Politeness in young children’s speech: context, peer group influence and pragmatic competence

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with children’s pragmatic competence. It presents the results of an empirical study of Danish children’s language in play, focusing on their use of politeness phenomena. Results from the present study are compared with previous research, most of which has found that girls appear to be more polite than boys when they play. This is not confirmed in the present study which found no significant differences in boys’ and girls’ use of mitigation. The girls as well as the boys often used an assertive, unmitigated style in their play. This result is discussed in relation to different patterns of socialisation in Denmark, emphasising the importance of socio-cultural context and peer group influence on children’s language, as well as children’s sensitivity of contextual norms, i.e., their pragmatic competence.

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1. Introduction

Are women more polite than men? This is a simple question but the answer, as Holmes (1995: 1) points out, is extremely complex. It depends, first of all, how we
define politeness\(^1\) and whether or not we accept that the same norms of polite behaviour apply to men and women\(^2\). Moreover—as always in sociolinguistic research—it also depends on other variables, such as the social class, ethnicity, and nationality of the men and women who are being compared, and on the context in which they are talking. Furthermore, we should be careful not to assume that gender in sociolinguistics should always be treated as an a priori social category. In spite of numerous examples in the literature of differences in men’s and women’s language, there is also evidence of no gender differences in sociolinguistic competencies and much overlap in usage (see, for example, Bergvall et al., 1996).

However, Holmes (1995) argues that when all the necessary reservations have been taken into account, then the answer to our initial question is in the affirmative. She argues that if we look at the evidence available in the sociolinguistic literature, the overall picture is that, in general, women’s use of language appears to be more explicitly polite than men’s use of language. For example, women are more likely to pay compliments (Holmes, 1988; Herbert, 1990); they apologise more and do this more openly and explicitly (Holmes, 1989, 1990); they are less likely to interrupt their interlocutor, and consequently, show more respect for his/her right to take the floor, and keep it (West and Zimmerman, 1983; West, 1984; Woods, 1989); they often appear more supportive in conversation, for example by providing more positive minimal responses and thus keep the conversation going (Fishman, 1983; Preisler, 1986); and in conversations in general, they appear to be more concerned with their interlocutor’s face and try to avoid face-threatening acts (cf. Goffman, 1967; see, for example, Deuchar, 1988).

If we accept that various expressions of politeness are more likely to be found in women’s preferred speech styles than in men’s, then an interesting question to address is when this gender difference emerges in the language of young children, and how? When do little boys and girls start to behave like men and women, and how are gender differences incorporated into the language of boys and girls? Gleason (1987) argues that there is a strong link between children’s language and the language of their same-sex parent. In her research, she found that boys and girls, by the age of four, were showing a preference for the same linguistic features as their same-sex parent; for example, a preference for direct imperatives in the language of fathers and sons, and a preference for indirect imperatives in the language of mothers and daughters.

\(^1\) Brown and Levinson (1987), whose theory on politeness is probably the most influential, see politeness as conflict avoidance with ‘rationality’ and ‘face’—which are both claimed to be universal—as the central themes. Other attempts to define politeness include Blum-Kulka (1992: 275) who argues that “appraisals of politeness will be motivated by cultural determinants of face wants and variable degrees of linguistic conventionalization” […] but will also “be affected by culturally coloured definitions of the situation.” Other theories incorporate the notion of appropriateness, such as Watts (1992), who argues that polite behaviour includes the ability to use “the full range of socio-culturally appropriate linguistic behaviour in any given social activity” (p. 50), or Eelen’s (2001) short and simple definition “Acting politely ... equals acting appropriately equals acting according to the hearer’s expectations.” (p. 128).

\(^2\) If we accept that there is some truth in the separate worlds hypothesis, as argued by Maltz and Borker (1982), we would also expect men and women to have different norms of polite behaviour. This means that an utterance, such as “Rasclat, man, your boots are wicked, know what I mean?” (Coates, 1993: 128), which, presumably, was intended as a compliment from one man to another, could in fact be perceived as not particularly polite—or maybe even rude—if uttered by, or addressed to, a woman.
When it comes to children’s acquisition of politeness routines, Gleason and Perlman (1985) argue that violations of the sociolinguistic conventions that have to do with politeness are likely to be judged most severely and therefore, unlike the acquisition of, for example, syntax and semantics, parents do not leave it to their children to construct their own rules. Rather, they take an active part in explicitly instructing their children in the use of appropriate politeness devices and therefore, according to the authors, the pressure on children to speak politely usually starts early in their development. The pressure on children to be polite is so strong that being truthful—something which most parents value highly in their children—is considered of secondary importance. If, for example, the child is given a present s/he doesn’t like, s/he is expected to hide his/her true feelings (and maybe even lie about them) and produce the appropriate politeness formula.

Greif and Gleason (1980) have researched the area of parents, children, and the acquisition of politeness routines in various ways. In one of their studies, children, aged 2–5, were requested to come and play in a laboratory setting, once with their father and once with their mother. After each play session, an assistant appeared with a gift for the child. The assistant greeted the child, presented the gift and left, saying goodbye to the child, which would give the researchers a chance to study the child’s ability to use polite social routines such as *Hi*, *Thanks*, and *Goodbye*. The results of this study clearly suggest that children at this age are unlikely to produce politeness markers of their own accord. Only 7% said *Thank you* spontaneously, and only 1/4 of the children said *Hi* and *Goodbye* of their own accord. The study also shows that prompting by parents is very common. If the child failed to produce the right politeness routine, parents would typically say something like *Say Thank you*, or *What do you say?* Parents did not insist that girls be more polite than boys, but in the parents’ own speech there was an interesting difference in the use of politeness markers. Mothers were more likely to thank the assistant for the child’s gift and to say goodbye: of the 15 parents who thanked the assistant, 11 were mothers, and of the 18 parents who said goodbye, 13 were mothers. Therefore, while boys and girls were expected to behave equally politely by their parents, parents themselves apparently provided different models of polite behaviour. Consequently, the study confirms speculations that women’s preferred speech styles are more polite than men’s, and it also suggests that imitating the same-sex parent may have a stronger influence on the development of children’s speech than differential treatment of boys and girls.

