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Participation Structure as Cultural Schema: Examples From a Navajo Preschool

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This paper examines the relationship between micro and macro perspectives on the organization of participation structure, and considers how both perspectives can be useful to the ethnographer of interaction. It suggests that understandings of the organization of participation may be considered forms of tacit knowledge, or cultural schemas, which may differ cross-culturally. Examples are drawn from a study of Navajo preschool, and supported by a substantial body of classroom ethnography in other Native American communities. I argue that participation structure at the macro level of speech event is largely negotiated through and dependent upon cultural schemas for participation structure at the micro level of interaction.

The organization of participation in interaction has been described by ethnographers as existing at various levels of analysis, including the more *global, macro* level of the speech situation or event, such as a lecture, conversation, political meeting, etc. (Philips, 1972; Goffman, 1981) as well as at the *micro, interactional* level of speech act, or interpersonal interaction[1] (Goodwin, 1990; Hanks, 1996). The latter work has emphasized the emergent nature of the organization of participation as an aspect of the context of speaking which is co-constructed by its participants. In this paper, I would like to examine the relationship between these two perspectives on the organization of participation, and consider how they may both be useful to the ethnographer of interaction. In particular, I wish to focus on how an understanding of the organization of participation at these two levels of interaction may be considered a form of *knowledge* which is available to participants, which may differ cross-culturally. Examples are drawn from a study of silence as a response to questions in one Navajo preschool, and supported by a substantial body of classroom ethnography in other Native American communities. I argue that participation structure at the macro level of speech event, even though cultural schema(s) may exist for it, is still largely negotiated through and dependent upon cultural schemas for participation structure at the micro level of interaction.

To begin with, I need to explain what I mean by knowledge which differs cross-culturally. I have in mind what has been described by researchers of interaction in various disciplines as *tacit* knowledge, or knowledge which is generally not discursively available to speakers (Giddens, 1979) yet which they have nonetheless. Linguistic anthropologists have described this kind of knowledge in terms of "cultural models"[2] or "schemas" for interaction (Keesing, 1987; D'Andrade &

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Strauss, 1992; Shore, 1996). For example, as Keesing points out, such an "ideational" view of culture differs from earlier anthropological perspectives in that rather than positing the primacy of either social interaction or cultural knowledge (so that one must be derived from the other), it simultaneously locates culture in both public, shared "pools of common-sense knowledge" as well as in people's heads in the form of various versions of public, shared knowledge:

> An ideational theory of culture can look at cultural knowledge as distributed within a social system, can take into account the variation between individuals' knowledge of and vantage points on the cultural heritage of their people. It can also view cultural knowledge as shaping and constraining, but not directly generating, social behavior. (1987, p. 372)

Palmer (1996) has suggested that *speech act scenarios* are one type of cultural schema shared by members of a speech community which may be further broken down into componential subschemas, including schemas for participation structure and sequencing. I find this model for understanding the nature of participation in interaction a very useful one. Thus, speakers may have tacit knowledge in the form of cultural schemas, for the organization of participation in interaction at both the global level of the speech event as well as more micro levels of interaction. Levinson (1979) has made a similar point in observing that speakers have *inferential schemata* which are tied to the structural properties of different activities. For example, members of a speech community have knowledge about how participation is organized at the level of speech event or situation, from more clearly defined (or ritualized) contexts such as the classroom (Mehan, 1982; Philips, 1983) or Samoan *fono* (Duranti, 1981) to more spontaneous yet nonetheless clearly identifiable speech events such as the labeling routines which white middle class mothers practice with their children (Heath, 1983). At the same time, members of a speech community also share knowledge of norms for participation at the level of speech act or utterance (such as conversation analysis is typically concerned with), including knowledge of *adjacency pairs* (question-answer, greeting-greeting, etc.) and other more extended pragmatic units (narratives, lists, etc.). These types of tacit knowledge make up an important part of speakers' interactional repertoires, which they may call upon (consciously or unconsciously) in displaying or enacting their social identity(s) (Ochs, 1993).

In addition, knowledge of norms for participation may be tied to social role(s), as when teachers enact their role through asking pupils "pseudo-questions," or questions to which they obviously already know the response. People in the medical profession enact their roles through asking patients questions of an extremely personal nature, and caregivers in many societies enact theirs through the giving of unmitigated imperatives to children. Through enacting such speech acts, speakers not only index a particular role with a specific relationship vis-a-vis their addressee(s), but also simultaneously create a specific role for the addressee, altogether constituting what is often a culturally salient and recognizable participation

structure.

