The Pragmatic Functions of Children's Questions

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the pragmatic functions of Cantonese-speaking preschool children's spontaneously produced questions. Fifty-six normal children between the ages of 2;06 to 5;06 were having a free play individually in the adult-child interaction situation at their kindergarten. Questions produced by children during these interaction periods were categorized into ten pragmatic functions. The distribution of the questions among the ten pragmatic functions differed across age groups but was mainly seeking information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity. While seeking information for discussing observable topics and attracting attention questions slightly decreased, the question for seeking information for discussing the inner state and feelings increased very slightly across ages. A relationship between question form and function was noted in the corpus. Children extend the use of question forms to express more functions when getting older and the developmental changes in the children's questions for different functions are related to the pragmatic development.

Introduction

Question has its own unique features, its language meanings and functions. Children are exposed to a vast number of questions at a very early age in the communication with the caregiver. Psycholinguists and child-language specialists have explored how questions reflect language development and how questions are used by adults as pedagogical tools to teach children specific language skills, such as shared focus, interpretation, etc. (Dore & McDermott, 1982). Strategies for informational exchange experienced by children are heavily laden with question (Shatz, 1979; Parnell & Amerman, 1983). And those questions express a multiplicity of communicative functions (Shatz 1979).

Questions produced by children with different ages reflect important information about the children's language and cognitive development. According to Li (1995) and Li & Chen (1998), there are five stages for the children's language development (Li & Chen, 1998, p.1- 2). The first stage is babbling stage (birth to 0;06), at which infants explore a variety of sounds. However, the exploration of sounds is not used for communication between infant and adult, but it is a kind of reflex action. Then is the passive communicator stage (0;06 to 1;00). At this stage, infants purposefully repeat, elongate, and pause in sounds to imitate adult's speech. Thirdly, "specific language" communication stage (1;00 to 2;06) comes, children are able to communicate with others by using single word utterances or telegraphic speech. Then the focus of this study, the target oral language developmental stage (2;06 to 6;00) emerges and finally is the mature stage (above 6;00), at which children's language ability becomes mature and their language performances reach the adult's language. Children aged from 2;06 to 6;00, who are in target oral language developmental stage of Li & Chen's system, are in an important stage of the language development (Crystal, 1992; Li, 1995; Li & Chen, 1998). At this stage, children captured basic phonological and grammatical rules, language usage skills and certain vocabulary. The use of the "special language" components, which are the single word utterance, telegraphic speech, will be reduced and the target language (adult language) will be developed and their language use will approach to adult language.

Moreover, questions produced by children provide information about semantics/conceptual, and pragmatic development. Questions have been investigated at every level of linguistic analysis for decades across different languages. Several studies have focused on the semantic or conceptual aspects of children's questions. Tyack & Ingram (1977), Li & Tang (1991) investigated the order of different semantic question types. Li & Tang's results, remarkably similar to Tyack & Ingram's results, yielded the following order of acquisition for question production: *yes/no*, *what*, *where*, *why*, *how*, *who* and *when*. Tyack & Ingram suggested that this order be directly related to the concepts underlying the question types. *What* and *where* questions, which develop early, are closely tied to the child's immediate environment and refer to the names and locations of objects and people. Later developing questions, such as *why*, *how* and *when*, require the child to have some knowledge of more difficult concepts such as causality and time. Also, Li & Tang suggested that the production of question is the results of the curiosity and the need of answer, which are related to the interaction of cognition and language ability. And they suggested that children around 2;00 start to use linguistic forms to express their curiosity. Children around 3;00 are capable to use all the question forms, however, the use of question forms is narrow and a huge increase in the different use of questions will be around 4;00.

Another semantic aspect, which has been analyzed, is the content of children's questions. Piaget (1967) was the first investigator to focus on this aspect of question development. Based on his observations of a six-year-old child's *why* questions, he proposed that the content of children's *why* questions can be categorized into five semantic categories: *causal explanation*, *reality and history*, *human actions and intentions*, *justification*, and *classification and evaluation*. Davis (1932) and Meyer & Shane (1973) added a semantic category called *social relations* and used these six categories to analyze the content of children's yes/no and wh-questions. Results from both studies supported Piaget's observational results that there are developmental changes in the content of children's questions. Generally, children ask fewer questions about causal explanation and classification, while more questions about human actions, justification, and social relations with increasing age.

The studies just described have provided important information about the semantic /conceptual aspects of children's questions. In the past decades, pragmatic aspects of questions have received a considerable amount of attention. Kwok (1984) studied the sentences particles in Cantonese; she suggested that the use of interrogative particles, which are a kind of sentence particles, can reflect the use of questions, such as what kind of information is requested and the attitude and emotional state of speakers. Tsui (1994) investigated the discourse functions of different question types in adult speech. She described question as an utterance, which elicits an obligatory verbal response or its non-verbal surrogate. She proposed six discourse functions of question: *elicit information*, *elicit confirmation*, *elicit agreement*, *elicit commitment*, *elicit repetition* and *elicit clarification*. Wu (1989, 1996) had similar findings and he concluded that there is a complex relationship between question form and function.

Furthermore, in James & Seebach (1982) study, they studied the pragmatic functions of children from 2;00 to 5;00. They classified questions into three functions: *conversational function*, *information seeking function* and *directive function*. They indicated that their young English children use questions to serve different functions and there is a change in use of questions for different functions with age. However, they divided the pragmatic functions of children's questions too broadly. Further we do not know whether there will be any different questioning behavior in various cultural and linguistic communities, such as French-speaking 3;00 and 4;00 children used far fewer questions with question words in Sinclair & van Gessel's (1990) study than the American counterparts in James & Seebach's study. Also, most of the previous studies of Chinese questions focused on adult's questions (Tsui, 1994; Wu, 1996), while few focuses on the children's questions. The present study aimed to provide more information about the pragmatic functions of Cantonese-speaking children's questions: specially, we were interested in the following questions:

1. What are the developmental sequences of the Cantonese-speaking children's questions and the

pragmatic functions of the questions they produced?

