Chapter 9

Two systems of mutual engagement

The co-construction of gendered narrative styles by American preschoolers

Amy Sheldon and Heidi Engstrom
University of Minnesota

Introduction

Conversational interaction is the central medium through which we create our social lives. Conversations are also the major medium in which children hear stories from others and construct their own, well before they become literate. Preschool children are members of communities that are rich in conversations—families, neighborhoods, nursery schools, and daycare centers. Conversations are the medium through which they get to know others, jointly explore objects, materials and events, and create and recreate versions of the world they know or imagine. Before children’s formal schooling in literacy skills begins, they usually already have years of experience developing textual skills through shared talk with playmates, in which they have co-constructed far more elaborate stories than they can tell, or read or write, by themselves in first grade. That is partly because children’s co-constructed stories are emergent, developed in the realm of physical activity and enactment with material resources.

The study of these story texts is important not only because it informs us about the foundational skills children bring to school instruction in the intricacies of written texts, but also because it adds to our understanding of the human capacity for story construction across the life-span.¹

This chapter describes how the activity of interactionally constructing and enacting pretend play stories can be affected at its core by the community’s gender order. Cultural scripts of femininity and of masculinity are given subtly different sociolinguistic expression, which serves to index gender and make it integral to children’s process and content of co-constructed oral narratives.
This work on how gender can influence the process of interactive oral narrative construction builds on earlier findings of gender difference in story construction in this community of children (Sheldon & Rohleder 1996) and is consistent with work about gender differences in nursery school children’s stories (Nicolopoulou et al. 1994), and in conversational cohesion in talk produced by young friends (Tannen 1994), among others.

The children’s conversations discussed here emerged in the course of their spontaneous play together. They were not guided or interfered with by any adults. All adults apart from the camera operator, and occasionally the audio engineer recording the session were usually out of visible range. Extended, often negotiated, emplotment and enactment were interactively accomplished during pretend play. We start with two clear cases in each of a girls’ session and a boys’ session, and describe some of the sociolinguistic evidence that leads to a working hypothesis that, in this community of American preschoolers, when a child plays in a group with other girls or with other boys, these same-sex groups have somewhat different systems, or patterns, of mutual engagement that shape their joint development of stories. We call this the Two Systems of Mutual Engagement Hypothesis.

Two Systems of Mutual Engagement

The Two Systems of Mutual Engagement Hypothesis claims that there are sociolinguistic features in these children’s conversations during play that subtly differentiate and add tonality to the all-girl and all-boy interactions. The girls’ co-construction of pretend play discourse is primarily shaped by – or exemplifies – a consistently integrated and coordinated engagement. The boys’ co-construction of pretend play discourse is noticeably shaped by – exemplifies – parallel, disjoint, and intermittently coordinated engagement. The following is a summary overview of some features of these styles, which previews the data analysis that follows.

Features of these boys’ narrative engagement:
- They more often talk about mutual activity
- The listener’s activity is more often related to the speaker’s
- Individual experience is often reported in a series of repetitions by members of the group, creating the effect of a choral ensemble or a duet
- When individual experiences and evaluations are presented to the group they tend to be mirrored and matched by the others.

Features of these boys’ narrative engagement:
- Boys are slower to create a mutual focus and coordinated activity
- Their engagement is more episodic in a pattern of: engage-disengage-reengage
- They have shorter and more intermittent common foci of talk and activity
- There is more rapid introduction of play themes, and more rapid shift (turnover) to new play themes
- There are more attention-getting markers (“hey!”) and resistance markers (“but”) (not discussed here)
- They have fewer reciprocal turn sequences
- Their talk is often a report of the speaker’s own activity in parallel with another child’s activity or similar report
- Speakers jockey for topic rights
- The group eventually attains sustained mutual engagement and coordinated activity but does so more gradually than the girls, after some delays and derailments.

These are not mutually exclusive patterns, but rather differences in degree that give the girls’ and boys’ interactions different tonalities.

