Interactional and multi-modal resources in pre-school children’s game explanations

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This paper investigates how adults support pre-school children when accomplishing game explanations. Game explanations are ‘big packages’ that require specific discourse competences to establish local and global coherence. As explanations in general, they have the overall goal to distribute knowledge about a particular matter to the recipient(s). Analyses of explanations of 4-year-old children (n = 20) are presented who were asked to explain a board game to their caregiver. The following questions are addressed: (1) How do the caregivers support the children’s management of explaining the game by co-constructing global and local coherence? (2) What resources do the parents employ to maintain understanding throughout the explanation in order to support and ensure the transfer of knowledge? Analysis will concentrate on the adults’ multimodal practices to establish local and global coherence in the ongoing game explanations, and on their practices to achieve understanding on what the game is about and how it is played. The results will be discussed in relation to game explanations’ underlying function of stepwise knowledge transition, and with regard to developmental issues concerning the use of multimodal practices as scaffolding devices in situated talk.

Keywords: adult–child interaction; game explanations; global and local coherence; formulations; understanding
Introduction

Research on the acquisition of discourse competence has focused on school children’s growing ability to construct coherent multi-unit turns in explaining, storytelling, or resolving a dissent (Heller, 2014; Morek, 2015; Quasthoff, Heller & Morek, 2017). This article aims to build on this research by studying pre-school children’s production of interactive game explanations (see Kinalzik & Heller, this issue). Game explanations can be considered as ‘big packages’ (Sacks, 1995) that require specific discourse competencies (Quasthoff et al., 2017). For big packages to be a success, speakers need to establish global and local coherence through language resources. This article aims to gain insight into how parents support pre-school children in co-constructing local and global coherence, while, at the same time, attempting to maintain understanding throughout the course of the interaction. The conversation-analytically informed interaction analysis is based on 4-year-old children’s \((n = 20)\) explanations of a board game to their caregiver. It addressed the following two questions:

1. How do caregivers support the children’s management of explaining the game by co-constructing global and local coherence?
2. What resources do parents employ to maintain understanding throughout the explanation in order to support and ensure the transfer of knowledge?

The analysis concentrates on the adults’ verbal practices that seek to establish coherence in the ongoing explanations and on their practices to achieve understanding on what the game is about and how it is played. Results are discussed in terms of the underlying function of game explanations in achieving stepwise knowledge transition, and they are related to developmental issues regarding the use of verbal practices as scaffolding devices in situated talk.

Explanations as communicative genres

From a conversation-analytical perspective, game explanations, like stories or other sequences of action with a recognisable overarching structure, constitute ‘big packages’ (Sacks, 1995, vol. 2, p. 254), ‘coherent conversational units’ (Jefferson, 1978, p. 219), ‘activities’ (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994), ‘large projects’ (Kern, 2007; Selting, 2000), or ‘discourse units’ (Quasthoff
et al., 2017). Big packages do not just form an extended series of ‘topically coherent turns’ (Jefferson, 1978) in the sense of ‘referential continuity’ (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994, p. 4), they also have an overarching structural organization that establishes coherence (Robinson, 2012). In big packages, topical and structural coherence are thus strongly interrelated. Additionally, Heritage and Sorjonen (1994) point out that the overall structural organization of a big package is emic in the sense that participants can be seen to orient towards it. Explaining a game, like conversational storytelling, can be said to constitute one type of big package in this particular sense.

The conversation-analytical perspective on big packages can be enriched with a sociology of knowledge perspective (Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995) that focuses on the role of talk in interaction for the construction of social reality. Within the sociology of knowledge, big packages are understood as communicative genres, because they provide routine solutions to regularly occurring and culturally bound communicative problems. Having developed over time and through social practice, genres are composed of patterns of co-occurring linguistic resources that participants typically employ when addressing these problems because they assist recipients in recognizing and interpreting them. Importantly, by representing a central communicative means to construct social reality, genres are understood as important vehicles for maintaining and transmitting social knowledge (Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995).

From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, a central feature of explanations is their purpose of constructing and transmitting knowledge in interaction. Keppler and Luckmann (1991) have shown how participants produce ad hoc explanations as part of ‘teaching’ sequences at dinner table conversations. The teaching sequences are seen as devices of conversational knowledge transmission that participants may resort to in conversation. In Goodwin’s (2007) study on family interactions, explanations occurred as part of a practice of jointly exploring ‘new domains of knowledge’ (p. 107) such as the meaning of new words, idioms, or concepts.

