

# What authentic data tell us about pupils' interactional competence: A video-based interdisciplinary study

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## Abstract

This article introduces the Special Issue presenting the first findings of the Italian project *ChICaS* (*Children's Interactional Competence at School: Conversational Social Norms, Forms of Participation, and Language Structures*), a PRIN (Progetto di Rilevanza Internazionale) project funded by the European Union under the “Next Generation EU” initiative. Grounded in qualitative approaches—primarily conversation analysis—the project investigates the pragmatic and interactional competence of 8–9-year-old children, focusing on the forms of participation and communicative resources used in two classroom settings: whole-class and small group interactions. The project is characterized by two main features worth highlighting for the reader: it is based on authentic, video-recorded data, and it adopts a robust multidisciplinary approach. In this article, we outline the main

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<sup>i</sup> The paper, in its final form, is the result of a collaboration between all authors. Elisa De Roberto is directly responsible for Section 1b and 3v, Rosa Pugliese for Section 1d and 3iii, Elisa Rossi for Section 1c, Daniela Veronesi for Sections 1a(iv), 3ii and 3iv. Piera Margutti, who supervised the whole writing process, is directly responsible for Sections “Introductions”, 1a (i-iii), 2, 3i, and 4. This project has been funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU, Mission 4, Component 1.

theoretical frameworks and describe the methodological perspectives guiding our research. Our goal is to provide readers with a roadmap for navigating the contributions included in this Special Issue.

Questo articolo introduce il numero speciale in cui presentiamo i primi risultati del progetto *ChICaS (Children's Interactional Competence at School: Conversational Social Norms, Forms of Participation, and Language Structures)*, un progetto PRIN (Progetto di Rilevanza Internazionale) finanziato dall'Unione Europea nel quadro dell'iniziativa "Next Generation EU". Il progetto esplora la competenza interazionale e pragmatica di bambini di 8-9 anni utilizzando metodi di indagine qualitativi e, primariamente, l'analisi della conversazione. L'analisi si concentra su forme di partecipazione e risorse comunicative utilizzate in due contesti interattivi: classe plenaria e lavoro in piccoli gruppi. Il progetto si caratterizza per due aspetti principali, su cui porre particolare attenzione: è basato su dati autentici video-registrati e adotta un approccio decisamente multidisciplinare. In questo articolo delineiamo le cornici teoriche e metodologiche principali che hanno guidato il nostro lavoro, con l'obiettivo di offrire ai lettori una guida per navigare tra i contributi inclusi in questo numero speciale.

**Keywords:** interactional competence; children; classroom interaction; qualitative methods; conversation analysis

**Parole chiave:** competenza interazionale; bambini; interazione in classe; metodi qualitativi; analisi della conversazione

## Introduction

The articles in this special issue present some of the initial findings of the Italian project *ChICaS* (*Children's Interactional Competence at School: Conversational Social Norms, Forms of Participation, and Language Structures*), funded by the European Union under the “Next Generation EU” initiative. While key practical information—such as the composition of the research group, project duration and organization, and the institutions involved—is provided in the brief introduction to the special issue, this chapter offers an overview of the theoretical frameworks underpinning our research as a methodological introduction to the analytical papers included in this special issue.

As a disclaimer, we inform the reader that, due to word count limitations, the references cited in this chapter represent a selection of the broader literature across the various research domains.

In the 1970s, several foundational studies were published on how adults and children use language in authentic interaction, based on naturally occurring data. These works marked a significant shift in focus—from structural and cognitive models of language to pragmatic approaches. This new orientation gained traction across various fields, all emphasising the study of naturally occurring interaction. Two main research strands emerged: one on children's interactional competence and the other on classroom interaction. The latter focused on one of the two primary settings in which children engage in interaction—the other being the home, where children actively participate in exchanges with adults and peers.

The origins of the first line of research can be traced back to 1977, when Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan published a collection of contributions on child discourse. This volume brought together scholars working with naturally occurring data, united by a shared interest in communicative competence (Hymes, 1962) and the sequential rules of talk. These authors recognized disciplines such as the ethnography of speaking, sociolinguistics, and conversation analysis as the foundation for a new research strand, which opened the field to the study of children's developing pragmatic and interactional competence (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983; French & MacLure, 1981; Goodwin M.H., 1983; Wootton, 1997; Cekaite, 2017; Casillas et al., 2016; Stivers et al., 2018).

The second research strand, emerging around the same time, focused on classroom interaction. Pioneering studies based on naturally occurring data were published by Mehan (1979) and Sinclair and Coulthard (1975). While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to review the extensive literature stemming from these works, it is important to note that early research predominantly focused on teachers' actions (e.g., questions and other initiating moves, as well as the third evaluative turn) within the IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) model. Far less analytic attention, however, was given to the students' contributions.