Importantly, cultural schemas for how participation is to be instantiated in interaction may differ across speech communities. Indeed, knowledge of such norms for participation (among other things) is a large part of what defines one as a member of a particular speech community (Hymes, 1966, 1972). For this reason, members of differing speech communities may notice that norms for participation differ in other communities, often associating these other norms with specific roles or contexts from those other communities. For example, as several ethnographers of Native American interaction have pointed out, the performance of particular *speech acts*, such as the asking of questions (especially those of a personal nature) is, for many Native Americans, something which non-Native Americans do (Black, 1973; Darnell, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Liebe-Harkort, 1983; Leap, 1993). Thus, as Darnell explains, for many Cree people:

> The terms *moniyaw* (white man) and *nehiyaw* (Indian person) are frequently used as labels of behavior rather than as ethnic identification. To label an Indian person as *moniyaw* means that s/he is behaving like a white man, this being negatively valued. The term *moniyaw* is most often glossed as "loudmouthed." ... A native student of our acquaintance was proud of her B.A. from the University of Alberta until her family referred to her as a "fake white woman." ... It is very hard for a school teacher not to behave like a moniyaw. The role itself demands a control of others' behavior which is not consistent with the native etiquette. (1979, p.2)

In many Native American communities, speech acts such as the asking of direct questions and giving of directives (Basso, 1979; Field, 1998) are handled with a good deal of circumspection. They are not normally used in conversation (especially between strangers) in the same way as they are by many non-Native Americans, in what Tannen (1993) calls an "involvement strategy" for indexing intimacy and rapport. This is not to say that questions are not used at all or that directives are never given, but simply that these speech acts are used in a different way, and index different social roles. For example, in some Native American communities, the asking of questions is tied to the role of *student*, rather than teacher (Black, 1973), and individual performance or "being in the spotlight" is associated with the *teacher's* role, rather than the student's (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982).

One important difference between the norms for the asking of questions in many Native American speech communities and mainstream American culture is that *responses* to questions need not be immediate (Philips, 1983; Field, 1998). As Philips (1976) found in her study of interaction on the Warm Springs Indian reservation: "answers to questions are not immediately obligatory," as the Indian system "maximizes the control a speaker has over his own turn and minimizes the control he has over others" (93). In my own ethnographic study of language socialization in a Navajo community, I also found this to be true. This interactional

norm contrasts with that of the dominant, Non-Native American speech community, in which immediate (verbal) replies to questions are expected, as the following authors have noted:

> In a normal conversation, the participants will make the following assumptions, among others, about the discourse:...Rule IV: With questions, the speaker assumes that he will get a reply. (R. Lakoff, 1972, p.916)

> A basic rule of adjacency pair operation [of which "question-answer" is one subtype] is: given the recognizable production of a first pair part, on its first possible completion its speaker should stop and a next speaker should start and produce a second pair part from the pair type of which the first is recognizably a member. (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p.296)

These are the norms, or schemas, which many mainstream Non-Native Americans share for the asking and answering of questions. In addition, they are also a significant part of the speech situation or interactional context of "school," in which teachers typically ask the questions and students are expected to answer them; this ritualized type of interaction often constitutes the speech event of "lesson," even when more prolonged discussion by the children is the goal. Learning to respond to questions both verbally and immediately is thus a task which many Native American children are faced with when they enter school, constituting a socialization process which may be more or less distressful depending on how it is negotiated by both teacher(s) and student(s).

In the following discussion, I will examine some examples illustrating 1) the existence of different norms for the sequential organization of questions and responses on the part of Navajo children and their teachers and 2) how the negotiation of interaction at the level of the speech act (i.e., question-asking) affects the overall participation structure of classroom interaction or the speech event "lesson."

DATA

All of the data presented here are drawn from a corpus of 30 hours of transcribed videotape of naturally-occurring interaction from a preschool classroom on the Canoncito Navajo reservation in New Mexico. The data were collected over the 1996-7 school year[3].

