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Hi, thanks, and goodbye: More routine information*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines children's acquisition of three politeness routines: *hi, thanks, and goodbye*. Twenty-two children, eleven boys and eleven girls, and their parents participated. At the end of a parent-child play session, an assistant entered the playroom with a gift to elicit routines from the children. Spontaneous production of the three routines was low, with *thank you* the most infrequent. Parents actively prompted their children to produce routines, however, and children usually complied. Further, parents themselves used the routines, with more mothers than fathers saying *thank you* and *goodbye* to the assistant. Results were discussed in relation to the role of parents in linguistic socialization and to the importance of routines in social interaction. (Routines; politeness formulas; linguistic socialization; parental teaching; mother-father differences; sex role socialization)

INTRODUCTION

Research into children's language acquisition has typically concentrated on systems central to linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, syntax, and the lexicon. Recently, however, it has become increasingly clear that it is important to study the social and interactive components of language as well. The ability to use sociolinguistic routines, e.g. greetings, thanks, farewells, and excuses, is an essential part of communicative competence. As Ferguson (1976) has pointed out, some politeness routines, like greetings, are universal phenomena in human languages, and it is important to include an account of their acquisition in our ethnographies of communication. Interestingly, routines are interactive in their acquisition as well as in their use: children learn routines as much through adult intervention as through their own cognition.

In studying the *trick or treat* routine at Hallowe'en (Gleason & Weintraub 1976), we found that parents explicitly teach children this routine at ages when the children have no understanding of the semantic basis of the routine; i.e., they do not know that saying *trick or treat* is a threat meaning 'Give me a

treat, that is, a gift of candy, or I will play a trick on you.' Children simply learn to perform the routine at the right moment, long before they are able to analyze it into its component parts and well before they know what tricks or treats are. Everyday politeness routines, like greetings and thanks, are less constrained than *trick or treat*. They are also more important because there are many occasions on which they are obligatory in American society, and learning such routines is part of the child's earliest training in communicative competence. As we indicated, the routine *bye-bye* is one of the earliest conventionalized communicative acts insisted upon by adults and produced by infants.

While both parents are involved in the linguistic socialization of their children, little attention has been paid to mother-father differences and to the differential treatment of boys and girls. Until recently, mothers were considered the primary socializers of children; however, recent research shows that fathers may play a major role (Lamb 1976). Through explicit instruction and modeling, both fathers and mothers teach children the appropriate use of politeness routines. Since there are differences in the language of men and women (Haas 1979), fathers and mothers are likely to differ in their own use of routines. These differences may also be reflected in parent teaching styles.

The current study focuses on three routines—greetings, thanks, and farewells—that children must learn at an early age. The purpose of the study was to investigate, under modified laboratory conditions, the ways in which fathers and mothers impart these routines to their young daughters and sons. The major questions to be answered in looking at *hi*, *thanks*, and *goodbye* were: are some routines more obligatory than others; what forms do routines take; are males and females socialized differently; do fathers and mothers treat children differently; and, finally, do mothers and fathers provide different models of politeness behavior for their children.

ELICITATION OF ROUTINES: METHOD

Twenty-two middle-class children, eleven boys and eleven girls, and their parents participated in the study. The children ranged in age from two to five years, with a mean age of 3;5. Each child visited a laboratory playroom twice, once with each parent. During each visit, the parent-child pair was videotaped during a 30-minute play session as part of an ongoing study of parent-child interaction. At the end of each session, a project assistant entered the room to give the child a gift for participating in the study. Children received a different toy each time they came.

The assistant followed a script designed to elicit three routines from the children. The script went as follows: After entering the playroom, the assistant turned to the child and said, "Hi, I'm ——— . Hi, (*child's name*)."

