VOICES OF THE SELF: CHILDREN'S NEGOCIATION OF IDENTITY IN INTERACTION

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Abstract: This study investigates how children construct and negotiate their self-image in televised dialogues between preschoolers and an adult interlocutor. The analysis is based on a corpus of interactions that reveals various ways in which children refer to themselves. Particular attention is given to how children position themselves within the family. The paper also examines two examples where the child's identity is shaped through reference to the kindergarten peer group, highlighting emerging social awareness and group dynamics among peers. Another line of analysis concerns the child's response to adult-imposed rules. Here, children reproduce fragments of adult discourse in ways that both reflect internalized norms and allow for subtle forms of resistance or negotiation. The study emphasizes the role of language in the development of self-concept, showing how identity is co-constructed in interaction, often through the appropriation of adult voices and values.

Keywords: self-construction, child–adult interaction, identity, televised discourse, family roles, children's construction of the self

In psychology, children's cognitive development is commonly broken down by age, with each stage presented separately according to specific characteristics. I find these approaches restrictive, because self-formation—and thus a person's overall development—cannot be reduced to fixed stages. The present study moves away from such models and instead adopts a socio-pragmatic perspective, complemented by discourse analysis, showing that a child's identity is built through verbal interaction in concrete social settings.

Selfhood is constructed over time through social relationships. As Steve Caton observes, "the process is a social one, an interaction between the individual and some other or others in its environment" (Caton 1993: 321). The same idea is underscored by Ochs and Schieffelin, who chart the essential role of language in socialization and in learning a community's norms: "the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language, by acquiring knowledge of its functions, social distribution and interpretations in and across socially defined situations, i.e., through exchanges of language in particular social situations" (Ochs and Schieffelin 2001: 277).

Alison Sealey likewise links language acquisition to other aspects of child development, showing that language learning is not a purely linguistic process but involves significant social, cognitive, and affective evolution: "a child learning language is developing on all fronts, not just the linguistic one, and is trying to make sense of his social environment" (Sealey 1997: 37).

A particularly intriguing line of inquiry concerns how children relate to rules imposed by adults. Within the analysed corpus, only a few sequences reveal children's attitudes toward such rules, whether acceptance or contestation, yet these observations lay the groundwork for future research into how children negotiate social norms in televised discourse.

Acquisition of a language is therefore intertwined with integration into a network of social relations. The notion of the child as a social actor captures how children position themselves in

two key settings of early development: the family and preschool. In both contexts, they negotiate relationships with adults and peers and interact directly with authority figures. Within the family, children construct identity either by differentiating themselves from other members or by marking their belonging to the group. In preschool interactions, negotiation with others and the assertion of individuality are even more visible, likely because the interactions are more complex.

This study explores the performative and relational dimension of children's identities in the television interaction „Copiii spun..." ("Kids Say..."), hosted by Virgil Ianțu. In the corpus transcription, C refers to the child, while V refers to Virgil Ianțu. The corpus consists of full transcripts from several episodes of the show. Children's discourse is analysed through two dimensions of identity: the individual self and the child as an immediately situated social actor, contextualized here by the family and preschool environments—both essential to identity formation in childhood.

In children's discourse, pronouns are a key means by which the individual self is constructed. Pronouns are not merely markers of personal identity; they position the child in relation to others. Children's identities are dynamically built through discursive interaction and are shaped equally by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. As Alison Sealey notes, "within each of the proposed dimensions of identity managed by children in their talk, there are both inclusionary and exclusionary influences" (Sealey 1997: 27). She also shows that all children project their identity along a temporal axis, referring to past or future selves and comparing their age with that of others: "all of the children refer to their age, often in the context of a comparison with people of other ages or with themselves at previous or future periods in their lives" (Sealey 1997: 27).

In the televised interaction between adult and child, the child is invited to construct identity through reflective discourse. Only a few cases in the corpus feature direct references to personal abilities or traits, confirming Sealey's observation that such self-disclosures are relatively rare: "children sometimes comment in various kind of conversation, on other aspects of their personalities, skills and abilities" (Sealey 1997: 29).

Corpus analysis

A central observation in analysing the construction of the individual self in children is acknowledging that the self "is a changing identity, especially in childhood" (Sealey 1997: 29). Individual identity is significantly marked by developmental stages. Children are aware of this change, which becomes linguistically visible in how they refer to their own age and compare themselves with earlier or future versions of self. Thus, a temporal axis can be traced along which children negotiate identity.

When mathematics arises in conversations, Virgil Ianțu deliberately offers scientifically incorrect information to sustain the programme's humorous frame. Maintaining the comedic play around mathematics, he also provokes amusing confusion among children with siblings by referencing birth order, age differences, and so on.

