
Playful Talk, Learners' Play Frames, and the Construction of Identities

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Abstract

Drawing on educational and sociolinguistic research, this chapters attempt to bring together early, major, and more recent studies that have examined the intersection of playful talk, learners' play frames, and social identities in schools and classrooms. These studies confirm that playful talk is an enduring feature of classroom talk and action and highlight the importance of looking beyond learners' curriculum-oriented talk usually with teachers to the heterogeneity of voices, frames, practices, and discourses in schools and classrooms and its implications for learners' meaning making and identity work. They also point to the need to further examine learners' expressive repertoires, including various forms of playful talk, the values attached to their linguistic resources, and their multiple and often conflicting identity negotiations, embedded in broader social, historical, political, and ideological contexts and discourses, as well as teacher's playful talk and social affiliation.

Keywords

Playful talk • Play frames • Negotiation of identities • Schools

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Introduction

Recent educational and sociolinguistic research into learners' talk in schools and classrooms has investigated the intersection of language and identity construction drawing on social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives. Social constructionist approaches view identity as "an emergent construction, the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretative process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others" (Bauman 2000, p. 1). From this perspective, language, including playful talk, emerges as one of the central semiotic resources available to learners for self and other identity ascriptions. By focusing on the learners' linguistic and other semiotic resources and the values ascribed to these resources, we can then explore "when and how identities are interactively invoked by socio-cultural actors" (Kroskrity 1993, p. 222). This understanding of identity is premised on a view of the self as an active participant in the interactively achieved social construction of meaning. However, Kroskrity (2001) cautions "against any approach to identity, or identities, that does not recognize both the communicative freedom potentially available at the microlevel and the political economic constraints imposed on processes of identity-making" (ibid., p. 108). Poststructuralist approaches to identity have alerted us to the uneven distribution of linguistic resources and the structural constraints within in which participants have to act. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) argue, "poststructuralist theory recognizes the sociohistorically shaped partiality, contestability, instability, mutability of ways in which language ideologies and identities are linked to relations of power and political arrangements in communities and societies" (p. 10).

Playful talk can, therefore, provide a productive locus for the study of the constitution and negotiation of learners' social and institutional identities in schools and classrooms (see also Luk Ching Man, "► [Classroom Discourse and the Construction of Learner and Teacher Identities](#)"). In this chapter, I use the term "playful talk" as a superordinate category with the purpose of capturing a wide range of verbal activities and routines, including teasing, joking, humor, verbal play, parody, music making, and chanting that can emerge in learners' talk. Some of these activities and routines may be more fleeting and highly unstructured (e.g., private

solo singing and humming of popular tunes in circulation) and others more ritualized (e.g., teasing, ritual insults). Moreover, these verbal phenomena may require different understandings of local and global contexts and allow for varying audience roles and participant structures. The notion of playful talk can be fruitfully combined with the concept of performance as linguistic practice that is “situated, interactional, communicatively motivated” (Bauman 2000, p. 1). Playful talk as performance then can “represent for participants an arena for the display, contemplation, and manipulation of salient elements, practices, and relationships that allow language to serve as a resource for the expression of identity” (ibid., p. 4).

Early Developments

Bateson in *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (1972) was one of the very first scholars to develop a theory of play and communication drawing on a number of disparate disciplines, including anthropology, psychiatry, and biology. In his pioneering essay *A Theory of Play and Fantasy* (reprinted in the aforementioned volume), he provides us with two important insights that have influenced the way subsequent scholars working within educational and sociolinguistic paradigms have conceptualized the relationship between play and communication. Observing two young monkeys playing in the San Francisco Zoo in the 1950s, he noted first that the monkeys were engaged in an interactive sequence of actions or signals that were similar to but not entirely the same as those of combat. Second, he noticed that the participant monkeys treated their playing as such. Based on these observations, Bateson deduced that the two monkeys were capable of some degree of metacommunication that involved exchanging signals carrying the message “this is play” (Bateson 1972, p. 178). Drawing on Bateson’s insights, subsequent scholars have explored the close association between play and combat in human communication and the liable nature of play as well as the significance of metacommunicative awareness in recognizing that an interactive sequence should be interpreted as play.

