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Journal of Pragmatics

Volume 35, Issue 3, March 2003, Pages 435-454

The role of context in mother-child interactions: an analysis of communicative intents expressed during toy play and book reading with 12-month-olds

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[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166\(02\)00144-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0378-2166(02)00144-3)

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Abstract

The situational contexts most commonly represented in studies of language acquisition are book reading and toy play. Remarkably few studies have explicitly compared the language of young children or their adult interactants across different situational contexts, despite the likelihood that certain contexts may promote particular interaction styles. In the current study, we compare the speech of mothers and their 12-month-old children in book reading versus toy play contexts by examining communicative activities that emerge in each context, and by determining if contexts generate differences in the children's sophistication of language. Results indicated that context influenced both

maternal and child expression of pragmatic intents. Most striking was the finding that children, as young as 12 months of age, showed variations in language use, vocabulary, and early syntax, given contextual differences. These findings suggest that distinctions in maternal interaction style (e.g., conversation-eliciting vs. directive) may have to be examined to exclude the possibility that these are differences in preferred context of interaction more than in style of talking. In addition, assessments of child language are generally assumed to be robust and not influenced by differences between book reading and toy play; our results suggest, though, that context makes a rather large difference.



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Keywords

Maternal input; Pragmatics; Language acquisition; Conversation

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This research was supported by Grants F32-DC00419 from the National Institute of Deafness and Communication Disorders and RO1-HD31540-01A3 from the Human Learning/Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The authors thank the families who gave their time to be a part of this project, Elisabeth Duursma for her help transcribing and coding the data, and Barbara Alexander Pan for her continued assistance with the INCA. We also

loading the data, and Barbara Alexander Panter for her continued assistance with the project. We also wish to thank the students and members of the Pennsylvania State University's Health and Development Project, and in particular, Amy Kolak, Lea Bish, Teri Crisafulli, and Patricia Wamboldt for their continued assistance.

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