Hence, explanations can be seen as routine solutions to the problem of knowledge transfer. This is reflected in the way in which they are structured co-operatively in ongoing conversations. Pauses produced by the speaker are used to structure the content of the explanation (i.e. the explanandum) and segment the information into smaller units; they also provide the recipients with the opportunity to acknowledge the new information; and they invite them to express understanding, ask a question, or simply signal
the speaker to continue with the explanation (Keppler, 1989; Keppler & Luckmann, 1991; Kern, 2007). Intonation also plays an important role as a structural and interactional device: a final high pitch will signal potential continuation but also create sequential positions for minimal response (Schegloff, 1982); a final falling pitch signals turn ending and provides the opportunity for more elaborate responses such as follow-up questions; and a rising-to-mid pitch indicates that more is to come and thus does not invite response activities (Kern, 2007). In return, recipient response may signal understanding or ‘following so far’ by simply signalling the speaker to continue with her or his explanation (Keppler, 1989; Keppler & Luckmann, 1991; Kern, 2007). Indeed, establishing and maintaining understanding throughout the ongoing interaction can be regarded as an important conversational task and a major premise for successful knowledge transmission. With regard to game explanations, the knowledge transmitted mostly concerns procedural information on central game activities, the material of the game, and its goal (Kern, 2003; Stude, 2006).

Once started, a big package needs to be carried out as a locally and globally coherent piece of talk. ‘Global coherence’ refers to the way larger projects are constructed as recognisable patterned wholes or thematic units by completing successively occurring organizational jobs (Quasthoff et al., 2017). According to previous research, game explanations are composed of the following content units: introducing the game material, stating the goal of the game, and explaining the central game activities (Kern, 2003). Producing these units as part of a superordinate whole makes them recognisable as parts of a game explanation and thus as parts of a specific overarching structure. Whereas global coherence is thus established in the overall structured composition, local coherence is found in smaller units such as turns or turn-constructional units as well as between these units. A well-known means to establish local coherence is to use adjacency pairs such as question–answer pairs, greeting–greeting pairs, or offer–acceptance pairs (Levinson, 1983). Further resources are discourse markers (Cekaite & Goodwin, 2013), conjunctions, the repetition or substitution of lexical items, and various other grammatical and textual devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Indeed, repetitions of verbal and nonverbal material play an important role in establishing coherence over a sequence of turns (Goodwin, 2004).
Developing discourse competence

It is well known that competence in accomplishing big packages such as storytelling, explaining, or arguing starts to develop in early childhood and continues to develop in later childhood (Quasthoff et al., 2017; Kinalzik & Heller, this volume). Many studies have addressed how children acquire the competence to produce and signal global and local coherence in interactively accomplished ‘big packages’. With regard to storytelling, studies have shown how adults scaffold children into coping with the demand of placing a storytelling in a conversation and into expanding their tellings in multi-unit turns (Bateman & Carr, 2017; Theobald, 2019); and how co-tellings between an adult and a child enable a story to progress (Filipi, 2017). Hausendorf and Quasthoff (2005) have shown that adults systematically establish global narrative tasks to make children elaborate an event coherently. Kern and Quasthoff (2005) have found that adults use supportive moves that help children to tie their narrative thematically to the previous conversation. With regard to explanations and arguments, studies have demonstrated how adults establish routine interactive patterns to support their less competent younger co-participants when constructing such big packages (cf., for example, Heller, 2012; Morek, 2012; Morek, this issue; Kern & Quasthoff, 2005).

