Pragmatics: The speech acts identified in the utterances of a bilingual child under two years old

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Abstract

Pragmatics is that branch of linguistics which studies how meanings are derived from the context of an utterance (Trask, 1997:174). In making such interpretations based on utterances, it can be said that pragmatics thus concerns the ability to use language appropriately in context and such an ability can only be accomplished as a result of cognitive development as well as through social interactions with others, and almost always, through trial and error. Those involved with language acquisition and social uses of language have termed such ability as sociolinguistic competence. Although one cannot expect a child under two to learn about sociolinguistic rules too rapidly in his development, there is evidence to show that a young child who has acquired language is inclined towards using it for making meaningful communications. In his attempts to communicate with others and where his linguistic competence is clearly restrained by age and maturity, data show that the child creates his own strategies for conveying his communicative needs. This paper displays the actual utterances of a bilingual child who was aged between 22 and 23 months old. These utterances serve as linguistic evidence which indicates that the young child employs the two languages which he had been exposed to from birth for the purpose of conveying specific speech acts. Of these speech acts performed, it appeared that besides using language for fulfilling the task of naming referents, language was simultaneously used for making requests and questions which stood out more prominently than other speech acts.

Key terms: Bilingual, communication, requests, speech acts, strategies

Introduction

Language is a tool, an instrument which human beings, and currently, even artificial intelligence (computers), use for the purpose of conveying specific intentions for a targeted audience. Such intentions can range from making idle conversations to injecting humour within conversations to serious advertisements, reports on accidents as well as for the purpose of sharing compassion as shown through obituaries.

In the field of language acquisition, we are aware that an infant may be born helpless and unequipped but within two years of age, we are amazed by his ability to use language almost in the same way an adult speaker does. Theories of language acquisition remind us of the various possible reasons which could be seen as being contributory to such an achievement. Of the various theories proposed, one of them argues that the child's ability to use language is due to the child being exposed to hearing how language is used within its environment (see Vygotsky 1986). This theory or argument, undoubtedly, refers to the circumstance where the growing child consistently hears language being spoken and used by the adults in the environment where he is developing. The same theory also maintains that the sounds of language are heard over and over again by the child and it is this consistency that enables the child to learn to differentiate the various sounds from each other and as he grows older, he also develops the ability to make sense of those language sounds and how these are used.

Miraculously, without being specifically taught the intricate details about the language, the child, somehow, acquires the competence to use language by his second birthday. When the child has accomplished the ability to understand and use language, what communicative needs does his use of language convey? This paper provides some answers.

Focus of the study

This study is part of a longitudinal study which traces the simultaneous language development of Mandarin and English of a Malaysian Chinese infant from birth until he attains the age of two. The study provides insight into looking at how the child who is on the verge of reaching his second birthday, articulates words from both Mandarin and English and in what way his utterances were used for performing communications with those around him. This paper shares with the audience the notion that the child's linguistic ability in using both languages could not be considered as competent yet as he has not acquired all the grammatical aspects of both languages. However, the child's spoken data show that even a very young child is capable of using language to convey specific speech acts.

Literature review

Ninio and Snow (1988) indicates that the starting point for communicative speech is when the speaker has an intention of carrying out some social communicative act which he performs through verbal means. The overtly communicative act is intended by the speaker to be interpreted by the hearer as performing that act desired by the speaker. This means that what is intended by the speaker is expected to be likewise decoded by the receiver. Such intentions of language are classified as speech acts.

Speech acts are illocutionary acts (Austin in Trask, 1997:204). A speaker is said to be trying to perform something such as apologising, ordering, promising or agreeing by speaking in a particular way. A speech act theory is thus, a theory of pragmatics which maintains that saying something is a way of doing something. "Speech acts concern locutions and the illocutionary force behind locutions" (Trask, 1997:204). In communication, the force of the locution is identified in order to use it as a determinant to see whether or not the addressee is to take the utterance as an assertion, a question or a command (Trask, 1997 ibid.).

Likewise, Olson (1978) claims that speech acts are pragmatics because of its "intended use by the speaker" (Olson, 1978:151). He distinguishes speech acts made by a child according to the child's relative status to his interlocutor. A child in conversation with an interlocutor of a higher status than he would use request forms as in "May I have a block (toy)?" In conversation with an interlocutor who is of a lower status than he, the child uses command form as in "Give me a block!" With his peer, the child may use an explicit true proposition such as, "You have two more than me." Olson's (ibid.) study looked at how 2 nursery-going children negotiated on a social problem of play.