NEGOTIATED PARTICIPATION STRUCTURE AT THE INTERACTIONAL LEVEL

In this section, I offer an example illustrating how conflicting expectations for participation structure at the level of interpersonal interaction may lead to a breakdown at the level of speech event, as Navajo children respond to a teacher's

questions with silence.

In this example, several mothers are present with their children in the preschool classroom, along with two teachers and myself (serving as an aide). One of the teachers, "C," who is also the director of the program, is not Navajo herself, but has been working in the community for close to ten years. The other teacher "E," is from the local community. "C" has called everybody to sit down with her so that she can present a short lesson on Navajo kinship terms, and have all the children present (M and G are children) practice calling their mothers (or aunts) by the appropriate Navajo term (shimá "my mother," or shimá yázhí "my aunt"). When she gets to this part of the lesson, her instructions to the children take the form of a question to which everyone in the room knows the answer (i.e. "who's that person?" pointing to the child's mother) which she expects the children to answer in front of the group. Thus, this projected lesson, along with its attendant speech act(s) of asking questions aimed solely to elicit a performance, which are addressed to particular individuals, involves a participation structure which has (for many Native Americans) been noted to conflict with the norms for participation in other contexts (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Philips 1983). As the transcript illustrates, her lesson breaks down when two children refuse to cooperate (beginning line 13):

1)

1	C:	ok,
2		who's that woman over there,
3		((points to M's mother))
4		um, Mara?
5	M:	uh::,
6	C:	what's her name?
7	M:	(5.0) shimá.
8		*my mother*
9	C:	aoo'.
10		*yes*
11		shimá.
12		Gwen, who's that?
13	G:	((looks down; no response))
14		ask her in Navajo, E?
15	E:	(3.0) Gwen,
16	C:	Gwen! <LO ask her in Navajo LO>.
17	E:	<X háidish éí át'é X>?
18		*who is it, that person?*
19		éí "shimá"?
20		*it's "my mom"?*
21	G:	((looks down, then away, no response))
22	E:	(1.0) Ronald?
23		háidisha?
24		*who is that?*

25		shoo, "shimá,"
26		***say, "my mom,"***
27	R:	((looks at E steadily, no response))
28	E:	so, that's the first step.
29	C:	hah hah hah.
30		so, anyway, uh,
31		we're having one of the grandmas come in,
32		for small group,
33		and she's gonna do::
34	E:	she's gonna do,
35		the blue corn meal?

In line 12, when the teacher "C" asks Gwen (4 years) to name her mother, Gwen averts her gaze from C, and does not respond at all. Gwen's mother, who is sitting right behind her, does not interfere. Teacher "C" then turns to her co-teacher "E," who speaks Navajo, and asks her to ask Gwen the question again, in Navajo, *inferring*, based on her own cultural schema for the organization of questions and answers, that perhaps the reason for Gwen's lack of response was that she had not understood the question[4]. Thus, the "rules" for answering questions, as outlined above by Lakoff (1972) and Schegloff & Sacks (1973), function much like Grice's maxims (1975) in that interactants draw inferences based on their *violations* (as "C" does in this case).

The teacher from the community, "E," asks Gwen the same question in Navajo (in line 17), even supplying her with the correct answer in the form of a confirmation request, so that all Gwen would have to do to reply "correctly" is nod her head affirmatively, yet Gwen still averts her gaze and does not respond verbally. In effect, as argued in more depth below, Gwen indexes nonorientation to the speaker, and, I argue, her own nonavailability as an addressee. At this point, "E" turns to Gwen's brother, Ronald (age 2 and 1/2), and asks him the same question (line 24), also supplying him with the answer, but to no avail. Ronald, who is sitting in his mother's lap, looks "E" full in the face, yet does not reply verbally.

DISCUSSION

Indigenous Schemas for Caregiver-Child Interaction

Notably, throughout their interaction with the teacher, the mother in example 1 does not intervene, attempt to prompt her children, or tell them to respond throughout their interaction with the teacher. I also frequently observed this behavior on the part of other mothers and caregivers in this Navajo community, i.e. a stance of nonintervention in their children's interactions (with both teachers as well as other children, in general). The mother's reaction in this example is important to the analysis offered here in two ways.

