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To cite this article: Dorian De Haan & Elly Singer (2001) Young Children's Language of Togetherness Le Langage de e Togetherness f des Jeunes Enfants El Idioma del Sentimiento de Unio ´ n de Los Menores, International Journal of Early Years Education, 9:2, 117-124, DOI: 10.1080/713670682

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713670682>



Published online: 21 Jul 2010.



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Young Children's Language of Togetherness

Le Langage de «Togetherness» des Jeunes Enfants

El Idioma del Sentimiento de Unión de Los Menores

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ABSTRACT *In this article we discuss verbal strategies used by children to express and construct a sense of togetherness. In a case study the language of one child was audiotaped over 2 years (at the start he was 3 years old) in his interactions with other children and teachers. Brown and Levinson's theoretical model for analysing the politeness strategies of adults is used to analyse the verbal strategies of these children. Three general mechanisms for expressing togetherness are distinguished: expression of common ground, of cooperation and of care. The expression of common ground seems a specific domain for 2- and 3-year-olds at the day care centre. Young children use imitation and repetition of (nonsense) words and the explicit reference to sameness as a favourite mode of expressing common ground.*

RÉSUMÉ *Dans cet article, nous examinons les stratégies verbales utilisées par les enfants pour exprimer et construire un sens de «togetherness». Dans une étude de cas, le langage d'un enfant a été enregistré sur deux ans (à partir de l'âge de trois ans) dans ses interactions avec d'autres enfants et ses enseignants. Le modèle théorique d'analyse des stratégies de politesse des adultes de Brown et Levinson est utilisé pour analyser les stratégies verbales de ces enfants. On distingue trois mécanismes généraux d'expression de la «togetherness»: expression de points communs, de coopération et d'affection. L'expression de points communs semble être un domaine spécifique pour les enfants de deux et trois ans de l'école maternelle. Les jeunes enfants emploient l'imitation et la répétition de mots (dépourvus de sens) et la référence explicite à la similitude comme mode préféré d'expression de points communs.*

RESUMEN *En este artículo hablamos de las estrategias verbales usadas por los niños para expresar y elaborar un sentido de unión. En un estudio de caso, se grabó el lenguaje de un niño durante dos años (al inicio tenía tres años) en sus interacciones con otros niños y profesores. Su usa el modelo teórico de Brown and Levinson para analizar las estrategias de buena educación de adultos a fin de analizar las estrategias verbales de estos niños. Se distinguen tres mecanismos generales para expresar unión: expresión de puntos en común, de cooperación y de atención. La expresión de puntos en común parece un dominio específico para los niños de dos y tres años en la guardería. Los menores usan imitaciones y repeticiones de palabras (sin sentido) y la referencia explícita a identidad como un modo favorito de expresión del punto común.*

Introduction

'Susan and Maartje have been best friends since they were babies. They went to the same day care centre.' Parents often tell this kind of anecdote about their schoolchildren when discussing the effects of day care. A life-long friendship proves the value of day care centres for the social development of children. In this article we will discuss the relationships between Dutch children in a day care centre and especially the children's verbal strategies to express and construct a sense of togetherness. The language of one child, Cas, was audiotaped over 2 years in his interactions with the other children and teachers. At the start of the research Cas was 3 years and 1 month (3;1) old and at the age of 4 he switched from the day care centre to a centre for after school care.

The case study of Cas was carried out by one of the authors, Dorian de Haan. This study is part of a research programme on the moral development of young children. According to Emde *et al.* (1991), moral development starts during infancy. As a result of care-giving experiences infants learn rules for reciprocity, for give and take (Dunn, 1988). During play with siblings and friends toddlers and pre-schoolers construct shared rules, rituals and markers for togetherness (Corsaro, 1979, 1996). Because 'being together' is so pleasurable, children become motivated to follow shared rules (Damon, 1988; Emde *et al.*, 1991).

The main aim of the study was to gain a better insight into the language of moral development. In studies into relationships between children the focus is obviously on interaction between the children. However, research that systematically explores the language involved is scarce and fragmented. Exceptions are the work of Eisenberg and Garvey (1981) on conflicts between children, the studies of Gottman (1983) and Berndt (1987) on the language of friendship and Corsaro's (1996) research into conflict talk and access rituals in nursery schools. In the study by De Haan the theoretical model of Brown & Levinson (1987) was used as 'a tool for describing ... the quality of social relationships' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 55). In this article we focus on one component of this model, relating to the language of togetherness.