At that time, with only a few exceptions (Philips, 1972; Hammersly, 1977; MacLure & French, 1980; Shultz et al., 1982; Heath, 1983), students remained the neglected side of the two interacting parties. Another important exception was represented by a group of researchers who, under the guide of Clotilde Pontecorvo, in Italy, developed quite extensive research on the relationship between children's knowledge construction and social interaction at school (Pontecorvo & Zuccheromaglio, 1983; Orsolini, 1988; Orsolini & Pontecorvo, 1992). More recently, however, a growing number of scholars have begun to explore what can be called “the other side of the moon” of classroom interaction (Thornborrow, 2003; Sahlström, 2002; Szymanski, 2003; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 2004; Koole, 2010; Kääntä, 2014). Furthermore, it is only in the past two decades that researchers have started to investigate the behaviour of younger students in school settings (Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 2004; Gosen et al., 2024; Van Balen et al., 2024; Nasi, 2022).

The contributions included here start from the premise that the classroom is a particularly favourable setting for exploring children's interactional competences and practices. On the one hand, we assumed that the social

norms and the institutional goals of the educational context, along with competition for the floor—especially common in large group classes— shape children’s conducts, enhancing their participation (Cekaite, 2017). On the other hand, the classroom is of particular interest because it features multiple turn-taking systems and conversational procedures (Sacks et al., 1974), blending highly formal talk (McHoul, 1978) with “quasi-conversational modes” (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 28), and closely reflecting the contingencies that shape the moment-by-moment construction and progression of actions.

In the following section (Section 1), we outline the theoretical and methodological foundations of our study. We then describe the type of data collected and the analytical procedures adopted, which enabled the research team to work collaboratively and share observations and findings (Section 2). Finally, we present the five dimensions identified as relevant, through which we examined children’s interactional practices with both the teacher and their peers (Section 3).

## 1. Theoretical approaches to the study of children’s interactional competence at school

In this section, we offer an overview of the approaches we used. The project is characterised by a strong multidisciplinary perspective: each member has contributed their specific scientific expertise to the analytical process, sharing and integrating methods, observations, and findings.

### *a) Conversation analysis*

The research group has adopted Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) as its main theoretical and analytical approach. CA is an empirical method of investigation based on video recordings of naturally occurring interactions that take place in both ordinary and institutional contexts (Sacks, 1995; Robinson et al., 2024). Developed within sociology in the 1970s, CA originated from the groundbreaking work of Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson, at a time when other disciplines were also exploring the relationship between language and social action (Levinson, 1983; Bazzanella, 2005). The object of study in CA are the structures and organizations of social actions in interaction: it emphasizes the social nature of language and the communicative, multimodal (verbal and nonverbal) resources that contribute to the production of social actions (Heritage, 2022). By placing at the centre of its inquiry the ways in which speakers accomplish daily activities through interaction (Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1995; Schegloff, 2007; Drew, 2014, 2018), CA enables researchers to explore and identify the social and communicative practices that individuals enact, grounded in a shared, generalized awareness of “how to do things with words” (Austin, 1962), and thus as an expression of shared pragmatic competence (Psathas, 1990). Through detailed and repeated observation of (audio and/or video) recordings and transcriptions of actual behaviour in natural settings, this approach is suited to producing descriptions of participants’ conduct that are generalizable, observable across contexts, and attributable to shared social norms. The conversational perspective, therefore, offers an empirical contribution to the study of pragmatic and interactional competence, analysing it as “situated” (Pekarek Doehler, 2006) within real-life contexts, rather than through experimental or semi-experimental tasks defined by researchers.

Since the early work on turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974), three main dimensions have been identified:

- (i) *Features of turn-taking system and of turn design*: speakers organise their social conduct and take the floor either by self-selecting or by being selected, according to the basic rules of the turn-taking system in conversation (Sacks et al., 1974); they produce turns in either first or second position, as in the “adjacency pair organization” (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In classroom interaction, this means

observing how pupils are selected or volunteer to respond, how they take spontaneous and autonomous initiatives, and how they respond to teachers' questions. A fundamental component of the turn-taking system is *turn design*: speakers construct their turns through vocal and non-vocal utterances, as well as a range of other embodied conduct. Turn construction is closely related to the second dimension of interaction: action production and recognition (Levinson, 2013).

