

**VERBAL SWAGGERING  
PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S STRATEGIES FOR SPEAKING AT LUNCH TIME<sup>1</sup>**

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Verbal swaggering, a way of speaking at the lunch table at a child care center, is a flexible routine which provides some dramatic insights into the sociolinguistic competence of preschool children. Unlike studies which seem to indicate that young children rely on formulas like scripts or rituals to organize both playful and serious talk (Katriel 1985; Nelson & Gruendel 1979), verbal swaggering is both paradoxical (participants assert untruths as if they were true) and multifunctional depending on who the participants are and what the frame is. Swaggering can be used to delineate the relationships among children, or to circumvent classroom rules of politeness established by adults. Swaggering provides a protective zone within which children can approach topics which may otherwise act as conversational and social dynamite.

I collected the data for this paper at the child care center where I have been teaching for two and a half years. The participants at each lunch table were children ranging in age from two years four months to four years nine months, at least one teacher, and sometimes a parent. I tape recorded six lunch times, all but one at the most isolated of three tables. There are approximately three hours of taped lunch table conversation. Although the children knew they were being taped, I put the tape recorder on the floor (to protect it from spilling food and drink) and they tended to forget it. Several of them had used the tape recorder to record stories or "shows" and occasionally they mentioned that, or made reference to previous recordings. Because of their familiarity with the tape recorder, and with me, most of the taped conversations sound authentic. I was present during most of the tape recordings, although I occasionally had to leave to answer the

telephone. During one of these absences I was referred to as "dumb in the butt", followed by a discussion about how I was going to "slap Simeon's butt" when I looked in the milk, where he claimed to have hidden a granola bar. This incident lends some credence to my hunch that the children forgot the tape recorder. The tapes also sound authentic because of the amount of data on them which is not swaggering. The tendency to "show off" for a visitor, which may come out during taping, (as demonstrated by Patrice's announcement to her table mates that she will say "butty head" during taping) is not at all apparent on most of the tapes. They contain many turns of "ordinary" conversation: requests for help, silences accompanied by spoons clattering, chairs scraping, bags crumpling, lunchboxes closing. The business of an ordinary lunchtime can be heard on the tapes.

After each one of the taping sessions, I made rough transcripts of the tapes, noting down as much information about non-verbal activity as I could remember. I supplemented the data from tapes with participant observation, although as a participant with a defined (and demanding) role, I found it difficult to take notes. After lunches I would jot down topics of the routine, snatches of dialogue I remembered, who participated, and what happened before and after. The data is least adequate in showing the physical action which accompanied the verbal activity. I was able to recall many major physical moves, but often such important activities as food trades escaped my notice.

Initially I paid only slight attention to the issue of food sharing and trading, which with its marketplace implications I found somewhat distasteful in our Quaker child care center. I have, since undertaking this paper, come to respect the lunch table marketplace much more. Food, second only to toys imported from home, is the hard currency of the child care center. It may be used to buy goods, services, and friendship. Good faith and honorable agreements are generally assumed; this year I have seen some misunderstandings, but only one breach of good faith in trading, which was harshly censured by the other children. The children are adept at bargaining, and frequently the outcome is satisfactory to all.

Outcomes of food distribution parallel most of the functions of verbal swaggering. A child may give a small item to everyone at the table (peanuts, say)--enhancing group solidarity. There is also some sharing that negotiates, and the negotiation for food is intimately tied to a negotiation about relationship--relationship itself is a bargaining chip in these trades, as are future trades. "Currency" may include such rhetorical expressions as "you can come to my house if" or "you can't come to my birthday party if". The association of relationship with trading or sharing is made even more explicit by exclusionary trades. "I'm not sharing with you because you're not my friend."

I have used the children's real first names in the transcripts, assuming confidentiality for them. I do so because it is important to understand this routine in the specific social context, not just of this child care center but of this group of children in it. As Helen Schwartzman (1978: 236) has pointed out, in an attempt to suggest that their findings can be generalized, some studies have treated play as if the players "do not exist and instead we have only 'Ss', or the player is eliminated entirely in an attempt to elucidate the structure and function of play or games in general".

A little background information is also helpful in deciphering the social context of the swaggers quoted in the text. The primary verbal swaggerers are four-year-old boys: Conor, Dhan, Evan, Ned, and Simeon. Dhan's mother almost always visits the center at lunch. The four-year-old girls in the group are Rachel, Patrice, and Ellen. Other participants who appear in the transcripts are Adam, a two-year-old boy who says very little; Matthew, three; Imani, three; Jessica, three; and Russell, two. There are several younger children who don't appear on the tapes at all. The primary speakers in most of the tapes, however, are the four-year-old boys. Among the oldest children, friendship is a variable state. Any given four year old might name all, none or some age mates as friends on a given day.

