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Expressing abstract notions in adult-child story-reading interactions

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1. Introduction

Telling stories has always been a way for human beings to share experiences and knowledge with their community. Cameron-Faulkner and Noble (2013) showed that children's books are remarkably diverse in the topics and characters they deal with and while children listen to stories about the world seen through the eyes of various characters like animals, little girls and boys, they are also presented with a large set of lexical and syntactical structures. Because children and their parents are invited to talk about imaginary events when reading stories, the present paper aims to show that interactions during shared book reading activities present a favorable locus for children to learn to talk about others' experiences of the world and to express abstract facts and notions like feelings and sensations.

Researchers adopting a usage-based and constructivist theoretical approach have shown that child directed speech plays a crucial role in children's language development and have focused on children's input. In her 2003 book, Clark writes about the input and its impact on children's spoken productions and she states that "child-directed speech and other sources of language – overheard speech, stories read aloud, speakers heard on radio or TV, for instance – provide such rich input that children should eventually learn enough of their language for all their needs" (p.429).

To child language researchers working within a usage-based, usage-driven and constructivist framework, children's utterances cannot be analyzed without the context in which they are produced and the input is part of the context. Lately, some researchers analyzing children's language have taken into account other modalities of expressions like gestures, vocalizations, facial expressions and body actions produced both by children and their parents to have a better understanding of how children learn not only a linguistic system but also social conventions

(Beaupoil-Hourdel, Morgenstern & Boutet 2015; Morgenstern *et al.*, 2016). Morgenstern (2014) emphasizes the idea according to which children learn their mother tongue and their culture in the interactions they have with their caregivers when she writes that “even if children have innate biological and cognitive capacities, they need to learn social and linguistic conventions from the input.” As Clark (2003) and Morgenstern (2014) suggest, language is not only based on daily-life activities and stories read aloud can be considered as part of children’s input.

It has been demonstrated that *Shared Book Reading* (SBR) activities (Cameron-Faulkner & Noble, 2013) have a positive effect for children on a range of skills like vocabulary development (Payne, Whitehurst & Angell, 1994; Snow & Goldfield, 1983) and grammatical development (Thea Cameron-Faulkner, 2013). Snow *et al.* (1976) and Hoff-Ginsberg (1992) have shown that language used during SBR involves higher mean length of utterance (MLU) than in spontaneous adult-child dyadic interactions. Cameron-Faulkner & Noble (2013) and Bus *et al.* (1995) observed that there is a relationship between SBR and grammatical development because written language contains a wider range and a more complex set of sentence types than in child directed speech and oral speech in general. Cameron-Faulkner & Noble’s study on SBR (2013) used two types of books: the first category was composed of books with pictures only and the second sample was composed of books with the story written and they observed that both types of books generate more complex constructions than free play Child Directed Speech.

Therefore, books can be viewed as a form of enriched linguistic input (Cameron-Faulkner & Noble, 2013). Other studies showed that SBR activities help children develop narrative skills with the ability to adopt somebody else’s perception (Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; Leroy-Collombel, 2013). SBR activities also offer a great locus to study how children talk about themselves, their experiences and others’ feelings. Book-stories are not located in the here and now and not focused on the child. Therefore, the child needs to learn to talk about others’ stories and experiences of the world.

Thus, it appears that SBR activities offer a favorable context for children to acquire language. The activity itself triggers a constant back-and-forth movement between the children’s daily lives and the work of fiction they are reading but it also prompts displaced speech on the part of both the parents and the children. It adds a new dimension to language

itself since language is no longer used to do actions but rather to talk about displaced events or imaginary characters. Thanks to that particular context, words may allow children to make sense of the world and to express their feelings and sensations. Sensations and the act of referring to absent people or displaced events are part of the process of discovery, allowing them to grasp the world.

Yet, the ability to use words to tell stories comes later than the use of words to perform actions in children's language development (Beaupeil-Hourdel & Debras, 2017). At first, children use language to discover the immediate environment they inhabit and it is only when they can talk about concrete objects in their environment that they are then able to talk about displaced events, absent people, imaginary characters and more abstract facts (Danis, Bernard & Leproux, 2000). In the present paper, I analyzed four adult-child dyads filmed in spontaneous interactions and in SBR context and focused on the moments when the children talked about the character's feelings and experiences of the world. I used a multimodal approach because young children may not have the target words necessary to describe pictures and the gestures and actions they produce can substitute for lexical gaps and help them talk about others' feelings in a nonverbal manner. This paper presents a qualitative analysis and scrutinizes how children describe imaginary characters' sensations and how they react to them. I will therefore study to what extent Shared Book Reading (SBR) activities is a privileged locus for children to learn to talk about their own experiences of the world as well as others'.

