THE PRAGMATICS OF PLAY: INTERACTIONAL STRATEGIES DURING CHILDREN'S PRETEND PLAY

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1. Introduction

When children between the ages of three and six get together, they invariably begin to play. This early form of social interaction is predominantly verbal, and is distinguished by its "fantasy" nature. The children pretend to be parents, relatives, firemen, policemen, and ninja turtles. They establish which role each child will enact and what the relationships between the roles will be. Unlike the play of older children, these roles and relationships change frequently; in a single play session, each child takes on a succession of roles, as the play "drama" is continually redefined. This type of social behavior is called *sociodramatic play*.

Sociodramatic play is characterized by an abundance of what Bateson called *metacommunication* (Bateson 1955, 1956), communication about how the interaction itself is to proceed. Children engaging in sociodramatic play have not yet mastered the metacommunicative functions of language to the degree that adults have (Keenan & Schieffelin 1976). As a result, this language function is foregrounded, and is more noticeable than in the subtle, mature language use between skilled adults. While children play, they are constantly "negotiating" what and how they are playing, how they will continue the play, and often negotiating interpretations of past play events. For Bateson, this was analogous to the negotiation of topic shift in adult conversation. Even though this type of negotiation could be accomplished through an explicit request, it is almost always *implicitly* communicated (Auwarter 1986; Giffin 1984). Children metacommunicate "implicitly" by speaking within their play drama role, but with a "hidden agenda" of directing the play along certain lines. Although adult speech also contains implicit and explicit metacommunication, the visibility of this negotiation makes children's play speech seem quite different from adult discourse.

My current research involves the ethnographic study of children in nursery school classrooms for extended periods of time, a minimum of one academic year. The typical classroom brings together 24 children of ages three, four, and five for a morning of unstructured group play activity. A fundamental component of this research has been to gather audio- and videotapes of children's play dialogue, for later transcription and

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detailed analysis. Unfortunately, Bateson's notions, while helpful, were not elaborated in a rigorous fashion suitable for this sort of microlinguistic analysis. Bateson implied that metacommunication occurs only at the beginning of an interaction, as a stage during which the interaction is defined, and that the interaction is then played out. This approach has also been characteristic of psychologists studying children's language use during play. However, more so than "topic" in adult conversation, children constantly redefine and renegotiate their play activity (Ochs 1979; Sutton-Smith 1979). My ethnographic observations in the nursery school have led me to focus on the following questions: to what extent is metacommunication a fundamental, ongoing aspect of children's play dialogue? What are the types of metacommunicative techniques which children use during play? What guides a child's selection of one strategy over another? What are the constraints, if any, on the use of a given metacommunicative strategy? After a brief summary of current psychological theory, and an elaboration of the metacommunication concept by reference to the pragmatics literature, these questions are explored through a micro-analysis of an extended transcript of children's play.

2. Theoretical precedents

Piaget's early work in the nursery school (Piaget 1926) led him to distinguish the *social speech* of the older child from the *egocentric speech* of the younger child. Although this distinction has recently been questioned for some contexts (Keenan 1974), and Piaget's "staged" model of linguistic competence has been widely criticized, most researchers have noted that nursery school children move through a continuum, from a relative lack of competence at social play before the age of three, through a progressively more advanced capability for linguistic interaction towards the ages of five and six. How is it that the older children can play together in this fashion, when a few years earlier they primarily engage in egocentric speech? For the play to be shared in any meaningful sense, the children must share some understanding of what is going on in the play session. Recent theories of sociodramatic play have focused on describing the nature of this shared understanding, and how this shared understanding influences the children's interaction.

The approach to transcript analysis taken in this paper uses several concepts from pragmatics to elaborate upon contemporary theories of children's talk during play. Several contemporary researchers have proposed that the shared understanding takes the form of a *frame* (Goffman 1974, using Bateson's term), an interactional framework which defines the play drama. The "play frame" is "a set of shared organizational principles that places behavior and events in a context" (Giffin 1984). Before the children can play together, a play frame must first be created and understood by the participants, containing "specific transformations of specific objects, persons, time, space, action, and rules." Giffin has suggested that once this frame is created, children communicate their desires to change the frame by acting "within frame," speaking as their play character, or "out of frame," speaking as themselves. Auwarter (1986) has developed a model similar to Giffin's, which characterizes metacommunicative play

utterances as either in the "play" or the "reality" frame.

Many researchers have used a variation of the frame model, the *script* model of Schank and Abelson (1977), including Bretherton (1984), Nelson and Gruendel (1979), and Nelson and Seidman (1984). Variations of this concept go by the term *event schemas* (Mandler 1979) or *interactional routines* (Peters and Boggs 1985). Nelson and Gruendel characterize the script as a shared context: "to sustain a dialogue the participants must each assume a shared topic context within which that dialogue is structured. This shared context determines such things as what is expressed and what is left to inference, the particular answers that follow from a given question, and the particular semantic and syntactic links that will be established between utterances."²

A distinct line of study has focused on the role-playing aspects of sociodramatic play. These views gain support from the symbolic interactionist tradition derived from Mead (1934) and its recent blending with role theory (Stryker & Statham 1985). Roles have also been termed *participant structures* (Philips 1972). Fein (1985) has proposed that children's play is directed by *affective representational templates*, which are explicitly contrasted with script views. Role theory views of play emphasize that play is a way of learning about social roles and their interrelationships. A given play situation arises from the interaction of a given set of role assignments. Certain roles require that complementary roles be taken by another child; for example, if one child acts as the "baby," another child must take on the "mother" role. Other researchers who have focused on how role-playing structures play interaction include Garvey and Berndt (1977), Garvey (1982), and Smilansky (1968).