2. Are certain question types used proportionally more often to serve a particular pragmatic function regardless of age?
3. Does Cantonese-speaking children's use of questions to serve the pragmatic functions change as a function of age?

Method

Subjects

In this study, a cross-sectional approach will be used to study the development of the pragmatic functions of Cantonese-speaking children's questions. The subjects in this study were fifty-six Cantonese-speaking children aged between 2;06 and 5;06. They were evenly distributed into seven age groups, each consisting of four boys and four girls. They were assessed by the receptive section of Reynell Developmental Language Scale (Chinese version, 1987) and their scores were within normal range. The interviewer, who was an undergraduate of speech and hearing sciences, played with the individual child for about twenty minutes and the session was audiotaped. The sessions were conducted in the children's kindergarten. The interviewer talked and played with the child for most of the time during a conversation related to the free play involving bathing and dressing a doll. The data collected were transcribed, following the format of CHILDES (MacWhinney, 1991), and the transcriptions were computerized. The data used in this study were drawn from a study called 'Milestones in the acquisition of spoken Cantonese by pre-school children'. (A project awarded by the Hong Kong Government Language Fund to P. Fletcher (PI), S. Stokes, C. S. Leung & T. H-T. Lee).

Data Analysis

The children's questions were categorized into one of the six question types and one of the ten pragmatic functions.

(1) Question Types

Questions in Chinese are indicated not by changes in word order as in English. They differ structurally from simple declarative sentences in certain ways and each of them is characterized by a special word order arrangement or prosodic feature (Matthews & Yip, 1994; Gao, 1980, Kwok, 1984). The formal definition of question applies only to utterances in this study, and the rare indirect questions are not included. However, rhetorical question, which does not require an answer (Goody, 1978, p.28), is also targeted in this study. Subjects used this question frequently, and this question has its important function within the interaction. Also, Freed (1994) suggested a more reasonable view of question, which "does not assume an answer or response to be a required and/or automatic consequence of the occurrence of the question in the first place" (p.640). In this study, question types in Cantonese, which is the native speech of the great majority of Chinese people living in Canton, the capital of Kwangtung Province, and in Hong Kong (Kwok, 1984, p.1), were focused. Questions were classified according to syntactic structure and Kwok's (1984) classification was adopted. Definitions and examples of the question types are provided below.

(a) Tag Question

It is formed by adding a short A-not-A tag to the end of a declarative sentence.

*CHI: dou2 hai2 li1 dou6 , hou2mou5 ?

Pour at this place okay

'Pour it here, don't we?'

(b) Intonation Question

It is formed by superimposing a rising contour on a declarative stem.

*CHI: nei1 dou6 Jiu3 zoek3 ? ↗

This place want wear

'Put it here?'

(c) Particle Question

It is formed by adding an interrogative particle to the end of a declarative sentence. There exists in Cantonese a group of interrogative particles (Kwok, 1984, p.42) and they are: *maa3, aa5, me1,* *aa4*, *ge2*, *ne1*, *le5*, *laa1 maa3*, *laa3 wo3* & one more member was included in this study *ho2*.

*CHI: sai2 goek3 goek3 aa4 ?

wash foot foot SP

'Wash the foot?'

(d) Interrogative-word Question

It is a structure that is defined by the selection of one or more of the interrogative words.

*CHI: me1 lei4 gaa3 ?

what SP SP

'What is it?'

(e) A-not-A Question

It is formed by juxtaposing a verb with its negative counterpart.

*CHI: hai6 mai6 hoi1 gaa3 ?

Is not open SP

'Can it be opened?'

(f) Disjunctive Question

It is formed by joining two simple declarative sentences together with a coordinator.

*CHI: nei5 juk1 ge2 ding6 hai6 keoi5 zi6gei2 tan3 hau6 gaa3 ?

You move SP or is she self move back SP

'You move it or it moves itself?'

(*CHI: child's speech; SP: sentence particle)

(2) Pragmatic functions

The pragmatic success of an utterance depends not on grammaticality (the syntactic criterion), or interpretability (the semantic criterion) but on the appropriateness of felicity of an utterance on the occasion it is produced (Austin, 1962; Lyon, 1977). According to the model of states and events of face-to-face interaction (Ninio & Snow, 1996, p.30), there would be different levels of interaction and also types of interchange relating to them. In particular, speech act theorists have attempted to distinguish the illocutionary force of utterances, which is referring to how the speaker intends his/her utterance to be taken, from their semantic content (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Shatz (1979), Sinclair and van Gessel (1990), James & Seebach (1982), Freed (1994), Tsui (1994) and Wu (1989, 1996) categorized functions of questions differently but they all indicated that questions serve different pragmatic functions. The functional categories used in these studies have varied, but several general pragmatic functions appear in their classification systems. In this study, question's function was categorized by identifying what information was sought by the question and the child's intention within the social context. The taxonomy of question functions was developed by integrating the previous studies' categories and from the actual question types, which occurred in the data. Mainly, children's questions in this study, were seeking information, non-seeking information or rhetorical. The taxonomy includes ten functions: proposing action, clarification, confirmation, seeking information for discussing the observable topics, for discussing the non-present topics, for discussing the inner state and feelings, and for negotiating the ongoing activity, attracting attention, exclamation, and maintaining contact functions. In this taxonomy, questions for seeking information were divided into four areas, according to the immediate conversation context. As Ninio & Snow (1996) suggested the immediate social situation has significant influence on the content of interaction. Figure 1 shows the taxonomy of functions of questions in the children's speech in our corpus and definitions and examples of the functional categories are provided below.

