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EMERGENCE OF CREATIVITY AND IMPROVISATIONAL CONVERSATION IN PRETEND PLAY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how children improvise pretend play drama. We observe 3 to 5 years old children's play at free nursing time and analyze it focusing on the process of how children negotiate the definition of a situation. Objects, utterances and gestures are used as components of play drama. In other words, children use their original meanings to create imaginary new meanings in pretend play. The discussion is made pertaining to the process of improvising play drama unceasingly using objects, utterances and gestures, which suggests the possible development of pragmatics in language through play activity.

Key Words: pretend play, improvisation, developmental pragmatics, creativity

INTRODUCTION

Children create play drama without scripts. In other words, they improvise it (Sawyer, 1997). This shows children's play interaction as improvisation and tries to describe their interaction as the sequences of what is happening moment by moment.

We make hypothesis that they improvise play scenario sharing the meanings of the context. We study on the pragmatic aspect of children's play conversation; linguistic expressions that point to contextual information rather than symbolize context-independent, abstract concepts exist in every language (Ninio & Snow, 1996).

We will show this process by analyzing conversation using the notion of *the definition of a situation* (Goffman, 1959). Our goal is to understand how children create and share play-meaning using contextualized meaning.

In this paper, we will firstly explain the theoretical framework and then illustrate it empirically with observational data at preschools.

IMPROVISATION IN PRETEND PLAY

Children's play is a creative, novel improvisation in that children create and perform

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play drama (Sawyer, 1997).

In this process, a child needs to propose a turn and adds a new element into play scenario, while the others need to understand, share, and develop it.

Play interaction itself looks like following a shared script but it is fundamentally improvisational. Children's play is contingent process of creating drama. Mead comments on improvisational interaction, "The emergent when it appears is always found to follow from the past, but before it appears, it does not, by definition, follow from the past." (Mead, 1932, p. 2). Sawyer (1997) says that Mead's (1932) concept of the emergent shares much in common with the metaphor of interaction as improvisation.

PRETEND PLAY AS CONTEXTUALIZED ACTION

Russian psychologist Leont'ev (1981) notes play drama doesn't exist as context independent or just fantasy. Children reflect real life to play world. Therefore, play isn't merely a fantasy or an imaginal world. Vygotsky (1933/1978) emphasizes on the role of object to the play world. He discusses that actual action with an object, which originally inspired by adult social life, becomes an imagination. Therefore, play is an actual-action using object and will become symbolic action along with child development. Object has constraint of how people use it in their daily life, he coins this *the sense of an object*; an object's meaning shared in generally, and in contrast, he coins the term *the quality of an object*; an object's meaning transformed through play interaction. For example, children can symbolize a stick as a horse but can't symbolize a card as a horse because a stick can be ridden but not a card.

In this paper, we also assume children use the sense ubiquitous within play context, such as, toys, spaces, utterances, daily routines and gestures.

THE DEFINITION OF A SITUATION

Children improvise play drama and play drama isn't just a fantasy. They create play drama through ongoing play interaction. How this interaction is like? What happens in this process? We'll approach this question using Goffman's term the definition of a situation. Goffman (1959) explains that people manipulate their impression on other person through behaviors, tools and words. For example, a person tries to create an impression of belonging to elegant-upper-class by high quality furniture but in fact he/she swings his/her hair in the background to collect them, which is far from the impression of being elegant. Perinbanayagam (1974) explains Goffman's notion of the definition of a situation as an interaction which is a management of impression between actors; one proposes a certain definition of a situation by using whatever objects and words, and the others accept and reject develop this proffered definition of a situation. Using Goffman's contention, we make hypothesis for emergence of creativity in children's pretend play, where children dramatize the roles of them and the sense of an objects. Context, words and objects, are utilized to sustain the definition of a situation (Figure 1).