Frame and script views focus on static structural descriptions of the play drama, a situational definition which must be shared by the children before play can occur, and characterize "metacommunication" as an attempt by a child to change this frame definition. Children can do this implicitly, usually by speaking as their play character, or explicitly, usually by speaking as themselves (in Giffin's model "degree of explicitness" and "role spoken from" covary, while in Auwarter's they are orthogonal). However, these views do not adequately characterize situations in which a static frame definition is difficult to identify. Several researchers (Keenan & Schieffelin 1976; Sutton-Smith 1979) have observed that a large percentage of discourse is occupied by the process of establishing the situational definition. Conversation analysts and other theorists of linguistic interaction have argued that "talk" cannot be understood as a static transcript, but must be viewed as fundamentally "in play" during interaction (Gumperz 1982; Schegloff 1990; Schegloff and Sacks 1973). In my own transcribed data,

² The notions of "frame" and "script" are not synonymous with discourse analysis notions of "topic." "Topic" refers to a denotational and referential aspect of the ongoing conversation; for discourse analysts, topic is often considered a noun phrase, and is distinguished from the "comment," a dichotomy often compared to Clark and Haviland's (1977) "given-new" distinction. For Keenan and Schieffelin (1976), "discourse topic" is a proposition, associated with the presuppositions of the prior discourse and its context. The frame and script concepts are more comprehensive and contextual, in that they include social role assignments, relative role relationships, and other sociological situational factors, as well as temporal/durational expectations.

I have found that children's play is often characterized by a rapidly changing, constantly fluctuating situational definition, and that it's not uncommon for children to fail to achieve a single shared frame definition. Gumperz (1982) has criticized the "frame" perspective for inadequately representing the indeterminacy actually present at each moment of an interaction:

"although we are dealing with a structured ordering of message elements that represents the speakers' expectations about what will happen next, yet it is not a static structure, but rather it reflects a dynamic process which develops and changes as the participants interact." (p. 131)

Psychological research in the above traditions has tended to neglect processes of frame establishment and negotiation: how children initially establish a shared frame, or how shifts in frame definition are proposed, negotiated, and accepted. The majority of these studies of metacommunication and role-taking presume that a shared interactional reality is already in place. The process by which this reality is initially created is rarely addressed. If the play frame changes frequently and dramatically throughout the play session, shared static structures may be difficult to detect and characterize. If the play frame is observed to change constantly, the negotiation of the play frame may occupy more of the children's play than the resulting "within frame" play.

The emphasis on metacommunication in the above psychological theories, although not fully developed, is consistent with theoretical developments in a variety of fields (including sociolinguistics, interactional pragmatics, and the ethnography of communication) which emphasize the importance of metacommunication in adult interaction. In the next section, I propose a pragmatic elaboration of Bateson's concept of *implicit metacommunication* which will provide a plausible process description of how metacommunicative negotiation results in a shared play frame.

3. Metacommunication revisited

To understand better the non-static, fluctuating aspects of children's play, we need to extend the psychological models by focusing on the metacommunicative aspects of pretend play. Such an elaboration must focus on these questions: what is the nature of children's interaction in sociodramatic play? How can we explain frequent, rapid, transformations in the play frame? What strategies do children use to communicate their play session goals? What is the relative effectiveness of each strategy? What conditions lead to the selection of a given strategy? How are children able to maintain a minimal level of conversational coherence, allowing all children to participate, despite the existence of different goals? These questions represent an "unpacking" of the metacommunication concept. Bateson argued that metacommunication is generally *implicit*, that rather than being explicitly stated, the speaker projects his conversational goal indirectly. The concept of *implicit metacommunication* is complex, and has been

a central focus of contemporary pragmatics.³ Our analysis of interactive strategies of negotiation is based on Peirce's concept of *indexicality*, as elaborated by Jakobson (1960) in the notion of the *poetic function* of language.

This analysis is based on the premise of microsociological research (symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and conversation analysis) that these interactional phenomena can only be studied through a close, detailed analysis of naturally occurring conversational practice. Conversation analysis has been the locus for detailed micro-analysis of conversation, and several of these researchers have studied children's play interactions (Corsaro 1985; McTear 1985; Ochs & Schieffelin 1983; Peters and Boggs 1985). Although conversation analysts have argued that "talk" must be viewed as fundamentally "in play" during interaction, these theorists, like the psychologists reviewed above, have rarely analyzed the interactional techniques which conversationalists use to negotiate "what is going on" in a conversation. For example, conversation analysis has, in practice, focused on relatively static "interactional routines," rather than an exploration of how routines are coconstructed in interaction, or how the selection of a given routine is negotiated.

This study uses a model of interactive negotiation based on Peirce's concept of *indexicality*. In Peirce's trichotomy of signs, an *index* is a sign which requires an association between the sign and its object. The classic example of an index is the weathervane, which *indicates* wind direction. An index is not arbitrary, thus distinguishing it from the *symbol*; yet it is not isomorphic to its object, thus distinguishing it from the *icon* (Peirce 1931: 243 - 265; 274 - 307). The concept of index can also be applied to language use, in referring to linguistic signs, lexical or otherwise, that have a non-arbitrary relation to their object, usually some aspect of the sociolinguistic context. Within pragmatics, the most studied aspects of the indexical use of language are *deictics*, lexical signs whose referent is determined by the context of usage (Levinson 1983). Expanding upon this notion of indexicality, one can observe other forms of indexical relations; for example, syntactic structures which indicate that a certain topic has already been identified as "in play" are themselves indexical of the topic of the conversation. This has been referred to as *indexical presupposition* (Silverstein 1976). As a conversational interaction proceeds, the indexical presuppositions established at each moment act to constrain each speaker, since the speaker must maintain some minimum level of *coherence* with the topic structures, registers, and role relations already established. Indexicality may also operate to project, or regiment, the future content or structure of an interaction; this could be referred to as *indexical entailment*, since it represents an indexical relationship to some presumed future direction of the interaction. For example, in languages with a systems of politeness registers, e.g., the t/v distinction in Russian, the selection of a given register