As scaffolding devices, reformulations and repetitions have been shown to play an important role (Corrin, 2010; Delves & Stirling, 2010). Clarke, Soto and Nelson (2017) have described repair techniques and reformulations as recasts that adults regularly produce during conversations with children, providing less competent interlocutors with correct linguistic forms. Adults may also use repetitions or expansions of the children’s utterances to encourage them with a model utterance that may present a better way to express the intended meaning (Clark, 2014). Tarplee (2006) has shown how adults repeat single words in picture-labelling sequences with young children in order to perform phonetic corrections. Finally, Clark and Bernicot (2008) have reported how repetitions serve as ratifications to place information in common ground. This article aims to shed more light on this last function by focusing on the role of repetitions in achieving and maintaining understanding as a publicly accountable action in an ongoing discourse.
Data and methods

The data stem from a collection of videotaped game explanations from parent–child interactions that were recorded in a university children’s lab as part of a research project on pre-school children’s embodied performance on different discourse tasks.¹ After a short warm-up phase, a specially developed board game was explained to the children. The game was composed of jigsaw pieces with different geometrical forms (circle, triangle, rectangle, star) designed to elicit form-related iconic gestures. It was also embedded in the short story that – for the purpose of eliciting storytelling – resembled a story from a book that had previously been shown to the children’s families. After having been introduced to the game, the children played it with a student experimenter. The game activity consisted basically of throwing a die on which the same geometrical forms were depicted. Depending on the throw of the die, the child was allowed to take a little Playmobil character and let it ‘fly’ through the respective form on the board. After playing the game, the student experimenter left the room, and the caregiver (mother or father) joined the child and asked her or him to explain the game they had just played:

Thus what makes the data distinct is not only the interactive setting as a whole – it is not mundane, but elicited talk – but also the participants’ different discourse competencies. Four-year-olds can be very eloquent, but even though this holds for many of them in turn-by-turn talk, they usually rely on, and are helped by, adult co-participants when it comes to accomplishing big packages in interaction. This is also the case in the data presented here. So far, 20 children have been videotaped; the explanations of 8 of them have been transcribed according to GAT2 conventions (Selting et al., 2011; for details see the back of the special issue). This provided the empirical basis for this article. The theoretical framework for the following analyses was set by viewing game explanations as communicative genres with global and local structures and patterns. It focuses on adults’ practices when helping children to establish local and global coherence and to achieve understanding.

The present analysis was based on a multimodal interaction approach informed by conversation analysis. This might be somewhat atypical, because conversation analysis is usually applied to naturally occurring talk. However, with regard to the ‘unnaturalness’ of the present data, it is argued that even though participants are in unfamiliar surroundings,
they rely on – and indeed employ – practices they also use in their everyday interactions. Practices to achieve mutual understanding and to support less competent co-participants are not made up ad hoc, but are part of a repertoire participants rely on as ‘competent members’ (Forrester & Reason, 2006) in ongoing interaction. This is confirmed empirically in the present data, because the use of the practices did not lead to noticeable interactional trouble. This is understood as indicating that participants are familiar with their use. However, it can be argued that the specific setting in which children and their parents are located functions as a magnifying glass: especially the adults are observably oriented towards step-by-step understanding that, in reverse, leads to the frequent use of support practices. The parents’ orientation to be observed throughout the data set very likely reflects their understanding of the public and scientific realm of the setting, but it may also be motivated by their wish to be able to play the game later with their child.

Establishing coherence in children’s game explanation

The interactively co-constructed explanations feature several practices that occur systematically and function as scaffolding devices to establish both local and global coherence, and, often simultaneously, serve to claim understanding. The most frequent device employed by the caregivers is producing questions in a series. The examples below are meant to demonstrate, among other things, the close connection between global and local coherence.

Establishing local and global coherence through series of question–answer pairs

In the first extract, the caregiver assumes most of the conversational work. She produces questions in series to keep the interaction going, employing the interactive power of questions as first-pair parts of adjacency pairs to make answers conditionally relevant. Additionally, the questions in series indicate to the child what her mother needs to know about the game and in what order. They thus provide the child with a basic structure of a game explanation, as Extract 1 illustrates.


Extract 1a
(EcoGest _GAT_11_GES)

