

## CHILDREN'S RIDDLES: WHAT DO THEY TELL US ABOUT CHANGE IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION?<sup>1</sup>

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**RESUMO** Partindo da constatação de que a relação da criança com a linguagem sofre importantes mudanças ao longo dos primeiros anos da infância, pretende-se neste artigo, através de exemplos recolhidos junto aos “corpora” de A e J (acompanhadas dos 1;9 até 5 anos de idade), caracterizar um aspecto dessa mudança: a alteração na sua condição de predominantemente interpretada pelo adulto para intérprete do outro e de sua própria fala (De Lemos 1996, publicado neste volume).

Como exemplo da primeira condição será considerado um diálogo entre adulto e criança, que mostra como a interpretação do interlocutor modela expressões sintática e semanticamente indeterminadas, conferindo-lhes um sentido compatível com o contexto discursivo, dirigindo a fala da criança para um e não outro sentido. Sem o compromisso de assumir que esta indeterminação desaparecerá completamente, pretende-se ir adiante e exibir um conjunto de adivinhas, espontaneamente criadas pela criança aos 4;6 de idade, dados que mostram a criança experimentando a condição de intérprete. Estudadas na literatura sobretudo sob o aspecto da compreensão (Clark 1978, Lefort 1982, Shultz 1974), as adivinhas serão neste artigo observadas sob o ângulo da **produção**, cabendo levantar as seguintes questões: chegam as crianças a produzir verdadeiras adivinhas? Qual o formato (traços estruturais) que tais peças exibem? Como adulto e criança se engajam nesta brincadeira, comandada pela criança? Finalmente: o que as adivinhas nos ensinam sobre as mudanças operadas na relação criança-linguagem? A relevância teórica dessas questões torna-se clara quando se recorda que adivinhas e outros jogos verbais são considerados como indícios de uma atividade metalinguística, cuja emergência é esperada somente num ponto mais avançado ou tardio do desenvolvimento linguístico.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a version of the communication presented in 5<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatics Conference, in July 1996. A longer version of the paper, in which I present a tentative classification of riddles, was presented in Portuguese at Seminário Oswald Ducrot, in October 1996. At the end of this paper I present the data in Portuguese.

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The child's relationship with language changes during the first years of her/his linguistic development. An important change in this respect is her/his moving from a position of being submitted to the other's interpretation towards that of being able to interpret both her/himself and her/his interlocutor. This work intends to characterize some aspects of this change in data from two subjects (A and J) between the ages of 1;9 and 4;6. Firstly we will consider an episode from an initial period of J's development when the child's speech is submitted to the adult's interpretation, i.e. to the meaning the adult assigns to the child's syntactically and semantically still indetermined expressions. Without assuming that this indetermination will disappear completely by the time the child is able to signal the essential syntactic and semantic contrasts, we will go ahead and present data which show the child experimenting with another position, that of the interpreter of the speech of the other and her/his own. The possibility of contemplating the child in this position is offered by reformulations and most of all by a verbal game: that of proposing riddles. Namely, by a verbal game which has been taken as a class of metalinguistic activity. As far as we know, the language acquisition literature on riddles has focussed only on the understanding and appreciation of these games between the ages of 6 and 14 (cf. Clark 1978, Lefort 1992, Shultz 1974), and not on the production or emergence of such activity. We had the opportunity to discover among the utterances of one subject a clear demonstration of interest in this verbal game. Those data were found around the age of 4;6 and not later, as the literature has led us to believe. Despite their being limited from a quantitative point of view, their relevance as production data cannot be discarded.

A conversation between J. and the mother will provide the basis to discuss the status of the adult's interpretation in early child's speech:

(1) (*Seeing mother walk towards the bathroom, J starts to get up and take off her blouse*)

J. Mummy, bath!

M. You've already taken a bath, Ju.

J. Bebel. Bath.

M. Yes, Bebel has given you a bath.

J. Bebel bath, Mummy bath. (= i)

M. Yes, Bebel gave you a bath. Now Mummy's going to take a bath.

(when mother finishes her bath, child says)

J. Me bath, me bath.

M. No, you've already taken one. (D - 1;9.20)

What is remarkable about this episode is J's third utterance: **Bebel bath, Mommy bath** (= i). From the point of view of its formal structure, both sequences appear to have the same configuration: a person's name, **Bebel** and **Mummy**, followed by another noun (?), **bath**, under the same prosodic contour. Bebel and Mummy seem to have a role in the process: that of giving or taking a bath. Nothing in these sequences' structure - where relational terms are still absent - imposes the reading of Bebel as Agent in the first case and Mummy as Experiencer in the second. This interpretation is given by the mother in her utterance **Yes, Bebel has already given you a bath. Now**

**Mummy's going to have a bath.** In fact, the verbs - give or take - which would project in an unequivocal manner the semantic roles of Bebel and Mummy are missing .