Goffman’s discussion of frames in *Frame Analysis* (1974) can be a useful point of entry into the examination of the unstable nature of play with important implications for the conceptualization of play frames in general and learners’ play frames in particular. Goffman regards frames as mechanisms through which participants structure their social and personal experiences, thereby providing us with an interpretation of what is going on in a given interaction (Goffman 1974, pp. 10–11). As indicated in the introduction of this review, playful talk as performance can encompass a wide range of verbal phenomena (e.g., humor, teasing, joking) which in turn set up play frames. Learners can then employ clusters of contextualization cues (e.g., laughter, shifts in pitch, rhythm, voice quality, volume, nicknames, repetition) which function as framing devices and signal how their utterances, movements, or gestures are to be interpreted by their teachers and fellow classmates. Contextualization cues as framing devices allow us to unpick the organization of social interaction and explore how learners strategically exploit playful talk to do identity work in educational settings. By framing talk as play, learners mark-off periods of playful talk

devoted to a particular verbal activity (e.g., teasing, music making, verbal play) from talk about other matters (e.g., talk about a school task). Learners need to have a certain degree of metacommunicative awareness in order to distinguish between those signals or cues used for play and those used for combat. Metacommunicative awareness is created and constantly renewed against a backdrop of shared cultural assumptions, associations, and background knowledge reflecting the learners' interactional histories and interpersonal ties.

Some of the earliest social interactionist studies on playful talk in urban neighborhoods in the USA and Turkey explored verbal duelling and ritual insulting routines among African-American young males (Labov 1972) and Turkish young people, respectively (Dundes et al. 1972). Although not focusing on schools and classrooms, these early studies have provided important insights into the investigation of playful talk, learning, and peer socialization.

Major Contributions

Educational and sociolinguistic research has tended to focus on learners' official school practices, often ignoring that there is more happening than just learning academic subject matter in schools and classrooms. Indeed, as Maybin (2006) aptly argues, mainstream accounts of schools and classrooms have tended to adopt an "educational gaze." They have tended to concentrate on the learners' curriculum-oriented talk usually with their teachers. As a result, they have often treated instances of "off task" talk in the classroom, for instance, or as learners pass through school corridors, play in school grounds, and have lunch together as marginal. Nevertheless, educational and sociolinguistic studies of schools and classrooms from an ethnographic perspective have repeatedly shown that playful talk is an enduring feature of classroom talk and learning (e.g., Lytra 2007, 2011; Maybin 2006; Poveda 2011; Rampton 2006; see also Garcez, "► [Microethnography in the Classroom](#)"). These studies have demonstrated that learners' talk is often saturated by the use of nicknames, crosssex teasing routines, and quiet solo singing. They have also illustrated that learners experiment with rhyme and rhythm, differences in intonation contours, pitch, volume, and repetition. Moreover, they have shown that learners often refer, allude to, or perform recyclable and recontextualizable fragments of talk from music, TV, fiction, and film as well as mimic and parody the voices of their teachers and fellow classmates. The shift of focus away from the learners' official school worlds has also been influenced by more recent approaches to classroom talk. These have probed into the heterogeneity of classroom discourses and practices and have highlighted the processes of recontextualization and dialogicality at play in learners' talk (e.g., Blackledge and Creese 2010; Gutiérrez et al. 1999; Haworth 1999; Kambarelis 2001). This line of research has emphasized "the social and cultural dimensions of children's language experience in school" (Maybin 2009, p. 70).

In his seminal study *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents*, Rampton (1995) was one of the first scholars to shift our analytical gaze away from

curriculum learning and draw our attention to the wide variety of different expressive resources and practices in young people's talk in multiethnic schools and classrooms. Among other practices, he identified crossing into Punjabi by black and white adolescents in routines of jocular abuse and the impact of popular media culture (in particular music making) on their talk and conduct across different interactional contexts at school. As far as the latter is concerned, he looked into crossing into stylized Asian English in school-sponsored theatrical performances and the spread of bhangra (a form of folk music and dance closely associated with Punjabi culture) among black and white adolescents. One important theme that emerged in his work was the different ways in which popular media culture provided young people with rich and complex linguistic and cultural repertoires for play to appropriate, transform, and recontextualize in order, for instance, to take part in a sequence of jocular abuse or in singing along snippets of Bhangra and pop songs.