2. Data

This paper analyzes the expression of feelings and sensations in SBR contexts in four longitudinal corpora of two monolingual English-speaking children and two monolingual French-speaking children. The children were filmed at home one hour a month from one to four years old in spontaneous and natural interaction with their mothers. For this study I used three corpora from the *CoLaJE*¹ *Corpus*² and one follow-up, collected in London by Sam Green (UCL ESRC). The study focuses on the expression of feelings and sensations produced in SBR contexts and

¹ Projet ANR CoLaJE (<http://colaje.scicog.fr>), a project funded by the French National Agency. (Morgenstern & Parrisé, 2012).

² The recordings and transcriptions can be downloaded from <http://colaje.risc.cnrs.fr/index.php/corpus-colaje>.

not in storytelling situations. Contrary to storytelling, SBR occurs in a high joint attention setting in which the reader and the listener interact with one another to tell the story.

Table 1 synthesizes the data and the sessions analyzed. The third line presents the video recordings that have been analyzed for each child and the fourth line shows the length of the data. The bottom line shows the proportion of SBR activities among the data. For this study I coded an overall of 43 hours of video data in which the children are engaged in free play activities with their mothers. Among this data I isolated 5 hours of videos during which the children and their mothers are reading books together. It appears that SBR is a frequent activity in all four corpora because in three dyads out of four, this game represents about 20% of the overall data. In Ellie's corpus, the percentage is lower but there are a certain amount of recurrent other activity-types like cooking which are not as frequent in the other data (Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2015).

Language	French		British English		Overall length of the data
Child	Anaé	Madeleine	Ellie	Scarlett	
Video	From one year and six months old to four years old every six months	From one to four years old every year	From ten months old to two years old each month and from two to four years old every six months	From eleven months old to one year and two months old each month	
Length of the corpus	6 hours	4 hours	20 hours	6 hours	
SBR (proportion)	23% (1h20)	20 (50 minutes)	6% (1h05)	27% (1h40)	5 hours

Table 1. Overview table of the data

3. Methodology and analysis

My theoretical approach makes me consider language as an integrative system in which all the modalities of expression play a role in the construction of an utterance. Goodwin *et al.* (2002) showed that to express themselves, adults and children rely on a variety of semiotic means they can choose to combine or to use in isolation. They also observed that in face-to-face interactions, participants often use gestures, prosody, facial expressions, vocalizations, shouts, screams and body actions in combination with speech as meaningful means of expressions. As a consequence, for the present paper, I took into account all the semiotic means that compose language to analyze oral communication.

SBR activities offer a rich context to study adult-child language and how they communicate. To analyze the expression of feelings and sensations in children's productions their utterances were classified into two categories.

- The first one was dealing with who the experiencer was. I focused on whether the child was talking about the *character's* feelings, *her* own feelings or those of her *mother* or of an *absent person*.
- The second category addressed the referential frame of the child's utterance; each utterance was classified as being either anchored in the *here and now* and *the frame of the story* or as referring to a *displaced event*.

The frame of the child's utterances refer to different layers of interaction and I observed that children's utterances were first dealing with the setting of the story, later with the here and now and once they were older with displaced events. It is however difficult to give age boundaries for each stage because the movement from one stage to the other depends on each child's individual linguistic development. However, it seems that after three years old, they slowly start building on the story and the character's experience of the world to redefine the frame and talk about their own experiences and about displaced events in which they are the focal character.

3.1. Talking about others' feelings and sensations

In the context of SBR, the primary goal of the activity is to go through a story in which the main character is not the child. The mother and the child's focus is set on a fictitious character, which is not common in mother-child daily-life interactions. Indeed, before four years old,

when the child is interacting with her mother, she often is at the center of attention.

In the following example, Scarlett is a year and five months old and she and her mother are telling the story of a greedy caterpillar. The child knows the story because her mother has already read it to her several times. The mother begins a sentence and gives the opportunity to the child to end it when she says “that night he had a +...” and Scarlett answers “stomachache”. The mother repeats “stomachache” and explains that indeed the character’s stomach hurts.

Example (1) Scarlett – One year and five months old

*MOT³: that night he had a +...⁴

*CHI: stomachache .

*MOT: stomachache ouh@i⁵ his tummy hurt his tummy was
ouy !

%act⁶: the mother looks at Scarlett and touches the child’s
stomach.