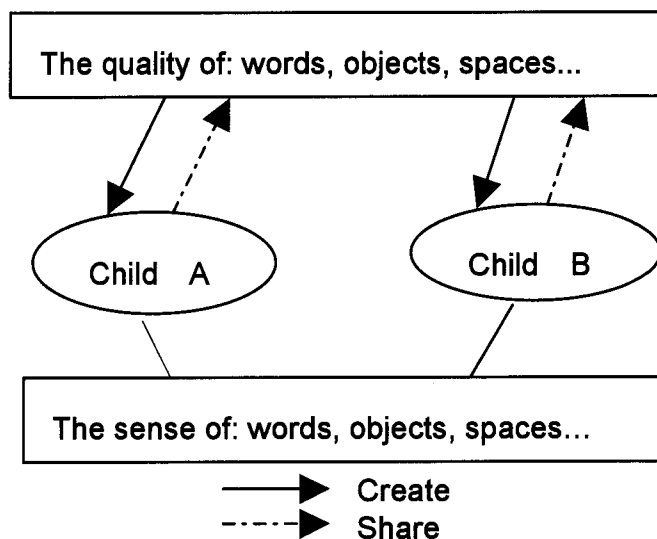


Figure 1 Making the definition of a situation in pretend play

METHOD

Episode 1

Procedure

The data was collected on January 11, 2004 at a private preschool located in Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan. We observed and IC recorded children's play at free nursing time from 4:00pm through 5:30pm. One female observer observed play and sometimes she played with children.

We saved IC recorded data on PC and then transcribed it as a protocol data.

Participants

Participants were two 5 year-old girl's.

Episode 2

Procedure

The data was collected at Kindergarten of H University. We observed and video-recorded children's play at free nursing time. One female observer and two male observers observed children's play and sometimes played with them.

We saved video recorded data on PC and then transcribed it.

Participants

Participants were 4 to 6 years old children. Takuya (5 year-old boy), Rio (5 year-old boy) and Nami (5 year-old girl) were main participants in the episode.

RESULTS

1. Negotiate the definition of a situation using words and objects

In episode 1, Kao (5 year-old girl) and Usa (5 year-old girl) are playing together in sand box. They pretend black sand (sand is black for it is moist) as chocolate and pebble as

 Episode 1

In episode 1, Kao (5 years-old girl) and Usa (5 years-old-girl) are playing together in sand box. They sit next to each other.

- (1) Kao I really have no idea of what you're cooking (with that sand).
 (2) Usa Chocolate [DEFINITION OF A SITUATION]
 (3) Kao eh?
 (4) Usa Because its color is black. [ACCEPTANCE]
 (5) Kao OK. Then mine is also chocolate.
-

beans chocolate and put them into a bucket. They pretend to make chocolate cakes, chocolate parfait and chocolate ice cream using three cups of black sand as ice cream, cutting board and spoon. They seem to, all in all, just enjoy making chocolate.

Episode 1 shows how children make those play situation using the sense of words and objects.

Kao and Usa are just playing with sand sharing one idea that they are cooking something. At utterance (1), Kao seems to try to expand this shared idea. Usa answers Kao's question that she is cooking chocolate at utterance (2). As a result, Usa proposes her definition of a situation. However, Kao can't figure out this definition of a situation since black sand is still just sand but not chocolate for her, so she says "eh" at utterance (3). Because Kao can't understand Usa's definition of a situation, Usa retries to explain her definition of a situation showing black sand. At utterance (4), Usa completes the meaning of her previous utterance (2) with the sense of an object (i.e. black sand). At utterance (2) and (4), she proposes the definition of a situation (i.e. We are cooking chocolate).

At utterance (5), Kao finally accepts and understand Usa's definition of a situation that she is cooking chocolate with the sand due to the fact that sand is black.

What we can find from this episode is that children make the definition of a situation using words and objects. The sense of an object (i.e. black) is transformed into the quality of an object (i.e. a chocolate) and consequently they share the definition of a situation: We're cooking chocolate together. In this way, children complete the meanings of objects with the meanings of words or vice versa.

Figure 2 illustrates the above explanation.

2. Negotiate the definition of a situation using words, objects and gestures

In the next episode 2, we will see the similar process of how children create the definition of a situation using words, objects and gestures.