The Language of Togetherness

The model of Brown and Levinson (1987) assumes two basic needs in social interaction: the need for freedom of action and the need to be understood and approved of. The model is designed to explain politeness strategies which people use when they wish to satisfy their desire for freedom of action and at the same time want to maintain good relationships. Brown and Levinson are especially interested in the politeness strategies used among adults to reach compromises between these two needs. We concentrate on that part of Brown and Levinson's model, which deals with basic needs. The first kind of need, for freedom of action, covers themes studied in the work of Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984): justice, honesty and truth. These needs are related to the language of rights. The second kind of need relates to themes of attachment, togetherness and care, dealt with by Gilligan (1982). Our article mainly deals with the second need.

Brown and Levinson distinguish three general mechanisms by which people express their desire for togetherness. The first concerns the expression of 'common ground' in attitudes and knowledge. The second mechanism cited by Brown and Levinson is the expression of cooperation. The third mechanism relates to the fulfilling of the needs and desires of the other, which we will label as care. Brown and Levinson have elaborated these mechanisms into different strategies, which suggest an approach for the study of children's language. How then

do children express themselves in order to communicate togetherness? We will first elaborate on the method of the study and then describe the children's language according to the model of Brown and Levinson.

Method

The research is a case study and is longitudinal in design. Our subject, Cas, was aged 3;1–5;1 when he was audiotaped and observed in his interactions with his environment. This environment was a group of children between 1;9 and 4 years at a day care centre and an after school centre for children between 4 and 10 years, together with their teachers. The numbers of children enrolled in the groups were 14 and 18, respectively. In both centres there were stable groups in which friendships arose spontaneously, mainly between children of the same age and sex. Both settings were characterised by a rather low level of organisation of activities. During free play the children were able to wander around and play with all available play material. The teachers seldom played with the children: their main role was taking care of and responding to the children when they needed help.

The audiotaping at the day care centre began once parents had left and the children, gathered around the table, were eating fruit. The audiotaping took 3 hours and ended after lunch. In after school care the audiotaping began when children ate something together and ended 2 hours later, when Cas went home.

Cas was equipped with a small microphone and a sender in a little backpack and elsewhere a receiver and recorder were installed. All his language and the language of the other children and the teachers were recorded and transcribed using the CHILDES project programs, a tool for transcribing and analysing child language (MacWhinney, 1995). The recordings were taken one morning a week at the day care centre and one afternoon at the after school centre for a period of 4–6 weeks, with intervals of a month, with a total of 52 recordings. Here we report the first and the last recordings. The data we present concern the whole group of children.

Results

Broadly speaking, the three general mechanisms and most strategies identified by Brown and Levinson can be recognised in the interactions of the children. However, the language used by children to express these strategies differs from the language of adults presented by Brown and Levinson. In addition, a number of interactions involved strategies related to friendship. Children are aware of the importance of friendship. This is not accounted for in the model of Brown and Levinson, but is relevant in mapping the language of togetherness.

We will first give some figures about frequencies of use of expressions relating to the general mechanisms and friendship and then look further at the kind of expressions the children used and differences between the periods at the day care centre and the after school centre.

As Table I shows, there appear to be important differences between interactions at the day care centre and the after school care centre, although statistical analyses still have to be carried out. At the day care centre children were more engaged in expressing what they shared in common, whereas in the after school centre their language was more often a manifestation of cooperation in play. There also seem to be some differences related to the third general mechanism of care. So, what are the children doing with their language? In the following we will present data on the language of the children for each of the general mechanisms.

TABLE I. The numbers and percentages of expressions related to the general mechanisms of the language of togetherness

	Day care centre		After school care centre	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Common ground	229	43	56	7
Cooperation	223	42	739	88
Care	46	8	11	1
Friendship	38	7	30	4

Common ground

Children express experience of common ground in a number of ways. The first way is to *manifest interest in and appreciation of the other*. This may be done by *enthusiastic greeting, questioning of features of the other and compliments*. Compliments were more often given at the after school centre.

1. Situation: Thomas enters, walks toward Cas, and greets him enthusiastically.
Thomas (4:0): Hi Cas, hi!
2. Situation: At the teacher's request Cas takes Aagje's jumper in with him.
Cas (3:1): Aag Aag Aag! Are you cold Aag? Are you cold?
3. Situation: playing football: the score is 10–7 to Jaïr.
Cas (5:0): Jaïr, you're a really good football player, man.
4. Situation: eating at table. Cas has a tanned face.
Santje (6:3): You look really well.

