

**"It was hecka funny:"**

**Some Features of Children's Conversational Development<sup>1</sup>**

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In this election year, we are hearing a lot of attack humor. We hear that the former governor of Texas, George W. Bush, is Vice-President Cheney's young protégé, or that the reason he needed Cheney at the 9/11 hearings is that he is still on training wheels. We have always had political humor.

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<sup>1</sup> The data in this paper were collected by an unfunded collaboration of Martin Lampert and Susan Ervin-Tripp, with the aid of Richard Sprott, Elena Escalera, Lauren Silver, and Michael Shopshire. The bilingual data come from the dissertation project of Iliana Reyes, and the preschool data from the dissertation project of Elena Escalera. Transcription and coding were done over many years by dozens of undergraduates at Holy Names University and at the University of California, Berkeley. Helen Stillman coded the preschool data.

A generation ago, Dick Gregory was a well-known African American stage comedian. His memorable performances are available to us as phonograph recordings. Gregory grew up in extreme poverty in St. Louis, and was involved in the civil rights marches in the sixties. His major political themes were poverty and civil rights. Besides autobiographies, he wrote on American history, so he used historical themes in his comedy routines. He liked to quote the Declaration of Independence on a citizen's duty to protest an unjust government. A current analogue would be to Iraqi resistance to occupation.

In his speeches he used linguistic features as allusions, to make the point that we don't look at black violence the same way as white violence in American history. In the next example, he made an implicit comparison between black rioters and the American colonists' resistance to the British. He gave African American vernacular features to Paul Revere to evoke the shared political situation of colonists resisting the British and Black Panthers resisting the police. Dialect features also contrast the revolutionary Paul Revere with modern viewers.(Ervin-Tripp 2001) This is a 1969 college talk.

- (1) 1 [lo, slow] in the \*early days, when the british  
\*was the \*PO:lice,  
2 a \*white boy, by the name of \*Paul \*Revere  
3 rode through the \*white \*community and said  
4 "git a \*gun, white folks, the \*PO:lice is comin/"  
5 [audience laughter, applause]  
6 you can understand the \*white \*panthas,=  
7 can't you,  
8 but the \*black \*panthas make you forgit  
about your \*history,  
9 don't they/<sup>2,3</sup>,

Solo comedians like Gregory often switch style, dialect, or language for punch lines or to mark shifts in perspective. In effect, solo comedians represent dialogue by themselves producing different voices.

The focus of this paper is a first look at how these skills develop. The developmental history of humor in children's dialogue can be seen as a window into the conversational component of pragmatic development.

In adult comedy or adult humorous turns in conversation one can see how a conversationalist accomplishes placement of humor in the conversation, addresses shared perspectives and issues, picks a target every ally in the audience can share, uses code switches effectively, deploys style features either to mimic someone or to allude to social features or values. Adults sometimes take risks to self-presentation or to social relationships in their joking, by giving vocal signals that they are not serious, or by making sure the key of the conversation clearly implies irreals when they begin to joke about themselves or the listener (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp in press). In adult spontaneous conversational humor we find the following features:

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<sup>2</sup>Gregory, Dick.. "Black rioters"(1969) from *The dark side, the light side*, Poppy Records.

<sup>3</sup>Most of the transcripts use the Gumperz-Berenz notation (Gumperz and Berenz 1993), which was designed for computer transcription of conversational data. Here we use \*for stressed lexical item, (xxx) for unintelligible speech, {[f] loud speech}, {[p] soft speech}, :: phoneme prolongation, <5> 5 second silence, =overlapping segment=, ==latching, / terminal drop, ..for pauses. and added CAPS for a stressed syllable.

- many topics outside of the immediate context, chosen from shared interests
- mimicry
- solo narratives
- shared put-down targets
- risking social relations by teasing
- risking self-presentation by humor about the self
- variation of language style to mark perspective shifts

In this paper we will not go into detail about the causes of age changes since we have only the outcome behavior. But we can speculate about what changes with age in peer conversation could be due to. They can be about

- changes in memory or processing ability,
- changes in knowledge about the world, broadening possible topics,
- changes in social skills or social goals,
- socialization by others,
- age graded cultural environments.

