suitable for addressing a recipient of higher status, in this case an unknown adult.

(68) C (8;7.2; proudly, to M on train): I can balance four kitchen rolls on my head. I did it yesterday, when I got home from Waitrose with Daddy.
Man sitting opposite: I'll try it when I get home and see if I can beat you!
C (getting off train, to M): His wife will be ashamed of him! [mentalisation]

Although the child feels proud of her balancing feat, and expects her mother to be impressed, she believes that an adult would feel the opposite: "ashamed," if their partner tried this. She saves the man's face – for now, before he potentially gets home and loses face - by not commenting about his supposed plans until out of earshot.

Thank you

"Thank you" originates from the 14th century, and is the shortened version of "I thank you" (Seargeant: 2025). It is the agreed routine for showing gratitude to someone and therefore counts as a positive politeness strategy. The importance of using this phrase throughout life is emphasized by Greif and Gleason (2008: 165-6). They point out that adults and children are

expected to express thanks even if they do not mean it, and any adult omitting to show gratitude to another person by saying “thank you” risks making themselves very unpopular.

According to an experiment in the context of gift-giving by Noles and McDermott (2023: 2), children tend to associate “thank you” with reciprocity rather than gratitude between ages three and five. They report feeling gratitude for material things by age five, and (p.2) for people and relationships by age 9-12. The researchers suggest that future studies could investigate a link between the development of gratitude and theory of mind (mentalisation) or emotional development (p.8). This is a similar idea to the link between positive politeness and mentalisation suggested in the above Introduction and Literature Review, and subsequently the examples found in Building Rapport.

Greif and Gleason (2008) also studied the use of politeness routines in children between age three and five years. The children spontaneously said thank you in only 7% of cases when they were given a gift (p.162). Where children did not say thank you, the parents prompted them in almost every case. “Say ...” was the flag used by parents to show that a prompt was to come. The children complied but did not vary the format they were given or add any appreciative comment, so there was no evidence that they knew the meaning of thank you. One child aged 2;3 even said thank you after the giver had left the room (p. 163).

Greif and Gleason discuss the huge effort made by parents to teach politeness routines and hypothesise that although direct teaching can influence politeness behaviour, parents’ own use can provide a valuable model. They concede (p.165) that a naturalistic setting might produce a wider range of attitudes, as laboratory studies tend to generate stereotypical phrases. Indeed, the diary examples below show the child’s actual development in her use of “thank you”.

Diary entries tracking acquisition of thank you:

(69) C (1;9.3): kee utch [giving something to M and pre-empting M's response; emerged]

(70) C (1;10.3): Fank oo. [giving a stone to M and pre-empting M's response]

In (69) and (70) the child is giving something and predicting the response she will get. She did this on many other occasions, often suggesting the response she was hoping for, for example "Oh all right then."

(71) C (1;11.0): Fank oo tre (thank you for the drink) [established for objects].

One month later, independent use of thanks for objects is established.

(72) M: I like your hair.

C (3;10.0): Thank you, Mummy [established for compliments]

Compliments are an abstract concept, so "thank you" cannot be "triggered" by a gift as it was when the child was younger. She could have reached the stage of expressing gratitude, rather than simply regarding the marker as a sign of reciprocity.

((73) C (9;0.2): Thank you for taking me to lovely places. [generalised, and showing gratitude].

((74) C (9;0.3): Only men say "Cheers!" [instead of thanks, at station ticket office].

In keeping with Noles and McDermott's findings, and with Greif and Gleason's for the earlier years, obvious gratitude in this case study does not come until appreciation of holiday experiences at age 9;0.2. Interaction (74) shows actual metapragmatic awareness – the child has noticed *how* people say thank you at the ticket office, probably because they respond with it as an isolated phrase. Men probably say this to the male station employee as it is associated with solidarity (Culpeper & Gillings 2018: 10).