A second way is *expressing membership of the same in group*. Children did this in the day care centre by imitating playful, often nonsense, words of the other, as in (5), whereas the use of nicknames (6) and strong language (7) was sometimes used at the after school care centre. The use of 'dirty words' (8) occurred in both situations.

5. Situation: Cas makes sure a child keeps away from Bob's bicycle. They cycle away together.
Bob (2:10): Big blief-flie
Cas (3:2): Big Blief-fie.
6. Situation: Yves and Maarten play with a crane in the sandpit.
Yves (7:2): Not in my pit! You have to throw it here. Yobbo.
7. Situation: playing football. Cas scores.
Jaïr (5:4): Shit man!
8. Situation: Maarten has a balloon.
Jaïr (5:1): big willy.
Cas (4.8): big willy!
Cas: that's a big willy.

A third way of expressing communality is *explicit labelling of sameness*, as in example (9) (*we are the same!*), a practice exclusive to the day care centre, and the use of *me too, as in* (10).

9. Situation: At table.
Randa (2:7): We're all eating together.

10. Situation: Bob and Cas are waiting for the group of children to go outside to play.
 Bob (2:10): I'm a monkey.
 Cas (3:2): I'm a monkey too.
 Bob: You're a monkey too.

Cooperation

Togetherness may also be manifested in language aimed at cooperation: in their play children express common desires and goals. When children *offer* something to another or when they *promise* something they suppose common desires in their play, as in (11). There were no great differences between the day care centre and the after school care in the extent to which children displayed this kind of cooperative behaviour, but at the after school care centre an offer was more often part of a more complex interaction in which children, for instance, negotiated participation in games, as Lucca does in (12).

11. Situation: in the sandpit.
 Thomas (3:11): Do you want to take care of some of my ice lollies?
 Cas (3:1): Yes.
 Thomas: Come on then, Cas. You can give some lollipops. You can do that.
12. Situation: Lucca has a cart.
 Lucca (6:3): Bob can you give me a push, then I'll play with you.
 Bob looks, but goes on playing with Cas.
 Lucca: I know what, I'll be someone of yours Cas en Bob, I'll play with you and I'll earn the money.

Another way to express common purposes in play is to use language forms like *let's*, and the pronoun *we*.

13. Situation: Cas steps up to Bob.
 Bob (2:10): Stepping together!
 Cas (3:2): Yaa.
 Bob: We'll do it like this!

Togetherness is further to be seen in initiatives taken to cooperate in games and in the verbalisation of the continuity of play. In pretend play in particular, in which children co-construct a shared 'reality', they manifest cooperation by the use of temporal and lexical cohesive devices. In example (14) both Jair and Cas use the temporal connectives 'and then' and the lexical element 'power sword now'. We found this kind of integrated pretend play especially at the after school care centre. However, it was also obvious that not all play was so harmonious as it is in (14). Much play, whether it is pretend play or football, is characterised by negotiation of roles and actions in which reasons are often used to convince the other of justified desires, as in (15). However, most of these discussions end in common solutions and continuation of their play, which in themselves are just as much manifestations of children's desire for togetherness.

14. Situation: Cas and Jair are playing together with a castle and knights.
 Jair: (5:4): ... and then this one used 'power sword now'!
 Cas (5:0): Now power sword was just too late. Power sword, and then (?) with the sword, like that. One two three four.
 Jair: Three against four is much fairer.
 Cas: And then this one came out.

- Jair: And then this one fell off the castle.
 Cas: And this stupid one too... .
15. Situation: playing football.
 Bob (4:7): No, not penalty!
 Cas (5:0): Yes it is. That's how it is in football.

Satisfying the Needs of the Other: care

Brown and Levinson only mention the gift of goods, sympathy and understanding. In the broader perspective of moral development we found other ways by which children attempt to satisfy the needs of the other. They offer help, especially to younger children, as in (16), express compassion (17) and comfort other children (18) (cf. Rayna, this issue). Sometimes they express social understanding (19). Although the differences are not impressive, we found this kind of caring behaviour more at the day care centre: a frequency of occurrence of 46, whereas we observed this behaviour 11 times in the six afternoons at the after school care centre.

