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## **“Un Niño Puede Agarrar un Perro”: Children’s Use and Uptake of Directives in the Context of Play and Performance**

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*This paper examines the ways in which Mexican American children use directives in the context of play. There is a range of directives that young children employ as they do pretend play, teach their younger siblings new play skills, and spontaneously invent play. Much of the research discussing the use of directives among young children has not explored the range of directives they may use in mixed-age play but rather has argued that children learn to employ more complex forms as they become older. I argue that age is not the only factor leading children to use directives in complex forms. In mixed-age play, older children may simplify their directives and younger children may utter directives in complex ways to fit the play. Data are drawn from 50 hours of video-recorded naturally occurring verbal and nonverbal actions among caregivers and young children in three Mexican American families living in South Central Los Angeles.*

This paper examines Mexican American children’s use of directives in the course of play. The main aim of the paper is to contribute to the literature on the use of directives in naturalistic interactions among young children. Specifically, this study suggests that there is much variation in the use and uptake of directives when they are embedded in the social activity of play. The study also focuses on the use of embodied actions in conjunction with directives. These non-vocal actions are not viewed as separate from verbal behavior but rather are seen as complementary to it.

Little scholarship has focused on children’s use of directives in social interaction. Ervin-Tripp (1976) argues that this is because the mostly western Piagetian perspective views children as egocentric, deemphasizing their use of language for communication. Moreover, much of the research examining children’s use of directives has relied on anecdotal evidence, has focused on developmental aspects, and has not attended to the ways in which directives may form an integral part of a larger activity such as play. For example, Ervin-Tripp (1974, 1977) describes the development of request forms used by English, Italian, and Turkish speaking children during the first five years. Her findings are that the earliest requests involve gestures, “general desire sounds,” “names of the desired objects,” and a few words such as “more” and “want.” She found that statements of need are next to develop, along with statements of condition (e.g. “I’m hungry”) and direct requests, which specify both act and object (e.g. “Push dolly”). Ervin-Tripp argues that as children’s vocabulary increases, their use of directives becomes more sophisticated. For example, by age four, children can devise request strategies that involve taking

several steps to the desired goal, and by five or six they can use hints that do not specify the desired goal at all. These conclusions are supported by the work of a number of other researchers (e.g. Barrett, 1980; Bates, 1976; Dore, 1974; Garvey, 1975; Read & Cherry, 1978). These studies focused on the developmental aspect of the use of directives among children, but the ways in which children employ directives in naturalistic interactions in mixed-age play groups remain to be assessed. There have been some studies (e.g. Anderson, 1978) which examine how children employed directives in role play but which concentrated exclusively on the development of syntactic features. A study by Corsaro (1979) showed that children playing the role of “baby” differentiated the higher status roles of mother and big sister by using more requests for permission with the mother. Cazden, Cox, Dickenson, Stienberg, & Stone (1979) found that when children tutored their peers, they employed unmitigated imperatives which contrasted with an immediately subsequent question directive addressed to the teacher on the same subject.

The use of directives among children has also been examined in studies whose aim was to explain children’s local understandings of their everyday world. Wootton (1997) argues that

through recognizing their existence, the child’s sensitivity to the ‘context’ in which she acts undergoes an enormous developmental step. Prior to being able to take understandings into account the child has various sequential skills, and she also has the capacity to recognize, and become creatively involved in, relatively routinized sequences of events such as certain games (p. 9).

Wootton further explains that the ways in which a child at ages 2;1 and 2;5 employs imperatives, arguing that they are based on the sequential relationships that exist between the utterances and understandings which may take place prior to a given interaction. He argues that a child’s choice of a particular type of imperative depends largely upon the local interactional context and that these understandings can form a new context.

While these studies shed considerable light on the developmental side of children’s use of directives, they do not explore the ways in which directives may be used in varied ways in naturally occurring contexts among mixed-age siblings and in interactions with peers more generally. As Goodwin (1990) points out, developmental studies in the child language literature rarely consider peer interaction as a major source of norms. It is important to examine the use of directives in such settings as their use may differ from when children address directives primarily to their parents. By exploring the use of directives among children of mixed ages in naturally occurring situations, it is possible to look at the ways in which even very young children may use or respond to directives in sophisticated ways when interacting with their older siblings. For example, young children may enforce their commands by giving directives in a loud voice, through repetition, or through nonverbal actions. They may use nonvocal actions, code-switch between languages, or respond to directives with accounts. It is important to explore the ways in which

directives vary since it allows us to take into account other aspects of the complexity of language (e.g. embodied actions, amplified voices, code-switching) besides syntactic features. Hence, this study attends to the ways in which directives are employed among mixed-age siblings and demonstrates how within a single segment there is variation and complexity in the types of directives used.