The "verbal swagger" is a rule-governed way of speaking in which the topic is fantastic. Participants elaborate or escalate the original fantastic statement, either

semantically or tonally, in predictable ways. This form of talk contrasts with two other ways of speaking at the lunch table: orderly, "serious" conversation used in pragmatic conversational activities (food trades, reporting about events of the day, deciding where to sit, getting food, etc.) and a conversational *melee*--participants speak at the same time, scream, yell, cry, and move around more than in the other two forms of talk (it is under these circumstances, for example, that a participant may fall out of her chair.) The most regulated conversation occurs most frequently when two or more adults are present, and most closely resembles everyday adult speech. The most chaotic situation may occur when adults are present, but is more likely to occur when they are absent or perceived as non-participants. Swaggering and chaos can occur simultaneously with an adult conversation, which clearly does not include the children at the table.

Swaggering's position in the middle ground between rule-governed and free-for-all speech suggests that it serves a strategic purpose for the children who use it. First, I will examine what constitutes verbal swaggering: topics, intonation and rhythm, how it is initiated, how one gets and takes a turn in verbal swaggering, and how it is concluded. Then I will consider its different strategic functions, how it corresponds to and draws distinctions between alliances and antagonisms, younger children and older children, children and adults.

Topic is the most noticeable distinction between verbal swaggering and everyday speech. Everyday conversation is characterized by topics which are to be taken as true, while verbal swaggering deals with fictive topics. While remaining in the structure of everyday conversation (in which one person speaks at a time), the children must signal to one another that the frame for their conversation has changed. To do this, they need ways of indicating "that the messages or signals exchanged...are in a certain sense untrue or not meant" (Bateson: 189). Yet, in order to "do verbal swaggering", they must also respond to the outlandish statement as if they have taken it for truth.

This can be accomplished very smoothly with the observer left uncertain about whether the participants share the perception that the topic is fictive. Alternatively, the transition can be difficult for the participants to negotiate. Although "absurd topic" characterizes the verbal swagger, the children occasionally switch to "serious talk" by inflection, lower volume, and slower pace, to clarify the swagger frame. "Not really" spoken parenthetically may mark non-factual conversation. Sometimes a child contradicts another's swaggering opening in a non-swaggering voice. A drawn-out "unh-unh, you-ou don't know" plays along with an opening, while a more quickly spoken, "I do not" forces the attempted swagger into a serious dispute.

The difficulty in demonstrating this lies in the fact that the signals of "fictive topic" are often intonational, sometimes intonational only. To document these differences in the way words are spoken requires more than a playscript transcription. Studies of child language need more techniques for transcription of intonation (Ochs 1979). I attempt to give some idea of the intonation here largely through glosses.

Some general characteristics which mark playful speech, both in swaggering and during play, are a high pitch register; various kinds of singsong (although singsong is also used to invoke rules, and may be an element of a jeering argument, as in "You're not supposed to go up there"); drawn out syllables; and another quality, that of barely suppressed laughter beneath the speech. This last is the most difficult to mark in transcription, and perhaps the most significant. It is with this voice that children parody themselves, indicating to one another a shared sense of the ridiculous in their mock-serious statements.

The presence of two-voices--serious and playful-- is most obvious when they appear juxtaposed to one another, as in the following example.

SIMEON: (*play*) My mommy go moomy. My mommy go ba-moo ba-moo ba-moo  
ba-moo!  
EVAN (*play*) bahbahbahbah  
MARGARET: (*serious*) Are you saying your mommy spans you, Simeon?  
SIMEON: (*serious*) My mommy hate spanking.  
MARGARET: (*serious*) Oh, she hates spanking?  
EVAN: (*play*) hamboobamboo bamboo  
SIMEON: (*serious*) Yeah.  
MARGARET: (*serious*) So I guess she doesn't spank you.  
SIMEON: (*serious*) No. (*turns to E, play, singsong*) My mommy, when I poop in  
my pants my mommy spank me!

An unmarked playscript transcript makes Simeon's statements look like a blatant contradiction. The rhythm and intonation of his speech to me differed considerably from that of his speech directed at Evan, essentially splitting the talk into two separate conversations. In silly mode, to Evan, Simeon spoke more quickly, moved his body more and in quick jerks, and used a slightly higher pitch than in his conversation with me.

Some of the most common topics of swagger talk are monsters and superheroes, food, scatological topics, and violence and weapons. Discussion of the later two may violate adult-established rules of politeness in the classroom. There is a clear rule (which the children quote to one another) prohibiting the discussion of excrement during meals. The discussion of guns and weapons is not prohibited, although toy weapons are not allowed in the center. As a result, children verbally invoke the idea of weapons, either to draw attention to the prohibition, and in the safety of words (rather than deeds) flout it, or to substitute for the toy weapons they don't have. This swaggering opening followed a brief "swordplay" with carrots, which the teacher asked the children to stop.

