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Where communication flows, languages swim freely: developing fieldwork methods for investigating preschool children's language beliefs

In this paper I reflect on methodological aspects to take into consideration when developing methods for investigating three- to five-year-old children's beliefs about language, language use and bilingualism. I analyze participant observations and notes taken in the field. The study focuses on bilingual Finnish-Swedish children in Swedish-medium preschools in Finland. At one of the schools, most of the children and I did not share a common language, so the interaction between us heightened both the children's language awareness and that of my own. This drew my attention to communicative aspects of embodiment and multimodality and to the distribution of responsibility for interaction. I detected two interaction orders in which children's agency stood out in their intention to make their voice heard, and I used my experiences to develop an ethically-oriented data-generating approach to enhance communication about communication.

Keywords: fieldwork methods, preschool children, interactive agency

1   Introduction

This paper is about a crucial step in investigating bilingual preschool children's (typically between 3–5 years of age) beliefs about language use and bilingualism. I present and analyze observations that were conducted in prospective research sites with the goal of developing methods to enhance communication about language use, which could then be used for the 'actual study'. When conducting research with children it is important to reflect upon the adult-child relationship throughout the research process (Curtin 2001; Christensen & James 2008; Albon & Rosen 2014). One vital consideration in this respect is the power imbalance. In this particular study, the relationships between me – an adult researcher – and the children at one of the two preschools I went to were colored by the fact that not all of us shared the same language(s). This became clear on the first day of fieldwork, and it was relevant for the interaction throughout the pre-observation research phase. Analyzing my pre-observations, I came to conceptualize communication through what I refer to as C-aspects, that is, connection, confidence, code and content. **Connection** stands for the mutual will to communicate. Small children do not necessarily speak to you out of courtesy, and as a researcher you will want to respect their "no" and not force your research quest upon them. **Confidence** is a matter of participant experience; that as a participant you are spoken to without being under assessment or accountable for something. **Code** is about agreeing on means for communication. Such means might be a common language, but they might as well be gestures or using artifacts around you to communicate. **Content**, in this model, refers to authenticity concerning the subject being talked about – all participants need to show interest in what is up on the agenda.

These C-aspects can be viewed as the meeting place between individual agency and social interaction, and I claim that they are the foundation of what I refer to as **distributed communicative competence**. I will show that the distribution of responsibility in the investigated communication situations is an example of interactive agency, and I propose that interactive agency is a relevant aspect to consider when aiming at saying something about children's beliefs.

The study reported here was carried out within the research project Child2ling, funded by the Academy of Finland 2013–2017. The goal of Child2ling is to describe and analyze bilingual Finnish-Swedish children's beliefs about and practices of bilingualism, focusing on bilingual Finnish-Swedish children in Swedish-medium preschools in cities in different linguistic areas of Finland. The two national languages of Finland, Finnish and Swedish, are used to a different extent in different parts of the country. The two sites in this study differ from each other in that one of the preschools is situated in a monolingual Finnish city and the other in a bilingual Finnish-Swedish city.

The theoretical framework of the project views beliefs about language as not only represented but also constructed in everyday interaction (Spolsky 2004, 2007, 2009). In this study, children are seen as participants with an agency of their own, being thus considered as participants in the construction of meaning (James, Jenks & Prout 1998). In order to capture some of the complexity in how participants actually co-construct meaning, a holistic nexus analysis approach (Scollon & Scollon 2004) is used for analyzing encounters. The nexus analysis approach means that when analyzing a specific practice we take the participants' **historical bodies** into consideration, as well as the **interaction order** and the **discourses in place** (Scollon & Scollon 2004: 13–14).