These data come from an ongoing project over many years on informal interaction. Our studies of humor are an incidental by-product of the conversational data. Lampert and Ervin-Tripp started an analysis of humor with conversations collected by students in university class projects (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992; Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 1998) . Later, we developed a method of taping children with no adults present (Ervin-Tripp 2000) . We used recess and lunchtime pairing of mutually chosen friends at the second grade and fifth grade level. The schools were socially contrasted: a middle class parochial school and a working class, heterogeneous public school in the neighborhood of a shipyard. Iliana Reyes added working class immigrant bilingual samples of the same age. Elena Escalera collected some preschool snack time samples. Here our examples are from ages 3, 5, 7, and 10, in contrast with adults.

<i>Investigator</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Social source</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>School</i>
Elena Escalera	Berkeley	UC preschool	3,4,5	CSC
Iliana Reyes	Oakland	Bilingual	7,10	W
Lampert & Ervin-Tripp	Alameda	Working class	7,10	L
Lampert & Ervin-Tripp	Oakland	Middle class parochial	7,10	T

## **1. Reference to topics outside the immediate context**

Children's first talk is typically directed to get attention to themselves, to get another person to do something, or to get a hearer's shared attention to something nearby. Very young children, around two or three, do not converse easily with other kids. Some of them don't know how to start a conversation. They can have trouble joining up in activities with others. Of course, all these skills vary because some children are more extroverted or get more home experience. Even some adults can't carry on a conversation beyond "oh".

Humor involves laughing at the weird and unexpected, or at the clash of expectation with reality. Early humor is a child's laugh with delight at what happens or at what they see. Since getting attention to something both can see is a common function of early talk, it is not surprising that three and four year olds can get laughter from each other by

pointing at or talking about something odd in the context, or by clowning, or by making funny noises, or by dressing up, or by putting a balloon on one's head.

Our interest, however, is in the words that make hearers laugh. We identified all the incidents of laughing or giggling in our transcripts which had identifiable causes. Example 2 is a conversation between two five year old boys.

- (2) 247 Pe: hey look [laugh] it almost landing on my head  
>248 and then you have a balloon hat/  
249 Ma: [laugh] if it touches somebody they'll have  
a balloon hat/

Escalera CSC 5M1<sup>4</sup>

Children's humor calls attention to the context or comments on the context or creates a violation with expectation. Context-based humor is the highest in frequency in the youngest children, and drops off.

- (3) >13 T: Karen \*look i've got \*disgusting stuff  
14 \*stuck ins::ide my lunch/  
15 K: [laughs and sounds of disgust]  
16 \*yeah isn't that \*sick/  
17 T: ==\*\*yuck \*disgusting/  
18 \*\*Karen guess what =i've got/ =  
.  
26 \*pes::to?  
27 \*pa::sta/  
28 K: [moan]

UCDisclab T7F4

That pesto pasta in your lunch is disgusting is a shared attitude here. Children up through seven have a great interest in what is disgusting and find it very funny. The point here is that there is plenty of grist for humor in children's physical surroundings, and as they learn about the world, the span of their topics enlarges. The impersonal immediate context is still around a third of the content of humor at seven. But, by ten, it is unimportant. We will see what has replaced context as the source of humor by ten.

## 2. Mimicry

By three, children have a range of markers in their speech that indicate either emphasis or role contrasts during dramatic play. By four we hear their changes in loudness, rate, and pitch, we hear funny voice quality, accents, and lexical discourse markers like *OK*, *so*, and *well*. They use markers for turn boundaries, and at later ages, they indicate shifts in topics, perspective, and activity frame, and boundaries of episodes.

When preschool children are taking roles, we hear deep voices for representing males, and even accents and medical terminology for representing doctors. Elaine Andersen, in her marvelous studies of role playing, showed that children's youngest role playing uses vocal and phonological features and later adds lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic choices. Four year olds in several languages had people in power like doctors and teachers say *well* more often (Andersen, Brizeula et al. 1999). That kind of tuned ear means children can be masters of mimicry.

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<sup>4</sup>Transcript names indicate school, age, gender, group number.