(1)
C: Yes, well, I did dance classes when I was little, now I do karate.
V: You do karate, right, so do I! Shall we do a kata now? How long have you been doing it?
C: If we count this year too, three years.
V: Ah, so you started at four.
C: Six.
V: Are you starting with crazy calculations again?
C: From six, because we moved into a rented place when I was six.

Example (1) features a child's reference to their past self. In the context of a discussion about extracurricular activities, the child constructs a temporal self-representation by comparing a physical activity performed in the past ("I did dance classes when I was little") with one currently ongoing ("and now I do karate"). In response to the adult's question ("How long have you been doing it?), the child offers an approximate answer based on reasoning (If we count this year too, three years"). The adult's reply includes an apparent misunderstanding, based on a miscalculation ("Ah, so you started at four"). The child corrects the mistake, and when the adult persists in the confusion with an ironic remark ("Are you starting with crazy calculations again?"), the child ties the time estimation to a personally meaningful event ("From six, because we moved into a rented place when I was six").

Two instances were identified in the corpus in which children refer to their future self, treating it as a distinct entity from the present self. A distinction is made between two referents: the child in the present and their projection into the future—the adult. The future self is represented with different characteristics than the identity expressed in the present. It is worth noting that, in general, adults encourage children to relate to their future self, especially in the context of conversations about ideal professions.

(2)
C: I want to have several jobs: to be a voiceover teacher, a TV presenter, a make-up artist…
V: Ah, so you basically want to do them all.
C: No, and an acting teacher. I really liked what job Ms. Roben has, so I want to have it too, when I'm 20 at the latest.

In example (2), the child lists several professions she would like to pursue in the future ("voiceover teacher, presenter, make-up artist"), all of which fall within the artistic sphere. The future self appears as an extension of the current self, yet it bears distinct characteristics. The child adds another aspiration that was initially omitted: "acting teacher". In this addition, the child also mentions a real-life role model, Ms. Roben: "I really liked what job Ms. Roben has, so I want to have it too". The child projects her future identity through personal ambitions and by referencing meaningful relationships in the present.

(3)
V: Kind of like Lolek, Lolek with a big mouth… Thank you, that's lovely, you're so sweet… I'll keep it. How do you see yourself in 10 years?
C: In 10 years, I'll be a real artist.
V: An artist? Do you know how to sing?
C: Drawing artist
V: You mean a visual artist, or something like that

In example (3), the adult's question ("How do you see yourself in 10 years?") is an invitation for the child to articulate an explicit projection of her future self. Her aspiration, although stated with confidence ("in 10 years, I'll be a real artist"), includes an imprecise but compelling expression: "real artist". A possible gloss of this phrase might be "a true artist in every sense of the word". This projection is anchored in a concrete activity that the child already engages in. The presenter seeks clarification about the artistic domain in question ("artist, do you know how to sing?") and the child responds with a creative but intelligible formulation of her desired profession ("drawing artist"), which the adult subsequently reformulates as "visual artist".

Next, we analyze how the child constructs their self-concept according to a recurrent theme in the interaction: their status within the family. Children define themselves in relation to other family members, either through comparisons (for example, related to age differences) or by marking their belonging to the family group through the pronoun "we", which illustrates this collective identity. An important aspect is that "the individual level and the situational level are sometimes so correlated that they overlap" (Sealey 1997: 30). This phenomenon becomes visible in sequences where children negotiate their position within the family. As previously mentioned, the host maintains a humorous tone in the show by provoking confusions related to the child's family status.

(4)
V: Your sister is 22 years older than you, which you'll turn this summer when you go to the border to party.
C: I'm not turning 22 this summer, you didn't understand.
V: Okay, is it better to be the younger one or would you rather be the older?
C: I'd like to be just the way I am, that is, the younger one.
V: Yes, do you have advantages?
C: Let's say yes. The first advantage: my homework is easier; the second advantage: I have more free time.

In example (4), the child's status is negotiated through an exchange marked by humor and corrections. The presenter deliberately introduces a confusion regarding the guest's age, attributing to her, in a playful manner, the age of the older sister: "Your sister is 22 years older than you, which you'll turn this summer at the border when you go to party". The joke relies on exaggeration and an intentional shift of referent. The child does not grasp the adult's humorous intent, feels contradicted, and offers a serious correction: "I'm not turning 22 this summer, you didn't understand". By appealing to the truth, the child consolidates her family status. The adult's question, ("is it better to be the younger one or would you rather be the older?"), triggers a reflective moment about the child's position in the family. The girl chooses to maintain her current

status within the family ("I'd like to be just the way I am, that is, the younger one"), justifying her choice with advantages: "my homework is easier", "I have more free time".

