Humour in Multi-Ethnic Peer-Group Interactions of Pre-Adolescent Children

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Research has recently begun to focus on the role that peer-group interaction plays in pre-adolescent children’s interactional skills (Goodwin, 1990; Evaldsson, 1998; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005). Goodwin (1990) in particular has shown how pre-adolescent children exploit the power of language in disputes, gossip and games to organise and produce shared activities. Such research shows us that children are engaging in sophisticated peer relationships in everyday interactional routines. Although these studies provide important information, there is still little known about the social organisation and meaning of pre-adolescents’ everyday peer interactions and still less about these interactions in a multicultural context. By deploying quite sophisticated techniques multi-ethnic children were able to construct and participate in creative joking alignments. This paper will discuss the verbal and non verbal resources the children draw upon to create and participate in joking events.

Introduction
Humour plays a significant role in the multi-ethnic peer interactions of second language speaking children. It becomes an important way of building relationships and maintaining group coherence even when all speakers are new to English. This article outlines some of the humorous interactions among pre-adolescent second language speaking children. It presents emerging results of a larger PhD thesis, which examines in detail, the more general interactions among pre-adolescent second language speaking children. Interactions among second language speaking children’s peer groups, from a sociolinguistic point of view, have been underrepresented in the literature. Given the current movement of populations around the world and the increasing diversity of Australian cities, this is somewhat surprising.

Second language conversations are becoming an increasingly common occurrence due to increased travel for business and pleasure, communicating through new technologies and increased movements and resettlements of populations across the world (Firth, 1996; Firth & Wagner, 1997; Gardner & Wagner, 2004). Australia, with its diverse multilingual population, provides a unique opportunity to examine second language conversations. Overseas migration contributed 46.4 percent to the total population growth of Australia in the 2005 June quarter (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). First and second generation Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds now account for approximately 23 percent of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001 figures). While there are no specific statistics available for an accurate picture of second language speaking children in schools, given the above general population statistics it can no longer be assumed that second language speaking people in Australia, including children, will exclusively

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come into contact with, and need to communicate with, people who speak English as a first language. Second language conversations in this country are no longer isolated events.

As a result of this increased population movement and resettlement, children from many differing ethnolinguistic backgrounds are in daily contact in Australian schools. The inner city Brisbane school where the data for this study were collected has a population of forty-eight second language speaking children from a total population of one hundred and eighty. In this situation it is therefore no longer viable to examine only those conversations among children that represent first language speaking children or second language speaking children in conversation with first language speakers. On arrival at school second language speaking children must develop the ability to communicate, not only with children who speak English as their first language but, as the statistics infer, also with children who use English as a second or subsequent language. English is often the only language these children have in common as increasingly diverse populations of people reside and work together and as their children enter Australian schools.

The larger project addresses this phenomenon of second language (L2) conversations of children by developing a rich grounded description of what the children in such ethnolinguistically diverse situations do to maintain cohesive interactions. It highlights the children’s strategic interactional competence, which is constructed collaboratively in the sociocultural context of peer group interactions. As such, it does not make any direct claims about children’s L2 acquisition; instead it focuses on the conversational strategies L2 children employ in their performance of their second language. This research is interdisciplinary and draws upon respected research in areas such as culture in interactions (Clyne, 1994; Neil, 1996; Allard, 2002) children’s peer interactions (Goodwin, 1990; Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998) and children’s second language acquisition (Blum-Kulka, 2004; Cekaite & Aronsson, 2005) to discuss the normality of these conversations as an everyday occurrence between children at school.

**L2 speaker and New English Speaker versus non-native speaker**

The terms Second Language Speaker (L2) and New English speaker (NES) are used throughout this paper in preference to the more traditional term of non native speaker. This has been done for a number of reasons. Firstly, all children who participated in the data collection use English as a second or subsequent language and as such required differentiation to illustrate that they are not a homogeneous group. The data collected come from L2 speakers from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Their reasons for being in Australia also vary greatly from refugee to business migrants, to parents with Australian aid scholarships or student visas. To label all these children ‘non-native’ speakers would not allow the complexity of their language use situations to be illustrated. The term L2 implies a more neutral connotation. It was also necessary to differentiate those children who were present at the beginning of the data collection from those who joined the groups as new arrivals during the process of filming. The term New English Speaker has therefore been used to demarcate the differences between the children who have been present for all of the filming and those who arrived as new English speaking children during the data collection.
Secondly as Firth & Wagner (1997), Firth (1996) and Acevedo-Butcher (2005) have argued, the terms *native* and *non-native* have the tendency to put the speakers in opposition to each other resulting in the non-native speaker being marked and somehow deficient in comparison to the native speaking standard. The term *second language speaker*, in contrast to the latter-mentioned categories, conceptualizes the participants as *language users*. As Firth (1996) argues, these language users “are deserving of unprejudiced *description*”, rather, “than as a person conceived *a priori* to be the possessor of incomplete or deficient communicative competence, putatively striving for the ‘target’ competence of an idealized ‘native speaker’” (p. 241). Such labels also assume a ‘monolingual norm’ which cannot adequately describe or allow for multilingualism, or bilingualism which is, by statistical representation, the worldwide reality (Crystal, 1997; Kachru, 1990).