A large number of studies—the vast majority from the USA—have been concerned with gender differences in children’s linguistic behaviour. Most of them have looked at children’s play and have focused on the different communicative strategies employed by girls and boys playing in dyads or triads. The overall conclusion from a great number of these studies is clear: girls’ talk is generally seen as collaborative and inclusive with a lot of mitigation; boys’ talk, on the other hand, is usually seen as controlling and assertive, with little or no mitigation. Studies that support this conclusion include Miller et al. (1986) who found that in arguments between same-sex groups of 5-and 7-year-old boys and girls, the girls used more mitigating strategies, including compromise and evasion, whereas the boys used a more assertive style. Likewise, Sachs (1987), who analysed the use of mitigated and

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3 Mitigation can be defined as a ‘softening’ device in language, i.e., any linguistic (or paralinguistic) feature which makes an utterance appear less threatening and hence more polite.
unmitigated forms of language in pretend play among pre-schoolers, concludes that girls’ obliges were mitigated in 65% of the cases, and unmitigated in only 17%; the boys, on the other hand, had unmitigated obliges in 42% of the cases, and mitigated in 34%. A very similar result was found by Austin et al. (1987). Evidence is also provided by Sheldon (1990), who analysed disputes in same-sex triads of boys and girls and found that boys use a more adversarial style, which leads to extended conflicts and disruption of play; the girls, on the other hand, are much more likely to compromise and resolve their conflicts and strive to maintain harmony within the group (see also Leaper, 1991; Kyratzis and Ervin-Tripp, 1999 for similar results).

However, there are also studies which show that girls as well as boys can use language in a highly assertive way. In her study of conflict talk in American middle-class pre-school children’s pretend play, Sheldon (1992, 1996) found that the girls frequently use what she calls a “double-voice discourse”. This assertive negotiation style allows them to “confront without being confrontational; to clarify without backing down; and to use mitigators, indirectness, and even subterfuge to soften the blow while promoting their own wishes.” (Sheldon, 1996: 61). Goodwin (1980, 1990), who took the research on children’s play outside of the white, middle-class context, found that although the Afro-American working-class girls in her study used more mitigation overall than the boys, the girls were also capable of using a more assertive, unmitigated style when they were arguing or playing in mixed-sex groups. Likewise, Goodwin’s (1998) research among Spanish–English working-class girls playing hopscotch questions the traditional notions of girls’ mitigated, co-operative language styles, and Cook-Gumperz and Szymanski (2001) conclude that in mixed-sex group work, Latino girls as well as boys use powerful assertive strategies.

More recent research on children’s language and gender has also analysed non-American contexts and emphasised the need to question girls’ co-operative, mitigated language use as a cultural universal. Kyratzis and Guo (1996, 2001), for example, compared conflict strategies among Mandarin speaking pre-school children in China and English speaking pre-schoolers in the USA. They found that while the American girls preferred indirect, polite conflict strategies, the Chinese girls were very direct and highly assertive. Farris (1991, 2000), in her research on Chinese pre-school children in Taiwan, found a complex pattern of conflict styles. The boys’ conflict styles were direct: they frequently used physical action, teasing, insistence and directives. The girls, on the other hand, used direct as well as indirect conflict strategies: they simultaneously enacted the role of “the virtuous wife”, where silence and modesty are required, and “the good mother”, which requires verbal and behavioural assertiveness. Thorell (1998) analysed 6- and 8-year-old Swedish children’s play dialogues and found that the stereotypes of the rough boys and the submissive girls could not be upheld. In the children’s play dialogues, irrespective of gender, she found assertive as well as non-assertive styles. However, Thorell also concludes that the boys’ struggle for power was more visible, just like the girls’ focus on relational games was more obvious. A similar result is reported by Evaldsson and Corsaro (1998) who compared Italian pre-school and Swedish preadolescent children’s pretend play. They conclude that although the children sometimes divided their play activities along gender lines, and although an awareness of gender identity was observed, boys as well as girls were generally seen as co-operative as well as competitive.
The evidence presented above allows us to draw at least two preliminary conclusions. First, that research on gender marking and indexing in children’s language will have to take into account the variability that may arise because of cultural and contextual factors (see Ervin-Tripp, 2001). Secondly, that in the majority of studies, irrespective of cultural context and socio-economic group, there is evidence that girls are more likely to prefer—but do not always use—a more indirect, polite speech style.

