Learning, Culture and Social Interaction 32 (2022) 100600

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi

Full length article

Singing in semiotic assemblages. Pre-schoolers' use of songs in interaction

Marie Rickert *

Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, the Netherlands
University of Münster, Institute of Dutch Philology, Alter Steinweg 6/7, 48143 Münster, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Singing
Pre-school
Language socialization
Semiotic assemblages

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes toddlers' spontaneous singing of songs in non-formalized interactions in pre-school from a language socialization perspective. Songs are highly intertextual resources which are interrelated with specific sociocultural contexts and/or communities. My analysis of instances selected from audio recordings and field notes from 4.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a pre-school in the Netherlands shows that spontaneous singing can take on interactional functions and reflects socialized knowledge. Closely investigating song-choice and particular times when children chose to engage in singing, it becomes clear that the practice gains meaning as part of co-created assemblages in which material objects, bodies and place stand in inter-relation with the deployed musical and other linguistic resources. The way children draw on songs as a resource resonates with the sociocultural environment of the pre-school, where singing comprises a meaningful social practice in formalized interaction between teachers and children.

1. Introduction

As for many children, Early Childhood Care and Education is the first step out of a more intimate home-sphere into the educational system, and thereby the wider society more generally (Schwartz, 2018), pre-schools are influential sites for children's socialization. Children are immersed in the community of practice of their pre-school, which constitutes of interactions with teachers and peers, on a regular and long-term basis. Therefore, pre-schools also contribute to shaping children's language socialization, i.e., their "socialization through the use of language and socialization to use language" (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1986, p. 163).

One important element in the day-to-day language use of Early Childhood Care and Education is singing. Singing has been inherent in kindergarten pedagogy since it has first been conceptualized by Friedrich Fröbel in 1840 (Fröbel, 1904; Kalantzis & Cope, n.y.) Throughout a morning at the pre-school, teachers commonly use songs to create a pedagogical environment, and songs can have didactical characteristics, e.g., during morning circles or for instruction (Kultti, 2013).

Yet, singing at pre-school is more than just a pedagogical and didactical means within formalized interaction. Through experiencing songs and singing, musical knowledge is socialized and children get familiar with artful ways of expression. Children themselves also engage in a variety of rhythmic and musical activity in non-formalized interaction themselves, e.g. during free play. For example, children may give toy animals and dolls character voices, punctuate imaginative events in associative play with noises, or vocalize their own bodies' or objects' movements (Young, 2002).

* Maastricht University, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, P.O. Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, the Netherlands.
E-mail address: m.rickert@maastrichtuniversity.nl.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2022.100600
Received 16 August 2021; Received in revised form 31 December 2021; Accepted 3 January 2022
Available online 13 January 2022

While singing in the pre-school is an important part of early musical education, it also has communicative affordances, which will be the focus of this paper: From an interactional viewpoint, it is known that interaction partners can establish meaning and communicative action through singing (Stevanovic & Frick, 2014). Children may use (parts of) songs in their interactions as well (Young, 2002). From a language socialization perspective, using songs in spontaneous every-day- interaction bridges the situational context with the wider sociocultural one. Therefore, it is contingent upon sociocultural and linguistic sensitivities and socialized knowledge, which is gained through experiences and interactions, amongst others in the pre-school. Singing in interaction comprises a recontextualization of a cultural text (Frick, 2013) which might hold sociocultural implications that it came to be associated with while travelling from singer to singer and from context to context, and which simultaneously regains and renews meaning locally and situationally on the spot.

Consequently, using songs in interaction is a so-called *languagecultural* practice, resulting from and based on the intertwinement of sociocultural and language practices, shaped by ideologies (cf. Agar, 1996; Cornips et al., 2017). Rather than being passive receivers, children actively take part in their language socialization (Schwartz, 2018) and consequently also in their socialization into *languageculture*. In the sense of language ecologies, i.e., briefly, the "interactions between any given language and its environment" (Haugen, 1972, p. 325), language practices become meaningful in relation to the social and cultural environment. When singing spontaneously, children agentively make communicative moves while simultaneously operating within the languagecultural ecosystem of the pre-school, which in turn is part of wider society the children are socialized into.