Gender in language practices

Our analysis of the data that lead to this formulation concludes that these are features that index gender distinctions between these groups. Previous descriptions of conversations of children in this community have shown that the conflict talk of these girls and boys is gendered (Sheldon 1990a, 1992a, 1992b, 1996, 1997; Sheldon & Johnson 1998). In addition, Sheldon and Rohleder (1996) have shown that even when this community of children interact in all-girl or all-boy groups in the same play spaces with the exact same play resources (on different occasions), the outcomes for their co-constructed narratives are strik-
ingly different. The present study finds more differences in looking at other features of their joint narrative development.

In saying that these children’s speech is gendered, we mean that they are using speech practices that make them recognizable to each other as a girl or a boy in ways that are consistent with the local gender order. (This is not to deny the fact that there are similarities in girls’ and boys’ use of language, which may be vaster than the differences.) These discourse practices achieve different narrative content and effects and give different tonalities to their interactionally produced stories. The girls and boys in this preschool community have the same (age-related) linguistic competencies available to them. Yet they are making some different linguistic choices, which have consequences for their jointly developed narrative texts. These different language practices, which may be small in proportion to the similarities, nevertheless have important effects on the moment-to-moment development of their joint narrative work, and on the narrative outcomes.

Method

The data studied here are part of an archive that was collected on videotape by Sheldon at a preschool, and is reported on elsewhere (e.g. Sheldon 1990a). Thirty-six three, four and five year old Midwestern American preschoolers were studied. They were long-time attendees at a high quality, anti-bias, all-day childcare center, which was managed by a well-trained, skillful group of teachers, who had been at the center for many years. The center was located in the Twin Cities, in Minnesota. It was among the first to develop an explicit ‘anti-bias’ mission and curriculum. Developing the curriculum and training the staff to implement it was in progress during the time period studied.

The children were engaged in unsupervised spontaneous pretend play in same-sex triads at the daycare center. Twelve triads (6 of girls, 6 of boys) took turns on different days playing in the same playroom with exactly the same toy set-ups, for about twenty-five minutes apiece. They were the only children in the room. They were videotaped by a camera operator who stood in the doorway of the room. An audio engineer was hidden behind a curtain and was in charge of mixing the sound tracks from the children’s individual microphones (attached to the lapel of a vest they wore) onto the audio track of the videotape at the time of taping. This chapter describes an exemplar of a girls’ group and an exemplar of a boys’ group; the children are four-year-olds.

Both sessions took place in a self-contained play space down a hall from their larger group’s activity in the day care center. The play room was set up primarily as a domestic setting, i.e. a ‘housekeeping corner’, which had a toy stove and sink, a basket filled with plastic food, a dinner table and chairs, eating utensils, a high chair, a crib with dolls, a child size foam easy chair, a telephone, dress-up clothes and a mirror, and some toy doctor supplies: a stethoscope with a blood pressure cuff, a needle-less syringe, and an ear scope.

The girls created a domestic script, that could be described as ‘a day in ordinary life’, with events such as preparing and eating a meal, pretending to be at a restaurant, having conversations about food, feeding baby at the table, putting baby to bed, tending to a sick baby which included calling the doctor, pretending to be a nurse, giving the baby a shot, taking its temperature, looking in its ears, getting and making telephone calls including narrating the unseen speaker’s words to the rest of the group, and reporting a scary story ‘told’ by the person on the other end of the telephone. There were negotiations (of varying degrees of intensity) over roles, plot development, who got to do what, etc.

The boys spent much less time developing a domestic story world than the girls did, but they started out in that realm and spent time preparing food, eating it and talking about it at the dinner table, sitting some babies at the table, giving a sick baby a shot, playing doctor with each other and checking a boy’s heart, stomach and blood pressure. But the main story world they constructed could be described as a ‘dangerous and action filled adventure’. They eventually settled on a narrative proposed by one of the boys, that brought them on an ‘explore’, finding a bear, a bat, and ‘lumpy things’ before they ran home, barricaded the door with the kitchen stove and overturned chairs, and hid from the polar bear who was trying to break in.