As can be seen in the utterances below, a polite response to thanks (“It’s a pleasure”) was established at around the same age as “thank you” was established for compliments. This shows a realisation that politeness markers are often reciprocal to keep the balance of “face” between speaker and hearer. As an infant, the child would only ever instigate “bye bye” (plus wave) - she could never be prompted to say “bye bye” if the hearer had already uttered it themselves. She did not yet understand the reciprocity of the routine.

It is not surprising that “thank you” emerged two months before “please”. The parents would have said “thank you” to each other in the informal environment of home more often than “please”, and more likely as an isolated phrase, and so it would be more salient and come to the child’s notice more easily. Snow *et al.* (1990: 294) ask the question: how much do children learn from overhearing polite forms between adults, as well as in their own interactions? This question will be addressed in the Discussion.

Parental prompts for thank you (the only examples noted):

(75) C (3;2.2) (to boy in playground – they had taken it in turns to play with his toy truck): Bye bye! Thank you. (response to M’s verbal prompt and wave).

(76) C (3;7.2): Thank you (receiving a gift, in response to M’s “baby sign” prompt originating from C’s infancy).

In (75), the mother prompted both positive politeness markers in succession, because the boy had been shy but had allowed the child to take turns to play with his toy truck. Although he was a similar age - equal in status - he was unknown to the child, and the degree of imposition was high. “Bye bye” acknowledged the time spent with him and that this time was over, and “thank you” expressed gratitude to him. Without this prompt, the child looked likely to proceed to the next piece of play equipment without showing him any appreciation. In (76) the mother’s silent,

signed “thank you” perhaps shows her reluctance to intrude and expose the need to elicit the phrase.

Responses to thank you:

(77) C (3;10.3) Thank you (for looking after Teddy).

M: It’s a pleasure.

C: Can I clean up the table?

M: Thank you, that’s very helpful. [M modelling here]

(78) C (4;0.0): It’s a pleasure [established – used frequently].

(79) M: Thank you [for a picture C drew for her]

C (4;6.2): It’s my pleasure, Mummy. [trying a more formal register].

The mother is clearly modelling the polite phrases here, and the child is producing the phrase herself. (79) is the child’s attempt at a more formal register – too formal for home. She abandons it – perhaps because of a surprised reaction, or a gradual realisation that at home nobody uses this.

4.4 Summary of all the strategies studied

Table 2 enables progression to be seen more clearly and ages of emergence to be directly compared, to help answer the research question in the Discussion below.

Table 2 Summary of all the strategies studied

Strategy	Age of emergence	Details
NEGATIVE POLITENESS		
Conventional indirectness		
Uses indicative interrogative	2;3.0	Can I have ...
Uses subjunctive interrogative	3;0.3	Would you yike ...
Uses subjunctive interrogative with contraction	3;9.0	I’d like ...

Uses subjunctive interrogative	4;7.1	Please could I ...
Correctly chooses bald on record/conventional indirectness	4;7.1	Considers status/formality/ degree of imposition
Hedging		
	2;10.1	I wonder ...
	4;5.0	maybe
	6;1.1	perhaps
Mentalizes – offers very easy “out” to hearer	7;0.1	This might be a strange question, but ...
Please		
	1;11.1	Correct use
	2;1.0	Established in 2-word request
	2;4.0	Consciously uses to reinforce request
	5;2.1	Part of conv. indirect request
	5;4.0	Full acquisition of social power of please
(Parental prompt for please	2;4.2, 2;10.3)	
OFF RECORD		
Hints	2;2.2	Hearer left to infer meaning
	5;7.1	I wish ...
	8;1.0	Metapragmatic awareness of use of “I wish ...”
Strategy	Age of emergence	Details
POSITIVE POLITENESS		
Building rapport		
Bye bye	1;5.2	
Hello	2;2.0	
Compliment + attn. to own face to balance	3;10.2	
Pays attn. to names	4;1.1	