Typically in peer role playing, children's voices differentiate whether they are speaking as the director, as the child speaker during planning and commentary, or as an actor in role voice. The issue for us here is when this ability is put at the service of humor, which is a step beyond collaborative play. In the fourth example 3 year old boys say:

(4) 74 D: come in, come in Batman, come in  
 75 A: come in Batman  
 76 D: ==this is Robin  
 77 G: come in Superman, come in Super- man/  
 Escalera CSC 3M2

At three, children can take a local stimulus, the microphones, to launch into the voices they think appropriate to Batman and Robin. At five they have moved on to astronauts. In each group three boys join in the role play. (Notice the appearance of overlap repair on line 94 as well).

(5) 88 D: okay/ hello/ hello/ hello/  
 89 C: can you read me? can you read me?  
 90 D: oh no my shirt fell off/  
 91 C: can you read me/..#playing with microphones#  
 92 D: yes i can = read you/  
 93 L: = { [p] can you read }=  
 94 D: yes i can read you/  
 95 i can read you/  
 96 C: come in, astronaut/ come in, astronaut/  
 Escalera CSC 5M2

At all ages from three to ten, the microphone stimulates singing like radio and TV performers with a lot of laughter. The voices of the media are a major resource.

Funny stories are an important part of adult conversational humor, whether fantastic or realistic. But everyone who works with young children has noticed that they don't tell each other anecdotes as much as they tell them to adults.

### 3. Narration

Why is narrative humor so difficult for children? First, solo stories are extended productions, demanding planning and ample working memory. If they are realistic reports, they require recall. Even more important, story-tellers either have to get the partner to yield the floor to a solo performance<sup>5</sup>, or get the partner's collaboration in producing the story. In both cases, they have to get interest, which is unlikely in the case of long personal anecdotes. Some adults are willing to scaffold stories, but children aren't. The most collaborative productions in our data are joint role play drama, which children successfully do by three, in some cases, and can do well at four. But we found no extended personal funny anecdotes between children in our data until seven.

One extended solo narrative by a three year old on the phone to another child of the same age about a dispute between cats was mostly meows and was interrupted by the completely frustrated other child. The first example in our data is at seven. Example 6 is a successful tale by a seven year old girl.

<sup>5</sup> Angeliki Nicolopoulou, who has worked with Head Start children, finds that solo narratives appear very early if adults provide the floor for the child's presentation. (Nicolopoulou 2002).

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(6) 56 K: [laughs] \*Terry our \*yard is made out of \*clay?  
57 T: =laughs=  
58 K: we were \*breaking up \*clayballs for  
    \*three \*straight \*hours  
59 { [ac] \*just to put in the \*bulbs }?  
60 { [ac] it was like { [f] \*smash? }  
61 and we were like \*picking out a \*gazillion  
62 little tiny stones and dad was like  
63 = [f] \*stones \*stones \*stones \*stones / } =  
64 T: = [laughing ] =  
65 K: = \*huh i need \*water / =  
66 T: = [laughs ] =  
67 K: = i'm \*sick of saying stones // =  
68 T: = [laughing ] =  
69 K: oh um... \*Lisa got \*tired of \*just using one  
70 \*tool so she gets = \*two sledge \*hammers? =  
71 T: = [laughs ] =  
72 K: { [ac & f] and i said \*what are you \*doing with  
73 the sledge hammer }?  
74 i said/  
75 { [ac & hi] \*smashing the \*dirt? }  
76 { [f] \*\*no:: \*dumbo }  
    { [ac] you're \*just going to make it  
77 \*go- (plunge) into \*globs }?  
78 { [ac] it's like } \*oka::y then i'll get \*two::  
79 \*toothpicks? { [ac] he's like } [sigh]  
80 { [lo] you're \*just going to  
    break the \*toothpicks  
81 and get a piece of wood \*stuck in it }/  
82 it's like what \*can i do?  
83 and dad's like..  
84 { [lo] \*go clean \*up your room }/  
85 and like { [f] \*\*no:: }?  
86 T: [laughs]

UCDisclab T7F4

The other child's laughter throughout shows the success of this anecdote. In the seventh example, also at seven, there are matched fantasies, each girl using the other's name to attract interest, and each taking turns having the floor. The first has the format of a known rhyme, with singsong delivery.