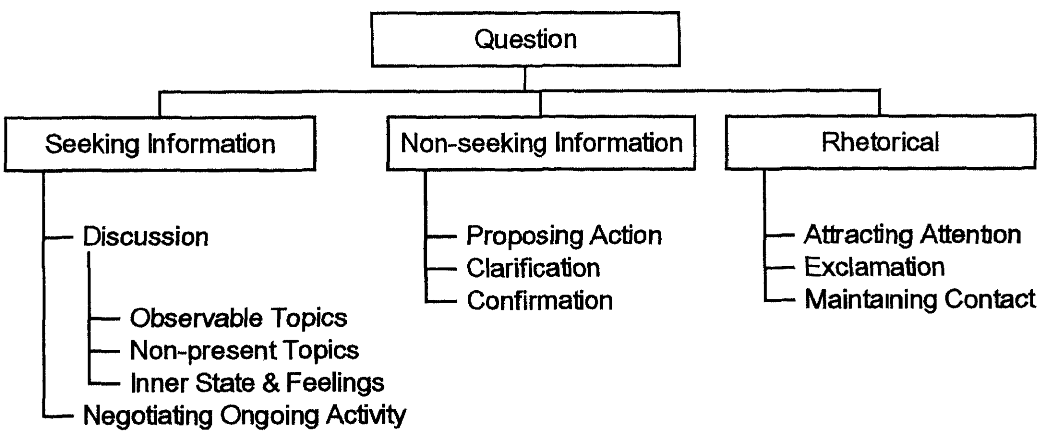

Figure 1: Functions of Questions in the Children's Speech

(a) Proposing Action

A question that proposes, suggests, request, impose, offer or invite possible future actions of the addressee and/or speaker.

→ *CHI:	bat1jyu4	ngo5dei6	waan2	go2	di1	je5 ,	hou2mou2	aa3 ?
	Rather	we	play	that	CL	thing	okay	SP

'Let's play that one, shan't we?'

*INV:	ngo5dei6	jat1zan6	sIn1	waan2	aa1 .
	We	later	only	play	SP

'We play that later.'

(b) Clarification

A question that confirms or verifies what has already been heard. The question often asks for a repetition of the information, which has been provided by the other speaker.

*INV:	hou2	m4	hou2	sik6	Laa4	nei5	gu2	haa5 ?
	Good	not	good	eat	SP	you	guess	SP

'Do you think it is tasty?'

→ *CHI:	me1	waa2 ?
	What	SP

'What?'

*INV:	nei5	gu2	haa5	gam2joeng2	hou2	m4	hou2	sik6	Laa4 ?
	You	guess	SP	such way	good	not	good	eat	SP

'Do you think it is tasty?'

(c) Confirmation

A question that is used to request the addressee to confirm or verify the speaker's assumption.

→ *CHI: li1 go3 gai1zai2 lei4 gaa4 ?

This CL chicken SP SP

'Is it a chicken?'

*INV: hai6 jo3 -: leng3 m4 leng3 aa3 ?

Is SP pretty not pretty SP

'Yes, is it pretty?'

*CHI: leng3 aa3 .

Pretty SP

'It is pretty.'

(d) Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics

A question which seeks information for discussing something observable in the environment that both attend to, for example, objects, persons, other's actions. However, the information is not related to the speaker's and addressee's actions.

*INV: keoi5 mei1 Maai4 ngaan5 aa3 !

He close ASP eye SP

'He closed his eyes!'

→ *CHI: zou6 mat1je5 mei1 Maai4 go3 ngaan5 ge2 ?

Do what close ASP CL eye SP

'Why did he close his eyes?'

*INV. dim2gaai2 mei1 Maai4 ngaan5 aa3 ? keoi5 fan3 dai1 aa1 maa3 !

Why close ASP eye SP ? He sleep low SP SP

'Why did he close his eyes? He has lain down!'

(e) Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics

A question which seeks information for discussing something that are not observable in the environment, for example, past and future events.

*INV: hai6 jaa4 nei5 seng4jat6 dou1 tai2 din6si6 jaa4 ?

Is SP you always also watch television SP

'You always watch television?'

→ *CHI: nei5 tai2 m4 tai2 sou3wong4sin1fung1 gaa3 ?

You watch not watch "sou3wong4sin1fung1" SP

'Do you watch the program "sou3wong4sin1fung1"?'

*INV: ngo5 aa4 ? jau5si4 laa1 , gam2 nei5 ne1 ?

I SP sometimes SP so you SP

'Sometimes, how about you?'

(f) Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings

A question which seeks information for discussing the speaker's or hearer's non-observable thoughts and feelings.

*INV: hou2 faan1 zau6 m4 leng3 gaa3 laak3 !

Good ASP then not pretty SP SP

'It is still not beautiful even it has recovered!'

→ *CHI: nei5 m4 geng1 ge2 ?

You not afraid SP

'Why don't you afraid?'

*INV: m4 geng1 gaa3 !

Not afraid SP

'I am not afraid!'

(g) Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity

A question which seeks information for negotiating the ongoing activity that both participate to, for example, the next action of the speaker/ addressee.

→ *CHI: zoek3 faan1 tiu4 fu3 sin1 . dim2 zoek3 aa3 ?

Wear ASP CL pants first. How wear SP

'Wear the trousers first. How to dress it?'

*INV: li1 gin6 hai6 saam1saam1 lei4 wo3 .

This CL is clothes SP SP

'This is a shirt.'

(h) Attracting Attention

A question which refers or attracts the hearer to a new informational content contained in what the speaker is about to utter, or to the direction the conversation is about to take; for example by asking rhetorical question. These are known elsewhere as "pre-announcements" (Levinson, 1983, p.349).