One of the shortcomings of this research area (as of so much other sociolinguistic research) is the heavy emphasis on the Anglo-American context. Therefore, we need to gain more insight into children’s language use outside the scene of white middle-class American families. This article offers an analysis of the language use in children’s play in the context of Danish kindergartens and pre-school classes. The socialisation of young children in Denmark is in many ways quite unique (Smith, 2001). Even though the number of families with both parents working outside the home is on the increase in most Western countries, traditionally, the overall pattern has been that one parent—usually the mother—has looked after the children until they begin school. This is not the case in Denmark where the vast majority of children are placed outside of the home at a very early age. Different patterns of socialisation are likely to have an effect on children’s linguistic behaviour, and the aim of this article is to analyse pre-school children’s language in play situations, focusing on possible gender differences, or similarities, in their use of various linguistic features of politeness. The results will be compared with similar studies from other countries, predominantly the USA, focusing on the need to contextualise research on children’s linguistic behaviour. Furthermore, the paper will focus on the importance that increased peer group influence may have on children’s language, particularly in relation to the notion of pragmatic competence (cf. Corsaro, 1997).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The children used as participants in this study were 18 boys and 18 girls playing in 16 same-sex dyads (12) or triads (4). The children came from middle-class families and were aged between 3;8 and 7;3 years. The playgroups were formed on the basis of acquaintance and matched for age, i.e., the children were well-acquainted and as close to each other in age as possible (in most groups, there was an age difference of only 2–4 months, with the exception of three groups which had an age difference of 6 and 7 months). The children were recorded in four different kindergartens and pre-school classes situated in three different places in the country: Glostrup and Rødovre near Copenhagen, and Nykøbing Mors in North-West Jutland.

2.2. Procedure

The children were video-recorded in their kindergartens and pre-schools. Each group was recorded at least twice: once while they were playing with conventional toys, and once while they were playing with Lego (for the older children) or Duplo (for the younger
children). The conventional toys consisted of typical boys’ toys (such as miniature cars, motorbikes, aeroplanes), typical girls’ toys (such as miniature dolls and doll’s house equipment like tables, chairs, beds, china), as well as more gender neutral toys (such as various animals, building blocks and a magnifying glass). The children were asked to sit down at a table and were given the toys in a bag. An experimenter opened the bag and told the children that they could play with the toys in whichever way they wanted; no particular play theme was explicitly suggested or encouraged. The experimenter did not interfere in the children’s play (except in one case when two boys became quite aggressive and started throwing the toys) but was either standing behind the video-camera, or sitting quietly in a corner of the room. Each recording lasted about 20 min; after that most of the children—particularly the younger ones—became impatient and bored with the toys.

The children were engaged in various kinds of play during recordings, most commonly pretend plays. The miniature dolls (both male and female, grown-ups and children) and the doll’s house equipment were frequently used in a sort of family-pretend-play, and a lot of the time was spent negotiating, and indeed arguing, about roles, and who was allowed to play with which toys. The animals, and to some extent the cars and aeroplanes, were often used as well in the children’s play. Interestingly, there was no clear correspondence between the children’s sex and their use of ‘gender-appropriate’ and ‘gender-inappropriate’ toys, i.e., the boys were just as likely as the girls to play with the small dolls and the doll’s house equipment, irrespective of age, and the girls would frequently include the cars, motorbikes and aeroplanes in their play. In 14 out of the 16 play scenes that were analysed, girls and boys were engaged, at some point, in play involving ‘gender-inappropriate’ toys. The typical pattern was that the girls would play with the dolls and the doll’s house equipment first, and then play with the motor vehicles and aeroplanes second; the boys would play in the exact reverse order. This tendency for the children to play with ‘gender-appropriate’ as well as ‘inappropriate’ toys is contrary to the results reported in studies from other countries, including the USA (Lloyd and Duveen, 1993) and Japan (Nakamura, 2001).

2.3. Linguistic markers of politeness in Danish

In English, it is common to achieve a polite style by modifying the syntactic form of a sentence (for example, from I want to I would like). This is also possible in Danish, but less common. Another way to make a polite request in English is to use an indirect approach (as in Could you give me...?) as opposed to a direct approach (Give me...), or to incorporate one of the most common features of politeness in English, Please or Excuse me. The indirect approach is also possible—and quite common—in Danish, but there is no equivalent of please. Excuse me (‘Undskyld mig’) exists but is rarely used. Politeness

Pretend play is defined as play in which the child transforms an object (such as a toy), another person, or him/herself into something beyond the present situation (see DeHart, 1996). Typical pretend play utterances include utterances setting the scene (“Let’s play school”), or negotiating roles (“I’ll be the girl, you’ll be the boy”), utterances referring to pretend scenarios (“We were on the bus now, right?”), or giving directives to peers (or to oneself) about his/her role in the play scene (“And then you said NO”); “And then your man jumped”, “And then I built the house for you”). The latter category of pretend utterances was particularly common in the present data.
in Danish is commonly achieved by means of particles, such as lige, jo, næsten, helst, gerne, da, altså. They are not at all easy to translate but they can function as ‘softening’ or mitigating devices (but they don’t always do), and are used to make an utterance less threatening and more polite. In most cases, the best way to translate them into English would probably be by means of a tag.

The mitigating device most commonly used by the children in this study is the particles, with lige and jo being by far the most frequent. Indirect requests are also quite common, but by no means as common as the particles. However, the problem with these mitigating particles is that in terms of their function, they do not always mitigate. If, for example, we look at an utterance such as Sæt dig lige ned (“Sit down, will you”), which appears to be a mitigated imperative if we look at the transcript only, this utterance may in fact, if we look at intonation and stress, or the non-verbal signs accompanying the utterance, be unmitigated in terms of its communicative intentions. Consequently, in the analysis of mitigated and unmitigated forms in the present study, the appropriate interpretation of a particular utterance had to be found not by looking at the words in the transcript alone, but also by carefully studying the videos as well as the transcriber’s notes about the children’s posture, gaze and other non-verbal cues (such as what they did with the toys).

