

## **Children in arguments with peers: Young children's strategies as Opposer and Opposee**

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The present study sought to extend Eisenberg's functional roles theory (i.e. Opposer and Opposee) by examining the strategies used by children when occupying different functional roles in verbal arguments with their peers in a mixed-gender group. The four participants of the study were between three and four years old, two female and two male. All were children brought up speaking Mandarin in Taiwan. Natural conversations were recorded during break time in their day care center. The results showed that both genders had equal likelihood of being Opposers or Opposees. While strategies varied depending on gender and functional role, "insistence and repetition" and "verbal support" were the most frequently used strategies for all combinations of functional role and gender. This indicated that children between three and four can use strategies in argument, but they have not yet completely departed from the "round-structure" form of series of assertion and counter-assertion.

### **1. Introduction**

During the 1970s and 1980s, an increasing number of researchers began to examine acquisition of communicative competence, looking into how children learn to use language in a socially appropriate way. As stated by Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis (2001), the approach of looking at children's communicative competence was "influenced by ethnography of communication, and involved theory of sociolinguistics, speech act usage, and conversational analysis." The ethnographic approach redirected the researchers' interest to language socialization, which is "how language learners are able to be participating members of a social group by acquiring social and linguistic skills" (Cook-Gumperz & Kyratzis 2001). By the mid-1980s, the focus was on children's discourse competence, in a search for answers to how children participate meaningfully in specific conversation contexts.

When studying children's naturally occurring speech in these specific contexts, some researchers have focused on children's arguments, because arguments are viewed as the ideal situation for children to learn to negotiate and form their self-identities. In arguments, children realize that they want different things than other people in the group. They begin to see the need for communication and negotiation

in order to achieve their goals.

The methods for studying child pragmatics and discourse changed in the later 1980s. Some researchers started to think of children as agents of constructing their own language and culture rather than simply learners. Children in peer interactions were analyzed in a new way, which treated the subjects as active members of their groups who could construct their own cultures, giving birth to the notion that children are active constructors of their identity, culture and social rules (Corsaro 1985, Goodwin & Kyratzis 2007).

Some research has been undertaken on the developmental perspective of children's argument. It was shown that three year old children would consider the "semantic context" of their opponent when forming their speech in response (Eisenberg & Garvey 1981). Dunn (1996) concluded that children increasingly use reasoning in their arguments at the age of four. Similarly, other studies have shown that young children between three and five could provide evidence and reasons in response to disagreement and conflicting statements from their opponents. Other skills, such as compromises, promises and alternative proposals were also found in young children around this age (Eisenberg 1987).

In addition to the developmental perspective, studies have also examined the content of children's argument. Some studies have commented on coherence in dispute exchange units, finding that children's verbal conflicts often start with repeatable exchanges of statements. As stated in Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis (2001), young children often "engage in ritual cycles of assertion and counterassertion" in their arguments, and in argument this form is a series of rounds of "assertion, challenge, and counterchallenge." Young children's speech exchange in arguments is limited by this "round-structure" (Dunn & Munn 1987) while older children can introduce new elements into the conversations, such as addition of new information, providing justifications for the opponent's challenge, etc. (Brenneis & Lein 1977).

Eisenberg, in her 1987 study on children's conflict, focused on functional roles in children's conflicts. According to Eisenberg, there are two functional roles in an argument: Opposer, the person who makes the initial opposition, and Opposee, the person who is being opposed. She held that functional roles are significant to the study of children's conflict, because they reflect the strategies the children use. Children use different strategies depending on whether they are Opposer or Opposee. Along the same lines, Eisenberg and Garvey (1981) pointed out that Opposers, who make the initial opposition, need to use a wider variety of strategies, such as providing evidence or justifications, than the Opposees, who only need to stand their ground. Accordingly, information on how functional roles affect the result of arguments is an expected outcome of the present study.

Some research has analyzed children's communicative competence from the perspective of gender. Perhaps one of the most well-known studies is the theory of the Separate World (Maltz & Borker 1983). This theory assumes that "gender

segregation” is prevalent in early childhood, in which girls only play with girls and boys only play with boys. It is asserted that this segregation results in the great difference in speech development between females and males. However, this gender segregation in early childhood is not always the case. In children’s arguments, there are studies stating that the most frequently occurring argument type was “possession and use of object,” and it is not difficult to imagine that young boys and girls would share this same intention. The present study reexamined the theory of the Separate World by observing whether young boys and girls use differing strategies depending on the gender of their opponent.

The current paper examined the strategies children use when they occupy different functional roles in verbal arguments with peers in a mixed-gender group. We investigated whether young children between the ages of three and four have already departed from the “round-structure” in dispute (Dunn and Munn 1987), and if so, what strategies they used in verbal arguments. Additionally, the study was designed to determine whether young children have learned to use different strategies for different genders, with the intention of reexamining the theory of the Separate World proposed by Maltz and Borker (1983).