At this age, thanks to the repetition of the same activity, reading the same book over and over, the child is able to express the character’s sensation. In other contexts she is also able to express this same sensation as in a previous session she touched her head and said “ache”. We also observe that the mother non-verbally explains to the child where the locus of the pain is, using the child’s body for she touches Scarlett’s stomach while explaining that the caterpillar had a sour stomach. The fact that the mother’s gaze goes from the book to the child at that moment also shows that the mother is redefining the focus of the story and puts the child at the centre of the interaction. The child and the mother are taking part in a cooperative activity and they are constantly building on each other’s utterances and actions to tell the story of the caterpillar. They are engaged in a *cooperative semiosis* in which they

³ The CHAT (MacWhinney 2000; <http://chilides.psy.cmu.edu>) transcription system includes main tiers indicated by * and a three letter name for the speaker (MOT : mother ; CHI : child) and secondary tiers indicated by %act describing the actions).

⁴ +... is a convention from the CHAT format that signals that the utterance is suspended.

⁵ @i is a convention from the CHAT format that signals an interjection.

⁶ %act is a convention from the CHAT format that indicates that the participant is doing an action. Gestures are signaled by %gpx, pointing gestures by %xpnt.

both build actions and utterances using the other's previous utterance to tell the story of the caterpillar (Goodwin, 2010).

In example (1), Scarlett is able to say that the caterpillar had a stomachache because she knows the story well (since her mother has already read the story to her several times) and the mother makes the connection between eating too much food and having a stomachache. In the data, children under four usually describe what they see on pictures and their mothers often verbalize what the characters' feelings and sensations are.

Example (2) Madeleine – three years old

*MOT: Alors que fait le petit marcassin ?

What does the little wild pig do then ?

*CHI: i(l)⁷ [/]⁸ i(l) [/] i(l) pl(eure) [///] i(l) sanglote .

he [/] he [/] he is cr(ying) [///] he's sobbing .

%act: Madeleine looks at her mother

*MOT: i(l) sanglote ?

he is sobbing ?

%act: the mother moves next to Madeleine and looks at the book.

*CHI: tu vois (.)⁹ i(l) sanglote .

look he's sobbing .

%act: Madeleine looks at the book and points to a picture.

*MOT: ah@i oui i(l) sanglote .

he's sobbing, you're right .

*CHI: parce que là son papa i(l) vient de mourir .

because his father is dead .

*MOT: hum (.) il est triste .

hum (.) he's sad .

In example (2) Madeleine never says that the little wild pig is sad but rather sticks to the physical description and the cause of his grief. The mother, on the contrary, immediately understands that the tears mean that

⁷ In the CHAT format, letters or strings of characters that are between parentheses are not pronounced.

⁸ [/] is a convention from the CHAT format that signals a repetition of the previous word. [///] signals a correction.

⁹ (.) is a convention from the CHAT format that signals a pause.

the character is sad and she says so. A picture of a crying character only shows the visual consequences of a feeling. Before four years old, because children cannot read, they do not have access to the text that goes with the pictures and that may state that the character is sad. The only access Madeleine has to the adjective *sad* in this context is the parent. In example (2) the fact that Madeleine utters the French verbs <pleurer> and then <sangloter> - a verb used less frequently in adult-child interactions - shows that her mother has already read this book to her in the past. Indeed, she first describes the picture with the verb “pleurer” and then recalls the narrative she has heard previously and utters the verb “sangloter”.

This analysis shows that the children verbalize what they can see on the pictures and what they can understand from the text read by the parents. In example (2), Madeleine does not use the target-adjective *sad* but when we analyse the interaction we understand that she means that the character is sad. Indeed, she is able to explain that the little pig is crying because his father is dead. From a cognitive perspective she fully understands the situation.

In example (3), Madeleine is a year and eleven months old and she also understands that the character is sad. She does not know how she should express it but her description of the picture, the intonation of her utterances and her action altogether show that she understands the feelings depicted on the page.

Example (3): Madeleine – one year and eleven months old (Sekali & Morgenstern, 2009; Morgenstern & Sekali, 2009, p.10)

*CHI: sa maman ε@fs¹⁰ pleure .

his mother is crying.

%sit: the character on the book is crying.

*MOT: ah oui elle pleure parc(e)+que (.) elle est trop pauvre <elle peut plus donner à manger> [///] elle a plus assez à manger pour ses enfants .

She is crying because she is too poor and she can no longer feed [///] she does not have enough food for her children.

*MOT: c'est triste .

it's sad.

¹⁰ @fs is a convention from the CHAT format that is used when the children produce a filler (Morgenstern, 2009).