³ Among others, Grice's *conversational implicatures* (Grice 1967), Hasan's *implicit semiotic style* (Hasan 1984), and Sperber and Wilson's *communicative intention* (Sperber & Wilson 1985) can be viewed as attempts to characterize implicit metacommunication. Most of these approaches focus on the denotational or referential aspects of language, and attempt to identify implicit structuring principles which help maintain the topical coherence of the linguistic interaction.

by the first speaker is indexical of how the speaker expects the status relations to play out during the interaction (Friedrich 1971). Likewise, Bakhtin's work on *voice* and *speech genre* suggests that all language use is inherently indexical of social relations and group membership (Bakhtin 1981, 1986).

Peirce's notion of indexicality has been further elaborated by Jakobson in his analysis of the *poetic function* of language. Jakobson (1960, 1971) notes that some forms of indexicality are dependent on broader structuring principles of a text; for example, a word placed in line-final position has implicit (indexical) relations with other words in other line-final positions, which can vary depending on the overall structure of the poem. Much of Jakobson's work was focused on exploring parallels between poetic language and everyday speech.⁴ Silverstein (1979, 1981) used this concept to analyze "poetic" forms of indexicality in everyday adult conversation, discovering through micro-analysis of transcripts that much of the social interaction is played out at this level of indexicality. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (1979) has argued that Jakobson's poetic function is a central, foregrounded element of children's play language.

This approach to indexicality can provide a rigorous analytic framework from which to explore Bateson's insights about implicit metacommunication. As with indexicality, a metacommunication may act to constrain the future utterances of participants, as well as formulating a link of coherence with the indexical presuppositions established by the prior dialogue. The ways that this balance between projection and coherence maintenance can be negotiated are culturally constrained, as Cicourel (1974) noted in describing *interpretive procedures* shared by members of a social group. Acquisition of the culturally approved set and balance of strategies is an essential element of *communicative competence* (Hymes 1967). Gumperz (1982) suggested that *speech communities* are defined by a shared set of knowledge about how this creative balance was to occur, in contrast to a *linguistic community*, which is defined by a shared set of denotational elements of language such as a lexicon and rules of syntactic structure. A microanalysis of these interactional techniques, and their salience and frequency of use, could result in insights about socialization within a culture's characteristic "semiotic style" (Hasan 1984).

3.1. Multiple frames

Before the age of three, children's nursery school speech is largely egocentric (Piaget, 1926, 1962; Vygotsky 1982). Auwarter (1986) has noted that the better children get at sharing frames, the less they metacommunicate; by the age of six, children are quite competent at establishing a shared frame, and therefore do not need to metacommunicate as frequently. In contrast, when two or more children of younger ages play together, they rarely seem to integrate their utterances into a linked discourse

⁴ See Senderovich (1982) for a review of Jakobson's early work on poetics. More comprehensive reviews are found in Krampen (1981) and Stankiewicz (1983).

interaction. An analysis of metacommunicative strategies would then be particularly relevant to children who have not yet achieved skill at establishing a shared situational definition.

Even after children begin social play, it may be inaccurate to speak of a single shared play frame. Younger children engaging in pretend play rarely share a single cohesive play frame, and very young children may not be capable of creating and maintaining a shared structure. Children of this age are not yet expert in enforcing or even recognizing consistency and cohesiveness among the participants, and thus one would expect each child to maintain a distinct perspective of the play frame. This suggests that there may be *multiple frames* in play in the interaction of these younger children.

For sociodramatic play to continue in the presence of multiple frames, each child would need some awareness of these frames, and would need the strategic competence to integrate their frame model with the active set of participant models. We will refer to the recognized intersection of individual frames as the *cocreated play frame*. This is roughly equivalent to the static play structure of the frame and script models. The older and more skilled that children become, the more coincident their multiple frames become; as their individual frame interpretations become coincident, it would be correct to refer to the cocreated play frame as a single play frame.

This conception of the play situation as containing multiple frames is consistent with Bakhtin's analysis of conversation as fundamentally *heteroglossic* (Bakhtin 1981). As Bakhtin suggested, features of the cocreated play frame will demonstrate varying degrees of certainty or consensus, ranging from well-established, shared frame features to as yet unnegotiated individual interpretations and play session goals. The cocreated frame can take on an independent character as the play session evolves; it is usually not coincident to any single child's frame (although it may be if one older child dominates the session). In such an interactional environment, several metacommunicative strategies are available to the child. One might expect the sophisticated player to blend frames, even in a single utterance, if it is the most effective strategy. Several researchers (Auwarter, Giffin) have noted the "combined frame" nature of many pretend play utterances, with the analysis focusing on only two frames: a unified "pretend frame" and the "reality frame." In the presence of multiple play frames, a larger variety of combined frame statements may be detected in pretend play.

4. Interactional strategies

In sociodramatic play, each utterance is an opportunity for children to project their own play frame interpretation onto the other participants. This indexical entailment is successful to the degree to which it *regiments* subsequent dialogue. Projection strategies can involve both projecting interpretations of past events and projecting future expectations onto the other participants. Children's attempts at projection are reconciled through both explicit and implicit metacommunicative negotiation.

Each utterance occurs at the intersection of two vectors of interaction: the first, representing the indexical presuppositions in play, constrains the possible moves by the requirement to maintain coherence, and the second, representing the individual play goals of the child, is projected onto future utterances through the metacommunication of indexical entailment (Halliday 1984). On the one hand, children want to project their own frames as strongly as possible, and on the other hand, they know that the utterance must retain coherence with the flow of the play session, or else it will lose its projective power. Coherence must be met in order to fulfill the fundamental requirement of pretend play: the interaction must be maintained in such a manner that all children can continue to participate.