To develop research methods that are appropriate for small children, I needed to get to know their ways of being in order to have a basis for developing my methods (Curtin 2001). Thus, I used the nexus-analytic concepts of historical body and interaction order to analyze my pre-observations. The pre-observations I reflect upon in this article made me realize the importance of paying attention to agency and the conceptualization of the child-adult dichotomy, not only as a theoretical notion or as an analytical tool, but also as an actual process in the fieldwork and in data collection. In this article, I present these insights by reflecting on how to build a communication climate that supports interactive agency. For example, when I leaned on my assumptions of the child-adult relationship instead of paying attention to the actual communication situation, the communication fell flat on the floor. However, when I let go and was 'present in the present' as an equal participant, the children told me about their thoughts. Another crucial aspect is the incremental co-construction of beliefs, which takes part in interaction, but this discursive aspect will not be discussed in this particular article.

2   Background

2.1   Research with children

Research into children's opinions or beliefs can provide knowledge that counterbalances the weight of adults' voices (opinions or beliefs) in matters that concern activities or institutions involving both children and adults. The approach taken in this article is in line with the **new sociology of childhood** – studies that see children as actors and childhood as socially constructed (Matthews 2007; Prout 2011). However, as Spyrou (2011) has pointed out, we need to focus on how we interact with children in research that we call research about, or with, children if we want to represent their voices. Drawing on Komulainen (2007), Spyrou (2011) questions the concept of voice as being tied to viewing a person as autonomous and static, and highlights the importance of analyzing

the interaction holistically, with an awareness that different voices emerge in different contexts. In the words of Spyrou (2011):

> we need as researchers to become more aware of how children's voices are constantly constrained and shaped by multiple factors such as our own assumptions about children, our particular use of language, the institutional contexts in which we operate and the overall ideological and discursive climates which prevail. These issues may become particularly salient in research with children who have little or no speech. (Spyrou 2011: 152)

Spyrou's point is within the same conceptual district as Prout (2011), who revises the foundation of the new sociology. Prout (2011) comes to the conclusion that if researchers stay put with the dichotomies that are vivid within the approach (agency/ structure, nature/culture, being/becoming) they will be blind to everything that does not fit those categories. He proposes research perspectives that recognize fluidity and relationality as methodological concepts instead of more essentialized ones. From a pragmatic perspective, the incremental and dialogical nature of communication is crucial for understanding the specific meaning constructed in a particular conversation (see, for instance, Edwards 1993).

Accessing children's opinions and beliefs is a thoroughly documented research step and ways of getting children to share their thoughts by trying to even out the power imbalance between the researcher and the children is a common theme in research literature. Crump and Phipps (2013) propose that the most important thing in research with children is the willingness to foster a respectful, playful and creative relationship. A researcher can find out what is important for the child if she/he lets the child lead the conversation (Curtin 2001). This implies taking a step away from the adult's traditional role and responding to the child's will (not only her/his need) and letting the child set and steer the agenda. Such a role is often referred to as the "least adult" role (Spyrou 2011; Johansson 2012), but I call this the "auntie-mode", because as an aunt one experiences the freedom to interact with nieces and nephews without the duty of child rearing, but one can still stay in the role of an adult. It is important for the researcher to familiarize him- or herself with children's milieu and the children themselves (Barley & Barth 2013), but an "auntie-mode research attitude" can actually be a strange and rather artificial way of interaction for both the child and the adult, as concluded by Curtin (2001):

> Establishing a different type of relationship can be difficult at times for the researcher because children often react with bewilderment and then test the limits of the relationship. The children may find a nondirective and nonauthoritarian adult-child relationship puzzling if it is a new experience to them. (Curtin 2001: 297)

Johansson (2012) reports on a project in which the researchers tried to treat children as co-workers and hold back from being "an adult in charge". Afterwards the children assessed the adults as being too kind and not keeping the order. Hence, if the participants expect traditional roles to prevail, it might be problematic if the researcher tries to even out the power imbalance. Still, there might be interactional occasions where traditional roles even out, such as when an adult and a child are absorbed in a common activity or when children know more about an activity than the adult (Johansson 2012: 107).

