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This study identifies key mechanisms through which a young child operates with external knowledge in her immediate social context. Central to this is the child's capacity to draw on discourse-based understandings which have become evident in prior interaction. These understandings are shown to inform and shape various aspects of the child's behaviour, notably request selection, the emergence of new request forms and various kinds of child distress, and they form the 'context' to which the child's actions come to be increasingly sensitive. In contrast to studies which analyse development under different headings, such as language, emotions and cognition, Tony Wootton links these aspects in his examination of the state of understanding which exists at any given moment in interaction. The result is a distinctive social constructivist approach to children's development.

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## Preface

Several years ago, after publishing one or two small-scale studies relating to children's requests, I sat down to think through the relationship between these studies and the spectrum of research carried out on children. The approach I had been taking was a minority interest, one which placed its methodological emphasis on the rigorous analysis of small numbers of sequences. Here, 'rigour' meant identifying the details within these exchanges which documented the understandings of the participants involved. It seemed fairly clear that by proceeding in this way one could tap into forms of interactional organization which seemed quite powerful, but the question arose as to how these findings meshed in with the large amount of other knowledge about young children's behaviour which had been generated by alternative and more conventional modes of research. This was the issue I sat down to address.

I found this task very difficult. Much of this other research was heavily quantitative, and thus generated through the application of various kinds of pre-specified taxonomy to the flow of what took place in children's interaction. These taxonomies usually came with some evidence of high reliability, in the technical sense, but there was little compelling basis for selecting one taxonomy rather than another. And, more importantly, in spite of pioneering work by people such as Carter (1975, 1978), there was little systematic attention paid to finding ways of figuring out the significance which these different forms of speech act had for the children themselves. Rather reluctantly, therefore, when confronted by categories like 'imperatives' I found myself reaching back into the main corpus of recorded data which I had available in order to learn more about the ways in which the child studied employed these devices.

In the weeks that followed various systematic patternings began to emerge, especially as regards 'imperatives'; and other lines of analysis also

suggested themselves, ones which come to form core themes of this book. In the course of this, however, it also became clear that the contours of these findings had important implications for various issues in developmental research. One of these was the matter of how the child first accessed contextual knowledge, how contextual awareness was built into the ways in which her conduct was organized. Another related to the question of how the child comes to have knowledge of the ‘internal’ states of other people, how knowledge of other minds first enters into her everyday behaviour. A third concerned the relative parts played by agreement and disagreement in development: if my observations were correct then rather than the conflict emphasized within the Piagetian tradition it was agreement that played the more pivotal role. And, at the same time, important links began to emerge between aspects of the child’s behaviour which were normally given discrete treatment in the research literature, aspects such as the emotional and the cognitive.

This is not the place to anticipate all these more general themes, but what has emerged from my ‘case study’ is a general developmental statement that is in its own way distinctive. It is a statement about how one child enters the world of culture, and the central processes involved here turn out to be those through which her conduct comes to be connected to publicly established understandings which have emerged in interaction. I argue that it is these understandings which play a pivotal role both as regards her grasp of the culture which surrounds her and as regards the ways in which she employs the language which is at her disposal. It is they, rather than internal psychological representations or external cultural scripts, which come to matter for the child in the on-line management of her conduct; and I suggest that it is they which lie at the heart of a variety of more specific developmental accomplishments which children normally attain in the months after their second birthday.

This book is rather different, therefore, from that which I first sat down to write. Furthermore, input from other people has further served to alter its shape. In particular, I thank Maureen Cox, Derek Edwards and Michael Forrester for their pertinent and helpful comments on earlier drafts.