First, the fact that she does not intervene in her child's interaction with the teacher, and that mothers in general in this classroom did not, is part of a larger

pattern for interaction in Navajo society reflecting a general value on individual autonomy and avoidance of coersion (Lamphere, 1977; Holm & Holm, 1995; Field, 1998).

Secondly, she is displaying a preference for noncoersion which is also related to the sequencing of questions and answers in Navajo interaction; i.e., questions are typically framed as open-ended and/or addressed to a generalized audience rather than individuals, so that response may be *volunteered*, but is not immediately required. This general expectation, or schema for the organization of questions and responses, differs from that described by Lakoff (1972) and Schegloff & Sacks (1973) (cf. above) for Non-Native Americans, e.g. that the asker of a question expects an answer right away. According to the norms for etiquette in many Native American societies, questions are typically designed so that answers need not be "local" or immediately sequential, as this expectation would constitute an imposition on the hearer's autonomy. For example, questions may be addressed to an entire group, or framed as a rhetorical question, such as "I wonder whether ...?" (Leap, 1993). This kind of framing allows individual hearers more autonomy at the micro, interactional level of questioning as a speech act. It allows silence as an acceptable response without any awkwardness or loss of face on the speaker's part[5].

Perhaps the mother in this example does not urge her children to respond to the teachers' questions as many Non-Native American mothers might, because their silence does not violate her (Navajo) schema for the organization of questions and answers, whereas her intervention in the speech event *would* in that insisting that her child answer the teachers' question would be a coercive act.

The question may also be raised concerning why teacher "E" pursues responses from the children when she herself is Navajo and from the local community. Notably, she does so at teacher "C"'s repeated request. As eloquently explained by Darnell (1979) in the quotation above, (for Cree classroom interaction), enacting the role of "teacher" in American society often means behaving in a manner which is not consistent with Native American etiquette.

When both children refuse to respond, "E" tactfully excuses them, saying, "that's the first step" (line 28), and "C" changes the subject, effectively dropping the lesson as she had planned it (there are still other children who have not been asked to "perform" yet). Thus, the use of silence as a response to questions may have important consequences for the negotiation of participation structure at the level of speech *event* (in this case, a "lesson," which "C" had planned). The point is that although participation structure may indeed be tied to culturally shared schemas for particular speech events, it also exists at the interactional level, and to a degree, must be negotiated by participants in any event.

Educators' Schemas for Classroom Interaction

Preconceived notions of appropriate participation structure(s) for particular contexts (such as school or lessons) exist in the form of culturally shared schemas,

such as the well known "initiation-response-feedback" sequence identified by Mehan (1982) for most American classrooms, in which teachers initiate interaction (with a question, most typically), students are expected to respond, and then teachers provide feedback in the form of evaluation of the students' response. Note that "C" does this in the above example when Mara responds "correctly." This schema for teacher-student interaction plays an important role in most American classrooms as it allows teachers to evaluate whether students are following and understanding the activity, especially at the preschool level. But as Philips, (1983) and other researchers of classroom interaction in many Native American cultures have noted (Dumont & Wax, 1969; Cazden & John, 1971; Darnell, 1979; Erickson & Mohatt, 1982; Van Ness, 1981), this schema for participation structure, in which someone (such as the teacher) controls the flow of speech, initiating questions directed to individuals and then overtly evaluating them, is a foreign one for many Native Americans, which has no analogue in any context outside of the school in their community(s). A common response to it when encountered is thus that of silence.

Deconstructing the "Silent Indian Child": Two Types of Silent Response

This example also illustrates well two *types* of silent response on the part of children in this classroom: 1) that of silence accompanied by nonorientation to speaker (Goodwin, 1981), as when the intended addressee pointedly averts his/her gaze or shifts their body posture away from the speaker, as Gwen does in this example, as opposed to 2) silence accompanied by engagement or orientation towards the speaker (Goodwin, 1981), as illustrated by Ronald in this example as well as by the children in examples two, three, and four.

These two types of silent response on the part of an addressee have very different consequences for the negotiation of participation structure at the interactional level. For example, the first type clearly indexes that the addressee does not wish to be an addressee *at all*, i.e., does not wish to be in the role (of addressee) which the speaker is constructing for him/her, and signals this stance through overt nonverbal cues such as aversion of gaze and/or shift of head or body alignment[6]. In this example, Gwen (4 years) averts her gaze away from teacher "C," and continues gazing at the floor throughout "C"'s and "E"'s repeated questions to her.