Curtin (2001) also focuses on cognitive facts by suggesting that preschoolers might not have the vocabulary for talking about anything other than the here and now, or the capacity for understanding complex causality. This means that the researcher must be alert to the immediate situation and the dialogue that emerges in the ongoing interaction. Children also communicate in ways that are to some extent different from adults. They might, for instance, be more silent and touch more. Drawing pictures can be a fruitful way to communicate with children. Not only is the drawing a good conversation piece (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry 2009), but children might also feel less observed and therefore less inhibited when they are caught up in an activity. Doing things, rather than "just talking" is presented as the main way of proceeding when doing research with children (Curtin 2001; Christensen & James 2008; Crump 2014).

2.2   Agency and the relation between a child and an adult

In this study, I take a dialogical and developmental approach on agency and focus on **interactive agency**, as presented by Nijnatten (2013). The concept of agency can (heuristically) be defined as the competence to take action, while the lack of agency makes only *re*action to inner or outer stimuli, a state of 'being acted upon', possible. According to Nijnatten (2013), agency is a capacity that we use to handle emotions and experiences within ourselves (individual agency), but it is also a capacity that we use in interactions with others (interactive agency). Children's individual agency develops (or does not develop) in interaction with those who (should) care about them during the first years of their life. Through dialogue the child learns to make sense of the inner and outer world and to experience continuity of the self, i.e. the child learns to feel and act as an "I", a person that has a voice that others listen to. If the dialogue does not include recognition of the child's needs, this might not happen. Nijnatten (2013) describes the relation between the quality of the child's dialogue with primary caregivers and her/his agency in the light of psychological effects.

Individual development is tied to language and conceptual development throughout our lifetime, but the child's initial acquisition of language is different from adults in the sense that the child is biologically dependent on adults and thus

encounters the specific environments that the surrounding adults introduce to her or him. The child's individual agency develops at the same time as their first language(s) during their first years, in interaction with an adult or adults through the process of naming and other more complex types of scaffolding.

Adult mediation and scaffolding when acting with children do not imply that children would be less active in the interaction, but it does imply that the adult is in a more powerful position. This developmental perspective reflects the belief, common in Western countries, that adults are responsible for guiding children how to get by in this world, something that is mainly done through language (Ochs & Schieffelin 1986). Through guidance we present children with our worldview, and to a great extent we thereby teach children if they can have agency, and if so, what kind of agency can be theirs (Nijnatten 2013). These unequal positions in child-adult interaction concern not only verbal language but also embodiment (Albon & Rosen 2014). An adult can for example lift a child or prevent him from doing something, but not vice versa.

To be an adult is to have a sociocultural position of stronger interactive agency. Interactive agency "is about the voice of the participants being heard, about their contribution to the exchange of thoughts in encounters, and about their capacity to present and negotiate identities" (Nijnatten 2013: 33). In the analysis of my pre-observations and field notes it became clear to me that the children's desire to communicate made them take actions. Interactive agency, that is, the agency of making oneself heard, is also the aspect of agency that I focus on in this article.

3   Design of the study

When entering the research sites, my intent was to interact with the children rather than to observe them (cf. Angrosino 2005). I engaged with the children and got to know them and their preschool life in order to be able to interact with them on their terms. I soon became aware of the fact that I also needed to recognize and get to know my own way of being around children. I tried to avoid repeating situations in which I had interpreted their behavior as a sign of their being uncomfortable. For my first visit, I brought a video recorder to the site to record for a research colleague. Nevertheless, as I noticed that the camera raised a wall between the children and me, I decided not to bring the recorder with me until I had some method to try out. In this article, I report on the interactions that were not recorded. I went to the preschools on 14 different occasions and spent about three hours there at each visit. I took on the auntie-mode and gave the children my attention, but stayed in my adult role and, for instance, helped them to get dressed for the playground. Occasionally I also gathered a group of children around me and

led different games, but half of the time I just sat around and let the children take the initiative to interaction. The field notes were written as an immediate consequence of my visits to the preschools.

