



NAMING GAMES AND BEYOND: REFERENCING IN CHILDREN'S VERBAL PLAY

JOHN HOLMES McDOWELL

- What's the difference between an elephant and a loaf of bread?
- I don't know.
- Remind me not to send you to the grocery store.
(Traditional interrogative routine)

Children are, among other things, little thinking machines. Childhood is a period of intense mental activity wherein the child's innate cognitive capacities work upon the raw data of sensory experience, guided by interpretive codes drawn from the ambient culture, to fashion serviceable portraits of reality capturing the possibilities of the moment but always evolving through time. With only a small stretch of the imagination, we can picture young children as mad-cap scientists, boldly trying out theories, testing hypotheses, and adjusting their notions as to what is going on as new data arrives. It is a conspicuous fact that a considerable portion of this mental work is accomplished in settings of pleasurable social intercourse, frequently through the framework of play, and it is this dimension of the child's mental development that I want to address in this paper. Specifically, I want to highlight a thread of children's verbal play that pursues the linguistic theme of referencing, that is, the naming, describing, and evoking of objects, and follow this thread progressively from an initial moment, when the interlocutors are adult care-takers or older siblings, to a subsequent moment when the child becomes empowered as the agent of play and the interlocutors are its juvenile playmates. Culling material from research I have done with children's verbal play and verbal art over the years, I will describe and analyze the transformation of "the naming game" and "the animal voices game" of late infancy to "the riddling game" of the primary school years.

There is a cluster of significant propositions at stake in this incursion into the mental development of children. One piece is the emergence of agency in the young child. We are accustomed to thinking of children in the first two years of life as being essentially passive recipients of communicative gestures originating from adults, older siblings, and other older children in their environments. A trend in current research throws this assumption into doubt (Dissanayake 2001; Meltzoff 2007), and I hope to contribute to the questioning of the young child's passivity — let's call it the passivity paradigm — by showing how children as young as 12-16 months assert their agency in acquiring active control over familiar playful routines. Two crucial developments can be observed here: first, the child rather quickly becomes the initiator of the sequence, and second, before long, the child learns to subvert the routine's logic by deliberately supplying "suspect" or "wrong" contributions.

A second proposition of interest in this analysis is the centrality of play, and particularly verbal play, in the development of children's cognition and the child's



realization of self. Adults have often exhibited impatience with children at play, and children's play frequently departs from adult canons of perspicacity. We have numerous accounts of attempts to limit, contain, and sometimes even exterminate the play of children, which seems to always find outlets that circumvent these adult-imposed measures (Sutton-Smith 1995). The materials at hand for this study underscore the utilitarian dimensions of play, enabling us to see the arenas of children's play as vital, engaging, and rewarding learning environments. Obviously, not all children's play is verbal, but the materials for this study affirm verbal play as key among the arenas of children's play, one that absorbs a great deal of the child's time and energy, and one that is readily accessible to close inspection by those of us who seek to understand the mind of the child.

At last, the approach I will elaborate in this paper — we could call it the agency paradigm — proposes a specific understanding of human nature and human society, since the prototype we will isolate in children's verbal play can be projected well beyond childhood; indeed, it can serve as a template for the continuously evolving human personality. In this vision of things, we are all, throughout our entire lives, interacting with others, often in playful modes, and in the process calibrating our conjectures on the way things work. This process may be more dramatic in childhood, where the learning curve takes us from zero to socially competent in the space of just a handful of years. And it is possible that the child's processing of reality is qualitatively different from what happens later in life. For instance, close observation of children's play suggests that children possess a freedom to toy with cultural codes that diminishes as the person approaches and enters adulthood. The child's delight in "silliness" and a striking capacity for metaphorical thought and expression are two indices suggestive of age-defined difference. But the larger linkage remains, I believe, foregrounding the child's acquisition of agency and understanding through social play as a universally human enterprise.

The Naming Game

Visualize this familiar scene: a young child is seated on an adult's lap, with a picture-book in hand. The child is in the early stages of language acquisition — it has a small vocabulary but cannot piece together much in the way of phrases as of yet. The adult pauses over images on the page to inquire of the child: "What's this?" The naming game begins with this pointing and questioning. Catherine Garvey (1984: 62-71) sees in these collaborations a key conceptual maneuver, "the ability to indicate an entity for attention, for either one's own or another's benefit," and she locates it early in the second year of life. In order for the naming game to run smoothly, the child must realize that specific items can be isolated and named; hence, the naming game, in its opening gambit, is an adult-initiated rehearsal of essential cognitive skills.

