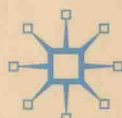


# Children's Voices

## Talk, Knowledge and Identity



*Janet Maybin*



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Janet Maybin

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*For Jo, Simon, Seth and Zareen*

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# Transcription Conventions

In representing children's voices in the transcripts, I have recorded their non-standard grammatical expressions as accurately as possible, but not their non-standard pronunciation of particular words. In order to make the transcripts more readable, I have added some written punctuation. The names of people and places have been changed, to protect anonymity.

Comments in italics and parentheses clarify what's happening, or indicate non-verbal features e.g. (*points to snail*), (*laughter*).

(...) indicates words on the tape which I can't make out,

/ indicates where another speaker interrupts or cuts in,

[ indicates simultaneous talk. The overlapping talk is also lined up vertically on the page.

## **Ages of children**

### **Camdean**

Julie (10 years)

Kirsty (10 years)

Sharon (10 years)

David (10 years)

### **Lakeside (main research site school)**

Darren (12 years)

Karlie (12 years)

Simon (12 years)

Keith (12 years)

Sherri (almost 12)

Tina (almost 12)

Alan (11 years)

Karen (11 years)

Kevin (11 years)

Kieran (11 years)

Martie (11 years)  
Michelle (11 years)  
Terry (11 years)  
Lee (11 years)  
Geoffrey (10 years)  
Helen (10 years)  
Melissa (10 years)  
Nicole (10 years)  
Sam (10 years)

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# Introduction

The word in language is always half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary, that the speaker gets their words!), but rather it exists in other peoples' mouths, in other peoples' concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.

(Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293–94)

The ideological becoming of a human being ... is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others.

(*op cit.*, p. 341)

In this Introduction I explain the focus of the book, introduce my theoretical approach to analysing children's talk and provide an outline of the individual chapters.

## **Focussing on the margins**

This book is about a part of children's language experience which lies outside the scope of mainstream accounts. I focus on how 10–12 year-old school children use talk to construct knowledge and identity, particularly through their use of other people's voices, and especially in 'off-task' conversations among themselves. While there is a long history of research on talk and learning in school, this has tended to

concentrate on children's curriculum-orientated talk. Findings are usually framed in terms of what could be termed an 'educational gaze', that is, educational definitions of knowledge and skills and psychological measurements of child development. In this book, I construct a different kind of lens through which to examine what is happening in children's talk. First, while my recorded data includes children's dialogues with teachers and talk among themselves as they work through classroom tasks, it also covers the whole range of children's other talk in school: 'off-task' talk in the classroom, at break time, as they pass through the school corridors, get changed for swimming or sit together at lunchtime. I take my cue for what children can do in talk not from their rather muted role in dialogue with the teacher, but from their undirected conversations elsewhere where they pursue their own questions and preoccupations. Secondly, I draw on linguistic ethnography and poststructuralist theory to construct an analytic framework which is orientated towards a much broader conception of knowledge and learning than is usual in traditional educational research, and incorporates a more dynamic conception of communication. I use this framework to capture some of the ongoing collaborative processes of meaning-making in children's talk, both inside and outside the classroom, right across the school day.

The children in my study are at the point of negotiating the transition between childhood and adolescence and are starting to explore new kinds of knowledge, relationships and identities. Attending two nearby Middle Schools in Southern England which I used as my pilot and main research site, they could be seen as a fairly homogenous group in terms of age, ethnicity, social background and locality. The schools served largely white working-class public housing estates, situated at the edge of a new city and abutting on to more rural farm-land. However, as I shall explain in the course of the book, this apparent homogeneity is deceptive. I was to discover an enormous range of diversity in children's personal experience, and in the different ways in which they inhabited the same nominal categories of age, gender and class. While there is now a rich literature documenting cultural and linguistic diversity in classrooms, I provide an account of the diversity of the individual experience of 10–12 year-olds who seemed, on the face of it, to come from a very similar social and ethnic background.

## **Conceptualising voice and meaning-making**

Like many people of my generation working in language and education, I have been strongly influenced by the Russian psychologist

Vygotsky's ideas<sup>1</sup> about how children learn through dialogue and how this learning then feeds into individual conceptual development. However, while most neo-Vygotskian work has focussed on dialogues between teachers and pupils, adopting the educational gaze I mentioned above, I am applying his ideas about language and thought more broadly. Vygotsky makes it clear that the dialogues through which children learn have strong cultural-historical dimensions. They are vehicles of socialisation as well as of conceptual development and the two processes are closely intertwined. As he puts it, 'The history of the process of the internalisation of social speech is also the history of the socialisation of children's practical intellect.' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 27). My approach in this book is to view children's dialogue as an important vehicle for constructing knowledge about their social world as well as more formalised educational knowledge, and as fulfilling a number of simultaneous individual and social functions. Talk is referential, in the sense of referring to and representing the world, evaluative in making some kind of comment on experience, interpersonal in its contribution to children's construction of relationships with others and emotive in presenting children's inner feelings. These meanings are always co-present and always interrelated, in teacher-pupil dialogues as well as in children's talk among themselves.