02 MO was habt ihr geMACHT,
what did you do
03 CH ein MONDspiel;
a moon game
04 MO [ein MONDspiel,]
a moon game
05 CH [(   )] |ich ge (durfte) REINpuzzeln,
| I (was allowed to) work on the jigsaw
| ((moves right open hand from right top to left bottom))
06 =und da hat dis (-) dis kind wollte nicht SCHLAfen,
and then this this kid didn’t want to sleep
07 und dann ist es ( ) DURCHgeflutscht;
and then it slipped through
08 MO DURCHgeflutscht;
slipped through
09 MO okay,
10 und (. ) musstest du WÜRfeln,
and did you have to throw a die
11 oder wie (. ) [funktioniert das SPIEL;
or how does the game work
12 CH [ ||WÜRfeln;
| throw a die
| ((moves open hand upwards))
13 MO ah du hattest einen WÜRfel,
oh you had a die
14 CH hm;
15 MO also du hast |zuerst den WÜRfel;
right you first had a die
| ((forms a cup with hand))
16 | |und was machst du DANN,
| and what do you do then
| ((moves open hand upwards))
17 CH | |<p> WÜRfeln;>
| throw a die
| ((moves upper body forward + open hand upwards and away from body))
18 | |<rail> WÜRfeln;>
| throw a die
| ((repeats gesture that starts on the ground further away from the body))
19 MO und daNACH,
and then
20 CH muss man (---) ist das kind DURCHgeflogen,
you have to the kid flew through
21 und dann musste das kind das |RAUSmachen,
and then the kid had to take it out
| ((moves right hand forward fast))
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The extract can be segmented into a series of successive question–answer pairs: lines 2–3, 10–12, 13–14, 16–17, 19–20, 23–24, and 25–26. Because the mother is asking the questions, progress in the ongoing talk is achieved mainly through her conversational work. The mother opens the conversation by asking the child to tell her what went on before when she was not in the room, thereby potentially opening the floor for a multi-unit turn, or big package. However, the child provides just a short answer (line 3), and only the mother’s subsequent repeat question leads to a fragmented explanation of the game the child had played earlier in the form of a multi-unit turn (lines 5–7). Note that by producing the explanation, the child demonstrates her interactive competence in understanding the mother’s repeat question as a request for more information on the game. The mother, after an acknowledgment token (line 9), asks first a closed and then an open question (lines 10 and 11). Overlapping with the second question, the child begins to answer the first, closed question.

In what follows, a series of questions and answers develops. The mother employs questions-in-series (lines 16, 19, 23, and 25) to elicit more information on the game such as the game material (the die) and central game activities (throwing the die, letting the Playmobil figure fly through the holes in the board). Thus, the mother offers continuous support to the child’s local step-by-step accomplishment, thereby tutoring the child into what constitutes an appropriate game explanation. Moreover, through her questions, she implicitly provides a global structure, thus establishing coherence more globally. The overall structure is revealed in the details the mother is asking for, because these refer to the above-mentioned underlying thematic units: she first requests the game material; and second, information about the game activities (line 16, and then). Global coherence is also accomplished through some of the questions’ and prefaces (lines 10, 16, and 19). And-prefaced questions are used to achieve coherence across sequences (e.g. a series of adjacency pairs) and help to maintain a joint
orientation towards the larger ongoing activity (Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994; Nevile, 2006). In child–parent interactions, they may be employed as scaffolding devices to elicit further details about a story event (Filipi, 2019). Breaking up the global structure of explanations through successive questions eases the child’s burden of having to accomplish a big package in (more or less) one go, and demonstrates the interconnection of global and local coherence.

However, these questions in series achieve more than just progress in the talk. They construct coherence on both local and global levels. First, question–answer pairs serve as local coherence devices through their well-described status as adjacency pairs that include the connection between the first and second part through conditional relevance (Levinson, 1983). Second, with regard to the global level of coherence, the mother uses her background knowledge about games and game explanations to ask consecutive questions that provide the global coherence of the big package. Through the questions in series, the mother’s underlying knowledge about games surfaces when she is working through what she knows about games, such as that they might involve dice (did you have to throw a die), and about what she thinks she needs to know in order to be able to play the game herself, such as central game activities. This knowledge is employed to ask questions about the game in a specific order, and thereby revealing that these questions serve as devices to establish global coherence. Because the questions aim to elicit relevant knowledge for playing the game, they also provide the child with basic structural patterns of what belongs to a game explanation.

In sum, the questions in series are a means to retain interactive control over what is going to happen next on both a local and a global structural level. They thus serve as a device for the adult to present the basic structure of a game explanation step by step and to achieve global coherence—albeit through locally operating devices.