(7) 99 Car: t: *de de qué hablamos?*  
    e: what are we talking about?  
100 Jul: t: *um de- de la casa/*  
    e: um of- of the house  
101 Car: t: *okay/ { [singsong reciting]*  
    *um había una vez/*  
    e: once upon a time there was  
    t: *una niña que se llamaba Julia /*  
    e: a girl named Julia  
103 t: *que estaba en su: casa:/*  
    e: who was in her house  
104 t: *y luego el guinea pig se salio a*  
    *escondida/*  
    e: and then her guinea pig ran away  
105 t: *Julia estaba dormida/*

e: Julia was sleeping  
 106 t: *y el coca-cola se salio:,*  
 e: and the coca-cola got out  
 107 t: *y después se fue: y se escapo! y \*ya*  
 e: and then it left and it escaped already  
 108 Jul: t: okay  
 109 Car: t: *y luego Julia estaba llorando*  
 e: and then Julia was crying  
 110 >Jul: t: *okay ahora yo,*  
 e: okay now me,  
 111 t: *había una vez Carolina*  
       *se le escapó su perrito*  
 e: once there was Carolina;  
       her puppy escaped  
 112 t: *estaba llorando*  
 e: she cried  
 113 t: *y lleno todo- toda la casa de agua//*  
       [giggle]  
 e: and she filled the whole house with  
       water[giggle]  
 114 Car: t: *y estoy llorando [fake cry]mm mm mm*  
 e: and i'm crying [fake cry] mm mm mm  
 115 Jul: t: *ay =\*ma\*\*má= [giggle]*  
 e: oh =no= [giggle]  
 116 Car: t: *=\*ma\*\*má= [giggle]*

Reyes W7F3<sup>6</sup>

Though we have many shared dramatic performances which tell stories, solo humorous narratives are a later-developing skill. The dominance of joint dramatic narratives is still apparent at ten. Each child supports the other in dramatic play.

#### 4. Targeting others

A lot of adult humor is about criticism of shared human targets. Vice President Dan Quayle was the butt under Bush I, and now whole books take Bush II on with humor. This practice of common targeting starts in three year old children by teasing each other, since the other child is close at hand, in a way part of the context. We see this in example 8.

(8) 102 D: coocoo poopoo head! [giggle]  
 103 G: you big poopoo butthead!  
 104 A: poo poo poo (gibberish) um

Escalera CSC 3M2

Example 9 of five year olds is socially subtler. Several children are playing telephone and whispering. They express concern about whether the target, the teaching assistant, can hear a shared insult in which her body is the target of criticism. Especially when the target is an adult, whether she can be teased face to face depends on your relationship. The teaching assistant is a very large woman, and her body attracts their comment, but she is playful, and does a lot of teasing herself. Here we have a discussion by three five year old girls about whether to keep secret their comment about her.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Victor Gonzalez and coded by Rosa Lutrario.

(9) 178 [whispering in telephone]  
 >179 M: {[pp]Emily has an elephant on her  
       butt}[laughs]  
 180 L: did you hear that? #to Emily#  
 181 E: unh'unh/  
 182 L: goo::d/ cuz it's something about you= ..  
 183 =with an elephant=  
 184 M: =yeah =  
 185 K: it's a bad thing..they said a bad thing  
 186 but you're not going to tell her  
 187 because it's silly huh?  
 188 M: yeah/ when we get back to the classroom  
 189 we'll tell her/

Escalera CSC 5F2

This kind of humor develops in two directions, outside and inside the interacting group. One is the easy aim towards outside targets, where humor is a vehicle of shared perspectives on absent or distant persons. This humor can be a useful basis for expressing joint norms and attitudes that are the stuff of friendship. A lot of folklore research examines joking about shared targets. But humor is not funny unless you share values. In example ten there are ten year old girls criticizing a classmate's clothes. We have a lot of examples like this from the ten year olds in the working class school, who gossip mercilessly and joyfully about bodies, clothes, tastes, dating, and behavior of all kinds.

(10)169 M: t: que feo se viste Ramón  
       e: see how ugly Ramon dresses  
 170 A: t: *yeah donde está*  
       e: yeah, where is he?  
 171 M: t: *allí= palla =*  
       e: over there  
 172 A: t: =*(a de veras)=*  
       e: ah it's true  
 173 t: *mira los zapatos que trae*  
       e: look at the shoes he's wearing  
 174 [both laugh]  
 175 t: *(ye:up)*

Reyes W10 F6<sup>7</sup>

Subtler and more complex is the evolution of humor directed towards a conversational partner, what we call ribbing or teasing. While there is funny name-calling by young children, teasing about the other's individual behavior or attributes does not appear as early. It increases and becomes a very important component of adult talk of friends. We found that with adults there can be significant increases of teasing between people who are alike in gender and probably ethnicity or other similarities. You might think this teasing is because being close gives you the liberty of teasing and of using reverse-valued epithets. Teasing can be a significant boost to friendship. But it requires intimacy. At a gay party, a friend was overheard saying to another guest, "You can't call me *faggot* because you don't know me well enough." The same can be said of *nigger*. These can be called reverse-valued or flip-flop epithets because they are insults to non-friends and intimacy markers to friends.