Hence, investigating children's emergent singing of songs in interaction in the pre-school can generally contribute to an understanding of their socialization into *languageculture*. Given the importance of early education and care settings in many toddler's lives, I zoom in on pre-school as a site for processes of language socialization surrounding singing by investigating the following research question:

How do children agentively use songs within non-formalized interactions in the pre-school, and what do they achieve socioculturally by engaging in spontaneous singing?

The aim of this paper is to better understand the interactional as well as socializing functions of spontaneous singing and the situational co-creation of meaning in young children's communication through drawing on songs as communicative and expressive resources. As such socialization and meaning-making takes place in situated interaction in the day-to-day, I will analyze instances of spontaneous singing observed and documented in ethnographic fieldwork, after reviewing the literature and introducing the methodology of this study.

2. Singing and songs as a resource for social practice

2.1. Children's productive musicality and spontaneous singing

Young children's spontaneous expressions include various kinds of vocalizations that could be considered as musical: Amongst others, they engage in chanting, rhythmic and prosodic articulation, making sounds, intoning words, as well as singing in a more classical sense (Forrester, 2010; Young, 2004, 2006). However, the lines between different kinds of young children's vocalizations are often blurred. By the age of approximately 2, children's vocalizations start to be more clearly classifiable as sung and/or as spoken based on a classical understanding of singing and speaking voice (Mang, 2000).

In a longitudinal study in which one child was accompanied with regular video recordings at meal-time between the age of 1;0 and 3;6 years, Forrester (2010) found that expressions of the child's musicality predominantly took place in cooperation with an attuned interaction partner and became more and more self-initiated and self-focused as the child developed. From the age of 2;5, she started to purposefully weave songs into imaginative play and storytelling, e.g., by singing on behalf of her toys (2;5) or producing a story while she engaged in 'pretend-reading' of a picture book, shifting between singing and speaking (3:0). Comparable instances where children exploited singing in meaningful ways for narrative purposes were also found by Mang (2000). In her study of child-adult interaction and play settings, a child aged 4;11 used spontaneous singing of multiple learned songs within animated storytelling while looking at a book (p.118). Mang also reports on comparable events with improvised songs.

These examples confirm Young's (2006) conclusion that singing is a means to engage with bodily experience as well as with experience of the material- and the social world. Thereby, it is mostly interwoven with other modes such as physical movement.

While there is a substantial body of work on children's spontaneous singing, this often comes from a musicological, musical-educational or a developmental perspective (for a review see Forrester, 2010). Young (2006) cautions researchers that such work is often based on adult-centric understanding of singing drawn from Western art music, and is not inclusive to children's manifold creative vocal play. Against this background, this article's approach is not to understand children's vocal practices based on normative classifications of singing and speaking, but rather to investigate the social meaning of children's singing of songs, which can be understood as a sociocultural interactional resource. In order to introduce this approach, I will elaborate on the social meanings of songs in interaction in the next section.

2.2. The social meanings of songs in interaction

Singing songs is a performative act which can have different social meanings and functions, depending on who the singer is, in which context they sing, and who the listeners are. For example, a song during a staged performance usually bears a different range of organizational, social and interactional affordances than a spontaneous performance of the same in every-day social interaction. As such, the social meaning of songs is contingent upon the situation and social context. While this dynamicity generally applies to other linguistic resources that co-participants[1] use in interaction, too, songs are peculiar since their words as well as other features such as prosody and rhythm are usually pre-given, which stands in contrast to spontaneous, free spoken interaction that is typically less formalized (Stevanovic & Frick, 2014). This shall not imply that singers cannot creatively adapt lyrics, prosody, and pitch situationally, but it makes clear the highly intertextual nature of songs which carry with them sociocultural and sociohistorical associations. In this sense, from a Vygotskian understanding of creativity (cf. Vygotsky, 2004, p. 13) spontaneously drawing on songs in interaction, be it with the original lyrics and musical features or with modified ones, is a highly creative way to co-create meaning as it entails an imaginative process in which elements from past experiences are re-worked into new contexts (on language creativity see also: Cekaite, 2017).