Given the existence of both implicit and explicit metacommunicative strategies, what contextual factors determine the child's selection? Why do children choose an explicit or implicit metacommunicative technique? Both children and adults display a strong bias towards implicit techniques.⁵ Given the complexity of this speech activity among adults, it is not surprising to find a developmental precursor in sociodramatic play.⁶ The bias towards implicitness suggests that implicit metacommunication may be interactionally more effective in projecting play frame features than explicit metacommunication. If so, children will tend to use more implicit statements as their competence increases.

Given the strategic power of implicit metacommunication, the continued occurrence of explicit metacommunication requires explanation. Our above discussion suggests that the primary constraint on a child's utterance will be the requirement to maintain coherence with the set of indexical presuppositions established by the prior flow of the interaction. An effective implicit metacommunicative statement can only be formed within an appropriately developed discourse context. Thus we would expect the balance of implicit and explicit speech acts to reflect the coherence of the discourse.

We could characterize the cocreated play frame as having its own regimenting quality which evolves throughout the play session. When a strongly regimenting cocreated frame is more similar to a child's personal frame, that child can use a greater degree of implicitness. When either condition weakens (a weakly regimenting cocreated frame, or a cocreated frame which does not readily accommodate the child's play goals), metacommunicative statements must become accordingly more explicit, to retain coherence with the cocreated frame (Keenan & Schieffelin 1976). We would expect

⁵ Hasan (1984) argues that the *degree of implicitness* of a semiotic style varies across cultures, and presents data suggesting that Urdu speakers have a greater tendency towards implicitness than English speakers. Note that Hasan's discussion of implicit and explicit semiotic styles is restricted to the semantic, or denotational/referential, aspects of linguistic interaction, and focuses on topical coherence across utterances.

⁶ Although she does not argue for an implicit/explicit dimension of language use, Ochs (1979) contrasts *planned* and *unplanned* discourse, and argues that the more unplanned adult discourse is, the more it becomes like children's play dialogue. Four of the five features of young (under three years of age) children's discourse she identifies operate at the poetic level of discourse interaction, and thus can be understood as implicit metacommunicative techniques.

that skilled children will use the most implicit statement possible, given the degree of regimentation of the cocreated play frame. This provides us with an interesting empirical prediction: among skilled children, the degree of implicitness of a statement is an index of the degree of regimentation provided by the indexical presuppositions in play at that moment, as well as an index of the degree of compatibility between the speaker's intention and his perception of the cocreated play frame.

The remainder of this section presents a variety of metacommunicative strategies, what might be called *interactional poetic strategies*, with examples of each taken from the transcript found in the appendix. The salience of these interactional strategies in the transcribed data provides support for the above theoretical approach. The strategies outlined fall into two groups: the first group of strategies are techniques for projection of play frame goals, and the second group are techniques for the maintenance of coherence with the existing cocreated play frame.

4.1. *Strategies of play frame projection*

The degree of regimentation of an indexical entailment is equivalent to the degree of force with which a statement imposes the speaker's individual frame onto the group. As noted above, implicit metacommunication is more strongly regimenting than explicit (Giffin refers to this as the "illusion conservation rule," Giffin 1984). This could be due to the difficulty of refusing to respond to an implicit projection; while an explicit projection can be denied explicitly, an implicit one must be countered implicitly, a more difficult act.⁷ Schegloff and Sacks (1973) termed this type of projection *close ordering*, and much of their work focused on the analysis of one type of implicitly indexically entailing mechanism, the *adjacency pair*. Four projection techniques are discussed below: use of play frame proper names, asymmetric movements of tense, asymmetric movements of degree of explicitness, and asymmetric movements between frames.

4.1.1. *Proper names*

The use of personal deictics, including both proper names defined for play frame roles and personal pronouns, is a common strategy of both projection and coherence. Projection via play role proper name often takes the form of a "baptismal" event, as in Heather's projection of the "mother" role onto Kathy, in lines (23 - 24) of the transcript in the appendix:

(23) H. Annie, let's say you gave me a spanking.

(24) And I call you Mom.

⁷ Hasan (1984) notes this difficulty, and suggests that Urdu speakers can maintain a more implicit semiotic style than English speakers because their social structure is more rigidly specified (p. 157). As a result of this rigidity, there are less variables "at play" in the interaction.

Such initial baptismal events must be explicitly metacommunicated, but usually demonstrate continuity with a series of implicitly metacommunicative proper name usages, not only after the baptismal event but sometimes before as well:

- (20) H. My mother yelled at me. (pre-baptismal usage)
- (24) H. And I call you Mom. (baptismal event)
- (32) H. Mother, I did that because! (post-baptismal usage)

The repeated use of the proper name is a role projection strategy, which ranges from explicit metacommunication in the baptismal event, through implicit metacommunication in later statements. Throughout the above exchange, Kathy has indicated her preference to be called "Annie," but she is not successful at refusing the "mother" role projection.

4.1.2. Asymmetric movements

These movements are the most complex devices used by children. The movement involves a change in utterance structure in subsequent parallel statements. This parallelism provides perhaps the most obvious evidence that Jakobson's poetic function is at play in these interactions. Projecting movements of tense begin with a statement in a future tense, followed by a statement in past tense, moving through a projected event in a metaphorical present; this strongly regiments the event as having occurred. Heather uses such a parallel series in (7 - 9):

- (7) H. She wants to get married so she's crying.
- (8) You should get married.
- (9) Let's say you guys were already married, OK?