Introduces herself to peers	4;4.1	
Introduces herself on phone	4;8.0	
Gives wildflowers	4;8.0	
Uses inclusion phrases in play	4;8.2	
Shows appreciation	4;11.1	
Mentalises	4;8.0	
Extends good wishes	5;0.3	
Greets teacher by self	5;1.3	
Uses goodbye rituals	5;3.0	
Shares jokes/banter	5;4.3	
Writes invitation	5;4.3	
Defends friend's face	5;7.3	
Introduces friends to each other	5;8.1	
Shows social awareness (girls' togetherness)	5;9.2	
Goes to "say hello" (=start conversation w. friends)	6;8.1	
Balances friend's face with own	7;6.3	
Uses both positive & negative politeness in message	7;8.3	
Stays silent to avoid FTA	8;7.2	
Thank you		
	1;9.3	Emerges
	1;11.0	Established + object
	3;10.0	Established + compliment
	9;0.2	For the whole summer's activities
	9;0.3	Metapragmatic awareness: only men say "cheers" for thanks
(Parental prompts for thank you	3;2.2 & 3;7.2)	
Responses to thank you	4;0.0	It's a pleasure
(M. modelled 3;10.3)		
	4;6.2	It's my pleasure (too formal – abandoned)

5. Discussion

This discussion is in answer to my research question:

Which politeness strategies emerge during this child's language development, and at what ages do they appear?

To answer this question, I will refer back to the child's interactions and the commentaries given with them, as well as to the summary in Table 2.

5.1 Positive, negative and off record politeness strategies

Positive and negative politeness markers

The first politeness strategies to emerge in the case study are “bye bye”, “thank you”, and “please”. They arise at around the age of two, as do the examples quoted by Wotton (2007: 171) and Fenson *et al.* (1994: 93). This is despite limited parental prompting of “please” and “thank you”. Unlike the previous studies, the results of this longitudinal study allow us to trace the child's acquisition of these markers right from imitating and predicting them at the beginning, through to using them as a convention, and finally to using them effectively and being aware of their social power.

It would be interesting to research the question of whether parental prompting really makes children more polite, and the broader question of how these abstract markers are acquired at all at this young age. This could be investigated via Roy's Human Speechome Project (2006) corpus, if it becomes available. Its data would show the gradual “birth” of these words, including all the essential adult input and overheard conversations, up to age three. Then it would be possible to identify the context when the child first heard each word, observe how it continued to be used, and how the child acquired it and generalized it for new contexts.

Positive politeness: building rapport

At ages two and three the child “rehearses” positive politeness strategies such as greetings and introductions while playing with her toys at home, and offers a friendly greeting to animals she comes across outside the home. This seems like a “cosy” and safe way of preparing to extend these strategies to the wider community. These observations mean that, for the first time, such rehearsals can be linked to the acquisition of positive politeness. Wellman *et al.* (2001: 655) pinpoint this age as a phase of rapid development in mentalisation. Hashmi *et al.* (2020: 7) confirm that such pretend play is an effective rehearsal for social perspective-taking, or mentalisation.

As early as age three, the child shows positive politeness skill in balancing a friend’s face with her own face. “Thank you” as a response to a compliment, and “It’s a pleasure”, a polite response to “thank you”, both arise at nearly four. These utterances are signs of the child’s growing skill in balancing face, and correlate with the results of Gerholm’s (2011) studies, which identify the starting point for development of awareness of face at age three. However, in this child’s case, burning curiosity outweighs any concern for unknown people’s faces, and this gives rise to loud comments on trains about other passengers’ unusual clothes or hairstyles.

Between the ages of four and five the child’s social world is expanding as she interacts more with other children in organized groups. More sophisticated strategies of building rapport emerge, such as introducing friends to each other. From the age of five, some of these examples show signs of quite advanced mentalising, in an effort to be friendly and avoid committing FTAs - see interactions (48), (51), (59), (63) and (68).

