Strategy in Counting-Out: Evidence from Saint-Nazaire, France

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In a study based on the ethnography of speaking approach, Goldstein described and analyzed various strategies used in counting-out by four- to fourteen- year old children in the East Mount Airy section of northwest Philadelphia in 1966-67. Goldstein observed that, although he had been informed orally of similar or other counting-out strategies employed in other parts of the United States, Canada, Europe, and Africa, there were to his knowledge no published accounts of these (178, n. 15). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the cross-cultural investigation of children's folklore by providing data on counting-out strategies used in Saint-Nazaire, France.[1] My field work was initially undertaken for a doctoral dissertation (Arleo 1982) involving the comparative study of counting-out rhymes in French and English. Research methods included observation, interviews and recording in play areas and in the classrooms of several elementary schools, as well as the collection of written documents (texts, drawings, descriptions, questionnaires) from children and adults. Additional collecting of counting-out and other children's rhymes has been carried out since 1982 to the present time in Saint-Nazaire and the surrounding areas.[2]

The Countimr-Out Ceremonv in France.

From my own data and that of other researchers it appears that counting-out is a widespread activity among schoolchildren of both sexes.[3] Certain counting-out rhymes are learned from parents, siblings or peers at an early age (around 2 or 3 years old), but are not actually used for selection purposes until the end of the Ecole Maternelle, roughly at the age of 4 or 5. At this stage performance is usually awkward, often marked by poor coordination between the rhyme and the gestures. Counting-out really blossoms in elementary school, but by Cours Moyen 2 (grade 5) many children consider it to be a somewhat "babyish" occupation. The function of counting-out is to choose an "It" (often called le Loup, "the Wolf', or "le Chat", "the Cat") in popular children's games like tag (jouer au Loup) or hide and seek (cache-cache). The counting-out procedure used in Saint-Nazaire is similar to that described by Goldstein: the players are seated in a circle and a

counter, often self-appointed, taps each player's foot on each syllable or each beat of the rhyme, almost always in a clockwise direction. Occasionally, as with "One potato, two potato. . .", fists rather than feet are designated and in this case a special rhyme is employed. According to some reports, counting-out also occurs with all players standing and the counter pointing at or tapping each person's chest.

The Use of Strategy in Counting-Out.

A survey on counting-out was conducted in 1981 at the Bibliotheque Municipale in Saint-Nazaire. 67 children (45 girls and 22 boys) filled out questionnaires, occasionally with the help of the librarians. Most of the respondents (nearly 70%) were in elementary school; only 2 children were still in nursery school (Ecole Maternelle) and 16 were in secondary school. Among the questions on counting-out were two related to the use of strategy. It was decided to frame these questions with the verb tricher, "to cheat," as this is an easily understood word employed frequently by children. Thus, the first question on strategy was formulated "Est-ce qu'il y a des enfants qui trichent en 'pouffant'?" (Are there children who cheat when counting-out?). The verb "pouffer" is a term used by children to mean "to count out". It is derived from the nonsense syllables "pouf pouf' spoken before counting-out begins. The second question was "Si oui, comment font-ils pour tricher?" (If yes, how do they cheat?).

55 (82.1 %) of the 67 respondents answered that children do cheat when counting-out, against 9 (13.4%) who answered that they do not, and 3 non-responses. It seemed interesting to look into possible correlations between the answer given to this question and the age or sex of the respondent. Specifically, I investigated the hypothesis that awareness of "cheating" would increase with age. It turns out that among the youngest informants (age 6 or 7) 10 answered "yes", i.e. children do cheat, and none answered "no" (one person did not answer). In fact, it was in the 8-9 age group that the "no" rate was highest, reaching 26.3% (5 out of 19 informants). Surprisingly enough, 4 informants aged 10 or above, all girls, also answered "no". My hypothesis was therefore not confirmed, at least for this limited population. The correlation between the answer to this question and the sex of the respondent seems tenuous as there was only a slight difference between male and female informants: 10% of the boys (2 out of 20) answered "no" compared to 15.6% of the girls (7 out of 45). The three non-responses all came from boys.

