

Oslo, 31st August 2020

Review of Anna Filip's Doctoral Dissertation, *The role of pragmatics in language and social cognition development.*

It was my great pleasure to serve as an examiner for Anna Filip's PhD thesis. Her doctoral work is highly commendable for the breath of its scope, ranging from theoretical work bridging several disciplines (Publication 1) to an experimental pragmatics study with infants (Publication 2) and a methodological tool for the assessment of pragmatic skills in young Polish children (Publication 3). Each of these articles was interesting and carefully conducted, reflecting a clear understanding of the relevant literatures and the necessary analytic skills to bring together different perspectives on very diverse issues, while exploring each theoretical question in depth.

The thesis is organized around three published papers, plus an Introduction and a Conclusions section. In what follows, I will give a brief overview and evaluation of each part, closing with those questions which I would like Anna to address in her Doctoral Defense.

Introduction

The opening section is divided in three parts, each related to one of the published papers comprising the thesis. Each part includes an in-depth literature review outlining the major theoretical positions in the fields of developmental pragmatics and Theory of Mind.

Part 1. "Lean" vs "rich" interpretations of early communication and the question of recursion

This introductory part outlines the tenets of the lean vs rich views of pragmatic development, with a special focus on Carpendale's and Tomasello's work (amongst others). Most relevant to Publication 1, this subsection introduces the debate around recursion in human language and cognition sparked by Chomsky and colleagues.



Part 2. The relation between early pragmatics and language emergence – processes underlying gesture and word use

This part of the Introduction extends the ‘lean’ vs ‘rich’ analysis of pragmatic development to pointing, and introduces the notion of *relevant pointing*, which is central to the study on the role of pragmatics in language development reported in Publication 2.

Part 3. The importance of early pragmatic assessment – links to later language and Theory of Mind development

The last subsection discusses empirical work showing the close relationship between pragmatics and language development. Given the importance of this connection for our understanding of developmental psychology, Anna makes a convincing case for the need for a pragmatics assessment tool for Polish children – which is the focus of Publication 3.

Evaluation and further questions

I was very impressed both by the breadth and depth of the literature reviews that Anna carried out in the Introduction, as they revealed a very good understanding of both theoretical and empirical work.

In the defense, I would like to hear Anna’s own views on the ‘lean’ vs ‘rich’ interpretations of early pragmatic development: which side of the debate do you think deserves more credit given the available empirical evidence?

Note that I do not expect Anna to solve this long-standing debate (which I am not even sure will ever be solved!), but rather give us her informed opinion on these two theoretical positions and her critical evaluation of the evidence that both camps have brought to bear on these questions over the years.

Publication 1

Filip, A., Białek, A., & Białecka-Pikul, M. (2017). Recursion as a common ground of mental, communicative and linguistic processes, *Annals of Psychology*, XX, 4, 701–721

The first article is a theoretical contribution to the debate around recursion and its role in human cognition – more specifically, whether it is limited to the so-called *internal language of mind*, as argued by Chomsky and colleagues, or it characterizes other human faculties as well,

such as communication, Theory of Mind, sentential complement syntax or pragmatics, as argued by other researchers.

Evaluation and further questions

This is a very impressive piece of work, revealing a critical understanding of a very complex theoretical question. The discussion starts with the notion of recursion in Linguistics (including an overview of the Chomskyan framework) and then moves to its role in Theory of Mind, syntax and pragmatics.

I have two questions about this work, one about a specific passage in the paper, and the other about their approach, more generally. Starting with the more specific question, the authors put forward the following view:

“We sometimes speak of “we-intentionality” here, implying that individuals **jointly and recursively** (as cited in Perner & Esken, 2015) take into account each other’s representations of final (desired) states. For instance, performing/ interpreting a gesture pointing to the place where the object is hidden is tantamount to children passing on/ interpreting the following intention: “I want you to know that the object is still in place X.” This means that, already at one year of age, they use implicit ToM for recursive reasoning such as “Y wants me to know that X” and for the evaluation of their own behavior from Y’s perspective – “[I think] Y wants me to think that X.” It is believed (Tomasello, 2014/ 2016) that only humans are capable of recursive inference about other people’s and their own intentions – of interpreting other people’s internal states with regard to their own internal states and, on that basis, of coordinating joint activities involved in communication and cooperation. This enables them to represent the same situations/ objects from different perspectives as early as the preverbal stage of development.” (p. 731)

The question that came to my mind when reading this passage was the following: what evidence do we have that young children engage in this form of metarepresentational reasoning when producing or interpreting language, or simply gestures?