In this basic version, the naming game evinces a patterned set of participant turns. A round of the game begins when the adult points and inquires, "What's this?" The child might respond with a possible label; if it does and the answer is deemed to be correct, the adult will confirm the child's response and perhaps

repeat it. If the child does not respond, the adult is likely to provide the intended label: “A horse” (for example). Garvey (1984, 63) describes a pattern of increasing demand: “the caregiver becomes more exacting as the child learns to respond: at first, any response will be accepted, then any vocalization, then only the correct label.” Through this series of approximations, adult and child participate in an activity initiated and controlled by the adult; the child’s role is restricted to that of acquiring and articulating the appropriate responses. The child is an active player but the passivity paradigm accounts adequately for what is happening here — culture is being inculcated from adult to child.

But Garvey (1984, 63) anticipates the next version of the game: “the child, once he learns the sequence of moves, often exchanges roles and begins to lead the game himself.” Before long, and under the right circumstances — a good comfort level, for example — the child is likely to seize the initiative, perhaps pointing at an object pictured and looking at the adult in expectation of an answer, or reproducing the interrogative move, “What’s this?” This reversal of roles installs the child as initiator of a round of play, and shifts the adult into the more limited role of responder. In this vignette, we can perceive the assumption of agency in the very young child, perhaps, as Garvey suggests, early in its second year of life. The child has learned not only how to respond appropriately but also how to perform the complementary role in the game. This mastery allows the child to select which objects to isolate and name, and also to bend the adult’s behavior to its will. There has been a shift from responder to instigator, and the child’s options have expanded. We are viewing in sharp profile the acquisition of agency.

The Animal Voices Game

This game is also familiar to most of us in the United States and probably is played in many other places as well. It consists of a question/response sequence geared to connecting an animal voice, as culturally coded, to the name of the appropriate species. The game can be played in two orders, either by giving the name of the species and inquiring what it “says,” or by giving the voicing of the species and asking for the species label. Here is a sample pair:

1
“What does the cow say?”
“Moo.”

2
“Who says (goes) ‘Moo’?”
“A (the) cow.”

This game is typically played with the familiar animals from the barnyard and home — cow, cat, dog, horse, pig, etc. These are also the animals most frequently encountered in picture books for children, thus providing a link to the naming game discussed above. More exotic animals can be introduced to add further interest, and as with any other game, this one can be pushed to its limits and beyond through the inclusion of fanciful options — the otter, the dinosaur, the unicorn.

As with the naming game, the animal voices game facilitates pleasing episodes of fruitful collaboration between infants and their adult caregivers. In both games, a pattern of interaction is specified and complementary roles are defined. A further continuity between the two games is the focus upon isolating and identifying significant phenomena in the child's world. And, in the voicing game's second order, the child is once again called upon to supply the needed label in response to a stimulus, in this instance not the visual representation of the object but its cultural-coded voicing. The naming game offers the delight of visual images contained in books; the voicing game has no such need of props and offers the special pleasures of imitating animal voices and provisionally, taking on their identities.

So how does the child take possession of this second routine? A first stage, obviously, is being able to adequately connect the voice to the animal, and to successfully reproduce the animal's voice. This latter achievement is often accomplished with some verve, affording the child a space for artistic elaboration. In this stage, the child acquires the knowledge to respond in culturally appropriate ways; we are seeing the transfer of cultural (and verbal) competence from adult to child. But two additional stages lie ahead and these will launch the child into an expanded zone of personal agency.

The second stage emerges when the child learns to initiate the animal voices game, shifting the original stipulation of roles as we saw with the naming game. The child initiates a round of animal voices, now selecting which of the orders to employ and selecting as well the sequence of animals to deploy. The child's range of options has increased, and the choices made in this expanded zone of operation carry a sense of this particular child's take on the process: the child has acquired space to develop and project a unique sense of self. I propose that a third stage emerges when the child attains sufficient mastery over the game to introduce fanciful choices — like the otter, dinosaur, or unicorn — or to subvert the integrity of the game by supplying, deliberately, the wrong voicing or species label. This third stage features a striking degree of agency — not only has the child seized the initiative in the turn-taking arena and exerted a peremptory control over the game's sequence, but it now pretends to drive the game to hilarious wreckage by violating the game's basic constitution, which depends upon a constant and predictable set of linkages between voicings and species labels.

