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**From reading minds to social interaction: Respecifying Theory of Mind**

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to show some of the limitations of the Theory of Mind approach to interaction compared to a conversation analytic alternative. In the former, mental state terms are examined as words that signify internal referents. This study examines children’s uses of ‘I want’ *in situ*. The data are taken from a corpus of family mealtimes. ‘I want’ constructions are shown to be interactionally occasioned. The analysis suggests that (a) a referential view of language does not adequately account for how mental state terms are used in talk (b) the dominant methodology for examining children’s understanding of ‘desires’ is based on several problematic assumptions. It is concluded that participation in interaction is a social matter, a consideration that is obscured by Theory of Mind and its favoured methods.

How individuals come to participate in social interaction is of perennial interest in psychology. This is reflected in the large body of work in developmental psychology that documents the processes by which children come to understand others. The development of children’s interactional competencies is typically studied under the rubric of Theory of Mind (henceforth ToM). This has been one of the fastest growing areas in psychology over the last thirty years as scholars have sought to illuminate the processes by which infants develop understandings of others’ mental states. Although participation in social interaction is a *social matter* ToM casts this as an individual ability as there is a concern with how isolated individual minds come to understand the contents of other minds. This article takes a different approach and examines the sequential environments in which young children make claims regarding their ‘wants’ in their everyday interactions. I begin by illuminating understandings of children’s ‘desires’ in contemporary cognitive psychology. I consider how ‘desires’ have been examined experimentally and explicate the assumptions underpinning this work. I then outline how these assumptions have been challenged by work in contemporary conversation analysis. The analysis presented here extends this critique and highlights inherent problems with work in ToM as I consider how notions of ‘wanting’ are deployed and oriented to in everyday talk. What is highlighted is that the question is not one of how the child develops an innate ability to ‘read minds’ but of how individuals participate in social interaction.

**Theory of Mind in Contemporary Cognitive Psychology**

To contextualise the concerns of the article, it is useful to consider research on children’s understanding of ‘desires’ in social cognition. There is currently vigorous debate concerning children’s acquisition of ToM and whether this is best characterised as a developing theory (e.g. Gopnik 2008) or a cognitive module (e.g. Leslie 1987; 1992). According to the ‘theory theory’ children form an understanding of others’ minds based on their own experience. A key theory change is the shift from understanding people in terms of a simple desire psychology (Wellman and Woolley 1989) to understanding them in terms of their thoughts and beliefs. The predominant view is that before the age of four children operate with a ‘simple desire psychology’ (Wellman and Woolley 1989) as they acquire understanding of the subjectivity of desires before they understand that others may have beliefs that differ from their own. Empirical support for this comes from two main strands of research. First, researchers employ observational methods to examine the role of language and social interaction in children’s developing social understanding. To assess children’s uses of mental state terms researchers have developed a range of coding schemes designed to identify “genuine references to psychological states” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, p. 31) and those which are coded as otherwise are disregarded for the purposes of analysis.In their seminal study of ‘how children talk about the mind’, Bartsch and Wellman (1995) suggest that children are able to make genuine references to their own desires from the age of eighteen months. In contrast children are not able to use ‘terms of belief’ such as ‘think’ and ‘know’ until after their second birthday. Coding schemes such as that developed by Bartsch and Wellman are widely used by researchers when studying talk, to differentiate “between uses of mental state terms that were genuine versus those that were conversational” (McElwain, Booth-LaForce and Wu 2011, p. 299).

A second strand of research has developed a battery of tests, which are methodologically comparable to the classic false belief test, that assess children’s understanding of desires. Repacholi and Gopnik (1997) designed a food request task in which experimenters expressed a strong preference for one food and distaste for another. Children are required to infer the snack preference of the experimenter based on these cues. Repacholi and Gopnik’s classic study is frequently cited as evidence that “toddlers are even beginning to understand the subjectivity of desires: that different people can have different attitudes toward the same object. Thus toddlers conceive of desires not only as internal or psychological states, but also as subjective states” (pp. 19-20).

Other tests are designed to assess whether children are able to use knowledge of others’ desires to predict their behaviour (Cassidy et al. 2005; Ng, Cheung and Xiao 2010) as well as whether children are able to predict desire-dependent emotions, such as describing someone as ‘happy’ when their desires have been fulfilled (Rakoczy, Warneken and Tomasello 2007). In the laboratory set-up participants are presented with vignettes in which they are either explicitly told the desires of a character, or where they are required to infer the character’s desires based on their experiences detailed in the story. Typically a discrepancy between the desires of the participant and the desires of the character is created. Children are then asked to predict the character’s actions. Consider a typical vignette;

Let’s look at these four things to do (eat candy, take nap, clean room, brush your hair). Show me the one that you like to do best, the one that you REALLY, REALLY like to do (Child chooses eat candy). Now point to the one that you hate to do, the one that you don’t like to do (Child chooses clean room). OK. So you REALLY like this one (eat candy) and you REALLY don’t like this one (clean room). Now I am going to read you a story and ask you some questions. This is Brendan. There are lots of things to do at Brendan’s house. Brendan loves to clean his room. Brendan loves to sing the clean-up song and he loves to put everything where it belongs. Brendan hates eating candy. Brandon thinks that candy is too sweet and he does not like to get his hand sticky. Brendan’s mom asks Brendan what he would like to do today.