An example of this problem is given in example (c) below where two girls, Cecilie (5;11) and Nadja (6;2) are arguing about putting a miniature car on top of a truck. Cecilie puts the car on the truck twice, and Nadja removes it on both occasions; after the second removal, Cecilie gets angry and, while pushing Nadja’s hand away from the truck, she shouts “HOLD LIGE OP” (STOP IT WILL YOU) with the sentence stress on lige. The shouting, the stress on the particle, and the gesture clearly suggest that in this context, lige does not function as a mitigating device but it makes the imperative more threatening.

Another example of mitigating particles changing their meaning is when another word, frequently a swear word, is included in the utterance and thus, neutralises, or changes, the significance of the particle. An example is Dennis and Jimmie (both 6;0) arguing about the position of various toys in a pretend play. They don’t agree as to what goes where, and Dennis, who wants to make it clear that he doesn’t like what Jimmie has proposed they should do to the animals, puts an ambulance on top of a horse and says, Jeg vil sgu da sidde oppe på denne her (“I’ll bloody sit on top of this one, won’t I”). Here, the mitigating effect of the particle da is cancelled, as it were, by means of a swear word which has a stronger effect on the meaning of the utterance.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the relationship between a mitigated and an unmitigated utterance is not that of a straight forward polite–impolite dichotomy. We can safely assume that a speaker who uses some form of mitigation is often trying to ‘soften’ his/her utterance and be polite, but it would be wrong to assume that an unmitigated utterance is always impolite. For example, “Where is it?”, which would be coded as an unmitigated question in the present analysis, is not necessarily impolite, but it does not appear as polite as its mitigated counterpart, “Could you tell me where it is?” In fact, we know that unmitigated utterances dominate in conversations between intimates (Holmes, 1995), which means they tend to be a sign of a relaxed, intimate atmosphere, and not necessarily an indication of an impolite interlocutor. However, in the present data it would be wrong to assume that unmitigated language suggests more intimacy per se, and it is essential, therefore, that contextual information is taken into account to get the exact meaning.
2.4. Coding

A total of 16 play scenes were selected for analysis, involving 36 different children. In 13 of the play scenes, the children were playing with the conventional toys, in the remaining three, they were playing with Lego/Duplo. These scenes were selected for at least two reasons: (1) they had the most amount of pretend play, a form of play which has been used in many previous studies because it is likely to elicit the linguistic features which are suitable for an analysis of linguistic politeness; (2) there was more parallel play in the Lego/Duplo-scenes, for example two children building each their house while talking about their activity, but usually not negotiating and arguing to the same extent as in the conventional toyscenes. Consequently, more play scenes with the conventional toys were selected.

Approximately 15 min of each play scene were transcribed, including detailed notes about the children’s movements, posture and other non-verbal behaviour (such as facial expression, pointing and gazing, and acting with the toys), in order to allow an almost complete reconstruction of the actual events. This has been important in many cases in the coding process where the children’s movements, or other aspects of their non-verbal behaviour, might help us interpret the exact meaning of a particular utterance. Stress, intonation and loudness were also considered in order to establish the communicative intentions as accurately as possible. In none of the play scenes were the children interacting verbally all the time: part of the time they would either play in silence, or, more frequently, produce the sounds of cars or animals, or they would be singing or humming to themselves while playing.

The data was coded using the framework proposed by Sachs (1987) and DeHart (1996), but with some modifications, however. Sachs’s framework includes the notion of mitigated and unmitigated obliges. An oblige is an utterance that demands a response (a reply or behaviour) from the listener. This means that an oblige will usually take the form of either a question (“What was your name boy?”), a directive (“They all have to sit down”), a prohibition (“Don’t take it”), or an imperative (“Sit down!”). A fifth, less frequent category is the attentional device (“Look at me eh”). An oblige can be either mitigated, i.e., softened, indirect, polite, or it can appear in the most direct form, i.e., unmitigated.

In Sachs’s coding system, certain categories of obliges are always coded as unmitigated, others as mitigated. Thus, imperatives, prohibitions, and declarative directives (such as “You have to push it”) are apparently always coded as unmitigated, whereas question directives (“Will you be the patient?”), joint directives (“Now we’ll cover him up”), pretend directives (“Pretend you had a bad cut”), tag questions (“That’s your bed, right?”), and state questions (“Are you sick?”) are always coded as mitigated. Information questions (“What does she need now”) and attentional devices are coded as neither mitigated nor unmitigated.

In the coding system used in the present analysis, any utterance (except the tag question) can be either mitigated or unmitigated: an imperative, for example, is not unmitigated per se. It can be (and most frequently is), as in “Sæt dig!” (Sit down!), but it can also be mitigated as in “Sæt dig lige ned!” (Sit down please!) This is particularly true for Danish with its frequent use of particles as mitigating devices. Thus, we might have mitigated and

5 These examples are from Sachs (1987: 182). All other examples in the article are from my own data.
unmitigated imperatives, as well as mitigated and unmitigated directives. Consequently, in the present analysis, we distinguish between mitigated and unmitigated forms for the following categories of obliges: imperatives, prohibitions, directives\(^6\), questions, and attentional devices. Table 1 provides an overview of the different coding categories with examples.

In any coding procedure, there is a certain degree of subjective interpretation, and therefore—to get some indication of the reliability of the coding—a second person was asked to code a proportion of the obliges. A random selection of 10% of the total number of 1048 obliges—i.e., 105—was coded by a second experimenter who was familiar with the coding procedures from her own research. In 7 cases out of 105, the second coder disagreed. This means that there is agreement in 93.4% of the cases, and we can confidently conclude that inter-rater reliability is high.

