CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Interest in discourse has burgeoned over the last few decades. With the development of pragmatics, analysing talk-in-interaction or discourse has become a major area of concern among language researchers and is now widely accepted to be a phenomenon in its own right. The perception of dialogue or talk has evolved from a classical view of language as a sign system comprising a stock of units and rules to one which regards language as loaded, multifaceted and dynamic. This modern view of language (dialogism, a term preferred by many) has reshaped our understanding of human communication as a whole. It has both received impetus from and imparted interest for research into authentic discourse. Observations of talk in focused face-to-face encounters between people in informal settings have also influenced the way communication is viewed and how discourse is approached in research. Communication is now seen to involve dynamic interplays of contexts, openness, ambiguities and potentialities (Linell 1988). It is replete with different versions and visions of the world (Goodman 1978) as well as multiplicity of perspectives or realities. (James 1996 [1909]) More importantly, communication is regarded as purpose and goal-driven (Clark 1996), of which meaning and understanding of what is said is of prime significance.

Given the multifaceted nature of communication, meaning potentials offered by a language system are thus not enough to determine the actual meaning of what is spoken. There are other factors such as shared understandings, common background assumptions and awareness of contexts. In actual communication, more exact meanings and interpretations are often negotiated and settled upon, and then exploited for specific purposes. (Linell 1998). Indeed, engaging in talk with another is a demanding task requiring communicative competence on both the part of the speaker and listener.

1.1 Talk As a Product of Communicative Competence

Communicative competence encompasses many things. At one level, it includes the mastery of linguistic features of a language and the ability to interpret the spoken word from a purely phonological, semantic and lexico-grammar angle. At another, it involves knowledge of and the ability to apply pragmatic elements for the production and interpretation of linguistic acts. This will include not only an awareness of the organisation and structure of speech but also notions such as logical presuppositions, common sense, ideas of cooperation or coordination, mutual other-orientation, contexts as well as social and cultural considerations.

1.2 Two Possible Perspectives to Analysing Talk

Early linguists like Chomsky, in the 60s, have tended to conceptualise language as a system or structure and their idea of competence is very

closely associated to the form of a language. Utterances are analysed as autonomous units carrying decontextualized meanings which often are written language biased i.e. linguists seldom worked with authentic discourse data.

> Scholars take ...certain forms of written language, as the norm for language, for its structure, use and expression.
>
> Linell (1988:28)

Written forms of discourse are permanent records and so meanings are viewed as fixed and within the reader's range of interpretation. When discourse samples consist of made-up dialogue, meaning can be studied with determinacy and principles can be derived without the risk of subjectivity. Linguistic expressions can be accorded single semantic representation because meanings are derived by looking at elements of syntax and semantics. Even when authentic discourse is analyzed, language is conceptualised first as structure and this has priority over linguistic practices. This leaves little room for the inclusion of additional, indirect or 'other' meanings. Because of the preoccupation with language as a system of codes and a fixed set of signs, discourse analysis approached this way has been categorized under the broad category of the formalistic approach.

On the other hand, a concern with indirectness in language use will yield a more functionalistic perspective which takes into consideration communicative functions and meanings of utterances situated in context. The

interactional nature of discourse is acknowledged and the actual meaning of an utterance is seen as something which must be worked out between the speaker and his interlocutor. The indeterminacy of utterance meaning is acknowledged because situated interpretations often go beyond the linguistic structure of discourse. There is the recognition of the allusive quality of language.

In this study, the researcher will adopt the functionalistic stance and look at language used in situated discourse. Utterance meaning will be the main concern of this research and it will deal with implied meanings made by children when they communicate in real life situations.

1.3 Utterance Meaning

Meaning has long been a preoccupation of language researchers. In the 60s and early 70s, the mainstay of the study of meaning was in the area of semantics. However, growing dissatisfaction with a purely linguistic approach to the understanding of what is said led to the opening of new fields in language research such as discourse studies and pragmatics. Verbal communication studies today are finding common ground in fields such as linguistics, stylistics, rhetoric, literature as well as communication science, psychology, sociology and philosophy. The move towards an eclectic approach is reflective of the view of man as a complex creature and therefore what he says cannot be dealt with in a one-dimensional way. One of the

earliest advocates of this approach was H.P.Grice (1975), a philosopher, whose notion of speaker meaning or utterance meaning (a term preferred by some) has generally been accepted by linguists as a central concept within discourse studies and pragmatics. He notes that speakers often intend their utterances to mean more than what is said, i.e., they implicate. As such, not all utterances can be taken at face value. They sometimes convey the speaker's intention for them to be taken beyond the literal. In everyday conversation, this is not an uncommon phenomenon. There is often the intricate intertwining of intention, meaning and context which requires the listener to derive the real meaning of the speaker's utterance. The following example serves to show that the meaning of an utterance cannot be accurately derived by merely analysing the semantic inferences of words used by looking at lexical and syntactic structures alone.