At this point, such interpretation should be questioned: would it really be the case that Bebel should be interpreted as Agent and Mummy as Experiencer (as interpreted by the mother) or both as Agent? Wouldn't it be possible to interpret it as "Bebel gave (me) a bath", "Now Mummy's going to give me a bath", the first showing agreement or adherence to what the mother is saying, the second making a request?

What allows the exclusion of this interpretation by the mother seems to be her argumentative orientation, namely, that of convincing the child that it was her (the mother's) turn to take a bath. The mother's interpretation of the utterances in (1) is thus compatible with this previously assumed direction, based also on the child's daily routine. It cannot then be taken as an expansion in Brown and Bellugi's terms, but rather as a restriction, as shown by Lemos (1992, 1995), since the filling up by the adult of the missing elements in the child's utterance has the effect of restricting its meaning, form and intention.

However, it would be a mistake to suppose that the emergence of grammatical mechanisms (inflected verbal forms, word order) will put an end to indeterminateness. The dialogue below between A and her mother, at a later age (3;11.13) shows it. In contrast to J in episode (1), A already operates with reasonable ability in marking the syntactic and semantic contrasts which allow the recognition of "agent" on the one hand, and "affected entity" on the other. However, this does not seem enough to achieve mutual comprehension.

(2) ( *A's mother shows her a story book* )

*M: What about this story? Tell me this story.*

*A: I don't know this one.*

*M: Yes, you do.*

*A: I don't.*

*M: I've told it to you several times. Tell it to Molly.*

*A: To Molly? Hum...**Little Darling broke.** (= a) *Little Darling is... Little Darling is... Little Darling broke the arm.**

*M: Molly's arm.*

*A: No. Little Darling/ (= b )*

*M: What?*

*A: Broke.*

*M: Little Darling broke it.*

*A: Broke.*

*M: Where...what did she break ? (= c )*

*A: No. I that said break Little Darling's arm.*

*M: Ah! Little Darling's arm broke (= was broken). (G - 3;11;13 )*

*OBS: Little Darling is the name of the doll which had its arm broken.*

Notice that the mother interprets the non-causative structure (ergative), used by the child in (a) - **Little Darling broke** - as if it were a transitive structure, Little

Darling being the agent. That interpretation is contested by A in (b). But this is not the only misunderstanding: in (c) when the mother was already aware of Little Darling not being the agent but patient, it is A's turn to misinterpret the scope of the expression *where* in her mother's utterance: A takes the mother's question as a request to tell the place (geographical space) in which Little Darling's action had occurred, and not as a question about the body part that was hurt. A tries to repair her mistake in the last turn, which, indeed, looks like a reformulation starting by a denial of the adequacy of the mother's question.

Could we then take this occurrence as an initial sign of the child's activity on the formal aspects of language, whereby she assumes the position of interpreter of her own speech? It would be more plausible to say instead that it signs her being sensitive to the effect - unexpected and discordant - of her own speech on the interlocutor. Notice that **I that said break Little Darling's arm** could be glossed by an emphatic "What I meant was "break Little Darling's arm".

Returning now to the point which led us to relate (1) from J and (2) from A, it becomes evident that, even when verbs, inflections and syntactic positions are already present in the child's speech, problems of interpretation still appear. It is also noticeable that in example (2) the misunderstanding occurs on both sides, initially on the mother's part and then on the child's. There is no absolute transparency either in the child's speech or in the adult's. Language - as represented both in the child's speech, and in the adult's - opens itself to multiple readings.

In episode (2) the child is confronted with the non-univocity of language. Yet it does not follow from such recognition that this makes her **ipso facto** either prepared or able to rely on structural ambiguity to build up language games. Games such as (3), for example, where the same expression present in (2) - **where/in what place** - is part of a riddle:

(3) *Question: Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?*  
*Answer: At the bottom.*

There is a great distance between one thing and the other, and children differ in their disposition for such games. A and J, who are sisters, show differences in relation to this: A was not interested in riddles, in contrast to J, from whom we heard five.

