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Discovering Meaning through Question Forms:
The Case of Malaysian Children

Karen Kow Yip Cheng
University of Malaya

Abstract. This paper is an attempt at analyzing meaning via the path of decoding
question forms. It involves sixty pre-school Malaysian children aged between four
and six years of age who are acquiring English as a second language. It aims to
unravel the way children decode questions and further to discover meaning as it is
encoded in the child's mind. The paper also takes into consideration the means
through which this meaning is conveyed.   This is of special interest as the
respondents are encoding meaning using English, which is a second language to
them. This study was embarked upon in view of the fact that Elissa Newport (1976)
found fewer declarative sentences (30%) used with regard to children than with
adults (87%), more imperative sentences (18% against 2%), and many more
interrogative sentences (44% as against 9%).

1. Introduction

Before venturing into the study proper, it is apt to define communicative
competence within the context of children. Studies by Dore (1974) and
Bloom, Ricissano, and Hood (1976) have shown that even the youngest
children appear to know the basic rules of conversation. Dore (1974) found
that even holophrastic children (children aged between 1 year, 3 months and
1 year, 7 months) appear to use language in clearly defined interactive
functions. Dore gives as examples acts such as labelling, repeating,
answering, greeting and so on. Children usually attempt to stay within the
interactive framework of giving an answer even in instances where the
target response was beyond their competence. They usually try to use some
of the linguistic information to produce responses that are relevant to both
the linguistic and semantic contexts. It is interesting at this point to look at
some of the strategies employed by children when faced with a situation in
which they cannot furnish the ideal answer. When a child is faced with
items that are syntactically uninterpretable to him or is in a non-control
situation as labelled by Potts, Carlson, Cocking and Copple (1979), the

child reverts to the labelling or repeating speech act. Some also respond with I 'don t 'know. 'In a situation known as interpreting unfamiliar linguistic forms by Potts, Carlson, Cocking and Copple, the child uses some of the information supplied to him to derive a familiar structure with which to respond to. In other words, he edits the structure to produce one that is familiar to him. What happens here is that the child assumes that the adult means something even though the utterance is unfamiliar to him. Thus, through editing the child is able to produce a response relevant not only to the semantic situation but also to some of the formal features, such as the word what , 'in the input. Potts, Carlson, Cocking and Copple identify a third situation that they label as partial control where the input is interpreted correctly but the child is not as yet in control of the structure. For example, on secondary conjunction items the following responses are recorded:

> This girl is running and so (did that one).
> This baby can t 'walk and neither (is she).

Potts, Carlson, Cocking and Copple point out that the responses above show partial control of structures. Nevertheless, a few details are still missing in production. It would be interesting to discover in this study if labelling, repeating, and saying I 'don t 'know àre the only three strategies that the Malaysian children in this study use in their effort to provide answers.

1.1 Profile of Subjects of Study

For the purpose of this study a total of thirty groups, each group comprising two respondents, was selected. Thus, a total of sixty respondents were studied. The respondents aged four to six comprised both male and female respondents. A breakdown of the age, sex, race and social-economic status of the respondents is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Profile of Respondents

Age	Sex	Race	No. of Respondents
4	M	C	2
4	F	C	4
4	M	ML	3
4	F	ML	5

5	M	C	8
5	F	C	4
5	M	ML	8
5	F	ML	4
6	M	C	9
6	F	C	1
6	M	ML	5
6	F	ML	7

The sixty respondents selected for this study were from four kindergartens located in urban areas in Malaysia. Two of the kindergartens were located in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and two were located in Petaling Jaya, a satellite town. It is not the aim of this study to compare the performance of the children from the four different kindergartens. Rather, it is assumed that the kindergartens are similar in that they are all located in urban areas and all the children who attend these kindergartens are from families where the parents are professionals (both or one of them), for example, lecturers, teachers, accountants and managers.

1.2 Types of Questions and Their Functions

Stenstrom (1994:92) defines questions as asking for information or confirmation; thus, a question expects an answer. In other words, the function of a question is to seek an answer that provides information or confirmation. Questions can be subclass fed into identification questions (WH- questions), polarity questions (Yes-no questions) and confirmation questions (Tag questions) based on the kind of answer it expects.

An identification question usually contains a WH-word and may require information that is specifying or open-ended. For example, *who, which, when and where* ask for specification whereas *what, why and how* require an open-ended reply. Specification questions require a very precise answer, that is, information that identifies or substitutes for the WH-word. For example:

> A)   What is your name?
>   My name is Alysha Wong.

On the other hand, open-ended identification questions that involve *what, why and how* 'questions place no restriction on the type of information nor on how much information is expected. For example:

> B)   How did your interview go?
>   Oh, okay I guess.

Polarity questions require a yes/no answer and are usually presented as an utterance involving inverted word order (example C) or a do-periphrasis (example D), for example:

> C)   Are you free tonight?
>   Yes, I am.

> D)   Do you know Timothy Wong?
>   No, I don t.'