Test Question: Will Brendan choose to clean his room or eat candy? (Cassidy et al. 2005, p. 453)

In this paradigm a ‘correct’ answer is that Brendan will choose to clean his room. An ‘incorrect’ answer, that Brendan will choose to eat candy, is understood to reflect an inability to appreciate that others can have desires that differ from one’s own. We can note that this experimental paradigm is based on several assumptions. The first is that the experimental set-up is an adequate ‘stand in’ for reality. Experimenters read vignettes to participants from which they are required to draw inferences regarding the protagonist’s ‘wants’. Children are shown pictures of items or activities and are asked to make predictions regarding what a protagonist (often a doll/puppet) will do or feel, based on the story told by the experimenter. The second is that people ordinarily act in ways which are consistent with the fulfilment of their ‘wants’. Children are given information regarding the protagonist’s preferences or ‘wants’ and are then asked to predict the protagonist’s actions. This work is grounded in a referential view of language, which assumes that mental state terms develop as names referring to private entities. This article challenges these individualistic notions and examines notions of ‘wanting’ as interactionally managed participants’ concerns. Rather than constructing theories and using knowledge of others’ desires to predict behaviour, invoking notions of wanting is shown to be a practical feature of the ways in which actions are discussed.

**Talk-in-Interaction**

Studies of talk-in-interaction have challenged the assumptions underpinning work in ToM in a variety of ways. Theory of Mind hinges on an understanding of mental states such as ‘desires’ as discrete private states that are communicated via language. A key feature of work in Discursive Psychology (DP) and Conversation Analysis (CA) is a focus on the action orientation of talk and what talk is *doing*. As such this work makes problematic any approach that adopts a referential view of language. What psychologists have traditionally seen as personal individualised notions, such as ‘emotions’ and ‘mental states’ are now seen in terms of their location in broader social and interactional practices. For example Edwards (2008) examines intentionality as a practical feature of how events are reported. He shows how, in everyday talk, speakers ordinarily invoke an ‘intention’ to do something (such as ‘I would like to X’) in circumstances when the intended actions are in danger of being unfulfilled or are a departure from expectation. He concludes that “intentionality is handled, in any context where it is mentioned, as part of the accomplishment of the practices done in talk” (p. 195). Childs (2012) discusses how speakers may formulatetheir ‘wants’ as part of a two-part structure, ‘I don’t want X, I want Y’ which speakers may deliver following a proposal regarding their future actions or following a formulation of their motivations by an interlocutor. The ‘I want Y’ format decreases the likelihood of challenge by a co-interactant in third-turn position. Childs argues that “rather than descriptions of pre-existing inner experiences, the ‘I want’ constructions examined here are best understood as formulations that are rhetorically organized to reject and undermine an alternative” (2012, p. 15).

The typical experimental set-up involves questions and answers regarding the actions of a puppet and discursive researchers have noted that such a set-up is a clear departure from what happens during everyday interactions (Antaki 2004; McCabe 2009). Early work in DP highlighted problems associated with vignettes that are used as a ‘stand-in’ for reality. Vignettes are used to describe and summarise events but discursive work has shown that describing and summarising are complex social practices (Potter and Edwards 1990) and that the practical features of discourse that are fundamental to discursive psychologists are wiped out (Potter and Edwards 2003).

A further limitation is that the focus of these experiments is on the activities and mental states of the protagonist, which forecloses any insight into how notions of wanting may be used functionally, *by the speaker,* with regard to the speaker’s own ‘first person’ projects. In this paper I examine speakers’ invocations of ‘wants’ in interactional sequences and discuss the kinds of activities within which these claims are embedded. In doing so I show that the typical experimental set-up, designed to assess children’s understandings of ‘desires’, is a clear departure from everyday interaction and a gross simplification of the meaning of ‘wanting’. The aim is to highlight some fundamental problems with the dominant methodology of ToM research compared to a conversation analytic alternative.