- (ii) *Action*: as first claimed by Austin (1962), with language we *do* things. This insight is further developed in CA as follows: "When interacting with one another, whether face-to-face, via the telephone or other media, we take turns to talk. Each turn we take is designed to 'do' something. Inter-action consists of the interplay between what one speaker is doing in a turn-at-talk and what the other did in their prior turn, and furthermore between what a speaker is doing in a current turn and what the other will do in response in his/her next turn" (Drew, 2013, p. 106). Through the way speakers design their turns, they produce recognizable actions such as greeting, requesting, apologizing, informing, complaining, inviting, etc. Grammatical formats—including declarative or interrogative utterances, lexical choices, phrasal or sentential components, discourse markers, dislocations, word repetitions, prosody, non-lexical vocalizations, laughter, silences, and so on—are all features that contribute to the realization and recognition of turns as actions. In classroom interaction, these aspects play a fundamental role in shaping both teachers' questions and pupils' responses. For instance, regarding the pupils' task of answering, *turn design* is especially relevant in how pupils repair their prior talk (Schegloff et al., 1977), self-correct, search for words, display hesitation, and show how they align their responses with the expectations and constraints of teachers' questions—in sum, providing evidence of their interactional and communicative competence.
- (iii) *Sequential organization*: Producing and recognizing the action performed by a specific utterance is accomplished not only through its *design*, but also by considering its *sequential position*, starting from how the action is structurally positioned as a relevant next one to what preceded it. A central assumption in CA is the role of context, to which every speaker is oriented. As Heritage (1984, p. 242) explains, "the significance of any speaker's communicative action is doubly contextual in being both *context-shaped* and *context-renewing*". Any contribution within a sequence of actions can be understood with reference to both the surrounding context and the prior turns. At the same time, "every 'current' action will itself form the immediate context for some 'next' action in a sequence" (ivi, p. 242), highlighting the indexical and reflexive relationship between talk and context. In classroom interaction, some sequential patterns have attracted more scholarly attention than others, such as the three-part IRE or IRF model (Initiation–Response–Evaluation or Feedback), as described by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), McHoul (1978), and Mehan (1979). Another level of sequential organization, which is particularly salient in institutional talk but has not received sufficient attention in the study of classroom interaction, concerns whether and how participants display orientation to larger structural units of talk beyond adjacency pairs or the three-part exchange model. Extended teaching sequences—such as oral assessments, task instructions, circle-time discussions, and explanations—may take on specific organizational shapes depending on the pedagogical goals being pursued (Levinson, 1992; Margutti, 2010; Margutti & Drew, 2014).
- (iv) *Multimodality*: Since its inception, CA has recognised the relevance of multimodal resources (speech, gesture, gaze, body movements, artefacts, etc.) in the accomplishment of social actions. Early analyses of multimodality, for instance, investigated how speakers construct their turns-at-talk by monitoring their conversational partners' visible conduct, and how they may consequently

re-start their utterances to secure the interlocutor's gaze as a display of attention and engagement (Goodwin, 1981). This led to conceive turns as “constituted through the mutual interaction of speaker and hearer” (Goodwin, 1981, p. ix); furthermore, it was shown how, *via* bodily behaviour, speakers may project a forthcoming talk contribution, as it can be done through gestures (Schegloff, 1984), or display “engagement with multiple course of actions and interactional involvement”, as in the case of postural conduct (Schegloff, 1998, p. 536). By taking the intrinsic multimodal nature of human action into account, and, even more relevantly, by not assuming the priority of talk *per se* over bodily conduct (Mondada, 2014, p. 139), in recent decades CA has further explored the interplay of talk and visible and audible resources, including material and digital ones, as well as embodied practices used autonomously from talk to format action. Scholars have thereby highlighted how these can be contextually combined together, each with their own specific affordances, to form “complex multimodal Gestalts” (Mondada, 2014; cf. also Streeck et al., 2011, *inter alia*) as resources in human interaction.

A wide variety of settings has thus been progressively examined, from institutional to mundane ones (cf. Heath & Luff, 2013; Hazel et al., 2014), ranging – just to name a few examples – from the workplace to the surgery theatre, from driving lessons to speech therapy, and, last but not least, to classroom contexts. As regards these latter ones, quite numerous are by now studies, both for L2, and, to a lesser extent, for non-language subject instruction, focusing on how participants orient to and draw on a variety of semiotic resources, simultaneously and sequentially, in carrying out their institutional and interactional goals (cf. Gardner, 2019). Instances thereof are investigations on teachers' and students' embodied coordination in lessons beginnings (Ingwer, 2007), on the way (silent) students' visual orientation may display their engagement in the activity at hand (Heidtmann & Föh, 2007), and on turn-taking as an interactional accomplishment in which resources as gaze, posture and gestures are mobilized by teachers and students (cf. Sahlström, 2002; Mortensen, 2008; Kääntä, 2012; Lauzon & Bergen, 2015). While a number of analyses have been devoted to teacher's bodily conduct – for instance, to the use of gaze in reproaching students (Andrén & Cekaite, 2017), or the role of gestures in vocabulary explanations (Waring et al., 2013), in soliciting students' self-corrections (Majlesi, 2014; Mortensen, 2016) and in clarifying reformulations (Kunitz & Majlesi, 2022) –, students' use of material objects and structures like the blackboard (Mori & Koshmann, 2012) has also been scrutinized, together with the interplay among semiotic resources in collaborative computer-assisted activities (e.g. Cekaite, 2009; Musk, 2016; Jakonen & Niemi, 2020; Mlynár, 2022; Vääntinen, 2014). Such vast body of research thus represents the departure point, within the ChICaS project, for studying interaction among and with children in the classroom setting, both in plenary and in small group pedagogical activities, by taking into consideration the repertoire of semiotic, multimodal, embodied resources – i.e. linguistic, prosodic, nonverbal, graphic, artefactual etc. (cf. Hall, 2018) – children may rely upon to shape their contributions when interacting with teachers and peers.