This referential shift between imagined timeframes creates an asymmetrical movement with the desired projection being that the marriage event has "metaphorically happened," due to the movement from future, through the projected event, to the past.

Projecting movements of explicitness begin with an explicit metacommunication, followed by progressively more implicit metacommunication. In the sequence (23 - 25), a movement from explicit to implicit metacommunication is used:

- (23) H. Annie, let's say you gave me a spanking
- (24) And I call you Mom.
- (25) Daddy, I'm crying 'cause my mother gave me a spanking and she yelled at me.

(23) and (24) first explicitly metacommunicate a play frame alteration, and (25) immediately strengthens this projection through an implicit metacommunication, acting within the projected frame.

Projecting movements between frames begin with a statement in a frame accepted by the addressee, followed by statements more central to the projected play frame. The initial frame may be the "reality" frame, accepted by all participants, or the addressee's play frame. A movement from the reality frame to the projected play frame is often signalled by a shift in tense: past tense is used to shift temporarily out of the play frame and implicitly metacommunicate about prior play events via "out-of-frame" statements. Past tense indexes an *out-of-frame* statement, and present tense indexes a *within-frame* statement:

(41) K. You didn't talk like that.

(42) You say (sweetly) "What's the matter, Mother?"

These asymmetric movements are effective because they begin with a statement which is accepted by the addressee, and then use the parallel structure of subsequent utterances to shift toward the speaker's projected play frame. In addition to movements from the reality frame to the projected frame, the transcript includes several examples of movement from the addressee's play frame to the speaker's projected frame, providing support for the "multiple frame" perspective.

The effectiveness of a given projection strategy should be visible in the nature of the subsequent response. If the projection strategy is successful at regimenting the cocreated frame, an implicit metacommunication rejecting the projection should be relatively difficult. A rejection of a strongly regimenting projection should require a more explicit metacommunication in response.

4.2. Strategies for retaining coherence

The discussion above suggested that there is a strategic preference for implicit metacommunication because it is more effective in projecting the speaker's frame interpretation. From this perspective, the occurrence of an explicit metacommunication is particularly interesting, since it is normally less effective. Thus, we should observe that implicit metacommunication requires a sufficiently regimenting cocreated frame, with indexical presuppositions which accommodate the speaker's intentions. We should expect the degree of explicitness to increase as the following conditions arise: (1) the degree of regimentation of the cocreated frame becomes so low that insufficient context exists for implicit metacommunication to be effective; (2) the cocreated frame regiments against a child's goal. The former case should be easier to handle successfully than the latter; effecting a shift in an established frame should be more difficult than simply contributing to the development of the initial cocreated frame parameters.

Children use a variety of strategies to maintain maximal coherence with the indexical presuppositions resulting from prior interaction. Deictics provide a rich source for analysis. By definition, deictics can only be used in conversational contexts which are regimented to a degree which would allow the participants to successfully determine the referent. Usage of play frame proper names, personal pronouns, and tense all

presuppose a certain minimal shared play interpretation. We should expect to observe that the level of usage of these techniques correlates with the degree to which the play frames are shared at the moment of utterance, and the degree to which the speaker is satisfied with his perception of that shared frame.

Proper name usage, by simultaneously reinforcing or assuming the implied referent, can also be a projection technique. In the sequence below, proper names are used as both projection and coherence techniques:

- (22) K. No, my name is Annie.
 (23) H. Annie, let's say you gave me a spanking.
 (24) And I call you Mom.

Kathy has chosen a relatively implicit self-baptism, stating her play frame name in first-person present. Heather maintains coherence in (23) by addressing Kathy with this name, but then combines this implicit acceptance with a new explicit attempt at baptizing Kathy as "Mom." Note that this baptism could have been done implicitly, by saying something like

- *(23) H. Mom, why did you spank me?

Such a usage of "Mom" would have been an implicit metacommunication of the "Mom" role, but perhaps would not have retained enough cohesion with the cocreated frame. As expected, the "implicit preference" rule is broken when the speaker cannot project the desired frame features and simultaneously retain coherence with the cocreated frame.

Personal pronouns are frequently used to retain coherence; by using a pronoun to refer to an established within-frame role, coherence is maintained. Pronoun usage is separated into two registers: play frame and reality frame. Children could potentially use such forms as "she/he" and "I/you" to refer either to the children in their play frame role, or to the children outside the play frame. There seems to be an unwritten rule that such deictics will be interpreted as referring to play frame roles (with the exception of the usage of "us" in "let's say" or "let's pretend"), yet occasionally the ambiguity affects the effectiveness of the desired projection. In (34), Andy is able to maintain coherence through the use of the deictic phrase "her gramma;" this is the first mention of a grandmother role, but it is consistent with the family context of the cocreated frame:

- (34) A. I'm calling her gramma to keep care of her, every day.

5. Transcript analysis

The accompanying dialogue excerpt represents three children, aged 3 1/2 to 5, engaging in spontaneous sociodramatic play, with no adults present. The dialogue was videotaped and later transcribed. A transcript of this length is necessary to demonstrate the

fluctuating nature of play through time, and to provide sufficient analytic context to understand the indexical presuppositions and entailments acting on a specific utterance. Heather, the oldest, is five; Kathy, the youngest, is 3;6; Andy is four. The transcript segment reproduced in the appendix is an extract from a longer, twenty-minute session, which included a wide variety of play situations (renumbered from Giffin 1984).

5.1. Initial negotiation

Heather, the oldest and most skilled player, initiates this segment with a series of statements intended to project her new play drama idea. Heather's initial frame evolves through statement (25), when she seems to have worked out her own version of the play situation, which is slightly different from the initial idea in (1). Heather first suggests that Kathy is "crying in the wedding place (1)." Kathy goes along with this suggestion, and cries (2). Heather then steps into her (unspecified) play role to speak to Kathy:

- (5) H. What's the matter?
- (6) You want to get married is why?