Achieving understanding through ‘formulations’

One of the salient features of the parents’ talk within the data set is (re)formulations of children’s utterances. For example, many of the questions the mother asks in the above extract repeat part of the child’s previous utterances (You had to push it; what did you have to push out; where are those moon stars). A closer look at the format of the questions and their
repetitive pattern reveals that they exhibit features of so-called formulations (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage & Watson, 1979). Formulations build on previous utterances by using part of their linguistic material to articulate the current state of affairs or what the conversation is about so far: ‘We shall speak of conversationalists’ practices of saying-in-so-many-words-what-we-are-doing as formulating’ (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970, p. 351). According to Heritage and Watson (1979, p. 138) who looked particularly at formulations after news deliveries (announcements, stories, etc.), their ‘primary business … is to demonstrate understandings and, presumptively, have the understandings attended to and, as first preference, endorsed’. They highlight two features of formulations: First, they require specific next actions that are either confirmations or disconfirmations, and are thus a first-pair part of the adjacency pair format ‘formulation–decision’ (Heritage & Watson, 1979, p. 142). Second, in the sense that they are demonstrations of understandings, they are presented as gists or upshots of the conversation so far, and thus function as a device to maintain ongoing mutual understanding.

Such formulations occur regularly in the game explanations. Looking at Extract 1 again reveals that formulations bear important functions concerning the elimination of misunderstanding and the maintenance of understanding throughout the ongoing explanation.

Extract 1b
(EcoGest _GAT_11_GES)

02 MO was habt ihr geMACHT, what did you do
03 CH ein MONDspiel; a moon game
04 MO [ein MONDspiel,] a moon game
05 CH [(            ) |ich ge (durfte) REINpuzzeln, I (was allowed to) work on the jigsaw |
| (moves right open hand from right top to left bottom))
06 =und da hat dis (-)dis kind wollte nicht SCHLAfen, and then the kid didn’t want to sleep
07 und dann ist es (   ) DURCHgeflutscht; and then it slipped through
08 MO DURCHgeflutscht; slipped through
09 MO okay,
10 und (. ) musstest du WÜRfeln, and did you have to throw a die
oder wie (.). [funktioniert das SPIEL; or how does the game work
12  CH  [Würfeln:
        throw a die
( moves open hand upwards )
13  MO  ah du hattest einen Würfel,
oh you had a die
14  CH  hm;
15  MO  also du hast zuerst den Würfel;
right you first had a die
( forms a cup with hand )
16  | und was machst du Dann,
    and what did you do then
( moves open hand upwards )
17  CH  Würfeln:
        throw a die
( moves upper body forward + open hand upwards and away from body )
18  | Würfeln:
    throw a die
( repeats gesture that starts on the ground further away from the body )
19  MO  und dannach,
    and then
20  CH  muss man (---) ist das kind durchgeflögen,
you have to the kid flew through
21  CH  und dann musste das kind das Rausmachen,
and then the kid had to take it out
    ( moves right hand forward fast )
22  Rausschlagen und * hhhhh
push it out
23  MO  Rausschlagen,
you had to push it out
24  CH  ( (nods ) )
25  MO  yeah, ( . ) Was musstest du rauschlagen,
yes what did you have to push out
26  CH  das diese: ( . ) mondstern;
the that moon star

Each of the utterances marked in bold repeats part of the lexical material from one of the previous turns. The mother’s turn in line 13 changes the child’s previous utterance into a syntactically expanded version, thereby transforming the verb würfeln (throw a die) that describes an action into a noun that describes game material. Her turn is prefaced by a change-of-state token (Heritage, 1984) indicating the newness of the knowledge transferred. Syntactically a declarative sentence, its prosodic packaging with final rising intonation signals that it is in fact a clarification request; and the child treats it as such: she nods, affirming the question.
mother’s next turn (line 14), which follows the child’s affirmation, is mostly a repetition of her previous one. It features some changes, though. First, she adds a confirmation token (right) and a temporal adverbial (first). The confirmation token indicates that the status of the new knowledge has now changed into established knowledge. The temporal adverbial serves as a lexical marker to establish global coherence by indicating that more will follow. Second, the prosodic packaging is different: the utterance now features a final falling instead of a final rising intonation. Through these attributes, the turn is now presented as a confirmation of the previously established knowledge (i.e. that a die is part of the game material). In sum, the mother produces first an understanding check (line 13) and then a formulation (line 15) to construct the knowledge provided so far as what is now publicly shared knowledge.