NED: Evan? when I grow up you know what I'm gonna be?  
EVAN: what?  
NED: A knight. and I'm gonna have a sword  
EVAN: Can you ....  
EVAN: (in baby talk) know what I'm gonna be when I gwow up? A knight  
NED: me too  
EVAN: and I'm gonna have a sword  
NED a real sword for me

The significance of "forbidden" topics in verbal swaggering becomes more apparent when we look at how children initiate swaggering. One of the most common and

successful techniques is to refer to the forbidden. Some examples of swaggering openings which use this technique are as follows:

**PATRICE:** And I'm gonna say booty head. Booty head.

*Laughter by several of the children.*

**RACHEL:** enough of that Patrice.

**MATTHEW:** tells a story about Mr. Rogers.

**PATRICE:** I saw that on TV too.

**MATTHEW:** I saw 3 billy goats.

**PATRICE:** (*laughs*) 3 billy goats. (*Fake laughing*)

**MATTHEW:** You know what I saw on TV? Fall on your head.

**PATRICE:** Boo stinky.

**ELLEN:** And his head came off.

**MATTHEW:** the eggplant.

**ELLEN:** the eggplant fell down for pretend.

**MATTHEW:** (*points bread gun at Beka and shoots*)--bang bang

**PATRICE:** (*takes out a pickle*)

?: I love pickles.

Conversation becomes a very regular, rhythmic one about what foods they like. This type of conversation happens almost every day and is very carefully pat  
terned: A: I like pickles. B: I like pickles too, etc.

and

**SIMEON:** My mommy's gonna poop in her pay:nts

**EVAN:** (*giggles*)

**JESSICA:** my mommy's gonna poop in the (*giggle*) pants

**MARGARET:** I don't wanna hear anything else about poop for the rest of this  
lunchtable

**SIMEON:** now you (*singing*) ha hi die da:da

**JESSICA:** (*sings*) ho yo

**SIMEON:** you are baby? Rachel.

**EVAN:** Simeon. (*falling inflection*)

**JESSICA:** (unclear)

**EVAN:** ooh ooh

**SIMEON:** choochoo

**JESSICA:** hello

**EVAN:** he:lp. pow.

**SIMEON:** ahh noo?

**EVAN:** bang bang

**JESSICA:** po:w

**EVAN:** hands up

**EVAN:** hands up

**MARGARET:** OK, that's enough. Please don't make your food into guns anymore.

Not only did these opening sentences lead to several turns of verbal swaggering, they were immediately followed by a slight pause and laughter, during which the speaker had the attention of everyone at the table, and, in the first case, of everyone at a

neighboring table as well. The lines quoted above about becoming a knight (bordering on the perceived forbidden because of their reference to weapons and violent conflict) led into a sequence of swaggering, marked also by the deliberate use of baby talk. Swaggering may be opened simply with tonal devices--high volume, or high volume followed by a pause and a drop to low volume. Some children use more formulaic openings, such as "You know what, guys?" or the repetition of someone's name.

All of these devices are more likely to be successful--followed by other turns at swaggering--if the opening hinges on some previous event or topic. Often, the swaggering converts physical action into verbal action, as in the example in which talk about knights referred back to swordplay with carrots. An adult is likely to intervene quickly to stop much physical movement, and the talk converts the forbidden activity to a permissible but equivalent one. Because swagger talk is protected by its play status, and is not to be taken seriously (by adults or children), the child-participants can avoid censure for talking in this way about things they're not supposed to do. It may also lead to a resumption of the physical activity as demonstration.

Swaggering may make use of a previous "serious" topic of conversation to launch a series of absurd statements, and several subjects are especially suited to this, as they have become part of lunch table folklore. At least once a week someone brings up the issue of whether yogurt is best drunk, or eaten with a spoon. This has been used as a lead-in to a short sequence of swaggering. There is also the legend of how Conor choked on his string cheese, an invented cautionary tale which may provide an opening for similarly gory tales.

Appropriate responses to a swaggering opening may elaborate on either its topic, its tone, or both. The rules for taking a turn in the swaggering sequence are revealed both through successful turns, and through clearly ineffective or inappropriate turns. Younger children and adults are rarely successful at gaining entry into a swaggering sequence, while the four year olds are almost invariably successful participants.



The simplest swagging turn can be taken by repeating an opening statement in a louder voice. The opening, "My mommy's gonna poop in her pants," cited above, was made by an older child (four-year-old boy). It gained the attention of all the children at the table previously involved in several different conversations. It was immediately repeated by a three-year-old girl, who said it in a louder voice and with a different pattern of stress:

**SIMEON: MY MOMMY'S gonna poop in her pay:nts. (*first two syllables said louder than the level of ambient noise, the rest slightly softer, last word stretched out*)**

**JESSICA: MY MOMMY'S GONNA POOP IN THE (*giggle*) PANTS. (*this is said louder than S, and with a different stress*)**

Both turns were followed by giggles from the other children at the table. Increased volume is a technique used by all the children, but most often by younger children, who tend to yell their contributions to the swagging sequence. Yelling alone is not enough to constitute a full turn, however, as in a sequence in which different foods were called "police foods", beginning with "police raisins". After two turns by older children, a two-year-old child stammered in a loud voice, which became softer as he sought words, "THESE, this, and, my, mine too". The last part of this turn was overlapped by another older child saying "This is police yogurt".