- *CHI: donner un doudou .
give a bunny.
- *CHI: doudou pour Madeleine .
bunny for Madeleine.
- *MOT: tu veux lui donner un doudou ?
do you want to give her the bunny?
- *MOT: pour la consoler ?
to comfort her?
- *CHI: con(soler) [//] consoler consoler .
comfort (.) comfort comfort.
- [...]
- *CHI: nə@fs donner un doudou pour Madeleine .
I give a bunny for Madeleine.
- *CHI: tiens .
there.
- %act: Madeleine puts her bunny on the book.
- *CHI: ne@fs donné un doudou <a@fs> [/] a@fs
 Madeleine .
I gave Madeleine's bunny.
- [...]
- *CHI: ça va mieux .
better .
- %act: Madeleine takes the bunny and looks at the picture on
 the book.

Just before she turns two, Madeleine understands the feeling depicted by a picture but the linguistic realization of her utterance is not abstract enough to refer to the feeling. Her spoken utterance “his mother is crying” only describes the picture and not the abstract notion of what sadness is; but her action of giving her bunny to the character is meaningful and shows that she perfectly understands the character’s feelings. Her body actions show that the child is empathizing with the character. At almost two years old, Madeleine has associated the act of crying to the act of comforting this person and because she has a bunny that she hugs when she is sad, she offers her bunny to the character. The whole sequence of saying that the character is crying and giving her bunny to her is a multimodal way of talking about the character’s feelings without putting herself as the focal character in the interaction.

In the following example, Ellie is three and she is reading a book with her mother about a dog named Patch.

Example (4) Ellie – three years old

*MOT: and then what would Patch do ?

*CHI: sad .

%gpx: shoulder-lift and looks at her mother.

*MOT: Patch would be sad, oh dear !

This sequence differs from the previous ones because Ellie is able to produce the target-word to describe the character's feeling. The child does not describe the picture, which could have been possible given her mother's question, instead she says that the dog is sad, raises her shoulders and looks at her mother. Contrary to Madeleine, Ellie does not show any sign of empathy with the character. The shoulder-lift she produces may convey powerlessness but not empathy. However, like Madeleine, Ellie does not refocus the attention on herself but rather keeps talking about the character. She also goes beyond the mere description of an image and has understood that the tears on the picture suggest that the dog is sad. These differences can be linked to the age of the children but also to the activity of reading books in itself. Indeed one important variable is that reading books is a repetitive activity at this age and we do not know how many times the parents have read the story with their children before they were filmed.

Therefore, the examples studied above show that expressing the feelings of an imaginary character is a complex process because the child needs to go beyond what she sees in the picture and to understand that the image is referring to an abstract notion. A feeling is an abstract concept and a picture only shows the visual and physical consequences of a feeling. As Danis *et al.* (2000) showed, SBR may be a good activity for children to learn and grasp how to verbally express abstract notions. Going from a concrete representation of a feeling to verbally expressing an abstract notion is part of the cognitive processes and development of children. SBR activities seem to create a rich interactive environment in which children learn words to talk about others' feelings, because they constantly transfer the events depicted in the book to a less abstract sphere of understanding, that is to say, their own life and experience of the world.

3.2. SBR activities: a privileged locus for children to talk about their feelings and experiences.

SBR activities prompt children to constantly shift from the imaginary setting of the story to their own real lives, in which they are, so to speak, the focal character. Storybooks help them to draw parallels between the characters' experiences and their own experiences of the world. Therefore, adult-child SBR activities create a "zone of proximal development" (Bruner, 1983). In examples (4) and (5), Anaé is three and Scarlett is one year and a half and they both build on the story's events to talk about their own experiences of the world and about displaced events which are not part of the story:

Example (4) Anaé – three years old

*MOT: tu nous racontes, c'est qui là sur ce livre ?
will you tell us the story?

*MOT: on les connaît eux .
we already know them, don't we!

*MOT: c'est les copains de la forêt !
they are the friends of the forest !

*CHI: ouais (.) et ça ?
yes (.) and this ?

%xpnt : Anaé points to a picture on the book.

*CHI: ah <c'est quand on é(tait)> [/] c'est quand on était au manège .

oh <it is when we went> [/] when we went onto the merry-go-round.

*MOT: ah bon .
are you sure ?

*CHI: +<¹¹ oui.
yes .

%act : Anaé turns the page.

*MOT: hum .
hum .

*MOT: quand est+ce+que tu étais au manège Anaé ?
when did you go onto the merry-go-round Anaé ?