**The Sequential Organisation of Children’s Requests**

A second relevant focus of research is the sequential organisation of children’s requests. The examination of request format selection by conversation analysts has revealed how children’s conduct is organised with reference to understandings reached earlier in the interactional sequence. Wootton (1981; 1997; 2006) made recordings of his daughter’s activities between the ages of ten months and four years. He examines the design and sequential organisation of the child’s requests and suggests that “from the age of two onwards her conduct displays a special sensitivity to a particular order of knowledge- sequential knowledge” (1997, p. 196). He shows how the design of requests is informed by understandings gleaned from the prior interaction such as whether or not a request is likely to be granted and whether or not what is being requested is a departure from the recipient’s projectable next action. He suggests that “it is through coming to take account of that which has gone before, through this order of sequential attentiveness, that the child’s actions come to be systematically aligned with, and to display recognition of, the interactional context within which she is operating” (ibid). These studies comprise an approach to intersubjectivity as something that is situationally achieved. How shared ‘understandings’ are reached is to be found in the sequential organisation of everyday talk. As Schegloff notes, “the ordinary sequential organization of conversation thus provides for displays of mutual understanding” (1992, p. 1300). Rather than a concern with putative psychological mechanisms that may underpin participation in interaction, this strand of research shows “on a case by case basis, the kinds of attribution which are associated with different kinds of turn design, in different sequential positions” (Wootton 2006 p. 192).

**Data and Method**

The dataset comprises sixteen mealtimes recorded by the ‘Crouch’ family. In this family there are two girls, Anna aged two and Katherine aged five, mother Linda and father Mike (all names are pseudonyms). The family were given a video camera and were asked to make recordings of approximately fifteen meals when they were happy and able to do so. The family were given the option of deleting any recordings before the end of the recording period and all participants gave consent for anonymised extracts to be used in research meetings and papers. The data were initially transcribed verbatim by a transcription service. A broad search of the materials was carried out to identify phenomena of interest. A corpus of sequences in which speakers use the term ‘want’ was transcribed using the Jefferson notation system for conversation analysis. The analytic approach is located within the theoretical framework of DP, which focuses on psychology as something displayed in talk in interaction (Potter 2005). The analysis draws on the analytical techniques of contemporary CA, which examines matters that are fundamental to the situation of people interacting with each other, such as robust patterns of interaction and rules that speakers orient to.

**Analysis**

The analysis is divided into two subsections. In the first I illustrate how claims regarding ‘wants’ may be fruitfully understood as interactional resources produced within specific sequential contexts as I examine the kinds of sequences within which ‘I want’ constructions are embedded. The analysis in this subsection leads to the conclusion that in everyday interaction, ‘wanting’ is not understood or treated as a sufficient basis for ‘doing’. In the second section I examine one recurrent environment in which young children build requests using ‘I want’ which is when the object of the request has been made available to a sibling. Here the ‘I want’ format is designed to manage the considerations involved in requesting something which has also been made available to an interlocutor. Rather than understanding actions as a *consequence* of pre-existing ‘desires’ I approach the relationship between ‘wants’ and actions as “a practical concern in how actions are reported” (Edwards 2008 p. 177).

**‘Wanting’ in Interaction**

This section focuses on young children’s uses of ‘I want’ formulations during the course ofconversation. I begin to show how what may otherwise be understood as an expression of a private experience of desire functions as a device in and for interaction.

*Extract 1 Crouch 3 02:10*

01 (7.2)

02 Kat: I don’t ea:t (.) all mi::ne (.) ↑yoghurt ( )↑

03 (2.0)

04 Lin: >you’re have to have< so[me chee]rios as well=

05 Ann: [hh ]

06 Lin: =th[en if you’re not goinna eat that one]

07 Ann: [bee: gesu::h ]

08 neh!ver guu:h *((singing))*

09 *((reaches over and points at Kath’s yoghurt))*

10 (2.0)

11 Ann: [gu::h yoghu::rt ]

12 Ann: [*((taps Kath’s yoghurt))*]

13 (0.8)

14 Kat: don’t want ↑ea::t↑ that o:ne

15 (0.3)

16 Lin: if you don’t eat that one you’re going to need

17 to eat some cheerios cause that’s not enough one

18 little yoghurt¿ before you go to schoo:l.

19 | (1.6) |

20 Lin: |*((separates full yoghurt from Kath’s eaten one*

21 *and places towards middle of table))*|

22 Ann: o:[:h!]

23 Lin: [ w]’you have some cheerios?

24 Kat: *((nods head slightly and quickly))*

25 → Ann: [I w[a:nt o::]:ne ]

26 Ann: [*((reaches for Katherine’s yoghurt))*]

27 Lin: [or a banana?]

28 |*((moves yoghurt away from Anna))*|

29 | (0.2) |

30 Kat: °mum[ee::° ]

31 Lin: [you need] to finish that fi:rst darling

32 *((to Anna))*

33 → Kat: I want cheerios please

34 Lin: °°alri:ght eat your gra[pes]°°

35 Ann: [I wa]nt two (.) woghurts

36 (2.2)