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<sup>7</sup> Translated by Elizabeth Keating and coded by Rosa Lutrario.



Is it just that these epithets and teasing are an allusion to being insiders, to being intimate? No, it turns out that even when mutual teasing is experimentally and deliberately produced, it increases felt solidarity in groups (Keltner, Capps et al. 2001). So teasing and solidarity go together, at least for existent groups, and when evenly distributed.

We have friendly teasing by seven.

- (11) 247 S: t: i (see) {[sp pronunc] a Marcella muy fea}  
 e: i see a very ugly Marcella  
 248 E: t: [laugh] i (see) big Sonia \*muy flaca  
 e: i see big, \*very skinny Sonia
- W7F1

As with adults, teasing was usually marked by laughter, continuation of a humorous key, and/or exaggeration, to make clear that the accusations are not serious.<sup>8</sup>

Teasing is culturally variable however. In our data, children in the working class school, where children were from many countries and races, teased the other child about three times as often as the middle class parochial school children. No wonder teasing has been such an object of attention from anthropologists. The cultural milieu of stimulation is crucial to the development of skills in interaction. Studies of early language development in a number of settings have pointed out that teasing is a stronger component in some social groups than in others.

## 5. Humor targeting the speaker

The third kind of attack humor is joking about oneself. In the adult women's conversations with each other we have examined, women tell humorous stories or wisecracks in over thirteen percent of the turns. In single-sex groups, women joke about themselves more than men do. In women's sociable talk with each other in our adult samples, 27% of the humor was self-deprecating confessional humor about the speaker, and a fifth of the male humor was directed to the self. More of the male humor was a fantasy rather than realistic, however (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp in press). We looked for this pattern in children. There was very little self-targeted humor, the totals for each age subgroup being no greater than 7%. We have brought together some good examples to show what this kind of humor is like, and how ambiguous these child examples can be. In example 12 from seven year olds, there is sharing of secrets about the fathers. These could be seen as joking about fathers, but there is also a shared confessional element because it is the family of each that is involved.

- (12) 231 J: t: y tu dijistes que no =celebrabas=  
e: and you said you did not celebrate it  
#Christmas#  
232 = [laugh] =  
233 I: t: *pero que importa algunos no celebran/*  
e: that doesn't matter, not everyone  
celebrates it  
234 t: [laugh]

<sup>8</sup> Note that in some standard format or ritualized teasing, such as the dozens, it is a rule that it cannot imply literal truth, and can provoke fights otherwise. Teasing is risky (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp in press).

235 t: {[laugh] *pero y tus*}  
 e: but yours  
 236 t: [laugh]  
 237 J: t: {[singing] \*I \*I \*I \*I *eres una changita*}  
 e: you are little monkey  
 238 [both giggle]  
 239 I: t: *ira ("mira")*  
 e: look  
 240 t: *mi papá*  
 e: my dad  
 241 t: *también bebe*  
 e: he drinks too  
 242 t: *pero a mi mamá no le gusta/* =  
 e: and my mom does not like that  
 243 J: t: =(*ay basta*) =  
 e: oh stop it  
 244 J: t: {[f] *qué::?*}  
 e: what?  
 245 I: t: *que mi::*  
 e: that my  
 246 t: *que mi papá bebe*  
 e: that my dad drinks  
 247 t: *y a mi mamá no le gusta/*  
 e: and my mom does not like that  
 248 J: t: *sí?*  
 e: yeah  
 249 I: t: *no le gusta a mi mamá/*  
 e: my mom does not like that  
 250 t: *mi mamá se enoja*  
 e: my mom gets mad  
 251 t: *un =día tuvo que dormir=*  
 e: one day she had to sleep  
 252 J: t: =*mi papá=*  
 e: my dad  
 253 t: *mi papá no va a la iglesia/*  
 e: my dad does not go to church  
 254 I: t: *mi papá tampoco//*  
 e: my dad does not go either  
 255 t: <5> [laugh]

Reyes W7F5<sup>9</sup>

It is not clear whether reports of naughty behavior are confessions or boasts, like this seven year olds' remarks about going to see the principal.