In his more recent work, Rampton (2006) examined the positioning of such instances of playfulness in daily school activities and classroom routines. Although, as he argued, such instances of playfulness during instruction were often regarded as undermining teacher authority and the canonical patterns of classroom talk, they had the potential of opening up new possibilities for teaching and learning. Rather than sanctioning such talk throughout, the teacher in his study seemed to tolerate a high degree of playfulness by a group of over-exuberant and keen learners. Indeed, he seemed to regard their contributions as helping to keep the lesson on course. In doing so, the teacher and this group of learners negotiated and coconstructed a particular classroom settlement that appeared to be based on the strategic coexistence and mix of curriculum priorities and popular media culture (notwithstanding along with other influences). For the learners, this classroom settlement, Rampton maintained, seemed to allow them to explore different kinds of sociability, to consolidate existing friendship ties and aid them in their quest for social influence among their peers.

One strand of research that has fruitfully explored the intersection of learners' expressive repertoires, including various forms of playful talk and text production, such as producing and acting out imaginative episodes inspired by contemporary superheroes and characters from ancient Greek mythology, and popular media culture are child literacy studies (see also Bloome, "[► Literacies in the Classroom](#)"; Mahiri, "[► Literacies in the Lives of Global Youth](#)"; Prah, "[► Language, Literacy and Knowledge Production in Africa](#)"). Dyson's (2003) ethnographic research into primary school literacy development highlights the importance of young learners sharing what she called a "common sociocultural landscape" to draw upon in playful talk and text production. This shared sociocultural landscape provided young learners with diverse symbolic and textual material and resources to appropriate, recontextualize, and reuse in order to fashion both their official and unofficial school worlds. Moreover, their engagement with popular media culture opened up spaces for more polyphonic written and oral playful performances, which in turn, generated new opportunities and challenges for meaning making, learning, and social affiliation.

The importance of the children's shared common knowledge and metalinguistic awareness in participating in playful activities and routines has also been illustrated in studies looking at more linguistically, culturally, and ethnically rich pupil populations from an ethnographic sociolinguistics perspective (see also Fenner, "► [Cultural Awareness in the Foreign Language Classroom](#)"). In my own work (Lytra 2007, 2009), I examined the linguistic and other semiotic resources and practices available to a group of majority Greek and minority Turkish-speaking children in an Athens primary school. I illustrated how the children adapted and refashioned shared references to mainstream Greek popular media culture in their playful talk (e.g., teasing routines and music-making activities) across school contexts. I argued that these resources and practices functioned as a powerful identity kit for the display and coconstruction of a shared peer group identity and showed how this peer group identity coarticulated with their other social identities and roles at school (e.g., gender, pupil/language learner identities). The active participation in such playful routines and activities allowed minority children in particular to gain access to and display their knowledge and expertise of valued semiotic resources and practices associated with mainstream Greek popular media culture. At the same time, these processes of boundary leveling based on the sharing of out-of-school recreational practices, experiences, and a common sense of humour were fraught with tensions and contradictions. Minority children's claims to knowledge and expertise displayed through their playful talk could be contested by their majority peers, thereby raising boundaries of exclusion and positioning them as peripheral to the group.

Duff (2004) further explored the processes of boundary leveling and boundary raising in relation to intertextual references to popular media culture (e.g., references to shared jokes, one-liners, and set phrases from various media sources) in two linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse Canadian social science classrooms. Taking an ethnographically informed applied linguistics standpoint, she observed that for the local (Canadian born and raised) pupils and teachers such popular media culture laden talk, saturated by playful banter and repartee, served to affirm their sociocultural affiliations. For most of the newcomers (ESL learners), however, this ongoing playfulness was a source of fun but also bewilderment and ambivalence: more often than not, ESL learners had difficulty following the complex web of intertextual references which they had no or limited access to at home and through their various community networks. These well-established classroom practices among locals had the effect of restricting the active participation and involvement of ESL learners – or at best allowing them some marginal participation. This resulted to "what was cultural play for some [being] heavy cognitive and identity work for others" (Duff 2004, p. 253).

In a similar vein, Poveda (2011) examined how a group of Latin American students in a multicultural secondary school in Madrid appropriated the label "India" (American native) from a historical novel featuring Spanish colonial relations in America and exploited its mainly pejorative associations for verbal play among peers. He demonstrated how the students in question used this term for ritual insulting during classroom interactions to strategically reconstruct similarity and

difference among the diverse Latin American migrant communities in Spain, such as to draw contrasts between students' rural and urban backgrounds and lighter or darker skin colors. However, the social relationships and experiences they drew upon were not easily accessible to their Spanish origin peers which limited significantly the latter's participation in the jocular activities, thereby creating boundaries between "Spanish" and "Latin American" peer groups in the classroom.