Thirdly, the term second language speaker is a step towards recognizing that this is only one identity that can be brought to the surface as instrumental in the children’s interactions. Being a second language speaker is only one identity which the children represent, many of which are present simultaneously, and all of which are fluid. At any one time the children in the group present themselves as experts, competitors, team-mates, friends, jokers, story tellers, and co-conspirators, and many others. While being a second language speaker is the main identity presented in this argument, it is also understood, from an emic perspective, that this is only one of many that the children can draw on in the course of their interactions.

**Theoretical considerations**

Much of the literature which supports L2 interactions is found in second language acquisition research. The literature, which deals with second language interactions among children, also focuses on the untapped potential of peer interactions leading to a better understanding of learner strategies, and therefore, language acquisition. Much of this literature deals with L2 speakers accessing ‘native speaking’ peers as a linguistic resource (Cazden, 1988; Enright, 1991; Johnson, 1994; Norrick, 1992) or interaction among children themselves in order to access mainstream class academic concepts (Willett, 1995). Those studies which do focus on peer interaction for language learning tend to compare and contrast the benefits of peer interaction as opposed to teacher-fronted activities (Wong Fillmore, 1982). Other studies which focus on peer interaction among second language speakers are generally found in the immersion classroom context, where findings indicate that peer cooperative learning situations result in less anxiety and a larger percentage of communication than does interaction with a teacher (McGroarty, 1989; Swain & Lapkin, 1989). In these contexts, however, the children all have a common first language and culture to draw upon. While such studies inform and define the present research, its focus differs significantly. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature takes the perspective of ‘interlanguage’, language that is somehow ‘in progress’. Language ‘errors’ are seen as potentially significant aspects of learners cognitive and language development. The current study moves laterally away from SLA research to a focus on the interactional competence of the children, framing them as *language users* (Firth, 1996) as opposed to language learners. That is, the focus then becomes about the identification of strategies that L2 children use in the successful performance of their second language with other second language speakers. It focuses on those strategies which allow the conversations and accompanying activities to continue successfully, thereby, highlighting the sociocultural and sociolinguistic knowledge of the children.
in this particular context. Goodwin (1990) has shown that children’s interactions are extremely complex, drawing on numerous linguistic and cultural resources to successfully create a common culture of interaction. While her study focuses on monolingual children it illustrates that children engage in quite sophisticated peer interactions in order to achieve a number of social aims. Fassler (1998) likewise illustrates that multi-ethnic preschool children draw upon sophisticated language resources to create mutually satisfying social interactions even when they have limited first language conversational partners to rely on. Such studies set the stage for an examination and rich description of peer interactions among multi-ethnic pre-adolescent children, whose presence is becoming an increasingly common occurrence in Australian schools.

Humour in pre-adolescent multi-ethnic peer interactions
The initial analysis of the children’s interactions revealed that joking around, or being playful was a significant genre in their interactions. By deploying quite sophisticated techniques these second language speaking children were able to construct and participate in creative and playful alignments for a variety of purposes. Two of the overriding questions of this section were:

1. How were the children engaging in humour during these early phases of their L2 use?
2. What interactional purposes were these playful events serving?

The following section is divided into three separate segments illustrating how humour was used by the children to serve a specific purpose. This first section addresses how humourous teasing can be used to indicate non-comprehension of a speaker’s utterance. The second section shows how ‘mocking’ is used to draw attention to inappropriate vocabulary use and the final section illustrates how ‘lavatorial humour’ becomes an important tool, easily accessible to non English speakers (NES), to allow entry into a conversation and gain attention through what may be perceived as somewhat risky humour.