In the vast majority of examples, an oblige would equal a turn but there were examples of two, or even three, obliges in the same turn. In a total of 76 cases, it was impossible to determine whether an utterance was mitigated or unmitigated, or whether an utterance was an oblige or not; such cases were not included in the analysis. The question cases include examples where it is impossible to determine the function of a particle, as in, for example, *Vi sad I bussen jo* (*‘We were sitting on the bus, (right)’*), where it is difficult to determine whether or not the particle *jo* has a mitigating effect on the utterance. Other examples include obliges that are ambiguous in terms of their meaning, such as, for example, *Nej ved du hvad se lige*, which could be seen as either a mitigated attentional device (meaning ‘Listen, look here eh’), or it could be seen as an unmitigated directive (meaning ‘This is too much, look’).

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\(^6\) Sachs (1987) uses four different kinds of directives in her analysis. There was no justification for keeping this distinction in the present study, because there were hardly any pretend directives at all, and rather few joint directives. The declarative directives were by far the most frequent, and the question directives were coded as questions, not directives. Therefore, a subcategory of directives appeared to be unnecessary.
Furthermore, some examples were excluded from the analysis because it was impossible
to determine whether an utterance was meant to be an oblige or not. An example is provided
by Jimmie and Dennis (both 6.0) playing with miniature dolls. Jimmie says Og så døde hun
(‘And then she died’), Og så kom ambulancen (‘And then the ambulance came’), which
could be seen as either giving directives about the play, or as simply making a statement.
Finally, it should be mentioned that repetition of obliges was not counted, for example, if
the listener did not hear, or did not respond, and the speaker was repeating the oblige.
Obliges which were partly unintelligible were also omitted.

The Question-obliges in the present analysis are divided in two: tag questions and other
questions. I agree with Sachs (1987) who argues that tag questions always mitigate,
because their function is to give the listener an opportunity to concur or disagree with the
content of the utterance, and hence, they generally reflect the intentions of a more
considerate speaker. Consequently, tag questions are always coded as mitigated, whereas
the remaining questions—a combination of what Sachs calls State Questions and Informa-
tion Questions—can be either mitigated or unmitigated.

3. Results

In the 16 play scenes, there was a total of 1048 obliges, with directives being by far the
most prominent category. Table 2 gives the numbers and percentages of mitigated obliges
in various categories for boys and girls, and Table 3 gives the numbers and percentages of
unmitigated obliges in various categories for boys and girls.

At least two things are obvious from Tables 2 and 3. First, the unmitigated obliges are by
far the most predominant: in fact, there are twice as many unmitigated obliges (699) as
opposed to mitigated obliges (349). This result is not surprising, however, since unmi-
tigated utterances tend to dominate in conversations between intimates. Second, the
difference in the number of obliges uttered by boys and girls is very small. For both
categories of obliges, the female subjects have a small lead, but the differences appear to be
too small to be of any statistical significance.

However, to test this assumption, one-way ANOVAs (six mitigated linguistic categories
by gender) + (five unmitigated linguistic categories by gender) (P < 0.05) were per-
formed. The results of the ANOVAs show that no significant gender differences were found

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperatives (%)</td>
<td>15 (4.3)</td>
<td>21 (6.0)</td>
<td>36 (10.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibitions (%)</td>
<td>6 (1.7)</td>
<td>7 (2.0)</td>
<td>13 (3.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives (%)</td>
<td>65 (18.6)</td>
<td>72 (20.6)</td>
<td>137 (39.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions (%)</td>
<td>36 (10.3)</td>
<td>36 (10.3)</td>
<td>72 (20.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tags (%)</td>
<td>27 (7.7)</td>
<td>44 (12.6)</td>
<td>71 (20.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentional devices (%)</td>
<td>17 (4.9)</td>
<td>3 (0.9)</td>
<td>20 (5.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>166 (47.6)</td>
<td>183 (52.4)</td>
<td>349 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for any of the 11 categories of mitigated and unmitigated obliges. Only in two cases are the differences noticeable: the tags and the mitigated attentional devices. In the latter category, the boys—contrary to our immediate expectations—have more than the girls. As for tags, the girls do have more than the boys—a result which is in accordance with the tendency reported in some of the literature, including Sachs, 1987. However, as already pointed out, the gender differences in the present study are not statistically significant\(^7\).

It is widely assumed in the literature that children’s use of politeness phenomena increases with age (see, for example, Ervin-Tripp, 1982). Therefore, considering the age span of the participants in this study, a second set of ANOVAs was performed to see if there were any significant differences between the younger and the older children’s use of mitigated and unmitigated obliges. The children were divided into four age groups (AG): AG 1: 3;0–4;0; AG 2: 4;1–5;0; AG 3: 5;1–6;0; AG 4: 6;1–7;3, and one-way ANOVAs were performed (six mitigated linguistic categories by age group) + (five unmitigated linguistic categories by age group) ($P < 0.05$). The result shows some significant differences, but only for two of the six mitigated linguistic categories, namely the mitigated imperatives ($F = 6.789; P = 0.004$) and the mitigated directives ($F = 5.186; P = 0.0117$). For those two categories, the older children (AGs 3 and 4) use significantly more mitigated forms than the younger children (AGs 1 and 2). Furthermore, for two of the unmitigated categories, we also have significant differences, namely the unmitigated prohibitions ($F = 3.822; P = 0.0324$) and the unmitigated directives ($F = 5.916; P = 0.0072$); as in the case of the unmitigated obliges, it is again the older children who use these categories significantly more than do the younger children.