The assistant then paused to wait for or allow time for a response. Next, the

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TABLE 1 *Children's production of hi, thanks, and goodbye, and parent prompts (in percent)*

	Hi	Thanks	Goodbye
Spontaneous production of routines by children	27	7	25
Parental prompting of children who do not produce routines spontaneously	28	51	33
Production of routines by children after being prompted	44	86	82

Note: Each of 22 children participated with mother and father separately. Therefore, this table is based on an analysis of 44 episodes.

assistant said: "Here's a gift for you for today's visit." (Pause). Then, after unstructured conversation, the assistant said to the child, "Goodbye, (*child's name*)."

All videotapes were transcribed and routines were analyzed.

RESULTS

Spontaneous production of routines. Before considering the nature of the parents' attempts to induce their children to say *hi*, *thanks*, and *goodbye* at the appropriate moment, we examined the transcripts for evidence of the children's spontaneous production of the routines. Since each of the 22 children was seen twice, once with each parent, there was a total of 44 routine-generating episodes. Only one child, a three-year-old boy, produced all three routines without prompting, and that was on only one of his two visits (the visit with his father).

Otherwise, as Table One shows, children spontaneously said *hi*, *thanks* and *goodbye* with varying frequency. An examination of all of the opportunities to produce routines in all 44 episodes revealed that the children responded with *hi* or *goodbye* about 25% of the time, whereas they produced *thanks* without being prompted to do so only 7% of the time. They were therefore much less likely to say *thank you* than either of the other two routines, but spontaneous production in general was low. There was, in addition, no observable tendency for older children to produce a higher proportion of routines than younger children. Boys were more likely to say *hi* to the research associate than girls were. Boys said *hi* 41% of the time, while girls did so only 18% of the time.

Prompts from parents. While spontaneous production of routines was fairly rare, parents' attempts to elicit them from their children were not: in general, parents tended to prompt the child to say the appropriate thing.

Prompting occurred in virtually all of the families: only one of the 22 children in the study produced no routines and was at no time prompted by either parent. Boys and girls were equally likely to be prompted if they did not produce the routine: 39% of the time for girls and 36% of the time for boys. Younger and older children were also equally likely to be prompted. There were, however, large differences in the likelihood the parent would prompt for the different routines when the child did not produce them. Parents were most insistent that their children say *thank you*, prompting them 51% of the time if they did not produce the routine when receiving the gift. The children were also remarkably compliant: they said *thank you* 86% of the time when they were told to. On the rare occasion when a child actually refused to say *thank you*, the parent insisted relentlessly:

- Father: Whaddya say to Susan? Say *thank you* to Susan.
 Child: (mumbles)
 Father: Say *thank you* to Susan.
 Assistant: That's all right.
 Father: Richard, I want you to say *thank you*.
 Child: No.
 Father: Richard, that's not nice.

Clearly, he felt that it was important for the child to be polite. In those cases where children did not spontaneously produce a routine, parents were much less likely to prompt for *hi* (28%) or *goodbye* (33%) than for *thank you* (51%).

Forms of routines and prompts. The children's forms of the routines were almost invariant; they said only *hi* (when told to) and *bye* or *bye-bye*. Children who were told to say *thank you* or *thank you for . . .* repeated the adults' words exactly. None of the children varied the adults' form or attempted to express their appreciation in their own words. No child said, for instance, *thanks a lot*, and there was no evidence of the children adding to their expressions of appreciation such things as *Thank you, it was really nice of you to give me this toy*. In general, the children performed the routine without elaboration in the form presented to them, without giving evidence that they knew, in any sense, what the routine meant. Nor was it even clear that they knew that the routine must be performed in the presence of the appropriate person. One of the youngest children, for instance, a girl aged 2;3, produced the routine after the assistant had departed, as the following excerpt from the transcript indicates:

- Assistant: Bye-bye, Nanette. Nanette, bye-bye.
 Child: I, I, I, . . . I have to . . . I have to pay for the mustard.
 Mother: Oh, she still has to pay for the mustard.
 Assistant: (laughs) Bye.