What should be pointed out here is only that what is common to misunderstanding, riddles and other games which explore structural ambiguity is their bringing about an unexpected effect of significance emerging from linguistic structure itself. There is, however, a fundamental difference: in episode (2) this effect is unintended and, once recognized, can be the object of reformulation. In the case of riddles, such effect is prefigured by the proponent, and worked out as one of the interpretative paths opened by the question in order to lead the opponent into a kind of trap.

When is the child able to do this? Language acquisition studies have directed their focus on the child's ability to appreciate and understand riddles, leaving out production and/or attempts at creating riddles. Furthermore, since it is generally assumed that riddles rely upon linguistic structuring *par excellence* riddles are placed

together with rhymes, puns and jokes, among late achievements. As they involve a reflexive action on language itself they would also imply a certain level of awareness and explicitation of the properties of the object-language, compatible only with a more advanced age. Thus, when they approach this kind of data, researchers turn themselves not to the 4/5 years of age group but to a later stage, between 6 and 14, as can be seen in Clark's quotation:

(4) *“The commonest riddles, according to Sutton-Smith (1976), are homonymic, requiring an implicit reclassification of the words in the initial question, as in:*

*Q. Why did the dog go out in the sun?*

*A. He wanted to be a hot dog.*

*In this example, a class (dogs) and a class attribute suggested by the question (namely, dogs exposed to high temperatures) are reclassified in the answer to form a new class (something edible). This type of riddle makes up about sixty percent of those elicited from children between six and fourteen A.*

*(E.Clark 1978: 30-31, emphasis mine).*

Further on, Clark makes explicit what would be implicated in these language games, that is, homonymy.

*“Children’s ability to appreciate and make up puns and riddles seems to mark an awareness of language in yet another way: they must be able to recognize potential reclassifications and realize that two sequences with the same sounds can have quite different meaning.”*  
*(id., ibid.)*

In fact, in most riddles one is faced with a question which is assigned the status of an enigma through being phrased in a way that hides the possibility of immediately identifying an object, by making use of the fact that the same word or expression may also refer to another object. The riddle quoted by Clark illustrates it. But, apart from homonymy, what else is involved in the construction of riddles?

At this point we will look at some riddles (extracted from **Highlights**), similar to “adivinhas” in Brazilian Portuguese (extracted from oral tradition).

(5) *What runs around a pasture but never moves?* (a fence)

(6) *What always has an eye but never sees?* (a needle)

(7) *O que é? O que é? Cai de pé e corre deitado?* (chuva)

(8) *O que é? O que é? Tem asa, mas não é ave, tem bico mas não é pássaro?*  
(bule)

(9) *What we always put on the pizza after it's ready?* (the mouth)

The riddles (5) and (6), as well as the “adivinhas” (7) and (8) in Portuguese, show a structuration of two members **A** and **B**, such that **A** induces the opponent to think of an entity *x*, while the second denies the possibility of it. The presence of **but** conjoining **A** and **B** in (5) and (6) is a further evidence of it. Following a linguistic theory of argumentation such as the one put forward by Ducrot, it could be said that the first and second members are not co-orientated; on the contrary, that they are argumentatively counter-orientated. The line of reasoning sketched by **A** is aborted by **B**, in a description which presents itself as paradoxical until the enigma is solved. “Runs around the pasture” makes us think of people or animals; “never moves” makes us drop this idea and think of another discursive universe, with which the new description can be compatible. The same goes for “to have an eye” in the other riddle. The opponent cannot solve the riddle if he/she doesn't know how the game works. In fact, this is the presumption: that the opponent will not start by identifying expressions, such as “the eye of the needle”, ordinarily used to refer to some entity as frozen figurative language, i.e., as the tropes named cathacresis. Notice that one can say “the fence runs around the pasture” as well as “the boy/cow runs around the pasture”, that is, via metaphoric extension. In fact, it is the displacement from one path to another which leads to the solution of the enigma. The ability to build up riddles seems thus to lie on making the question such that it hides (but not completely) the right answer, in a way that turns the riddle undecipherable.

There are still other aspects of language, besides homonymy and currently accepted meaning displacement in figurative language, on which riddles can be based. (9) provides us with material for their discussion.