The study pursued the analysis of children's interactional competence through the lenses of other three dimensions: language variations, agency and relevance. The first has been explored through the use of the sociolinguistic approach (a), the second by means of the sociological methodologies (b), together with linguistics and conversation analysis. The third, a specific task of the Bologna unit, was to explore how children orient to the relevance of their talk. This dimension has been approached using conversation analysis, but with reference also to textual and pragmatic linguistics and to the cognitive-based theories of communication (c).

#### *b) The sociolinguistic dimensions*

Piera Margutti, Elisa De Roberto, Rosa Pugliese, Elisa Rossi, Daniela Veronesi – *What authentic data tells us about pupils' interactional competence: a video-based interdisciplinary study*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22577>



A systematic analysis of children's spoken interactions at school remains largely absent in Italian linguistic research, posing a major gap in improving language education. This issue is especially relevant in Italy, where historical and socio-cultural conditions have shaped a complex sociolinguistic context (Zuanelli Sonino, 1989). Regional Italian dominates informal speech, while standard Italian is used in formal settings. Dialects, though no longer alternative codes, retain vitality in specific domains, functioning as register-specific variants (Berruto, 1987/2012). Since the 1990s, immigration and multilingual classrooms—where many students learn Italian as a second language—have further diversified the linguistic landscape (De Renzo, 2008).

Since the 1970s, growing criticism of the monolingual school model (De Mauro, 1977; Bazzanella, 1980) has spurred increasing attention to sociolinguistic approaches in education. Research in primary schools uses various methods—surveys, experiments, classroom recordings—to the following purposes: developing didactic models based on variationist sociolinguistics (Lugarini & Roncallo, 1992); analysing pupils' repertoires (Ruffino, 2006 on the Sicilian area, Miglietta, 2004 on the Salento area and Lavinio & Lanerio, 2008 on Sardinia); studying multilingual classrooms, L1/L2 practices, and teacher attitudes toward variation (Tempesta & Maggio, 2006; De Meo et al., 2014; Fusco, 2022; Nodari et al., 2021).

Less attention has been given to the linguistic features of the Italian varieties spoken by children. While numerous studies analyse children's written texts—examining errors, interference from other languages, and difficulties with lexical and grammatical structures—fewer focus on the structure of their spoken language. Significant contributions include Corno and Janner (2009), who propose the notion of a “puerile variety of Italian” and provide detailed descriptions of children's speech (grades 3–5) in Novara and Ticino, focusing on lexical and morphosyntactic features. However, the verbal behaviour of primary school children—particularly their use of different repertoire varieties, the factors guiding these choices, and patterns of “intravariation”—remains largely unexplored across teaching contexts.

One of the aims of our project—and a specific task of the Roma Tre Unit—is to address this gap by analysing pupils' verbal productions through the lens of variational Italian sociolinguistics and Italian linguistics (Berruto, 1987/2012, 2009; Fiorentino, 2018). Specifically, the goal is to identify the varieties of Italian used in the classroom and the sociolinguistic variables involved, examining their distribution according to teaching context (e.g., plenary vs. small group), subject area, and specific activity (e.g., frontal lessons, dialogues, oral exams, etc.). This also includes analysing children's metalinguistic comments on language, structures, and vocabulary. Preliminary observations, especially in small group settings and oral assessments, suggest that third-grade pupils display sociolinguistic and discursive competence, selecting features associated with specific registers or discourse traditions (De Roberto & Rizzello, submitted, on children's history oral examinations, and De Roberto & Rizzello, forthcoming, about collective fairy-tales narration). To better understand and describe “puerile Italian”, it is essential to consider both the influence of sociolinguistic dynamics within the community repertoire and the role of the teacher's speech and the model of academic Italian. Developmental and acquisitional factors must also be taken into account (D'Amico & Devescovi, 2013), as they influence the acquisition and use of grammatical constructions, semantic representations, and pragmatic strategies. A second line of research aims to examine the relationship between code-choice and classroom interaction, with reference to the social, discursive, and conversational effects of register variation (see Section 3.3).

### *c) The role of children's agency in interaction and learning*

One of the objectives of this research project was to explore the gender dimension by drawing on gender studies and employing a social constructionist and performative approach, alongside Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) and Conversation Analysis (CA). According to these approaches, in daily communication

children observe and learn the way gender is created and expected in society, but as social actors with competence and agency they actively participate in the process, choosing among different courses of action, reproducing, challenging or negotiating gender differences. However, since our data did not reveal a significant relevance of gender in interactional competence, in this Special Issue we focus primarily on children's agency beyond a gender dimension.