As indicated by the above sequence, another way of taking a turn is to introduce a slight variation into the opening statement. "These are police raisins" was followed by "This is police juice", "This is police cheese", "This is police juice too", the two year old's attempted turn, and "This is police yogurt". In this case, the opening structure stands, and the children who are elaborating it provide a one-word replacement. They must be able to correctly perceive what part of the opening statement is variable, and what kinds of substitutions will work. The youngest child was unable to put all this information together and produce a contribution of his own. Sequences like this happen quickly and end quickly unless the basic structure is modified. In this case, after police yogurt, the children stopped talking and ate, and an adult introduced a new topic of conversation.

The other type of turn that can follow an opening involves elaboration of the initial absurd statement. This is a semantic raising of the stakes. After some misunderstandings and missed openings the participants used such elaboration in this sequence.

NED: (*spoken at same pace and volume as previous turns*) ah yikes!  
CONOR: (*faster and louder than previous*) And yikes! Yikes a MONSTER  
EVAN: a ant's in his foot  
ADAM: he ate a Monster  
NED: Yeah, a ant's in his foot  
CONOR: yikes A monster!  
NED: where?  
CONOR: yikes a monster!  
NED: right here?  
CONOR: no not that one  
NED: That big monster?  
CONOR: Yeah a big monster.  
EVAN: Yikes he's real.  
CONOR: He's scary.  
EVAN: Yeah  
CONOR: He could eat ME up  
EVAN: Yikes  
CONOR: He could eat the whole he could eat th-this whole school up  
EVAN: Not an h, he could eat more than this whole school, and he could eat any everything in the world.  
CONOR: But he could eat this whole school AND all this! And US, right?  
EVAN: And all the people in the world, right?  
NED: yeah  
CONOR: Yeah and--  
EVAN: Even policemen.  
CONOR: Right. He can eat every body in the school and this whole school.

In this part of a longer routine, the participants struggle to establish common reference. Evan and Conor agree on the fiction, as well as on a playful tone. The fiction is that the monster is "real" and, therefore, "scary". The tone is achieved through a faster pace and higher pitch than in the preceding conversation. Ned, despite the fact that he provides a play cue word "ah yikes", remains intonationally out of the swagger. He asks, in a factual voice, for factual type clarification "That big monster?" meaning the monster collage hanging on the wall, with magazine pictures pasted on it. Conor's response, "Yeah, a big monster", seems to indicate that he is using the monster poster as a jumping off point to talk about a fictive monster. While Ned remains a non-swaggerer tonally, he takes turns

pretty regularly throughout the sequence, thus keeping his hand in socially. Conor and Evan's elaboration progresses from combative ("not an h, he could eat.") to collaborative ("and all the people in the world, right?").

This is where the work of swaggering as a piece of negotiating relationship comes in. Although both Ned and Conor are very good friends with Evan, in this sequence the strongest alliance is between Conor and Evan. Later, the conversation breaks into two strands, with Evan participating in both. The alliances worked out verbally are also marked nonverbally. Twice during this lunchtime Conor does something with his food, which he attributes to Evan's direction. The first time he squeezes juice on his sandwich, the second time he puts tuna fish in his yogurt. He does very little of each, immediately calling my/the teacher's attention to it, which seems to corroborate the symbolic nature of these deeds. They mark solidarity not by sharing food, but by nudging the injunction against "playing with your food". The opening swordplay with carrots between Ned and Evan is similar. If this is, indeed, an instance of children negotiating alliance, one of the means of that negotiation, in this instance, is playing with food. The ambiguity of the state of these alliances is evident in the verbal swaggering, which proceeds raggedly, in and out of other kinds of speech.

Elaboration can involve more or less negotiation of topic, as in this case, and it can tend towards collaboration or conflict. Sometimes a swagger is developed primarily by one person, with the additions from other children serving as encouragement to the creator. The "My mommy poop in her pants" sequence was primarily developed by Simeon, whose listeners could scarcely keep up with his development of the topic. He elaborated on that, then on "My mommy go bamoo bamoo bamoo", "My mommy is a baby" and "My mommy gotta wear diapers". In that sequence, Simeon sustained his listeners' interest with a succession of outrageous statements, accompanied by actions such as putting his head under the table which nudged the boundary of what is permissible at lunch. He also kept the other participants involved by frequently incorporating snatches of their speech into

brief stories. Nevertheless, this conversation involves frequent and regular turns by other children, so that it reads in transcript like an interactive narrative.

His movement and his frequent reference to "poop" gave Simeon frequent attention from the teacher. Many times she participated in the swaggering, and all such attempts were in the wrong "voice". The wrong turns asked for "serious" clarification of plainly absurd statements. Simeon maintained "silly mode" throughout most of those questions, and he even used the teacher's attempts at redirection as part of his story. It is interesting to note that Evan, who took the most turns that Simeon in some way acknowledged, later shared his dessert with Simeon. This sequence was by far the longest, but also the least collaborative, which brings us to the question of duration.

How long does a sequence of swaggering last? This varies considerably, from possible openings which aren't followed, to as many as 92+ turns. The shorter exchanges take between 7 and 15 turns, and then usually become another kind of talk, or silence while the participants eat. Some of the more complex sequences (frequently kept alive by a child who eats little) last for more turns, but the pace slows down and digressions occur while children deal with the business of eating. The conversation about monsters lasted for about 52 turns, and changed focus several times. Other episodes followed, and then the topic of monsters battling one another was revived.