One key theme permeating the aforementioned studies is how through playful talk and text production learners appropriated, reproduced, and evaluated the voices of others by drawing on a diversity of sources (such as popular culture and fiction) for meaning making and social categorization. The notions of intertextuality (Kristeva 1980), contextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990), heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981), and double-voicing (Bakhtin 1984) are central in understanding these processes. These notions are premised on an understanding of talk and text as being "constructed of a mosaic of quotations" (Kristeva 1980, p. 66). They have been fruitfully combined among others with insights from sociocultural and social constructivist theories of learning (e.g., neo-Vygotskian approaches) and interactional sociolinguistics (e.g., Goffman's work on *Frame Analysis*). This line of research has looked into learners' various types of playful talk across learning contexts (e.g., in undirected informal talk among peers, small group, and whole group instruction) and has foregrounded the opportunities for learning and social affiliation.

For instance, Maybin (2003) explored how, through the introduction of "other voices" (e.g., snippets of songs, parodies of teacher voices, "he-said-she-said" routines and other forms of stylised talk) in informal talk during group work, learners produced rapid frame shifts to play. The frame transformations of instructional interactions into more playful ones allowed learners not only to display and experiment with different institutional identities and classroom practices but also to scaffold their engagement in classroom tasks and support learning across classroom genres (see also Maybin 2006; Haworth 1999). In a more recent study, Møller and Jørgensen (2011) pointed out how minority Turkish-speaking students in a Danish primary school moved between serious and play frames to simultaneously negotiate peer relations and the group work assignment. In so doing, the students strategically drew upon their knowledge of the monolingual norms of the broader Danish society in their linguistic stylizations of teacher-talk and exchanges of jocular abuse.

Learners may also exploit the voices of others in creative and complex ways to resist dominant societal and educational discourses and challenge established classroom practices and routines. Hirst (2003) investigated how through the ventriloquation of diverse voices characterized by the pervasive use of teasing, ironic remarks, and parody learners appropriated and resisted aspects of the teacher's voice in an Indonesian second language classroom in Australia. Blackledge and Creese (2010) illustrated how Chinese and Turkish heritage language learners in complementary schools in the UK deployed stylized accents to mock themselves, each other and lower proficiency English language learners, or used parodic discourses to undermine the teachers' efforts to transmit reified representations of the heritage culture while concurrently participating in the learning task at hand. By

capitalizing on different voices and the social values attached to them they negotiated a range of self- and other-identity ascriptions. In this respect, “the students’ discourse became a battleground on which to play out oppositions between the ‘heritage’ identity imposed by the school and the students’ contestation and re-negotiation of such impositions” (Blackledge and Creese 2010, p. 141).

At the same time, exploiting the voices of others in parodic talk served to reproduce the unequal social structures and linguistic hierarchies widespread in broader society. In the Cantonese heritage language classroom described in Blackledge and Creese (2010), students made use of highly stylized and ethnicized accents to stigmatize the way emergent learners of English spoke and relationally position themselves as more competent English language speakers. In Jaspers (2011), ethnic minority students in a secondary school in Antwerp, Belgium, experimented with stylized renditions of incompetent or broken Dutch that caricatured emergent learners of Dutch with the purpose of signaling their advanced linguistic competence and clearly distinguishing themselves from less competent Dutch-speaking peers.

Work in Progress

As discussed in the previous section, there has been an increasing empirical focus on the heterogeneity of voices, genres, frames, practices, and discourses in schools and classrooms and its implications for learners’ meaning making and identity work. In this context, a number of recent studies have explored the intersection of learners’ expressive repertoires, including various forms of playful talk, the values attached to their linguistic resources and their multiple and often conflicting identity negotiations (e.g., Blackledge and Creese 2010; Jaspers 2011; Møller and Jørgensen 2011; Poveda 2011). These studies have highlighted the role of learners as social actors, the complexity of their communicative repertoires as well as the different ways playful talk and identity construction are embedded in broader social, historical, political, and ideological contexts and discourses and can be mobilized to contest but also reproduce dominant linguistic hierarchies and social stratification. Concurring with Blackledge and Creese (2010), these studies have allowed us to “go beyond a simple dichotomy of ‘micro and macro,’ or ‘structure and agency,’ to understand the structural in the agentic and the agentic in the structural; the ideological in the interactional and the interactional in the ideological; the ‘micro’ in the ‘macro’ and the ‘macro’ in the ‘micro’” (Blackledge and Creese 2010, p. 125). These recent studies can provide a promising direction for work in progress in the investigation of learners’ playful talk, play frames, and identity construction in schools and classrooms.