According to the Sociology of Childhood, *agency* is a specific form of participation which highlights children's ability to act autonomously from external conditions, also those created by adults' educational actions: therefore, agency shows availability of choices of action, which can open different possible courses of action, and highlights children's competence in constructing knowledge and skills (James, 2009).

In the sociological literature, and in Education studies connected to psychology and linguistics, the concept of *agency* primarily refers to: (1) children's autonomous actions in accessing and producing knowledge (*epistemic authority*), in introducing unpredictability beyond learning and reducing teacher-student interactional asymmetry, sometimes facilitated by dialogic form of communication (Baraldi, 2022, 2023; Fele & Paoletti, 2003; James, 2009; Orletti, 2000; Shier, 2001; Wyness, 2013); (2) children's learning through active participation and adults' dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2017; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Sharpe, 2008).

Therefore, children's agency is always enacted within specific interactions situated in a social system with a particular function—namely, education—and is made visible through the participants' interwoven contributions. As said, the expression of students' agency implies that their actions are not entirely constrained by the teacher's actions, as typically occurs in the IRE sequence, for example (Rossi, 2010).

As mentioned, the studies in this Special Issue examine the actions children undertake not only in response to teachers' questions, as in IRE sequence, but also as initiators of new courses of action and in pursuit of their own individual agendas, sometimes going beyond the learning objectives. These actions occur both in whole-class settings and in small-group interactions, where children express opinions, feelings, and narratives, thereby constructing and negotiating social meaning, norms, expectations, and identities. Despite recent studies analyse children's agency within extracurricular workshops led by external experts (Baraldi, 2022, 2023), the research on the construction of agency during daily lessons is still missing: this represents the innovative contribution of our studies.

#### *d) The relevance dimension*

In current research, interactional competence is also being examined through the lenses of *relevance*: a property of conversation that broadly refers to how one utterance relates to the other. This dimension plays an even more significant role when it comes to analyse children's interaction with adults and with peers. For this reason, although CA framework and its analytical tools seemed to us very appropriate to capture the peculiarities of children's ability to "be relevant" in classroom multi-party interactions, we also found challenging to debate our findings with other approaches, even markedly different from CA and from each other. In what follows we briefly review how this notion has been addressed in CA and in these other approaches.

The notion takes on a distinctive character in the CA domain, compared to the conceptualizations of relevance provided by other theoretical-analytical perspectives. As mentioned above (see Section 1a.iii *Sequential organization*), a relation of relevance occurs between a first action and its response. Conversational analysts defined this relation as "conditional relevance", to qualify a property between the parts (turns) of the sequence unit (adjacency pairs), according to the principle 'given the first, the second is expectable' (Schegloff, 1972). The conditional relevance of the second action is contingent upon the production of the initial one, and it is expected, not in terms of a statistical probability or of a peremptory act, but rather as a shared tacit 'norm',



whereby people deem each other accountable (Enfield & Sidnell, 2022, p. 165). An essential point to be made is, in fact, that recipients can orient themselves towards the conditional relevance either by providing the relevant next action or by not producing it, however showing, in the latter case, an orientation towards its production. Thus, a sequential analysis of this “specifically sequential organization” (Schegloff, 1972, p. 76) makes it possible to focus on “what actions participants infer in and attribute to one another’s turns” (Drew, 2017, p. 62), while displaying them through talk, that is to say to focus on the analysis of actions – rather than meaning – that participants themselves carry out (*ivi*, p. 65), as it is also the case for what inferences a noticeable absence (a missing second pair part), generates in the ongoing exchange.

As an important requirement for conversation, relevance has been categorized differently in other theoretical approaches to the study of interaction and language. Looking back at its conceptual features described in other areas of research, a broad relevance’s scope is noticeable, which encompasses issues related to expectations, acknowledgments, interpretation and judgments of relevance and, foremost, to *coherence* – i.e. the logical connection of parts in a whole – largely investigated in textual and pragmatic linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Givon, 1993). Whether conversational relevance is a type of coherence across turns at talk, as some authors (Werth, 1981) assert or imply by their indistinct use of either term, has been debated by others (Kellermann & Sleight, 1989), who don’t see the former as a mere synonym for the latter, although recognizing their conceptual contiguity; or by authors who have distinguished the two notions on a local-global basis, that is by viewing relevance as a local relatedness between turns, while referring coherence to the global one (Craig & Tracy, 1983). On the theoretical level, this large inquiry brings back to Grice (1975) and his seminal work, in which he subsumed the principle – *be relevant*, indeed – under the category of ‘relation’, one of the core maxims (along with quality, quantity and manner) that shape the rational behaviour underlying a cooperative conversation. As it is known, these maxims don’t designate a set of normative rules, but rather assumptions that enact the inferences through which we are able to understand much more than what is explicitly said. How we infer implicit meaning and how detachable inferences are in the interactive use of language is the cognitive question that pragmatics has been addressing over the past forty decades (Levinson, 2024).

