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Reported Voices and Evaluation

In real life we hear speech about speakers and their discourse at every step ... people talk most of all about what others talk about – they transmit, recall, weigh and pass judgement on other people’s words, opinions, assertions, information.

(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 338)

Michelle The boy, he’s ugly, but he’s got a nice personality. He’s seven and he’s nice to me, he goes ‘Do you want to watch telly? Watch whatever you want!’ He’s so nice.

One of the things that first struck me when I listened to the tapes I collected was how frequently children quoted and reported other people’s voices. In the course of relating an experience, arguing a point or giving an explanation they frequently reproduced the words of parents, teachers, friends and other people in their lives. Why is this kind of recreated dialogue, like Michelle’s quoting of the boy’s voice in the example above, such a ubiquitous feature in the children’s talk? What does reproducing a voice accomplish that a straight account would not? In this chapter I begin to answer these questions by focussing on examples in children’s talk where the reported voice is fairly clearly marked as separate from the speaker’s own.¹ In Chapters 5 and 6, I look at the animation and orchestration of reproduced voices by children within their anecdotes and stories and, in Chapter 7, I move on to examine examples from their talk where the boundaries between the speaker and the voices they are reproducing are less clear-cut and other voices appear to merge with the children’s own. These four chapters provide the heart of my argument about the crucial role of reported and appropriated voices in the evaluative processes in children’s talk.
Reproducing a voice does not just invoke another speaker; ways of speaking and specific linguistic features may also index stances, activities and relationships, speech genres and scenarios. For instance when Kim says ‘She always goes (cross voice) “Get on with your work, Kim!”’ she invokes her teacher’s stance and an aspect of their relationship, and through these an associated classroom context. Kim also conveys some of her own negative feelings about the teacher. As Volosinov explains, ‘reporting’ always involves transformation; voices are not reproduced ‘straight’ in the reporting context, but are reworked and reaccented in particular ways by the speaker doing the reporting, in line with their own purposes. Whether in a conversational anecdote, a work of fiction, a polemical article or a defence attorney’s summation, reported speech always includes an element of evaluation. Words are selected, changed or edited, or a whole quotation is slanted in a particular way.

Researchers of adult talk have found that reported speech seems to be an enormously evocative way of representing and commenting on experience and drawing listeners in. The children I studied created voices to invoke and comment on people, their behaviour, relationships, emotions and values, within the context of recreated events and scenarios. The immediacy and specificity of their reported voices catches the listener’s attention, for instance by showing how a boy’s nice personality is expressed through reporting his comment ‘Watch whatever you want!’, rather than just stating blandly that he’s nice. Reported speech is perhaps particularly powerful for children because so much of their own experience is mediated and controlled through dialogue with adults, both at home and in school. As Steedman (1982) puts it ‘in most children’s lives, the words of adults are what move events forwards, forbid and prevent action … people talking to each other, and the effects that this talking had was the most important and powerful event that children ever witnessed’ (p. 90).

Michelle’s comment about the boy’s ‘nice personality’ occurred in an interview conversation where she and Kim tell me how their teacher is sometimes nasty to them, and where they struggle to understand Michelle’s father’s violence towards her mother (see Chapter 6). The boy’s niceness provides an important reference point in the girls’ exploration of the rights and wrongs of the behaviour of the adults who dominate their lives. Children’s evaluation of the perspectives represented in the voices they report (like Michelle’s approval of the boy’s niceness) is shaped by, and instantiates, social values and beliefs from their social world but it can also express their individual personal