In looking at children's first words, Greenfield and Smith (1976) identify that children's one-word speech (holophrase) were used primarily to act as performatives, for example, the child saying [*brm-brm*] while pushing the car or saying [*dada*] while looking at daddy.

Similarly, Nelson (1973) also considers the first 50 words, for example, *bye-bye, whoosh, thank-you* and *crash* of 8 children in his study as performatives. He indicates that when these children use the names of specific important people, they were used to perform as requests or as greeting forms.

Awareness of pragmatic development

As has been mentioned, pragmatics is related to speech acts which are performed by the speaker for an intended purpose to the hearer. Such acts may be in the form of requests, making questions, issuing commands, making refutations, denials, apologies, to express fear or disappointment and so on. Crystal (1997:248) mentions that the child's awareness of pragmatic development occurs at an early age and is performed through what he terms as conversational strategies. These strategies are manifested when the child participates in a conversation with others. The child is not only able to initiate conversations but also able to show understanding of turn-taking (see Holzman, 1997; Fromkin et. al. 2003) involved in dialogues. Within that interactive activity, the child also shows signs of knowing when and how to respond appropriately, for example, by providing clarifications when requested to do so. Crystal (ibid.) however, notes that the age range for this to occur is between 3 to 5 years. At this point of development, the child is said to be even capable of using politeness forms such as 'please' and 'sorry'. In addition to that, Crystal also claims that the child is able to make clarifications for himself, create indirect requests as well as make conversation repairs where necessary.

Using Local Particles to Perform Specific Speech Acts

In the Malaysian context, the use of local particles is also a common way of conveying one's message. Kuang (2002) discusses the various uses of local particles like *lah, ah* and *hah.* Of the implications derived from the use of local particles, she concludes that the use of particles like *ah* can be employed to mean 'yes' or as an agreement (see Kuang 2002:143). Likewise, she says that the particle of *hah* can be similarly used by speakers to show agreement as in 'yes' as well as to probe as in questions.

Background to the study

This study is an extract of a longitudinal study which looks at the simultaneous acquisition of Mandarin and English in one Malaysian Chinese child from the onset of birth. The study focuses on the linguistic product as seen in the language accomplishments of this one child instead of the process. To a certain extent, hypotheses were provided as probable supports which could help to explain why certain components of language (first sounds, then words followed by semantics) were achieved and others not.

The findings and analysis of the longitudinal study indicate that the bilingual child uses a mixture of languages from a very young age. Further, data also illustrates that the bilingual child was not just using some aspects of the two languages he had been exposed to from birth but also fragments of words from the environmental languages which he hears but were not specifically spoken to him so that he can acquire them. The child seems to be using the additional cum environmental languages (in this study, it encompassed Hokkien and Cantonese dialects and Malay) for communicating specific speech acts.

Method of Categorising the Various Speech Acts

Speech acts can be categorised under various headings encompassing requests, questions, arguments, denials and others. The choice of words engaged for various speech acts would certainly differ as the intentions are different. For instance, when a child utters words and meant for these to achieve a particular intention such as getting the mother to perform something which he wants, that utterance is perceived as a *Request*. A *request* is often worded as a beseech for something to be done and because of that it is often articulated in an appealing tone. On the other hand, when the same utterance is vocalized in a more demanding manner and is accompanied by an aggressive tone, it is labelled as a *Demand/Command*. Likewise, when an utterance is vocalized in a

manner that demonstrates care, concern and high esteem for the other party, the utterance is labelled as an *Appreciation*. An *Agreement* is interpreted through the use of affirmative words like [yes] or [ah huh] but in the context of this study, it involves the use of local particles like [*hah*] or [*ah*]. *Denials* are perceived as refutations or rejections and are expected to be accompanied by a negative word like [no]. *Appeals* are only articulated when the speaker lowers himself and this is conjured through the use of the word [please]. *Imitations* refer to instances where an utterance is produced as a result of repeating after the interlocutor whereas *Indications* use specific words used by the speaker to indicate the position of what the speaker thinks such as using words to indicate a particular place or person. In the analysis of the various speech acts identified in this study, *Invitations* are perceived when the speaker makes an offer such as inviting someone to do something together while *Complaints* are uttered to state that something is wrong. Similarly, the speech act of articulating a word to refer to specific concepts is termed as *Naming Referents*. When an utterance is said to just make a point, it is categorized as a *Statement*, and the *Expressions* of *fear*, *pain*, or *disappointment* are derived based on the words used, for instance, [Ow!] indicates pain while [I am scared] shows fear and [Oh no!] indicates disappointment.