Additionally, attention will be paid to the use of non-vocal actions embedded in directive sequences. As Charles Goodwin (2000) points out, talk and gesture mutually elaborate each other within larger sequences of action. For example, gestures may serve to amplify, enhance, or further explicate directives. Because gesture and talk complement each other, it becomes necessary to look closely at embodied actions. This study is able to investigate nonverbal actions by using videotaped data to examine the ways in which young children in Mexican American families use directives within naturally-occurring play, thus extending our understanding of complexities in the use of directives.

First, a typology of the syntactic variation among directives that the children employed in the course of play will be presented. For instance, the Mexican American children who participated in the study employed explicit, less explicit, and implicit directives. The young children were observed to vary the sentence types of their directives, employing imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives. Next, the ways directives are employed in the course of different play contexts will be examined. Children use mitigated or aggravated directives, switch between English and Spanish directives, and use nonverbal actions as they enact social hierarchy, demonstrate play skills to their younger siblings, and explain spontaneously invented play.

I additionally examine how directives operate interactively. Much of the earlier literature has not examined the ways in which children attend to directives but instead has focused on the types of directives issued by children. Children respond to directives issued to them during play in a variety of ways. They can formulate hypothetical narratives, use reported speech, and repeat and reformulate prior speech directed to them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data are drawn from an 18-month study, in which I video-recorded 50 hours of naturally occurring verbal and nonverbal actions between caregivers and young children in three Mexican families living in South Central Los Angeles. Since the aim of the larger study was to explore the use of complex language by children in working class families, I selected these three families who were first generation immigrants financially struggling in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles and thus representative of many recent Mexican immigrant families living in South Los Angeles. I had come into contact with the families while I was teaching in a bilingual program in an elementary school and remained in touch with them over several years. I transcribed data from various times of day (e.g. dinner time,

afternoons, evenings) because I wished to capture the use of directives within a wide range of activities. I coded utterances as directives by relying on the following definition: A directive is a verbal action which is treated by others as an attempt to get them to do so something (whether they do what is demanded/requested or take evasive action).

I initially transcribed the data in Spanish and then translated the utterances into English. Since Spanish is not my first language, I obtained assistance from native speakers of Spanish. In this regard, because my participants were of Mexican origin living in Los Angeles, I relied mainly on second-generation bilingual speakers of Spanish living in Los Angeles. Additionally, I asked family members to explain certain utterances that were unclear; there were several instances in which the interactions needed further clarification. In my analysis and transcription of the data, I focused on the use of directives among four children, aged two, three, and four; I was especially concerned with the use of directives among very young children because much of the literature on the use of directives among young children has been collected either using anecdotal evidence or experimental methods.

I coded the data into three broad categories using Mulder's (1998) classification, which categorizes directives in terms of the predicative, sentence, modified, and personal deictic dimensions. The predicative dimension focuses on the types of directives employed such as overt, less explicit, and implicit forms of directives. In terms of sentence types, directives include imperatives, interrogatives, and declaratives. According to Mulder, directives can be either modified or non-modified. For example, speakers can mitigate their directives by employing modals, or can choose to be forceful by omitting modals or other mitigating elements. The personal deictic dimension involves the ways in which an imperative may refer to the hearer. When speakers wish to be explicit, they will generally use the verb in the second person singular form, thus making explicit reference to the hearer, whereas when speakers wish to be less explicit they may use the verb in another form such as the first person plural, thus not focusing explicitly on the identity of the hearer. Classifying the directives in this manner allowed me to take into account the variety and complexity of directives that the participants used in their verbal and embodied actions.

In addition to classifying directives according to Mulder's (1998) typology, I examined the ways in which directives were actually employed in various play activities. I looked at non-syntactic features of directives (e.g. code switching, repetition, use of emphatic stress) and at embodied actions that the children employed within the three play contexts of pretend play, the demonstration of play skills, and the spontaneous invention of play. I focused on these specific play contexts because I noted that there was little evidence of structured play among the young children in these families; instead they tended to constantly invent play and to treat household objects as toys during play. Additionally, older siblings would attempt to include younger siblings in their play; mixed-age play was a common occurrence in the families in this study.

There is much discussion about what is universal and what is culturally specific in child development. Examining the use of directives set in the context of play among young Mexican American children can contribute to the larger discussion of directives in interaction among young children. However, the analysis presented here does not necessarily make any claims about the use of directives among the families as being specific to Mexican American culture. It is worth noting that many of the studies concerned with directives in interaction among young children have been undertaken in white middle class families. This paper, by examining the use of directives in Mexican American families, contributes to cross-linguistic research and shows the complexity of the use of directives in populations other than white middle class families.

### TYPES OF DIRECTIVES

This section discusses the types of directives that the children employed during the course of their play. Much of the time the children utilized overt forms of directives, using the imperative form (see Table 1). However, in certain instances they used other forms of directives.