Analyzing my field notes, I noticed that almost every entry was followed by comments on my status and relation to the children and on the communication as such, for example on the mode of communication (touching, verbal utterances, glances, etc.). I realized that those aspects could be viewed through the lenses of the concepts of historical body and interaction order (Scollon & Scollon 2004). The term historical body stands for the experiences and ways of thinking that we carry around, i.e. our habitus. We are mostly blind to our historical body as we experience it as natural. My use of the term interaction order is in tune with Goffman (1963); it describes our ways of acting toward each other in an encounter.

The study I present in this article answers to calls by Spyrou (2011) and Prout (2011) in that I study the relational aspects of interaction and keep the reflective focus on how the relation between a child and an adult play a role in the interactions. I present the results in a narrative form, trying to pass on the actual process of this part of ethnographic research.

4   Results: lessons learnt in the field

In this section I describe how my growing awareness of the C-aspects (connection, confidence, code and content) influenced my research methods as it helped me to adapt to the interaction with the children on a more equal level compared to what my historical body up to that point would have made possible. The C-aspects are the conceptualization of what was needed for our communication to work. By the end of the pre-observations it became clear to me that the interaction orders of **playing activities** and **narrative situations** were key interaction orders within the preschool children's everyday register. These interaction orders therefore became the foundation on which I could develop my methods. They were often advanced through children's **meta-communicative comments** (not always verbal, but also glances and gestures, for instance), which helped me to understand the children's view of the situation at hand.

4.1   Meta-communicative comments

The children and I used meta-communicative comments in all of our communication, but sometimes the meta-communicative comments were close to being an interaction

order themselves (setting the rules for our relationship). Arriving at the first preschool site, unaware that many children there did not speak any Swedish, I presented myself as a Swedish speaker who does not know any Finnish. It took several visits before we had reached a mutual understanding of our preconditions for communication. However, some children took on the role of a leader on the very first day, both translating and telling the other children that they needed to speak Swedish with me or informing other children that I did not speak Finnish. The lack of a common language triggered the need for meta-communicative communication, and some of the children acted on their own initiative in these situations, showing their interactive agency in doing so.

4.2   Playing activities

My historical body soon came into my reflective focus as I realized that I am not a playing adult. I tried to make contact with children by sitting down with them when they were playing, but the problem was that I did not play. I tried, but I was not able to. Instead, I explained. For example, when Tobias (all names in this article are pseudonyms) and another boy had set up the rails for a wooden train, and they had problems getting a wagon under a bridge because they had loaded it too high, I instantly started to explain why the wagon could not get through. When doing so, and in other similar situations, I realized that I was carrying around an explanatory urge that had nothing to do with playing – not even with teaching – or guiding. I changed my ways during the period of pre-observation; even if I could not go into play mode, I stopped explaining and started asking questions or suggesting ways to try and find solutions. This is the kind of "carrying around" that the term historical body refers to. During the train incident Tobias did not once look at me, he paid no attention to me at all. He was the first child to open my eyes to the fact that connection was not to be taken for granted, but something that only came about if both parties were willing to establish it. It was an act of agency from Tobias' part to give me the cold shoulder, so to speak – he literally turned his back on me.

In order not to make the children uncomfortable, I decided early on to try to avoid correcting the children in our interactions, even though that was very hard for me to carry through. The "guiding-mode" of an adult gave rise to my producing numerous automatic corrective utterances during a single day, and even though children are used to this, the eye of the observing researcher sometimes seemed to embarrass them. This was the case with Tove, who established contact with me, and through touching and speaking Finnish and some phrases in Swedish co-operated with me to create a bridge for communication. However, on one occasion we were singing one of those songs that are accompanied by movements or gestures, and Tove could not get one gesture right. I had detected no lack of fine motor skills in her, so I tried to show her how to do this

specific gesture. By doing so, I destroyed her trust in me as a friendly auntie, and it took some time to rebuild the trust. She physically moved away from me and turned her head in another direction.