*CHI: ah c'est quand z@fs étais petite ça .
and that was when I was little .

%act: Anaé turns the page and points to a picture.

*MOT: ah bon .

¹¹ +< is a convention from the CHAT format that signals an overlap with the previous utterance.

all right .
 *CHI: ouais .
yes .
 *MOT: tu te souviens ?
and you remember it ?
 *CHI: hum .
hum .

In this interaction, we observe a transfer from the story to reality and a movement from the frame of the story to a displaced sphere of action. The mother's request at the beginning of the interaction deals with the story and the characters but the child does not provide any answer. She waits for the mother to tell her who the characters are and then points to a picture and asks "and this?" and immediately adds that it is the same activity as when she went to the merry-go-round. Her mother does not seem to recall that event but she understands that the child is no longer telling the story. At that moment, Anaé makes a parallel between what is happening in the book and what has happened to her in the past. Like the character, Anaé went to the carrousel and it seems that the child uses the book in this situation to talk about herself and not about the character. This intention is reaffirmed when she turns the page, points to another picture and says "and that was when I was little". Anaé uses the book as a medium to talk about her own experience of the world and to tell a story in which she is the main character. Yet, Anaé does not put the book aside but rather keeps on turning the pages and pointing to the pictures to tell her own story. The use of pointing gestures suggests that if the child is talking about her real-life experience it is only because there is a link with the book and the events depicted in the story. The story is the reason why she is referring to displaced events and it is part of the construction of Anaé's narration.

Example (5) Scarlett – one year and five months old

*MOT: that night he had a +...
 *CHI: stomachache .
 *MOT: stomachache ouh@i his tummy hurt his tummy was
 ouy !
 %act: the mother looks at Scarlett and touches the child's
 stomach.
 CHI: yy cake !
 %xpnt: points to the cake

MOT: this is cake yeah chocolate cake. What else ?
CHI: hum@i !
%act: CHI touches her stomach.
MOT: hum@i !
%gpx: the mother nods.

In examples (1) and (5) the story teaches Scarlett that because the caterpillar ate too much it was sick at night. The conversation focuses on the act of eating too much and the consequences on the body. The mother touches the child's stomach and looks at the child, which is already a transfer from the story told in the book to the here and now but in the child's sphere of experience. The mother uses the story to explain sensations to the child and to map the sensation on the child's body. Thanks to joint attention, the notions of stomach, food and sickness, are cognitively activated. Then, Scarlett points to the cake and the mother thinks the child is only naming pictures but at that particular moment Scarlett is actually creating a sentence.

She introduces a new topic and when the mother says "cake, chocolate cake", the child knows the topic is secured and she has her mother's attention. Scarlett adds "hum" and touches her stomach. She combines a gesture and an interjection to tell her mother that she likes chocolate cake. Therefore, Scarlett uses the book as a prop to comment on her likes and dislikes. SBR activities enable both the child and the mother to constantly travel from the imaginary sphere to their own experience of the world. It also seems that the child spontaneously talks about her experience of the world. The pictures she names probably make her think about her own experiences.

4. Conclusion

The present qualitative study demonstrates that, thanks to a constant back-and-forth movement from the story of the book to their own daily-life experiences, SBR activities offer a favorable context for children to learn to express their own feelings and sensations as well as others'. Picture books help children refer to displaced events or absent people and share their own stories with their parents.

This analysis underlines that expressing others' sensations and feelings results from a complex cognitive and linguistic activity. Books can be viewed as a form of enriched linguistic input because children benefit from the rich participation framework in which the activity occurs. The present paper illustrates the importance to restrict the study

to SBR activities rather than to analyze all kinds of adult-child spontaneous interactions. Indeed, we observe that in all the above sequences the book is not simply an object or a picture book, it is what Goodwin (2003, p.221) calls a *game relevant semiotic object of a particular type*, which means an object that is necessary for the interaction to take place. As Marie Leroy-Collombel (2013) observed in a study on the development of Anaé's narrative development, language used to tell stories is not the same as language used in spontaneous interactions. Compared with spontaneous free-play interactions, SBR activities add a new dimension to language itself, another pragmatic layer, since language is no longer used to perform actions in the here and now but rather to talk about displaced events, imaginary characters and abstract notions like feelings and sensations. SBR activities prompt a constant back-and-forth movement going from the story to the child's experience of the world and from concrete depiction of the world to the expression of abstract notions like feelings and emotions. Thus, the activity itself seems to help children raise the level of abstraction in their interactions with adults and thus creates a journey into a zone of proximal development.

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