Humorous teasing as an indication of non-comprehension
Most literature refers to teasing as a complex interplay of both aggressive and playful components. In most cases, a tease is structured in such a way as to obscure its content. In fact, Loudon (1970) argues that the universal diagnostic nature of teasing is ambiguity. Likewise, Eisenberg (1986) claims that teasing is behaviour specifically designed to promote ambiguity and uncertainty in the recipient. Given the conflicting message inherent in teases it would follow that they are difficult for interlocutors to identify. Since the interlocutors in this study are all second language speakers it could be assumed that these teasing events are complex speech acts that are difficult for them to identify and respond to appropriately. In fact this is not apparent in the data. The teasing that occurs in the segments identified in the data are mostly framed as play, and are taken as such by the recipients. The following example shows how teasing can become a playful event even if it also contains a more subversive message.

In this example, Moses, a six-year-old Sudanese Bari speaker, teases Hui, a six-year-old Chinese speaker, about not being able to understand his utterance. In this instance the tease is received as humorous, but, as is common with most teases, it has a more serious component (Alberts, 1992):
Moses: I don't know how to-
Moses: gets up and walks over to the researcher
Moses: hey Kate I don't know how to play the weather game

Hui: /I know how to Moses. First you choose a card, this spin round, you will get to weather, and then you roll dice, how many other [then you have to- <RAPID SPEECH>/

Moses: /you're talking too fa:st and I can't even hear that because you just go /nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah nah <HIGH PITCHED><SINGSONGY> <RAPID>/ /You talking too fast I can’t even hear <RISING INTONATION>

Hui: smiling and jumps up and down on the spot
Hui: and it's your turn now
Moses: returns to his seat at the table

Moses indicates to the researcher his inability to play the game chosen by the boys (line 3). Hui has played the game before, indicates this to Moses, and then goes on to describe how the game is played (line 4). Hui’s speech is very rapid and his pronunciation is heavily marked. Moses reacts to his inability to understand Hui with a tease in line 5. His tease is high in seriousness, since he cannot understand Hui’s description of the game and is at risk of not being able to participate. The paralinguistic cues Moses is using, his high-pitched, singsongy and rapid voice, frame his utterance as playful. Hui acknowledges Moses’ tease as play and responds to this non-verbally, by smiling and jumping up and down on the spot. However, he does not respond to the seriousness of Moses’ tease by reformulating his utterance. Instead, he indicates to Moses that it is now his turn to play the game. Moses sits down at the table and the boys begin to play the game, with Hui still not having explained the rules to Moses. In effect, by not pushing Hui to repeat his utterance again and sitting back down at the table, Moses is allowing the activity to continue as normal and calling upon other cues within the context, such as observation and trial and error to allow Hui’s complex utterance, while commented upon, to become interactionally irrelevant to the interaction.

Mocking as a way of drawing attention to an incorrect word
Mocking is another example of playful behaviour used for a more serious intention. In the following example Ismael, a seven-year-old boy, whose first language is Papuan Pidgin, mocks another child in the group, a six-year-old boy whose first language is Tetum (East Timor), in order to highlight his incorrect use of a word.

Ismael and Jose are part of a larger group of five boys who are painting. The interaction begins with Jose declaring to the group that he will paint a house. Tariq then states that he will also paint a house. The following interaction then occurs:

1 Jose: copy cat, scaredy cat <SINGSONGY VOICE>
2 Hui: hhhh (2) Jo:se <QUIETLY>
3 Jose: it's not a swear {skwea} word
4 Ismael: square?
5 Jose: no:
6 Tariq: @@
7 Ismael: yea:h square. [O:h that's a square
Ismael.nv: drawing a square in the air with his finger
Hui: [skeedy cat is a sw-swear word]
Jose: yeah that word is a square
Hui: (do people nice no?)
Jose: it's not a square word Hui
Hui: yeah
Ismael: oh you mean a square? <HIGH PITCH>
Hui: I tell
Jose: I didn't done a square word
Hui: Kate Jose said skeedy cat skeedy cat nah nah nah nah

Jose starts the teasing by calling Tariq a ‘copy cat’. Hui immediately responds to this, by drawing in his breath and saying Jose’s name. This indicates to Jose that there is some kind of violation of his utterance. Jose responds to Hui in line 3, by indicating that what he has said is not a ‘swear’ word. He however pronounces ‘swear’ as /skweə/. Ismael has understood the intended meaning of Jose’s comment and is responding to his pronunciation of the word ‘swear’ by repeating it with rising intonation. Jose initially refutes his comment (line 5), but it becomes apparent throughout the interaction that he doesn’t understand what Ismael is referring to, since he never corrects his pronunciation of the word. Tariq’s laugh response (line 6) indicates that he is finding the interaction funny and sets the play frame for Ismael. Ismael, encouraged by Tariq, then reiterates his tease and elaborates it with nonverbal cues. The conversation between Hui and Jose continues in a serious mode, with Jose again using the pronunciation ‘square’ in line 10 and 12. In line 14, Ismael again attempts to bring Jose’s attention to the mispronunciation with no effect. The tease is not responded to and Jose is fully engaged with the conversation with Hui. This interaction is only humourous to Ismael and Tariq, and then for Tariq only momentarily.