37 Lin: [ea:t those first, ]

38 Lin: [*((passes grapes to Kath))*]

Let us consider Anna’s use of ‘I want’ at line 25 and the sequence within which the turn is embedded. Here Anna is attempting to retrieve a yoghurt that has been discarded by Katherine (lines 2, 14) and that is subsequently placed in the middle of the table by Linda (lines 20-21). Let us consider the various features of this sequence. Katherine announces that she will not be eating the second yoghurt at line 2. As Linda tells Katherine that in this case she will have to eat some Cheerios (a brand of breakfast cereal) instead of the yoghurt, Anna begins to reach over and point at the yoghurt (line 9), before reaching out and physically tapping it (line 12). Katherine then makes a second announcement and rejects the yoghurt; ‘don’t want ↑ea::t↑ that o:ne.’ Linda then picks up the yoghurt, which is still attached to an empty pot, and separates the two before placing the uneaten yoghurt towards the middle of the table (lines 20-21). Anna then delivers the target turn ‘I wa:nt o:::ne’ to request the yoghurt as she reaches out for it a second time.

There is an important point to note, which is the very nature of delivering a request. As an action requestingmay be defined as asking forsomething to be given or done. As such the very act of requesting presupposes that permission, assistance or agreement is needed from the request recipient. Anna is physically able to reach the yoghurt and does so at line 12 as she reaches out and taps it. If Anna were acting in a way which is consistent with the fulfilment of her ‘desires’ she could simply *take* the yoghurt. The very act of delivering a request presupposes that permission is needed and that in fact, one *cannot* simply act on the basis of one’s ‘wants’. Linda responds by moving the yoghurt away from Anna (line 28) as she instructs her to eat her cereal first. Thus Anna’s claim to ‘want’ the yoghurt is *not* treated as a sufficient basis for her to be given it. Rather, Anna is told what she *needs* to do first and so it is clear that there are obligations and necessitieswhich must be fulfilled before Anna can do as she ‘wants’.

Let us now consider Katherine’s ‘I want’ construction at line 33. Again, rather than understanding this as a simple reference to a private experience of desire, it is fruitful to consider the turn as part of the interactional sequence within which it is embedded. The sequence starts at the beginning of the extract as Katherine announces that she will not be eating the second yoghurt (line 2). Linda responds by informing Katherine that she will ‘have to have< some cheerios as well’. Linda delivers a second directive ‘if you don’t eat that one you’re going to need to eat some cheerios’ and an account that minimises the amount of food that Katherine has eaten (‘one little yoghurt¿’) and which restricts Katherine’s response options (she is going to school, has not eaten enough and so must eat more). Linda then asks Katherine whether she will have some Cheerios (line 23) or a banana (line 27).

At this point Anna launches a side sequence (Jefferson 1972) as she attempts to retrieve the yoghurt, disrupting the contiguity of the ongoing sequence between Linda and Katherine. At line 30 Katherine delivers the address term ‘°mumee::°’ which displays an orientation to reinitiating the interaction between herself and Linda. This is unsuccessful, however, as Linda continues interacting with Anna as she directs her to finish her cereal before she can have yoghurt (line 32). Katherine then delivers the target turn ‘I want cheerios please’.

There are two things to note here. First, Katherine’s ‘I want’ construction is produced in a position where the second part of a directive-compliance pair is due, with Linda’s instructions for Katherine to eat more food serving as the first part. Katherine could conceivably respond with ‘I’ll have some Cheerios’. However the turn is built as a request, as a *first pair part*. The turn terminal ‘please’ also marks the turn as a request (a canonical first pair part), rather than ‘I want Cheerios thank you’ which would imply acceptance of an offer. By delivering a request format in the space where compliance with a directive is due, Katherine marks the turn as a new first pair part which makes relevant a response from Linda. This works to reinitiate the interaction with Linda following the intervening side sequence. The second thing to note is the selection of an ‘I want’ format, rather than an interrogative such as ‘can I have Cheerios?’. An interrogative format formally solicits yes or no as response options. However within the preceding sequence the understanding (Wootton 2006) that Cheerios are on offer was reached. The use of ‘I want’ displays an orientation to this understanding.

With regard to the issue of whether people ordinarily act in ways which are consistent with the fulfilment of their desires, and whether ‘wanting’ is a sufficient basis for ‘doing’ or for ‘having’, Linda’s response at line 34 is particularly informative. Katherine’s turn at line 33 is delivered as a first position request to be granted. The status of the utterance as a first pair part is accepted by Linda as she delivers a receipting response (‘alri:ght’). However rather than immediately granting the request Linda instructs Katherine to first eat her grapes. What is notable is that although Katherine has been directed within multiple turns to eat Cheerios and has subsequently expressed a ‘want’ to do so, this is not treated as a sufficient basis for her to immediately eat them.Rather, the provision of Cheerios is contingent on her first eating her grapes and fulfilling this obligation before she can eat what she ‘wants’.

That people do notordinarily act in a manner which is consistent with the fulfilment of their ‘desires’ is evident as one considers the fine weave of interaction in the following two fragments. Both examples are taken from the same family meal. Extract 2 is fourteen and a half minutes into the recording, while extract 3 is taken from twenty minutes in, towards the end of the meal.