**Table 1: Distribution of Directives in Terms of the Predicative Dimension**

Type of Directive	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases
Explicit Directives e.g., <i>Matalo Papi. Matalo.</i> (Kill him Papi. Kill him)	160	77%
Less Explicit Directives e.g., <i>Un niño puede agarrar un perro</i> (A child can catch a dog)	24	12%
Implicit Directives e.g., <i>Quiere que te lo prenda?</i> (Do you want me to light it for you?)	22	11%
Total	206	100

In Table 2, the children's directives are classified with respect to their sentence type, and the segments that follow illustrate the variety of sentence types used in children's directives. The majority of the time, children used imperative forms, but in other instances, they also employed declaratives and questions as directives.

**Table 2: Distribution of Directives with Respect to Sentence Type**

Types of Directives	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases
<u>Imperatives</u> E.g. <i>Dáme uno.</i> (Give me one.)	177	86%
<u>Interrogatives</u> E.g. <i>Quiere que te lo prendes?</i> (Do you want me to light it for you?)	8	4%
<u>Declaratives</u> E.g. <i>Aquí cabe tú Jorge.</i> (You Jorge can fit here.)	21	10%
Total	206	100%

The following segment shows the ways in which a five-year-old child employs directives in declarative forms in a play context. In Example 1, Gloria (age 5), Betty (age 7), Jorge (age 3) and Carlos (age 4) are playing with an old mattress. There is a tear in the mattress that opens up a space inside it. Gloria has created a game in which she indicates that she wants her siblings to climb into the mattress with her.

(1)

- 1            Gloria:            **Aquí cabe uno.**  
   One more can fit here
- 2                            →            **Aquí cabe tú Jorge.**  
   You Jorge can fit here.
- 3            Jorge:                    ((*Jorge gets inside the mattress hole*))

Gloria employs the directive in the declarative form rather than the imperative form. Jorge treats Gloria's utterance as a directive in that he gets inside the mattress hole.

Example 2 illustrates ways in which a child uses directives in the interrogative form.

(2)

- 1            Miguel:                **Dáme uno.**  
   Give me one.

- 2 → **Ira. Quiere que te lo prendes?**  
Ok. Do you want me to light it for you?  
((Gets up and sits next to Miguel))
- 3 → **Quiere que te lo prende?**  
Do you want me to light it down?
- 4 ((Reaches out for Rolando's firecracker but Rolando continues to try to light the firecracker))
- 5 → **Quiere que te lo prende?**  
Do you want me to light it for you?
- 6 Rolando: ((Drops the firecracker; Miguel tries to pick it up))
- 7 ((Tries to prevent Miguel from picking it up))
- 8 **Estúpido**  
Stupid
- 9 Miguel: ((Picks up the firecracker))

After trying an imperative declarative, Miguel employs directives interrogatively in lines 2, 3, and 5. Because Rolando fails to respond to Miguel's directives, Miguel reaches out for Rolando's firecrackers, which indicates that Miguel's repeated questions are essentially formulated to serve as directives.

The type of directives that children employed in the three families also varies with respect to the ways in which they are modified, as shown in Table 3. The children do not modify their directives frequently, but there are some instances in which the children do modify their directives, showing their knowledge of variation in language use.

**Table 3: Distribution of Modified versus Non-Modified Directives**

Types of Directives	Number of Cases	Percentage of Cases
Modified Directives E.g. <i>Pueden llevar a la casa niña.</i> (They can take it to the small house.)	15	7%
Non Modified Directives E.g. <i>Pegame.</i> (Touch me.)	191	93%
Total	206	100





(5)

- |   |         |   |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Gloria: | <b>Yo soy la reina.</b><br>I'm the queen.                               |
| 2 |         | <b>La reina.</b><br>The queen.  |
| 3 |         | <b>POR FAVOR.</b><br>Please.<br><i>((Spreads her arms out))</i>         |
| 4 | →       | <b>Un niño puede agarrar un perro.</b><br>A child can catch a dog.      |
| 5 | →       | <b>Pueden llevar a la casa niña.</b><br>Can take it to the small house. |
| 6 |         | <i>((Extends her arm and points to the dog))</i>                        |
| 7 |         | <i>((Carlos and Jorge each walk up to a dog))</i>                       |
| 8 | Carlos: | <b>Okay. Perrito</b><br>Okay. Doggy.                                    |

Gloria prefaces the modification of her directives in lines 4 and 5 by saying *por favor* ('please') in line 3. By utilizing the modal *poder* ('can'), Gloria is constructing her directives as suggestions. In contrast, Gloria's nonverbal actions, as she spreads her arms out and amplifies her voice in line 3, are more forceful and serve to support the requestive nature of her suggestions.