*INV: leng3 m4 leng3 aa3 di1 Saam1 ?

Pretty not pretty SP CL clothes

'Are the clothes beautiful?'

→ *CHI: leng3 aa3 , nei5 Zi1 m4 Zi1 aa3?

Pretty SP you know not know SP

'Yes, it is pretty. Do you know?'

*CHI: ngo5 go3 baa4baa1 Le1 so4 zo2 , keoi5 waa6 Le1 li1 tiu4

I CL father SP silly ASP he say SP this CL

waa6 ngo5 hai6 bi4bi1 lei4 aa3 !

say I is baby SP SP

'My father is silly, he said that I am a baby.'

*INV: hai6 aa4 ?

Is SP

'Really?'

(i) Exclamation

A question which expresses the speaker's exclamation in the form of question as part of the speaker's expressive style.

*INV: zoek3 zyu6 Saam1 cung1 loeng4 gaa3 ?

Wear ASP clothes flush cool SP

'Bathing with the clothes?'

*CHI: hai6 aa3.

Is SP

'Yes.'

→ *CHI: Oh, my God ! gam3 do1 Saam1 ge2 ?

Oh, my God! So many clothes SP

'Oh my God! There are so many clothes!'

*CHI: ou3 , ceoi4 m4 dou2 aa3 .

SP remove not ASP SP

'Cannot be removed.'

(j) Maintaining Contact

A question that asks for information, which only the speaker can supply, but is a reflection of the speaker's expressive style. It includes self-addressed question, repetition of previous question. These are known elsewhere as "self-directed function" (Freed, 1994, p.632).

*INV: nei5 uk1kei2 wui5 m4 wui5 waan2 Barbie go2 di1 gaa3 ?

You home will not will play Barbie that CL SP

'Do you play Barbie at home?'

→ *CHI: ngo5 uk1kei2 aa4?

I home SP

'My home?'

*CHI: wui5 gaa3 .

will SP

'Yes, I will.'

(*CHI: child's speech; *INV: interviewer's speech; ASP: aspect; CL: classifier; SP: sentence particle)

Reliability

Reliability of categorization was estimated by comparing the percentage of agreement between five independent raters and by using test-retest judgments of the same rater separated by a week. The independent raters reviewed the transcriptions in the format of CHILDES (MacWhinney, 1991) and classified the questions produced by the children. The first index yielded a median percentage agreement of 88% with a range over categories from 75 – 92%. The test-retest procedure indicated that the same rater agreed with themselves 88.7% of the time. It was felt, therefore, that the definitions of the categories were satisfactory and that the classification of the questions represented objective categories.

Results

There was total 1099 number of questions in this corpus and it was about 12.7% of the total utterances. The total number of questions produced during the sampling periods was different across age groups because the data were obtained in an unstructured format and also there were differences in the duration of each interaction. Because the number of questions produced was not equal for the different age groups, the raw numbers were converted to percentages in order to compare the distribution of the functions of questions produced by different aged children and also the relationship between the question form and function. Table 1 shows the preliminary information about the data.

Table 1: No. of questions produced per minute and the percentage of questions produced in each group

Age	No. of subject	No. of question	Question per minute	No. of utterance	% of Question per utterance
2;06	8	48	0.35	807	5.95%
3;00	8	171	1.14	1330	12.86%
3;06	8	56	0.38	1054	5.31%
4;00	8	186	1.16	1312	14.18%
4;06	8	241	1.48	1492	16.15%
5;00	8	177	1.07	1366	12.96%

5;06	8	220	1.43	1295	16.99%

The number of question produced in groups of 3;00, 4;00, 4;06, 5;00 and 5;06 children were similar. They produced about one question per minute and the percentages of question produced were more than 10%. However, the number of questions produced by the 2;06 and 3;06 children was comparatively small. The number of questions produced per minute was less than one and the percentage of question produced was about 5% of all the utterances.

It is interesting to note the relative proportion of different question types across ages. Table 2 contains the percentage of question types across seven age groups.

Table 2: Percentage of question types for each group

Age	2;06	3;00	3;06	4;00	4;06	5;00	5;06	Total
Tag Q (13)	2	1	0	3	3	0	0	1
Intonation Q (58)	4	0	9	7	5	8	6	5
Particle Q (434)	35	47	29	36	34	45	42	40
Interrogative-word Q (436)	46	40	51	38	44	35	37	40
A-not-A Q (151)	13	12	11	16	14	12	15	14
Disjunctive Q (2)	0	0	0	0	0*	0	0	0*

* The percentage of disjunction question was less than 1% in total.

The most frequently used question types were interrogative-word and particle questions for all the age groups, and more than half of the questions the children produced were interrogative-word and particle questions across age groups. The interrogative particles *le5, la1 maa3, la3 wo3* were not used by the subjects. The most frequently used interrogative particles in this corpus were *aa4* (18%), *ge2* (10%) and *ne1* (8%).

Moreover, children used the interrogative-word *what, why, who, where, when, how* and *which.* The most frequently used interrogative-word questions in this corpus were *what* (22%), *why* (8%) and then *how* (5%) questions. Moreover, the production of *what* questions decreased gradually across age groups from 29% to 20%. The production of *when* questions began in 3;00 group and it had low occurrence in this corpus (3%).

The third common used question type, the A-not-A question, had more than 10% of the questions in this corpus. The children produced A-not-A questions with four structures: *hai/mai* (hai6 mai6 bi4bi1 gaa3? 'Does it belong to the baby?'), *yau/mou* (jau5 mou5 je5 sik6 aa3? 'Do you have food?'), *-mei* (jam2 saai3 mai6 aa3? 'Have you finished your drink?') and *v/v* (nei5 tai2 m4 tai2 sou3wong4sin1fung1 gaa3? 'Will you watch the program "sou3wong4sin1fung1"?') (Matthew & Yip, 1994). The most frequently used A-not-A question structure was *hai/mai*. On the other hand, the production of disjunction question was rare and only occurred in the 4;06 group.