Alongside my exploration of children's talk in the book, I build up an analytic framework, a language of description, which can capture the multifunctional, dynamic nature of their ongoing meaning-making. Treating culture as a verb rather than a noun,<sup>2</sup> in other words, seeing culture as emerging through processes within social practice rather than consisting of set patterns and products, I examine how ideas about contextual cues in talk, dialogue and evaluation can be used to unravel the intricate dynamics of meaning in children's talk. There is a tension here between the essentially processual nature of social practice and the fact that people orientate towards relatively stable social categories, beliefs and values. In the context of the different timescales of change at different levels of social life, I focus mainly on change at the micro level, in the course of children's social activity in everyday life. These moment-by-moment negotiations of identity and knowledge will feed into children's personal change over a number of years, as they make the transition from childhood into adolescence. And both these different kinds of change, with their different timescales, intersect with broader, slower-acting cultural change in social beliefs and values.

The book suggests ways of operationalising a number of concepts from the writings of Bakhtin and Volosinov<sup>3</sup> and applying them

within a detailed linguistic ethnographic analysis of children's communicative practices. I use the Russian language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of speech genre, together with ideas from linguistic anthropology about context cues in language, in order to look at how children draw on the contexts of their lives for meaning-making within talk. Bakhtin (1986) sees all language as patterned into a large and changing variety of speech genres (spoken and written), from informal everyday conversations, bureaucratic language, business documents, political speeches, to all manner of literary genres. A speech genre includes the language forms and use, content themes and evaluative perspectives which emerge in a specific sphere of human activity. Speech genres are an integral part of social practices, which include what people do as well as their use of language. Social practices in their turn both reflect and help to produce the macro-level complexes of language, knowledge and power (sometimes referred to as discourses<sup>4</sup>), which organise how people think and act.

I see the Bakhtinian concept of evaluation as central to the 'ideological becoming of a human being'. 'Evaluation' refers to the way in which we can never talk about anything without making some kind of judgement reflecting an assumed evaluative framework and signalling our own position in relation to it. Children, as I discovered, are constantly evaluating their social experience in the course of talk and this evaluative activity reveals how they are becoming conscious of their positioning in the world, acting on their environment and developing a sense of themselves as a particular kind of person. At the same time as expressing individual agency, the evaluation in children's talk reflects their social background and the beliefs and values of their community. The social parameters of evaluation reflect the macro level discourses I referred to above. In this sense it is part of their socialisation into particular kinds of culturally authorised evaluative perspectives and judgements about how to be in and act on the world. I see children's ongoing identification as individuals and their continuing socialisation as two sides of the same process, with evaluation as a double-edged driving force.

The arguments of Bakhtin and his colleague Volosinov about the multi-voiced nature of language lie at the heart of this book. Bakhtin and Volosinov see language as full of the voices of different genres, and what Bakhtin calls the social languages of different age groups, generations, professions and classes. More profoundly, they see words as always carrying the intentions of previous speakers and the connotations of their former contexts of use. This emerges most clearly in the

ways in which children, quite literally, take their words from other people's mouths. When I first listened to the recordings, I was struck by how often children referred to or quoted the voices of teachers, parents, friends, textbooks and pop songs, and also how they reproduced their own voice in anecdotes and in other references to previous experience. The voices children reconstruct seem to provide them with an extraordinarily rich resource for meaning-making. Reproduced speech was the main means used by the 10–12 year-olds in my study to invoke previous experience and bring it to bear on what was happening in the present. In particular, the children evaluated people, relationships and events through the ways in which they rephrased and reframed reported speech and through their orchestration of dialogues in anecdotes and longer narratives. This evaluation was negotiated and reconfigured through the ongoing dialogue between children and other people so that individual impressions and reactions became socially forged.

In summary, this book is about what 10–12 year-olds talk about and how they do it, especially when they are away from adults, focussing in particular in the role of contextualisation, dialogue and evaluation in children's developing construction of knowledge and identity, especially through their use of reproduced speech. This construction of knowledge and identity feeds into the longer term processes of socialisation and identification, which continue in various ways throughout life. The book is also about a linguistic ethnographic approach to investigating children's language practices, and what this can deliver in terms of insights about children's meaning-making. I use linguistic ethnography to find ways of conceptualising identity not through labels like class, gender or age or in terms of fixed personal attributes but as emerging through the flow of social practice. I also use it to locate and describe the unofficial knowledge which children are generating through talk together, beyond the official school curriculum.

The anthropological perspective has always worked in two directions, making the familiar strange as well as making the strange familiar. In the research I had to shift away from the familiar educational gaze in order to defamiliarise what I saw in the classroom and to move towards the children's perspective. In the account in this book, I develop an analytical framework which reveals insights about children's (strange) private worlds and documents the relatively under-researched dynamic processes of meaning-making in their ongoing informal talk.