Another way in which Mulder (1998) classifies directives is with respect to the ways in which an imperative may refer to the hearer. When the speaker wishes to be explicit, he or she will generally use the verb in the second person singular form, which makes explicit reference to the hearer (e.g. *Comes!* 'Eat!'; *Pones todo en orden* 'Put (these) in order'), whereas when the speaker wishes to be less explicit he may defocalize the identity of the hearer and use the verb in first person plural form (e.g. *Vamos a comer* 'Let's eat.'; *Asi ponemos todo en orden* 'This is how we put things in order'). This use of the first person plural form also creates an inclusive framework for the speakers. Most of the time, when the children use directives, they implicitly refer to the hearer, as illustrated in Table 4:



- 2                                   **Ok. Mira CARLOS.**  
Ok. Look Carlos.
- 3                                   **CARLOS! CARLOS!**
- 4                           →       **Cuando van. A hacer así.**  
When you go. One does it like that.
- 5                           →       **Así se hace.                   Así.**  
One does it like that. Like that.
- 6                                   (*Betty climbs on and slides off the dog house*)

When Betty explains the rules of the game to her younger brother, she does not explicitly tell him what to do. In line 4 she avoids referring directly to Carlos by using the indeterminate *se* in her directive.

The children employed various forms of directives during the course of their play. Mostly, they employed overt directives, using imperative forms. However, in certain cases children varied their directives by using implicit forms of directives, by modifying the directives with modals, with the use of the first person plural to create an inclusive group in play, and with the use of the indeterminate *se* to defocalize the directive.

### DIRECTIVES IN THREE PLAY CONTEXTS

This section of the paper discusses the range of directives and of embodied actions that children employ within three play contexts: when doing pretend play, when demonstrating play skills to younger siblings, and when spontaneously inventing play among siblings. The directives used by the children may vary across contexts or may vary within each sequence, and may vary depending on the number of participants and addressees present during these activities. The following examples illustrate ways in which children use directives to define their pretend roles during play.

#### Pretend Play

Gloria (age 5), Betty (age 7), Jorge (age 3), and Carlos (age 4) are playing with a shopping cart which contains clean clothes that their parents have just returned with from the laundry. Gloria is sitting on top of the laundry in the cart and pretending to drive. Betty climbs on the cart and sits behind Gloria. Carlos tries to climb on but is unable to do so.

(8)

- 1           Gloria:                   **Súbanse señores.**  
Climb aboard sirs.  
(*sing song voice*)

- 2                                   **Qué estoy manejando!**  
Because I am driving
- 3                                   *((Betty and Carlos climb on the cart))*
- 4                                   *((Jorge tries to climbs on the cart))*

In line 1 Gloria issues a directive using the bald imperative form: *súbanse señores* ('Get on sirs'). She uses a sing-song voice and employs the address term *señores* ('sirs') to her siblings, as perhaps a bus driver would call out to passengers. The fact that Gloria calls out to her younger siblings using this address term, rather than calling them by their names, signals play. This directive functions to portray her dominant role in the play because only the driver has the right to command his or her passengers to board the bus. Gloria's sing-song voice and particular address term are significant because it is these features that also help modify the directives used. Much of the literature (e.g., Mulder, 1998; Ervin-Tripp, 1977) that has discussed the use of various types of directives has not explored the fact that directives can be shaped in ways other than through their syntactic features. It is only when attending to directives in naturally occurring contexts that we are able to note the different ways in which they can be employed.

Example (9) illustrates a similar use of the bald imperative form but differs from the previous excerpt in that three-year-old Vicente does not use a sing-song voice but rather varies his directives through amplified voice, repetitions, and embodied actions. In the excerpt, Enrique (age 10) and Edgar (age 12) are playing with their toy guns and lasers in their living room. Included in their play is their sibling Vicente (age 3).

(9)

- 1            Enrique:            *((Pretending to shoot Edgar with his gun))*
- 2            Vicente:            *((Points to Edgar who is lying on the floor))*  
**PÉGALO. MÁTALO.**  
Hit him. Kill him.
- 3            Enrique:            *((Points the gun at Edgar))*
- 4            Edgar:            *((Closes his eyes.)). (0.5)*  
**Ya me mori (0.1) Vicente.**  
I died already Vicente.
- 5            Vicente:            *((To Enrique))*  
**Mátalo. Mátalo.**  
Kill him. Kill him.  
*((Points to Edgar))*

During these boys' pretend play, in lines 2 and 5, Vicente (age 3) orders his 10-year-old brother, Enrique, to kill his 12-year-old brother, Edgar: *Pegalo, Matalo* ('Hit him, Kill him'). Vicente's initial directives index play as Edgar is already lying on the floor, pretending to be dead. His directives may also function to demonstrate his dominant role in this activity, since he is the one who is ordering his older sibling around. He also demonstrates this position by uttering the initial directives to his older sibling in a loud voice. Next, he indexes the target of this directive by pointing his arm towards Edgar, who is lying on the floor. Much of the literature (e.g., Cazden et al., 1979) that has examined the use of directives of young children has not explored the ways in which embodied actions may amplify or mitigate directives. However, this nonverbal action used in conjunction with the loud directive serves to reinforce Vicente's message. Third, Vicente repeats his directives several times. Enrique responds to Vicente's directives, continuing to pretend to shoot at Edgar; Edgar also enters into the play frame by closing his eyes and stating that he is dead, *Ya me morí Vicente*. ('I already died Vicente'). Vicente then repeats his directive: *Mátalo. Mátalo*. ('Kill him. Kill him'). Thus there is much repetition of directives which serves to reinforce and extend the play. As was noted in segment (8), it is not always syntactic variation that helps reinforce the directives but rather repetitions and nonverbal actions that help convey the message. Hence when discussing the complexity of directives it is important to take into account these other aspects.