At age six and a half she begins to whisper her observations about other people when in public, to avoid threatening their faces. But whispering can be almost as conspicuous as

commenting out loud, and a few months later she starts keeping silent about what she sees, instead nudging her mother to prompt her to follow her gaze. At age eight, like an adult, she reserves her comments about a fellow passenger until after she has left the train, rather than risk committing an FTA. Keeping silent can be part of being polite. She now has advanced facework and mentalising skills and is using these to build positive politeness.

Negative politeness and off record strategies: conventional indirectness, and hints

The child acquires the linguistic forms for conventional indirectness strategies considerably earlier than hypothesized. She starts with indicative interrogatives and hints at age two, and hedging at nearly three. When she adds subjunctive interrogatives as she approaches four, it is unclear whether she knows that the subjunctive is more indirect (and therefore more polite) than the indicative, or whether she is simply repeating phrases she hears.

Axia and Baroni (1985) recognise that there is an age gap between when children first produce polite linguistic forms and when they start using them to balance the potential loss of face for the hearer. The case study child reaches this more advanced stage at just over four and a half, when she introduces more hedges and shows awareness of the factors to consider (status, formality, and imposition) when choosing an appropriate level of directness. This is younger than the children studied in the literature: only some of them, in Andersen's (1992: 170) study, reach this stage at just over age five.

At age seven the child uses a hedge to offer a very easy "out" to a hearer, in the knowledge that the hearer is unfamiliar, a lot older, and her question, interaction (18), bears a high degree of imposition. This is a question which requires the highest level of indirectness, and the child is

ready to meet the challenge. At age eight she shows metapragmatic awareness with her realisation that the hint “I wish ...” is effective precisely because the adult appreciates being offered an easy “out”. Children in Axia and Baroni’s (1985: 923) studies did not reach this level of competence in politeness strategies until age nine.

5.2 Unexpected benefits of the dual researcher-mother role: reflections by the child’s mother

An unexpected bonus of carrying out this case study as the child’s mother has been the “inside information” which has been available to me as a researcher, but only when I have been certain about the accuracy of my recollections. In analysing interaction (15), in the “hedges” strategies, I took into account that my daughter had acquired “I wonder ...” directly from me, and it was not a completely spontaneous “hedge”. When working on the “hints” strategies I knew that she had also taken the phrase in interaction (29), “In a minute”, directly from me and was using it to her own advantage. I also realised that she had absorbed the importance I gave to people’s names and was emphasising these as part of her positive politeness strategies.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to determine the ages of emergence of the politeness strategies studied. The most accurate hypothesis proved to be the age of acquisition of politeness markers. As this is a longitudinal study, the progression of this acquisition was tracked. However, not enough data about the surrounding adults' speech was available to ascertain exactly how the child used input from those around her to learn politeness markers. More precise analysis about how children achieve this can be undertaken via the Roy case study if the Speechome corpus becomes available.

The child's unexpectedly early mastery of conventional indirectness in its three dimensions could be specific to the child, as individual emergence and trajectory would be expected to vary. Alternatively, this longitudinal, naturalistic study could have detected more precise stages of development than apparent-time hypotheses. The latter provide a "snapshot" of a child's development, and might not be capturing conventional indirectness strategies until they are long established. Further longitudinal studies of children from age two to five could confirm this.

The "rehearsal" of rapport-building at ages two and three demonstrates the social benefits to children of playing with dolls and soft toys, even if playing alone, which confirms that this activity needs to be encouraged. The child extends these rapport skills to the wider community, where she learns positive politeness skills through interactions with the different people she meets. Her mentalising skills develop concurrently and contribute to these skills, and she learns to balance face, and mitigate or avoid FTAs.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the child uses many positive and negative politeness strategies which could not be included in this study, such as irony and joking. Moreover, as I also recorded

the acquisition of taboo words, it would be interesting to study these too, as investigations of children's swearing have so far been limited to apparent time hypotheses. There is a great deal more spontaneous data in this collection that could be used to complete the picture of this child's politeness acquisition.

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