(13) 39 W: yeah i go to see them cause  
 40 i did {[laugh] something bad/}  
 >41 i went to Ms. Thurmond \*\*five times  
 UCDisclab T7M1

The laughter is not distinct for reports on bad behavior or on odd appearance, so there is no internal evidence as to when laughter is due to boasting. A seven year old girl also describes her history as a troublemaker at home. The element of pride in these achievements may be common to other examples of self-revealing humor.

<sup>9</sup> Translated by Reynalda Martel and coded by Marybel Robledo.

- (14) 400 T: i broke oh a {[laughing] glass ball that was  
 401 in mom's-} that she got from her great-  
 grandmother?  
 402 K: Terry!  
 403 T: that was (dead)/  
 404 i broke my own dolphin?  
 405 K: okay/  
 406 T: um...i pulled out the chord on purpose  
 407 when Jack was on the internet?  
 408 [both laugh]  
 409 T: um i've done that about three times/  
 UCDisclab T7F4

At ten, three boys exchange advice from common bad experiences.

- (15) 124 A: remember when we- did you ever call a  
 girl a \*"b" word?  
 125 you'd be calling them a female dog/  
 126 J: i don't say it no more though/  
 127 T: =last time i did..=  
 >128 J: =know \*why..because i got \*popped/=  
 [boys chuckle]  
 129 T: =\*oh=  
 130 A: =cause it \*hurt \*too/=  
 UCDisclab L10.22.M4

We also found a clearly complex discussion about death. These ten year old girls, thinking about death, back off from a serious topic by a comical wisecrack. They avoided a somber topic by a sudden switched ending that could lighten the mood.

- (16) 188 C: t: *María que harías que yo me muriera/*  
 e: Maria what would you do if i died  
 189 t: *que..qué haría/*  
 e: what..what would you do  
 190 t: *que una de tus mejores amigas se*  
*muriera/*  
 e: if one of your best friends died  
 191 t: *qué haría/*  
 e: what would you do  
 192 M: t: *no sé/*  
 e: i don't know  
 193 C: t: *yo no haría una fiesta/*  
 e: i wouldn't have a party  
 194 M: t: *huh?*  
 >195 C: t: *haría una fiesta/*  
 e: i'd have a party  
 196 t: [laugh] *no te creas/*  
 e: i'm just kidding

Reyes W10F2<sup>10</sup>

So this kind of joking about oneself is rare in the pre-adolescent children we observed. According to some studies of westernized cultures, it emerges in adolescents, as a way of

<sup>10</sup> Translated by Victor Gonzalez and coded by Diana Huerta.

talking about emerging values concerning the self. Lampert (1996) noticed there was the onset of gender differences in this type of humor by ten.

## 6. Stylistic marking of perspective shifts

Finally, adult humorous narratives can involve variation of language style to mark perspective shifts. Children do start very young using style to mark roles, but we only see evidence of perspective contrast in some of the ten year old samples.

The children did a lot of copying of what they had seen in media or heard in CDs, displaying hours spent listening to rappers and to TV programs.

Example 17 has some ten year olds doing a Spanish TV station. This is only one of several episodes doing news, sports, and a soap opera:

- (17) 48 S: t: {[shift in register] *noticias \*catorce de*  
e: once again, channel 14 news  
49 t: *nuevo \*univisión...nos*  
e: (Spanish tv station) we are...  
50 C: t: =={[hi] *luz(\*\*cla::ri::ta)}*?  
#mexican soap opera#  
>52 S: t: *se esta muriendo dos personas aquí en*  
*mi lado*  
e: two people are dying next to me  
>53 t: {[ac] *tiene algo que \*decir señor*}/  
e: sir, do you have something to say?  
>54 C: t: {[hi+slurred+f] *no mi \*hija se va*  
*(morir) ( )*?  
e: no, my daughter is going to die.  
55 S: t: ==no..*\*pero no me =jale así señora*/  
e: no, sir don't pull at me like that.  
56 C: t: *ya..ya..\*clámense* =[sound of pain]=  
e: stop stop, calm down  
57 S: t: {[ac] *ya..ya..ya, (xxx jale)*  
e: stop, stop, stop

Reyes W10M1

Note that in this enactment, the two children shift roles, each contributing to the two perspectives of the announcer and the "witness". In line 54 and 56, C plays the suffering parent, but in 55, 56, and 57, both C and S enact the announcer trying to calm the parent. The children see the enactment of roles as a target to which both can contribute.