*Extract 2 Crouch 114:00*

01 Kat: plea::se have a no:::ll

02 Ann: ont another [o::ne ]

03 Lin: [(y’just)eat some more] UH vegetables.

04 Kat: [anna no::ll ]

05 Kat: [*((reaches towards packet of rolls))*]

06 Lin: Katherine >y’need to eat some< eat so:me vegetables.

07 Kat: I’VE ETTON SOME VEGETA~BU:::[LS~]

08 Mik: [ we]ll, why not

09 eat a few more.

10 (0.3)

11 Kat: no::huo:::

12 (1.0)

13→ Kat: [~#I don’t wa:nt! to I don’t li:ke the:m.#~]

14 Kat: [*((picks up fork))* ]

15 (1.0)

16 Kat: [*((holds fork above plate))* ]

17 → Kat: [~I don’t li:::ke vegetabu[:::lls~]]

18 Ann: [[AYE! I]:: I eaa unt=

19 Kat: [*((eats corn))* ]

20 Ann: =fwuntable:s

21 Lin: yeah

22 Mik: I’m eating all mi:ne.

23 (0.4)

24 → Kat: u::n, I: don’t li::ke the:::m.

25 | (4.2) |

26 Kat: |*((puts piece of corn in mouth))*|

27 Kat: thi:s (one) went rou::nd all arou:nd the

28 [ circa:]:

29 Lin: [hmm:: ]

30 (2.5)

31 Lin: °s’looks like a (.) (cannibal)°

32 (1.6)

33 Mik: °ghu:m ghu:m°=

34 Kat: [=I’ve etton some vegetabu:::ls]

35 Kat: [*((puts fork down))* ]

A preliminary observation is that Katherine makes a claim regarding her ‘wants’, specifically what she does notwant at line 13. To understand this turn one must consider it as part of the conversation within which it is produced. Linda (lines 3, 6) and Mike (lines 8-9) deliver a series of directives as they tell Katherine to eat more vegetables. Katherine repeatedly defies these in a series of turns (lines 4, 7, 13). She then delivers a further rejection ‘~#I don’t wa:nt! to I don’t li:ke the:m.#~’ as she picks up her fork to eat.Notably although Katherine resists Mike and Linda’s directives verballyby claiming ‘~#I don’t wa:nt! to’ she physically compliesas she picks up her fork, an action which recognisably precedes ‘eating more’. As Craven and Potter (2010) note, as a class of actions, directives “embody *no* orientation to the recipient’s ability or desire to perform the relevant activity” (2010, p.1, original emphasis), in that as speakers deliver directives they display authority and entitlement to involve themselves in the recipient’s business. By claiming ‘~#I don’t wa:nt! to I don’t li:ke the:m.#~’ as she begins to comply Katherine characterises her actions *as* obedience*.* It is clear that rather than fully ‘going along’ with the directive Katherine complies against her will. As Katherine holds her fork above the plate she produces a further negative evaluation of the relevant food item (lines 17, 24). She then immediately eats a piece of corn before announcing ‘I’ve etton some vegetabu:::ls’. In doing so she characterises her actions as obedience*,* displaying an orientation to the notion that one must do as they ‘should’rather than as they ‘want’.

When we consider the fine weave of interaction, the notion that individuals ordinarily proceed in a manner which is consistent with the fulfilment of their desires is a departure from what goes on during the course of our everyday lives. Let us further explore the divergence between the typical experimental set-up and everyday interaction as we consider the following extract.

*Extract 3 Crouch 120:44*

01 Ann: .HHHHH *((exaggerated outbreath))* heh heh heh

02 Lin: no::

03 Ann: ↑heh heh heh↑

04 Kat: heh hmm hem

05 Lin: no Anna no not silly noises.

06 Mik: nah

07 Ann: [*((kneels up on chair))*]

08 Ann: [BLU!HAH ]

09 → Mik: well I think because it’s such a lovely hot

10 da:y toda::y,

11 Ann: NUAA:::H!

12 → Mik: [*((holds out finger))*]

13 Mik: wauh [li:ste:n, (2.0) ]>I:: think because it’s

14 such a lovely hot day today, think we might be able

15 to have ani- ice lolly outsi:de as a

16 spec[ial treat.]<

17 Ann: [↑hu:h ]hu::h! ↑

18 (0.6)

19 Lin: right Kath[erine fuh- finish i:t]

20 Ann: [look peeka p]eeka apleek luke.

21 (1.2)

22 Ann: *((turns head and looks at Linda))*

23 Ann: ↑hah! heh [heh >heh heh heh] heh heh<↑

24 Kat: [heh heh .hhh! ]

25 Mik: £wass he s[a::y£]

26 Ann: [ peek]a peeka peek lu[::ke.]

27 Kat: [↑heh ]heh↑

28 Ann: ↑heh heh peeka peeka luke↑

29 (0.3)

30 Ann: [pee-]

31 Mik: [*((points at Anna))* ]

32 Mik: [bu::]t [you’ll have to eat one of your potatoe:s,]

33 before you have an ice lolly:,

34 [.hh you’ll ]have to eat some of your ve:g

35 [*((points at Kath))*]

36 before you have an ice lolly.