In both of these games, the naming game and the animal voices game, what begins as a coordinated interaction steered by adult initiative gradually transforms into a child-initiated routine that follows the stipulated rules of play or, in the perversion of the voicing game, subverts these rules. The child's scope for asserting agency is at first restricted to mastering its allotted role and performing effectively in that role. But as time elapses and the child becomes more familiar with these games, the scope for asserting agency is greatly expanded to the point where the child becomes the master of the game and its adult interlocutor fills a reduced role as respondent to the child's prodding. In the next sections, we will observe a similar dynamic and conceptual arena but now in the setting of child-to-child discourse, as the child carries these same interests and energies into its juvenile play group, with riddling as the chosen game.

Naming and Describing

John Lyons (1977, 225) notes that “the distinction between referring to an individual by name and referring to the same individual by means of a descriptive noun-phrase is something that the child only gradually acquires.” We have seen a progression from mere naming to evoking through voice in the transition from the naming game to the animal voices game. But imitation of voices does not require the verbal equipment that producing descriptive noun-phrases does. As the child enters more deeply into the referencing project, referencing through descriptive language becomes a central quest in the process of acquiring language. Continuing the theme of this paper, I want to show how involvement in playful activities, and indeed, how a renewed commitment to interrogative routines, enter into the expansion of social, verbal, and cognitive capacities, affording the pre-school, kindergarten, and primary-school child additional vehicles for the realization and expression of self.

As adults we take for granted describing an object or event as a strategy of evocation that works in tandem with naming. But this skill, like so many others going into the basics of conversing and socializing, must be learned and practiced in the apprenticeship phase as children observe and begin to reproduce the verbal moves in their social environments. Catherine Garvey (1984, 69) tells us that young children have difficulty producing adequate descriptions when “it is necessary to use a referring expression that unambiguously selects a referent from among others that differ from it on one or more dimensions of attributes.” Evocation through description is no easy task; the ideal description will locate some unique feature of the intended referent, and one that will register with the interlocutor.

The skills that go into describing expand upon the skills that go into naming. Once a range of objects, events, and persons can be effectively named, a supporting vocabulary of descriptive terms and phrases must be perfected so that precise reference can be accomplished. It is one of the miracles of human language that objects not present and even fanciful objects can be named, referenced, and brought into focus. Children master this magic in significant degree through the playful activities discussed in this paper. I want to turn now to the challenges to be met in forging effective descriptions, and explore, in particular, how these challenges are addressed in the interrogative routines known as riddling. We leave behind, for the most part, the realm of adult-child communication, since riddling is mostly practiced, in the contemporary United States at least, in peer-group settings. We shall discover in this batch of material a progression familiar from the two games already considered, from a phase of mastery to a phase of subversion, as children in the primary-school years graduate from descriptive routines to true riddles.

Riddling Games

Successful describing depends upon the ability to frame what John Searle (1969, 86) calls “the unique identifying description,” a verbal proposition or set of

propositions that sets the intended referent apart from all other possible referents. John Lyons (1977, 180) views this ability in terms of the “referencing expression” that allows the hearer “to pick out the actual referent from the class of potential referents.” In the early stages of riddling, as early as the fourth year of life, children build verbal exchanges ideally suited to testing and confirming appropriate describing strategies. These riddling initiates imitate the riddle technique, with its question-answer sequence, before they have mastered the subtleties of what folklorists know as the block element, that piece of deception at the heart of the true riddle.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1972) writes about the pre-riddle, which he defines as a puzzling question with an arbitrary answer, as one way to enter the riddling game before its logic is fully understood. I have written about what I call the descriptive routine (McDowell 1979), which offers another solution to this problem — in the descriptive routine, the child presents a transparent description in hopes of eliciting the name of the described object. The descriptive routine manifests as a joint exercise in the evocation of absent referents through their identifying descriptions. As younger children seek to enter the riddling arena, and as their slightly older peers seek to sustain a flagging session, riddles of transparent description make their appearance. Like Sutton-Smith’s pre-riddle, descriptive routines allow initiates to secure a space in the performance protocol — their productions pass as tokens of the game — even if these formulations fail to include the special conceptual twist of the genre.