In another case, we hear the voice and perspective of a series of courtroom actors. The complexity here is to provide a jury, a judge, a plaintiff (here called witness), the accused, and the lawyers. We hear all their voices and perspectives although there are only two children.

- (18) 1 E: i'll be the \*jury. here..  
i'll be the \*jury.  
2 L: this court will \*now \*come \*to \*order.  
[laugh]  
.  
.  
37 L: you may take your seat \*now. [laugh]  
38 this court will now come to order. [laugh]

39       you may make your opening statement.  
 40 E:    your honor.. my first-  
 41       my first defense will be the  
           witness.....  
       .  
       .  
 55 E:    Mary.. can you tell us what  
           absolutely happened?  
 56 E:    well..um.. i was at home and  
           i was feeling lonely and i...  
 57 L:    what did you do.. \*rape that \*man? [laugh]  
 58 E:    and i wanted my boyfriend to come and  
           i didn't think he would force me  
 59       to have sex with him so i told him no.  
 60 L:    \*sshhh. \*no. you cannot use that word  
           in this court.  
 61       [laugh]  
 62 E:    he wanted to do the wild thing.  
 63 L:    [laugh]  
 64 E:    but i said i didn't want to..  
           i was (married).  
 65       he slapped me and he punched me in my face/  
           [mock crying]  
       .  
 81 L:    well.. why are you pressing charge for  
           rape?  
           [laugh]  
       <2>  
 82 E:    he.. uh.. he.. \*yeah. he \*forced me to.  
 83 L:    he forced you but-but that is called  
           sexual harassment..  
 84       but did you press charge for that?  
 85 E:    yes.  
 86 L:    \*no. you pressed charge for rape..  
           which he did not do so.. [laugh]  
           (Asian-American and African-American girl) L10.19.F5

We could argue as to whether the legal terminology is doing more than marking the occupation of judge or lawyer as opposed to citizen witness or plaintiff, but the dialogue makes clear that the view of the story is different for the two roles.

This contrast is made in another role playing segment by ten year old bilingual girls. In our study, we sampled scientific register by providing a lot of magnets, compasses and related material, and workbook questions. Seeing magnets repel each other led the girls to dramatic play, with language shift representing the scientific animator vs. the magnets speaking.

(19)   660 L: t: *si lo pongo así y lo quiero acercar,*  
               *ese se va*  
           e: if i place it like this and then get it  
               close, it leaves  
       661 E:    [laugh]  
       >662       {[hi]i don't want to be with you}  
       >663 L:    =={[hi]i don't wanna be with you \*north  
       664       i wanna be \*with south my \*love}

665 [both laugh]  
666 t: *ahora un south con un south*  
e: now a south with a south  
667 { [hi] oh my goodness i love north  
i don't want you south  
668 oh get away from me} [crying sounds]  
669 { [lo] leave me alone?  
Reyes W10 F5<sup>11</sup>

## 7. Summary

The evolution of adult skills in children's conversation, as we see it from the vantage point of their humorous interaction, involves five major changes:

- Mimicry and role playing can be seen from the time they are three.
- Humorous solo narratives begin to occur by the time they are seven, though it is still easier to do narrative joking through role play at ten.
- There is a radical drop in topics from the immediate context to shared social topics by the time the children are ten.
- Children mark perspective shifts by language shifts by ten.
- There is teasing by five that becomes a major feature in some cultural groups by ten, protected by the speaker's laughter and exaggeration.
- But there is no sign by ten that self-revelation is yet an important source of conversational humor in these pre-adolescent children.

Changes in humorous discourse may reflect similar changes elsewhere in conversational behavior. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to accomplish these feats with humor. To anthropologists, this result is a reminder that the stage of development of children is crucial to what they can do, whatever the cultural setting.

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