37 | (3.3) |

38 Ann: |*((remains kneeling in chair)*|

39 Mik: (let’s) see you eat your potato the:n.

The first thing to note is Mike’s offer of an ice lolly (lines 9-10, 13-16). In some ways this can be compared with tasks designed to assess children’s understandings of desires. Researchers ostensibly create a conflict between the child’s desire and that of the protagonist by presenting items that are designed to be particularly desirable or particularly undesirable to the child. Several design features of Mike’s turn work to present the lolly as attractive, this is a ‘special treat.<’ as it is ‘such a lovely hot day’. Earlier in the meal Linda asked Anna to eat her potatoes, to which she responded by stating ‘don’t want to’ (data not shown). In extract 2, earlier in the meal, Katherine resists eating vegetables, claiming ‘~#I don’t wa:nt! to I don’t li:ke the:m.#~’. Both girls then have claimed not to ‘want’ to eat these food items.

During the typical experimental set-up children are presented with several items or activities. Children are then told which item the protagonist prefers and are asked to predict the protagonist’s reaction in a specific situation. To ‘pass’ this task, children are required to predict that the protagonist will act in a way which is consistent with the fulfilment of their own, rather than the child’s, ‘desires’. However it is immediately apparent that there is a departure between this experimental design and what occurs during the course of everyday interaction.

One notable feature is that the ice lolly is offered to persuade the girls to eat more of their main meal. This is evidenced as Linda directs Katherine to ‘finish i:t’ (line 19) while Mike explicitly presents the provision of an ice lolly as contingent on Anna eating a potato (line 33) and Katherine eating more vegetables (line 35). As Núñez and Harris note, “adults often seek to guide young children by means of conditional rules in which children are given permission to engage in some desired activity provided that a special condition is fulfilled” (1998, p. 153). The ice lolly is presented as something which is ‘desirable’ and it is clear that this will only be given once less ‘desirable’ food items (potato, vegetables) have been eaten. Again we can see that expressions of ‘wanting’ occur in relation to, and in the service of, interactions involving obligations and constraints. Rather than simply acting in ways which are consistent with the fulfilment of one’s desires, Linda and Mike are the arbitrators of Katherine and Anna’s wants as the moral nature of doing as one ‘should’before doing as one ‘wants’is put into place.

**‘I Want’ in Request Sequences**

The analysis thus far has illuminated how young children invoke their ‘wants’ in the service of sequentially unfolding interaction. When studying children’s talk researchers in social cognition code utterances as either genuinely reflecting a private mental state, or otherwise used “purely for social convention” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, p. 67), in which case they are treated as unrevealing for the purposes of studying the workings of ‘the mind’. Here we have begun to reveal that children’s claims regarding ‘wants’ may be fruitfully examined as resources in and for interaction and that considering children’s competencies in action may reveal an orientation to sequential knowledge. In this section I examine in detail one recurrent environment in which a two-year-old child deploys an ‘I want’ construction, which is to deliver a request when the requested item is something that is available to a sibling, as in the following 3 extracts.

*Extract 4 Crouch 302:10*

01 Lin: *((separates full yoghurt from Kath’s eaten one*

02 *and places towards middle of table))*

03 Ann: o:[:h!]

04 Lin: [ w]’you have some cheerios?

05 Kat: *((nods head slightly and quickly))*

06 → Ann: I w[a:nt o:::ne ]

07 Ann: [*((reaches for Katherine’s yoghurt))*]

08 (18.0)

*Extract 5 Crouch 305:20*

01 → Ann: I want two: of tho:::se.(.) like

02 K[atherine ]

03 Lin: ((*shakes head))*

04 Lin: [no >you’ve go-] you’ve g- you’ve had lots of

05 weetabix darling and you’ve got grapes as

06 we:ll.

*Extract 6 Crouch 100:27*

01 Mik: does any’ne w[ant a ] roll to make a hot dog

02 Lin: [Anna?]

03 what d’you say [Anna:]

04 Kat: [↑me ]me me me↑ me::

05 Ann: me m[e me m]e::

06 Lin: [( )]

07 | (1.2) |

08 Mik: |*((takes rolls out of packet))*|

09 Ann: gye:p

10 Kat: mum it’s only little piece of ( )

11 (0.4)

12 Mik: well you can make it (.) like a sort of

13 [hot dog]

14 *((to Kath))*

15 → Ann: [ I WAN]T\* WA:[N ]

16 Mik: [y’]can

17 [put some prawns there as well if you want.]