16. Situation: seated at table. The rule is that toys are put behind the chairs. Noortje (1:11) has just joined the group of infants. Cas wants to help Noortje in putting her bear behind her chair so he can hold her hand.
 Teacher: Now hold hands.
 Cas (3:1): You ... put the bear here.
17. Situation: Laura has scratched Noortje and she has a slight swelling under the eye. Lisa addresses the teacher.
 Lisa (3:8): What's wrong with Noortje?
18. Situation: Cas has fallen over.
 Bob (4:8): Cas I really like you.
19. Situation: Vera is in a bad mood. She says something to the teacher in an ill-tempered tone of voice.
 Cas (3:1): You can sit here.
 Vera is allowed to sit on the back of Cas' bicycle.

Friendship

As we said before (see Table I), children are aware of the importance of friendship. We found three ways in which children express this awareness. The first manifestation of friendship is by supporting another child in conflict (20). Children also repair the relationship after a conflict, as in (21). Further, they explicitly label or refer to the friendship, as for example in (22). The frequencies of occurrence are rather low in the day care centre as well as in the after school care centre. We found 19 expressions of explicit reference of friendship in the day care centre and 23 times at the after school care centre. It seems to be a developmental difference that children in the after school care centre more often use explicit reference in a conditional way, as in (23).

20. Situation: a child wants Bob's bicycle. Cas protects the bicycle for Bob.
 Cas: (3:2): You can't do that! You can't do that, boy!
21. Situation: Lisa sits behind on Thomas' bicycle.
 Thomas (4:0): You have to get off.
 Lisa walks away.
 Cas (3:2): Heh, Lisa. You can sit behind me!

- Thomas: Lisa [shouts]!
 Cas: Lisa [shouts]!
 Thomas: You can sit behind Cas! You can sit behind.
 Thomas points to Cas' bicycle and Lisa gets on.
22. Situation: Children hold hands in a circle.
 Cas (3:5): You're my friend, aren't you?
 Child (?): Yes.
 Cas: And Bob is my friend too.
 Child (?): I'm I'm I'm Leanne's friend too.
23. Situation: Bob wants to play with a hoop. Cas suggests something else.
 Cas (5:1): Bob, Bob shall we play football?
 Bob (4:8): No!
 Cas: Why not? Then I'll be your very best friend.

Conclusions

A conclusion to be drawn is that young children already have a rich repertory to express their relationship of togetherness with other children.

We also found that although children display a range of language functions that are incorporated in the model of politeness strategies of Brown & Levinson (1987), in some cases they have their particular mode of expression. In the first period of this research especially, at the day care centre, imitation of (nonsense) words of another child and repetition with some variation to and fro in a string of utterances appeared a favourite way of expressing common ground. It is a form of language play and in this simple form it is unique to young children. Both in the day care and the after school care period children used 'dirty' words to express togetherness. This seems to be a child's way of expressing group membership.

Another characteristic at this young age is an explicit reference to sameness and togetherness. Children seem to very much enjoy their discoveries of similarities, and out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh. Although adults do express commonality of experience, the explicitness of expression, by labelling sameness, may be typical for this young age, as Randa does in (9): 'We're all eating together'.

With regard to the expression of togetherness, several hypotheses may be formulated. A first hypothesis is that a shift occurs in the use of language functions from a focus on common ground to a focus on common goals. The expression of common ground seems a specific domain for children at the day care centre, between the ages of two and four. In this period the children seem to gain some awareness of *we*, of commonality as a component of friendship. In the after school care period togetherness may be more manifest in children's continued cooperation in play: they discover or negotiate a common orientation and concentrate on their common goal, play!

A second hypothesis is that the context affects language use. In particular, this may be the case with regard to language functions related to care. The greater share of care in the day care centre as a result of the presence of younger children who need to be cared for may prompt the older pre-schoolers to take care for them themselves.

If the findings of this investigation and the resultant hypotheses are confirmed by further research, the results may offer clues for day care education. More concretely, if togetherness as a component of relationships between children and care are important domains of development for children in day care, education should capitalise on this. As Damon (1988, p. 77) has argued:

The affective impact, engendered by the marked closeness of the relationship, causes children

to pay careful attention to friendship's norms, standards and rules of procedure. Such careful attention in turn leads children to remember and master the moral standards learning during friendship encounters, setting the stage for the child's later use of these standards all throughout life.

An emphasis in the day care centre on attentiveness, togetherness, bonds of friendship and care seems to find fertile soil at this young age. This is what parents like those of Susan and Maartje have in mind when they value the day care centre and the friendship that has grown there.

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