Singing a song in interaction is never just a vocal activity. Instead, it could, for example, be indexical of a certain occasion (e.g. singing a few lines of "Jingle Bells" could refer to Christmas in specific social interactions), and it might rely on a shared repertoire of songs between co-participants, which is culturally and personally influenced. According to Oxbury (2020), interpersonal familiarity between co-participants is (re-)produced when using song references. She has found that co-participants seem to prefer their interactional partners to know the songs they spontaneously start singing or referring to.

At the same time, drawing on songs can serve co-participants as a resource for social practice. Hence, they 'do something' with and through songs, such as achieving interactional and discursive aims. Prior studies have shown that these aims can be as diverse as indicating sequence closure (Frick, 2013), promoting affiliation, solidarity, and familiarity between co-participants (Oxbury, 2020), contributing to interdiscursivity (Rampton, 2006) enacting the communicative mode of sharing (e.g. emotional stance), and to a certain extent also the communicative modes of informing and requesting (Stevanovic & Frick, 2014).

Based on these considerations, I will approach songs in this article as a semiotic resource which, beside its artful and aesthetic dimension, a) is highly intertextual, b) is interrelated with specific sociocultural contexts and/or communities (of practice, Eckert & Wenger, 2005) and c) holds the potential of serving specific functions in interactions.[2]

3. Research methodology

This study is based on data generated during 4.5 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a pre-school in the province of Limburg in the Netherlands between autumn 2020 and spring 2021. Prior to fieldwork, I obtained ethical clearance by the Ethical Review Committee of Maastricht University for ethnographic research on language socialization in child centers in the German-Dutch border area.[3]

The pre-school in which this study has been conducted is located in the province of Limburg in the south of the Netherlands, where dialect is commonly used beside the national language Dutch. A group at this pre-school consists of 16 toddlers between 2;5 and 3;11 years and two teachers. Most toddlers attend the pre-school on two mornings a week, while some (those with an indication for early intervention) come on four mornings a week.

Teachers use both the regional language Limburgish (henceforth, drawing on self-descriptions of speakers: dialect) and Dutch, and children mainly use Dutch. I myself do not speak dialect and spoke to children and teachers in Dutch (my L2). I conducted participant observation in the pre-school on two mornings a week, so that I would follow a specific group of children. I documented my observations in several ways (written, visual, audio). Data discussed in this paper stems from 48 pages of typed fieldnotes and 102:19 h of audio-recordings. Singing itself as part of language socialization is a research interest that emerged for me during fieldwork when noticing its frequency and relevance both in formalized and non-formalized interaction, during participant observation over time. Both *participating* and *observing* were central to that process. While I was in the pre-school as a researcher, I also assisted the teachers with several tasks. Upon carrying out certain activities like cleaning the hands, children encouraged me to sing (Rickert, under submission). These moments of participation in which I was confronted with the rootedness of singing in the day-to-day of the pre-school directed my attention to singing as a communicative praxis in the pre-school, and enforced my sensitivities for it in my observations. Therefore, I also learnt about the social meaning of songs from moments in which children interacted with me, others, and their surrounding by means of singing. Consequently, I will reflect upon my own role in the interactions whenever relevant in the upcoming analysis section.

The data presented in this paper is taken from an account of instances of children's singing. After developing the research interest, I devoted more attention to singing in my generation of data, i.e., to listen closely to interactions which include singing, include descriptions of these in my fieldnotes, and audio-record them when possible. I coded these instances and additionally reviewed and coded a random selection of audio-recordings from the beginning of fieldwork. The cases discussed in the analysis were chosen for their salience in showing the diversity of interactional and socializing functions that children's singing can take.

[1] I use the term 'co-participants' to refer to participants in social interaction in a modality-neutral way.