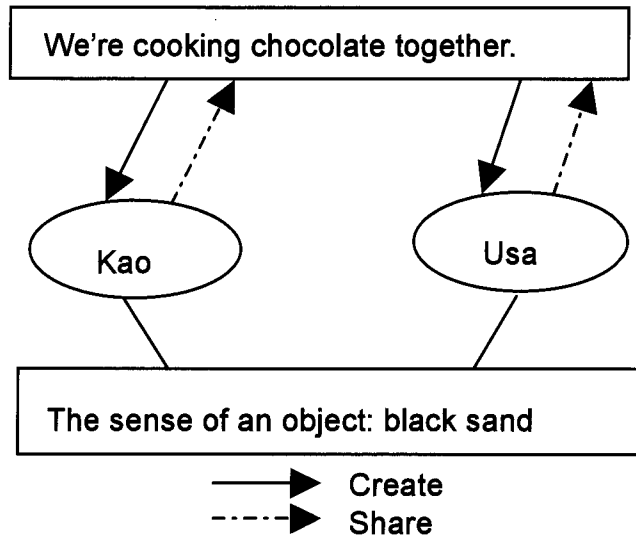


Figure 2 The definition of a situation in episode 1

Episode 2-1

Takuya, Rio, Nami and Yu are sitting on a soft tube.

(1) Takuya We're sharks. Shark.

Takuya moves to near Yu then he lets Yu go away.

Nami and Rio continue to sit on the tube holding each side of a short rope.

Yu moves to near Nami and Rio. Takuya says "Pause, pause" and then he gets down a tube. When Takuya is about to pass Rio, he explains his "definition of a situation" to Takuya.

(2) Takuya Pause, pause

(3) Nami Pause

(4) Rio ah Takuya

(5) Rio Here is the entrance and we're in a island and..

In episode 2-1, children are just sitting on a soft tube in a play hall before Takuya's utterance (1) "We're sharks", which gives them the definition of a situation that they are sharks and also projects freedom to other children for developing it. Rio expands Takuya's utterance as saying at utterance (5) "we're in an island and". Due to Takuya's utterance (1) and Rio's utterance (5), the original situation (i.e. Children are sitting on a soft tube) is transformed into a new situation (i.e. Children are in an island and they are sharks). The sense of the object (i.e. a soft tube which they sit on) is also transformed into the quality of an object (i.e. an island).

Figure 3 shows this process of creating the definition of a situation in episode 2-1. Takuya, Nanako and Rio improvise the definition of a situation utilizing words (i.e. shark) and the sense of an object (i.e. a soft tube). They know shark habitats in ocean and there're islands in ocean. Children sit on a tube, it might remind them of safe place like islands. They seem to make the definition a situation in this way.

Following episode 2-2 to 2-3, we will see the process of expanding the definition of a

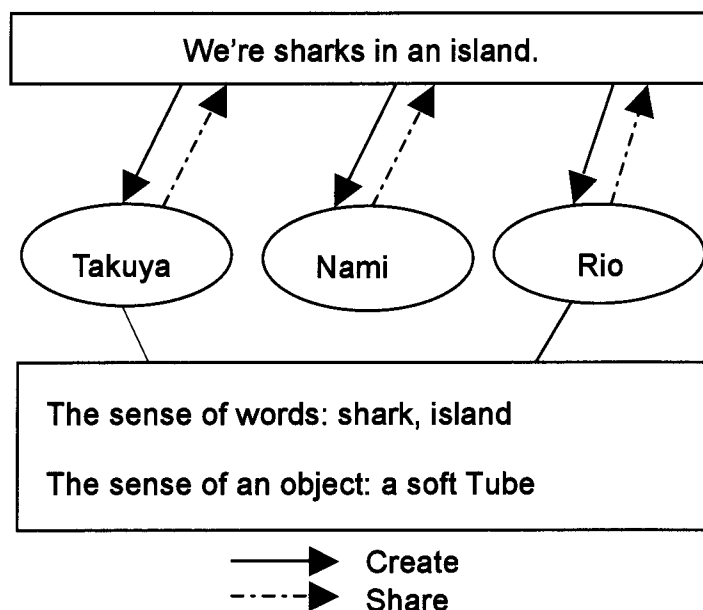


Figure 3 The definition of a situation in episode 2-1

situation using words, objects and gestures. Children develop the definition of a situation by themselves. They pretend that they are sharks in an island. They try to protect themselves by attacking sharks with knives.