Example

(B is looking around at the pharmacy.)

A: Yes, can I help you? ……..……..……..……..(A1)

B: Um. I don't seem to be able to find this eye ointment……(B1)
(shows prescription slip from the doctor).

A: You'll have to see the pharmacist on duty. …..……..…..(A2)

B: Oh, O.K.……..……..…….. ...(B2)

In this situation, A's response (A2) shows that she has accurately understood B's intention in making the utterance. She knows that B did intend it to be a

statement of fact but she is also aware that embedded in B's utterance is a request for information. In fact, the request is two-fold:

1. Does your store carry this ointment?
2. If you do, where is it?

Moving on, what is B to make of A's response (A2)? Can she judge A to be unhelpful or uncooperative? Or should she try to make sense of A's utterance (A2)? The "Oh, O.K." (B2) response seems to suggest that B has chosen the latter. What can be observed in this exchange is that, despite the seeming incongruence of A's statement in relation to what B has said, A has satisfactorily addressed B's need: A's instruction to B actually provides information for the embedded requests above. It helps B to conclude one of the following:

1. A is not sure if the store carries the item.
2. It may be a controlled item which only the pharmacist can dispense.

Whichever conclusion B chooses, he knows that the conversation with A has helped him move closer to his goal of getting the ointment. This example illustrates the need for the listener to extricate speaker meaning (the other meaning) by considering elements that are not purely linguistic. There are aspects such as context, the circumstances governing the utterance, prior knowledge and experience, and others which must be weighed before a qualified guess at the speaker's intention can be made.

1.4 Background of This Study

Research in the study of implied meaning in discourse has proliferated in recent years. However, most studies have tended to focus on adult understanding and use of this phenomenon. There seems to be an assumption that this phenomenon will not feature significantly in children's language. Their language is deemed to lack presupposition, hidden intentions, subtlety and indirect meaning. In fact,Taylor (1990) notes that several studies on children's language have shown that preschoolers produced no hints. Yet, it has been said that

> we tend to underestimate both the total extent and the functional diversity of the part played by language in the life of a child...at a very early age language already begins to mediate in every aspect of his experience...it is there from the start in the achievement of intimacy and in the expression of his individuality.
>
> (Halliday 1973: 60)

It has been documented in developmental studies that normal children by age 4 years do possess adequate communicative competence (albeit in varying degrees) to use language as a "rich and adaptable instrument" (Halliday, 1975). These studies suggest that the young child has been internalising language from his social environment since birth. This internalisation, which encompasses both linguistic and pragmatic skills, provides the child with the necessary resources to meet the complex and subtle demands of everyday interaction. His perception of language as a

multi-functional tool is apparent. He learns through the daily interactional routines in his environment that language can be used in a heuristic way, i.e., he can ask questions to finds answers. In addition, the language of admonition and discipline (produced by his parents/caregiver) has taught him the regulatory function of language as far as behavioural control is concerned. His exposure to interactional language, both as listener and participant, has also helped to shape both his verbal bahaviour and reasoning powers. This can be seen in the way he achieves his goals and meets his needs and wants, as well as in the way which he expresses his individuality.

It should not therefore be surprising if a four-year-old can use, exploit and make demands of language in very much the same way an adult is able to, despite being still an apprentice of language. He may not have achieved the full measure of competency like his adult counterpart, but it does not necessarily mean that he is any less efficient in managing conversation and negotiating meaning. On this premise, we should expect to see language phenomena associated with adult human communication, or at least a semblance of it, emerging in a child's language. These phenomena can be explored from developmental, linguistic, psychological or even social aspects but since it is impossible to explore every phenomenon in one research exercise, this research will explore the phenomenon of **conversational implicature (CI),** which can be briefly described at this point as, making an utterance mean more than what is said. This

phenomenon, together with aspects related to its understanding and use will be discussed in Chapter Two. Widely accepted to be an adult language use phenomenon, there is little documented evidence of the presence of CI in children's language. It could be due to the assumption that it is be too complex a phenomenon to be understood or managed by young children. Perhaps the sophisticated examples found in adult discourse data have caused many to assume that this sort of recourse in conversation will not be within the capabilities of a child with his limited linguistic mastery and lack of social experience.

1.5 Statement of Problem

In the researcher's observation of children using language in naturalistic settings, she has come across many instances of language use which have produced clear examples of conversational implicature. There are instances of pragmatic indirectness where utterances carry a meaning beyond that which is literal. The following are two examples where indirect strategies are used in making an intention known.