Consequently, contrary to our expectations, we cannot conclude that the use of politeness phenomena increases with age. Only for 1/3 of the mitigated categories was there a significant difference according to age, and the significance applies to two of the unmitigated categories as well, but not in the predicted direction. Furthermore, the tendency (reported in some of the previous research) for girls to soften their obliges, to seek compromise and strive to maintain harmony in the group, and to be more concerned with the other child/children in the play, has also not been confirmed in the Danish data. Likewise, our analyses have failed to reproduce the picture of boys as using less mitigation,

Table 3
Numbers and percentages of unmitigated obliges for boys and girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imperatives (%)</td>
<td>43 (6.2)</td>
<td>52 (7.4)</td>
<td>95 (13.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibitions (%)</td>
<td>62 (8.9)</td>
<td>66 (9.4)</td>
<td>128 (18.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directives (%)</td>
<td>147 (21.0)</td>
<td>160 (22.9)</td>
<td>307 (43.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions (%)</td>
<td>50 (7.2)</td>
<td>68 (9.7)</td>
<td>118 (16.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentional devices (%)</td>
<td>24 (3.4)</td>
<td>27 (3.9)</td>
<td>51 (7.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>326 (46.6)</td>
<td>373 (53.4)</td>
<td>699 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^7\) The results were also analysed in relation to other variables which might have an effect on the children’s linguistic behaviour, including regional subgroup and the size of the unit in which the children played. None of these variables had any effect on the production of mitigated and unmitigated obliges.
as being more assertive and preferring an adversarial style which would more often lead to a disruption of the play. If we look at the unmitigated imperatives and prohibitions (which, we could argue, are the most assertive and the least polite), the girls in this sample have more of these features in their language than the boys—although the differences are not statistically significant. In fact, if we look at just a few examples of the children’s play, we see numerous examples of girls using an unmitigated, controlling and adversarial style, something which has been referred to in the literature as typical of ‘boys’ language’ (Holmes, 1992). The following examples illustrate this point (capital letters indicate loud speech or shouting; a dot indicates a pause of approximately 1 s; // indicates an interruption).

(a) Monica (3;8) and Nanna (3;8)

1. N: Jeg har fundet to piger (I’ve found two girls) [takes another miniature doll from the pile of toys]
2. M: [takes a miniature tea pot from the pile]
3. N: Den sku’ jeg også bruge Monica (I should like that one too Monica)
4. [reaches out for the tea pot] ...
5. M: [gives blue doll to N.]
6. N: Kom lige med de to drenge (Give me the two boys eh) [reaches across the table for a blue doll]
7. M: [takes the blue doll]
8. N: Også med den anden (The other one too)
9. M: [takes a white doll out of a bed]
10. N: Kom nu med den anden (Give me the other one eh) [reaches across the table] Giv mig ham (Give him me) [takes the white doll]

(b) Jeannie (4;3) and Sandra (3;9)

1. J: Jeg ska’ ha’ flere (I need more) [takes another Duplo window]
2. S: Det var MIN (It was MINE) [looks at J]
3. J: NÆH (NO) [looks at S]
4. S: Nå (well) [in a soft voice] [holds the window forward]
5. J: det var min for Satan så (it was mine bloody hell)
6. S: Værsgo’ for Satan så [in a soft voice] (here you are bloody hell) [puts the window in front of J.]

(c) Cecilie (5;11) and Nadja (6;2)

1. C: Der kan lige være den (there’s just room for this) [puts a miniature car on the back of a truck]
2. N: NEJ Cecilie (NO Cecilie) [removes the car] det er der ikke plads til (there’s no room for that) […]
3. C: [puts the car back on the truck]
4. N: Nej Cecilie det gider jeg ik’ (No Cecilie I’m not having that) [removes the truck]
What we see in these examples is that the girls use both a very direct, assertive and unmitigated style, as in examples (b) and (c), but also that they can exploit mitigation to be assertive and controlling (cf. Sheldon, 1992, 1996). In example (a), we see Nanna using mitigation, for example, the past tense modality in “den sku’ jeg ogsa bruge” (line 4), the mitigating particles in line 6: “Kom ligeme de to drenge”, and line 11: “Kom nu med den anden”. However, she is not doing this to be polite but rather to assert power and control, which is made clear in her actions. While making her demands in lines 4, 6 and 11, she reaches across the table, literally grabs the toys out of Monica’s hands, silences her interlocutor, and excludes her from the play. The girls have no eye contact at any point; Monica is silent all the time and obeys Nanna’s commands and thus, there is no real confrontation. In the next two examples, however, the style is more aggressive. This is clearly suggested by the shouting (lines 2 and 3), and the swearing (lines 5 and 6) in example (b). Also, the eye contact in lines 2 and 3 supports the impression of a confrontational style, and whatever polite associations may be suggested by Sandra’s ‘Værsgo’ in a soft voice (line 6), while putting the window in front of Jeannie, are undermined by the coarse swearing. The fact that Sandra swears in a soft voice indicates, however, that she is backing off, letting Jeannie have the window.

In example (c), the style is not only assertive, but also aggressive. Both girls are very persistent: Cecilie keeps putting the miniature car back on the truck, insisting that they need to put it there to make room for the animals on the table; Nadja keeps removing the car. Cecilie is more openly aggressive; the shouting and pushing away Natalie’s hand from the toys (lines 9–10) show that the mitigating particle lige is not used to be polite. The girls have no eye contact at any point but keep their eyes on the toys. In lines 11–14, the girls become increasingly physical and are close to fighting. The climax is Nadja’s shouting in line 14 accompanied by banging a toy on the table, followed by the aggressive interruption in line 15, eventually leading to a disruption of the play (line 16).