These segments demonstrate the ways in which children use a range of directives and gestures as they enact imaginary worlds in play. In Example (8), Gloria uses bald imperatives with a sing-song voice and pretend address terms. In segment (9), three-year-old Vicente defines his superior stance over his older brothers by pretending to be an executioner with amplified directives and pointing. Gestures are a key element in the above sequences since the children use them to exaggerate their social positions. This illustrates the importance of examining directives within interaction since the above segments show that even within a single sequence a child may vary her/his use of directives whilst exhibiting her/his social positions during play. More important, the segments show that the directives are intensified and modified not simply through syntactic features. This shows that it is important to examine the use of directives in naturally occurring contexts. In addition, although on the surface it may appear that the young children are using bald imperatives much of the time, upon closer examination we can observe additional complexity in their use of directives.

### **Demonstrating Play Skills**

The above excerpts demonstrate the ways in which children use a range of directives as they index social hierarchy during play. The following segments will examine the use of various types of directives when older siblings demonstrate play skills to their young siblings or cousins. Often, as older siblings play, their much younger pre-school age siblings also wish to be included. In many cases, the older

siblings attempt to include their younger siblings in their play activities and often use imperatives to try to teach their younger siblings to play games, as illustrated in the following sequences.

In several instances, the older siblings play or enact games meant for older children. For example, in the Hernandez family, the older brothers, ages 10 and 12, often imitate television shows such as “Dragon Bollz,” an action oriented cartoon mainly viewed by 9-14-year-olds. However, when they act out these scenes, their younger three-year-old brother Vicente often joins in the play. The older brothers usually allow him to participate and demonstrate particular fighting techniques for him. The following segment illustrates ways in which Edgar uses directives as he attempts to show Vicente some wrestling techniques; the older brother employs the word *pooki* to refer to a particular wrestling technique.

(10)

- 1        Vicente:            *((Pushes Enrique against the fence))*
- 2        Edgar:                *((To Vicente))*  
**No. Eso es cochina.**  
 No that’s dirty.
- 3                            *((Shows Vicente the correct hitting technique with his fists))*  
**Así ira. Pooki.**  
 Like this. Pooki.
- 4                            **Así ira. Pooki dale.**  
 Like this. Pooki give it.  
*((Shows Vicente the correct hitting technique with his fists))*
- 5                            *((Points to Enrique))*  
**Córrale. Dale Pooki.**  
 Run. Give it Pooki
- 6                            **Dále. Pooki.**  
 Give it. Pooki.
- 7        Vicente:            *((Runs towards Enrique))*  
**Horita.**  
 Now.
- 8        Vicente:            *((Pretends to fall on the ground))*
- 9        Edgar:                *((To Enrique))*  
 I’m gonna get you.  
*((Edgar holds Enrique in front of him))*
- 10                            Then you move.

- 11 So that he can't do it to me.
- 12 **Dále Pooki. Dále Vicente.**  
Give it Pooki. Give it Vicente.
- 13 Vicente: ((Gets up from the floor))
- 14 **Dále Pooki.**  
Give it Pooki.
- 15 **Dále Pooki.**  
Give it Pooki.
- 16 **Dále Pooki.**  
Give it Pooki.
- 17 Vicente: ((Walks towards Enrique))
- 18 Enrique: ((Enrique moves away))
- 19 Edgar: **Dále Pooki Vicente.**  
Give it Pooki. Vicente.

In the above segment, directives are employed in a range of ways. When Vicente simply pushes Enrique against the fence, his older brother reprimands him *No. Es cochina*. ('No. That's dirty'). Edgar issues the directive *Dále Pooki* ('Give him Pooki') in line 3. From then on, Vicente is shown the correct hitting technique through repetition of the imperative 'Give it pooki' accompanied by repeated embodied actions (e.g. the clenching of fists and pointing). In this instance, gestures serve to further explicate the techniques being demonstrated; the gestures complement the directives. There is much active participation by the three-year-old in this segment.

While the directives issued to the three year old by Edgar are in Spanish, in bald form, with emphatic stress, and accompanied by many gestures, the directive issued to the older brother is in English, without any stress, without gestures, and followed by a justification statement: 'So he can't do it to me.' (lines 10 and 11). It is the switch from English to Spanish directives that conveys that Edgar has again begun to show new play skills to his younger brother. The code-switching further shows how directives can vary within one sequence depending upon the addressee and the larger context. Moreover, the gestures used with directives show that children can vary their directives not only in terms of verbal features but also in terms of non-vocal actions.

In the following segment, Christian, a nine-year-old, employs directives to demonstrate to his two-year-old cousin Alfredo how to play a Nintendo game (Nintendo games are generally meant to be played by eight-year-olds and up). Christian and Alfredo are sitting in front of the television set playing Nintendo. Christian



gives Alfredo one of the control panels and shows him how to use it.