[2] This list is not exhaustive but shall rather contain the most relevant characteristics for the analysis in this paper.

[3] Parents of participating children as well as teachers have given informed consent to participate in the study. All participants have been pseudonymized. Throughout fieldwork, I have been open to the children about my research and paused data generation situationally if I noticed any sign of discomfort on their side regarding the recording.

4. The role of formalized singing in the pre-school

Throughout a morning at pre-school, a lot of songs are sung in a formalized way, often teacher-led or teacher-initiated. Singing together was generally appreciated both by teachers and children. In order to better understand how the children's singing emerges in interrelation with the sociocultural environment of the pre-school, where singing is a common practice, I will briefly introduce the different occasions of formalized singing in the pre-school in what follows.

A typical day at the pre-school starts with free play, then a morning-circle, which is followed by a combination of arts and craft activities in small groups, and free play again. In the morning circle, for example, teachers and children sing a song to greet everyone and express appreciation that everyone is there. After a moment of eating fruit together and drinking water, it is time for a toilet and diaper-round, and book-reading. There is a specific song that is sung while cleaning the hands, and then one to kick off the activity of eating fruit as well as one for drinking water. Some animated physical movement such as dancing indoors or playing outdoors with toddler bikes or other vehicles follows. All along, there are specific songs teachers use for instruction purposes, like a song that signals that all toys shall be tidied up now, and a song that signals that all children should set up the chairs in a circle. The social meaning of these instructive songs is known to all children and teachers, which gets reflected in the children's subsequent orientation toward the instructed activity (or their deliberate ignoration of it).

Children are socialized into these practices within their first few visits to the pre-school. Next in the daily routine, children and teachers have a small snack before the children get picked up again after 4 h at the pre-school. Group activities often revolve around a specific topic which the groups work on for multiple weeks. Learning and singing thematic songs pertinent to that topic, and/or cultural festivity, is an inherent part of the group's work on the current topic.

As common in pre-schools in Limburg, code choice between the national language Dutch and the regional language Limburgish depends on the situation and is highly ideological (Cornips, 2020; Rickert, under submission). Teachers may use dialect to address individual children but always use Dutch in group situations. I observed singing only taking place in Dutch during my fieldwork both across formalized and non-formalized contexts. The teachers reported, however, that they sing a local song in dialect with the children for the yearly celebration of carnival.[4]

Formalized singing is thus firmly integrated into the daily routine at the pre-school and it has different, sometimes overlapping characteristic and functions: In general, it forms part of children's musical education, and children also enjoy it as such. If teachers sometimes forget to sing at a given event, e.g., while cleaning the hands, a child would request them to sing, or initiate the singing themselves (fieldnotes, 21/04/2021). Beyond its musical educational character, it can be ritualistic (e.g., every time before eating fruit), can be instructive (e.g., to set up the circle), a means for knowledge sharing (e.g., a thematical song which contains facts about the current theme), as well as for cultural socialization (e.g., in the context of singing songs for festivities like birthdays or Christmas). As it only happens in Dutch, is used in group contexts, and has multiple relevant functions for the organization of attention, it is part of the language hierarchies that Cornips (2020) describes with regard to dialect and Dutch. Thereby, it contributes to the dominance of Dutch in the pre-school in comparison to dialect which is mainly used for emotional and one-on-one contexts.

The frequency and relevance of songs in formalized pre-school interaction, initiated by the teachers, shows how rooted singing is in the pre-school. Against this background, I will turn to the spontaneous use of songs by children as agents in non-formalized interaction in the upcoming analysis section now. In the following, I will introduce different functions of singing, which relate to yet expand the functions singing takes across formalized interactions: At first, I show an instance where a child spontaneously sings in a teaching/learning context, as it is also commonly done in the circle, but where singing additionally becomes a means of empowerment for him within interaction. Secondly, I show how two boys blend singing into their play to establish joint action and thirdly, how singing can also be a way for children to shape imaginative play interrelated with the sociocultural context the language/singing socialization is embedded in. All together, the instances provide an exploration of how children's agentive singing in interaction becomes a meaningful practice in the sociocultural space of the pre-school, which is in turn embedded in the wider societal context.