A more complete discussion of how the physical setting was congruent with, or was transformed into, different story worlds is reported in Sheldon and Rohleder (1996). These boys’ pattern of spending some time in a domestic story construction mode but then transforming the domestic play resources to create a (usually) unrelated non-domestic story world was replicated by each of the other five male triads who played in this room set up when it was their turn. And the girls’ enactment of a domestic script, which was consistent with the room set up and resources, was repeated by the other five female triads when it was their turn to play in the room. There were very few transformations by the girls’ groups to play that was out of the domestic mode. When done, it was integrated into the domestic script, rather than being disjunctive.
Results

The two sessions that we will compare were about equal length (the girls’ session was 25.92 min. long, the boys’ was 26.33 min. long). Adjustments have been made for session length in making the following comparisons. We will compare both quantitative and qualitative features of their story constructions. We will look at: (1) total speech output, (2) features of their turns, (3) features of their topic development, and will then give (4) some short examples of discourse. The following tables present these features.

Basic measures

Table 1 shows that boys produced more speech than girls: almost 200 more utterances and their total word count was higher by about 600 words. This difference cannot be accounted for by the 25 second longer duration of the boys’ session. Adjusting for this slight time difference, we found that girls produced 23% fewer utterances per minute.

Table 1. Amount of talk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of utterances</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raw no. of utterances</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24% fewer utterances (not adjusted for time)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterances per minute</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of girls’ utterances to boys</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23% fewer utterances per minute (adjusted for time)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boys produced more topics, at a rate of 3.1 topics per minute compared to the girls’ 2.5 topics per minute. Girls produced 79% of the number of topics that boys produced.

Table 2. Length of utterances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MLU in words (excluding mazed words)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>4.04–5.4</td>
<td>4.28–4.37</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turn length</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean turn length of utterances</td>
<td>1.8 utterances</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range:</td>
<td>1.5–2.2</td>
<td>1.5–1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean turn length of words</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range:</td>
<td>7.22–11.44</td>
<td>6.5–7.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Boys produced more topics, at a rate of 3.1 topics per minute compared to the girls’ 2.5 topics per minute. Girls produced 79% of the number of topics that boys produced.

Table 3. Number of topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of topics</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics per minute</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for 25.92 min.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(for 26.33 min.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratio of girls’ topics to boys’</td>
<td>79% of boys’ rate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topic development

Looking at topic development, we find that boys more often continued their own topic than they continued another boy’s topic. There was more topic shifting in the boys’ group, more self-reports, more demands, challenges, refusals
and generally, more disputatious talk which made joint topic development more difficult to achieve. Girls had more shared topics and continued them longer in reciprocal exchanges. They had less topic shifting, fewer self-reports, fewer announcements, and less disruptive conflict talk.

These different patterns of reciprocal engagement can be seen in the two graphs, which portray gender differences in number of sequences in which all three speakers contributed to topic development.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of topics that have 1, 2 or 3 speakers. Nearly half of the topics in the boys' group had just one speaker. If we add to this the number of two-speaker topics, we see that nearly three quarters of the topics discussed in the boys' group involved one or two speakers. About one quarter of the boys' topics were discussed by all three boys.

The distribution goes the other way in the girls' group, however. One-speaker topics were least frequent. They occurred about half as often in the girls' group as they did in the boys' group. The girls had more three-speaker and two-speaker topics than the boys did, and these accounted for about three quarters of their topics.

Figure 2 compares the length of turn sequences when all three speakers were on-topic. When the three boys are all on the same topic, 80% of their talk on

![Figure 1. Percent of topics that have 1, 2, or 3 speakers](image1)

![Figure 2. Three speaker on-topic turn sequences](image2)

Figure 2. Three speaker on-topic turn sequences

that topic is done in short turn sequences, between 3–5 turns long. Girls, on the other hand, interact in longer sequences on a single topic. 53% of their three-speaker on-topic turn sequences are longer sequences, between 6–12 turns long. As could be expected, the girls had a lower rate of topics per minute. Their topic development sequences were longer; they shifted topic less. Taken together, these facts account for our impression from viewing the sessions that these girls' discourse was more reciprocal and integrated, and that their pretend play interactions were more elaborate across the length of the session.