## Outline of the chapters

In the book I interweave discussion of examples of children's talk with the development of my argument about how we can understand their meaning-making. In the first chapter I set the scene for the rest of the book. I give some flavour of collecting the recorded data and doing the research which laid the basis for my understanding of the children's social lives and their cultural world. I also develop the basis for my conceptual framework, which involved a shift towards more dynamic conceptions of context, dialogue and identity. First, I explain how I moved from a relatively static image of how different contexts influence children's talk to a more dynamic conception of how current and alternative contexts are reconfigured in children's talk, as part of their meaning-making. Secondly, I develop the idea of dialogue beyond the notion of the collaborative construction of knowledge in neo-Vygotskian work, through using Bakhtinian ideas about the patterning of dialogic links within and across conversations. Thirdly, I begin to explore Bakhtin and Volosinov's argument that language use is always evaluative, in relation to examples from the children's talk, and examine the role of evaluation in children's ongoing socialisation and construction of identity.

In Chapter 2, I develop my analysis of the contextual cues in talk. I suggest that children switch easily between the different speech genres in their lives and draw creatively and strategically on the generic resources of different contexts for meaning-making. I introduce Goffman's notion of framing to look at how relationships and identities are negotiated at a micro-level from moment to moment within speech genres. I suggest that contrasts between contextual cues and framing in teacher-dominated talk and in peer talk are associated with different kinds of knowledge construction, together with different opportunities for evaluation and identity.

Chapter 3 focusses on the patterns of collaboration that I found in children's conversations. I explore the multifunctional nature of children's talk and the ways in which utterances can be retrospectively refunctioned across the course of a conversation. I examine ideas about the relationship between language and gender, suggesting that while there are certain gendered patterns in the data, there is no simple correlation between children's gender and their language use. The expression of gender identity emerges partly through children's choices of personal style in language, within the context of their engagement in speech genres and associated social practice which are both a resource for, and a limitation to, children's creativity.

In Chapters 4–7, I develop my argument about the central importance of children's reproduction of other voices in the interrelated processes of meaning-making, socialisation and the construction of identity. I first look in Chapter 4 at how reproduced voices and snatches of dialogue provide enormously powerful ways of recreating and commenting on experience and drawing the listener in. Reported speech particularly clearly illustrates Bakhtin's concept of 'double-voicing', where the intentions of the original speaker and the intentions of the speaker reporting the voice are both represented within a single utterance. I examine how children convey judgements about people, relationships and events through the different ways in which the voices are reported.

Chapters 5 focusses on how reproduced voices are orchestrated in anecdotes in children's ongoing talk among themselves. I look at the role of children's stories in representing and evaluating experience, and in presenting and exploring identity. I examine three interrelated levels of narrative meaning which are produced through the text of the story, through its function at a particular point in a conversation and through the contextual links it makes with children's experience. I use the anecdotes of three individual children to look in particular at the role of reproduced voices in conveying children's agency and their negotiation and performance of gender identity.

The longer stories which children produced in my interviews with friendship pairs are discussed in Chapter 6. I look at the way in which children used these to present and explore personal experiences at greater length, and to reflect on the moral issues which confronted them in their lives, about justice, care and cruelty and adult relationships. Again, I look at the dialogical production of the stories, the articulation of contextual links and the ways in which children's orchestration of the dialogue between reported voices expresses and drives the plot, and also the evaluative function of the story.

The way in which children's use of reported voices contributes to their socialisation is explored from a slightly different angle in Chapter 7. While the previous three chapters focussed on reported speech which was fairly clearly signalled as coming from a different speaker, in this chapter I examine examples from the children's talk where the boundary between the speaker's voice and the voice they are reproducing is less clear cut, and other voices appear to merge with the children's own. I adapt Bakhtin's taxonomy of different kinds of voice reproduction (Bakhtin, 1984) to analyse the ways in which children report, repeat, appropriate and stylise the voices of teachers and textbooks, both in teacher-pupils dialogues and in talk among themselves.

I then discuss how this contributes to their induction into educational speech genres and school procedures.

A considerable amount of the talk of the children I studied was focussed around literacy activities. The organisation of space and time in classroom life, the management and assessment of children and the production of schooled knowledge were all articulated through the reading and writing tasks which filled children's days. In Chapter 8, I draw on Foucault's account of institutional disciplining in addition to Bakhtinian theory, to analyse the emphasis on procedure and product in classroom talk and its role in children's induction into school literacy practices. I also, however, challenge the division often assumed in educational research between in-school and out-of-school literacy. I use examples from my data to argue that classrooms contain a mixture of official, unofficial and hybrid literacy activities, with varying possibilities for different kinds of knowledge production, relationship and identity.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I briefly draw the different threads of the book together.