Now it seems that Heather had intended this to be the result of Kathy's crying. Because Kathy has already agreed to cry, Heather is playing from strength as she projects a role assignment of "groom/husband" onto Andy. She forms a strong asymmetric movement between imagined timeframes, from an imaginary "future" to an imaginary "past," to strengthen her projection of the marriage event onto Andy and Kathy:

- (7) H. She wants to get married so she's crying.
- (8) You should get married.
- (9) Let's say you guys were already married, okay?

The combination of Kathy's obvious participation in Heather's frame, with the strongly regimenting tense movement, strongly projects Heather's frame onto Andy. Andy, who does not want to be "married," is forced to make a series of highly explicit statements to reject this projection:

- (10) A. No!
- (11) I'm going to put on the song.

And this is followed by his enactment of a DJ role (12), although he has not successfully projected any roles onto Heather and Kathy. Heather then shifts her strategy and suggests a different relationship for Andy and Kathy, which is consistent with Andy's frame: they will dance to "the song" (13). Kathy immediately accepts this suggestion, and also insists that Andy dance with her (15). Andy's response is another explicit rejection, but this time he accepts the earlier role projection:

(16) A. No I [...] Dad.

Although Andy is obviously unhappy about both attempted role projections, first husband, then dance partner, if he wants to stay in the play group, he realizes he has to accept one of these role projections, since his own negotiation skills are not well-developed. Note that his accepted role is not identical to Heather's original projection of "husband" or "newlywed," but by being "Dad," Andy retains coherence while shifting the role definition to a non-romantic, authority figure. Heather accepts Andy's response; her next series of statements forms another tense movement, this time with three parallel acts, corresponding to future, present, and past tense:

(18) H. And you say what's the matter with me, Andy.

(19) (H. cries.)

(20) My mother yelled at me.

Heather has realized that it will be difficult to enlist Andy's cooperation. She suggests the question for Andy, and without waiting for him to ask it, responds to the question as if he had asked it. The crying act, and Heather's response, strongly project a frame in which Andy actually asked the question. (20) is a complex utterance for several reasons. This is the first time that a "mother" has been introduced. Heather is crying because "her mother yelled at her." This is an attempt at implicit projection of a new variation of the frame; however, this variation is too dramatic to retain cohesiveness with the existing cocreated frame. Heather seems to realize her mistake instantly, and the next several utterances are attempts by Heather to "backtrack" and project her frame variant more effectively. Because the variant in (20) has little cohesion with the prior interaction, Heather is forced to make a series of relatively explicit metacommunications:

(21) H. Let's say you gave me a spanking, Kathy O'Neil.

(22) K: No, my name is Annie.

(23) H: Annie, let's say you gave me a spanking.

(24) And I call you Mom.

In (21), Heather is attempting to project the new role of "mother" onto Kathy, but (21) is not sufficiently regimenting to place Kathy in the mother role; it is very indirect, suggesting that Kathy has spanked her, when she had instead claimed her mother had "yelled" at her. Because of this weak projection, Kathy is able to reject it; she proposes a new role assignment from her own frame, "Annie." This is the first specific role assignment to Kathy; note that the marriage of Andy and Kathy was not established by Andy's acceptance of the "Dad" role. Heather is able to integrate this response with her ensuing projection by addressing Kathy as "Annie." She realizes that her prior statements have been weakly regimenting. In the sequence (23 - 24), Heather creates a strongly regimenting movement from Kathy's frame, indexed by the use of "Annie," through the shared "reality" frame indicated by the use of the first-person pronoun "us,"

and into Heather's new frame variation. This movement strongly projects Heather's role as the child of Kathy, as "Mom." Heather completes this sequence by repairing her earlier inconsistent use of "yelled" and "spanked:"

- (25) H: Daddy, I'm crying 'cause my mother gave me a spanking
and she yelled at me.

5.2. Negotiation of role assignments

In these first utterances, we have observed a fairly complex process of play negotiation. A close review indicates that although Heather's frame seems the most fully developed, even her frame has evolved from (1) to (25) in response to the actions of Andy and Kathy. It would not be correct to say that Heather first conceived of a fully defined frame, and then projected it onto the others through her greater skill and age. At the beginning of the interaction, it seems clear that Heather was not intending to create a frame with herself as the crying child; note that her initial projection was to have Kathy be crying. If "Kathy crying" had continued to evolve as the cocreated frame, Heather could not at the same time be the crying child.

But even after statement (25), Heather's new frame is different from Kathy's frame, as seen in (27 - 28):

- (27) K: Pretend I was crying at the wedding place because you...
(28) you guys yelled at me...

In Kathy's personal frame, the children are still at "the wedding place," even though Heather has moved beyond this point, and Andy never agreed to this concept. In addition, Kathy is still crying, as she was in (4). Kathy's frame is inconsistent with Heather's suggestion that Heather be crying due to a punishment from Kathy. Heather's response is interesting: she does not attempt to "correct" Kathy; instead, she immediately responds with coherence to Kathy's frame, despite its obvious inconsistency with her own:

- (29) H: No I just told Daddy.
(30) I didn't yell.
(31) You aren't [...] since I told Daddy what happened.
(32) Mother, I did that because!

By continuing to address Kathy as "mother," Heather is implicitly reinforcing the original baptismal event of (20). Kathy has still not explicitly accepted this projected role assignment, and we could say it has not yet moved from Heather's personal frame into the cocreated frame.

