

## ***The Development of Interpersonal Competence***

Riccillo wanted to determine how very young children develop the ability to respond appropriately to communicative demands that vary in complexity. He proposed that, like grammatical ability, the ability to know when and how to use language occurs sequentially. His *purpose* was to test a developmental model of communicative competence.

His model was derived from an earlier one by Williams and Naremore. These authors viewed speech usage as ranging along a continuum from simple expressive utterances that are highly contextual to elaborative forms showing ability to adapt to the receivers' perspective. Using their work, Riccillo identified seven modes of communication: contactive (speaker simply makes verbal contact with another), conversative (speaker maintains controversial connection with another, the topic being irrelevant), descriptive (speaker tries to relate precise information to the receiver), directive (speaker tells the receiver how to do something), interpretive (speaker explains the meaning of an event, idea, or concept), narrative (an organized, developed story is related), and persuasive (speaker appeals to the receiver to change). Each mode of communication places a different demand on the individual speaker.

Riccillo wanted to see at what age each speech mode is mastered and whether communication forms including role-taking and audience adaptation occur at a later age. His *method* was to develop a set of questions that required each kind of language use. He used these probes to elicit language samples from 16 middle-class preschool children ranging in age from 2½ to 4½ years. Each child responded to a total of 14 probes, based on the seven communication modes. For example, the child's ability to respond descriptively was tested by asking him or her to describe what a favorite toy looked like.

Each response was scored on the basis of whether the child responded appropriately to the probe. Here are two examples. First, a child responds to a request to describe a toy by saying, "It's round and it's red and green." This is an appropriate response. Later, when asked to describe how it feels to go real fast on a tricycle (an interpretive probe), the child says, "I have a tricycle, it's red and my grandmother gave it to me. Sometimes I fall and have to go inside. My tricycle is red." Because the child does not explain the experience but instead describes it, this response is inappropriate.

Responses were analyzed by reporting the percentage of children at each age responding appropriately. Each speech mode was ordered in terms of the number of children at each level who were unable to respond to it. *Results* showed that all of the children communicated contactively and conversatively. Of the remaining probes, descriptive appeared to be mastered earliest, followed by explanative and directive. The narrative and persuasive modes were the most complex. None of the 2½ year olds could fulfill these communicative demands,

and less than half of the 3 year olds. However, by 4 years of age, over 80 percent could narrate and over 77 percent could persuade.

Riccillo says, "The modes of speech categories do seem to describe increasingly complex functional abilities and serve to give an initial indication of the stages in the development of communicative competence."

Source: Samuel C. Riccillo, "Modes of Speech as a Developmental Hierarchy: A Descriptive Study," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47 (Winter 1983), 1-15.