5. Listening to children's use of songs in interaction

5.1. Expressing expertise

The following situation happened in November, a period in which the pre-schoolers were working on the topic of autumn, amongst others through repeated singing of different songs about autumn together in morning circles. The situation took place during one of my first visits to the pre-school.

Extract 5.1.1, from fieldnotes 11 November 2020

Free play. I sit in the topical corner which is decorated like a forest on my own to take some notes. After a while, Daniel comes to me, approaching me slowly. He asks with a low voice if he can play in the forest, seems a bit shy. I say that he could, of course, and join him at the table with different fall items. He takes different items in his hands, touches them, shows them to me and lets me touch them: Leaves, an acorn, and also a little figure of an old woman. I ask him who this would be. '*Granny*', he says in English. '*Granny?*' I ask back in English as well. Daniel puts down the figure and gives me a pinecone. I really have no idea how

[4] I could not conduct fieldwork at the time of carnival due to a lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

this is called in Dutch, so I ask him: '*Wat is dat?*' *[What is that?]*. He tells me to touch it. I touch it softly and playfully pretend that it stings: I take my hand back again quickly. Daniel laughs: '*Nee, kijk*.' [No, look.] He touches it. Then he takes the shell of a chestnut and explains, singing: '*Dít is ♫prik-prik-prik au-au-au♫*' '[This is] *♫prick-prick-prick ouch-ouch-ouch♫]'*]. Daniel uses the hand movements the kids have learnt during circle singing as well: *♫prik-prik-prik ♫* – his index finger goes down rhythmically, and *♫au-au-au♫*, he shakes is right hand. I touch the chestnut shell, also exclaim 'au' [ouch] and move my hand. We go on with our play. I ask him again about another item, and he takes me to one of the teachers and asks her what the item would be for me. We find out it is supposed to be a rotten apple. Eventually, the teacher interrupts our play with the song for tidying up. Daniel tells me that we need to tidy up quickly, and asks me to sit next to him in the circle.

When Daniel[5] (3;11) first approaches me, he asks permission to play in the forest corner, which hints at the initial power relations at stake: I am an adult, and adults in the pre-school are classically the ones in charge from an institutional perspective, in comparison to the children. The adults that are regularly present in this specific pre-school are all women, like me, and include the two group teachers, a speech therapist, and an ergo-therapist, i.e. all guiding and/or leading institutional positions.

Yet, power relations are not static but instead situationally emergent as people renegotiate them in interactions on the spot (van de Weerd, 2019). Also in this situation, the power distribution dynamically develops over the course of the interaction. While the starting point of Daniel asking me permission to play in the corner (l. 2f) seems to be based on an institutionalized child-adult relation, other characteristics become situationally more important for the course of the interaction: My succeeding questions of who/what two of the items on the table are, or what they are called (l.5, 7), introduce the shift in power as they reveal my lack of expertise regarding the topic of autumn, at least in the context of this topical corner. Daniel tells me to touch one of the items that I inquired about (l.7). I subsequently show a reaction to my sensation which seems to be deemed inadequate and, therefore, laughable, and indexical of my not-knowingness for Daniel (l.7f), as can be derived from his subsequent action: He laughs and demonstrates gentle touch of the pinecone, without any indication of pain (l.8). Next, for the sake of comparison, he takes the shell of a chestnut and makes clear to me that this would be a prickly object (l.9f). Now, the power distribution has shifted as the interaction is not primarily organized around the relation of me as the adult in the pre-school and Daniel as the child, but around the relation of Daniel as the expert on the topic and me as the novice.

