Improvisation and conformity in children’s language play

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By adopting a dynamic sociolinguistic perspective on language creativity, this presentation examines children’s language play, and demonstrates that creativity in language use feeds on the ongoing tension between predictability (routine of culturally recognizable activities) and the novelty/improvisational character of in situ performance.

The paper explores children’s language play emerging in peer group interactions in a multilingual preschool setting in Sweden. Combining ethnographic fieldwork and detailed, multimodal interactional analysis, it examines the interactional organization, textual features and evaluative/affective stances characterizing children’s language play (Maybin & Swann, 2007). It addresses methodological issues that are pertinent in the analysis of everyday language creativity, demonstrating that such analysis has to integrate ethnographic knowledge, as well as the situated character of the verbal play to uncover the sociocultural anchoring, and the social functions of children’s verbal improvisations. Young children’s language play episodes involve multiple dimensions of creative language use (semantics, pragmatics, grammar), while they capitalize on the social dimensions of everyday institutional routines, and contribute to the organization of the social order of the peer group. Improvisational patterning of language form leads to creation of alternative realities, and contributes to the creation of peer group cultures and children’s joint affective and evaluative stance taking.

The study provides an empirical base for theory building, arguing that children’s language improvisations provide evidence of verbal creativity as emergent, novel, and recognizable, performed and interpreted by the co-participants within the culturally established patterns for action (e.g. Duranti & Black, 2012).

References


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