Playground Language

The following bibliography is based on suggestions from numerous colleagues, whose names are listed at the very end of this document (in Section C). These suggestions were made in response to an email message broadcast on four discussion lists (Linguist, Lagb, Baal and Edling) in which I said that one of my students was studying the playground language (e.g. truce terms, counting and skipping rhymes) used in her old primary school.

The bibliography (Section A) includes all the items that colleagues suggested to me, as well as any comments on their relevance to the project I had described. I have tried to make the entries as usable as possible, but I have not attempted to unify their format, and apologise for its messiness. I have also included (Section B) a number of general suggestions that colleagues made and which did not fit comfortably into the bibliography.

Dick Hudson
15 December 2000

A. Bibliography on playground language

Main value is extensive bibliographies which would allow the chasing up of origins and earlier forms of games.

The book contains nursery rhymes in French organised according to the type : i.e. 'numeriques,' 'avec injonction de sortie' etc..and it contains an interesting bibliography, half concerning French comptines and the other half those from other countries.

The second topic addressed in this concerns 'I bags', which in NZ has strayed from the 'claim' territory into the truce territory, and pegs (the local form of pax), which has strayed in the reverse direction, and may be of interest.


Laurie and Winifred Bauer, 2000, 'Creeping Games' Play and Folklore 38, July 2000
This is June Factor's newsletter. [See notes at the end of this bibliography.]


Brady. 1975. All in All in ; a selection of Dublin children's traditional street-games with rhymes and music (Comhairle Bhealoideas Eireann) Series: Scribhinni Bealoideas: Folklore studies.


    Contains a chapter on "The children", with a subsection "The language of the playground".

M. Curtis: Zig-Zag-Zoo and other games: the oral tradition of children of Asian origin in Keighley, West Yorkshire; Folk Life, 1999, 38, 71-82

Daiken; Allen, Barbara. 1963. Out goes she; Dublin street rhymes (Dolmen Publishers).

Norman Douglas. 1934. London Street Games . (Chatto and Windus)


    and you can look at bits of it and order it on their website: www.mup.com.au


Gomme, Alice Bertha, 1894, The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland with Tunes, Singing-Rhymes, and Methods of Playing according to the variants extant and recorded in different parts of the Kingdom. Vols I (1894) and II (1898). London: David Nutt.
    A comprehensive alphabetical listing, useful for comparative purposes.

    A mixture of ethnography and CA. An absolute classic on kids talk in the US. Work with an emphasis on gender, and looking at the discursive and rhetorical practices of girls playing hopscotch.

    In a more educational vein, it might be worth having a look at whatever Elisabeth
Grugeon has produced, eg [the above].


Liz Grugeon is an authority on playground language. I'm sure that she has published more recent stuff than this, and that she would be happy to supply further information. She can be contacted at De Montfort University, Education Department, Polhill, Bedford.

Shirley Heath: Ways With Words; Cambridge University Press, 1983

James, Allison. 1993 Childhood Identities: Self and social relationships in the Experience of the Child; Edinburgh Univ Press.


Those texts are relatively anthropological, though language figures as well.


Mary and Herbert Knapp. 'One Potato, Two Potato'. Norton, New York.


May contain a relevant chapter.

John Holmes McDowell: The speech play and verbal art of Chicano children; Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Texas, 1975

Janet Maybin. 1996. 'Children's Voices: The contribution of informal language practices to the negotiation of knowledge and identity among 10 - 12 year old school pupils. Open University PhD.

Meek Bill; Loesberg John; Ni Mheara Binn. 1985. Moon penny...; a collection of rhymes, songs and play-verse for and by children. Ossian Publications


a very short paper for teachers that is too introductory for your student, but might contain a few useful references:


The Classic study.

Iona and Peter Opie. 'The singing game'

This as historical background to games too. More recent than the Lore and Language
Iona Opie. 1993. The People in the Playground, Oxford University Press. memoir of more recent research.

M.V. Osorina: Modern children's lore as an object of interdisciplinary study; Soviet Anthropology and Archaeology, 1986, 25, 27-48 (haven't read this, but the title looks intriguing)


Peter Reich. 1986. "Language Development" May contain a relevant chapter.

James Ritchie. 1964. The Singing Street. (Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh) which treats only of Edinburgh children. Lots of stuff there of every type, all in Scots.

Russell, Heather, 1986, Play and friendships in a multi-cultural playground. another title which J. Factor contributed to.

Mary Sanches and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: Children's traditional speech play and child language. In: B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (ed.): Speech Play; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976 (and some other papers in the same volume)


Sealey, Alison. 2000. Childly Language: children, language and the social world. (Longman) I included a very brief account of some studies additional to the Opies'. The relevant section is on pp 96 - 99.


   Articles on games round the world, including several of potential value.


Brian Sutton-Smith: Children's Folklore: A Sourcebook; Garland, 1995
   (Particularly useful?)

Brian Sutton-Smith. "The Folkstories of Children"
   This emphasizes children's composition of verses and stories.


   Contains a map and some discussion but it looks rather derivative on reinspection.

   A discussion of playground language as it relates to phonological awareness and literacy.