(5)
C: Well, let me tell you, here's my mom when she gave birth to my siblings, so the firstborn was Radu, the second Sebi, and I'm the youngest although…
V: Who is the youngest?
C: Me.
V: So you were the first if you are the youngest?
C: Yes, and they grew up, and I no longer have anyone to play with because Radu is looking at his phone pressing buttons.

In this example, the child does not understand the humorous implication of Virgil Ianțu's remark. After expressing her status as the youngest by presenting the age hierarchy of her siblings, the adult offers an obviously false statement ("so you were the first if you are the youngest"). The child accepts this statement, showing that she has not grasped the interlocutor's intended meaning, and continues the interaction by expressing a grievance, which provides important clues about her cognitive and pragmatic development.

(6)
V: Pișpirică is younger than you? How old is he?
C: One year and two months.
V: One year and two months.
C: And I'm six.
V: Wow, so he's older than you.
C: Yes, he can even walk alone to the bed and to daddy and mommy...

Example (6) is very similar, where there is an apparent confirmation ("yes, he can walk") of an absurd statement by the moderator ("Wow, so he's older than you"). Although the child knows both her own and her brother's age, she does not yet have the linguistic competence to challenge the adult's playful comment.

Next, we propose the analysis of two situations where children demonstrate affiliation with the close social framework of the family through the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we". This pronominal form indicates both belonging to the family group and the way the self is constructed in relation to very close persons.

(7)
V: And you also let the pig run around anywhere. If it were up to you, you'd be covered in mud too, but still, you wash yourself, I don't know... you should wash the pigs too.
C: They don't have showers, they have food.
V: It's your fault, but does your dog go to the countryside too?
C: Well, we feed him, and now you blame us, we feed him.
V: No, not all of you, only you. Tell me…

In fragment (7), preserving the absurd tone, Virgil Ianțu directs an accusation towards the child ("you should wash the pigs too"), implying that the family should take better care of these

animals. The child's reply ("they don't have showers, they have food") is followed by a significant sequence where "we" marks belonging to the family: "well, we feed him and now you blame us, we feed him". The repetition of the pronoun "we" and the phrase "you blame us" demonstrate a defense of the whole family against the accusation. In this playful context, the presenter shifts responsibility solely onto the child ("no, not all of you, only you").

(8)
V: But the house has two floors?
C: Yes, and an attic too.
V: And do they keep you in the attic or do they let you come inside the house?
C: Well, we stay in the house, but in the attic, we store things.

A similar identity construction appears in fragment (8), where the ironic provocation by the adult, suggesting marginalization ("and do they keep you in the attic or let you come inside?"), is rejected by the child through a correction ("well, we stay in the house, but in the attic we store things"). The pronoun "we" signals family affiliation, and the explanation serves to clarify that the attic is a storage space: "but in the attic we store things".

The discursive identity of children is also closely linked to early social experiences, with kindergarten representing an important context in this stage of development. Below, we analyze two examples illustrating how children build their self-image through relation to the kindergarten group and implicitly, through interaction with peers.

(9)
V: How sweet you are, you're very good. Are you good with your classmates at school?
C: Yes, many children have invited me to parties.
V: But tell me… are you the class leader at school?
C: Yes.
V: See, I'm looking at you and again… you're the class leader. So what do you do? Do you hit the kids, make them sit at their desks, pull their ears?
C: No, I'm the best in class, my brain works sharp, and the teacher says I'm the boss, the boss of bosses.

In fragment (9), the child's identity in relation to others is constructed through two mechanisms: inclusion and distancing. The child's statement "yes, many children have invited me to parties" indicates belonging to the peer group and suggests social integration. However, when Virgil Ianțu introduces a stereotype about the class leader, using an ironic tone and exaggerating authority through expressions of physical violence ("Do you hit the kids, make them sit at their desks, pull their ears?"), the child rejects this image. Instead, the child emphasizes intellectual superiority ("I'm the best in class, my brain works sharp"), which distances her from other classmates and justifies her leader status. The child reinforces this idea through a structure borrowed from an authority figure who supports her academic performance: "the teacher says I'm the boss, the boss of bosses".

(10)
V: We go straight to the headmistress, I come with you hand in hand, and we say: Headmistress… you say the rest.
C: Headmistress, let me sleep only when we want to.
V: No, now you tell them so you don't get exhausted.
C: Headmistress, let us sleep when we want to, because this thing that you don't want, that we don't want chairs in the bathroom, that when kids leave with the adult they can't play in the park anymore, what the heck is that?

