

Saying ‘no’: Exploring children’s disagreement, refusal and rejection responses in parent-child and sibling interactions

Valeria Sinkeviciute

The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

While research into social interaction among adults has shown that certain social actions such as non-compliance, refusals or disagreement are designed as dispreferred in conversation through silences, hesitations, prefaces or accounts (Levinson, 1983), there are limited studies of children’s responses as part of their pragmatic and interactional competence. Orientation to various pragmatic and interactional norms develop at a later stage (e.g. Stivers et al. 2018), which means that at early years children are likely to use other ways to reject offers or suggestion, non-comply with requests or show disagreement with others’ claims. Drawing on interactional pragmatics approach, this paper aims to explore how children say ‘no’ in their parent-child as well as sibling interactions at home. Selected examples in this analysis are taken from one-week-long family talk video-recordings from a Spanish-speaking family and a Russian-speaking family living in Australia. The focus here is on four children’s talk in those families, who at the time of data collection were 2;6 and 5;7 in the Russian-speaking family, and 5 and 10 in the Spanish-speaking family. The analysis of (extended) sequences of requests, offers, suggestions and other types of directives shows a wide range of ways to say ‘no’ that are accomplished interactionally both through verbal and embodied action. They include the use of direct refusals, disagreements and rejections without delays, response cries, long silences, providing accounts and embodied action showing negative emotions. While the former two are more frequently encountered in younger children in the collection, the latter are employed by children of 5 years old and older. For instance, in (1) Alex (5;7), after being prompted by his dad, offers Misha (2;6) a choice of markers. Misha shows rejection of this offer by using the turn-initial ‘no’, followed by an immediate unmitigated directive indicating his want of all the markers (‘rainbow’).

(1)

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28 IRE:      %anda- anda a arreglar el Δcuarto Vale.
              come on go to clean your room Vale
              %gazing at laptop screen

              val:                                     Δputs the lace back gazing down
29          (1.2) Δ(1.0)
              val:                                     Δwalks past IRE to the glass door behind her
30 IRE:      Va: Δle:: %u:no
              Vale, one

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In (2), Irene (mum) urges Valentina (5) to clean her room. While Valentina does not provide any verbal response, she shows her non-compliance through embodied action signalling her engagement in other activities, namely putting down a lace and approaching to the glass door.

While such responses tend to be treated as problematic regarding interactional expectations and norms among adults, children’s responses show a wider range of what they orient to as (dis)preferredness in conversation.

%gazes at VAL

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val:          Δturns to IRE
5 ALE        какой (тебе) подойдет?
              ((looks at the markers)) which
              one will do?
6 MIS        no I want rainbow
              ((moves back, head down, gaze down))
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