18 *((to Kath))*

19 Mik: [*((cuts roll with knife))* ]

20 Lin: [sa:lt ]

21 Lin: [*((gets up and walks into kitchen))*]

22 → Ann: >#huh.hh#< I want one like tha::t

In each of the arrowed turns Anna uses an ‘I want’ format to request something that has been made available to Katherine. In extract 4 Anna asks for a yoghurt that has been discarded by Katherine. In extract 5, later in the same meal, Anna repeats her request for yoghurt, specifying that she wants two ‘like Katherine’. In extract 6 Anna asks for sauce on her bread as Linda is putting sauce onto Katherine’s bread. Stating that one ‘wants’ something as a way of doing a request is quite different from using a modal form (such as ‘can I have X?’). In the former case the speaker foregrounds themselves as the subject of the construction, in the place of the sibling. Further, the speaker avoids orienting to the willingness or ability of the speaker to grant the request (Wootton 1981). In attending to one’s own ‘wants’, and selectively emphasising the ‘subject-side’ (Edwards 2005) of a request speakers display entitlement to make the request and an expectation that the request will be granted.

There are several considerations that are likely to influence the selection of request format when asking for something which has been made available to an interlocutor. If something is available to one interactant, it is expectable that the same thing be available to the requester. Also note that in each example there is an additional basis for Anna to suppose that the request will be granted. In extract 4 Anna delivers the target turn just as Katherine’s discarded yoghurt is placed in the centre of the table (lines 20-21). In extract 5 earlier in the meal Linda told Anna to eat her Weetabix ‘first’, before she would be given a yoghurt (see the extended version of extract 5 below) and so it is expectable that yoghurt will eventually be forthcoming. In example 6 Mike offers a roll to both Anna and Katherine (line 10). In each example the first request is produced with the omission of an overt reference form, using a pro-term ‘I want *one*’ or ‘I want two of *those’*. This requires that the recipient refer back to the prior interaction to make sense of the turn, emphasising the connectedness and continuity between the request and the preceding interaction (Oh 2005). In extract 4 Anna states ‘I want two of those *like Katherine*’. This further enhances the display of entitlement, emphasising that the object of the request is one which has been made available to a co-interactant and as such should also be given to the requester.

On the other hand, requesting something that has been made available to a sibling makes available the inference that one may be requesting it merely because the sibling has it. ‘I want’ constructions foreground the speaker and request the object as simply a relation between speaker and object, irrespective of the sibling. The use of the term ‘want’ emphasises the request’s subject-side (Edwards 2005) and proposes that Anna is truly at one with the request, which is made for her own sake rather than any other reason. Here we can see that the formulation of what proponents of ToM take to be an internal mental experience of desire functions as a device in and for interaction in an environment where it may otherwise be assumed by the talk’s recipients (the parents) that the request is made because of a speaker-sibling rather than a speaker-object relationship.

Let us now consider extract 6 in which Anna requests a bread roll at the precise moment at which Mike begins preparing a bread roll for Katherine. This extract is peppered with offers (lines 1, 16-18) as the family prepare to eat. These are built with the transitive verb ‘want’. Offers built using this format propose to provide something that the recipient ‘needs’ or ‘desires’ (Curl 2006). Katherine is first to respond to this offer (line 4) and Mike takes a roll out of the packet (line 8) and engages with Katherine as he prepares the roll for her (line 12). Anna’s acceptance of the offer at line 14 is a direct repetition of Katherine’s prior turn. Mike does not respond to Anna as she delivers the ‘I want’ construction (lines 14-15) which breaks into Mike’s turn (addressed to Katherine). Anna abandons this turn and the object of the utterance is left unspecified. She begins a second turn ‘I want one like tha::t,’. On the one hand, the design of this turn indexes entitlement to have the request granted as it puts into place the absence of something for Anna which is available to Katherine. The omission of an overt reference form indexes the ongoing interaction (Oh 2005). This highlights that as Mike is preparing a bread roll for Katherine, one should also be prepared for Anna. The turn is notbuilt as ‘can I have a roll?’ which projects yes or no as possible response options. Rather, the ‘I want’ format invokes entitlement and does not index contingencies for the request’s granting. On the other hand the ‘I want’ construction emphasises the subject-side of the request and proposes that Anna is requesting the bread roll for her own sake, as a relationship between speaker and object, irrespective of other considerations that may be circumstantial to the request such as Katherine receiving a bread roll or an offer having been made. The turn is the second part of an offer-acceptance pair with Mike’s turn at line 1 serving as the first pair part. Anna’s initial response ‘me me me me::’ is recognisable as a second pair part. In contrast, the ‘I want’ format is built as a first pair partand undercuts the ‘firstness’ of the offer. By producing a request format following an offer, the turn is marked as a new first pair part which projects a response from Mike. This works to establish recipiency and reinitiate Anna’s interaction with Mike as he engages with Katherine.