On the other hand, silence accompanied by nonverbal orientation toward the speaker indexes that the addressee is oriented in some way to the speaker, (as in Ronald's reaction to the teacher's questions). Ronald's reaction is not at all unusual for children in this classroom, many of whom would often establish eye contact with teachers when asked direct questions (such as "What is that?" "What are you making?"), but would choose not to respond verbally, or would respond later, after the teacher had moved on to another interaction.

Alternatively, responses on the part of children in this classroom were frequently nonverbal or silent, but indexed a greater degree of orientation to the speaker in the form of *gestures*. As the next section illustrates, such silent but gesture-filled



Example 2

responses also index a willingness to accept the role of addressee which has been imposed upon them by the speaker's direct question (especially when accompanied by an address term).

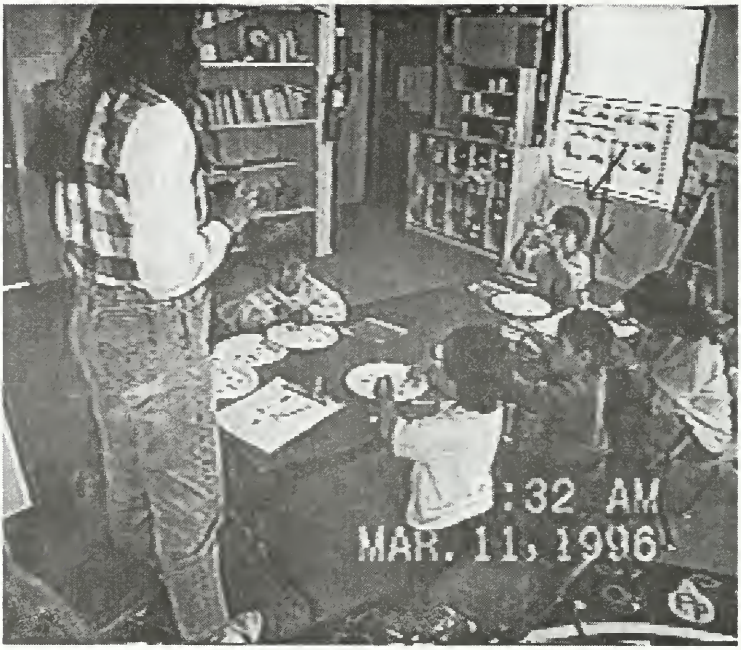
Nonverbal Responses to Questions: Indexing Engagement

The next examples (all drawn from a single activity) illustrate how gesture, such as pointing or holding out an object for the teacher's inspection, may constitute a reply:

2)

1		C:	((holds up some creation))
2		T:	what's that,
3			Cody?
4	→	C:	((no answer; photo taken here))
5		T:	what is tha::t?
6	→	C:	((no answer))

In (2), Cody nonverbally initiates interaction with the teacher, ("E" from example (1) above) holding up what he has made out of marshmallows and toothpicks for her inspection. He does not verbally respond to her questions, yet clearly he is engaged with her, and continues to hold up his creation in silent response.



Example 3

Example (3) is similar except that the child (K) initiates the interaction verbally with a directive: "look, teacher, what I maked."

3)

1	K:	look,
2		Teacher,
3		what I maked.
4		(holds up creation)
5	T:	what is that?
6 →	K:	((no answer; photo taken here))

As the above examples illustrate, a response may be silent yet still be a response. Yet for the teacher, who has been trained to write down the children's *verbal* responses to her questions as a form of evaluation, nonverbal responses do not quite fit into lesson plans, as the children eagerly display yet do not deign to label their creations (of marshmallows and toothpicks). Luckily for her, the children frequently *volunteer* labels for their creations, although their answers are not, for the most part, sequentially local to the teacher's questions, as line 17 in the following example shows:

4)

1		T:	let's see,
2			I think I'm gonna make something.
3			(.5) what am I gonna build?
4		B:	I don't know[7].
5			(2.0) build a house.
6		T:	Katy's making an animal?
7		G:	here.
8			((extending marshmallow on stick toward T))
9			lookit.
10		T:	build something.
11			can you build something?
12		R:	teacher, lookit!
13			((holds up marshmallow on stick))
14			(2.0) look at!
15			(1.0) at!
16		T2	((comes and gets more supplies for her group))
17	→	C:	look at, I make animal.
18			((holds it up))
19		T:	you made an animal?
20			wow,
21			what is it?
22		C:	((no response))
23			((T writes down what he said))
24		T:	where's your legs?
25			huh?
26		C:	((holds up his animal))[8]