(11)

1 Christian: *((To Alfredo who has one of the Nintendo control panels))*  
**No le puches**  
 Don't push it.

2 **Espérame.**  
 Wait for me.

3 Christian: **Cuál quieres?**  
 Which one do you want?

4 Alfredo: *((Points to the TV set))*

5 Christian: *((Gives him the Nintendo control))*

6 **Puchále aquí. Aquí.**  
 Push it here. Here.

7 *((Pushes the control buttons for Alfredo))*

8 *((Returns to his own control panel))*

9 Heh...heh

10 Alfredo: **oPucho**  
 I push.

11 Christian: **Púchale aquí. Mira aquí. Aquí**  
 Push it here. Look here. Here.

12 *((Pushes the control buttons for Alfredo))*

13 Okay?  
*((Returns to his own control panel))*

14 **Espérame horita.**  
 Wait for me now.

15 **Le puchas aquí.**  
 Push it here.  
*((Pushes the control button for him))*

16 **Aquí okay? Allí okay?**  
 Here okay? There okay?

- 17 ((Alfredo pushes the control button))  
**Aquí.**  
Here.
- 18 Alfredo: ((Points to the control button))  
**Aquí.**  
Here.
- 19 Christian: **Puchále.**  
Push it.
- 20 Alfredo: ((Alfredo pushes the control buttons))  
((They play for about a minute))
- 21 ((Alfredo stops to push the control button))
- 22 Christian: ((Christian smiles at Alfredo))  
**Le puchas aquí. Allí okay?**  
Push it here. There okay?
- 23 Alfredo: **Allí?**  
((Points to TV set))  
There?
- 24 Christian: **Le puchas aquí. Allí okay?**  
Push it here. There.  
((Pushes the control button for Alfredo))
- 25 Alfredo: **Cuál? Este?**  
Which? This?
- 26 Christian: **Púchale allí. Okay?**  
Push it there. Okay?
- 27 **Puchále.**  
Push it
- 28 ((Alfredo pushes the control buttons))
- 29 ((Christian and Alfredo play for about a minute))

Christian repeats his directive *Puchále aquí* ('Push it here') to his younger cousin Alfredo. Over several turns, Christian modifies his directives. In lines 15, 22, and 24 he pre-positions the direct object *le* ('it') for emphasis; in other instances, he post-positions the direct object. He also softens his directives in several instances by using interrogatives. For example, in lines 13, 16, 22, 24, and 26 Christian asks confirming questions to Alfredo in English: *Okay?*. Additionally, Christian uses

a softened voice as he gently explains to his young cousin how to manipulate the controls. While in the previous excerpts, the siblings used bald imperatives much of the time, amplifying their voices, using exaggerated gestures, and only occasionally mitigating their directives, in this segment, Christian deliberately mitigates his directives by using a low voice followed by confirming questions. These verbal actions are accompanied by nonverbal actions that further help soften the directives and maintain an encouraging teaching and learning context. For example, in line 21, Christian smiles at Alfredo. Additionally, he demonstrates to his younger cousin how to use the control keys as in lines 7, 12, 15, 17, 18, and 24. These embodied actions further help reinforce Christian's efforts to demonstrate to his young cousin how to use the controls. In the absence of these nonverbal actions, the sequence could have been easily interpreted as simply a series of repeated directives.

### **Inventing Spontaneous Play**

In addition to demonstrating new skills to their younger siblings, the children often invent play forms spontaneously. As they play, they often explain to each other the "rules" of these invented games and play forms. In this context as well, the children employ a variety of directives, as illustrated in Example 12. Betty (age 7) and Gloria (age 5) are playing "hand clap" with each other. Betty is explaining the rules to Gloria.

(12)

- |   |          |  |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Betty: → | <p><b>Pon tu mano así.</b><br/>Put your hands like this.<br/><i>((Betty spreads her hands outwards))</i></p> |
| 2 | Gloria:  | <p>Okay.<br/><i>((Gloria spreads out her hands and shuts her eyes as if meditating))</i></p>                 |
| 3 | Betty:   | <p><b>YA!</b><br/>Ready.<br/><i>((Betty slaps Gloria lightly on the face))</i></p>                           |
| 4 | Gloria:  | <p><b>YA!</b><br/>Ready.</p>   |
| 5 | Betty:   | <p>Okay.</p>   |
| 6 | →        | <p><b>Dame su mano.</b><br/>Give me your hands.</p>  |
| 7 | →        | <p><b>Pegame</b><br/>Touch me</p>  |

- 8 ((Gloria claps her hand on Betty's))
- 9 ((Betty claps her hand on Gloria's))
- 10 ((Gloria sits still with her hands spread outwards))
- 11 Betty: → **No. Tú me pegas en está.**  
No. You place (your hand) on this one.  
((Betty takes Gloria's hand and puts it on her own hand)).
- 12 Betty: → **Pegame.**  
Touch me.
- 13 ((Betty and Gloria continue to clap each other's hands over several turns)).
- 14 → **No. Ira. No.**  
No. Look. No.
- 15 Betty: → **Tú me tienes que pegar así.**  
You have to place (your hand) here
- 16 → **Así. Así.**  
Like that. Like that.
- 17 → **Despues vamos hacer así.**  
Then we are going to do that here.
- Así.**  
Like that.
- 18 **Despues así.**  
Then do that.  
((Betty continues to explain all the steps involved in the game to Gloria)).

