



CHILDREN'S SPEECH ACTS AS A PRACTICAL PRAGMALINGUISTIC PHENOMENON: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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This article seeks to develop a pragmalinguistic analysis of children's speech acts in English and Russian and to discuss the theoretical motivations behind examining children's pragmatic competence in early school education. I contextualize children's speech acts in the linguistic and sociocultural realities of primary school classrooms and highlight the dynamic interaction between linguistic forms and communicative intentions. Drawing on classroom-based research conducted among grades 1-4, I compare the pragmatic functions of speech acts in English and Russian and discuss their implications for language learning and teaching. I argue that children's speech acts represent a practical domain where linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors intersect, and therefore require an integrated analytical framework.

The study of speech acts has long been central to pragmatics, particularly in understanding how language is used to perform actions in social interaction. Children's speech acts are especially significant because they reflect the development of communicative competence and pragmatic awareness. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to how children learn to perform requests, refusals, apologies, and directives in different languages and cultural contexts.

However, comparative studies of children's speech acts in English and Russian remain limited, particularly in primary school settings. The central objective of this article is therefore to examine how children in grades 1-4 perform speech acts in English and Russian and to identify similarities and differences in their pragmatic strategies. This study is based on classroom observations and recordings conducted by the author as an English teacher in a primary school.

Pragmalinguistics examines the relationship between linguistic forms and their pragmatic functions in communication.¹ Speech act theory, introduced by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969), conceptualizes language as action and distinguishes between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.²

Children's acquisition of speech acts is not merely the acquisition of grammatical structures but also the development of pragmatic competence, which involves understanding social norms, politeness strategies, and contextual appropriateness.³ Previous studies have shown that children gradually acquire the ability to perform various speech acts such as

¹ Austin J. L. *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press. 1962.

² Searle J. R. *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press. 1969.

³ Vygotsky, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1978.



requests, commands, questions, and apologies, and that this development is influenced by both linguistic and cultural factors.⁴

In comparative pragmatics, English and Russian represent different pragmatic traditions. English-speaking cultures often emphasize indirectness and politeness strategies, whereas Russian speech behavior tends to be more direct and context-dependent. These differences are reflected in children's speech act realization patterns.⁵

Classroom-based research

The empirical data for this study were collected during the author's teaching practice in a primary school. The participants were students from grades 1 to 4 (ages 6-10). Classroom interactions were audio-recorded, and spontaneous speech during lessons, breaks, and group activities was observed.

The research focused on four main categories of speech acts:

1. Requests
2. Directives (commands)
3. Expressives (apologies, thanks)
4. Commissives and questions

The data were transcribed and analyzed to identify pragmatic strategies used by children in English and Russian. Both languages were used in classroom interactions due to bilingual instruction and code-switching practices.

Comparative analysis of children's speech acts in English and Russian

1. Requests

In English, children frequently used polite forms such as *Can I...?*, *May I...?*, and *Please*. These forms reflect early acquisition of politeness markers and modal verbs. For example:

(1) *Can I go to the bathroom, please?*

In Russian, children tended to use more direct forms such as:

(2) *Можно в туалет?* (May I go to the toilet?)

(3) *Я хочу пить.* (I want to drink.)

While polite particles such as *пожалуйста* (please) were used, they were less frequent than in English.

2. Directives

English-speaking children often softened directives with mitigators:

(4) *Let's open the book.*

(5) *Teacher, can we start?*

Russian children frequently used imperatives:

(6) *Открой тетрадь.* (Open your notebook.)

(7) *Слушай.* (Listen.)

This suggests a higher degree of directness in Russian children's directive speech acts.

3. Expressives

Both English and Russian children used expressive speech acts such as apologies and thanks. However, formulaic expressions differed:

⁴ Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1989.

⁵ Kasper G., & Rose K. R. *Pragmatic development in a second language*. Blackwell, 2002.



English: *Sorry, Thank you, Excuse me*

Russian: *Извини, Спасибо, Прости*

English children often combined apologies with explanations, whereas Russian children frequently used short formulaic expressions.

4. Questions and Commissives

English children showed a strong tendency toward question forms using auxiliary verbs (*Do you...?, Can we...?*). Russian children used intonation-based questions and particles (*А можно?, Ты сделал?*). Commissive speech acts (promises) were rare in both languages but appeared in peer interaction (e.g., *I will share my pencil; Я потом дам*).

Table 1. Comparative Features of Children's Speech Acts in English and Russian

Speech Act Type	English Strategies	Russian Strategies	Pragmatic
Requests	Indirect forms with modals (<i>Can I...?</i>), politeness markers (<i>please</i>)	Direct forms, modal <i>можно</i> , fewer politeness markers	English more indirect
Directives	Mitigated directives (<i>Let's..., Can we...?</i>)	Imperatives (<i>Открой, Слушай</i>)	Russian more direct
Expressives	Elaborated apologies and thanks	Short formulaic expressions	Cultural norms influence
Questions	Auxiliary-based interrogatives	Intonation and particles	Structural differences
Commissives	Rare, future tense promises	Rare, future tense promises	Similar frequency

The findings indicate that children's speech acts in English and Russian reflect both linguistic structures and sociocultural norms. English-speaking children demonstrated early awareness of politeness strategies and indirectness, which aligns with Anglo-American communicative norms. Russian children, in contrast, displayed a tendency toward directness and reliance on contextual understanding rather than explicit politeness markers.

These differences support the view that pragmatic competence is culturally embedded and acquired through socialization. Children learn not only how to form grammatically correct sentences but also how to use language appropriately in social contexts. Classroom interaction serves as a crucial environment for pragmatic development, where teachers model speech acts and children negotiate meaning with peers.

The comparative findings reveal that English-speaking children tend to rely more frequently on indirect strategies and politeness markers, including modal verbs and formulaic expressions such as *please* and *can I*. In contrast, Russian-speaking children more often employ direct forms, particularly imperatives and concise statements, relying on contextual understanding rather than explicit markers of politeness. These patterns reflect broader pragmatic traditions of the two languages and illustrate how communicative behavior is influenced by cultural expectations.



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