These examples are by no means unique; several other examples of girls arguing and using an adversarial style which, in many cases, eventually leads to a disruption of the play, could be included. Likewise, there are numerous examples of boys using a similarly assertive style.

Finally, if we look at responses to questions like “Would you like ...” or “Do you want ...” (some coffee/more bricks/another pillow/to borrow my truck, etc.), we get another

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8 Because the communicative intention behind these utterances is clearly not to be polite, they have not been coded as mitigated.
indicator of polite behaviour. In Danish, as in most other languages, a polite response, which most parents and caretakers would like their children to reproduce, to a question like this would be *Ja tak* or *Nej tak* (“Yes please” or “No thank you”). In the 16 play scenes, there were 10 examples of these Would-you-like or Do-you-want-questions, and only in one of these cases did the interlocutor respond with a *Ja tak* (“Yes please”). In the other nine examples, the response was just *Ja* (“Yes”) or *Nej* (“No”).

4. Discussion

It might be tempting to interpret the data presented in this study as evidence that Danish children are less polite than children in, for example, the USA or Japan. To draw such a conclusion is of course far too simplistic. It is more likely that the data reported here tell us something about children’s pragmatic competence, and about the importance of seriously considering the context of the play situation (cf. Sheldon, 1996; Ervin-Tripp, 2001).

Sachs (1987) argues that the gender differences in the use of mitigation which she found in her study might have three different, but not mutually exclusive sources. The first possible source is that children learn gender appropriate behaviour by observing how adults talk to each other, and to their children. This explanation would be supported by research done by Gleason and her colleagues (for example Gleason, 1987; Gleason and Perlman, 1985; Ely et al., 1996), who argue that children’s linguistic behaviour may be accounted for if we look at the verbal behaviour of their caregivers, most notably their parents.

The second possible source is that boys and girls have been treated differently by their parents. This means, for example, that using an assertive, unmitigated (even aggressive) style is acceptable—maybe even encouraged—for boys, but not for girls. Most people would probably agree that the notion of ‘a nice girl’ and ‘a real boy’ is more than just a theoretical construct and has something to do with different constructions of identity in boys and girls (see Ladegaard, 1998, 2000) – something which is encouraged by parents treating boys and girls differently, and by having different expectations of them. To assess the feasibility of this ‘Different treatment’ hypothesis, Sacks refers to research by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1982), who explored which consequences various types of speech would have for boys and girls in a family. They looked at children’s compliance gaining with their parents and found that generally, children of both sexes were more successful when they used a more direct, assertive style, as opposed to a more indirect, polite style. Based on these results, the authors argue that children are not being polite in order to get their way but because politeness is an important part of the linguistic systems they are being exposed to.

The third possible explanation source is that differences in boys’ and girls’ verbal behaviour may simply reflect other, more fundamental differences between the sexes. For example, numerous studies report that boys are more physically active than girls and are more likely to engage in ‘rough and tumble play’ (see, for example, DiPietro, 1981). Playing rough in bigger groups outside, we could argue, is more likely to encourage a verbally aggressive style in the boys, as opposed to playing in smaller groups inside, which may be more likely to lead to a linguistically more tentative style in the girls.
If we relate the evidence from our Danish study to these three theories, we may argue that these children do not display any gender differences in their use of politeness phenomena because (a) the adults who are acting as role models for these children do not display any gender differences in their language; (b) these children are not treated differently by adult caretakers when they act in an assertive manner; or (c) the boys in this study are not more physically active, or engaged in rough and tumble play, than the girls. If we consider (c), there is evidence in the literature that boys in Danish kindergartens are indeed physically active and more likely than the girls to engage in rough and tumble play, such as playing war-games, which are perceived as violent, and an undesirable activity for children, by their (predominantly) female caretakers (see Mouritsen, 1999). In fact, based on empirical evidence from Danish kindergartens, Mouritsen argues that many boys may have a problem because female norms of appropriate behaviour apply, which means that boys are sometimes not allowed to express this assertive, or even aggressive, side of their identity, but are being encouraged to engage in more quiet, typically ‘female’, activities such as drawing, painting, and sewing.

Secondly, considering (b)—whether a somewhat aggressive behaviour is perhaps more acceptable in girls—there might, at least indirectly, be some support for that hypothesis in the present data. We do not know what happens in these children’s homes, but in their kindergartens and pre-school classes, they are in a social context which is characterised by a high degree of peer contact—and consequently highly influenced by peer group norms—and a relatively low degree of adult contact, at least compared to children who spend most of their time at home with one of their parents. So in the context of the kindergarten and pre-school class, there is little doubt that assertive behaviour, including assertive linguistic behaviour, is probably more accepted in girls as well as boys.

This points to the importance of reconsidering socio-cultural context in our attempts to interpret children’s linguistic behaviour. We could argue that what these observations from Danish kindergartens and pre-school classes tell us, first and foremost, is that these children have a high degree of pragmatic competence. They know that they are in a social context dominated by peer interaction where politeness does not pay off. At home, with their parents, this might be a different story because in that context, the use of various politeness phenomena are likely to be rewarded, and the lack of these features, possibly rebuked. However, in this public sphere where so much time is spent with peers and the interference from adult caretakers is minimal, children quickly learn that they do not need politeness in order to be successful in getting their way, but that they need to be assertive. Therefore, I would argue against the conclusion drawn by Ervin-Tripp et al. (1982) who maintain that children do not learn to be polite to get their way but because politeness is part of the linguistic system they are exposed to. The data presented here suggest that children—irrespective of their gender—will apply the linguistic system which, in the particular context and circumstances they find themselves in, is likely to give them most success in terms of being heard, getting their message across, and getting their way.