Betty employs a range of directives in order to explain the play rules to Gloria. Throughout much of the exchange, as shown in lines 1, 6, 7, 12, 14, Betty employs directives in the imperative form. In line 15, Betty communicates her meaning more forcefully by modifying her directive with the modal *tener* ('have'): *Tú me tienes que pegar así* ('You have to hit me like this'). In line 16, Betty employs the directive in a less overt form, as she does not include the action verb in her command. Instead, she simply issues commands to Gloria employing the elliptical form: *Así, Así* ('Like that. Like that'). In line 17, Betty issues the directive in a mitigated manner, employing the first person plural *vamos* ('Let us'). Again, these directives are accompanied with gestures and embodied actions: For example, in line 2, when

Gloria simply holds her hands out and does not place them on Gloria's palms, Betty spreads out her hands and in line 11 takes Gloria's hand physically and puts it over her own hand. The nonvocal actions serve to complement and reinforce the vocal actions. Betty's use of a variety of directives accompanied by nonvocal gestures shows again how the use of directives is tied to the larger social activity of play.

The following segment presents another example in which children use directives to explain play rules to each other. The children, Betty (age 7), Liliana (age 8), and Gloria (age 5), have lined up boxes of blue crates which they are supposed to walk on; a toy monkey is tied to a pole. As the children walk on the crates, one child pushes the monkey towards the child who is walking. The child walking on the crates is supposed to avoid bumping into the monkey. Betty and Liliana explain the game, which they have invented, to their young siblings Gloria, Carlos (age 4), and Jorge (age 3).

(13)

- |    |          |   |
|----|----------|---|
| 1  | Betty:   | Get set go.   |
|    |          | <b>Ok. Mira JORGE.</b>  |
|    |          | Ok. Look Jorge.   |
|    |          | <b>JORGE!</b>   |
| 2  |          | <b>Cuando van. A hacer así.</b>                                   |
|    |          | When you go. Do like this.  |
| 3  |          | <b>Así.</b>   |
|    |          | Like this.  |
| 4  |          | <i>((Betty climbs on the dog house)).</i>                         |
| 5  |          | <b>Así se hace. Así.</b>  |
|    |          | This is how one does it. Like this.                               |
|    |          | <i>((Slides off the dog house)).</i>                              |
| 6  |          | OKAY GO.  |
| 7  | Liliana: | GO.   |
| 8  |          | <i>((Liliana pushes the monkey))</i>                              |
| 9  |          | <i>((Gloria walks halfway towards the monkey and them stops))</i> |
| 10 | Gloria:  | Heh...heh.  |
| 11 | Liliana: | GO. You need to go.   |

- 12 *(Liliana keeps holding on to the monkey))*
- ((Gloria runs underneath the monkey, runs over to the doghouse, slides on it, then pedals on the exercise machine, and then waits in line)).*
- 14 Liliana: Go Jorge. Go.
- 15 *((Liliana lets go of the monkey))*
- 16 *((Jorge bumps into it as he walks over to the monkey)).*
- 17 Liliana: Hah...hah.
- 18 Betty: Heh...heh...heh.
- 19 Liliana: **Va hacer linea.**  
Go make a line.
- 20 *((Jorge runs to the end of the line))*
- ((Jorge crawls over to the monkey))*
- 21 Liliana: **PARADO. PARADO.**  
Standing up. Standing up.
- 22 *((Jorge continues to crawl and passes under the monkey without bumping into it)).*
- 23 Betty: OK STOP STOP. OKAY GO JORGE. GO.
- 24 *((Jorge walks over to the monkey and bumps into it again)).*
- 25 *((Betty, Liliana, and Jorge all laugh))*
- 26 Betty: Go. Go.
- 27 *((Gloria comes crawling over to the monkey))*
- 28 *((Betty pushes the monkey slowly towards Gloria))*
- 29 *((Gloria bumps into the monkey))*
- 30 *((Gloria and Liliana switch roles))*
- 31 *((Gloria holds the monkey))*
- 32 *((Liliana gets ready to walk towards the monkey))*

