

Early communication in Peruvian 8-15-month-old children. An approach from multimodality and pragmatics

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Abstract

We examined how 8- to 15-month-old Peruvian children ($N = 18$) express pragmatic functions. Specifically: (1) through which modality do children express pragmatic functions and how referentially-specific (conventional) are their vocal productions?; (2) is older children's communication more adult-like?; and (3) is receptive and expressive vocabulary size related to more adult-like communication?

Data was derived from the Peruvian Spanish CDI (Fernández-Flecha et al., 2021), and spontaneous communication sessions recorded at the children's homes. Spontaneous communicative behaviors were coded for pragmatic-function: *declarative*, *imperative*, *personal expression*, *action guide* and *mimicry* (Fernández-Flecha, 2012); modality: *vocal*, *gestural*, and *multimodal*; and referential-specificity level: *vocalisations*, *words* and *phrases*. We also considered receptive and expressive vocabulary CDI scores.

Declaratives and imperatives were the most frequent functions. This predominance of declaratives was found by Snow et al. (1996) although later, by 20 months of age. The vocal modality was prevalent in all functions in its less referentially-specific form (vocalisations), followed by multimodality in declaratives and personal expressions, and by gestures in imperatives. Gestures appeared specially in multimodal behaviours rather than autonomously. Also, declaratives were the most referentially-specific function, with more words, and imperatives exhibited relatively more autonomous gestures, which supports previous results for Spanish (Karousou, 2003; Fernández-Flecha, 2012).

Older children produced more declaratives and less personal expressions. This apparent increase of declaratives supports the idea that they are more cognitively complex, and so develop later (Camaioni et al., 2004). Unlike previous studies, we found no decrease in gestures with age (Volterra et al. 2005), or with more advanced verbal skills (Snow et al. 1996): the vocal modality was the most common for all children, regardless of age. This could be explained by cultural differences, our sample being younger or our spontaneous communication sessions longer.

Children with larger receptive vocabularies produced more declaratives (but less personal expressions); and children with larger expressive vocabularies produced fewer personal expressions and more words. This complements the correlation found by Snow et al. (1996) between lexical and pragmatic measures starting at 14 months.

Finally, we believe our pragmatic oriented multivariable approach allows for a rich more nuanced view of early communicative development.

Figure 1. Relation between pragmatic function and modality

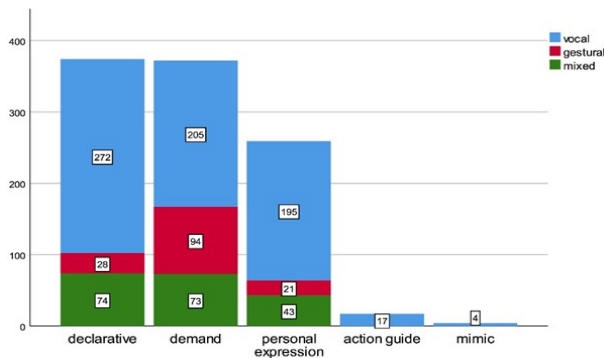


Figure 2. Relation between pragmatic function and referential-specificity level

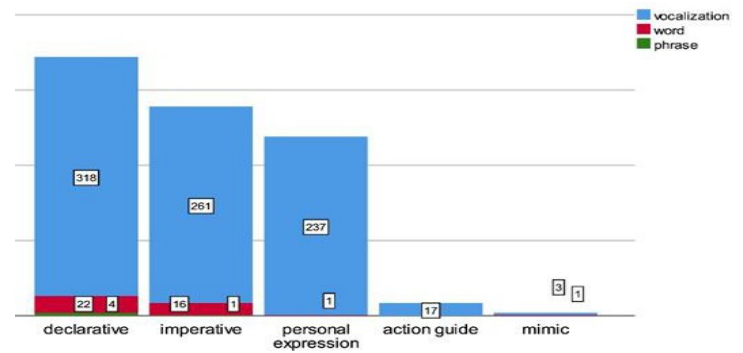


Figure 3. Development of declaratives with age

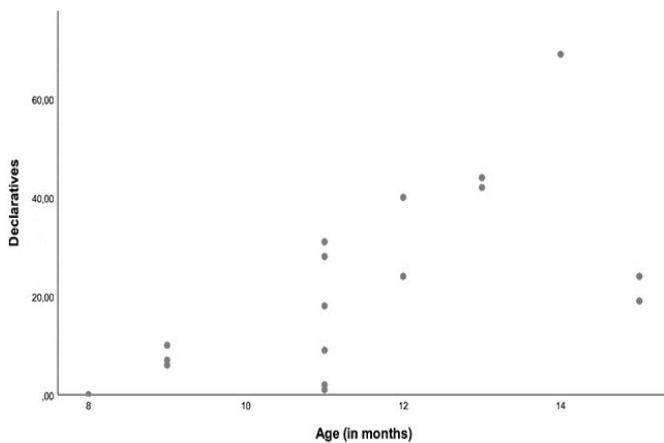
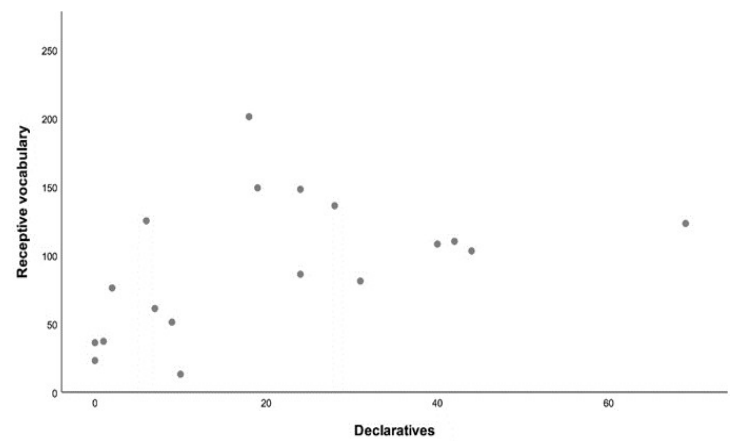


Figure 4. Relation between receptive vocabulary (CDI) and declaratives



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