Introduction

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Conversation analysts are interested in child-focused interactions due to their special capacity to reveal significant aspects of children’s social and educational lives, including socialization as manifested in interaction (e.g. Burdelski, 2010, 2013; Duranti, Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011), the development of interactional competence (e.g. Filipi, 2009; Wootton, 1994; Kidwell, 2012), and the social norms governing various child-centric domains (e.g. Church & Bateman, 2022; Henderson, 2021; Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015a, 2016; Sacks, 1992; Takagi, 2019). The five articles in this special issue address one or more of these topics – not by directly examining children, but rather by focusing on their adult caregivers and educators as they interact – collectively bringing to light important discoveries about children’s lives. All contributions to this special issue analyse naturally occurring,
videorecorded episodes of co-present interaction, using the methods of conversation analysis (CA) to investigate interactional practices that adults use as they talk to or talk about a child in a variety of settings.

When adults talk to or about a child, their orientations to fulfilling their social roles vis-à-vis children often become relevant and observable in their interactional conduct—roles normatively expected of them as parents (e.g. Baker & Keogh, 1995; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Pillet-Shore, 2012, 2015a; Raymond & Heritage, 2006), educators and teachers (Church & Bateman, 2022; Hayano, 2021; Pillet-Shore, 2016), medical practitioners (Heritage & Lindström, 1998; Maynard, 1991; Stivers, 2001, 2007), as well as professionals in other fields that involve regular interactions with children (Hutchby & O’Reilly, 2010). The practices adults use reveal how they position themselves in relation to children, constructing and maintaining their identities (as parents, teachers, medical professionals, etc.) and illuminating how children’s social worlds are in part constructed by adults.

This can be said about any mundane child-focused interaction, whether it is among family members or between parents and non-parents. Interactional participants’ child-centred identities tend to be particularly salient during institutional interactions (e.g. encounters between representatives of the family, school, and/or religious authorities), where participants place themselves in asymmetric epistemic statuses (Drew & Heritage, 1992, pp. 50–51) and deontic statuses (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012).

This special issue presents articles that elucidate adults’ interactional behaviour in various educational situations that are organized by reference to at least one (and in some cases, more than one) social institution. Three contributions (by Pillet-Shore, Hayano and Montiegel) examine encounters that take place in schools, with two of these (Pillet-Shore and Hayano) focusing upon interactions between teachers and parents, and one (Montiegel) investigating teachers’ embodied questions to students. In addition, two contributions (by Colla and Endo) analyse interactions that occur in residential settings, with one (Colla) analysing how parents talk to their children about homework, and the other (Endo) focusing on how a cleric instructs both adult and child members of a family in a religious ritual. While the settings and analytic phenomena are diverse across these five studies, four themes emerge: (1) the management of trouble; (2) the management of a participation framework involving children; (3) the management of epistemics, or unevenly distributed knowledge among participants; and (4) embodied practices and actions addressed to a child.
In what follows, we briefly consider each of these themes as discussed in the literature as a way of introducing the contributions to this special issue.

Managing troubles in interaction with/about children

Studies have established that talking about difficult, troubling or problematic issues calls for intricate interactional work (e.g. Jefferson, 1988, 2015; Lerner, 2013; Pillet-Shore, 2015b). For example, interactants often work to delay or avoid both correcting their interlocutors (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) and criticizing their recipients (Pillet-Shore, 2016, 2021; Pomerantz, 1984, p. 78). When participants complain and/or report troubles, they exercise great care in determining who to tell (Drew, 1998; Pillet-Shore, 2015b), often using practices that display their orientations to ‘troubles-resistance’ (Jefferson, 1984). When they deliver bad news or undesirable reports to a recipient, they display sensitivity to the likely repercussions that the news is likely to cause that recipient (Kawashima, 2017; Maynard, 1991, 1997; Pillet-Shore, 2003, 2016; Stivers & Timmermans, 2017). Recipients of troubles-telling have several ways of responding, including by working to display ‘troubles-receptiveness’ (Jefferson, 1984) and affiliation (e.g. through second stories about similar events/experiences, moves to normalize the problem, and/or expressions of sympathy, commiseration, and apology; Pillet-Shore, 2015b, 2016; Svinhufvud, Voutilainen & Weiste, 2017).