Studying peer interaction is especially relevant to teachers and parents in present-day Taiwan, because there are an increasing number of young children who spend most of their day in school, after-school centers and cram schools, where they interact mostly with peers at or around their own age. It may also contribute to understanding in other countries with similar social systems.

## **2. Methodology**

This study was designed to investigate children’s choice of strategies as Opposers and Opposees in verbal arguments in a mixed gender group. There were four participants in the study, two male and two female. According to previous studies (Dunn 1996, Eisenberg & Garvey 1981, Eisenberg 1987), children begin to apply strategies in conflicts between the ages of three and four. For this reason, children between three and four were chosen for the present study. Since the study was intended to analyze gender differences, children of both sexes were selected. Each of the subjects had known each of the others for around the same amount of time. The study was conducted at an after-school center that the subjects attended daily for English, mathematics, and art classes together. They often played with toys together during their break, and there was no obvious gender preference when choosing playmates. This situation differed from that described by the theory of the Separate World.

The children’s natural interactions were observed and recorded during their break time. They often played with toys and role-played with each other. A digital camera was placed at the corner of the room to record the children’s natural conversations. The children did not know that they were being recorded, so their

interactions were natural and not influenced by the camera. The researcher also recorded field notes to assist in coding the data later. The observation lasted for a period of one month, once to twice a week, around 15 minutes each time. The researcher was occasionally involved in the subjects' conversations, but only passively – for example, when one child told on another. The researcher also only gave passive response such as “hmm.”

Only the verbal argument sequences were transcribed. Based on Eisenberg 1987, the definition of a verbal argument sequence is the verbal exchanges from the start of the initial opposition until an apparent topic change, cessation of involvement of one of the participants, or an obvious consensus was accomplished. Therefore, when there was a situation in which an argument with the same focus was partitioned by several intervals (i.e. other people's interruptions), it would be coded as multiple argument sequences because each section had an obvious end to the interaction.

After transcribing the argument sequences, they were coded by argument type, which is defined as the focus of the argument (Eisenberg 1987). The subject's functional roles (i.e. Opposer or Opposee) and strategies were also coded. In one argument sequence, there would only be one Opposer and Opposee. In other words, each Opposer and Opposee was only coded once in an argument sequence. In the argument, if there was one person opposing the rest of the people in the group, only the Opposer would be coded. For categorizing argument types, the following framework from Eisenberg 1987 was used:

#### Argument Types

1. Possession or use of objects
2. The child's action
3. The opponent's action
4. A statement of fact

Eisenberg's (1987) framework for argument strategies was also used. It is divided into verbal and nonverbal categories:

#### Children's Verbal Strategies in Arguments

1. Insistence and repetition – expressing rejections without any support, including direct counter-assertion; reiterating, including direct counterargument
2. Verbal support – providing justification for a position, alternative for rejections
3. Mitigation – increasing politeness or indirectness
4. Appealing to another individual – tattling to the teacher or peers
5. Verbal abuse – threatening, taunting, mocking, name-calling

6. Temporizing – putting off compliance
7. Offering to compromise

Children’s Nonverbal Strategies in Arguments

1. Ignoring an opponent’s move
2. Crying and whining
3. Physically aggressive behavior

Both verbal and nonverbal argument sequences were transcribed, because they were still frequently used in the arguments as responses to oppositions.

**3. Results and discussion**

The argument sequences in the children’s interaction were identified and transcribed. There were 29 argument sequences identified in this study. Among all the argument sequences, we first determined the most frequently occurring argument type in the conflicts. Secondly, it was of the interest to our research to determine whether the young children between three and four had already started to use strategies in arguments. If they had, we were interested in what strategies they used in verbal arguments. Lastly, the argument strategies used by the young children were discussed and analyzed from a gender perspective. The video recording ran a total of 56 minutes and 39 seconds, and there were 29 argument sequences coded.

*Table 1. Argument types among young children*

<b>Argument type</b>	<b>Tokens</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Possession or use of object	23	79%
The opponent's action	2	6%
The child's action	1	3%
The statement of fact	3	10%

As indicated in Table 1, “possession or use of object” was the most frequent argument type among the subjects. This was in accordance with the previous studies (Eisenberg 1987). The participants in this study were commonly engaged in role-plays involving toys, and they often fought over the possession toys in order to achieve their goals in the role-play. As discussed in Cook-Gumperz and Kyratzis (2001), young children are aware of the power of certain social roles (e.g. doctors, parents), and they will compete for those roles. This situation was often observed in the data collection. Subjects often argued with one another in order to obtain the

ideal toys for their roles in the pretend play. This situation was seen in males as well as females.