Questions

Enveloped within speech acts is the illocutionary act of asking questions. In the context of this study, an utterance is also considered as an act of a question when the child's utterance carries a tone that rises. In this case study, instances where the child uses the local particles of [*hah*] or [*ah*] are also treated as *questions* when it is spoken in a rising tone but the same particles are deemed as *agreements* when the tone falls.

Social Expressions

Included in the analysis of speech acts is the illocutionary act of making social formulaic expressions. Social expressions refer to those expressions used in a social context and may encompass utterances like greetings of 'hello', 'hi' and farewells like 'goodbye' or 'bye'. In the Malaysian context, social expressions may also encompass the use of specific honorifics or terms of address for certain people such as a child addressing an elderly person as '*por-por*' or 'uncle' and 'aunty' to show respect (see Shaorong Huang and Wenshan Jia in AC Journal).

Data

The longitudinal study provides ample data for analysis but to cater to the scope of this study, analysis of data only focused on those utterances of the subject when he was aged between 22 and 23 months of age. The limitation is inevitable for to attempt to compare and contrast a few months of collected data would have been overwhelming. For the benefit of understanding and knowing what very young children would use language for, this paper was thus limited to looking at those spoken data which had been extracted within a month of the child's development - when the subject was between 22 and 23 months old. Actual data is provided in Table 1 of this paper.

Analysis of data

Analysis of data suggests that the child had verbalized a total of 62 utterances when he was between the age of 22 and 23 months. From Table 1 it was apparent that the child uses the two languages of Mandarin and English either singly or as mixed utterances. In addition, dialects may also surface. The languages used to convey the various speech tasks have been indicated in the respective columns in Tables 1 and 2 respectively with Mandarin

being referred to as *Mand.* with a translation provided, English as it is, and where the child mixes dialects and languages, these were termed as Mixed Utterances. Where the child makes an utterance in a Chinese term and he articulates this in a baby-like manner, it is termed as Chinese Baby Lingo. (For more on Chinese Baby Lingo, please read Chapter 5 of Kuang's (2007) unpublished PhD thesis.) Table 1 provides actual spoken data which have been categorised accordingly.

Table 1: Language Development Between 22 to 23 Months

Nos.	Age	Intentions or Meanings	Actual Words Articulated and Interpretations	Language Used and the Speech Acts It Performs
1	22:0	LH feels the itch on his body and wants mom to scratch	[Mom, mom, *yang! Yang*!] (Mom, mom, itchy! Itchy!)	Mixed Utterances **Request**
2	22:01	LH touches mom's buttocks and says	[*Pi-ku!*] (Buttocks!)	Mandarin – noun **Naming referent**
3	22:01	LH repeats	[Bar-tock!] (Buttocks!)	English – noun **Naming referent**
4	22:01	LH then looks at mom's chest and says	[*Nen-nen!*] (Breasts!)	Chinese baby lingo – noun **Naming referent**
5	22:01	LH shows mom four fingers and says	[Mom, two! Two!]	English – numerals/noun **Naming referent**
6	22:01	LH wants mom to stop swinging the swing	[Sitop! sitop!] (Stop! Stop!)	English – verb **Request**
7	22:01	LH sees mom drying her hair and he asks	[What are doing, mom?] (What are you doing, mom?)	English – **Question**
8	22:01	Mom says, "I am drying my hair" and LH repeats	[Hair]	English – noun **Imitation**
9	22:01	After drinking mom's coffee, LH says	[Hmm, ammy!] (Hmm, yummy!)	English – adjective **Appreciation**
10	22:01	LH is asking mom for a pen to write since mom is also writing	[Mom, mom, Lihoong, Lihoong!] (Mom, mom, give pen to me!)	English – noun **Request**
*11	22:01	When mom tests LH, "Hello, what's your name?" LH replies	[Lihoong!] (Referring to self.)	Mandarin name - **Naming referent**
*12	22:01	When mom tests, "How old are you?" LH replies,	[Lihoong!] (Referring to self.)	Response to question Mandarin name- **(unclassified category)**
13	22:01	LH sees an insect resembling a moth and he asks	[*Mi, mi, mok? Mok?*] Mom, mom, what is it? What is it?)	Mixed – **Question**
14	22:01	LH then points to the dead insect and says	[Dis! Dis! (This! This!)	English –adjective **Indication of position/place**