- 33 Betty: Okay. Gloria. You need to go heavy. Okay.
- 34 *((Liliana swings her arm back and forth))*
- 35 *((Liliana walks towards the monkey and jumps off the crate as Gloria pushes the monkey towards her))*
- 36 *((Vanessa begins to crawl on the crate))*
- 37 *((Carlos and Jorge are on top of the dog house))*
- 38 Betty: Okay. Carlos. Jorge. Come here. **Vengan.**  
Okay. Carlos. Jorge. Come here. Come.
- 39 *((They run over to the table on the patio))*
- 40 **Dan vueltas. Da vueltas. Da vueltas.**  
Turn around. Turn around. Turn around.
- 41 *((Betty turns around))*
- 42 Gloria: **Ire. Yo voy a brincar. Ire.**  
Look. I am going to jump. Look.
- 43 *((Walks over to the tables on the patio)).*
- 44 *((Gloria climbs on the table, where Jorge and Carlos are playing)).*
- 45 *((Jorge and Carlos are already turning around)).*
- 46 **Quitate. Quitense.**  
Leave it. Leave it.
- 47 **Quitate. Quitate.**  
Leave it. Leave it.
- 48 *((Jorge and Carlos jump off the tables))*
- 49 Betty: **NO! Dan vueltas. Yo dije dan vueltas.**  
NO! Turn around. I said turn around.  
*((Betty points to the table))*
- 50 Carlos: **Yo ya di vueltas.**  
I already turned around.
- 51 *((Swings his arms around)).*

- 52 Betty: **Yo dije-**  
I said.
- GO. GO. **Dan vueltas.**  
GO. GO. Turn around.
- 53 ((Carlos climbs on the table))
- 54 ((Jorge follows Betty))

In explaining the game to their younger siblings, Betty and Liliana employ directives throughout the interaction. For example, in line 40, Liliana issues new commands to Jorge and Carlos: *Dan vueltas* ('Turn around') as she introduces new concepts within the play. Though both Betty and Liliana employ bald imperatives much of the time, in certain instances they do vary their directives. For example, in line 11, Liliana intensifies her directive by employing the modal *need*: *You need to go*; in line 33 Betty also employs *need*: *You need to go heavy*. The children also vary their directives by expressing themselves in English as well as Spanish. For example, in line 1 Betty starts out by giving issuing imperatives in English: *Get set. Go*, immediately followed by a directive in Spanish: *Mira Jorge* ('Look Jorge'). As in the previous segments, the directives are complemented by embodied actions: in lines 4 and 5, Betty slides on and off the dog house to further explain the rules of the game; in line 40 Betty turns around; and in line 49 Betty points to the table.

In sum, the above segments show that children use a wide range of directives during the course of their play. The above discussion presented three different types of play contexts. In each of these contexts, children used varying forms of directives including mitigated, aggravated, amplified, softened, and sing-song voiced directives. They also varied their directives according to language, in certain cases using Spanish and in other cases using English. Different types of embodied actions enforced and complemented the directives. The use of varied types of directives within play situations shows that these variations may occur as part of a sociocultural activity rather than at different points in children's lives. The use of directives in this manner has not been explored in the research on directives, where much of the focus has been on looking at the ways in which children's use of directives becomes more sophisticated as they become older (e.g. Ervin-Tripp 1977; Corsaro 1979; Cazden et al., 1979; Wootton, 1997). This is not to deny that children employ directives in more varied and complex ways as they get older, but rather to note that there are other factors such as socio-cultural context and mixed-age play settings that influence children's use of directives.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Mexican American children's use of directives during play activities. Much of the literature that has examined the use of directives



in interaction amongst young children has focused on the ways in which children learn to use complex forms as they grow older. In contrast, this study explored how children use different types of directives within the larger activity of play. I have discussed the grammatical and linguistic forms of directives that Mexican American children employ, and have shown that young children employ bald imperatives to escalate their commands and embed modals in their imperatives to mitigate their commands. For example, when children play pretend roles they may use bald imperatives; in other instances, the children employ indirect forms of directives, using interrogatives and declaratives when they do not wish to overtly coerce their other siblings to perform actions. This study has also discussed how children use gestures together with directives; the gestures serve to enforce, mitigate, and explicate the directives. By examining the range of directives used by children who form part of this study I argue that we can expand our understanding of complexity of language use. In addition to illustrating the ways in which directives vary with respect to syntax, the above segments showed how directives can occur in different ways within a single segment. In other words, directives varied not only with children's increasing age but also varied within a single sequence in the course of mixed age play. In certain cases, the type of play could be quite simple but involve mixed ages and the range of directives could be quite complex. Code-switching from English to Spanish was observed, and the play could be physical and thus involve embodied actions. In other examples, a much older sibling would try to teach new play skills to a much younger sibling, using softened and mitigated directives.

Children responded to the directives in varied ways, depending on the number of children involved and on the nature of the play. In certain cases a two-year-old child simply repeated the directives issued to her and in other instances in which the play was much more sophisticated children responded to directives by giving full-length accounts. It is also important to note that the complexity of the play activity did not always depend upon the children's age. Even very young children creatively invented play and used creative language; in other cases older children interacting with very young children deliberately simplified their language. By exploring these issues, the paper contributes to a greater understanding of the kinds of language that young children use amongst themselves in naturally occurring situations.

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