Episode 2-2

About twenty seconds later episode 2-1, Takuya comes back.

He holds a rope. Showing the rope to Rio, he explains its function to Rio.

- (1) Takuya (showing his rope to Rio)
- (2) Takuya This is a rope in case something very odd comes near to us.
- (3) Rio (showing his rope to Takuya)
- (4) Rio How about this?

Takuya throws his rope toward floor beyond the tube.

Then Takuya sits on a tube throwing his rope towards floor again.

Yu, Rika, Nami, Saki, Takuya and Rio are sitting on the tube.

Takuya and Nami gesticulate passing a knife to Takuya.

- (5) Rio Yes
- (6) Saki Yes
- (7) Takuya Oh well, I, I'm going to, this Shark's

Takuya passes his rope to Rio saying something to him.

- (8) Takuya Nami, a knife
- (9) Nami Yes, here

Takuya and Nami gesticulate passing a knife.

Takuya explains the function of a rope to Rio at utterance (2) that it is kind of a weapon to protect them in that he transforms the sense of an object (i.e. a rope) into the quality of an object (i.e. a weapon).

Children also use gestures to complete the sense of words. At utterance (8), Takuya

says to Nami to give him a knife, though Nami doesn't have it. Since there isn't a knife, Nami gesticulate to pass him an imaginary knife. In this interaction they seem to create new definition of a situation (i.e. Beat the shark with a knife). Figure 4 illustrates interaction of creating the definition of a situation in episode 2-2.

They again take gestures to create and share the definition of a situation in episode 2-3.

Episode 2-3

Takuya gesticulates jumping into ocean. Nami and Rio follow him.

(1) Takuya Go

(2) Nami I'm going

Nami gesticulates jumping into ocean and so does Rio.

(3) Takuya I'll bring this knife to the shark,

(3) Takuya cause' he's there

Nami goes back to the tube. Rio follows to Takuya.

Rio and Takuya gesticulate fighting with the shark.

After fighting, they come back to the tube. Takuya moves to another place.

Takuya jumps into the floor in that he seems to transform the sense of an object (i.e. floor) into the quality of an object (i.e. shark habitat) and creates the definition of a situation: jump into ocean. At utterance (2), Nami immediately shares this definition of a situation as she follows him to jump into the floor, and so does Rio. Rio even develops this definition of a situation by gesticulating fighting against the shark with Takuya. The boys seem to accept and develop Takuya's utterance (3) "I'll bring this knife to the shark, cause' he's there!" by gesticulating to beat the shark.

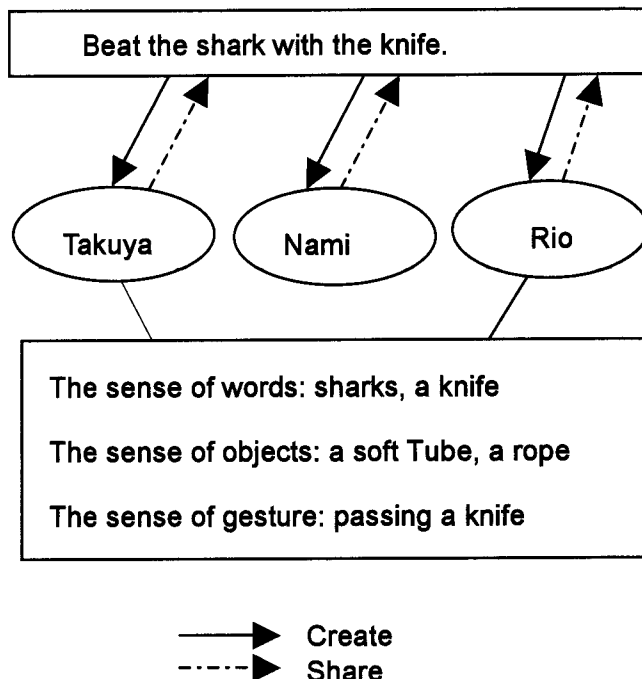


Figure 4 The definition of a situation in episode 2-2

Figure 5 illustrates the whole interaction of creating the definition of a situation through episode 2.