Andy's comments in (26) and (34) indicate that his own play frame model is quite different from Heather's and Kathy's models. Statement (26), "I'll kill her," contains no regimenting value. It is an implicit attempt to metacommunicate a more

active, violent frame, but it fails to maintain coherence with any features of the cocreated frame, and thus has no power. Because of its lack of regimenting power, it is ignored by Heather and Kathy. In (34), Andy is more successful at projecting his frame variant:

(34) A: I'm calling her gramma to keep care of her, every day.

(35) Hi, Kathy...

This statement successfully maintains coherence, by use of the deictic pronoun "her," and by reference to a family relationship, "gramma." Note that it is unclear whether this pronoun is meant to resolve to Heather or Kathy, since there are two different frames in play, one with Heather crying, and one with Kathy crying. Nonetheless, no clarification or correction is necessary, because (34) maintains coherence with both of these frames. Even though Andy is calling a distant person, when he speaks into the phone saying "Hi, Kathy," Heather corrects him, this time returning to Kathy's frame:

(36) H: No, her name is Annie.

This is odd, since Andy is clearly not calling the "Annie" character, and since in Heather's frame, Kathy has been assigned the role of "Mom." This statement is representative of the confusion that is often present in play dialogue. It almost seems like Heather is making an automatic mapping of "Kathy" to "Annie," without first considering the full context. Perhaps this is Heather's way of reinforcing her assignment of "mother" onto Kathy, by reminding everyone that Kathy can be a mother and still have the name "Annie."

Kathy then makes a creative projection onto Heather, a new addition to what seems to be the beginning of a more completely shared play frame:

(38) K: You said "What's the matter."

Heather responds to this projection as if the projected event had already happened in the past, but then enacts the event anyway, perhaps for the opportunity to project the "mother" role again; Kathy has still not accepted Heather as "her child:"

(39) H: I know I did!

(40) What's the matter, Mother?

Finally, Kathy accepts the "mother" role, in (42). Her two-part response is an asymmetric movement of explicitness: first, an explicit statement, indicated by past tense, followed by an implicit "within-frame" statement, indicated by present tense:

(41) K: You didn't talk like that.

(42) You say (sweetly) "What's the matter, Mother?"

5.3. Negotiation of "victim" role

The next few utterances once again confuse and alter the two primary frames in action, one in which Kathy is a crying victim, the other in which Heather is the victim. The play situation continues in the presence of these two different frames. The presence of these two frames is not a precursor to the eventual creation of a single stable play frame; in fact, the play drama moves onward without the confusion ever being resolved.

In (43 - 60), the confusion between the two versions of "who is crying" is negotiated. In (43 - 45), Heather works at resolving her own spanking and crying, with Kathy's crying:

- (43) H: What's the matter Mother?
(44) 'Cause I told Dad and all your crimes
(45) [...] Well I had to tell Dad.

Through this statement, Heather adds context for her crying and her response to "Dad" in statements (19) and (20). In (46), Kathy begins to accept Heather's frame projection, that Heather was treated badly and should be viewed as the victim:

- (46) K: Let's say I was really bad to you.

But it's too late; Heather's frame model has moved on, and she no longer wants to be in the "crying" role. In (47 - 51), Heather becomes angry and slams the door, providing a reason for Kathy to cry. This is again an asymmetric movement from Kathy's frame into Heather's frame through a series of parallel statements which strongly regiments Kathy's response:

- (47) H: Mother I'm sorry about that!
(48) I'm very angry!
(49) Bye!
(50) H: And I closed the door
(51) And you start to cry

In this series, Heather has begun with the frame which Kathy projected in (46) (which, note, was originally suggested by Heather in (20 - 21)), in which Heather is the crying victim, and through the asymmetric movement of (47 - 51), has reformed this into a projection of her frame, in which Kathy/Mom is crying. Heather continues to project this new variant, by being nice to "mother" and offering gifts. Nonetheless, Kathy has not yet accepted the projection: however, its strong regimenting power forces her to reject it with a relatively explicit metacommunication:

- (59) K: No, I'm not crying yet.

Soon after this sequence, the play drama begins to shift even more rapidly, as Andy projects his "police" frame, beginning with (76). Minutes after this transcript segment,

the drama has moved through police, jail, and doctor. The segment analyzed above, (1) through (59), is a relatively cohesive series, despite the confusions and discrepancies noted.

6. Conclusion

While previous research has focused on the analysis of play within a static, shared play frame, the above analysis has elaborated upon current theory by refining Bateson's concept of metacommunication. At this level of micro-analysis, we have identified specific metacommunicative strategies, relatively sophisticated interactional techniques which children seem competent at manipulating. A second result of this approach is the suggestion that each individual maintains a distinct, constantly changing play frame. Of course, a certain minimal level of coherence must be maintained before children can play together. However, without multiple frames, idiosyncratic interpretations of "what is going on" in play, there is less need for metacommunicative negotiation. When children become competent at sharing a common play frame, near the age of six, the use of implicit metacommunication during play drops dramatically (Auwarter 1986). After this age, rule-governed game playing is predominant.

The above analysis presents Heather as the most adept at implicit metacommunication. She employs the complex poetic projection techniques of asymmetric movement more frequently than Kathy or Andy. She also seems better able to make judgements about the coherence of each utterance. This could be expected from her age: she is 5, while the others are under 4. Despite Heather's competent performance, she does not single-handedly create and project a single, shared play frame. Each child continues to maintain an individualistic interpretation of the play frame; Heather accepts this, and works well at shifting and integrating her own frame goals. Between the extreme of Andy, who marginally participates in this excerpt (although from (76) onward he is more central), and Heather, Kathy participates to a greater degree while retaining a distinct play frame.