The second instance (lines 22–25) is a variation of the first: after the mother’s formulation that once again performs a clarification request (line 23), the child once more acknowledges her formulation – this time by nodding (line 24). The mother’s subsequent acknowledgement takes the form of a simple ‘yes’ (Jefferson, 2007). However, because the ‘yes’ signals epistemic uncertainty through its prosodic packaging (final rising intonation), the child nods again. This is then followed by an additional question about another source of trouble in the child’s previous utterance, namely what had to be pushed out (line 24).

 Whereas Heritage and Watson (1979) have described formulations in conversations among adults as first parts of a two-part pair, in the data at hand, they may additionally occur in other positions, or prompt three-part sequences rather than second-pair parts. This is the case in the first instance of formulation in Extract 1b above: the mother first produces a formulation that is then acknowledged by the child in the next turn. As a third part, the mother produces another formulation, this time not as a repeat question, but as a confirmation of the just negotiated piece of information – as signalled by the above-mentioned additional verbal and prosodic resources. This formulation is not followed by another acknowledgement token; instead, the mother continues with a question about a new issue – that is, what happened after the die had been thrown (line 26).

Thus, in the data at hand, formulations occur regularly as first parts and are used to achieve understanding as in conversations between adults (Heritage & Watson 1980). However, in contrast to descriptions
of conversations between adults, they do not occur only in pairs, but also as first parts of extended sequences as in Extract 3 below. In these cases, the formulations project a second part – preferably a confirmation, such as in the extract above – that is then followed by either another formulation – this time, prosodically packaged as a claim of understanding – or, alternatively, an acknowledgment token.

The first instance in the example above (lines 12–14) features another interesting phenomenon: a formulation with final falling intonation as a sequence closing third (Schegloff, 2008). Such formulations regularly occur in third positions in the present data. In these cases, they do not project a second part, but instead acknowledge the new information so that it acquires a new status as knowledge that is publicly shared between the two participants. The following three examples illustrate such cases. The numbers on the transcript indicate the three parts of the sequences.

**Extract 2**
(EcoGest_GAT_11_GES)

01 MO  wo guckt            WAS macht das,
where does it look  what does it do
02 CH   das drückt die FENstern raus;
it pushes out the windows
03 MO   das drückt die FENster raus;
it pushes out the windows
          (2)
          MO und spielt man das spiel alLEine,
and do you play the game by yourself

**Extract 3**
(EcoGest_GAT_14_GES)

01 FA   gabs da auch so etwas wie WÜRFel oder so,
did you have something like a die?
02 CH   ja das gabs nur ein würfel und ein PLAYmobilkind;
yes there was only a die and a playmobil kid
03 FA   ein würfel und ein PLAYmobilkind;
a die and a playmobil kid
          wenn man gewürfelt hat,=
          when you have thrown the die
          =was ist dann passiert?
          what happened then
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Extract 4
(EcoGest_GAT_12_GES)

MO  was habt ihr denn bei dem spiel geMACHT, what did you do when playing,
CH  <<flüstern>> durchkommen;
    <<whispery>> going through
01  MO  <<flüstern>> was,>
    <<whispery>> what
02  CH  durch die FORM geflogen; flew through the form
03  MO  durch die ↑FORM geflogen; flew through the form
     WER ist geflogen who flew

Each example illustrates a case in which the sequence starts with the caregiver asking a question. The child’s answers to the questions are then repeated as formulations but with final falling intonation. This particular prosodic packaging transforms them into claims of understanding that do not project another confirmation by the co-participant but instead represent a confirmation on their part.