15	22:03	LH is angry with mom, he hits her thighs and says	[*Ai tan!*] (Wai-tan) meaning [Naughty.)	Mandarin – adjective **Expressing anger**
16	22:03	LH sees mom writing on the table he asks	[What are doing?] (What are you doing?)	English – **Question**
17	22:03	LH sees a bottle of hand and body lotion and he says	[Shou-syen] (Lotion.)	English – noun **Naming referent**
18	22:03	On touching the heater which is already warmed up, LH says	[Hot-hot! Hot-hot!]	English – adjective **Expressing comprehension of temperature**
19	22:05	Watching TV LH sees a puppet horse galloping and LH says	[Horse, mom, horse!]	English – noun **Naming referent**
20	22:05	A children's program, 'Teletubbies' is on and a teddy bear is shown on the screen and LH says	[Bear, mommy, bear!]	English – noun **Naming referent**
21	22:05	Imitating the teletubbies	[Eh-Oh!]	English – **Imitation**
22	22:05	PH had snatched something from LH, LH fights for it back	[*Kei wor!*] (Give me!)	Mandarin –verb phrase **Request**
23	22:06	Declining the wrong pillow given by PH	[*Pu sze!*] (No*!*)	Mandarin – **Rejection**
24	22:07	LH wants to know how an [armour] is called	[*Mok*, mom? *Mok*?] (what is it, mom, what is it?)	Mixed – **Question**
25	22:07	Before mom can say [armour], LH says it	[Armour!]	English – noun **Naming referent**
26	22:07	In the bedroom, LH asks mom	[Mom, what, doing?] (Mom, what are you doing?)	English – **Question**
27	22:07	LH can point to the respective organs on his face and names them	[Eye, nose, mouf.]	English – nouns **Naming referent**
28	22:07	LH points to cheeks and says	[Chin]	English – noun **Naming referent**
29	22:08	LH praises himself	[Good boy!]	English – adjective phrase **Appreciation**
30	22:08	LH wants mom to reward with a kiss	[Kiss, mom, kiss mom!]	English –verb **Request**
31	22:08	LH wants a specific pillow from PH	[*Ker*, pillow] (Elder brother, pillow) and tugging at it insists, [Pillow]	Mixed **Request**

32	22:08	LH declines the wrong pillow	[*Pu sze!*] (No!)	Mandarin – **Rejection**
33	22:08	LH protests PH	[*A-kai*!] (Rang-kai which means go away!)	Mandarin – verb phrase **Command**
34	22:08	LH wants mom to draw stars	[Mom, star, star!]	English – noun **Request**
35	22:08	Saying yes to mom's "You want stars do you?"	[*Ah!*] (Yes.)	Chinese – particle **Agreement**
36	22:08	LH wants mom to colour stars with crayon	[TAR, TAR mommy.]	English – **Request**
37	22:08	Making claims of crayon	[*Wor terk*!] (Mine!)	Mandarin – **Claim**
38	22:08	LH wants to give crayons to mom	[You!]	English – **Indication**
39	22:08	LH declines grandma's offer to give him a shower, "Lihoong Lai Ah ma choong liang kei ni"	[*Pu yau*!] (I don't want!)	Mandarin – **Rejection**
40	22:15	LH points to pillow and says	[PI-LO!] (Spoken loudly)	English – **Naming referent**
41	22:15	LH wants mom to draw stars	[Tars, tars!]	English – **Request**
42	22:15	LH is pointing to a helicopter bought by his father	[Mom, copter, mom, copter.]	English – **Naming referent**
43	22:15	LH wants to push the stationary helicopter via the blades	[*Tui*, mommy, *tui*!] (Push, mom, push!)	Mixed - **Request**
44	22:15	LH points to the pilot compartment and says	[Toi-let!] then looks at mom	English - **Naming referent**
45	22:15	Mom corrects, "No, Lihoong, not toilet, Pai-let!" Say, Pai let"	LH responds: [Toi-let!]	English – **Imitation**
46	22:15	After several tries, LH got it right	[Pai-let!]	English – **Imitation**
47	22:15	A few moments later, LH returns to toy helicopter , opens the doors of the pilot's compartment and says	[Toi-let!]	English – **Naming referent**
48	22:18	LH sees mom putting on clothes	[Mom, what …. doing?] (Mom, what are you doing?)	English – **Question**
49	22:18	LH points to mom's belly button and says	[Button!] (Belly-button!)	English – **Naming referent**