This micro-analysis of metacommunication provides strong support for the two extensions to psychological theory suggested above: (1) the notion that there are multiple active interpretations of the play situational definition, each of which can be conceived of as a "frame;" (2) the notion that the cocreated play frame, as well as the individual play frames, are frequently in flux and being negotiated during the play. Existing frame and script views have generally not addressed those aspects of play dialogue highlighted by the above analysis, including the persistence of distinct multiple frames over long periods of interaction, and the combination of multiple frames in a single utterance (e.g., the asymmetric movements of frame which Heather employs). As a rule, current theory has not attempted to analyze the methods whereby interaction can occur in the absence of a clearly identifiable, shared interactional definition. In this excerpt, most of the interaction is focused on the creation of such a definition; the process of creation is the focus, and a stable shared play frame is never achieved.

If a shared play frame is never achieved, what is the nature of what we have

been calling the "cocreated play frame?" In this transcript, one would be hard-pressed to propose a static, shared play frame structure as the context for any single utterance. The above analysis suggests that the constraints of the cocreated play frame can be thought of as the set of indexical presuppositions at play prior to the moment of the utterance. Each utterance occurs in the presence of multiple interactional realities, and each of these multiple frames is frequently changing. While the cocreated play frame is, loosely speaking, the unitary play frame of current theory, perhaps this concept refers not to an independent ontological structure, "shared" in some sense by the participants, but rather to a *process* of negotiation and change in the discourse. For the children to play together, they must ensure that their individual frame interpretations are minimally compatible, that they intersect at certain key points. Without a certain degree of intersection and compatibility among the differential frames, the children are no longer engaging in social play. Yet this "cocreated frame" is often in flux, changing to varying degrees with each utterance. The "frame" terminology may be used as a convenient metaphor for this process; however, to define the frame as a shared mental structure, with a static ontological status, seems to neglect the fundamentally negotiatory nature of reality construction in play.

Appendix

The following transcript is extracted and renumbered from the original in (Giffin 1984). Ellipses in brackets refer to unintelligible speech. Participants are Heather, age 5; Andy, age 4; and Kathy, age 3;6.

- (1) H. (to K.) You're crying in the wedding place.
- (2) [...]
- (3) Make the crying sound.
- (4) K. ("cries.")
- (5) H. What's the matter?
- (6) You want to get married is why?
- (7) (to A.) She wants to get married so she's crying.
- (8) You should get married.
- (9) Let's say you guys were already married, OK?
- (10) A. No!
- (11) I'm going to put on the song.
- (12) (The play stove has become a disco booth.)
- (13) H. Andy has to put on the song and then he'll dance with you.
- (14) (to A.) Give me the song.
- (15) K. You have to come and dance with me Andy.
- (16) A. No I [...] Dad.
- (17) H. And he can't dance.
- (18) And you say what's the matter with me, Andy
- (19) ("cries.")
- (20) My mother yelled at me.
- (21) Let's say you gave me a spanking, Kathy O'Neil.
- (22) K. No, my name is Annie.
- (23) H. Annie, let's say you gave me a spanking.
- (24) And I call you Mom.

- (25) (to A.) Daddy, I'm crying 'cause my mother gave me a spanking and she yelled at me.
- (26) A. I'll kill her!
- (27) K. Pretend I was crying at the wedding place because you...
- (28) you guys yelled at me
- (29) H. No I just told Daddy.
- (30) I didn't yell.
- (31) You aren't [...] since I told Daddy what happened.
- (32) Mother, I did that because!
- (33) A. (settles in a corner with a toy telephone)
- (34) I'm calling her grandma to keep care of her, every day.
- (35) Hi, Kathy.
- (36) H. No, her name is Annie.
- (37) A. Annie [...]
- (38) K. You said "What's the matter."
- (39) H. I know I did!
- (40) What's the matter, Mother?
- (41) K. You didn't talk like that.
- (42) You say (sweetly) "What's the matter, Mother?"
- (43) H. (imitating) What's the matter, Mother?
- (44) 'Cause I told Dad and all your crimes
- (45) [...] Well I had to tell Dad.
- (46) K. Let's say I was really bad to you.
- (47) H. Mother I'm sorry about that!
- (48) I'm very angry!
- (49) Bye!
- (50) And I closed the door,
- (51) and you start to cry,
- (52) and I make you some wedding cake,
- (53) Mommy, I did something nice for you.
- (54) I made you a wedding ring cake that you can eat for your own self.
- (55) (She offers empty angel food cake pan to K.)
- (56) A. (into "phone") So she can bring all of her toys.
- (57) H. You can eat it with a spoon if you want.
- (58) I made something cute for you.
- (59) K. No, I'm not crying yet.
- (60) H. I made something cute for you.
- (61) Here's one piece of candy.
- (62) She's my mother.
- (63) I do nice stuff for her.
- (64) A. Heather, I called her gamma.
- (65) And she's gonna keep...
- (66) she gonna keep care of her.
- (67) H. Gramma's gonna keep care of you.
- (68) A. And she can bring all her toys.
- (69) H. Yay!
- (70) K. She is?
- (71) H. And she can bring all her toys.
- (72) A. And bring all her clothes.
- (73) H. And bring all her clothes.
- (74) She's gonna take care of you, Mother.
- (75) A. And I told she spanked you.
- (76) Now I'm going to call somebody else.

- (77) And tell she yelled at you.
 (78) Now I'm going to call somebody else.
 (79) H. The police?
 (80) A. Yeah.
 (81) H. The police?
 (82) A. Yeah.
 (83) H. Better not.
 (84) I don't want my mother to get hurt.
 (85) Or get in jail.
 (86) She's a very good mother.
 (87) A. She's going to get hurt and she's going to die.
 (88) They're going to shoot her.
 (89) H. (gasp) Oh they're going to shoot you mother!
 (90) Quick! Get in here and we'll lock the door.

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