The answer to that riddle, besides being a nonsense answer, violates expectations held in ordinary discourse. In fact, when asked about what one puts on the pizza when it is ready, one is expected to give answers which frame an event both distinct from the one referred by the question and meaningful relatively to the latter. In other words, one is not expected to reply with an information already implied by the event chain expressed in the question. **Pizza** implies **food** and **eating** implies using **the mouth**; thus, the answer to riddle (9) brings back an element which is already a meaning component of the implicative chain instantiated by the word “pizza”. As a result, we have the apparent obviousness of the answer, wherein lies the surprise. The assumption is that by being so obvious, it couldn't possibly be the correct answer. Unless the question is framed as a riddle.

Moving now to J's riddles, it is worth emphasizing that, in spite of being only five, they offer us enough elements to characterize the child's move from the position of being interpreted to that of interpreter. As part of a game, the riddle's questions are put forward as a challenge whose answer is known only by the proponent - in this case, the child. Such condition already indicates a role reversal between adult and child: it is the child and not the adult who will judge the “adequacy” of the answer.

From that consideration we have to proceed to evaluate J's ability to actually construct real riddles at the age of 4;6. We shall start by presenting below the five riddles found in J's Diary for a small period of time. The emergence of this ludic

activity surprised her mother, who had never proposed any such games to the child. Her interest had been aroused by television programs and encouraged by her grandmother.

(10) *J. What is it?*

*When you put the trousers on, the trousers stay?*

*M. I don't know.*

*J. You have to guess. If you don't know I won't tell you.*

*M. I don't know.*

*J. Because the trousers are tight.* (D - 4;6.5)

(11) *J. What is it: you wind up the doll and she doesn't walk?*

*M. I don't know.*

*J. Ah...she's tied up!* (D - 4;6.5)

(12) *J. What is it...that when you put on the dress, the dress comes out?*

*(the mother tries to answer)*

*M. The girl has put on weight. The girl has lost weight.*

*The girl who has the dress.*

*J. (remains silent, a bit surprised, seems to evaluate the answer, which is correct). OK.*

*M. But what did you think of?*

*J. The dress is broken.*

*M. Broken?*

*J. Yes. It's a wooden dress!* (D - 4;6.6)

(13) *(J continues the game, excitedly)*

*J. What is it...that when a baby is born a baby with an earring is born.*

*M. With an earring? I don't know.*

*J. Ha...earring shop tummy!* (D - 4;6.6)

(14) *J. What is it...that when a cat drinks, the cat can't drink the milk?*

*(...)*

*J. The cat, the mouth was shut.* (D - 4;6.6)

Sequences (10) to (14) indicate that J is able to both formulate a question and provide a corresponding answer, showing some of the skills required by the type of activity intended, i.e., a game. In fact, it should be noted that those episodes are always preceded by the formula "what is it?" which locates the activity outside ordinary discourse.

However, that discursive-formal feature is not enough to identify the activity as a riddle. Other structural properties must be present for it to be recognized as distinguishable from questions belonging to ordinary discourse. In this aspect, it should be noted that the interplay of opposites - a characteristic of riddles (5) and (6) - does not go unnoticed by J, whose utterances in (11) and (12) are affected by this feature. Notice that **put on** in (12) implies (in the technical sense of the term) **stay on**; this does

not happen to the referred object: (the dress) **doesn't stay on/come out**. **Wind up** carries the consequence **walking**; this does not happen: (the doll) **does not walk**. Those utterances contain indeed items or expressions which, when predicated to a subject, describe events either unexpected or in opposition.

It is possible to recognize a movement similar to the one pointed out above as characteristic of a class of riddles. The child's sensitivity to the format of those among the adult's riddles which show counter-orientated implications or apparent contradictions, seems to be reflected in her riddles, although their thematic structure comes out from child discursive domains: dresses, dolls, cats. That is, the final product, if not a perfect riddle, shows itself at least affected in some way, by the structural characteristics of the game.

Notice that in (11), the child achieves, through the answer uttered as a counterpoint to her mother's "I don't know", a certain level of surprise (**ah...the doll was tied up!**), which could be said to be comparable or as good as an adult's riddle. The same goes for (14), whose answer is: **The cat, the mouth was shut**. The answer, in these cases, seems to be of the order of the "possible, but not expected", being as it is rather similarly to the answer found in the riddle (9) above.

At this point, it is worth calling attention to the relationships holding between riddle (9) and the child's riddle present in (14). The first lies on the answer's reintroducing an element already implied in the question. In (14), the answer - and its effect of surprise - lies on the mention of an obvious obstacle. This shows both what the child has already been able to extract from the game and how its effect of surprise is already achieved.