We examined the questions from each age group to determine if there are differences among the seven groups in the distribution of functions. Table 3 contains the percentage of questions serving different pragmatic functions by each age group.

Table 3: Percentage of questions serving different pragmatic functions by each age group

Age	2;06	3;00	3;06	4;00	4;06	5;00	5;06	Tota
Proposing Action	8	6	4	5	7	7	8	6
Clarification	2	0	11	9	4	6	5	5
Confirmation	10	10	5	3	5	3	9	6
Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics	37	36	39	29	28	30	29	31
Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics	2	1	2	2	3	3	2	2
Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings	0	1	2	3	5	3	5	3
Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity	21	28	14	36	31	30	23	29
Attracting Attention	12	11	6	4	4	2	1	5
Exclamation	6	6	11	5	11	15	7	9
Maintaining Contact	2	1	6	4	2	1	11	4

Except the younger groups (2;06 and 3;00), children used questions for all the functions. Examining the distribution of question's function, about 60% of the question was for seeking information, and they mainly sought information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity. A change in the use of questions for seeking information was noted. The use of questions for seeking information for discussing observable topics slightly decreased while questions for seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings occurred at 3;00 group had increased very slightly across ages.

For the other non-seeking information functions, the questions for proposing action function yielded similar results in each age group and were less than 10% across age group. Questions for maintaining contact, exclamation and attracting attention functions were rhetorical questions. The use of questions for attracting attention decreased slightly across age groups. Children produced rhetorical questions with about 13% to 22% of the total questions across ages.

Form & Function Mapping

The relationship between question type and their functional role was shown in Table 4. It contains the percentage of question types serving the ten pragmatic functions.

Table 4: Percentage of each question type serving the ten pragmatic functions

Age	Tag Q	Intonation Q	Particle Q	Interrog-ative-word Q	A-not-A Q	Disjunct-ive Q
Proposing Action	36	9	11	0*	11	0
Clarification	0	64	2	2	0	0
Confirmation	7	2	13	0	5	0
Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics	0	3	20	50	22	100
Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics	7	2	1	2	6	0
Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings	7	0	2	3	9	0
Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity	43	10	21	34	45	0
Attracting Attention	0	0	4	6	2	0
Exclamation	0	0	22	1	0	0
Maintaining Contact	0	10	6	2	1	0

Not all question types can serve all the pragmatic functions. Only particle questions served all the functions. Particle questions served the seeking information for discussing observable topics (20%), for negotiating ongoing activity (21%) and exclamation (22%) functions evenly. Further, some functions were served by a certain question type only, such as the clarification function was served mainly by the intonation questions, the confirmation and exclamation functions were served mainly by the particle questions. Interestingly, most question types served the seeking information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity as their main functions, such as A-not-A questions, and interrogative-word questions. Proposing action was not the major function for most question types and only tag questions had 36% of their use for this function.

When we examined the sub-division of the question types, 81% of interrogative particle *ge2* was used for exclamation function. Interrogative-word questions *how* and *where* served the seeking information for negotiating ongoing activity with 84% and 66% respectively. *What* questions were used most frequently and they were used for expressing all the pragmatic functions except proposing action, exclamation and confirmation functions. Further, for A-not-A questions, *v/v* questions were mainly for information seeking function (89%).

Development of Pragmatics in Questions

Finally, questions were examined to determine the relationship between question type and function for the different age groups. As the use of intonation, tag, and disjunctive questions were comparatively few (see Table 2), thus they would not be focused. The percentage of question types serving different pragmatic functions for each age group will be observed. For tag question, it was at first served the seeking information for negotiating ongoing activity only (100%) at 2;06 and then an increased number of functions served by this question type was noted from 2;06 to 4;06. For the older groups, tag question served the proposing action, seeking information for observable and non-present topics functions also.

For intonation question, they showed different patterns of use in different age groups, such as 2;06 children used it for proposing action only and 3;06 children used it for clarification only. However, a general increase of functions served by this question was noted. It served about three to four functions in older groups, which were proposing action, seeking information for discussing non-present topics, for discussing inner state and feelings and for negotiating ongoing activity functions. Moreover, some functions served only in older groups, such as questions for seeking information for the negotiating ongoing activity started at 4;00 and questions for maintaining contact started at 4;06. However, no observable increase in the use of intonation question for these two functions was noted across ages. Further, only 5;06 children use intonation question for confirmation function with 8%.

For particle question, Table 5 contains the percentage of particle questions serving different pragmatic functions by each group.

Table 5: Percentage of particle questions serving different pragmatic functions by each group

Age	2;06	3;00	3;06	4;00	4;06	5;00	5;06
Proposing Action	12	10	13	10	12	10	10
Clarification	6	0	0	6	4	0	1
Confirmation	24	17	13	7	15	5	18
Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics	18	22	25	22	15	22	17
Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics	6	1	0	0	0	1	2
Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings	0	0	0	4	2	0	3
Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity	12	25	0	25	17	27	15
Attracting Attention	18	12	0	4	2	1	2
Exclamation	12	12	44	13	30	33	16
Maintaining Contact	0	0	6	7	4	1	17

A general increase in the number of functions served by this question across age groups was noted and only the older group (5;06) used this question type for all the functions. The main functions varied across age groups. And functions served became widely distributed in the older group (5;06) and no function had been served by more than 20% of particle question. Further, particle questions for attracting attention slightly decreased across age groups and interestingly, an increasing use of particle questions for maintaining contact in older group (5;06) was noted, which had a similar pattern of questions in general (see Table 3).