Unlike the previous example where the child distanced herself from the group, fragment (10) shows an assumption of a collective voice. The adult invites the child to address an authority figure, the kindergarten headmistress, to express a grievance. The child accepts the role of group representative, formulating an ungrammatical but pragmatically significant request ("Headmistress, let me sleep only when we want to"). The individual perspective is replaced by the collective one, "we" representing the classmates. Encouraged to continue, the girl reformulates the request again in the name of the group ("let us sleep when we want to"), then begins listing other frustrations regarding institutional rules ("this thing that you don't want, that we don't want chairs in the bathroom, that when kids leave with the adult they can't play in the park anymore"). Finally, the exclamation "what the heck is that?" expresses the child's revolt against the rules they must obey.

It is necessary to detail the way in which children relate to the rules that govern their existence, as this is relevant to the process of identity construction. In interactions with adults, children position themselves as individuals belonging to a category that is subject to authority and constrained by rules imposed by parents, educators, or other figures. These rules promote certain behavioral norms meant to integrate children into the social sphere. In some situations, such as the one in the previous excerpt, the child expresses an opinion about the rules.

(11)
V: Do you like money?
C: I like money, but my mom doesn't let me handle money.
V: That's another story… why aren't we allowed to handle money?
C: Because boys aren't allowed to have money, because if they buy sweets and such, their teeth get ruined, and money is for clothes, not for sweets like that.
V: Exactly, that's why only ladies keep the money, so boys don't play with whatever they want: sweets, toy cars, I don't know what else...
C: I can play with toy cars, because they're small. You're not allowed to play with big cars, because they drive and you could crash into them.

In other situations, like in excerpt (11), the child demonstrates an understanding of their responsibilities but does not express a personal opinion about the rules. The parental rule is related to money: "my mom doesn't let me handle money". The mother, as the agent of authority, is the one who enforces the restriction. When Virgil Ianțu asks for a justification for this prohibition ("why aren't we allowed to handle money?"), the child reproduces adult discourse—an idea that will be further developed. The explanation involves how money should be spent. The distinction made by the child in the following reply is interesting, as it highlights another rule he reproduces: "I can play with toy cars, because they're small. You're not allowed to play with big cars". In other

words, the child is allowed to play with “small toy cars”, meaning toys, but not with “big cars”, meaning real ones.

(12)
V: Seriously? But why sneak around? Don’t they give you food? Is food expensive? They don’t want to give you food?
C: Sometimes when I’m not allowed those foods, I go under the table.
V: What do you eat in secret?
C: They don’t really let me have sweets.

Excerpt (12) differs from the previous ones, as the child negotiates adult-imposed rules in a different way, in this case regarding food. The child’s confession (“sometimes when I’m not allowed those foods, I go under the table”) shows an awareness of the restriction and a way of asserting their own will by resisting the rule. The child’s answer (“they don’t really let me have sweets”) highlights a typical prohibition in the parent-child relationship. Although the child is aware of the power dynamics in the family and the limits he is expected to follow, he attempts to circumvent them.

Following the previously mentioned idea, fragments of adult speech appear in children’s discourse and “taking on someone else’s voice also involves taking on a value position” (Maybin 1994: 143). In the following sequences, children seem to reproduce or paraphrase statements they have previously heard from adults. These descriptions may have been addressed directly to them or to others, and children adopt the language of adults.

(13)
V: Good, but when are we going to sing more songs together? We can’t leave like this. Another quality? Are you a bit ugly?
C: It doesn’t matter if you’re ugly or pretty, what matters is how you behave.
V: That’s very smart of you to say… or are you not very bright?
C: I am bright, that’s what my mom says, that I’m bright.

This interaction is significant in illustrating how children use language they’ve heard from adults to protect their self-image in the face of potentially threatening acts. Virgil Ianțu’s question (“Are you a bit ugly?”) may represent a threat to the child’s positive face. The child rejects the negative evaluation through a response that indicates the internalization of norms of conduct acquired in the family (“it doesn’t matter if you’re ugly or pretty, what matters is how you behave”). When the presenter poses another threat to the girl’s face, the child contradicts the negative presupposition by invoking her mother’s authority. The reply “that’s what my mom says, that I’m bright” serves as an act of maintaining a positive self-image, grounded in parental validation.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates that language plays a fundamental role in the construction of children’s sense of self. Language acquisition is closely linked to the learning of social norms. We have shown that the individual self is constructed within verbal interaction—a process through which children assert their identity and negotiate their status in interaction. We have highlighted the relevance of how children position themselves in two key environments of early development—family and preschool—and offered important observations about the negotiation of status and identity.

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