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- Mother: Bye-bye. Thank you, Susan. (Assistant leaves)
Child: Thank you for my . . . for my toy. (to door)
Mother: Yes. Thank you for the toy. That was nice of you to thank her. Maybe if you see her again you can tell her in person.

The parents' form in prompting their children was also remarkably consistent, with the word *say* appearing in fully 95% of prompts. Most prompts were of the form: *Say X*, or *Can you say X*, or *What do you say?* The parents produced a total of 59 prompts, only three of which did not contain the word *say*. These were: *Can you thank her*; *Anything like a "thank you"*; and *How about "thank you."* The parents' prompts, or elicitation routines, and the children's routines in response appear, therefore, to have a very predictable form, with the use of the word *say* acting like a flag to signal to the child to repeat the following words in virtually unchanged form.

Parents' use of routines. Thus far we have described parents' tendencies to urge children to use politeness formulas. While direct tutelage obviously can influence a child's linguistic behavior, a parent's own use of politeness formulas can also provide a model for children's language. The transcripts were therefore analyzed for evidence of differential use of politeness formulas by mothers and fathers. When the project staff member entered the room, she gave the parent the opportunity to provide a greeting, e.g., she said *hello* or *hi* to the parent. Forty-one of 44 parents (20 mothers and 21 fathers) responded with a greeting. When their child received the gift, many parents prompted her or him to say *thank you*. In addition, 15 parents said *thank you* themselves. Of these, eleven were mothers and only four were fathers, a difference that was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.95$, $p < .05$). Finally, the parents also had the opportunity to say *goodbye* for themselves when the assistant left the room; 18 of 44 did so. Again, the majority were women (13 mothers and five fathers). This difference was also significant ($\chi^2 = 6.00$, $p < .02$).

The results thus provide a fairly consistent picture, with children of both sexes and all ages between two and five being treated very much alike; predictable prompts with invariant responses; a heavy emphasis on *thank you*; and mothers providing more polite models in their own speech than fathers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown, among other things, that parents expend a good deal of effort in attempting to teach their children politeness routines. There has been some speculation, especially in the anthropological literature, on the possible instinctive bases of greetings and other similar human rituals (Morris 1967).

TABLE 2. *Parents' own production of routines (in percent)*

	Hi	Thanks	Goodbye
Mothers (N = 22)	90	50	59
Fathers (N = 22)	95	18	22
Mothers and fathers combined (N = 44)	92.5	34	40.5

Note: Differences between mothers and fathers were significant for *thanks* ($p < .05$) and for *goodbye* ($p < .02$).

The children we observed, however, showed little evidence of such instincts, while their parents provided many examples of explicit teaching. The finding that 21 out of 22 families provided some prompting of routines attests to the fact that such direct socialization is widespread, at least in a part of our society. Researchers in other English-speaking communities may find even more emphasis on routines, since the upper middle class, from which our sample was drawn, is generally "permissive" with children. Mussen, Conger & Kagan (1974), for instance, point out that members of this class are less likely to employ physical punishment than members of lower SES groups. This permissiveness probably extends to verbal as well as physical behavior: middle-class children frequently talk back to adults and tend to be rather frankly outspoken in their opinions. Even so, our subject who refused to say *thank you* came under very strong pressure from his father, who finally told him his refusal was "not nice."

The finding that there were no differences in the amount of prompting boys and girls received was rather surprising: we had expected that parents would be more insistent that the girls show appropriate politeness behavior. But while explicit exhortations to say *hi*, *thank you*, and *goodbye* were directed equally to girls and boys, the children were provided quite different models by mothers and fathers. Where there was a difference, i.e., in saying *thank you* and *goodbye*, the mothers were more polite. Thus, if social learning theory can account for any part of language acquisition, we have examples of children as young as two being exposed to different patterns of politeness behavior on which to model their own speech. The question remains: Does a two-year-old know that she is a girl and that she is supposed to talk like her mother rather than her father? This has far-reaching implications for sex-role development. The children's speech did not yet exhibit the sex differences seen in their parents' speech. Andersen's (1977) work on registral variation in children's speech has, however, shown that by age four children have strong stereotypical notions about how different people talk. It will be interesting to see in future research at what point girls' speech becomes more polite than

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boys' speech, since presumably this happens at some time before parenthood sets in.