The duration of a sequence of verbal swaggering is associated with the functions of the swaggering. The shortest sequences (7 turns) include the youngest participants. Solidarity (either between two children, or among children in a larger group) takes between 7 and 25 turns to establish. The two instances of exclusion took 11 and 20 turns, respectively (although the second of these was the conclusion of a longer sequence with multiple functions.)

A moment of group solidarity can be established in a short sequence during which each child at the table gets a turn or two to talk. (This is in marked contrast to adult-ordered situations in which each child is supposed to get a turn to talk, turns being

assigned by an adult.) These short sequences generally become slower, everyday conversation. Some of the slowing of conversational rhythm is accompanied by, or makes possible, eating. The shorter sequences of group solidarity (those taking between 7 and 13 turns) involved little or no negotiation of topic and relationship. Some of the other, slightly longer, sequences (in which the primary participants were four-year-old boys) include much more negotiation of topic, purpose and relationship. The uncertainty in these sequences, or more precisely, the participants' desire to establish a higher degree of certainty, is evidenced by expressions like "right?" "ok?", by contradictions "unhunh", "no", "but", and by the presence of more questions in these sequences.

It seems that the younger children (and in some cases the older girls), are less concerned with determining the correlation between their definition of the nonsense of swaggering and the definitions of the other participants. For the older boys, this seems to be an essential ingredient of "doing swaggering" with someone, which, if not established, blocks the occurrence of more turns. The shorter sequences (in which some of the participants are younger) include turns which are less tightly linked to one another semantically, than those of the older boys (which include more questions, and more debate about meaning--more talk about talk, in fact.) Consider the "butty head" sequence cited above in which the topic proceeds from butty head, to Three billy goats gruff, Mr. Rogers, falling off a chair, an eggplant. For these participants doing swaggering together can be simply the production of nonsequiturs. The following, more negotiated sequence involves

three four-year-old boys:

CONOR: Jelly beans

CONOR: (*singsong*) jelly beans come from jelly trees

*Adult talk from another table*

(6 seconds)

MARGARET: jelly trees?

EVAN: (*singsong*) jelly beans come. come from jelly, jelly, right?

NED: that's what you have

EVAN: I don't have jelly beans

CONOR: I have--

NED: no you have jelly

EVAN: I know--

CONOR: I have this

*Adults talking up front*

In this case, the turns include not merely absurd assertions, but debate about whose assertions will define the swaggering. These differing approaches to swaggering manifest themselves in varying durations for swaggers with the same function. A verbal swagger which includes much negotiation of topic takes more turns to achieve the same function than a swagger with less negotiation.

Even four-year-old boys, however, do not always negotiate the context of a swagger. One of the shortest sequences, that of the police raisins, includes three four-year-old boys, Adam (2 years), and a four-year-old girl. This lasted for seven turns. Turns used a one word variation on the opening sentence, thus eliminating the need for negotiation about what the topic or theme might be.

My data include three long sequences of swaggering (from 52 to 92+ turns). These all include at least three four-year-old participants, and their functions are more difficult to isolate. The pace of these longer sequences varies considerably from beginning to end. The outcomes seem less related to the progress of the sequence as a whole and more related to the final "chunk" of the sequence. In fact, these longer sequences can be broken down both by topic and pacing, into different sections. I lumped the different sections together because the central topic and the primary participants remained the same over the whole duration. The issue of these long sequences, and variable functions, will be discussed below.

Verbal swaggering has several different conclusions. Some swaggers are followed by a brief pause, during which the participants deal with the nonverbal business of lunch-- either eating, or "setting up" (opening lunch boxes, arranging chairs, etc.) or cleaning up. That pause may be followed either by slower, everyday conversation by the group, or everyday conversation by some members of the group. Solidarity swaggers often lead to conversation by the same group which did the swaggering--in other words, if a swagger involved two children, they may then talk, in a non-swaggering way, to one another. A swagger which involved a whole table often proceeds to whole table

conversation. The break provided by eating, however, may lead to a different conversational configuration. Thus, the "butty head" swagger cited above led to conversation about favorite foods by the whole group. The swagger about swords quoted above which concluded with the group affirming statement "That's right man man" led into several different conversational strands. It was followed soon after by the jelly bean swagger.

Another very significant outcome of verbal swaggering is food trading or sharing. As noted earlier, this is perceived by the children as one of the most significant events of the lunch table. It seems that swaggering alliances may lead to food sharing or trading following the swagger. Food trading/sharing necessarily concludes a sequence of swaggering because it is such a serious matter. Food is never traded in a jocular way, and is only rarely shared in a joking manner. Gestures are more circumscribed, voices deeper, rhythm of speech slower during food trading than during swaggering.

Playing with food is an intermediate stage between food sharing and more deliberate transgressions of classroom rules for lunch table behavior. Injunctions against playing with food are occasionally delivered by teachers, or quoted by children. More frequently mentioned are prohibitions against leaving the table before/without cleaning up, and mentioning scatological matters at the table. Both may be part of a sequence of swaggering. In only one case of swaggering recorded here did participants actually leave the table and run around the room. Despite its rare occurrence I suspect that teachers' desire to avoid such an outcome is a primary motivation in their interventions in swaggering.