More generally, I would like to better understand why the greatest challenge to the Chomskyan view of recursion comes from a developmental perspective (as Anna and her co-authors argue in this paper). In other words, wouldn’t parallel evidence from the communicative, pragmatic and Theory of Mind abilities of adults challenge the language-only view of recursion just as well? What further arguments/evidence do we gain by focusing on the development of these abilities?

Publication 2

Białek, A., Białecka-Pikul, M., Filip, A., & Broda, M. (2018). Relevance matters. Eighteen-month-olds' use of relevant informative pointing as a predictor of two-year-olds' language abilities, *Infancia y Aprendizaje*

The second article in the thesis reports an experimental pragmatics study investigating the relationship between the relevance of pointing and language development, which critically is more specific than previous investigations of the relationship between pointing and language development. Using structural equation modelling, the authors show that relevant pointing at 18 months is a predictor of language production and comprehension at age 2 – whereas irrelevant pointing did not correlate with these skills.

Evaluation and further questions

In my opinion, this is a very clever, robust and carefully conducted study showing, for the first time, the importance of children's sensitivity to relevance for their own language development. I commend Anna and her co-authors for the elegant and novel paradigm, the advanced statistical analyses, and the longitudinal approach to their investigation.

I have two questions about this study:

Was there any evidence of a different developmental trajectory for those children who performed relevant pointing, irrelevant pointing and no pointing at all? I appreciate that relevant pointing reveals more mature pragmatics than irrelevant pointing, but I wonder if children who pointed to irrelevant (but nonetheless novel) pictures, showed more advanced language development at age 2 than children who did not point for the Experimenter at all. This would be an interesting difference, showing three levels of pragmatic development, perhaps.

In the General Discussion, the authors present their results as compatible with both teleological and mentalistic interpretations. I wonder if Anna could hypothesize about ways in which future research could tease apart these two interpretations. I am aware that this is a difficult question (as evidenced by how well both theories could explain their results), so I do not expect Anna to propose a foolproof test – just some directions for future research in this area.

Publication 3

Białeczka-Pikul, M., Filip, A., Stępień-Nycz, M., Kuś, K., & O'Neill, D. (2019). Ratunku! or Just Tunku! Evidence for the Reliability and Concurrent Validity of the Language Use Inventory–Polish, *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 62, 2317–2331

The third and last article reports a study that tried to adapt to Polish a standardized parent-report measure, the *Language Use Inventory* (LUI) by Danielle O'Neill (2009). The study describes the sociocultural and functional adaptation of this pragmatic assessment tool, which will importantly enable cross-linguistic comparisons and pragmatic-related clinical assessment of Polish children between 18-47 months of age.

Evaluation and further questions

Whereas the development of a pragmatic assessment tool is beyond my expertise, I was very impressed by the work of Anna and her co-authors in adapting LUI to Polish and I praise them for embarking in this project, which will be useful to so many researchers in our field.

I have two general questions about this work:

I would like Anna to tell us a bit more about the greatest challenges that they faced from a social, cultural and linguistic perspective when adapting this tool to Polish (extending perhaps the discussion on pp. 2319-2320).

The authors mention in two places (once in the Introduction and then in the Conclusions) how their version of LUI would be useful for investigations of the pragmatic development of Polish-English bilingual children. This is an area I am personally interested in and would like to hear more about this line of research.

Conclusions and future studies

The thesis closes with some concluding remarks and discusses avenues for future work.

Final questions

In the last section of the thesis, Anna cites the following study (currently under review with *Language Learning and Development*):

Filip, A., Białek, A. & Białeczka-Pikul, M. *Production of recursive complement syntax predicts second-order theory of mind in five-year-olds*, which “introduces a new task to measure the production of recursive syntax, involving embedding of complements, and shows that both

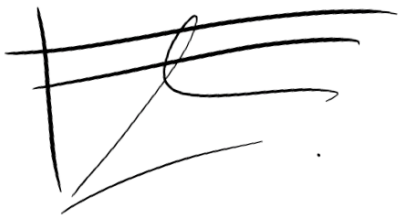
syntax and pragmatics of children's linguistic productions influence their ToM performance at the age of 5 and a half years." (p. 72)

If we had the time, I would be delighted to hear more about this new task and the results of this study as it sounds really interesting.

Finally, I would like Anna to reflect on her own contribution to each of these papers and share with us what she believes were her major contributions, where the biggest challenges were and what she thinks she learned with each publication.

As I said at the start of my review, it was a pleasure to review Anna's PhD thesis, and I very much look forward to the Defense.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping horizontal and diagonal strokes, appearing to be the name Paula Rubio-Fernandez.

Paula Rubio-Fernandez, PhD