50	22:18	When mom asked LH, "You want the helicopter?"	[*Ah*!] (Yes.)	Chinese – particle **Agreement**
51	22:18	LH wants mom to activate the helicopter	[*Kai*, mommy, *kai*!] (Open, mom, open!)	Mixed - **Request**
52	22:18	LH complimenting cartoon character of TV	[*Cheh-cheh mei!*] (Elder sister is pretty!)	Mandarin – **Appreciation**
53	22:18	LH repeats word after mom	[Coffee]	English – **Imitation**
54	22:18	[LH wants a particular chair	[*Mi! Mi!*]	English – kinship term **Request**
55	22:18	LH wants to sit in a particular position	[*Mi, cher pien! Chor cher pien!*] (Mommy, this side, sit this side !)	Mixed **Request**
56	22:22	LH is watching Elvis' GI Blues and at that moment, a baby was crying	[*Kuk liau! kuk liau*!] (Crying already! Crying already!)	Mandarin – **Expressing comprehension of emotion**
57	22:22	Plot of movie shows night time and baby is sleeping	[*Aun-aun liau! Aun-aun liau !*] (It's night time already! It's night time already!)	Mandarin – **Expressing comprehension of time sequence**
58	22:22	LH sees a number of pistachio nuts lying on the floor and he wants mom to open the shells	[Mommy, *kai*, mommy, *kai*. (Mommy, open, mommy, open) [I wan, I wan.]	Mixed - **Request**
59	22:22	Mom asks, "*Kai* what?" which means [open what]	[*Kai*….. sweet] (Open…sweet.)	Mixed - **Request**
60	22:22	LH sees book on floor used for drawing stars	[Star, mommy, star mommy.]	English – **Naming referent**
61	22:22	Mom asks, "Oh you want star?"	[*Ah*!] (Yes.)	Chinese –particle **Agreement**
62	22:22	Looking for his crayon to colour and draw stars	[Kei yon *leh*? Kei yon leh?] (Where is the crayon? Where is the crayon?)	Mixed - **Question**

Key: Utterances were defined as nouns, verbs (verb phrase), adjectives or prepositions without taking into consideration the terms of address used by LH, for example, [ah ma] or [mommy] at the beginning of the word. In addition, * show utterances that had been articulated previously. Also, the word *mom* and *mi* are considered as English words.

Data indicate that these utterances were used for conveying specific needs which encompassed the various 13 speech acts. While Table 1 illustrates the actual utterances and its categories of tasks which have been highlighted, Table 2 is a condensed version of all the speech acts utilized according to the frequency they were used.

Table 2: Categories of Speech Acts Created Between the age of 22 and 23 Months

Nos.	Speech Acts	Mandarin		English		Mixed Utterances		Chinese Baby Lingo		Total
1	Naming referents	2, 11	**2**	3, 5, 17, 19, 20, 25, 27, 28, 40, 42, 44, 47, 49, 60	**14**	-		4	**1**	**17**
2	Requests	22	**1**	6, 10, 30, 34, 36, 41, 54	**7**	1, 31, 43, 51, 55, 58, 59	**7**	-		**15**
3	Questions			7, 16, 26, 48	**4**	13, 24, 62	**3**			**7**
4	Imitations	-		8, 21, 45, 46, 53	**5**	-		-		**5**
5	Indications			14, 18, 38,	**3**					**3**
6	Appreciation	52	**1**	9, 29	**2**	-		-		**3**
7	Agreement							35, 50, 61	**3**	**3**
8	Rejections	23, 32, 39	**3**	-		-		-		**3**
9	Command	33	**1**	-		-		-		**1**
10	Claim	37	**1**	-		-		-		**1**
11	Express anger	15	**1**	-		-		-		**1**
12	Express emotion	56	**1**	-		-		-		**1**
13	Comprehension of time sequence	57	**1**	-		-		-		**1**
*	Cannot be classified	Nos. 12							**1**	**1**
	Total									**62**

