

“Stop Talking Like That”: A Toddler’s Construction of Identity at a Family Dinner

Carol Hoi Yee Lo

Teachers College, Columbia University

Parent-child discourse in family settings provides insights into children’s language socialization. In her seminal work on language socialization, Ochs (1993) argues that social identities are essentially constructed by verbal performance and the display of social acts and stances. This paper presents a single case analysis of a family dinner involving a three-and-a-half-year-old child, C, and her parents, M (mother) and F (father), interrogating how C asserts her identity, or resists those imposed on her, by “going categorical” (Stokoe, 2012) when counter-disciplining her parents. This analysis shows that when constructing her category membership, C appropriates her parents’ voices and proffers her incumbency in the ‘adult’ category.

Prior to the start of the extract, C is sitting at the table alone watching TV on a small portable TV set. Dinner is almost ready, but C is fully engrossed by the TV and refuses to turn it off. As the extract begins, she insists on watching just half of the show. Since her refusal to cooperate has stalled the dinner, F and M reject her request. At this point, the tension has increased, and C begins to counter her parents’ attempts to discipline her.

- 01 C: I’m watching half of it.
02 M: ((gaze to C, slightly shakes head))-mm
03 F: >No you’re not.< It’s all over for now.
04 [(>You can watch it af-<)]
05 C: → [STOP TALK]ING LIKE THAT.
06 ((pushes mini-TV away))-(0.5)
07 F: C.
08 C: ((closes the TV and puts it aside))
09 F: ((puts the TV set aside))-Thank you.
10 C: → ((pushes M’s hand))-Remember don’t talk like that.
11 F: C, (.) if you would do what daddy asks
12 and mommy asks right away, no one would
13 talk to you that way.
14 Okay?
15 ((walks to the kitchen))
16 M: And you should not speak to mommy and
17 daddy in that tone of voice.

In response to C’s request to continue to watch TV in line 1, M shakes her head in line 2 to issue a denial. F’s turn in line 3 also opposes the course of action that C proposes. Immediately, F offers a solution, if not a promise, to reconcile their divergent positions by allowing C to watch TV at a later time in line 4. Simultaneously, C yells “stop talking like that” in line 5. Shortly after reluctantly closing the TV set, as F is clearing the table for dinner, C further adds “remember don’t talk like that” in line 10. The second imperative, prefaced by “remember,” displays even stronger deontic force and a negative affective stance.

Of interest is C's use of imperatives to counter her parents' attempts to discipline her. In family settings, coerciveness, power, as well as the right and entitlement to control are attributes bound to the category 'parent.' Directives are thus commonplace and normative in parent-child discourse, and when used by parents for discipline purposes, they are neutral or unmarked (Goodwin, 2006). In this context, C's directives take the form of an "aggravated imperative," conveying coerciveness, a strong affective stance, and negative emotional valence (Aronsson & Cekaite, 2012). She deploys disciplinary directives, an attribute and activity tied to the membership category 'parent' to counter-discipline her parents. In other words, while C is a member of the 'child' category of the 'stage of life' membership categorization device (MCD), she is appropriating the voice of an adult, displaying incumbency in the 'adult' category, a category occupying a high rung of the hierarchy in the "stage of life" MCD. The appropriation of a parental, adult voice—talking their "talk"—enables C to resist her parents' discipline work.

This excerpt shows how counter-discipline is accomplished through the adoption of predicates tied to membership in the category of 'parents.' This claim is also supported by how both M and F, in response, treat C's noncompliance and counter-discipline work as inapposite and subversive. In lines 11-13, F highlights why discipline work is necessary because C fails to "do what daddy asks and mommy asks right away," while in lines 16-17, M chastises C for yelling at them, pointing out her failure to meet her moral obligation. Note that both F and M explicitly mention their category membership as C's 'daddy' and 'mommy' and thus deploy the standardized relational pair 'parent-child' to reassign the duties and moral obligations carried by the relationships—ones that C has failed to observe.

The socialization of children can be viewed as a constant process of cementing and resisting categories and their respective predicates, duties, moral obligations, and entitlements. In this brief example, we can observe the process at work as both parents and child "go categorical" (Stokoe, 2012) to serve their own ends: The child appropriates adult language to claim power and to subvert the power asymmetry of the parent-child relationship, while the parents invoke duties and obligations associated with the categories 'parents' and 'children' to reinforce the power asymmetry of the status quo.

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Carol Hoi Yee Lo completed her M.A. in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests lie in critical discourse analysis and native/non-native English speaker interaction.