Verbal swaggering is a collaborative effort, during which children "maintain shared reference over a full conversational exchange" (Nelson and Gruendel 1979: 73) and it is accompanied by a sense of solidarity. I have chosen not to call this "friendship" because the alliance required to do swaggering with another child need not last long, and may not be associated with other friendship patterns in the classroom, or on that day.

Children negotiating the topic of swaggering, or the pivot points of responses, may use "friendship markers" like "right?" and first names (Corsaro 1978; Emihovich 1981) or they may choose disputing techniques such as denial, counter assertion (Boggs 1978). Dispute forms and friendship forms are equally appropriate in verbal swaggering because of the swagger's location in time and place. Lunch is one of the few times when the children are in a perceived "informal" situation, and are yet constrained, because of space limitations, to be part of a group which includes friends and non-friends, children and adults. At other "free" times, they can physically and/or socially separate themselves from other people.

Within this situation of constrained informality, swaggering delineates the alliances and adversarial relationships among participants at a given moment. It may characterize only one relationship, or it may use the distinction between allies and adversaries to call attention to the character of two or more relationships. For example, a child may rile adults as a form of display for another child, with whom he is establishing an alliance.<sup>2</sup> Below is a table of the possible permutations of swaggering alliances and oppositions.

#### POSSIBLE DELINEATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP IN VERBAL SWAGGERING

ALLIES	ADVERSARIES	TYPE OF SWAGGER
whole group	-----	solidarity
whole group	adult	solidarity/rile adults
whole group	child	solidarity/exclusion
2 children	-----	solidarity
2 children	adult	solidarity/rile adults
2 children	child	solidarity/exclusion
boys	girls	solidarity/exclusion

This chart implies, correctly, that solidarity is always one function of the routine. Both exclusion, and "riling adults" are achieved through a partnership. Although some partnerships appear to focus more on the second function, exclusion or adult bothering, they are always accompanied by some alliance.

The sets of allies and adversaries listed above represents all possible combinations. In the recorded data, however, certain sets of relationships predominate. Exclusion of a



child, in the two recorded instances, co-occurs with solidarity between two children. The data do not include any sequences in which a whole group of children exclude another child. There are also three sequences in which the negotiation of alliance runs through the largest part of the sequence. No constellation of relationships predominates and both dispute and friendship markers are used in addressing the same child. Under most circumstances, "adult riling" is done by a whole group, or at least by more than two members of the group. These different types of swaggering illustrate the adaptability of the routine to different circumstances. Verbal swaggering is available to all of the older children in the center as a playful means of deciphering relationships in the context of the lunch table. The adaptability of swaggering to different aspects of relationship makes it a strategic routine for a variety of lunch table circumstances.

A verbal swagger which involves two children can be a self-contained conversation, or it can select another child as topic or target of the swaggering. Two children may elaborate a short sequence of swaggering with each other as a prelude to other friendly events. In one sequence between two three-year-olds, they playfully asserted that each was a different body part--eyes, mouth, hair, teeth, lips. This structure of the simple elaboration then gave way to conversation in softer voices, moving chairs closer together, gentle patting and hugging, and food sharing. The use of a simple elaboration device for swaggering makes it easier for children to take appropriate turns, and those turns are both brief and clearly marked. Not only does this structure make it easier for the participants to know what to say, it is also easier for them to know when to say it. The choice of a simple elaboration may be seen not merely as an issue of linguistic competence (which it may be), but as a strategic option for maximizing shared reference, and thus, alliance.

While simply doing swaggering together may enhance solidarity, doing swaggering which excludes someone else has a similar solidarity-enhancing result. One means of exclusion is choice of topic. At the culmination of a longer sequence, Conor and

Evan shifted the group's topic of speculation about how you could eat yourself, to a description of how they would "cut up, karate up, and eat up" Ellen, who protested to the teacher, "They're telling bad ideas". By this topic of conversation they changed the character of the sequence from whole group participation (including both Ellen and Simeon) to one of two children against one. Other exclusion devices are ignoring or contradicting a turn, the former being the most common device used on adults and younger children, the latter used most frequently on peers.

In direct contrast to the simple elaboration of solidarity, are several sequences in which the participants seem to be repeatedly "missing" one another. These sequences involve three children--Conor, Evan and Ned--and the timing, topic, and nature of elaboration are difficult to discern. That the children don't share a sense of what these should be, is indicated by their frequent shifts of rhythm and intonation. An example of this confusion is the jelly bean sequence, which includes several irregularities. The turns of the teacher, instead of providing fuel for adult riling, as in Simeon's "mommy go poop..." seem only to add to the participants' confusion. In the following turns (the whole sequence lasted for 20 turns) the participants fail to acknowledge, and even rebut each other's attempts to establish alliance.

EVAN: chocolate my sandwich

MARGARET: what sort of a sandwich?

EVAN: (*spoken double-time, serious voice*) tuna fish, right?