The child's focus on such effect deserves further comments. In (12), after accepting the interlocutor's answer made in accordance with ordinary discourse, she provides another possible but unexpected answer: "The dress is broken". Thus the effect of surprise is obtained and she can proceed to provide a justification: "Ah...it is a wooden dress!". In (13) one may find the same movement towards the non-sensical, also present in the adult's riddles: her answer "Ah...Earring shop tummy!" leaves no margin for any other consideration outside of violating the laws of ordinary discourse to achieve the effect intended in riddles.

As concluding remarks, it is important to emphasize what the child's riddles tell us about change in language acquisition. First of all, they point to a different relationship with the adult interlocutor, as shown by the uptake of a challenging position in a game whose aim is to provoke surprise with either unexpected or obvious answers. Secondly, a different relationship with language, represented by the way the child handles structural aspects of questions, the bipartite structure of which is argumentatively counter-orientated and of answers where the non-sensical and the absurd are allowed.

It should be finally pointed out that riddles are only one among the various discourse domains where the child is given the opportunity to experience both the position of interpreter and a different relationship with language inside and/or outside ordinary discourse. This amounts to acknowledge the impossibility of either predicting its order of emergence or explaining its emergence as conditioned by cognitive/metacognitive development.



## DADOS

(1) *(ao ver a mãe se dirigir para o banheiro, J começa a levantar a blusa)*

J. Mamãe, bain!

M. Cê já tomou banho, Ju.

J. Bebel. Bain.

M. É, Bebel já deu banho em você.

J. Bebel bain. Mamãe bain.

M. É, Bebel já deu banho em você. Agora é a mamãe que toma banho.  
*(quando a mãe termina de tomar seu banho, J diz)*

J. Eu bain.

Eu bain.

M. Não, você já tomou.

(D - 1;9.20)

(2) *(A e sua mãe estão falando sobre figurinhas que A tinha jogado fora; a mãe muda de assunto, pegando um livro de histórias)*

M. E essa estória? Conta prá mim essa estorinha.

A. Essa daqui eu não sei.

M. Sabe, sim.

A. Não sei.

M. Já te contei várias vezes. Conta prô Molly.

A. Prô Molly? A Q... a Queridinha quebrou. A... a Queridinha tá... A Queridinha tá... A Queridinha quebrou o braço dele.

M. O braço do Molly.

A. Não. Queridinha/

M. Que que tem?

A. Quebrou.

M. A Queridinha quebrou.

A. Quebrou.

M. Em que lugar, que ela quebrou?

A. Nã. Eu que falei quebrá o braço da Queridinha.

M. Ah! Quebrou o braço da Queridinha.

(G - 3;11.13)

(3) *Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?*

*At the bottom.*

(5) *What runs around a pasture but never moves? (a fence)*

(6) *What always has an eye but never sees? (a needle)*

(7) *O que é? O que é? Cai de pé e corre deitado? (chuva)*

(8) *O que é? O que é? Tem asa, mas não é ave*

*Tem bico, mas não é pássaro? (bule)*

- (9) *O que é? O que é? Que a gente sempre põe na pizza quando ela fica pronta?*  
( a boca)
- (10) *J. O que é, o que é?*  
*Quando a calça põe, a calça fica?*  
*M. Não sei.*  
*J. Tem que adivinhar. Se não saber eu falo.*  
*M. Não sei.*  
*J. Porque a calça tá apertada.* (D - 4;6.5)
- (11) *J. O que é, o que é: dá corda na boneca e ela não anda?*  
*M. Não sei.*  
*J. Ela tá amarrada, uai!* (D - 4;6.5)
- (12) *J. O que é, o que é? Que quando o vestido põe, o vestido sai?*  
*M (animando-se a responder). A menina engordou. A menina emagreceu. A dona do vestido.*  
*J (fica em silêncio, um tanto surpreendida, parecendo analisar a resposta, que é satisfatória). Tá certo.*  
*M. Mas o que você tinha pensado?*  
*J. O vestido tá quebrado.*  
*M. Quebrado?*  
*J. É. Vestido de madeira, uai!* (D - 4;6.6)
- (13) *(J continua a brincadeira, animada)*  
*J. O que é, o que é: que quando nasce um bebê nasce um bebê de brinco?*  
*M. De brinco? Não sei.*  
*J. Ué?! Barriga de loja de brinco!* (D - 4;6.6)
- (14) *J. O que é, o que é? Que quando o gato bebe, o gato não consiga beber o leite?*  
(...)  
*J. O gato, a boca estava fechada.* (D - 4;6.6)

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