Figures 1 and 2 are measures of reciprocity and linguistic involvement within the group with regard to the linguistic development of topics.

**Discourse examples**

We now present some examples of talk in each group in order to elaborate on the quantitative measures.
Three-speaker integrated and coordinated talk

Example 1 is an example of three-speaker integrated and coordinated talk in the girls’ group:

Example 1. “It's butter!” (35 seconds)

(The girls are by the table, which they have set for a meal and have brought plastic food to. Arlene is sitting at the table. She reaches for the bread and holds a plastic knife in her other hand.)

01 Arlene: Hey, (Looks around at the table and towards the girls) where’s all the stuff to spread on the bread?
02 Erica: Put on- on your bread?
03 Arlene: I don’t know.
04 Erica: Me too. Well,=
05 Elaine: (Sits down at the table) =It’s BUTTER!
06 Erica: (Stands near table and looks at Arlene) It’s butter.
07 Elaine: It’s butter.
08 Erica: Butter.
09 Arlene: Well-
10 Elaine: That’s what mommy putted on it.
11 Erica: Yeah, wh-
12 Elaine: [I always] love butter on mine.
13 Arlene: [I always] kinda have my bread cut like this. (Crosses plastic knife over the bread)
14 I always have a je-
15 (Turns to high chair where Erica has just brought a doll to put in the high chair between Elaine and Arlene)
16 Elaine: (To Erica, about the doll) Now put her- I’m her mommy.
17 Elaine: Well,
18 I must say
19 you cer[tainly do].
20 Arlene: [I always] kinda have my bread cut like this. (Crosses plastic knife over the bread)
21 I always have a je-
22 (Turns to high chair where Erica has just brought a doll to put in the high chair between Elaine and Arlene)
23 Elaine: (To Erica, about the doll) Now put her- I’m her mommy.

Example 1 contains conversational turns with repeated and recycled elements that create the effect of reciprocity and textual coherence. One way this is accomplished is that words and syntactic patterns are echoed by different speak-
Tripp 1999), or interaction that is not necessarily involved in story construction (Leaper 1989).

Example 2 is another example of this same kind of contingent talk that is common in the girls’ session. The verse format of the text highlights the lexical repetition and structural parallelisms:

Example 2. “I need to cut up my soup!” (160 seconds)

(The girls are all sitting at the table enacting having a meal)

01 Arlene: I’ll cut UP the mashed potatoes.
02 Erica: I-
03 I needa-
04 I need to cut up my CHICken.
05 Elaine: I needa cut up my SOup.
06 Erica: (Looks at Elaine) Your SOUP!!!
07 Elaine: (Looks at Erica sheepishly) Not my SOUP.
08 Erica: (Laughs)
09 Elaine: I mean EAT my soup.
10 Erica: (Laughs)
11 You said ‘CUT up’ your soup.
12 (Laughs)
13 You don’t need to cut UP soup.
14 Don’t cut up soup.
15 Arlene: (Looking for an opening in the conversation to change the activity, turns her body toward the phone as if she hears it ringing and prepares to get up and answer it)
   Wait-
16 Erica: Don’t cut.
17 Arlene: (Turns backs as Erica continues to talk)
18 Erica: (Laughingly)
   You DON’T CUT soup, NO=.
19 Arlene: =Oh! (Looks at the others and raises her left hand to get their attention)
20 Arlene: I’ll get it. (Gets up from the table, goes to the phone, and picks up the receiver. Elaine and Erica stop talking and eating and pay attention to what Arlene is saying on the phone)
21 Yes?
22 Ok.
23 What?
24 Oh.