CONOR: right

NED: (*high pitched*) I have tuna fish too

CONOR: (*exaggerated stresses*) No the chocolate's in the sandwich. uhuh (*a giggle*) The chocolate's in the sandwich.

EVAN: (*serious voice*) Not an h.

CONOR: (*serious voice*) that's what I call it.

*child talking at another table*

EVAN: I call it (?)

MARGARET: what kind of bread is it really?

(?)

CONOR: (*serious voice*) I can't because I have to (?)...

NED: (*play voice, high pitch*) oh neeoh I hate goldilocks and I hate the three bears.

(5)

*child talking at another table*

EVAN: (*play voice, singsong*) no more no more

This sequence, especially at this point, is more of an attempt to get a swagger going than it is swaggering. I have tried to describe how the participants use intonation to indicate whether their responses should be taken seriously or playfully by the others. For some reason, either intonationally or semantically, no turn in this sequence elicits a playful response.

Swaggers may include all the people at a table, or they may be one of several conversations occurring simultaneously at one table. Strategic choice of topic and timing are likely to gain the attention of an entire table. The child who waits until everyone is eating and says into the silence, "And I'm gonna say butty head" has created a situation in which a whole table is party to, if not necessarily participating in verbal swaggering. On the other hand, a different choice of topic or timing can result in a small two-person swagger, which occurs simultaneously with other conversations. Swaggers with different scopes such as these have different social results.

In the event that a whole table is involved in a swaggering sequence, particularly one that includes forbidden topics, the group solidarity is likely to arise from the collective daring involved in walking the boundary line between appropriate and inappropriate speech. A teacher cannot very well ignore a conversation which includes all children at the table. Thus, whole table sequences of verbal swaggering are often dealt with as "disruptive" talk. Teachers in particular tend to respond to swaggering either by directly asking children to stop--"settle down," "eat your lunch,"--or by attempting to redirect the conversation. Parents are less interventionist, being present in a less official capacity, and therefore not required to the same degree as teachers to know and enforce the center's rules of politeness. Reactions by teachers indicate a perception of verbal swaggering as a challenge to the teacher-established norms of the classroom. The tension between adults and children is most acute in instances where a visiting parent is present at the lunch table, and a swaggering topic is introduced. In this case, the teacher is

performing her official role as teacher for a less familiar adult audience, with slightly different rules for interaction that prevail in the center.

The other effect of visiting parents, however, is to split the table into several different conversations. Visiting adults tend to choose topics and ways of speaking that include only one or two children. Adults introduce "serious" topics with scripts and references that are more complex and less familiar to the children than their own invented swaggering. Parents tend to ask for accounts of the day, with particular reference to "projects" time (the teacher-directed activities). Children's accounts of the day generally focus on their free time and often on relationship ingredients of that time-- fights or "good games", shared toys. If the adults at a table do not attempt to engage the children in serious conversation, with adult rules, they become involved in conversation among themselves.

Although outside the child care center it is typical for adults to talk among themselves, ignoring children, this is not the norm inside the child care center for much of the day. Both teachers and children operate under the assumption that conversation with children has a prior claim on teachers than conversation with other adults. That this is the precedent is demonstrated by the teachers' responses when they don't follow this precedent. They can be heard to say, "I'm talking to (another teacher) right now, could you just wait a minute," or words to that effect. Children may respond to that request by insisting on the priority of their message, frequently citing some kind of emergency situation (a fight, wet pants, etc.). Only rarely can teachers be heard to protest children's interruptions, although sometimes, particularly at teacher-directed events like story time, teachers will ask a child to stop interrupting.

Children frequently invoke a no interruption precedent in their own speech with children and adults, using expressions like "I'M talking," "Don't interrupt me," or "it's MY turn to talk." They treat the conversational floor with the same possessiveness as they treat the physical spaces in the classroom. While these "child-centered" rules for speaking

prevail during "free time," teachers invoke additional rules during more organized times of the day--projects, story time, and nap. The children may also call upon these rules, as in "Stop talking. I can't hear the story."

As a result, verbal swaggering directed at adults can be seen as a strategic response that reasserts the rules for speaking inside the child care center as the children see them, and as they have been altered by adults at the lunch table. It is a script for speaking that the children know and that adults either do not know or cannot do. As such, it is an inversion of the scripts that Nelson and Gruendel (1979) considered. The script for swaggering is not a play copy of real life--an imitative script--but an innovative script that exists only in playful conversation. It can therefore be invoked by children as talk that they do together, and in which adults do not participate. The appearance of whole-table swaggering, however, is not limited to instances in which two or more adults are present at the lunch table. Yet the mere presence of several adults seems to make it very difficult for children to collaborate in doing verbal swaggering.

The script of swaggering, therefore, can be seen as applicable to such situations, but not developed in them, and perhaps not primarily for them. Swaggering is more often a whole-table affair when a familiar adult (or two) is present, and rather than marking antagonism towards adults and adult-imposed conversational rules, it marks solidarity among the children at the table. It does this most effectively, however, when the topic borders the forbidden, and in that sense, many whole group/solidarity swaggers have an undercurrent of "riling adults." Swaggering fills the vacuum left by the absence of adult-imposed conversational topics. It does so with a lunchtime equivalent to free-time talk--it is "play" talk, interspersed with other kinds of talk.