Within this time frame, and still in a speculative area of inquiry, the Gricean principle of relevance has inspired Sperber and Wilson, who have developed, from 1986 onward, the Relevance theory: a model of the inferential abilities involved in the interpretation of an utterance’s meaning, also defined as a cognitively-based general theory of communication, which is built upon the presumption that the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, whereby a speaker will make a cooperative effort to be “optimally relevant”, while, in a specular manner, a listener will have expectations of relevance.

Both of these deductive theories, from the fields of philosophy and psycholinguistics, are not based on actual talk, nor do they refer to natural data in conversational sequences, their conceptual analysis of relevance being illustrated only by drawing on introspective ones, i.e. imaginary examples, in view of testing the predictions derived from hypotheses in empirical validation (see, for example, Zufferey, 2016, as to experimentations in developmental studies). Conversely, it is precisely how turns are embedded in sequences of naturally occurring interactions – as previously recalled – that constitutes relevance and its contingent structural nature within the inductive, radically empirically-grounded CA perspective (Sacks et al., 1974).

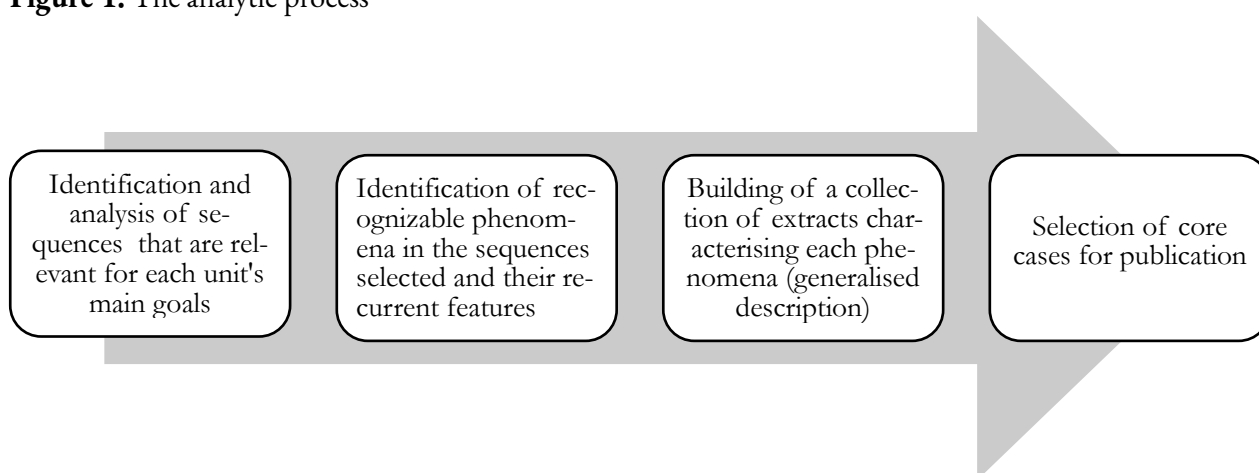
The procedural differences between the approaches by both Grice and Sperber and Wilson and CA methodology reflect, indeed, the theoretical assumptions that guide their different types of research: while the former are concerned with a logic and cognitivist interpretation of participants’ actions in conversation and comprehension processes, as well as with a focus on individual inferential reasoning, within CA it is the implicit rules that govern turns/actions in a sequence that are at the centre of the analysis.

## 2. Data collection and their treatment

In this section, we outline the main phases of the shared analytic process adopted by the group, which provided the foundation for each author's subsequent specific investigations. The graph below (Fig. 1) offers a concise description of the analytic procedure that followed data collection and the transcription of key sequences—each unit having selected those most representative of their corpus.

Data were processed using the software *ELAN* and transcribed according to Jeffersonian conventions (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017), alongside Mondada's system for transcribing multimodal phenomena (Mondada, 2014). The process illustrated in the graph was applied repeatedly during a series of workshops held on a regular basis (either weekly or monthly), with meetings organized both within individual units and across units. These meetings were conducted as data sessions: all participants brought their expertise to bear on the same data samples, collaboratively sharing and comparing observations and interpretations.

**Figure 1.** The analytic process



## 3. Main interactional dimensions of children's talk in the classroom

We examined children's interaction in whole-class and peer settings, mapping them across turn design, sequence organization, social actions, and when necessary, larger pedagogical activities and relevance (Section 1). Our analysis, informed by prior research, focused on the four key dimensions recognized as markers of interactional and pragmatic competence and listed below. Although children show pragmatic awareness before mastering grammar, full development of these skills takes longer. Research shows that infants recognize turn-taking and communicative intentions in their first year (Bates et al., 1979; Carpenter et al., 1998; Cekaite, 2013), but active use of pragmatic competence emerges from preschool age (Ervin-Tripp, 1979; Casillas et al., 2016). The 8–9 age group, which is our target age range, is especially important, as several studies converge in finding that this stage possesses distinct developmental features, summarized below.