One notable feature of Example 2 is how talk itself is of interest and becomes a topic of conversation. The girls display close listenership. Interestingly, Johnson and Aries (1998) find that talk is the central activity between women friends, which implies the central importance of listening, as well. The first example of the attention to talk is Erica’s correction of Elaine’s conversational misstep as she goes down the syntactic garden path of the pattern ‘I’ll cut up X’ to produce ‘I’ll cut up my soup’, in line 5. Elaine’s blooper provides a lot of benign entertainment to Arlene as she contemplates and comments on this impossibility.

Second, Erica and Elaine stop eating when Arlene ‘answers the phone’, an act which provides her with the opportunity to invent a conversation with an imaginary character on the other end of the line, and thus insert her own story thread. This has captured the other girls’ complete interest. Arlene’s new thread is woven into their joint pretend play plot, after she gets off the phone (not shown in this data, however).

A third, particularly subtle indication of how well these girls are listening to each other is the way Arlene times her phone call. She is waiting for Erica to be done commenting on Elaine’s mistake. She misjudges Erica’s completion point in line 15 and starts to get up for the phone before Erica is done. Seeing that Erica is still talking, she turns her body back to the table, tucks her feet back under it until the next opportunity to take a turn. Her timing is precise; in line 19 again she prepares to get up for the phone, prefacing her move with a surprise marker, ‘Oh!’ and at the same time lifts her hand to get the other girls’ attention. Latching her talk to Erica’s with these turn-initial indicators, she successfully gets a turn at talk without seeming to interrupt Erica. Once she has it, she skillfully keeps their attention fixed on her talk on the phone.

Boys’ three speaker parallel talk

The following are examples from the boys’ group that can be described as parallel rather than topically integrated or coordinated. Each boy is pretty much
talking about his own topic although there are some overlaps. We have put their talk in columns to make it easier for the reader to follow the pattern of an individual’s talk.

Example 3. “Hey, cheese!” (108 seconds)

Robert:
01 I got the food guys. (Takes basket of food to table)

02 Supper time.

03 I got the food.

05 Look at all the food, guys.

06 I got- Give the baby a shot.

08 (To Mark) Here, get the baby to give a shot.

10 [I got ALL the FOOD.]

11 (Still playing with the syringe on himself)

This [s- (hums)]

12 I got a EGG for breakfast now.

13 (Gets up, goes to the table and looks in the food basket) Hey, I’m gonna have a ta- some tato.

Connor:
(Playing with the blood pressure cuff and a syringe in front of the table)

02 Supper time.

03 I got the food.

05 Look at all the food, guys.

06 I got- Give the baby a shot.

08 (To himself) And HERE’S a shot.

Mark:
(Standing near Connor, in front of the table, holding another syringe)

02 Supper time.

03 I got the food.

05 Look at all the food, guys.

06 I got- Give the baby a shot.

08 (To Mark) Here, get the baby to give a shot.

09 (Turns to the baby in the crib beside the table and gives it a shot)

14 Hey, I’m gonna have a tOMATO for supper.
(Makes sound effect of eating)

15 This is BREAKFAST time. (Puts two pieces of bread on a plate and bends down to pretend to eat them, making sound effects)

16 We’re gonna have TOMATO for supper I’m like FOZZIE Bear (Puts a tomato to his eye. Makes a sound effect)

17 It’s BREAKFAST time.
(Takes more food out of basket to his plate)

18 (To no one in particular) Know what’s fun?

19 Corn. (Bends over plate and eats from it with his mouth, making eating sounds)

20 Hey, I got a tomato- (Puts tomato on his head then bends down to get things from the food basket)

22 Hey, could make- could make pot- pot-potatoes in it!

23 Hey, CHEESE! Swiss cheese.
24 Yes and this. *(Holding a sandwich)*
25 I'm having CHEESE!
*(Turns his back to the table ready to get up)*

26 Oh look at this! *(his sandwich)* I have a big SAMICH. *(Said in a wondrous tone. Lifts the sandwich to his mouth and makes a chomping noise)*

27 *(Takes no notice and gets up from the table)* I'm gon- I'm gonna shot *(use the pretend syringe)*. My, Robert, you're gonna have your- your shot will only hurt for a minute.