Then we focused on another major question types produced by the children. Table 6 contains the percentage of interrogative-word question serving different pragmatic functions for each group.

Table 6: Percentage of interrogative-word questions serving different pragmatic functions by each grou

Age	2;06	3;00	3;06	4;00	4;06	5;00	5;06
Proposing Action	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Clarification	0	0	3	3	0	5	4
Confirmation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics	55	61	55	55	46	47	51
Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics	0	0	3	1	3	2	4
Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings	0	2	0	3	3	5	2
Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity	27	27	21	40	39	39	29
Attracting Attention	14	9	10	6	8	3	4
Exclamation	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Maintaining Contact	5	2	7	1	4	0	6

For interrogative-word question, about 50% of this question type was for seeking information for discussing observable topics across age groups, and the second major function was the seeking information for negotiating ongoing activity. This question type was not used for seeking information for discussing non-present topics for the younger groups (2;06 and 3;00). Increasingly, interrogative-word question used for attracting attention decreased slightly across age groups.

Further, when we look at the interrogative-word questions finely, the use of *what* question, which was the most frequently used interrogative-word questions across age groups, was used for only attracting attention and seeking information for discussing observable topics in younger group (2;06). It served more functions for older groups and it served not only the functions the younger groups had, but also clarification, maintaining contact and seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings.

The distribution of A-not-A question, which was the third major questions used, will be focused. Table 7 contains the percentage of A-not-A question serving different pragmatic functions for each of the age groups.

Table 7: Percentage of A-not-A questions serving different pragmatic functions by each group

Age	2;06	3;00	3;06	4;00	4;06	5;00	5;06
Proposing Action	0	5	0	0	9	9	31
Clarification	0	0	0	0	0	5	4
Confirmation	0	14	17	0	3	5	3
Seeking Information for Discussing Observable Topics	50	14	33	26	15	32	16
Seeking Information for Discussing Non-present Topics	17	0	0	0	15	14	0
Seeking Information for Discussing Inner State and Feelings	0	5	17	3	15	9	12
Seeking Information for Negotiating Ongoing Activity	33	52	33	65	42	32	38
Attracting Attention	0	10	0	3	0	0	4
Exclamation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maintaining Contact	0	0	0	3	0	0	6

A general increase in functions served by A-not-A question across age groups was noted. More than 50% of the A-not-A question served the seeking information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity functions. Clarification served by older groups (5;00 and 5;06) with about 5% only. Interestingly, A large increase of A-not-A question for proposing action function was noticed in 5;06 group (31%).

The 4;06 group used the rarest occurring question type, disjunctive question, to serve the seeking information for discussing observable topics function only.

To summarize this section, generally, the number of questions produced and the distribution of these questions among the ten functions differed across ages. The most frequently used questions were interrogative-word and particle questions across age groups. Information seeking for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity were the major functions served by the children's questions. Further, questions for attracting attention and seeking information for discussing observable topics functions decreased slightly across age groups while seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings function increased very slightly across age groups. A relationship between form and function was noted. Not all the question types could serve all the functions; only particle questions could in this corpus. Moreover, an increase in the number of functions served by certain questions, such as A-not-A, and particle questions was noted.

Discussion

Form and Function Mapping

Most of the children's questions either interrogative-word questions or yes/no questions, which include A-not-A questions, particle questions, tag and intonation questions (Matthews & Yip, 1994), were mainly for seeking information function in this study. The findings are compatible with the predictions made by Kearsley (1976) and the conclusions reached by Sinclair & van Gessel (1990). Kearsley stated that while interrogative-word questions were used for garnering knowledge about topics unfamiliar to speakers, yes-no questions were used for gaining information about topics already familiar to speakers (p.363). Sinclair and Gessel reported that in their data "the most specific question forms", by which they meant questions had formal semantic markings, "are associated with referential [information] questions" (p.940), which are the seeking information function of this study. We might expect, therefore that within a conversation, speakers would use roughly equal number of these two types of questions when seeking information. Indeed, this is what occurs in these data.

In this corpus, while 89% of *v/v* question, a structure of A-not-A question (Matthews & Yip, 1994), was used for seeking information, none of the *v/v* question was used for confirmation function. However, particle question served all the functions. These distributions of question use support Li &

Thompson (1979) and Ree's (1981) studies. They stated that the *v/v* and particle questions were used in different contexts. *V/v* question employed in a neutral context that the questioner has no assumption concerning the proposition, which is being questioned and wishes to know whether it is true or not. The particle-question may be used in a neutral or non-neutral context, and which the non-neutral context corresponds to the confirmation function in this study. Moreover, especially the *aa4* particle question, which expresses a measure of doubt (Kwok, 1984), was for confirmation, such as (ping4gwo2 lei4 gaa4? 'Is it an apple?'). Interestingly, when we examined this corpus, we found that most of the confirmation questions were particle questions with the interrogative particle cluster *gaa4*, which is a production of particles *gaa3* + *aa4* → *gaa4* or with a compound particle *lei4 gaa4.*

When we investigated the relationship between the form and function of the children's questions, we discovered that some questions were more likely to be used for particular functions. The children's use of question was similar to the adult regardless of age. All the question forms, interrogative-word, particle, tag, intonation, A-not-A and disjunctive questions could serve the information seeking function; while only A-not-A, tag, intonation and particle questions could serve the confirmation function; and intonation, particle and interrogative-word questions served the clarification function in this corpus (see Table 4). These distributions of the use of questions support Wu's (1996) description while he studied the form and function mapping of Cantonese-speaking adult's questions. Also, the distribution of question types for particular function in this study support James and Seebach's (1982) study, they suggested that the most common question type for directive function is the yes-no questions. Noticing the questions used for proposing action – corresponding to James and Seebach's "directive function" – was mainly the particle, tag, intonation and A-not-A questions which can be categorized as yes-no questions (Matthews &Yip, 1994) (see Table 4).