A confirmation question seeks confirmation and may take the form of a tag question (example E) or a question with a declarative structure (example F), for example:

> E)   This is your book, isn t it?
>   Yes, it is.
> F)   She was sitting up in bed?
>   Yes, she was.

From the various types of questions, it is possible to draw up a list of functions that questions may be used for:

- to get information/confirmation
- to create contact
- to start and carry on a conversation
- to ask permission to do something
- to get somebody to do something.

2. A Preview of the Task

In this task, the respondents were required to recite the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty." The respondents were first given the instruction to listen very carefully to the researcher while she recited the nursery rhyme. Next, they were required to recite the nursery rhyme on their own.

After both respondents had taken turns to recite the nursery rhyme, the researcher posed a total of three questions to the respondents.

On the whole, English nursery rhymes are prominent teaching items in kindergartens in urban areas of Malaysia. This may be because children naturally love nursery rhymes and there are many pedagogical reasons for introducing young children to rhymes. It is a good starting point as it is a valid and fun way of tuning children into sound.

In the effort to discover meaning through question forms in the context of Malaysian children, the researcher designed a set of three questions. The aim of these questions was to discover the meaning that the nursery rhyme holds from the children's perspective. In other words, the questions do not test knowledge of the nursery rhyme but rather attempt to discover what meaning the content of the rhyme holds for the children. For example, what do the children understand about Humpty Dumpty, the King's men and horses?

2.1 The Questions Posed to Respondents in the Task and Their Functions

Below is a list of questions posed to the respondents at the end of the Task, i.e. the recitation task. The questions were presented in the order listed below:

1. Who is Humpty Dumpty?
2. Who are the King's men?
3. Why did Humpty Dumpty sit on the wall?

The first question posed to the respondents was: "Who is Humpty Dumpty?"

This question functioned as an identification question, that is, the respondent has to substitute the *who* for information that identifies the character Humpty Dumpty. By so doing the researcher wanted to discover if the respondents were familiar with the character Humpty Dumpty. This led to Question 2, a polarity question, which was followed by an identification question.

Question 2, also an identification question, was a rather demanding question. It required the respondent to conclude that the King's men were men who were under the King's orders to save Humpty. The men who qualified to carry out this rescue task would be the soldiers, the warriors of a nation. In posing this question the researcher was prepared to accept alternative responses that the respondents would give. These alternative responses would provide data that would enable the researcher to analyse:

- the creativity of respondents in coming up with an alternative response
- alternative strategies that may be employed, for example, body language
- the meaning the respondents attach to the concept 'King's men'

The final question that was posed was also an identification question: 'Why did Humpty Dumpty sit on the wall? The answer to this question would not be found in the nursery rhyme itself. This meant the respondents had to employ their creativity in providing a response to this question. The researcher wanted to discover if the response to this question would be culled from events of the respondent's everyday life or whether the respondent would use his imagination.

2.1.1 Responses to Question 1

The responses to Question 1 in Table 2 may be said to fulfill the heuristic function in Halliday's (1985) function of language. This particular function of language enables a child to explore his environment. Language here functions as a means to investigate reality and is a way to learn about things. Here language is used to learn, thus the importance of the question and answer routine.

Table 2   Responses to Question 1

Answer	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Total
Egg	3	9	10	22
Man/boy	2	1	-	3
No response	1	-	1	2

From table 2, it can be seen that the respondents favoured the response that Humpty is an egg. Only two respondents failed to answer the question. This brings to mind Dore's (1974) statement that children always try to stay within the interactive framework of providing an answer. This happens even in instances where the target response is beyond their competence.

From the responses above the conclusion may be drawn that the respondents are familiar with the character Humpty. They possess prior knowledge of this nursery rhyme as they have recited it before in class with their teacher. Humpty is an egg according to the respondents in this study. If one studies the nursery rhyme, there is in fact no mention of this fact. One has to conclude, therefore, that this piece of information was culled from other sources. Perhaps their teachers have shown them pictures of Humpty Dumpty. The nursery rhyme is also usually accompanied by a picture of an egg-like Humpty, thus the conclusion that Humpty is an egg. One may, therefore, learn an important pedagogical fact here, that is, children learn from multiple sources and through using all their five senses. In other words, children glean meaning from all the sources available to them.

2.1.2 Responses to Question 2

From Table 3, it can be seen that the favoured answer is 'guard/soldier.' A total of twelve respondents gave this answer and six of them are six years old. Only three respondents aged four and five respectively gave this response. It may be concluded, therefore, that this question requires a higher level of thinking skill. The older respondents who were more familiar with the nursery rhyme had an edge over the younger ones in tackling this question. The difficulty of this question is further seen in the <disclaim> response as categorised by Stenstrom (1994) provided by one of the 4 year old respondents. Stenstrom (1994:114) defines the category of answer

<disclaim> as one where the speaker declares that the answer is unknown. The non-verbal <disclaim> answer was also used by two other respondents, one aged five and the other six.