While the frequency of children's spontaneous production of politeness routines was low, there were large differences both in their production of *thank you* and in parents' prompting of this routine, compared with *hi* and *goodbye*. One possible explanation for this difference is that parents may assume that their children already know *hi* and *goodbye* but still need to learn *thank you*. It should be noted that both *hi* and *bye-bye* appear in most children's lexicons early in the one-word stage, but *thank you* does not. Interestingly, *thank you* is also the initial member of a routine sequence. The children had only to respond to a *hi* or *goodbye* said by others, but no routine verbal cue preceded the *thank you*. Instead, the child had to distinguish environmental cues that called for thanks. This may account for the fact that only 7% of the time did children do this on their own, and for the high rate of parental prompting. The invariance of the children's forms for all of the routines probably means that they are simply saying the words without any idea of their meaning. Children and adults are, in fact, sometimes expected to say *thank you* even when they do not *feel* thankful.

Hi, thanks, and goodbye are just a few of the routines that occur in everyday interaction. While excuses have not been the focus of this study, they are also clearly important (Goffman 1971). Moreover, parents are not the only agents of sociolinguistic socialization. Recently, for instance, one of the authors (JBG) was on an airplane, seated next to an eleven-year-old boy who was traveling alone. At one point the boy left his seat and, in squeezing past, stepped firmly on her toe, whereupon she uttered an involuntary cry of pain. When the boy reached the aisle, he was immediately stopped by a female flight attendant, who said "Did you say *I'm sorry?*" Obviously, you have to say *I'm sorry* when you step on someone's toe. You have to say *thank you* when you get a gift, *hello* when you answer the telephone, and *trick or treat* when you ring the bell on Hallowe'en. These formulas mark the speaker as an appropriate member of our society, and failure to perform them or some variation of them is the sign of an eccentric or bizarre person.

The laboratory setting that was used in this study helped to structure the situation in such a way that a very restricted set of routines was called for: The assistant said *hi* or *goodbye* to the child, who was expected to respond in kind, and the gift was presented with a phrase that optimized the likelihood that *thank you* would ensue. In a more natural setting, a broader range of alternatives is available to participants: while greetings, thanks, and farewells of some sort are generally called for, they frequently take the form of expressions like *how're you doing?*; *Oh, it's lovely*; or *see you later*. The laboratory situation tends to produce a kind of stereotypic behavior; in teaching routines to their children, parents produce the most paradigmatic

responses. The fact that all parents choose the same forms of the routines to teach their children reflects their metacommunicative awareness.

Children do not seem to use politeness routines very willingly or spontaneously, but the adult world insists on their performance. Once acquired, these routines become not only markers of membership in polite society but also some of the most durable elements of our linguistic repertoires, persisting even in the face of aphasia, Alzheimer's disease, and senile dementia, when referential speech may be largely lost. The fact that routines are explicitly taught and drilled into us may have something to do with this exceptional robustness. There are few things in life that one is so compelled to say as *thank you* on receiving a gift, or *hello* on seeing a friend. Failure to do so results in catastrophic interpersonal consequences.

The enormous effort that parents put into teaching routines and the far-reaching consequences of failure to use them belie the notion that they are unimportant or somehow incidental to language acquisition. While a child might get by in the world without ever using the passive, or even a common lexical item like *ball*, the child who does not learn to say *hi*, *thanks*, and *goodbye* will become a despised member of society. Anything that can have such an effect cannot be unimportant.

NOTES

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