The contributions to this special issue explore this theme as it relates to studies of child-focused interaction. Pillet-Shore examines a range of interactional methods that schoolteachers use to manage the focal student’s trouble by depersonalizing it, delineating as among these the practice she calls ‘routinizing’. And Hayano considers how nursery schoolteachers project whether their incipient report is of a worrisome nature and manage the parent’s response to it through the use or non-use of child-addressed talk.

While the first two articles focus on talk about past and/or potential troubles, the other three articles address a potential or actual problem with an interlocutor’s behaviour. Colla documents ways in which parents refer to school morality when issuing critical directives to their children regarding how they should do homework. Montiegel analyses how teachers in a deaf or hard-of-hearing preschool classroom design their questions with accompanying embodiment that conveys their negative stance towards some problematic student behaviour portrayed in their questions. And finally,
Endo illustrates how parents and a priest instruct a child differently when the child is struggling to follow religious rituals. Presented together, the five articles illuminate many facets of the moral orientations that arise as a child’s trouble is addressed and/or handled by adults.

Managing a participation framework in interaction with/about children

It has been reported that in child-centred interactions, the participation framework (Goffman, 1974, 1981) tends to be built or adjusted to accommodate the child participant, whether to include them (Bateman, 2022; Stivers, 2001), get them engaged (Cekaite, 2015) or marginalize them (Hutchby & O’Reilly, 2010). How adult participants manage the participation framework in interaction with children emerges as a critical theme in two of the articles in this special issue. It is the central question raised by Hayano, who investigates how nursery schoolteachers’ addressing practices attribute different participation roles to the child during the interaction that is primarily between the teachers and parents. In addition, Endo illustrates how parents and the priest position themselves in different participation roles in accordance with the progression of a religious ritual, and how the focal child performs at the moment. These articles together showcase a range of interactional resources available for adults to manage the tripartite dynamics involving the parent, child, and an expert, among whom knowledge, entitlement, and agentivity are intricately distributed.

Managing epistemics in interaction with/about children

An interaction among a child, their parent, and an expert (e.g. a teacher, physician, clergyperson, etc.) almost inevitably involves elaborate epistemic work given that it consists of at least two types of relationships that serve as the bases for knowledge claims: the parent–child relationship (‘R’ in the terminology of Sacks, 1972), whereby a parent has epistemic rights to and responsibilities for the particular child (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Kamio, 1994; Raymond & Heritage, 2006), and expert–lay relationship (‘K’ in the terminology of Sacks, 1972), whereby the expert has epistemic rights to and responsibilities for the relevant field pertaining to the child.
(Dalledonne Vandini & Cino, 2020; Hayano, 2021; Pillet-Shore, 2015a, 2016). That these relationships position the participants in different epistemic statuses can constrain their interaction, but it can also serve as a resource to manage interactional tasks and contingencies. Practices reported in three of the articles in this special issue are good examples. Teachers’ technique of routinizing a pupil’s issue is a method of indexing their expertise and authority to give credibility to their advice and claims (Pillet-Shore, this issue). Parents may also utilize the authority of the school when they make reference to school morality in interacting with their children (Colla, this issue). When a parent and an expert are co-present with a child in need of instructions and help to perform in a situationally appropriate manner (e.g. to follow a religious ritual), they may both act as the knowledgeable and experienced parties towards the child but in a way consistent with their relative levels of expertise (Endo, this issue). The three authors demonstrate that the adult participants not only display sensitivity to the different epistemic rights and responsibilities concerning the child, but also utilize them so as to accomplish an interactional task at hand.

Embodiment in interaction with children

There is no doubt that embodiment is an indispensable semiotic resource for face-to-face interaction among participants of all ages (Goodwin, 2017), but its indispensability may be more evident when an interaction involves small children (Kern, 2022). Indeed, there is an abundance of studies that report the roles that embodiment plays in interaction with or among children, including guiding children’s bodies into a shared participation framework (Cekaite, 2015; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2013), and socializing children into culturally appropriate bodily behaviour (Goodwin & Cekaite, 2013), among others.