In Example 3 the boys make a number of announcements of what they each are doing or what they each have, sometimes repeating their self-report or announcement a number of times. Robert's multiple repetition that 'This is breakfast time' is ignored by Connor, who announces that he's having 'supper'.

Connor also prefaxes a number of his turns with an attention marker, 'hey!' In this boys' session there were 46 occurrences of 'hey' in 33 turns, 21 made by Connor. The marker often prefaced an announcement of what the speaker is doing during parallel play, sometimes with as many as four occurrences of 'hey' in a single turn. Sometimes one use of 'hey' triggered a series of turn initiations with 'hey'. Other functions of the marker were to prefax a question, an opposition, a suggestion, to mark surprise, and to advance the story. In the girls' group there were six occurrences of 'hey' in six turns, four by Arlene. This asymmetry in the use of 'hey' held up across all the triads in the larger corpus: In the six girls' triads 'hey' was produced 75 times, and in the six boys' triads, it was produced 298 times. The difference suggests that the boys had to do more conversational work to get noticed or to get a response and reciprocal engagement.

Although the talk in Example 3 is mostly in parallel tracks of self-reports, the boys usually seem to be noticing what each other is doing and their announcements could be interpreted as competitive comparisons. There is at least one structural parallelism in the above data, in the pattern 'I got X', 'I'm having Y', and 'I have Z', said by one or the other boys, all self-reports. Another difference between Example 3 and the two examples in the girls' group is that the boys do much more moving around back and forth from the table, compared to the longer stretches of time that the girls sit and eat and talk face to face.

**Example 4.** “I'll be the doctor for a minute, ok?” *(90 seconds)*

This next example is a spate of parallel talk that is prior to the point at which all three begin to coordinate with each other in jointly producing a story of action and adventure. Connor has invited the others to join him on ‘an explore’. He is alternatively caught in the embrace of his imagination, enacting and narrating his explore, and reemerges from it to persuade the others to join him. At first, Mark and Robert make a brief effort to join him, but they quickly drop out and get interested in their own parallel activities. Robert is setting the table and will soon try to get the boys involved in a story enacted in a doctor's office. Meanwhile, Mark is looking around the room, distractedly holding a doll by one arm and the opposite leg, noticing things in his surroundings. It is Robert and Connor who are independently developing story worlds in this example, each trying to get the others involved, but not having success yet. *(Overlapping utterances are in square brackets.)*

01 Connor: *(Carrying a doll, wearing a military jacket and hat, and walking around the room by himself)*
02 I [hear some- I see] some-
03 I see some lumpy things.
04 Mark: *(Standing by the table, holding a doll by one arm and the opposite leg, looking around the room)*
05 [They're taking pictures of us]
*(Referring to camera operator in a corner)*
06 07 Connor: *(Goes up to the table that Robert is setting) What are those?* *(Referring to silverware)*
08 09 Mark: They're taking pictures of us.
10 Connor: *(To the others) We're taking- we're going- Shhh!
11 There's a BEAR!
12 Now it's time to leave=
13 Robert: *(Humming) =dan-dan-dan= Let's eat!
14 *(Ignores Connor, sits at table) (Hums)*
15 Connor: *(Ignores Robert and walks away from the table into his "explore" territory)*
(Whispers to Mark) And he’s saying “rrraaarr!” to us.
And we better run home. (Runs away from Mark, and sits in a chair by the kitchen table)
(Walks over to the table)
(Goes over to the table) I’ll be the dad for a minute, ok?
I’ll be the da-
(To Connor) =No that’s my chair.
(Gets up from the chair, hums a tune) de-de-de-de-de-de-de-