### i) *Initiating and responsive actions*

According to previous literature on children's interactional competence, when involved in ordinary interaction with peers and adults, school-aged children tend to respond to questions less frequently than older speakers.

They are also described as rarely initiating new discursive sequences through questions, requests, assessments, explanations, directives, explicit references to norms, formulations, or narrations (Ervin-Tripp, 1979; Mueller, 1972; Casillas et al., 2016; Stivers et al., 2018). However, little work has examined this in classroom settings. We find classrooms to be an important context to observe children's spontaneous interactional initiatives.

Following Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) we considered that not all utterances or 'type of sequence' parts (p. 716) operate in the same way in interaction. We therefore distinguished children's *first actions from second action*. In the former we explored how children asked questions, selected next speakers, set constraints on what should be done in the next turn, and initiate new courses of action; in the latter we investigated how children respond to teachers' questions, displaying their knowledge of the topic at hand and their orientation to the social norms of classroom interaction (Margutti et al., this issue).

### ii) *In/directness*

Previous literature has shown that, as compared to adults, in designing their turns children employ more direct and less complex structures and forms, also when disagreeing, and they tend to interrupt other speakers, thus displaying to be less aware of politeness conventions (Bates et al., 1975; Ervin Tripp & Mitchell-Kernan, 1977; Axia & Baroni, 1985; Casillas et al., 2016; Stivers et al., 2018).

This is particularly relevant for responsive actions that are possibly not aligned with the interlocutor's expectations and with related social norms – as disagreeing/refusal responses to impersonal assessments and invitations –, and which adults tend to mitigate and thus format as "dispreferred" (e.g. with delays, prefaces, accounts and the like, cf. Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013).

As for first actions like "directives" (designed to get someone else to do something, e.g. requests and proposals, cf. Goodwin, 2006, p. 515; Sorjonen et al., 2017; Stevanovic, 2018; Thompson et al., 2021), furthermore, recent CA studies have shown how, beyond generic "politeness" issues (Brown & Levinson, 1987)<sup>1</sup>, both in adult-adult (cf. Stevanovic & Svennevig, 2015) and in child-adult interactions (Wootton, 2005), participants design their contributions, and the responses thereto, according to specific interactional contingencies – such as joint *vs.* individual commitment to the ongoing activity, or the relevance and the beneficiary of the requested action –, thus selecting among a variety of linguistic formats (e.g. imperatives, positive or negative modal interrogative forms as in *can you/can't you*, interrogatives etc.).

Within this project, the question thus arises as to whether and how, when interacting in pair- or group-work, 8-9-year-old children manage mitigation practices and contextual contingencies, as displayed in the way they format first actions (for instance, proposals *vs.* requests in the imperative form) and second actions (softened *vs.* bold refusals/disagreement). By considering peer interaction as shaping a "double opportunity space" (Blum-Kulka et al., 2014), we thus aimed at gaining insights on children's interactional competence, as related to in/directness (cf. Veronesi & Simone, 2025a), both in terms of acquisition of social/linguistic skills as well as in terms of co-construction of social organization and peer-culture within the larger educational institutional context (Kyratzis, 2004; Nasi, 2024).

### iii) *Being relevant*

As part of the heterogeneous set of conversational skills that children must learn, *speaking relevantly* concerns the ability to link, at various levels and in appropriate ways, one's conversational turns to those of the interlocutors. Taking root at an early pre-verbal age and later acquired along with linguistic skills (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979, 1983; Ervin-Tripp, 1983; see Fasulo, 1999 for an overview), this ability evolves over a lengthy span of time, during which children increasingly realise that participating in interactions requires being able to produce

*timely* appropriate contributions – which involves directing an abiding attention at the ongoing talk in order to monitor it and take one’s turn at the suitable moment – and *topically* pertinent ones, so that the content of one’s own fits with what has previously been said by others on the topic at hand.

It is, in short, a matter of coordination of timing and content, the latter to be built and adapted moment by moment on shared knowledge or common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991). Children consolidate progressively their competence in this regard, through gathering conversational experiences made with different interlocutors (adults, siblings and peers) and deriving expectations and ‘norms’ from those sedimented experiences (Casillas, 2014). Growing empirical evidence of how this coordination is accomplished, mostly in pre- and initial school age, has been provided by naturalistic sociocultural-informed studies and experimental cognitively-oriented ones (see Clark, 2004; Veneziano, 2018; Cekaite, 2013; Matthews, 2014; Filipi, 2020, for progressive overviews), the two main, methodologically diverse research trends on developmental pragmatics, a now advanced field since the first scholarly works on the subject (Erving Tripp, 1979; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1979).