Example 1

(At the children's department in a mall, Mother has chosen a baggy dress for the child.)

Mom: This is nice, isn't it?..... (A1)

Child: Got no belt ah? .....(B1)
(Age 6)

Mom: O.K. Let's look for one with a waist..... (A2)
Child: Yeah. ..... (B2)

The child in this example understands the mother's question but she chooses to respond with another question which seem to indicate disagreement. The issue of the belt is not her main concern. It is an indirect way of expressing her unhappiness about the design of the dress chosen by the mother. The mother's statement (A2) shows an understanding of the implied meaning intended by the child and this is confirmed by the child's "Yeah" at the end.

Example 2

(B had taken A's toy without her permission. A is displeased.)

Child A: You took my barbie doll. I tell daddy.

Child B: You didn't practise the piano.

Child A is issuing a threat to Child B and Child B understands it to be a threat. However, Child B attempts to strike a bargain with A in an indirect way. The reminder B embodies in her utterance may be said to function as a veiled counter threat, having a tit-for-tat implication.

Situations such as the above observed by the researcher have led her to hypothesize that children do hint and do exploit language for its non-literal potential and they do so very creatively, echoing what Karjalainen (1998: abstract) says in her study of special features of children's conversations,

> "they enjoy playing with language and a child's resources extend beyond the phonological and lexico-grammatical means".

Van Kleeck, in her discussion of pragmatic awareness in children also stresses the child's perception of language as a potential item of play (Van Kleeck, 1980). She observes that children from 2 years onwards have, through their social-interactional experiences, become aware of the importance of language as a pragmatic tool that provides them the fundamental means for participating in and managing relationships. This implies that even for children, communicative competence must necessarily extend beyond linguistic capabilities to include pragmatic skills. If this is so, is it possible to measure and document their ability to manage implied meaning and intention in their daily interaction?

1.6 Purpose of Research

While a great deal of literature is available on the developmental aspects of linguistic acquisition among children, little has been documented concerning the feature of conversational implicature in children's language. It is thus the objective of this study to find evidence of its use in several young children aged 3 to 7 years. Children's language acquisition studies have established evidence to indicate that children can spontaneously categorize objects, events and situations for the purpose of linguistic expression by age 3. In addition, they possess a certain amount of non-linguistic cognitive and perceptive ability to help link particular language forms to the function of the

word. The subjects for this study, being in the 3 to 7 age group would therefore have a basic grasp of the formal, functional and pragmatic aspects of language to manage conversation competently.

Since the underpinning idea of this study is that, as an interlocutor speaks, much more than words are exchanged, the researcher will focus on finding samples of dialogue which show the child's ability to make language and context serve his intentions. In doing so, this study hopes to show that even at a tender age, the child is aware that speakers have different positionings when they say something and therefore as far as meaning is concerned, words serve mainly as clues and utterances cannot always be interpreted in the light of linguistic expressions per se. The study also seeks to investigate the child's ability to derive implied meaning as well as to actively implicate meaning in conversation. If evidence of the above can be found, the researcher will attempt to identify the kind of pragmatic competence the child may have at his disposal, which has facilitated his management of this phenomenon.

1.7 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are basically:

(1) Do young children demonstrate any observable ability to imply meaning and understand nonliteral meaning of the CI type?

(2) If they do, what are the identifiable aspects of pragmatic competence within their possession which have facilitated this ability?

1.8 Significance of Research

For too long, the ability to produce implicatures has been assumed to be the domain of adults. This has its roots in the assumption that one must have adequate experience in life, coupled with linguistic and communicative competence, before one can skilfully manipulate language in this way. This research attempts to broaden the scope of the study of conversational implicatures to include children as viable subjects. It seeks to show that children are competent communicators, regardless of their existing level of linguistic competence. If it can be shown that children are competent enough to manage implied meaning, then there may be implications for parents and caregivers. It may cause them to review their own perceptions of meaning and intention with regard to child discourse. For language researchers, it may provide evidence that child discourse data can prove to be authentic data for testing out adult theories of human communication.

1.9 Limitations of Study

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This study will apply approaches to adult discourse analysis to assess language produced by children. It will consider naturally-occurring examples of children's use of conversational implicature in their everyday interaction with members of their families and close friends. It will take on a functionalistic framework where language is assessed from interactional and contextual aspects. While it is acknowledged that language use cannot be isolated from structure, form alone is not enough to determine speaker or utterance meaning. Hence, the analysis of data will take into consideration aspects of context, purpose and intention, among others. However, since the sampling is small and localised, it will remain a case study – an attempt to document evidence of the presence of this phenomenon in children's language use as well as an investigation of children's pragmatic competence.