Microgenesis of language creativity: Innovation, conformity and incongruence in children’s language play

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ABSTRACT

The study examines young children’s engagement in language creativity, in this instance, spontaneous language play. It presents an analysis of peer group interaction in a multilingual preschool setting for 3- to 6-year-olds in Sweden. Combining video-ethnography and detailed interactional analysis, it explores the interactional organization, textual features, evaluative/affective stances and social functions that characterize language play. The theoretical perspective draws on interactional sociolinguistics and the Vygotskian (2004) notion that imagination and creativity are built on patterning (i.e., recognizability), innovative transformations and manipulations of prior materials, experiences and understandings. Here, creativity is shown to be a collective and normatively guided process: it is located in peer group collaborative performances, and involves peer group language, affective and aesthetic socialization. The analysis shows that children’s spontaneous language play is characterized by an aesthetic in which that which is incongruent, unexpected and also recognizable is exploited and appreciated. It feeds on the ongoing tension between predictability (routine of culturally recognizable activities) and the novelty/improvisational character of in situ performance. Creative language use serves as a multifaceted locus for aesthetic, affective and normative (ideological) stance taking and mutual socialization. Through their performances, the children socialize each other into sensitivity to what kind of contributions constitute valued verbal genres of the peer group culture.

“Creativity is present, in actuality, not only when great historical works are born but also whenever a person imagines, combines, alters, and creates something new, no matter how small a drop in the bucket this new thing appears compared to the works of geniuses.” (Vygotsky, [1967] 2004: 10–11).

1. Introduction

Young children’s spontaneous language play offers ubiquitous examples of creative language use (Cook, 2000), and the empirical exploration of children’s interactions may be useful for understanding the microgenesis of language creativity. Here, microgenesis is conceptualized as the emergent development and learning that takes place within moment-to-moment social interaction (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1982). In the present study, language play situations are examined while paying attention to the social dimensions of creativity and documenting the social interactional architecture of creative processes in
improvisational communicative events. In addition, the theoretical link between linguistic and broader approaches to creativity is discussed (cf. Swann and Deumert, this special issue).

2. Theoretical and empirical approaches

The theoretical perspective adopted here conceptualizes creativity as improvisational dynamics, i.e., a social and cultural process that is emergent in and as social action and constitutive of social activities and practices (Ingold and Hallam, 2007: 20). This perspective exposes the limitations of ‘conceptualizing creativity as a form of invention, exercised by an autonomous individual’ (Ingold and Hallam, 2007). A related view is represented by the sociocultural psychological notion of creativity and imagination as involving the combination of patterning (i.e., recognizability) and innovative transformations of prior materials, experiences and understandings (Vygotsky, 2004). It is the human ability to combine elements to produce a structure, creatively reworking elements of the ‘past experience and using them to generate new propositions and new behavior’ (Vygotsky, 2004: 9), that forms the basis of creativity. Creativity is thus the rule rather than the exception in characterizing human sociality. It depends on practice in exercising ‘combinatorial abilities’ (Vygotsky, 2004: 9) in relation to and in a dialogue with socioculturally anchored creative traditions, models and material conditions (Carter, 2016; Goodwin, 2007; Goodwin and Cekaite, in progress). Individual acts and capacities are not autonomous, rather, they are embedded and shaped by sociocultural resources, and rely on social modes of interpretation. The sociocultural view on psychological combinatorial mechanisms can be fruitfully extended by using an interactional sociolinguistic perspective that acknowledges creativity as situated and contingently emergent in social interaction (Linell, 2009). Talk-in-interaction as the primordial form of human communication and sense-making involves language use that occurs in interplay with the physical and social environments and is processual and ‘dialogical’ (‘other-oriented’) (Linell, 2009: 27). In that individual actions are constructed by assembling diverse materials, including language structure, prosody and visible displays, human action ‘is intensely co-operative’ (Goodwin, 2013: 8). The perspective provides analytical tools for an interactional analysis of language creativity, produced as social and embodied acts of ‘co-operation’ (Cekaite and Aronsson, 2004; Goodwin, 2013).

The present study examines young children’s language play as one of the early and common realizations of creativity. The analysis concerns 3- to 6-year-old children’s spontaneously evolving language play in their interactions in a Swedish preschool. Rather than positioning creativity ‘in liminal zones far removed from the mundane structures of society’ (i.e., individual creativity perspective described in Wilf, 2014: 401, see also Kotthoff, 2007), the study attends to the sociocultural, ethnographic context in examining how children’s creative agency is deployed and socialized in recurrent social interactional practices. Analysis of young children’s spontaneous language play, its combinatorial properties and interactional architecture, it is argued, can generate knowledge about the microgenesis of creativity as a cultural activity characterized by collaborative aesthetics.

3. Poetic forms in everyday discourse

Creative language, here viewed as a form of language play, is associated with the poetic, self-referential potential of language (Jakobson, 1960). In children’s early language play, it involves the manipulation of linguistic form – word and sound play (Jakobson, 1988; Cook, 2000). In the present study, language creativity is linked to the linguistic anthropological notion of ‘performance’ (Bauman and Briggs, 1990), which highlights the social character of language as a ‘reflective practice in which the speaker assumes the responsibility for presentation to an audience,’ and which is also subject to evaluation by the audience (Maybin and Swann, 2007: 515). This implies that there are cultural conventions and expectations concerning what characterizes an entertaining and competent performance.

Such a view also requires embracing the processual aspects of performance, which are characterized by a contingently evolving recipient design that takes into account the active and responsive audience. Ethnographic data are particularly suited to an exploration of creativity in that they allow documentation of the affective and evaluative dimensions of creative performance, realized as participant stances that display appreciation or criticism. According to interactional sociolinguistics, a stance is assembled ‘dialogically through overt communicative means (language, gesture, and other symbolic forms), through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, position subjects (themselves and others), and align with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field’ (Du Bois, 2007: 163). Moreover, stances involve lamination of words with embodied actions, gestures, gaze, laughter, smiles, and repetitions, configured within embodied participation frameworks (Goffman, 1981). Stances, lodged within embodied sequences of action (Goodwin et al., 2012), display aesthetic and emotional assessment toward both the performance and the performer (Jaffe, 2009). While creative flow is usually associated with an individual experience, from an interactional perspective it can be seen as participants’ mutual monitoring and dialogic stance-taking, indexing their immersion in a co-production and aesthetic co-experience. In a social situation, creativity and situated aesthetics involve not only speakers and recipients, but also overhearsers, and situated language aesthetics can work as a normative practice, used to establish alliances, highlight hierarchies and social positionings.

Language play has multiple social functions: It can work as a cultural resource for establishing social alignments and solidarity, and it can simultaneously be used to delineate the social boundaries of a group (Goodwin, 1990; Evaldsson, 2005; Cekaite and Aronsson, 2014). Understanding the emergence and the interactional development of situations of
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