An area of work in progress that has thus far received limited attention is the investigation of teacher’s playful talk and social affiliation in schools and classroom. Jaspers (2014) discussed how educational and sociolinguistic research has tended to prioritize pupil’s talk. With notable exceptions (e.g., Rampton 1995, Piirainen-Marsh 2011), “teacher’s off-task, playful or non-standard language use is not very

often in the scientific radar” (Jaspers 2014, p. 373). In his study of heteroglossic teacher practices in a Dutch-medium vocational secondary school in Bruxelles, Jaspers (2014) illustrated how the bilingual French-Dutch teacher used linguistic stylizations in playful and nonstandard talk to carve spaces for the students' full range of linguistic resources, negotiate social and institutional positioning, and build interpersonal relations. At the same time, the teacher's heteroglossic practices assigned the use of these linguistic resources to the margins of classroom talk, thereby reproducing language boundaries and imposing the normative use Dutch.

Problems and Difficulties

While the increasing attention to learners and teachers' heterogeneity of resources, genres, styles, registers, and frames cannot be denied, more research needs to be done in this direction. The privileging of whole class instruction over, for instance, undirected informal talk among learners and small group instruction and the corresponding focus on unified floors, sequential turn-taking, and the conventional IRE structure of classroom discourse have influenced the extent to which learners' playful talk and play frames have been examined as discursive phenomena in their own right. As a result of the focus on particular types of talk, practices, and resources, playful talk, play frames, and their producers continue to be consigned to the margins of educational and sociolinguistic research. Moreover, when they do become the focus of research, these discursive phenomena have often been associated with noisier, more unruly classrooms and have been seen as undermining traditional teacher authority and power and disrupting content transmission (cf. Rampton 2006; Jaspers 2014). The fact that these phenomena remain by and large underresearched may be linked to broader questions concerning what counts as legitimate knowledge in educational settings and what kind of linguistic resources and practices are relevant in supporting it (Maybin 2009; Heller and Martin-Jones 2001).

Future Directions

Maybin (2009) has argued for “a broader view of language in school,” a view that “combines close attention to children and teachers' language use with an analysis of context and social practice” (p. 70). This broader view of language can be also enhanced by exploring the possible contribution of other research perspectives in examining the intersection of playful talk, learners' play frames, and social identities in schools and classrooms; for instance, engaging with research on learners' playful, humorous, and creative uses of language within second language acquisition (SLA) research and applied linguistics (see Cook 2000; Bell and Pomerantz 2014; and for an overview, Bell 2012), or at the crossroads of the arts and second language learning (Chappell and Faltis 2013). Moreover, it can draw valuable insights from studies of children's language use and pretend play across settings (García-Sánchez 2010;

Gregory et al. 2015; Kyratzis 2010). Finally, while the fine-grain analysis of learners' playful talk in schools and classrooms can yield important insights into how they manage their semiotic resources and identity negotiations, future research can adopt a multimodal lens to combine a focus on language with other modes, such as image, writing, speech, moving image, action, and artifacts. As Kress et al. (2005) have maintained "looking at language in the context of other means of meaning making gives the possibility of a much sharper, more precise and more nuanced understanding both of the (different) potentials of speech and of writing, and of their limitations" (Kress et al. 2005, p. 2).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Classroom Discourse and the Construction of Learner and Teacher Identities](#)

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

- Anne-Brit Fenner: [Cultural Awareness in the Foreign Language Classroom](#). In Volume: Language Awareness and Multilingualism
- David Bloome: [Literacies in the Classroom](#). In Volume: Literacies and Language Education
- Jabari Mahiri: [Literacies in the Lives of Global Youth](#). In Volume: Literacies and Language Education
- Kwesikwaa Prah: [Language, Literacy and Knowledge Production in Africa](#). In Volume: Literacies and Language Education
- Pedro Garcez: [Microethnography in the Classroom](#). In Volume: Research Methods in Language and Education

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