Table 3 Responses to Question 2

Answer	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Total
guard/soldier	3	3	6	12
no response	1	-	1	2
don t know	1	-	1	1
body language	-	1	-	

In analysing the responses given by respondents aged four, it was found that one of the respondents gave the answer the men . 'What the respondent had done here was to repeat the information given in the question, that is, Who are the King s 'men? 'This repetition strategy was also employed by the five-year old respondents as exemplified below:

G/Re 19
all the King

H/Re 20
all the men

In some cases, the respondents had chosen to repeat information given in the nursery rhyme, that is:

I/Re 40
Humpty

J/Re 48
he fall down

Likewise two respondents aged six responded with:
K/Re 2
the King

> L/Re 25
> the King s'

By employing this repetition strategy, the respondents were able to stay within the interactive framework as described by Potts, Carlson, Cocking and Copple (1979). This strategy provided redundancy and therefore extra time for the respondent to process, comprehend and assimilate the message

The following response (example M) from a six-year old portrays yet another strategy which Faerch and Kasper (1983) termed an interlanguage strategy:

> M/Re 13
> see like war lah they all go …

In this strategy the respondent who does not have the exact word required reverts to describing the thing. In this case the meaning of the term soldier was conveyed by describing what soldiers do, that is, they go to war. This answer can be subcategorised, therefore, as <imply>. Stenstrom (1994:114) defines the category of answer <imply> as one which gives adequate information implicitly.

2.1.3 Responses to Question 3

The responses obtained from question 3 (shown in Table 4) are interesting. It appears that the older respondents, that is, two aged six and one aged five failed to answer the question. One would assume that the younger respondents would be the ones who would fail to give an answer to a complex question. In this case the younger respondents, that is, two aged four and three aged five responded with I don t know. One may conclude that the respondents found this question challenging. This is because there is no answer to the question, at least not one that can be lifted from the nursery rhyme. Thus the younger respondents admitted defeat and chose the <disclaim> category of answer, that is, where they declared that the answer was unknown. On the other hand, the older respondents chose not to verbalise the fact that the answer was unknown. They chose the non-verbal

option of remaining silent. In both cases, the fact remains that the question is unanswered. The conclusion then is that as children grow older they become more adept at covering up their deficiencies.

Table 4 Responses to question 3

Answer	Age 4	Age 5	Age 6	Total
Naughty	1	-	-	1
Tired/rest	1	2	2	4
Fall down	-	5	2	7
`I like it '	1	1	3	5
`don t know '	2	3	-	5
No response	-	1	2	3

In analysing the other responses to this question, one finds that the respondents aged six pointed out that Humpty sat on the wall because Humpty Dumpty liked it. This answer points to the growth of individuality and free will in older children. They are beginning to assert their individual rights in life, to do what they choose to do for their own reasons. Hence it is found that in Western cultures, children are generally considered to be autonomous in their choice of activities. They are therefore asked many questions to which they have the choice of responding yes or no. Interrogative sentences are all the more numerous in the speech of parents to the extent that they amount to a polite version of what in other cultures appears in the form of an order - for example:

Can you do that for me?

The respondents aged five gave the answer hè fall down . ' In analysing this answer, one finds it is really not the answer to the question at all. Rather it is a consequence of Humpty s 'sitting on the wall. From a comparison of the answers given by the six-year old and the five-year old respondents, one can say that the ability to analyse and give appropriate answers to questions and thus the ability to convey meaning, increases with age, for example:

Why did Humpty Dumpty sit on the wall?

Respondents aged six: He is tired.
                                                    He likes it.

Respondents aged five: He fall down.
                                                     I don t know.

Respondents aged four: I don t know.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of posing the set of three questions to the respondents after the nursery rhyme recitation task is twofold, that is, to discover meaning as it is in the child s' mind and the means through which this meaning is conveyed. From the responses to the questions, the following conclusions may be drawn:
  1. Children can differentiate between fantasy and reality.
  2. Children employ various strategies when they have to answer complex questions.
  3. Older children are more capable of processing complex questions and
  4. Finally, they are able to respond with more complex answers.

In this study it was found that when faced with a complex question and lacking an extended vocabulary, children chose to convey their message using alternative strategies. Among these strategies are repetition, that is, repeating information that is found in the nursery rhyme or story (see answer to question 2). Indeed research has shown that mothers employ several tricks to make their children understand. One of them consists in the repetition of sentences. Psycholinguists who have analyzed maternal discourse have found that a third of the sentences in their productions consist in repetitions, often simplified, of the previous utterance. Other mothers reformulate their utterance, or that of the child, expressing it in a different way. Japanese mothers rather systematically reformulate children s' utterances to make them culturally acceptable. Other mothers choose to clarify their remarks by commenting on them. This latter technique is much more profitable for the child (Boysson-Bardies 88-89:1999).

The respondents also used the <disclaim> strategy where they openly declared that the answer was unknown (see answer to question 2 and 3). The respondents also employ the <imply> strategy which gives adequate information implicitly (see question 2).

The behaviour of turn taking which emerges toward the end of the second month, that is, when infants react to the vocal promptings of the mother by cooing when she stops talking is refined to an art. Hence in this study we find that children aged between four and six employ strategies to stay within the interactive framework and use language in clearly defined interactive functions.

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