The boys eventually did develop the story of the ‘explore’. What is missing in the above text is the creation of involvement through joint verbal negotiation of the story. In lines 10–12, each one announces their own story theme in progress, to the others. Connor announces ‘We’re taking- we’re going- Shhh! There’s a BEAR! Now it’s time to leave=’. In lines 27–38, Robert begins his story line with the announcement, ‘We’re in the waiting room’. (Goes over to Connor) ‘You’re in the waiting room.’ (Touches Connors hand) ‘Your turn.’ (Goes back to the ‘waiting room’ but Connor backs away). (Encouragingly) ‘Your turn. Your turn. The other boys do not respond to either Robert’s or Connor’s invitations, and instead continue in their separate story worlds. All three girls, on the other hand, move into the joint discussion and enactment of their story world quickly at the beginning of their session. Competition for ‘story rights’ between Robert and Connor delays story development and enactment, both their own and as a group activity.

Discussion

We have described two sessions that are representative of what we claim to be two gendered systems of mutual engagement, which are operating in girls’ and boys’ spontaneous pretend story construction. These are not mutually exclusive processes in the girls’ and boys’ groups, but they are noticeable in their effect on the quality and outcomes of the interactions, both social and narrative. The girls’ joint construction of pretend play stories have a strong quality of continuity, smooth development, mutuality, and cohesion, where listener and speaker are engaged in interrelated activities that advance jointly constructed pretend play stories. The boys are slower to develop a mutual focus and coordinated activity in a single story world. Their mutual engagement takes the form of numerous announcements of their own side-by-side activity, attempts to get each other involved in their own story worlds, resistance or absence of
uptake interspersed with episodes of short mutual foci of talk and activity. They have more of an engage-disengage-reengage pattern of imaginary play, until the group finally sustains a shared imaginative focus.

The girls' talk has a 'dialogue' quality, a sense of duetting, or turn-by-turn coordination of content and form. All speakers' activities seem to be on-topic.

Grounding

Two phases are needed for a complete conversation, or for it to be 'grounded': the 'presentation phase', in which messages are sent off to be considered, and the 'acceptance phase', in which a speaker is assured that the message has been understood as it was intended to be (Clark & Brennan 1991).

The two groups seem to be producing their discourse as a collective activity somewhat differently. The boys are issuing utterances, spending a lot of time in the presentation phase, e.g. self-reports of their own activity, repeated attempts to get their own topic picked up by the others, or introductions of a new topic. But they are not always receiving a response that indicates that their utterances have been received, or understood, i.e. the acceptance phase. Competing for attention and pursuing individual activity apparently does not move a group into an elaborate jointly developed narrative for the time spent together. The girls, on the other hand, seem to be giving more positive evidence of understanding to each other, i.e. providing the acceptance phase, providing evidence of attending to what is being said and incorporating it into their own next utterance. This may be one source for the impression of greater positive reciprocity in the girls' group. The differences in the organization of conversations in these two groups probably reflect the speakers' interactional goals at the time, e.g. the importance placed on independent activity vs mutually coordinated activity, and would change as those goals changed.

Conclusion

The research reported here describes some characteristics of children's discourse that have consequences for the joint construction of pretend play stories. It is intended as a first step toward studying a larger body of data.

We are claiming that the narrative practices of these friends in same-sex groups contain interesting differences - whatever similarities they also contain. Pointing out gender differences in how language is used in this particular context does not mean that these practices 'belong' to one sex in some essen-

tialist fashion, or that their linguistic practices are invariant across all situations and with different interlocutors, e.g. in mixed-sex groups. The linguistic practices used in one group are available to all the children and can be used by girls and boys alike. Speech style is variable because it is situated behavior. One area for further investigation would be to learn more about how children's discourse may vary in their displays of gender as a response to situational constraints. There is evidence that children are attending to gender differences in how language is used, and can talk about it, at around six years of age, or when meta-linguistic abilities emerge (Sheldon 1990b). Thus, a fruitful avenue for research would be to compare the process of co-construction of stories by the same children as a function of being in same- and in mixed-sex groups, in the same play spaces.7 To echo the position articulated by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, "... gender is not part of one's essence, what one is, but an achievement, what one does... gender is also about managing social relations" (2003:305).