In this study, we defined questions strictly to the utterances that have the same syntactic structures as questions (Kwok, 1984). Therefore, an utterance (mou5 je5 ge2? 'There is nothing inside!') produced when a child opened a box and discovered that the box was empty, was also counted as question for exclamation function in this study. This interrogative particle *ge2* was widely used in this corpus. However, in nowadays conversation, *ge2* may not be considered or used as interrogative particle. As Matthews & Yip (1994) mentioned, sentence particle *ge2* gives two distinct functions. It expresses puzzlement about a fact or expresses assertion and reservation at once. It is no longer included as interrogative particle and it is categorized into assertive particles. Whether there is a change of the use of sentence particle such that it is an interrogative particle as Kwok suggested or an assertive particle, it will be better to include it in this study to have a wider view of children's questions.

To conclude, the relationship between the questions used and the pragmatic functions expressed was compatible with the previous studies; which a certain question form was used for certain functions and in situations.

Development of Pragmatics in Questions

Although there is no obvious change in the use of question types across age groups in this corpus, several important conclusions emerge from the analysis presented above. First, in the corpus, *what* question appeared more frequently than *how*, *why* and *when* questions, with *when* question beginning to occur in the 3;00 group in our corpus. It may be related to the developmental sequence that *what* question acquired before the other question types (Tyack & Ingram. 1977; Li & Tang, 1991). Also, Piaget (1967) has observed that the latter groups of question tend to appear in children after 3;00, a time at which children enter a period of extensive questioning activity. The concepts necessary for each of these questions perhaps explain the frequencies we found. The degree of context embeddedness or, conversely, context independence is a decisive factor in the ordering of acquisition of different types of communicative acts. The more clearly they are related to the immediate context, the earlier communicative acts appear. *What* questions are closely tied to the child's immediate environment. It will often be used to seek new names of objects, as they served the information seeking for discussing observable topics function in this study. The decreased use of questions for this function across ages is supported by Meyer & Shane's (1973) results that questions for classification, such as labeling, which is the seeking information for discussing observable topics in this study, decreased with age. Later, as the child develops interests in concepts of cause, manner, and time, the relevant question-words will appear.

In the corpus, a large increase in the questions for maintaining contact in older group (5;06) might be related to expansion of discussion contents of the children. Children used these questions usually for gaining time to think and organize the communication partner's speech or the questions the communication partner asked in order to continue the conversation. Most often the use of this question situated in a discussion contents of the child's inner state and feelings, or non-present topics in this corpus. As Ninio & Snow (1996) suggested, statements discussing an observable topics appear earlier than statements discussing feelings and inner states and statements discussing non-present topics. This developmental progression reflects the main organizing principle of the speech-use system, namely, the degree of context embeddedness. Thus, the more a discussion is contextualized or built on a joint perceptual focus, the earlier young children participate it in verbally. When children get older, the discussion topics extend from concrete, here and now to abstract topics. Non-present topics and topics about inner state and feelings increase and at the same time, the questions produced for seeking information for these two topics will be expected to increase. However, examining the results, we found only a very slight increase of questions for seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings and no observable increase of questions for seeking information for discussing non-present topics across ages.

In this study, the most important function questions fulfilled for the 3;00 to 4;00 Cantonese-speaking children was the seeking information functions. Attracting attention followed the seeking information function and proposing action was with the lowest percentage compared with the above two functions. When compare the results with Sinclair & van Gessel's (1990) study. In their study, the most important function questions fulfill for the 3;00 to 4;10 French speaking children was that of proposing action, and then was that of referential, which is the seeking information function in this study, and the third one was that of attracting attention. The differences between two studies maybe explained by two major reasons. Firstly, in Sinclair & van Gessel study, they dealt with the child-child interaction; while in this study, the adult-child interaction was focused. We may see that a child in the adult-child interaction would act as a passive communicator and most of the time the interaction would be led by the adult. As Mishler (1978) suggested that adults have more authority and can exercise more power to children, whereas children are relatively equal to each other in power. Thus children's questions for proposing action may be lower in adult-child interaction. Secondly, although we cannot account for the differences with the present knowledge of questioning behavior in various cultural and linguistic communities, Walters (1979) and Wierzbicka (1985) suggested that linguistic differences are shown to be associated with cultural differences. They suggested that the use of linguistic form to express a certain speech act should be related to the culture of the speakers. Thus, the relatively low percentage of question for proposing action function can be explained by looking at the question form for proposing action. Most of the questions for proposing action function were the A-not-A and tag questions. When we looked at the A-not-A question, we could find that the question was composed of a directive plus a tag or a "verb-not-verb" component for requesting an agreement on the speaker's proposal (Matthews & Yip, 1994), such as, (mit1 zo2 go3 gaau1zi2 keoi5, hou2 mou2 aa3? 'Remove the sticker, don't we?'), (ho2 m4 ho2ji3 bong1 keoi5 zoek3 faan1 di1 haai4zai2 Tung4 mat6? 'Can you wear the shoes and socks for him?'). Thus, I would suggest that children expressed proposing action function through other linguistic forms, one of which Ervin-Tripp (1977) mentioned – the desire statement, such as (ngo5 soeng2 tai2 haa5. 'I want to have a look.'), and the softened request. Considerable use of softened request, such as (bei2 ngo5 tai2 aa1. 'Let me have a look.'), which the sentence particle *aa1* softened the request by adding consultative and lively in tone (Kwok, 1984), was noted in the corpus.

