

# “I will send badass viruses.” Peer threats and the interplay of pretend frames in a classroom dispute



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## Abstract

This paper explores threats as they appear in children's everyday dispute interactions. The main purpose is to extend understandings of children's interactions and disputes in order to show how young boys construct threats in pretend frames within a classroom peer dispute by drawing upon the resources of the video game world and a verbally constructed fight. The conceptual and methodological frameworks underpinning the analysis are conversation analysis and Goffman's concept of frame. The analysis focuses on one episode that illustrates how the boys, in the absence of the teacher, invoke, share and switch frames within the dispute. Using pretence, they posit threats and build attack strategies in a video game and in mass fight frames, even though they are in a classroom and unable to complete the threats at that moment. The analysis points out that the pretend threats are different to other sorts of threats and escalate the dispute sequence. Threats in the pretend frame, as in the video game frame, are also opportunities to bring activities outside school into the classroom. Hence, this study also looks at how video game playing is used as a resource when not playing. The implications for broader educational practices exemplify how language and social interaction function in children's peer interactions by uncovering the multifaceted aspects of peer culture, friendship and children's agentive roles in maintaining and creating social and moral order in different realities.

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## 1. Introduction

Interest in studying children's own methods for making sense of everyday interactions, including dispute situations, has increased in recent years. These kinds of studies have positioned children as competent language users and agentic actors in their social and cultural worlds, and have uncovered the topics and strategies children use in peer disputes (e.g., Bateman, 2010, 2011; Björk-Willén, 2012; Butler, 2008; Church, 2009; Cobb-Moore et al., 2008; Danby and Theobald, 2012; Goodwin, 1990, 2007; Goodwin et al., 2002; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987; Sheldon, 1996). Close examination of disputes has revealed these interactions to be not only children disputing, but also interactive work accomplishing social activities through various resources. Further, it has been recognized that these interactions emphasize opportunities embedded within dispute situations in relation to contributing to children's social and linguistic competence, as well as moral reasoning and agency (e.g., Butler, 2008; Mashford-Scott and Church, 2011; Goodwin, 2007; Sheldon, 1996). Most often, disputes among children have been studied in early childhood classrooms and nursery schools or in playground situations (see Bateman, 2010; Butler, 2008; Church, 2009; Danby and Theobald, 2012).

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This article builds on and contributes to the work of previous studies on children's disputes and the role of threats in peer interactions, as well as interactions in classroom settings. The aim is to examine how two seven-year-old boys, who are best friends at school, use threats in pretend and real life frames in managing classroom disputes. The analysis focuses on one extended episode from a study of more 26 h of video-recorded classroom observations in a classroom in Finland. Despite their significance and occurrence in children's discourse, less attention has been paid to children's threats and their functions, and threats in pretend frames have not been the main focus in the studies of children's disputes (see Benoit, 1983; Church, 2009; Church and Hester, 2012; Danby and Baker, 1998b; Goodwin, 1990, 2007; Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987).

The analysis shows that there is no specific topic in the dispute, and it reveals how the boys switch from one pretend frame to another or to a real life frame, and how different realities and multiple roles are omnipresent in the children's interactions. This article also shows how, with the use of threats, boys bring issues related to their subculture and out-of-school activities to the fore, such as video games, and invoke moral orders of what they are or are not allowed to do inside the frame that they are in. Before proceeding with the detailed analysis of threats in pretend frames, this next section discusses prior research of children's threats and disputes, and the methodological considerations of this study.

## 2. Disputes as interactional achievement

Disputes are mutually constructed achievements indexing that the other person has done something bad, inappropriate or unwelcome related to the other person, or that one person has attempted to influence how another should behave (e.g., Danby and Baker, 1998b; Hay and Ross, 1982). As Antaki (1994), Cromdal (2004) and Maynard (1985) have discovered, usually disputes consist of two contradictory positions established over three-turn sequences. The three-part-structure includes an antecedent event, an opposition and a reaction to the opposition (Maynard, 1985), or a claim, a counter claim and a following expansion (Antaki, 1994; Cromdal, 2004).

In disputes, as well as all forms of interaction, participants orient to the sequentiality of an interaction, i.e., the way in which actions and utterances are ordered (e.g., Schegloff, 2007). Each turn in a conversation is understood as doing something and it is consequential for the ongoing social action. Maynard (1985) demonstrates the sequential structure of children's disputes which begins either verbally or non-verbally prior to the dispute. As Antaki (1994) and Danby and Theobald (2012) point out, it is the subsequent talk that makes what has been said a disputable matter or not. The following excerpt provided by Danby and Baker (1998b) shows how the second speaker constructs the first speaker's turn as producing a point of dispute:

A: Go and make her (nodding towards C) feel better.

B: I didn't do anything.

A: Yes, you did.

B: No.

The dispute begins on the second participant's turn with an opposition and continues until opposition ceases (e.g., Church, 2009). The disputability of the first turn is defined in the second turn; for example, whether an action is determined as an insult or tease always depends on its recipient and the frame at hand. Although the disagreement is a dispreferred activity in adult conversation with the use of delays and prefaces mitigating the disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984), in children's disputes, oppositional actions tend not to be dispreferred (e.g., Church, 2009; Goodwin, 1982). Children usually display opposition towards signalling opposition immediately and without mitigation (Goodwin, 1982; Goodwin et al., 2002); the clear orientation is towards highlighting rather than mitigating opposition. According to Goodwin et al. (2002), children display an orientation towards sustaining and promoting, rather than resolving the dispute, and they suggest that the tendency to display opposition is an important feature of children's peer culture. This definition works as a point of departure, as the focus in this paper is not on the dispute format, but rather on the threats.

### 2.1. Threats as part of disputes

Threats are forms of social action with the purpose to influence the behaviour of another. They are types of argumentative moves expressing the intention to punish the receiver or withhold an object/action to achieve the purpose of altering the receiver's behaviour (e.g., Benoit, 1983; Church, 2009). The idea of threat is performative,<sup>1</sup> to make some action happen. It means that the threat-maker's intention must be perceived as an intended threat by the recipient (Benoit, 1983).

<sup>1</sup> The term performative is drawn from J. L. Austin's work, "How to do Things with Words" (1962).

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