There were a variety of answers to the second question on how children cheat. Tile most frequent response (16 out of the 44 informants who answered the question) was "ils 'sautent' des joueurs" (they "skip over" players). This was followed by 7 respondents who said "they think it over

ahead of time" (variants: they calculate, they "count in their heads"). A related response, mentioned six times, was "they start with themselves." Other techniques noted less frequently were: the same person is counted twice (4 informants), "by going fast" (3 informants), "they forget to include themselves in order to avoid being the Wolf', "they skip a turn", "they count out twice", "they add words" (2 informants for each of the last four techniques). Although some of these answers are difficult to interpret, it is nevertheless clear that the "skipping over" technique, whether applied to the counter or to another player, is quite widespread.

Regarding the technique of adding extra words, mentioned twice, it should be added that there is a special rhyme, or coda, which is used for this purpose. This is illustrated by the following example:

> Pouf pouf. Ca sera toi le Loup, mais comme le roi et la reine ne le veulent pas, ça ne sera pas toi.
>
> Pouf pouf. You will be the Wolf, but as the king and the queen don't want this (to happen), it won't be you.
>
> Source: 9 year old boy, in 4th grade, Ecole Primaire Minot, La Laule, recorded in 1985.

In the numerous examples of this type, the clause beginning with mais ("but") always follows a short counting-out rhyme which could stand on its own. Here then is an example of a linguistic device (as opposed to "skipping over" or "calculation") used for strategic purposes. It may even be argued that this coda contributes to language development by increasing awareness of the contrastive function denoted by the conjunction mais. Moreover, by invoking the "king and the queen" to preclude the choice of a particular player, the counter shifts his or her responsibility to a higher authority, thus making it more difficult for the other participants to challenge the final outcome.

Conclusion.

The results of the above survey, although based on a small population, show that strategy is a part of the counting-out procedure used in Saint-Nazaire, France, and that, even at a young age, children are generally aware that liberties can be taken with "an idealized set of rules" (Goldstein 172) through the use of different verbal or non-verbal devices. Furthermore, a number of techniques mentioned by Goldstein, such as "skipping over", "calculation" or "rhyme extension" appear to be practiced in France as well.[4] Data from other folklorists suggest that similar ploys are utilized

elsewhere.[5] It has long been known that counting-out, a game in itself and a preparation for other games, is a widespread genre of children's folklore. The use of strategy in this context implies that cross-cultural similarities involve performance as well as textual features and also raises questions about how this form of children's play contributes to social and cognitive development. Our exploration of this field, however, has barely begun: in order to pursue research on these and related issues in a fruitful way, it will be necessary to obtain data from children's folklorists working within a wide range of cultures.

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Notes

[1]Saint-Nazaire (1990 pop. 65,380), located on the mouth of the Loire River (60 kilometers southwest of Nantes), famous for its shipbuilding industry, is traditionally perceived as a working-class town. In recent years, however, there has been a diversification of economic activities and as a result most of my informants could be described as coming from both working class and middle class families. Although there are social differences from one neighborhood to another, these do not seem to be reflected in the material I have collected or in the way it is performed.

[2]For further details see Arleo (1988) and Arleo & Flament (1988). The latter is an experimental study based on the acoustic analysis of the French counting-out rhyme "Une poule sur un mur".

[3]The standard work on French counting-out rhymes is Baucomont et al (1961). More recent data can be found in Brinton (1985) and Hazael-Massieux (1987). Laforte (1987) is a very complete compilation of published texts of children's songs and rhymes in French.

[4]As far as I know, few researchers have explored the use of strategy in counting-out among French-speaking children. Picard (1970), in her interesting book on mathematics and children's games, devotes a chapter to "Counting-out rhymes, or how to cheat" (66-75). This is a description and formalization of the "calculation method" mentioned both by Goldstein and my informants.

[5] According to folklorist Erik K. Nielsen (letter dated Nov. 1 and 15, 1981), Danish children sometimes use strategy by extending the counting-out rhyme or by putting in an extra word or line. This is usually done by older or more sophisticated children with younger participants. Ase Enerstvedt (letter dated Nov. 8, 1981) writes that some Norwegian children "know how to manipulate the rhymes to get a certain outcome". Furthermore, all children are aware of this possibility and even small children (age 5, for example) may master the technique. Devices include manipulation 'of stress and rhythm, place-changing and rhyme extension. Finally, Bengt af Klintberg (letter dated Oct. 26, 1981) has heard that children in Sweden often use strategies to influence the result of counting-out.

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