A reduce of questions used for attracting attention was noted across age groups (see Table 3). As the children in older groups, the power and authority exercised from the adult to the children seems to be reduced. Thus, it was suggested that the children expressed attracting attention function through other linguistic forms like simple request or command, such as (teng1 haa5. 'Listen.'), (tai2 haa5 li1 dou6. 'Watch this one.'). Further, children used rhetorical *what* question frequently for attracting attention in young age, such as (me1 lei4 gaa3 , gu1lu1@o , Hou2 tim4 gaa3 , tai4zi2 Zap1. 'What is it? It is really sweet, the grape juice.'). It may be explained that the children's intention of asking *what* question was not for seeking information in young age, rather, they just wanted to attract other's attention to a new object which they explored and were interested. For older children, they were interested in the object and wanted to get more information about it. It corresponded to Elkind's (1974) description of children's questions. Elkind pointed out that 5;00 children's questions are less rhetorical and "more to the point" than the younger children (4;00) (p.59). Thus, older subjects used proportionally more questions to ask for information – corresponding to Elkind's "to the point" questions – and fewer questions for attracting attention.

When the percentages of each question type used for the ten pragmatic functions were examined by the groups, a major pattern appeared in the children's use of question types. The children use old form to express new function and expand the use of questions across ages. Younger groups (2;06 & 3;00) did not express all the pragmatic functions in their questions, but older groups did. Seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings would be considered to be a later developed functions as it occurred in 3;00 group and increased very slightly in the successive age groups. *What* was considered to be the old form as it was the most frequently used questions, especially for the young group. The pattern of use old form for expressing new functions was evident in *what* question. The 2;06 group used all the *what* questions for information seeking for discussing observable topics and attracting attention functions only. Across successive age groups *what* question was used for seeking information for discussing inner state and feelings, maintaining contact, and clarification functions also. A similar pattern was evident in the A-not-A question (see Table 7). The number of functions served by A-not-A questions increased across age groups, which increased from three functions to six functions. Moreover, intonation question showed similar pattern of shift of function. Apparently, the children used established question types for particular pragmatic functions first. Once they had mastered the old forms, they used them for other functions or new functions. This pattern corresponds to the general developmental principle that old forms serve new functions (Werner & Kaplan, 1963; James & Seebach, 1982).

To conclude, the children's use of question for different purposes may be related to the interaction context, the linguistic and the cultural differences, the context of the communication and the pragmatic development of the children. Also, the children use old form to express more functions when getting older, and the developmental changes in the children's questions for different functions are related to the pragmatic development.

Clinical Implications

In the study, a relationship between form and function of children's question was noted. As Geis (1989) explained that the importance of what an utterance is literally said, i.e. the meaning of the utterance itself, is dependent on the conversational context in which it occurs. It becomes clear that the actions accomplished by speakers in uttering of particular sentences are not the properties of the sentences themselves, but of the situations in which the sentences are used. It gives an important clinical implication for speech and language pathologists or mothers to teach children with different questions. Not only the semantic meaning of the questions is important, but also do the pragmatic functions the questions carry out in the context. Moreover, the relationship between semantic and pragmatic aspects of questions should be considered. Thus, questions for seeking information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity would be taught first.

Limitations and Further Investigations

The occurrence or non-occurrence of certain questions is predictable from the context, as

Sinclair & Gessel (1990) suggested that there are links between the type of episode and the functions of question produced. It would not be surprised to note that certain types of question, which are common in other settings, did not occur in the corpus, such as "greeting" (Roberts & Forman, 1972). Since in this setting, the participants always arrived together, greetings between them are unnecessary. Clearly, it would be dangerous to conclude that the functions of children's questions are only these ten categories.

In Mishler's (1978) study, he investigated the responses of first grade children to questions asked by adult and children. He suggested "adults have more authority and can exercise more power vis-à-vis children, whereas children are relatively equal to each other in power" (p.280). While in child-child interaction, children ask more questions as the relative social equality between children and it is marked by their relatively higher use of questions as responses. Also, Ninio & Snow (1999) supported that children's use of linguistic forms, such as question, will be varied according to the communication partner. Thus, it indicated that another picture of questioning behavior might be found in the child-child interaction. It would be of interest to study the children's questions produced between different kinds of dyads, in different immediate social situations or episodes.

Further, the sampling size could be expanded in order to have a better understanding of the children's use of question. Also, it would be interesting to explore in a language-delayed population where the distribution of question's pragmatic functions would have similar pattern in this study. In this study, as the gender of the clinician had not been controlled, it would be interesting to investigate whether the gender effect of the communication partners will affect the children's use of question.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are four implications noted in this study. The first one is that the main pragmatic functions for the 2;06 to 5;06 children are seeking information for discussing observable topics and for negotiating ongoing activity and these functions are served mainly by interrogative-word and particle questions. Secondly, there is a relationship between form and function in the

Cantonese-speaking children's question, such that certain question types serving particular functions. These patterns of use are similar with the adult. Thirdly, the use of question for different purposes may be related to the interaction context, the linguistic and the cultural differences, the context of the communication and the pragmatic development of the children. And finally, the children use old form to express more functions when getting older, and the developmental changes in the children's questions for different functions are related to the pragmatic development.

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Communication Skills Checklist

Name: Age/Sex: Examiner: Date:

		Request	Gain Attention	Command	Protest/ Deny	Answer Question	Ask Question	Greeting	Comment	Initiation	Take Leave
Response Types	Spontaneously										
	Delayed										
	Imitation										
	No response										
Response Modalities	Eye Gaze										
	Facial										
	Gesture										
	Physical Manipulation										
	Jargon										
	Echolalia										
	Preverbal Sound										
	Babbling										
	Telegraphic Speech										
	Short Sentence										
	Complex Sentence										
	Conversational										