

## **“Who Would Like to Go to the Movies With Me?” Negotiating Social Participation Through Word Play**

**Barbara Turk Niskač, PhD (Tampere University)**  
**barbara.turkniskac@tuni.fi**

### **Introduction**

In his studies of two-to-five-year-olds, sociologist William Corsaro identified two main themes in children’s peer cultures. The first is social participation, since children want to be involved, participate in, and be part of a group. The second is sharing because “children want to gain control of their lives and they want to share that sense of control with each other” (Corsaro 2003, 37). Furthermore, a peer group provides an important context in which children learn language and culture (see for example Harness Goodwin 2006).

In this article, I draw attention to the ways in which preschool children navigate their social interactions within peer groups through word play. I provide a comprehensive definition of word play in the proceedings. My particular focus is on exploring how children engage in social interactions through the lenses of intersubjective meaning making and shared intentionality (Tomasello and Carpenter 2007). In this context, intersubjectivity is conceptualized as “a process that makes it possible for subjects to detect and change each other’s minds and behaviour, by purposeful, narrative expressions of emotion, intention, and interest” (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001, 18). I propose that examining how children initiate, maintain, and occasionally decline social participation in their day-to-day interactions with peers through word play offers a valuable perspective for gaining insights into the complexity of children’s social lives. By doing so, I underscore the significance of ethnographic research in comprehending the lives of children, which has broader implications for the field of childhood studies.

### **Methodology**

The data presented in this text were gathered through a combination of participant observation and video ethnography conducted at two preschools in Slovenia during the period spanning from 2010 to 2013. These data collection methods were integral components of the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted as part of my doctoral dissertation, in which I also employed other methods, such as participatory photography, to examine how work, play, and learning are interrelated in early childhood. For this short article, I analysed field notes from participant observation and transcripts of video footage of social interactions in which children used word play.<sup>1</sup>

## Word Play in Action

Like William Corsaro (2003, 69), I noticed that four-to-six-year-old children form friendships based on what they have in common, by sharing and participating in joint activities, including word play. In the definition of word play, I follow Catherine Garvey who distinguished three types of social play with language: “spontaneous rhyming and word play; play with fantasy and nonsense; and play with speech acts and discourse conventions” (1990, 67). She noted that spontaneous word play arises from states of mutual attending and desultory conversation with one child leading by starting the word play and other children repeating the leader’s words and rhythm (Garvey 1990, 67). In the word play I observed, it was common for a child to state a sentence which incurred a response from other children, who countered with a variation of that same sentence. For example, at snack time one child said: *“I will eat mud,”* and others followed: *“I will eat the flute [pretending that the hot-dog was a flute],”* *“I will eat the dinosaur,”* *“I will eat the poison from the snake.”* Such word play initiated and maintained social interactions among children. In this case the repetitive mode of the word play was also complemented with a play on the realistic and the unrealistic. To participate successfully in this social interaction, children had to adhere to an unspoken rule, which was to include an object in their statement that could not be eaten. Examples included mud, a flute, a dinosaur, and poison from a snake. However, children were also highly selective and occasionally declined to engage in social interactions initiated by other children. In such cases, they responded to their peers’ calls for this type of playful interaction by employing tactics such as silencing, ignoring, and direct refusal (Schwartzman 1978, 238). On one occasion during lunch, Nejc and Simon (both 4 years old) sat at the same table. Nejc was persistently trying to initiate conversation with Simon, who simply ignored him. On another occasion Jakob (6 years old) said to Ivan (5 years old): *“I will eat a snake,”* to which Ivan replied: *“Stop playing with food, this isn’t a snake, this is bread!”*

A similar type of word play involved questions. This, too, often occurred among children who were sitting together at mealtime. Jernej (4 years old) began interaction with a question, *“Who wants to go to the tractor with me?”* After the other boys sitting at the table raised their hands and shouted, *“Me!”* the word play continued in the same way, asking questions. On another occasion, Jernej, Aleš, Oto, and Sven (all four years old) were playing in a corner of the playground, leafing through a book. At first, all the boys browsed the book together, but then Jernej, Aleš, and Sven hid under the table which left no room for Oto. Oto, visibly angry, walked away, sat for a moment, then came back and said, *“I won’t invite any of you to my birthday party and you won’t even get an invitation!”* The boys came out from under the table, and Oto immediately suggested another play corner: *“Let’s go, there’s more space here.”* But instead, the boys left the book with Oto and went to play with Legos. Clearly, Oto did not achieve his desired goal; the book was not what he was after. Visibly unhappy, he tried to at least persuade Jernej to continue browsing the book with him: *“Jernej, you can look too.”* He was unsuccessful. The boys ignored him, but he did not give up. A little later, Sven and Jernej started playing with a tennis ball, Oto looked at them and told them: *“This isn’t a marble. Hey, do you want me not to give you an invitation to my birthday party? So, you won’t come then.”*

Jernej replied: “Yes, we want to come,” but Sven said: “I’m not going to invite you to my birthday party either.” Similar to the initial stage of Oto’s exclusion, he once again employed the strategy of negotiating social participation through a birthday party invitation. However, this time, this negotiation evolved spontaneously into a word play of questions, started by Jernej: “Who would like to go to the tractor with me?” Other boys exclaimed “Me!” and similarly continued with questions about who would like to go to the swimming pool, the movies, the birthday party, the playground, etc. Oto joined in the word play and got several turns to ask his questions. This engagement enabled him to re-connect with other boys, and when Sven interrupted the word play by saying “Let’s go play hide and seek!” Oto was again part of the group. Thus, word play in this situation entailed negotiating inclusion and exclusion from the peer group, and ultimately had a positive outcome for Oto, who had been successfully integrated into the peer play.

## Conclusion

This article delved into how preschool children employ word play to navigate their social world. For social participation to be successful, children have to recognize each other’s intentions and synchronize with each other in a shared activity (Tomasello and Carpenter 2007, 121–122). Helen Schwartzman similarly noted that, in order to be able to participate in shared play, children constantly communicate their intentions to each other and recognize each other’s intentions (Schwartzman 1978, 238). As I have shown, some of the negotiation within the peer group is conducted through word play. Without setting the rules of the game, children synchronized their conversations in word play and participated in intersubjective meaning-making. Imitative responses in word play functioned as “affirmation, acceptances, or commentaries with respect to accentuated displays of the other person” (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001, 7). Thus, initiating, maintaining and negotiating social participation within the peer group through intersubjective meaning making was at the very root of their word play exchange.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All research participants have been pseudonymized. The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

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### Author Biography

Barbara Turk Niskač is a Marie Curie Research Fellow at the Faculty of Education and Culture, Tampere University, Finland. She received her PhD in ethnology, cultural and social anthropology from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. In 2016, she was Fulbright visiting student at Rutgers University. Her main research interests include the anthropology of children, anthropology of work, visual and multimodal anthropology, and environmental anthropology.

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**Author contact:** Barbara Turk Niskač, PhD (Tampere University),  
[barbara.turkniskac@tuni.fi](mailto:barbara.turkniskac@tuni.fi)

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