Some of the articles in this special issue build on these lines of CA research by examining interactions in settings that call for extensive reliance on embodiment. Through her analysis of interactions among nursery schoolteachers, parents, and their children, Hayano shows that such embodied features as gaze direction and prosody play important roles in making public to whom the teacher’s talk is addressed. Colla presents a detailed analysis of how a child’s embodiment constitutes a response to a directive or a parent’s embodied display of evaluative stance to their child’s work. Montiegel’s contribution, which investigates interactions in a
Contributions to this special issue

This special issue consists of five articles, all of which present conversation analytic studies of naturally occurring interactions focusing on children. Although the preceding sections have already mentioned the lines of discussions pursued in the articles, let us briefly introduce the interactional settings and analytical foci of each as a way of concluding this introduction.

The first two articles, by Pillet-Shore and Hayano, primarily investigate how teachers and parents talk about a child. Examining parent–teacher conferences recorded in the United States, Pillet-Shore provides a data-based overview of a larger class of ‘depersonalizing’ methods that speakers use when discussing a (student’s) trouble. She then identifies the practice of ‘routinizing’, elucidating how teachers cite first-hand experience with other similar cases to enact their expertise. Pillet-Shore’s analysis demonstrates that this practice allows teachers to attenuate and credential their advice-giving to parents and pre-empt parent/caregiver resistance to their student-assessments/evaluations.

The contribution by Hayano also looks at parent–teacher interactions, this time occurring between nursery schoolteachers and parents of younger children in Japan. Hayano examines the teacher’s everyday report chiefly addressed to the parent in the situation where the focal child is present as a potential addressee or teller. It is demonstrated that the teacher’s use or non-use of child-addressed talk constitutes an interactional resource to project the nature of the incipient report.

The other three articles are primarily concerned with adults’ practices to talk to children. Colla presents an analysis of parent–child interactions at home in Italy. Specifically, she studies homework sessions where the parent gives directives concerning the child’s homework. She demonstrates that
parents refer to ‘school morality’ so as to evoke the family–school partnership and thereby increase their entitlement. Montiegel’s contribution centres on interactions within a deaf or hard-of-hearing oral preschool classroom in the United States. Her focus is on teachers’ embodiment when formulating questions as no-preferring. The findings suggest that embodiment serves as an indispensable resource for resolving potential action ambiguity, which may be a task of special import in the given context. And finally, Endo examines a setting that is of an interesting and different nature: a religious ritual led by a priest but held at a family’s home in Japan. She elucidates how the adult participants – the parents and the priest – differently but collaboratively support a child participant performing in the religious ritual.

The five articles in this issue showcase interactions involving the two most fundamental socializing institutions in a child’s life: school/education and home/family. The aim of this collection is to generate a multi-directional view of how adults involved in a child’s life construct and reconstruct their identities vis-à-vis the child and how their interactional conduct in turn contributes to the construction of a child’s social and educational experiences.

About the guest editors

Kaoru Hayano (PhD, Radboud University Nijmegen with affiliation to Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics) is associate professor at the Department of English, Japan Women’s University (Japan). She specializes in conversation analysis with a primary focus on interactions in Japanese. Her research interests include interactants’ orientations to epistemics, grammar in interaction, and embodiment as a resource for addressing. In her recent publications, she reports on the organization of interactions between nursery schoolteachers and parents and alternative formats of responses to polar questions.

Danielle Pillet-Shore (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire (USA). Specializing in conversation analysis, her research examines videorecorded naturally occurring interactions, focusing on how people create and maintain their relationships. She is currently investigating how both previously acquainted and unacquainted parties open and close their face-to-face interactions across a wide variety of settings, as well as how primary schoolteachers and their students’ parents interact during parent–teacher conferences. She is on the editorial board of Research on Language and Social Interaction, and previously guest edited a 2018 special issue of ROLSI organized around the theme ‘Opening and Maintaining Face-to-Face Interaction’.
References