In conclusion, two types of formulations can be found during the interactions in which children explain the game to their caregivers. The extracts in section 6 show that formulations appear in first and third positions of sequences of talk. When they occur in first positions (Extract 1b), they feature the following characteristics: (1) they occur as first parts of three-part sequences; (2) they repeat at least part of the child’s previous turn, thus stating ‘the “gist” so far’ preliminarily; (3) they have the syntactic form of a declarative clause but feature final rising intonation; (4) they are regularly followed by verbal or gestural acknowledgement tokens (hm, nods); that are then (5) followed by the co-participants’ confirmation that may take various forms (simple acknowledgment token or another formulation). Through their formal characteristics described in (2) and (3), the formulations present candidate understandings of the ‘gist so far’ that the child confirms in the next sequential position. What had been asked then counts as reliable knowledge about the game. Formulations thus present an important device to achieve understanding about a detail of the conversation so far. How formulations are used for stepwise understanding of the transferred knowledge thus becomes observable.
In addition, and in contrast to descriptions of conversations between adults, formulations also occur in third positions. In these cases, they feature the following characteristics: (1) they function as ‘sequence-closing thirds’; (2) they repeat at least part of the children’s previous turn, thus expressing the ‘gist’ so far; (3) they once more have the syntactic form of a declarative clause but, contrary to the first type of formulation, feature falling intonation; and (4) they are followed regularly by a next question presenting a new first-pair part. Thus, third-positioned formulations do not make confirmation or disconfirmation relevant as a next action, but are used to conduct confirmation themselves. While doing this, they create a structural position for a new next action such as another question.

In sum, and similar to conversations between adults, these formulations serve as major resources for mutual understanding and sequence organization. However, a second, new type was found that occurs in third positions and displays understanding of and closing down on a game’s feature as a mentionable; additionally, it prepares a structural slot for talk about the next feature. This new type might reflect the special affordances of game explanations and thus might be produced as a solution to them: knowledge about the game material, its goal, and so forth has to be transformed into established public knowledge before the explanation can progress.

Concluding remarks

The intention of this article was to build on previous research on the acquisition of pre-school children’s explaining competencies in order to gain a better understanding of how adults support their management of ‘big packages’. The focus was first on how adults supportively bring about local and global coherence, and second, on how adults achieve the process of knowledge transfer by maintaining understanding. It was observed that questions are used regularly as resources for sequence organization and for the mutual accomplishment of coherence and understanding as a practical achievement (Macbeth, 2011). Questions fulfil several functions in this context: they ensure the progressivity of the talk due to their position as first-pair parts of adjacency pairs, and they are used to perform either comprehension checks in order to maintain understanding or to open a new thematic focus and provide a tool for topic progression. This applies especially to and-prefaced questions (Filipi, 2019; Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994). All these features establish local coherence throughout the ongoing
explanation. Furthermore, in adult–child interaction, questions in the conversational environment of big packages seem to serve another important function: because information is requested step by step, the basic global structure of the game explanations is unfolded as a co-constructed, joint achievement. Thus, in the data at hand, questions in series make features of the global structure of explanations publicly observable and thus potentially comprehensible for the children.

Unlike the results demonstrated in previous research on repetitions in adult–child interactions (Clarke et al., 2017; Tarplee, 2006), repetitions were not used to correct linguistic features of utterance. Whereas they appeared as important resources for establishing coherence in the data (Goodwin, 2004; Halliday & Hasan, 1976), it could be shown additionally that they were employed to do more than just create coherence: adults used them as formulations for both checking understanding through clarification requests and for claiming understanding as a publicly accountable action. Importantly, two types of formulations could be distinguished that differ with regard to their sequential positioning and the action carried out with them. Both serve as a useful device to maintain control over the progress of the ongoing explanation and the delivered information. However, their main function seems to be to maintain understanding while displaying very clearly how the adult’s knowledge about the game changes during the course of the interaction. In this regard, the formulations play a vital role in the interactive organization of step-by-step knowledge transition (Keppler & Luckmann, 1991) by placing relevant information in the common ground (Clark & Bernicott, 2008).

To conclude, questions in series and formulations serve as important support devices through taking a greater share of interactional work, providing the children with local and global structural patterns of explanations, and displaying publicly achieved knowledge transfer. However, with regard to the observed ‘unnaturalness’ of the data, it is once more necessary to ask whether the caregivers’ practices are an artefact of the specific public situation in which the recordings were made. Because parents were notified by university staff about the goals of the project and the researchers’ interests in the children’s performance in the different communicative genres, the caregivers’ observable orientation towards helping their child to accomplish the game explanation and maintaining understanding may reflect their understanding of the interaction’s public and scientific realm. And although none of the practices under investigation led to any
observable conversational trouble, thereby indicating the participants’ mutual familiarity with them, further research needs to investigate in which ways these support practices are also used in everyday adult–child interaction.

About the author

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Note

1 See the DFG-funded research project EcoGest (https://scs.techfak.uni-bielefeld.de/ecogest).

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