Story-telling is a key way in which we create social relationships and make sense of the complex world in which we live, until the end of our lives. It is a major way in which we display aspects of our identity to others, and read their identities. The preschool years are rich with exciting story-telling accomplishments, which are primarily communal. They are opportunities for the construction of often complex, shared, oral texts (Sheldon in press). The joint construction of stories is an opportunity for children to be fully engaged in the embrace of imagination as tellers and recipients, as they give the tale linguistic and interactional shape. They can be involved in every aspect of the craft - from inventing, to deciding, to editing and rearranging - developing characters, providing suspense. Hopefully, this research is a step toward the goal of knowing how the production of co-constructed story worlds also connects their individual minds and bodies to a symbolic gendered social order.

Acknowledgements

Research assistance was provided by Jessica Franklin, Matthew Wolf and Lisa Rohleder, at the University of Minnesota. Special thanks to Professor Jennifer Windsor for assistance with the SALT program.
Notes

1. These issues are explored further in Sheldon (in press).

2. Taping was done before digital equipment. VHS tape was used and each child was additionally tapered on an individual audio cassette in a back pocket on a vest each one wore.

3. A measure based on all words spoken, including undeterminable words or phrases. Determinable utterances are ones which coders could determine what the child was speaking about. An undeterminable utterance is a false start, e.g. 'one ba-', which could not be interpreted from context, or an unintelligible word or phrase that was untranscribable and appeared in the transcript as 'XXX. The girls' utterance total includes 39 undeterminable utterances and the boys' total includes 21.

4. Two word counts were taken in the SALT Program (Miller & Chapman 1998). SALT allows one to separate out words that are false starts, repetitions and reformulations. Those are coded as a 'maze' and the word count can contain them or not. An 'unmazed' word count contains all words that are not in a maze, which are considered the main content of the discourse. Thus, a mazed plus an unmazed word count are all words spoken. The boys had somewhat more tokens of mazed words. This may be due to more repetition, reformulation due to overlap, trying to get attention, individual differences in overall speakers, or it may be random.

5. "The women we interviewed isolate talk as the most important aspect of the relationship [with women friends]" (219). "... Through extensive talk about the most routine daily activities to the most private of personal problems and crises, women friends establish connections with one another that function significantly in their lives" (221).

6. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the children in this study already have learned a variety of speech repertoires, as shown by their use of different speech registers: e.g., speaking like a parent when they were in that role, using child-directed speech to the dolls, using robot speech, using a military register to issue commands, etc.

7. For some work on mixed-sex groups, see Kyratzis and Guo (1996).

Chapter 10

Narrative and the construction of professional identity in the workplace

Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra
Victoria University of Wellington

Introduction

In this paper we examine one of the many functions of narratives in the workplace, namely their contribution to the construction of the professional identities of managers. In different workplace contexts, and even at different points within the same interaction, participants emphasise particular facets of their social identities and different dimensions of social meaning – institutional or organisational affiliation, professional status, collegial solidarity, authority responsibilities, gender category, ethnic affiliation, and so on (see Meyerhoff & Niedzielski 1994). Narratives provide one resource for producing or enacting particular aspects of an individual’s social identity, and may serve, in particular, as discursive strategies for reconciling contradictory aspects of an individual’s complex social identity at work.

In addressing our topic, we first briefly describe the dataset and methodology of the large project from which the material analysed in this paper is taken. We then discuss in some detail the issue of how to identify workplace narratives, or ‘workplace anecdotes’ as we label them, and, in particular, how to distinguish them from reports and descriptions with which they share many structural features. Finally, we turn to an examination of some specific workplace anecdotes, exploring their function in relation to the ‘display’ of participants’ social identities (Goffman 1981), and especially in the construction of the complex professional identities of managers in two contrasting workplaces.