But to characterize descriptive routines as flawed tokens of the genre is to miss their positive contributions to the child’s developing mastery over the social and cognitive skills entailed in their construction. I prefer to see them as a legitimate forum of verbal intrigue, slanted toward the straightforward reproduction of cultural knowledge, as was the case with the child’s initial encounters with the naming game and the animal voices game. When children produce descriptive routines, they are engaged in a search for proper descriptive strategies. The proof of success in this endeavor is the capacity to call to mind the name of an object simply by describing it. For children at this stage of development, this outcome is remarkable and rewarding in itself.

There are multiple techniques used by children in producing descriptive riddles. I will draw upon field data I gathered in the mid 1970s among Mexican American kids in Austin, Texas, to illustrate some of these options. One is to describe through reference to the object’s salient physical properties. Consider the following cluster:

What’s red? *A rose.*
 What has five sides and lives in the sea? *A starfish.*
 What’s square and it gots a point on the top? *A house.*
 What gots a lot of colors when it rains? *A rainbow.*
 It’s in a circle, gots little sticks, and they got something planted?
A tree.

As generally is done in riddling, one child enunciates the query and then leaves an interlude for the other child or children to announce the solution. If the respondents are not forthcoming with the solution, the child who began the routines provides it.

Three features immediately are striking as we contemplate this cluster of descriptive riddles. First, it is clear that these opening queries are spontaneously formulated. One advantage of this style of riddling for the neophyte is this ready-to-hand quality of the material — there is no requirement to carefully keep in mind a complicated ploy, as in true riddles. Second, these quick formulations seize on the basic perceptual categories such as color, form, extension, and so forth. They foster the perfection of an objective lexicon that can be applied across the spectrum of experience. These routines exhibit a strong empirical orientation to the world. And third, there are degrees of acuity evident in these descriptions both with regards to amount of detail and clarity. The first example can be seen as too broad in its descriptor, since any number of objects possess redness; the next item, describing the starfish, comes much closer to the desired quality of uniqueness in the descriptor.

The quest for clear articulation in identifying descriptions is evident in the following exchange, where an older child improves upon the query of a younger peer:

- Oh, what's red and white,
red and white and doesn't do nothing,
and has a stick down its side,
and the red and white thing is against the stick?
— I don't know.
— Flag.
— To a pole,
red, white, and blue, stuck on to a big pole.

Here the younger child inadvertently produces something closer to a true riddle, by concealing the intended referent of his description, a riddling tactic akin to what Roger Abrahams (1972) refers to as “the scrambled gestalt.” The older child creates a better description by eliminating the excess verbiage, replacing the word “stick” with the more appropriate “pole,” and adding the missing element “blue.”

Ironic Descriptions

As in the naming game and the animal voices game, the riddling game opens into a sophisticated twist on basic procedures as children gain mastery over technique; but in riddling, this additional twist is required in order to reproduce satisfactory examples of the genre. The riddle proper, unlike the puzzling pre-riddle or the empirical descriptive routine, pivots on the block element, that kernel of linguistic or conceptual sleight of hand that is deliberately introduced to temporarily separate the query from its solution. The riddle appears to be a venture much like the naming game or the animal voices game, in which an identifying description



launches a search for an intended referent. But right off there is something odd about these descriptions. Perhaps they contain a contradiction in terms, as in this example:

What has eyes but cannot see?

This is a problematic description because it appears to challenge its own grounds of plausibility; Robert Georges and Alan Dundes (1963) term this strategy “privational.”

Other riddle queries are not inherently contradictory but instead lead to a state of semantic indeterminacy:

What has four wheels and flies?

A thousand lights in a dish, what is it?

These descriptions do not readily evoke their intended referents. In fact, to solve such riddles the child must set aside the apparent drift of the description in order to locate the intended referent. This technique is present in the most famous riddle in the English language tradition:

What’s black and white and red all over?

In order to hit on “a newspaper,” the child must resist the sequence of color terms to hear “read” rather than “red.”