The breakdown of speech acts shown in Table 2 implies that of the total 62 utterances, the child had engaged them all for the purpose of conveying 13 speech acts with one utterance being unclassified because the researcher does not know under what label to classify. To identify which of these speech acts were more significantly or less prominently used, Table 3 provides the breakdown in percentage.

Table 3: The breakdown of the 13 speech acts

No.	Types of speech acts	Percentage	Frequency of occurrences
1	*Naming referents*	27.41 %	17/62
2	*Requests*	24.19 %	15/62
3	*Questions*	11.29 %	7/62
4	*Imitation*	8.06 %	5/62
5	*Indication*	4.84 %	3/62
6	*Appreciations*	4.84 %	3/62
7	*Agreement*	4.84 %	3/62
8	*Rejection*	4.84 %	3/62
9	*Command*	1.6 1%	1/62
10	*Claim*	1.6 1%	1/62
11	To *Express anger*	1.6 1%	1/62
12	To *Express emotion*	1.6 1%	1/62
13	To present *Comprehension of time sequence*	1.6 1%	1/62
14	*One category is Unclassified*	1.61 %	1/62

The breakdown of the 13 speech acts displayed in Table 3 suggests that of the child's 62 utterances recorded when he was between 22 and 23 months old, the child appears to be using language(s) for the purpose of naming referents, making requests, asking questions and as imitation strategies. These appear to occur in the order of importance too which only means that the child is still at the stage of learning names for specific objects surrounding him as well as for making requests in order to realize his intentions. The 'curiosity' aspect of development is also emerging as is shown through question-making tasks while his imitation attempts illustrate that language is also possibly accomplished through the behaviourist theory (Skinner) of stimulus-response. The other speech acts as seen I Table 3 above were used in a limited manner and this could have been attributed to the child's age.

Conclusion

This study is a condensed version of a PhD thesis which focuses on the simultaneous acquisition of Mandarin and English by a bilingual child from birth until age two years old. Due to the restriction of the scope of this paper, only the child's spoken data when he was between 22 to 23 months old were used for analysis. The analysis focused only on identifying the kinds of speech acts performed by the child when he used language to make communications with his surroundings. Analysis of data indicates that the child who is exposed to a multilingual setting used various languages (and dialects) to make communications with others. In addition, data also indicate that even though he was comparatively young, the child articulates and use these to convey his intentions and needs. Where he may be restrained by language input or output or limited by linguistic competence, the child creates his own strategies for conveying his needs. Of these strategies seen, data also show that he may use either Mandarin or English singly as monolinguals do or he may mix these two languages

within an utterance.

Analysis of data also seems to suggest that the child's utterances, although limited in some extent, were used to perform specific speech acts. The relevance of these spec acts clearly suggests that language is a tool for communication and in this respect, language was used by the child to perform various speech acts which encompass: (1) Naming referents (i.e. to label a particular object as a name), (2) Making requests, (3) Asking questions, (4) as Imitations and the other less significant speech acts were demonstrative of (5) Indications, (6) Appreciations, (7) Agreements, (8) Rejections, (9) Commands, and (11) Claims.

This study also demonstrates that the child-speaker uses language to express anger, comprehension of emotions, and also his ability to note time sequence. However, they were minimally used.

Implications of this study

The findings of this study is limited to the observations of one Malaysian bilingual child and thus, could not be seen as representative of all young Malaysian children who are developing and growing to acquire language or languages competently. However, from this study, one can conclude that in the young child's world, ego is a primary element and this is represented through the use of language which the child uses primarily to 'label' or name objects as well as to make requests. This therefore, supports Piaget's (1958) and Vygotsky's (1986) perception of the child being an egoistic individual who cares only for his own needs. In the home environment, perhaps, parents and caregivers can focus on the use of language to formulate requests which may enable the developing child to not only acquire components of language but also to become socio-linguistically skilled and be seen as adapting to society which consists of specific social manners.

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