We can see then that the selection of request format displays recognition of the interactional context within which Anna is operating, where the ‘I want’ format is designed to manage the considerations involved in requesting something which is also available to an interlocutor.

**Discussion**

The consideration of children’s formulations of ‘wants’ in everyday talk-in-interaction raises several pertinent issues for work in ToM. A key point of this study is that ordinarily, ‘wanting’ is not treated as a sufficient basis for acting or for ‘having’. In everyday life, people typically *do not* proceed and act in a manner which is consistent with the fulfilment of their ‘wants’. These findings can be compared to those of Edwards (2008). He notes that there is a trouble-orientated basis on which speakers normatively invoke intentionality, that “the very notion of an intention to do something, as something worth formulating, makes relevant a potential a gap between thought and action” (p. 180). Similarly, the very act of stating that one ‘wants’ something presupposes that the relevant object, action or state of affairs is not readily available and that permission or assistance is needed. If it were possible to do so, one would simply carry out the action. Expressions of ‘wanting’ may occur in the service of interactions involving obligations and constraints. Rather than simply acting in a manner which is consistent with the fulfilment of one’s ‘wants’ here we see an orientation to the moral nature of doing as one ‘should’*.* These points highlight the limitations of experimental studies which require children to predict the actions of a character based on information about the character’s ‘desires’. An assumption of these studies is that the puppet or character in the story will act in a manner which is consistent with their preferences or wants. When children ‘correctly’ predict that the character will do so this is taken as evidence that the child understands that others may have desires that differ from their own. However, the analysis here leads to the conclusion that the notion that individuals proceed and act in a manner which is consistent with the fulfilment of their ‘wants’ is a departure from what goes on during the course of our everyday lives and a gross simplification of the meaning of ‘wanting’ for both children and adults.

This study has also highlighted the limitations of coding schemes that are typically used to assess children’s uses of mental state terms. When studying children’s talk researchers in social cognition adopt a referential view of language and typically code utterances as either “genuine references to psychological states” (Bartsch and Wellman 1995, p. 31) or otherwise as doing some sort of action, in which case they are treated as uninteresting and unrevealing for the purposes of studying the workings of ‘the mind’. These instances are dismissed for the purposes of analysis. This study shows that rather than using the term ‘want’ as this corresponds with an inner experience of ‘desire’, children’s invocations of ‘wants’ (such as ‘I want’ to deliver a request) are orderly, sequential phenomena. The argument here is that any conversational deployment of a notion of ‘wanting’ will always be a means of performing some kind of action within an interactional sequence. Rather than making guesses about references to putative internal states it is possible to examine how speakers design their talk with reference to the ongoing sequential context. In sum, a referential view of language, which is dominant in the field of social cognition, does not adequately account for children’s uses of mental state terms in talk-in-interaction. Children may use ‘I want’ constructions to manage a range of interactional and deontic considerations, regardless of whether or not the child may truly ‘desire’ the relevant object or state of affairs.

As noted above there is a long standing debate regarding the processes through which children acquire a Theory of Mind and whether this may be accounted for by a neuro-cognitive module (Leslie 1987; 1992) or whether this is best characterised as a developing theory (Gopnik 2008). It has been suggested that the resolution of this issue would help settle the debate between two of the main theoretical perspectives, the ‘Theory-Theory’ and the Modular Theory (Wellman 2010). Within these approaches ‘beliefs’, ‘desires’ and ‘intentions’ are understood as individual, discrete entities, which creates the problem of how children learn to ‘read other minds’. This ‘mind reading’ ability is understood as a prerequisite to successful participation in social interaction. Drawing on existing discursive research and following the analysis here I argue that researchers should take a different approach to this topic. A discursive approach offers a new way of understanding ‘wants’ as interactional concepts rather than private, individual entities. Speaker’s avowals of ‘wanting’ are sequentially specific constructions that work within a flow of interactional considerations. The important point is that the problem is not one of how the child develops an innate ability to ‘read minds’ but of how individuals participate in social interaction. An important point is that children may use ‘I want’ to deliver a request. Consider that requesting is a common conversational action, particularly in the talk of young children, who are dependent on care-givers for permission and assistance with everyday activities. It is preciselyfor this reason then, that ‘want’ is used more frequently than terms of ‘belief’ such as ‘think’ and ‘know’. The methodological approach taken here, which examined children’s uses of the term ‘want’ in talk-in-interaction, allowed a focus on what has been neglected in social cognition, an understanding of children’s interaction *as a social matter.* Regardless of what a speaker may be thinking or feeling, speakers state what they ‘want’ in specific sequential contexts to accomplish particular actions. There is no need for theory construction to bridge the gap between isolated, individual minds as what is currently viewed as a ‘psychological’ matter becomes an interactional one.

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