These examples illustrate how the participation structure of a context, even a fairly ritualized context such as a lesson in a classroom, is a negotiated process. The teachers in the above examples have a fairly clear idea in mind about what the participation structure of a lesson needs to be: the teacher will ask questions and the pupils will respond verbally so that their utterances may be evaluated. This basic schema for the speech event "lesson" has related subschemas for sequential organization (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Mehan, 1982) and participation structure (Philips, 1983) and is often taken for granted by educators, especially as it grows out of the common American socialization practice of teaching children to label things through question routines (Heath, 1983; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1984). What I have tried to show in this paper, however, is that even though such a "top-down" schema for the participation structure of a particular speech event may exist, for example, in teachers' heads, the participation structure of any context must still be constituted through social practice, at the more micro, interactional level, and can not be taken for granted. As I hope to have illustrated with the above examples, the lessons which the teachers had planned in the above examples ran awry exactly because of such an assumption.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, this paper has argued that the notion of participation structure may be conceived of as 1) tacit knowledge which members of a speech community share concerning the organization of interaction in various, especially more ritualized, speech events, as well as 2) a negotiated process which is dependent on tacit knowledge or norms concerning the use of particular speech acts and their sequential organization at the more micro, interactional level. I have tried to show how these two levels of cultural knowledge interact as participants enact them and attempt to make sense of each other's actions and utterances (or lack of them) in terms of such tacit schemas. I have offered examples from a Navajo preschool classroom illustrating that the tacit expectations of teachers (Navajo or Non-Navajo) may not be shared by their pupils (or their pupils' parents), as ethnographers of classroom interaction in many other Native American communities (including Sahaptin, Chinook (Philips, 1983), Ute, Lakota (Leap, 1993), Ojibwa (Black, 1973), Cherokee (Dumont & Wax, 1969), Cree (Darnell, 1979), Odawa (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982), Western Apache (Liebe-Harkort, 1983), Chipewyan (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), and Koyokon (Van Ness, 1981)) have also argued. When different expectations exist concerning what is an "appropriate" participation structure, for a speech event or for a speech act, misunderstanding often typically ensues, as interactants attempt to infer each others' meaning based on differing inferential schemas (Levinson, 1979; Gumperz, 1982). Thus, silence as a response to questions may be perceived by Non-Native Americans as a sign of mishearing or misunderstanding of the previous utterance (as in example 1), or may not "count" as a preconceived notion of what a "response" should be (as in examples 2-4, where the teacher repeatedly asks questions designed to elicit a *verbal* response to write down). A better understanding of variation in cultural preferences for the organization of interaction, including participation structure, especially for educators in this country, can only help to improve educational practice, and is an issue which the field of applied linguistics may directly and usefully address.

NOTES

[1] For further references on this distinction between global and interactional levels of analysis, see Kulick 1992:254, and Fasold 1984, as well as Levinson's distinction between "utterance-event" and "speech event" (1988:167).

[2] The terms "schema" and "cultural model" are often used interchangeably in the cognitive anthropology literature. In this paper the term schema will be used for consistency.

[3] I am indebted to the parents and staff of the Canoncito Family And Child Education program for their generous cooperation and aid in this project.

[4] Data collected by Gwen's mother for me in their home revealed that English was indeed the preferred language used both by and to the children, so clearly the problem is not one of misunderstanding.

[5] Importantly, the norms for question-asking may differ between intimates, in which case the violation of "etiquette" such as the asking of direct questions or giving of directives may in fact constitute the very social roles of intimate participants, as between very good friends or family

members.

[6] Cf. Field 1988, chapter nine, for more in-depth discussion and examples of this type of silent repsonse.

[7] Note that this response "I don't know" illustrates a common response which all of the children certainly know how to produce, yet do not, for the most part (this was the only token in this transcript). Interestingly, here it is volunteered as a response to a question about what the *teacher* is making.

[8] This interaction is continued in ex. 2.

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