The solidarity engendered by doing this kind of talk with someone is materially evident through food trading and sharing, which may follow verbal swaggers. The swagger, by either creating or underlining alliances, sets the tone for sharing and trading food. The activity of giving away food, however, cannot be done during swaggering; it

requires serious talk on the part of the participants. Swaggering may also follow food trading, commenting on the tenor of the trade.

If swaggering is an uncommon script, with which only some of the participants are familiar, it occupies a peculiar position when considered from the point of view of developing linguistic competence. Both Nelson and Gruendel (1979) and Katriel (1985) have addressed the issue of young children's acquiring competence through the use of scripts or ritual--formulas that enable children to collaboratively frame their talk. Nelson and Gruendel looked at ways in which children were unable to collaborate, situations in which they "missed" one another. Katriel noticed that younger children chose set forms for establishing *brogez* with each other, so that the social meaning could not be missed.

In the data on swaggering, two groups demonstrate linguistic competence: younger children and adults. Both adults and younger children take turns that don't count; they are overlapped, ignored, or answered in "serious" contradicting voice, rather than swaggering voice. In the example cited earlier, in which I asked for clarification of a swagger, I was given a real world answer--"My mommy hate spanking"--but my subsequent comments were incorporated into the sequence as a "straight" counterpoint to various outrageous statements. This was, perhaps, the most successful integration of adult contributions into a verbal swagger. Adult attempts to "redirect" swaggering into serious talk are either transformed into a more fictive, playful mode or ignored.

Younger children may indicate an awareness of the pattern, and attempt to take a turn, but they are frequently overlapped heavily and ignored. Three year olds are sometimes successful participants, and can independently generate a short sequence of swaggering. The two year old whom I have seen attempt to participate in swaggering is still unable to take a turn that is acknowledged by the other children. He demonstrates awareness of the pattern, without being able to produce it, as in his attempt to call one of the items in his lunch "police food".

This two year old is both socially and linguistically less competent than the older participants. He appears to understand the script and the rules for speaking within it without being able to put them together to form a correct turn at the correct time. Although I only began systematically observing these swaggers two months earlier, I can recall similar conversations from previous years. (They were especially difficult moments for me as a new teacher and therefore somewhat memorable.) The children who are doing verbal swaggering now are not the children who dominated the lunch table conversations last year, or the year before. Continued study could show whether the form remains when the individuals who presently use it leave the child care center. "Cross-cultural" study, in a micro-cultural sense, could show whether the pattern, or one like it, exists in other child care centers, or among older children in groups.

Some of the oldest children in the group, however, were also participants in attempted swaggers that didn't achieve full collaboration. These children are capable of generating fairly complex swaggers. Why then the almost complete breakdown in shared reference? These difficulties occurred in triads, in which a more complex relationship than alliance/opposition was evolving. Either the form of verbal swaggering was too constricted to delineate this constellation of relationships, or perhaps the participants themselves were uncertain of what the relationships were. Further study of unsuccessful or choppy swaggers might point out what is the next step in the playful delineation of relationships at the lunch table.

What is clear is that the pattern, over the course of that lunch time, is the smoothest where there are primarily two participants. The sword play involves Evan and Ned, then trails off when Conor enters the sequence. The monster sequence has its most purely fictive, semantically related turns when Ned's contributions are limited to "yeah." The final belly showing sequence, which includes Adam as well as these three (and even Adam lifted up his shirt and showed his belly) is the least complex, structurally, and the most uniform, intonationally, in the transcript.

Thus, among the options of verbal swaggering makes available, those with a stricter patterning are easier for a group to achieve. Additionally, more complex groups--three children rather than two or a whole table (five or six)--may be part of a more complex pattern of relationship which does not easily lend itself to expression in verbal swaggering.

In conclusion, we have seen how the pattern of verbal swaggering at one child care center is a complex strategy that brings a play frame to a non-play situation (lunch). It also suggests a more complex sociolinguistic competence among pre-school children than is generally discussed. Nelson and Gruendel's (1979) discussion of maintaining shared reference through scripts does not account for the sophistication required to maintain shared reference in two ways of speaking--swaggering and "serious" food trading talk. Unlike the children studied by Katriel (1985) (who were older than the oldest children of this study), the "rituals" used to insure that participants do not "miss" one another are a flexible way of speaking, with a variety of acceptable responses and a variety of social functions. Development of competence, in this case, seems to lead some participants to a new level of complexity, which is more difficult to fit into the form. Thus, development proceeds unevenly, with some children producing simple, tightly organized routines that express simple relationships, while other children attempt to make the routine do more complex interactional work. The playful ritual of swaggering carries a significant social meaning that becomes important in the non-play activity of food trading and in adult/child relations. Verbal swaggering allows preschool children to accomplish social ends through talk in the predominantly verbal context of the lunch table.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the "Ethnography of Speaking" course taught by Dean Hymes.

<sup>2</sup> The lack of inclusive language in this sentence is deliberate--the data only indicates such behavior by boys.



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