Episode 2-4

20 seconds later episode 2-3, Nami, Yu, Hiroko, Rio, Saki and Rika are sitting on a tube. Takuya comes back to the tube and he warns them to escape to seashore.

(1) Takuya Now,

Takuya runs around a tube. Then he warns other children move to iron-bar-place.

(2) Takuya Get down to seashore, Get down. Shark is...!

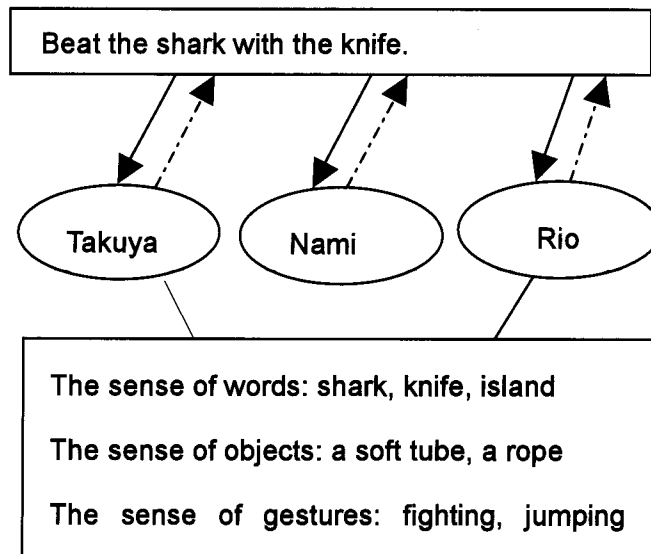
(3) Takuya So that Shark might not be coming again

They move to iron bar and starts sitting on it but soon after nursery teacher announces that free nursing time is over.

Children improvise the definition of a situation (i.e. Get down to seashore so that shark might not be coming again) by moving to iron-bar-place after utterance (2) and (3). The episode 2-4 also shows the similar fact with episode 2-2 and 2-3 that children complete the sense of words with gestures to make shared definition of a situation. This Episode finished when nursery teacher announced that free time was over.

DISCUSSION

As we have described in result, children improvise play situation or the definition of a situation using words, objects, and gestures. We can also point out the fact that the



—→ Create
 - - - - -→ Share

Figure 5 The definition of a situation in episode 2

meaning of words, objects and gestures complete its meaning with each other.

Unless they improvise play definition of a situation, they only share the sense of an object and the real situation. Children need to create and share new meaning derived from reality to play together. Therefore, children have to improvise the definition of a situation using every meaning embedded within context so that they can share and expand it.

Although children's play situation seem to have many elements of fantasy, they share the sense of an object from real situation. Then transform it into the quality of an object and in fact they make play world as contextualized world.

Whalen (1995) observes children's fantasy activity and she also comments on the reflection of social world in pretend play. She finds that fantasy play activities are complex for children to interact and to display social world to each other.

We can also notice that children's utterance (speech use) incorporating pragmatics. Ninio and Snow (1996) study many aspects of pragmatic development and one of them is that "the acquisition of communicative intents and the development of their linguistic expression, including the conduct of communication prior to the emergence of speech- that is, by vocalizations and gestures." (p. 11)

As we have empirically described in episode 1 and 2, children communicate and improvise in play interaction by the sense of words (speeches), objects and gestures. Children use the sense of an object, word and gesture, which is shared among peers in play context and transform it into shared new meaning to expand the definition of a situation.

We can see the emergence of creativity in play from the similar fact that children create the quality of an object and new elements into play context. However, we should notice that creativity in this sense doesn't mean an ability to produce a totally new idea but to produce an idea influenced by ongoing context of interaction. This principle overlaps with the principle of children play. Leont'ev (1981) comments play is not merely the fantasy. Play interaction is situated action where children make the definition of a situation through context. To give suggestions for kindergarten education, we need further analysis on what kind of context; objects in other words, nursery environments are effective for giving a child chance to enhance their creativity in play.

Although this paper can't widen the range of theoretical problem to the process of pragmatic development of speech use in pretend play, further study needed to find more facts on how a child develops his/her developmental skill to create new meaning in the perspective of pragmatic development. Consequently, we can find more about play interaction and how it relates its ongoing situation in the perspective of developmental psychology.

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