Riddles like these, the true riddles of riddling, offer a furtive act of description in the guise of an obvious one. Their identifying descriptions are deliberately skewed to the opaque, to odd semantic nuances and fortuitous homophonic equivalences. They qualify as extensions of the naming game, but the quest here is for illicit rather than sanctioned modes of description. Children in their seventh and eighth years of age specialize in these excursions into a shifty world of verbal intrigue. The descriptions in true riddles add word play, metaphor, and anomaly to the child’s bag of tricks. They accomplish the magic of actually describing while appearing not to describe.

Riddling at this level amounts to a deconstruction of the act of referencing, revealing that naming systems are only approximate and tentative. Riddles built on word play, like this one,

What has four wheels and flies? *A garbage truck*

point to limitations in the verbal code, its often duplicitous matching of sound and sense and its sometimes ambiguous structures of logic. Such riddles exploit these wrinkles in the code to produce descriptions with a curious semantics; they invite awareness of the arbitrary and conventional status of natural languages, of their incompleteness and imperfection, their relativity.



Riddles based on metaphoric connections assess another sort of code limitation, the poverty of conventional systems of thought in comparison to the wealth of sensory experience. Let's return to one of my favorite children's riddles:

A thousand lights in a dish, what is it? *The stars in the night sky.*

Riddles like this one propose innovative arrangements of objects in our fields of experience based on the use of valid but unorthodox criteria. They reveal that conventional forms of classification, acquired with such persistence by the younger child, are in fact skeletal. These riddles momentarily bring into focus alternative visions of the cosmic order — the set of concave objects (dishes, the night panorama) and the set of points of light (stars, lights in a dish). The child correctly concludes that these phantom conceptual regimes are less pragmatic than the conventional ones, but it delights in highlighting their impeccable if impractical logics.

Finally, riddles based on anomaly contribute their special flair to children's riddling.

How many balls of string would it take to reach the moon?

One big one.

What do kangaroos have that nobody else has? *Baby kangaroos.*

What is taller sitting than standing? *A dog.*

Here we have neither word play nor fresh comparison. Instead, these riddles find their block element in real-world observations that run counter to our conventional patterns of thought. Their message, it seems, is that the world of experience is far more replete than our systems for classifying and codifying it can ever be.

Conclusion

In her AFS paper presented in Québec City, 2007, Katharine Schramm looks closely at what she calls "nascent folklore," which she positions as early manifestations of Laurie McGonnagill's "protolore," the first stirrings of conventionalized artistic expression among preschoolers (McGonnagill 1993). Schramm's infants are in the preverbal stage, for the most part, yet their gurgles and coos, facial expressions, squirms, and wiggles indicate that they are already tuned into communicative networks and anxious to assert themselves as players in these arenas. What I have tried to do here is sketch out lines of continuity between the expressive profiles described by McGonnagill and Schramm and the robust activation of creative energies that we celebrate as children's folklore (McDowell 1995). I have no doubt that we can systematically trace this progression in artistic competence, and I offer this paper as an initial stab at marking out a consolidation of agency and expertise in one specific zone of communicative competence.

The concern here has been to construct a longitudinal portrait of the young person's indoctrination into the naming and referencing of things. Naming and referencing are undoubtedly crucial pieces in the acquisition of basic cultural competence, so they offer an important arena for observing how children gain mastery over materials and instruments of their culture. We have concerned ourselves with playful activities centered on naming — the naming game, the animal voices game, and riddling games. Play, it appears, is a vital forum in the process of learning how to be a person in a society. These playful activities in one phase are places where children can absorb, try out, and perfect the naming and referencing practices of their communities. In another, subsequent phase, the newly-mastered maneuvers can be inspected for subversive potential — the possibility of odd animal voices, or of unconventional modes of description.

Becoming a person in society entails developing a sense of self, and these naming games provide opportunities for expressing the genius of self, from the toddler phase into early adolescence. One step is seizing control over an interactive routine; another is directing the game to the child's preferred style and content; a third is using the game to challenge received structures of cultural coding. I hope to have demonstrated in this paper that children's play with naming and referencing is a wonderful arena to observe the acquisition of culture and the realization of self. I propose, in conclusion, that this play is more than that — that it is, as well, an essential zone of personal engagement and growth.

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