Tove also showed two different sides of herself, depending on whether our activities were recorded or not. I could sense that she did not want to be observed or evaluated because when I was recording she became silent and suddenly seemed shy and less competent in the activities we had carried out before. "I could sense" is also part of my historical body: my feelings and interpretations of the children's attitudes and behavior toward me and toward our interactions are anchored within my own sociocultural mind map. Tove is one of the children who made me understand the importance of confidence. Children's confidence in me seemed to be proportionate to their confidence in communicating and making themselves heard. Choosing to close the door on communication by being silent is an act of agency, but it is not part of agency as in making oneself heard. To be able to say "no" in a way that gets respect is essential for individual wellbeing, but it only takes you so far. As my goal as a researcher was to be trusted as a listener, occasions when children turned away from me felt like a failure to me.

There was one kind of playing activity that I could participate in, or at least in which I could play along. This was clear when I was reading a book about different professions, and a paragraph about the hairdresser led me to tell the children that I was nervous about going to the hairdresser in Finland because I did not speak Finnish. The children immediately came to my rescue. They fetched a box with props of various kinds and placed me on a chair and went to business. Together the children guided me through a visit to the hairdresser, alternating between speaking Finnish and Swedish and using gestures, facial expressions and the props to get by. This occasion made me aware that when a genuine connection is made, and we share something to talk about (content), communication takes off. The children used every means available and co-operated in order to reach the communicative goal of explaining a visit to the hairdresser to me. The situation also gave them the upper hand because they were the ones helping me out, guiding me on how to get by in this world. Their confidence and agency seemed strong as they managed to hold my full attention. Situations like this also raised my awareness that verbal language was far from being the only code available to keep communication going (see. lingual bias, Block 2014). I will return to this below, in the case of narrative situations. There were no meta-communicative comments in this particular situation, but the situation itself could be seen as a meta-communicative comment as the children used play to tell me about a real-life interaction order, that of visiting the hairdresser.

4.3   Narrative situations

As in playing activities, also in narrative situations the communication itself seemed more important than the specific code that was used in the interaction order. This can be seen in the fact that I kept on speaking Swedish even to those children who did not respond in Swedish. As these were all Swedish-medium preschools, this was in line with the formal policy and not an odd situation for anyone; even in the preschool where many children did not speak Swedish it was clear that most had a pretty good understanding of the language. What was remarkable to me was that the children acted on their own initiative to tell me about things. They did so in Finnish, in Swedish and by using gaze, touch, props and whatever other means were available to them. These interactions raised the awareness of my own lingual bias (Block 2014), because the communication was multimodal, embodied to a much higher degree than I would have expected. In order not to distinguish between the codes they used by grammatical form, I would go as far as to say that the children communicated in Finnish, in Swedish, in Gestures, and in Body Placement. Tobias, the boy we met by the railway tracks above, finally gave me his trust. I noticed it first because he faced me with his whole body and deliberately caught my eye. Over time the connection felt more relaxed, with confidence on both sides, and the communication started to flow.

With Tobias there was never a shortage of things to talk about (content), and even though he did not speak Swedish, he was always eager to make me understand what he wanted to tell me. A clear example of this happened one day when the children were getting dressed to go outside to play. I describe this as a narrative interaction order because getting dressed seemed to be something going on in the background, behind the scene in which the actual story took place. On this occasion, Tobias was lying on the floor and apparently just tapping the carpet with his hand. I was a bit impatient and wanted him to get on his feet and dress up, but he kept on tapping on the floor and saying something in Finnish. Finally I asked what he was saying, making some suggestions. "Oh, is it a soccer field?" I asked in Swedish. He did not answer. I kept on asking the same question, uncertain whether or not he knew the Swedish word for soccer field. After a while, I took him under his arms and set him on his feet so he could get his overalls on, but then he used his foot to tap on another picture on the carpet and I realized my mistake. It was not that he did not know the Swedish word for soccer field, but it was that I did not know what a soccer field looked like! He was tapping his foot on a picture of a soccer field – the first picture had been a basketball court. He finally managed to make himself heard, but he had to fight hard against my grownup mindset, my belief that I knew and he did not.