9 We have strong reasons to believe that contact with adults in Danish kindergartens is highly limited. Members of the OLAP Research Group spent 2 weeks in kindergartens observing and doing various pilot studies before proper experiments were carried out. All pilot observations were recorded, and it was notable how rarely an individual child had any proper conversation with an adult caregiver (usually, 2–3 adults would be responsible for 20–25 children aged 3–5).
In terms of the last hypothesis, parents’ influence on children’s speech, this theory may also have some relevance to our Danish data. As mentioned in the introduction, patterns of early child socialisation are somewhat different in Denmark compared to many other Western countries. The vast majority of children are placed in full-time day care at a very early age, usually when the child is around 6–8 months old. Denmark has changed radically during the past 30–40 years in terms of early child socialisation. In the 1960s, only half of the mothers of young children worked outside of the home; today 9 out of 10 are working mothers. Furthermore, proportionally Denmark has the largest number of working parents of any country in the world. This means, for example, that more than 70% of children in Denmark under the age of 1 year, and almost 90% of children under 4, spend about 40 h or more per week in daycare away from their homes (see Smith, 2001).

Consequently, Gleason and her colleagues’ explanation of the differences in young American children’s speech by referring to differences in the speech of their parents may indirectly also apply to our Danish data. The fact that these children, compared to children in many other Western countries, may have less adult contact, and spend much more time with their peers, could also help us explain the lack of significant differences in the politeness markers used by boys and girls in this context. It would seem natural that spending more time with peers would also lead to increased peer group influence (Corsaro, 1997)—and possibly decreased parental influence, not least in the public context of the kindergarten and the pre-school class. This means that what we see in these boys and girls adopting an assertive, unmitigated style may be their attempt to accommodate to the speech patterns of their peers rather than their parents (see also Ladegaard and Bleses, 2003).

5. Conclusion

This article has re-emphasised the need for language and gender research on children to be thoroughly contextualised (cf. Sheldon, 1996; Ervin-Tripp, 2001). The majority of previous studies, most of which have focused on white, middle-class American children, has reported important differences between boys and girls in terms of their use of politeness phenomena in their play. These differences were not confirmed in the present study, which focused on the use of mitigated and unmitigated forms of language in Danish pre-school children’s play in kindergartens and pre-school classes. The study found that assertive, unmitigated language was a predominant characteristic of the language of these 3–7 year olds, irrespective of their gender. Similar results have been found in more recent research which—like the present study—is also based on evidence from groups of children that are socially and culturally different from the white, Anglo-American middle-class subjects who have previously dominated this research area (see, for example, Cook-Gumperz and Szymanski, 2001; Evaldsson and Corsaro, 1998; Farris, 1991, 2000; Goodwin, 1998, 2001; Kyratzis and Guo, 2001).

Consequently, the present study re-emphasises the importance of considering the sociocultural context in research on children’s language. It also argues that children have a high degree of pragmatic competence because they know the contextual norms of the public context where peer group influence is the predominant force of children’s play and interaction and where assertive behaviour, not politeness, is being rewarded. We may
also speculate that they are aware of a different set of norms applying to the home context where, presumably, parents will expect their children to act politely, and consequently reward them when they do (cf. Gleason and Perlman, 1985). However, this dichotomy between private and public context has not been documented in the present study and will have to be the object of further research.

Ely and Gleason (1995: 266) argue that ‘the attention researchers have paid to socialisation that takes place within family interactions has tended to overshadow the role that others, including peers, may play in children’s socialisation.’ They further argue that family relationships have traditionally been seen as children’s precursors to relationships with the larger world (including peers, teachers, and other adults), but in times where the family structure is under change and where young children spend an increasing amount of time outside of their homes—this is true not only for Denmark but, increasingly, also for children in many other countries—we will need to focus more attention on the significance of peer group influence on children’s early socialisation and linguistic development (cf. Corsaro, 1997; Nakamura, 2001).

There is no doubt that in the context of the kindergarten and the pre-school class, children socialise each other, for example in establishing and maintaining their gender identity (Cahill, 1986), in the acquisition of social routines (Preece, 1992; Rice, 1992), and in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, such as standard and non-standard language behaviour for girls and boys respectively (Ladegaard and Bleses, 2003). However, this is an area that needs to be much more thoroughly researched. Furthermore, this study has emphasised the need to compare the same group of children in the private context of the family (during dinner table conversations, for example), and the public context of the kindergarten (during play with their peers, for example). This would allow us to study to what extent young children are contextually sensitive and can distinguish between pragmatic competence in the private and the public sphere.10

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10 This is in fact one of the tasks undertaken by OLAP (Basbøll et al., 2002). We record families with twins, including two with opposite sex twins, selected on the basis of regional differences between the parents’ language, every three weeks (beginning around the age of 8–10 months). What we hope to be able to analyse in dinner-table conversations and play sessions between adults and children is a possible relationship between differences in parental input and differences in the children’s output. OLAP is also looking at these children interacting in kindergartens in order to analyse how peer group influence may affect their language development.
Part of this study was presented on different occasions and I’d like to acknowledge useful comments from my audiences on these occasions: at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig (29 October 2000), at The Eighth Nordic Child Language Symposium, The Danish University of Educational Studies (17 November 2000), at The Department of Applied Linguistics, Copenhagen University (9 February 2001), and at The School of Languages, Linguistics and Culture, Birkbeck College, University of London (24 May 2001).

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