According to Norrick (1994) mocking and teasing play a special role in group involvement. This kind of repetitive joking or mocking in conversation can serve to pick out the foregoing talk the joker finds unacceptable (Norrick, 1992). In the above example Ismael mocks Jose for saying the word “swear” incorrectly by repeating the offending construction. He does this by repeating Jose’s utterance with rising intonation and later by placing the ‘slip’ in a new context. Any of these strategies serves to highlight the error, embarrass the first speaker, and call for laughter (Norrick, 1994). In the preceding example, Jose does not pick up on the mocking attempt by Ismael designed to correct his language.

In this sense it counts as a metalinguistic act according to Jakobson (1960), as it allows Ismael to point out what is an inappropriate word choice which should then allow them to negotiate the word appropriate to the interaction. The push for Jose to correct the word goes unnoticed by Jose, however, it does not cause the interaction to break down. Hui does not draw attention to the inappropriate lexical choice but continues with the conversation, even modelling the correct form in line 9. By doing this he is allowing the error to become interactionally irrelevant (Firth 1996).

**Using humour to gain entry into a conversation**
A third type of playful behaviour emerging from the data is lavatorial humour. The inclusion of words in their conversations associated with toilet use is viewed by the
children as a humorous event. It is used by children of all language proficiency levels in this study to enter into conversations and gain group attention; however, its interest here is its use by a NES to enter into a conversation with more advanced speakers. It is an easy form of humour to engage in because the inclusion of lexical items alone invokes the humour and can create laughter among the other children. In so doing, it becomes a powerful tool for NES by which to gain entry into a conversation.

In the following example, Jie uses lavatorial humour as a way of entering into a conversation with more competent speakers. Jie is a NES having arrived at school after the filming began. She is nine years old at the time of filming and is in a group with three other children who are nine, ten and eleven years old. She had had prior schooling in China but not prior experience with English.

The children in this example are playing a board game. Tewhata has moved his game piece to the same square as another player. The game pieces are small animals and Tewhata has placed his animal so that its head is pointing directly to the back of the other game piece. He indicates what he has done to Tae:

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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tewhata</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Tae.nv</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Tae</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Aroha</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Tewhata</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Jie</td>
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Tae and Aroha find Tewhata’s actions funny as indicated in line 3 and line 5. Jie also smiles but it is not until line 6 that she indicates that she has understood the previous interaction. She joins in the humourous interaction by leaning into Tewhata with her mouth wide open, and saying “you eat my poo poo” (line 6 and 7). Her statement, which has previously been implied by Tewhata’s non verbal action, is now stated out loud by Jie and invokes laughter from both the boys, which she joins in with in line 11. The fact that she has stated what Tewhata intended, but has not said out loud, rather invoking his intentions through non verbal actions, makes the utterance risky and therefore funny. The use of lavatorial humour within the context of the classroom becomes what Blum-Kulka (2002) labels as subversive and risky behaviour, therefore creating a humorous situation.

**Conclusion**

The data presented in this paper are a ‘first look’ at one of the genres which is becoming interactionally relevant to multi-ethnic peer interactions. Humour, or ‘being playful’, becomes an important aspect in the social interactions of second language speaking children as a way of expressing non-understanding, of drawing attention to incorrect language use and initiating and joining in with more competent
speakers. It is one of a growing variety of resources emerging in the data for creating collaborative cultures in L2 peer interactions.

Such creative linguistic resources drawn on by the children demonstrate the complexity of their interactions and most importantly show that limited English vocabulary does not necessarily hinder participation within a larger group context. The conversations are not full of miscommunications and breakdowns as has been the focus of much research on L2 communications to date. In fact, the above examples show how being an L2 speaker is not necessarily the first identity the children engage in their interactions with each other. First and foremost, they are possible play partners and classmates.

A focus on talk in interaction among L2 pre-adolescent children focuses on how these children use talk for a variety of purposes to successfully act out the ordinary aspects of their play and interaction with their peer group.
APPENDIX 1 TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Name.nv non verbal actions of child (name initial)
[ overlapping speech
/ beginning of marked speech
<RAPID> explanation of marked speech
(2) timed pause to the nearest second
: extended vowel
@ laughter
Text emphasis placed on a word
(text) unsure transcription
{IPA} IPA transcription of pronunciation of preceding word
References