*Table 2. Most frequently used strategies according to functional roles*

Strategy	Functional roles	
	Opposer	Opposee
<b>Verbal Strategies</b>		
Insistence and Repetition	21	8
Verbal Support	13	10
Mitigation	1	2
Appealing to Another Individual	4	0
Verbal Abuse	2	1
Temporizing	5	0
<b>Non-verbal Strategies</b>		
Ignorance	2	7
Physically Aggressive	6	4
Crying and Whining	3	2

It had been predicted that the children would use different strategies depending on which functional role they occupied (i.e. Opposer or Opposee). However, this prediction was proven to be only partly true. “Insistence and repetition” and “verbal support” were the two most frequently used strategies no matter which functional roles the children occupied. Table 2 shows that Opposers used a bigger variety of strategies than did Opposees, which was in accordance to the previous study (Eisenberg 1987). Almost all the strategies were used more often by Opposers than did Opposees. Each strategy was used at least once in either Opposer role or Opposee role, with the exception of “appealing to another individual” and “temporizing.” The high number of instances of “insistence and repetition” suggests that children of this age have not fully grown out of the round-structure in dispute. In other words, they often used direct counter-assertions without any reasoning or verbal support to state their opposition, and were responded to in kind by their opponents. Nevertheless, children did use quite a few “verbal support” in the arguments, resulting in that strategy’s position as second most frequent in the data.

The most common kind of verbal support used by the Opposer role and Opposee role was “I got it first!” or another similar assertion. Among non-verbal strategies, “physically aggressive” was frequently used in the Opposer role, while “ignorance” was frequently used in the role of Opposee. This result shows that the children have not fully acquired the conventions of social interaction and communication.

In Table 2, the participants were observed to use some “temporizing” and “offering to compromise” when they were in the Opposer role. This was parallel to the previous studies which showed that young children between three and four would start to attend to the semantic context of their opponents and form their responses accordingly, such as an offer of alternatives or compromise (Eisenberg & Garvey 1981, Dunn 1996, Eisenberg 1987).

*Table 3. Gender and functional roles*

Gender match-up	Total interactions	Gender	Opposer (No. of tokens)	Opposee (No. of tokens)
F-M	17	F	8	9
		M	9	8
F-F	8			
M-M	5			

As shown in Table 3, the frequency of the mixed-gender interaction was higher than that of same gender-interaction. The frequencies of being an Opposer or Opposee respectively showed no significant gender difference in mixed-gender interaction; female and male children had almost equal chances of being Opposers or Opposees. Therefore, the Separate World theory was not supported by the results of the present study. Separate World also predicts that girls are more likely to maintain harmony in the group while the boys are more often engaged in rough conflicts. In the present study, girls were equally as likely to initiate oppositions as did boys. During the observation and data collection, it was clear that the intentions of the female subjects were more or less the same as those of the male subjects (e.g. wanting to possess or retain toys). Under these circumstances, the finding that girls and boys were equally likely to be Opposers was not surprising. Just as with boys, conflict between girls regarding the possession of an object could be prolonged and even involve physical aggression.

When in the Opposer role, girls in mixed-gender and single-gender arguments alike were observed to use the same strategies whether arguing with peers of the same gender or of the opposite gender. They used the strategies like “insistence and

repetition,” “verbal support,” and sometimes became “physically aggressive.” However, young boys in the Opposer role tended to use “verbal support” and “appealing to another individual” in arguments with peers of the same gender, but “insistence and repetition” and “temporizing” with the opposite gender. When playing the Opposee role, young girls still favored “insistence and repetition” and “verbal support” with playmates of both the same and the opposite gender. Male Opposees used more strategies with the opposite gender than with the same gender, such as “insistence and repetition,” “verbal support,” “mitigation,” and “offering to compromise”. On the other hand, they often just ignored opponents of the same gender.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Using Eisenberg’s framework, the present paper examined young children’s argument types and their usage of strategies in verbal conflicts. The results showed that children were most likely to argue over the possession or use of objects, and they would use various strategies when occupying the Opposer and Opposee roles. At ages from three to four, the children had not yet departed from the “round-structure” of argument, and they still frequently used “insistence and repetition” both when making initial oppositions and when being opposed. Some nonverbal strategies, such as “ignorance” and being “physically aggressive” were common as well. At the same time, they have learned to use “verbal support” and other strategies, such as “offering to compromise” and “temporizing.”

In respect to gender, the results showed that young girls were equally as likely as young boys to make the initial opposition. Girls also showed a higher frequency of becoming physically aggressive than did boys, and their arguments oftentimes caused prolonged interruptions in their interactions with both boys and girls. The results did not support the Separate World theory, for they showed that young girls were not noticeably leaning toward maintaining harmony. Additionally, there were a great number of mixed-gender interactions than single-gender interactions.

The results of this study could be further examined and confirmed by utilizing a larger sample of subjects. Additionally, future studies can take into account the frequency of interaction between each participant in order to gain better insight into this topic. Despite its limitations, the current paper successfully extended Eisenberg’s theory of functional roles in children’s argument into the language setting of Chinese, and has provided supporting evidence for previous studies regarding arguments among children between three and five. Moreover, the findings can provide contributions to research on children’s peer interaction, which can contribute significantly to a society in which children are increasingly spending more time in their day care center than at home.



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