Pragmatic language: Olivia – Aged 6 years

Definition

When communicating, the tools to understand what people say (receptive language) and to find appropriate words to say what we mean in return (expressive language) are essential. However, to use our receptive and expressive language tools effectively, we need to know how to use our language in social situations, and this is known as pragmatic language. Pragmatic language is what we infer from other people’s non-verbal cues, the tone of their language, and from the rules that govern normal conversation within our culture, including what we say, how we say it, and our body language. Children who have developed pragmatic language display conversational skills such as turn-taking, eye contact, the ability to maintain and introduce topics of conversation, asking questions, use of appropriate language for the listener(s), use of humour, body language, facial expression, intonation of voice, understanding of personal space, using appropriate methods to gain attention or interrupt another conversation, and avoidance of repeating information.

Developmental issues and implications for interviewers

The development of pragmatic language is complex. Interviewers need to be aware that unlike other areas of child development, each child will have a different developmental trajectory when it comes to pragmatic language, and particular milestones cannot be pinned down to certain age groups. Additionally, some groups will find pragmatic language more difficult than others. People with autism, particularly those with Asperger syndrome, may use language in a way that is inappropriate, and even strange, despite their receptive and expressive language skills being in the normal range. Children with disabilities such as hearing loss may also experience developmental delays in their pragmatic language. In addition to this, pragmatic language is culturally specific: a child growing up in an African or Asian country will have different pragmatic language to a child who is growing up in Australia.

In the Flowerpot film, 6-year-old Olivia’s interview shows a child with developing pragmatic language. This is demonstrated in a number of ways. First, Olivia participates in turn-taking; in a one-on-one conversation, each person takes their turn to speak, and then quietly listens while the other person is talking. Olivia demonstrates this skill by responding to questions asked of her and by not talking over the interviewer. When the interviewer transitions from eliciting a narrative to a more direct line of questioning, Olivia picks up on this and waits expectantly for the next question after providing her short responses. She understands that it is now the interviewer’s turn to speak again.

Another way Olivia demonstrates her developing pragmatic language skills is by showing good eye contact with the interviewer. When a person is using pragmatic language effectively they understand when it is appropriate to look at the speaker and when to look away. Olivia looks at the interviewer when the interviewer is speaking and looks away when she is recollecting, showing that she understands eye contact well.
A third way Olivia reveals her developing pragmatic language skills is when she accurately chooses how to respond to different types of questions. When the interviewer asks Olivia an open-ended question, she replies with a narrative. When Olivia is asked a 'why' question, she responds with an explanation of why. Minimal encouragers (e.g. ‘uh huh,’ ‘yeah,’ and head nodding) also elicit more information from Olivia without further prompting. In contrast to this, younger children with less developed pragmatic language are less able to abide by conversational rules. Young children would be unlikely to answer all of an interviewer’s questions, and would need continuous prompting to elaborate on their narrative.

In conversation, pragmatic language allows a speaker to appreciate when a listener is showing signs of confusion, and it informs the speaker when to change their answer or add further explanation in order to help the listener understand. Olivia is able to judge whether the interviewer understands her response, and she has the ability to alter her response when faced with the interviewer’s confusion. At line 36, in response to being asked how the man and girl were friends, Olivia replied, ‘because the girl was patting him and drying him out’. The interviewer gave a sign of confusion and misunderstanding, which Olivia picked up on. Olivia then clarified her explanation by saying ‘the doggy’. Younger children with less developed pragmatic language would be unable to understand the interviewer’s confusion and would not adapt their response. For example, if an interviewer asks a yes/no question and raises her eyebrows, a child with less developed pragmatic language would not be able to interpret this as the interviewer expecting an answer. This is because younger children have not developed a Theory of Mind, and cannot appreciate that other people’s mental states may differ from their own. (For more information on Theory of Mind, refer back to ‘Inferential Processing’.)

In summary, pragmatic language develops at its own rate in each child, although, generally, younger children are less adept at using language in social situations than older children. Interviewers should keep an open mind with each child, and not assume that a child can pick up on the social cues adults take for granted when speaking with other adults or with older children. Open-ended questioning with guiding (but non-leading) prompts will ensure that children of all abilities are given the best chance to communicate their narrative to interviewers in the investigative interview context.

Further reading