Drawing on this previous research and using CA methodology, this part of the research has analysed how 8-9-year-old children handle conversational relevance during their everyday activities in the classroom whole-group, how they implicitly achieve it in the flow of dialogue, or make it a topic of attention, therefore establishing a level of meta-discourse. Still, our analysis has also concerned how children accomplish a ‘break’ in the expectation of a relevant action/response, or through an apparent violation which it accounted for by playful purposes. The joint observation of verbal and non-verbal aspects (eye and body orientation, laughter, etc.), within the framework of a sequential analysis, has allowed us to identify some significant peculiarities.

#### *iv) Co-construction and collaboration*

As mentioned above, children display pragmatic understanding at as early as 12 months of age, after which they progressively start engaging in social collaboration (cf. Warneken, 2018), with the ability of anticipating others’ needs, and acting accordingly, by around the age of two. While such competence constantly develops over time (Ninio & Snow, 1996; Casillas & Frank, 2017; Casillas et al., 2016; Stivers et al., 2018), and a number of studies related to early childhood and pre-school age is now available (see Kidwell, 2013 for an overview; cf. also Hutchby & Moran Ellis, 2005; Bateman, 2015), little is known yet about forms and interactional circumstances in which primary school children, particularly those aged 8-9 years, modulate their conduct in a way that is sensitive to others’ practical needs, and participate collaboratively in interaction.

By focusing on children working together at joint didactic activities, in pairs or small groups, in our work we thus explored various practices through which collaboration and co-construction may manifest, such as for instance the way in which children manage intersubjectivity in cases of “troubles of speaking, hearing and understanding” (i.e. repair, cf. Schegloff et al., 1977) and how they go about linguistic “correctness” and correction (Veronesi, in preparation), as well as to what extent opening, closing and progression of the ongoing activity is co-constructed by all pair/group members. Furthermore, we focused on how children provide assistance when a peer displays a difficulty within a verbal or manual activity, and how they comply with requests of help (cf. Kendrick & Drew, 2016; Kendrick, 2021), as discussed in Veronesi & Simone (2025b, this issue).

#### *v) Interactional effects of code choice*

As noted above, the sociolinguistic study will specifically focus on the linguistic resources related to interactional functions, particularly the role of diatopic and diaphasic variation in shaping the lexical and morphosyntactic elements employed for discursive and procedural purposes. This involves not only identifying which va-

ieties children draw upon but also examining instances of interference and deliberate style shifting—understood as movement between registers or varieties of the same language within a single communicative event (Eckert, 2000; Roberts, 2004). Another area of investigation frames the classroom as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where specific linguistic forms may be used when naming objects, referring to people, or managing routine activities. Identifying these features helps to highlight children’s linguistic creativity and the ways in which group dynamics contribute to the construction of effective communication.

#### 4. Conclusions

The studies included in this special issue approach classroom interaction with a shifting focus—one that pays closer attention to children and their conduct: the “other side” of the classroom, which has been often overlooked. While much of the previous research on classroom interaction portrays this setting as largely shaped by the constraints of teacher questioning on children’s responses and behaviours, the articles in this issue adopt a new perspective. By looking at interaction through these revised lenses, they not only provide fresh insights into children’s interactional and pragmatic competences but also offer a more nuanced and comprehensive portrait of everyday school life for both children and adults. In the analyses presented here, children emerge as more active and less constrained participants than traditionally represented in earlier research.

These studies—and the project as a whole—draw their strength from using the same authentic data collections, even though each unit takes a different approach and explores varied themes. In addition, the design of the project ensured a significant dimension of the corpus, its extension in terms of where recordings took place, its homogeneity as far as the context (3rd year of primary school), the age span of the participants (8-9 year) and the pedagogic goals of the activities are concerned. Finally, the method of videorecording allows and ensures the accuracy of the analytical descriptions, transcending representations that are tied to fixed and pre-defined dimensions. In sum, by working on the same corpus of authentic videorecorded data, these studies provide a distributed and dynamic view of participation in the classroom, one in which children are represented as fully engaged and active in pursuing their interactional goals.

#### Note

1. In Brown’s and Levinson’s conceptualization, “politeness” encompasses a range of “strategies” aimed at safeguarding and enhancing one’s own as well as the interlocutor’s “face” (cf. Goffman, 1967), i.e., public image, and sense of self-worth, both in positive (desire to be liked and appreciated) and negative (desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition) terms. Against this background, “directives” are seen as acts that threaten the interlocutor’s negative face, and they can thus possibly be minimized/mitigated – also in relation to factors like degree of imposition, social distance, and power – through a variety of forms (modal verbs, hedges, etc., as in ‘can you close the window?’, ‘would you close the window, if I may ask?’, cf. Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 129-163).

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.1970-2221/22577>

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