B. Comments

Winifred and Laurie Bauer:
a. We are currently at the end of the second year of a three-year study of children's playground language in NZ. Our main focus was to see whether there is regionalisation in this area of NZ English (and there is), but of course we have also accumulated quite a lot of info on the folklore side of things in the process. </div>

b. Julia Bishop has a folklore email list, with members world-wide: a very useful source of expertise. The list basically functions when one of the members asks a question or has something to share. We have found people on it really helpful in trying to find out things like whether things found here are also found in the UK: important for us at times to know whether they are imports or homegrown. There are lots of people of different persuasions out there studying children's play. Julia's email is: J.C.Bishop@sheffield.ac.uk
c. June Factor in Australia publishes a newsletter called Play and Folklore, with snippets from all sorts of places and on all sorts of topics. (She's a member of Julia Bishop's folklore email), but her email is j.factor@history.unimelb.edu.au.

d. We ourselves have a few preliminary publications, but expect to have something more substantial in a year or so.

e. It's an interestingly complex and under-researched area. We have some amazing data on rhymes and the like which is peripheral to our main concerns, but nonetheless fascinating.

Nigel Fabb:

Why not get her to write to Iona Opie herself? Peter Opie's been gone since the early 80s but I think she's still alive (she's in her mid seventies, and lives in West Liss in Hampshire, according to the ever-reliable Internet). Or do it via OUP.

Ben Rampton:

Have you tried the National Sound Archive?

Elizabeth Taylor:

There's a series of books here in Australia which are collections of what you call 'playground language' written by June Factor, who is very well known for popularising this in the 1980s. They have rhymes etc which have been collected in Australia and are intended for a 'popular' audience. I remember noticing when my children went to primary school here (I am English) that a lot of rhymes/games seemed familiar, but there were lots of Australian variations.

Have just searched our university library catalogue; they are:
Cinderella Dressed in Yella
Far Out, Brussel Sprout
All Right, Vegemite
Unreal, Banana Peel
Real Keen, Baked Bean (all above 1980s publications)
Roll Over, Pavlova (1992)

Kate Pahl:

Liesbeth De Block at the Institute of Education supervised by David Buckingham is doing a thesis on playground language.

Mike Baynham:

A former PhD student of mine, Ken Cruickshank of the University of Sydney, did a very interesting Master's thesis on this topic based on fieldwork in inner city playgrounds in Sydney. He can be contacted on: k.cruickshank@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Peter Patrick:
Labov 1966 used counting-out rhymes etc., and I believe gives some in the appendix. Also, it might be worth trying the AAA anthropology resources site
   http://www.ameranthassn.org/resinet.htm
or the one at UCSB:
   http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/links/pages/
though this does seem more like folklore. Bruce Jackson, a noted folklorist (though not a kiddie collector), has an interesting site for starting web searches at:
   http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/SOURCES.HTML
and of course one could start by checking folklore depts at places like Penn.

Ian Crookston:

I ask most of my first year classes for truce terms, and duly neglect to write down the result, but from memory barley, croggies, keys, pax and my own skinge are all still alive.

There must be local words for playing truant - a friend of ours who works in Hull schools reports "twagging".

David Faber:

It also occurs to me that you may be able to get a huge amount of data by getting in touch with as many local dialect societies as possible and asking them to put a notice in their next newsletter or on their website if they've got one. There must be dozens of them, they (the non-academic ones particularly) will have plenty of older members, and changing playground language strikes me as just the sort of thing many of them might be interested in. They may even have already published something on the subject.

Henri-José Deulofeu:

Your question reminds me of the books by the french ethnologue Gaignebet, namely "le folklore obscene des enfants", in which he studies in a comparative basis (it is in fact a content analysis) the obscene songs and rhythms that are used by children in the playground.

Jim Vanden Bosch:

This is not a study of playground language, but the Dictionary of American Regional English is in fact a rich resource for such studies, although, obviously, focused on the North American scene. The editors of this dictionary worked hard to include as many of these vocabulary items as they could gather.

Edith Esch:

I supervise an M.Phil student from the Ukraine, Olga Grayvoronskaya - to whom I am sending a copy - who is doing her dissertation on the use of nursery rhymes in teaching a second language at primary school level and is more generally interested in the way nursery rhymes can support children's linguistic development.

Vally Lytra:
I am a post-graduate student at the Dept of Byzantine and Modern Greek, King's College, London where I am doing a PhD. in Greek sociolinguistics (Dr. Alexandra Georgakopoulou is my supervisor). The focus of my thesis is on playful language (such as teasing and name-calling) in different settings at school.

Euan Reid:

There was material in the Edinburgh Univ Library in the 70s on local traditions in this - I'm afraid I have no author-names etc - but think the School of Scottish Studies there might be able to help with Bibliogs etc.

John Widdowson:

a. As it happens, the topic coincides with some of our research here at the Centre [for English Cultural Tradition, Sheffield University - http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/cectal] where, among other things, we are investigating continuity and change in children's playground language 1950 to 2000. Actually this section of the project has not yet begun (we are working on sayings, proverbs etc). However, we hope to produce a report on the research early in 2003.

b. Julia Bishop, e-mail J.C.Bishop@sheffield.ac.uk, runs an e-mail discussion group on children's folklore. It's a very lively group and a great deal of information gets passed around to those involved.

Valerie Baggaley:

I remember a book called 'sally go round the sun'. I think that was it's name and it was Canadian or British, I believe. ... I was recently playing with some Kosovar kids who did really neat counting out rhymes in Albanian.

C. Names of contributors

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