Some narrative situations can also be seen as meta-communicative; one example is our p(l)aying a visit to the hairdresser. The children also made an effort to tell me how things work at their preschool. There was an explanatory air to these situations, one that echoes the same sociocultural mind map that I carry around as part of my historical body. Explaining is one of the things we learn in preschool and later in school.

The interaction orders of the preschools I visited foster agency, and my observations show that the children managed to make themselves heard in these interaction orders. The observations also made me realize that in order to get communication going, there must be jointly accepted responsibility to build a connection between the participants. In addition, it requires confidence as well as a shared will to use and 'listen' to different codes when the need arises. When it is all there, we can talk about distributed communication competence.

5   Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to present pre-observations and field notes I made before embarking on actual ethnographic research, in order to illustrate some grounds for developing methods for research with preschool children (three- to five-year-olds) about their beliefs. From one perspective, there is nothing new to this kind of research – researchers before me have already stated that it is important to get to know children if you want them to talk to you about their opinions (for example Barley & Barth 2013), and that children use their body to convey meaning (for example Curtin 2001). What I propose is a model that can be used to detect when children want to speak up and reveal their voices, rather than to give strategies for making children answer research questions. My pre-observations gave me the incentive to develop my data-generating approach on the foundation of interaction orders with which children are familiar and comfortable. By doing this, I could show my respect for the children and at the same time affirm their interactive agency. This is a solid advice for doing research with small children: change the routines that they are used to as little as possible – a bug in the window will be enough excitement to rock their world, a topic to keep them talking for the rest of the day.

The interaction orders that emerged with the children were of two kinds: playing activities and narrative situations. They were followed by meta-communicative comments primarily connected to our lack of a common language. In these recurring interaction orders I could detect children's agency as their wanting to make themselves heard. That is, the initiative came from them. Building on the children's initiative is a reliable way to accomplish an ethically-oriented research approach.

The concept of making oneself heard is not problematized in this article, but rather seen simply as taking an active part in the interaction and also taking responsibility for reaching the communicative goals that emerge in the interaction. It should be noted, though, that the older children in the preschool (four- to five-year-olds) showed a much more complex interactive agency, contributing their thoughts to various matters such as language use. For example, the older children's desire to explain and guide me in their preschool environment signaled their understanding of the importance of learning conventionalized meanings in order to get by. To know the importance of the routines and conventionalized meanings in a situation is a crucial insight and a means for making one's voice heard. The children taught me what the different signs meant, and how to use their free playtime-board if I wanted to play a certain game (one should place a name tag in a square marked by the symbol of a specific game). They used their interactive agency to introduce me to the cultural cues and thereby made it easier for me to use my interactive agency in a smooth manner (voicing which game I wanted to play).

The children in this study made their voice heard on several occasions during my visits. This was only possible when there was a connection between us, when the children had confidence in me, when we found a common code and when there was some content to be shared. These C-aspects were never a question of me giving something and children receiving it, or vice versa, but they emerged through mutual attention to the communication situation. This is why I refer to the model of the C-aspects as **distributed communication competence**. I propose that distributed communication competence is the ticket to conversations where opinions and beliefs about different matters emerge – sometimes even in the form of the speaker positioning her- or himself. I think of the model as ethically-oriented, still recognizing the vanity in that description since all research should be ethically-oriented. The particularly ethical strand I claim to put into the model is connected to children's interactive agency, as it aims at enhancing, or reinforcing, their agency. Strengthening children's agency is a task that is not only written into preschool policy documents, but is also important for researchers who aim to increase scholarly knowledge about children's beliefs about language and language use.

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