

“Am I a good boy?”: Explicit membership categorization in parent–child interaction[☆]



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Abstract

This paper examines moments in which desired categories such as “good boy/girl” are invoked explicitly in parent–child conversations. Guided by Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), we describe the sequential contexts of these explicit categorical identities and the interactional practices that parents and children employ to refer to and negotiate them. The data are drawn from a 120-h corpus of audio recordings of parent–child conversations involving two- to five-year-old girls and boys in five Singaporean middle-class families. The findings suggest that children’s categorical identities are often mentioned explicitly in assessments, request negotiation, contracts involving a reward, and prayers. Once a category has been introduced by the parent in talk, the child may resist or affiliate with it. There is also evidence that a child can bring up a desired category in ways that reflect how that category has been co-constructed in previous interactions. In light of the findings, we discuss the nature of children’s competencies as social members and the potential emergence of competence in talk-in-interaction.

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1. Introduction

Becoming a member of society involves discerning cultural patterns, expectations, and values through daily interactions with others, and negotiating one’s own identity in relation to these cultural reference points. Some decades ago, Harvey Sacks posed the question, “When is it that a culture begins training persons for various future memberships the culture might have?” He reasoned that this training could begin with making sense of and managing membership categories and “the systematic relations between various collections of categories” (1995, Vol. 1, p. 591). Following Sacks’s insight, we examine membership categorization work by children and their parents in moments when desired categories such as “good boy/girl” are invoked in conversations. Specifically, we analyze the contexts in which parents and children produce these explicit categories and the interactional practices they mobilize when talking about these categories. Our inquiry will be guided by Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) and Conversation Analysis (CA).

Taking MCA’s and CA’s ethnomethodological perspectives, we focus on the competencies that children display in talk. Our study is inspired by Sacks’s (1972a) analysis of a story told by a child (aged 2;9), “The baby cried. The mommy picked it up,” which demonstrates the child’s abilities to accomplish membership categorization and sequential ordering as a

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member. Since MCA and CA focus on members'—including children's—competencies in their own right, children's methods of making sense of and producing social orders in interaction are *not* seen as approximation of adults' methods, and children are *not* considered “incomplete” or “deficient” individuals to be “socialized” into the world of adults (Forrester, 2009; Livingston, 1987; Mackay, 1974).¹ Rather, children are viewed as “knowledgeable and capable agents” who display their competencies locally in talk as they accomplish social actions (Bateman and Church, 2017a, p. 2; see also Bateman and Church, 2017b; Butler, 2008; Jenks, 2004). In the next sections, we will review key concepts in MCA and discuss previous research on children's membership categorization practices.

2. Membership Categorization Analysis

MCA examines the methods that people use to produce, reproduce, and interpret descriptions, classifications, or categories locally and contingently in talk-in-interaction (Sacks, 1972b, 1995). Growing out of Sacks's interest in how members make sense of social categories such as “mother” and “baby,” MCA maintains an ethnomethodological stance: categories must be *member-generated* (not analyst-generated) and must be demonstrated to be oriented to locally by the participants in talk-in-interaction (Hester and Eglin, 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015; Sacks, 1972b, 1995). Importantly, categories reflect and constitute commonsense knowledge about members, or in Sacks's words, categories store “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society” (Sacks, 1995, p. 40; see also Schegloff, 2007, p. 469). Thus, doing membership categorization work in talk-in-interaction is *doing culture-in-action* (Hester and Eglin, 1997; see also Fitzgerald, 2012) and for this reason, membership categorization is a rich site to observe children's competencies at work.

Participants place themselves and each other into social categories through the explicit mentionings of (a) *categories* (or ‘categorical identities’) such as “man,” “woman,” “good boy,” and “good girl,” (b) *membership categorization devices*, that is, collective sets of related categories such as “family” (father, son, daughter), or (c) *category-resonant descriptions*, which may include either *category-bound activities*, that is, activities that are in situ linked to a category, or *category-tied predicates*, that is, characteristics deemed to be related to a given category such as rights, obligations, attributes, and competencies (Stokoe, 2012, pp. 280–281, cf. Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Sacks, 1972a,b, 1995; Schegloff, 2007). Further, the assertion that a person belongs to a certain category based on their category-bound activity may have the effect of a degradation (e.g., “acting like a baby”) or a praise (e.g., “acting like a big boy”) (Sacks, 1972a, pp. 222–223, his examples).

According to Sacks (1972a,b), there are certain rules of application that govern the use of categorization devices; among these is the *repeatable use* rule, which specifies that once a category has been established, it “can be repeatably used” (1972b, p. 36). This last point is especially useful for understanding interactions between the same participants over time, as in our study. Also of particular relevance to this paper's focus on explicit categories is Sacks's notion of Membership Inference-Rich Representative (MIR) device, which he considered to be a “very central machinery of social organization” (1995, Vol. 1, p. 40). A MIR device includes category sets such as “a woman,” “a Catholic,” and “a psychiatric social worker” (Sacks's examples). These are inference-rich in the sense that if a person is put in a category, members can infer a great deal about that person based on what they know about that category. A MIR device may involve two-set classes, that is, classes with opposite sets such as rich and poor or young and old (Sacks's examples). Importantly, Sacks observed that a MIR device can be used by members to “enforce,” “teach,” and “control” others (pp. 42–43).

More recently, MCA has been infused with conversation analytic (CA)'s sequential analysis to enable the observation of the “on-going in situ nature of members' category work whereby category and predicates do not remain static but are continually developed, clarified, made accountable, and even retrospectively modified” (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 14; see also Butler, 2008; Butler and Fitzgerald, 2010; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Watson, 1997). Since the sequential organization of talk reflects and contributes to participants' orientation to categorization work, “both the sequential and categorizational aspects of social interaction inform each other” (Hester and Eglin, 1997, p. 2). In CA-integrated MCA, broadly speaking, the analytical procedure focuses on the *sequential context* of the explicit mentions of categories, the *action orientation* of the turns containing the categories, devices, or resonant descriptions, the *participants' orientation* toward these mentions, as well as the *interactional consequences* of these mentions. Further, the analysis focuses on how participants construct or contest categorizations turn-by-turn (following Stokoe, 2012, p. 280).² It is important to keep

¹ This is distinct from a socialization view, which, while also interested in how children develop social identities through verbal performance of acts and stance displays in everyday interaction (e.g., Ochs, 1993), places a strong focus on the socialization of children, mostly by adults.

² This approach of CA-integrated MCA has also been considered to focus on *formulation-generation categories*, that is, categories explicitly invoked via vernacular labels, metaphors, descriptions, and the like. Alternatively, categories may be invoked *implicitly* through turn-by-turn actions such as questioning and answering (as *turn-generated categories* (Watson, 1997)) or through sequence organization (as *sequence-generated categories*) (Bushnell, 2014, pp. 740–741).

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