This shift is co-constructed and brought about by our engagement with sensory experience and multiple semiotic resources: Firstly, our engagement with the objects is mediated multimodally by physical touch, gaze, and hand movements as well as vocal expressions of talk and singing. My lack of expertise is revealed to Daniel as I playfully take my hand back after touching the pinecone, which leads him to ask me to look at his touch (l.8f). Secondly, the vocal part of the interaction is multimodal in itself i.e. it includes speaking and singing (cf. Stevanovic & Frick, 2014). Daniel draws on a song about the pricklyness of hedgehogs which he had previously learnt in the circle (l.9) In the circle, he gets socialized into seeing singing, entangled with touch as well as other sensory engagements, and movements, as a learning opportunity (Pica, 2015). Now, he draws on singing and the specific song about hedgehogs with its accompanying hand movements to share knowledge to me in the course of a spontaneous interaction. Thereby, the singing does not only serve for the communicative purpose of informing me, but it also enables Daniel to reinforce his position as the expert and mine as the novice who is listening and learning through his singing and performance. He takes the position which the teachers in the circle commonly take, guiding the exploration of pricking and non-pricking fall items through singing, moving, looking, touching, and speaking.

The distribution of positions of expert (Daniel) and novice (me) remains throughout the rest of the interaction after the shift. After I ask another question one more time (l.12), Daniel shows me a way to obtain information and another way to learn, which is asking the teacher directly. Furthermore, Daniel also displays familiarity with the social meaning of the song that the teacher sings and tells me which consequences hearing the song has for our play, namely that we need to tidy up (l.15). Even though I am an adult, he asks me to sit next to him with the children in the circle afterwards.

In this interaction, child Daniel used a song to achieve communicative and interactional aims. The song had been acquired throughout formalized interaction in the pre-school before, where it (re-)produced a specific social structuring. A comparable dynamic is reflected in this interaction as well. The next extract will show that children also draw on songs to shape their play.

5.2. Singing as part of joint play action

One morning during free play, child Leon (3;10) approaches me to show me the high tower that he built together with his friend Felix (3;6). Some other children are also playing with blocks on the same mat. I stick around, lay down my recording device and start to build as well. At one point, Felix's and Leon's high tower becomes instable and eventually falls:

[5] All names are pseudonyms.

Extract 5.2.1, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

1	Leon	↑↑HIJ WORDT TE [ZWAAR!
		↑↑IT GETS TOO [HEAVY!
2		**[((tower falls))**
3	Felix	**EH:::::!**
4	Leon	=<↓#hij [was te zw]aar>
		=<↓#it [was too he]avy>
5	Felix	[↓oh:::] (ga je) maken, ik
		[↓oh:::] (will you) make, I
7	Marie (researcher)	oah jammer (0.2) hij was zo [hoog
		oah too bad (0.2) it was so [high
6	Leon	[kom! Dan gaan we een nieuwe (.)maken!
		[come! Then we'll make a new (.)one!
9	Felix	ja!
		yes
10	Leon	aan de slag!
		let's go!
11	Felix	ik ik ga niet doen ik heb pijn in m'n handen
		I I won't do I have pain in my hands
12	Marie (researcher)	wat heb je, met jouw vinger
		what do you have, with your fingers
13	Felix	PAF zo
		PAF like this
14	Marie (researcher)	oh is die gevallen op jouw vingers?
		oh did it fall on your fingers?
17	Felix	nee maar (daar)
		no but (there)

The falling tower leads to initial disappointment by Leon, expressed through the explanation for the tower's falling delivered with a creaky voice and low pitch (l.4), and by Felix who utters 'oh:::' with low pitch (l.6) as well as by me, who says it would be too bad (l.7). Leon quickly finds motivation again and suggests to build a new tower (l.6), which he complements by exclaiming 'aan de slag! [let's go]' (l.10), a line which I had observed Leon and Felix shout rhythmically together over and over again in the past during play with objects like toy train rails. Whereas Felix first agrees (l.9), he then rejects because of pain in his fingers (l.11–l.17) and eventually, as can be seen in the following extract, also encourages to build a new tower (l.16-19).

Extract 5.2.2, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

18	Leon	Kom
		come
16	Felix	kom op we gaan een nieuwe toren
		come on we'll a new tower
18	Leon	ja, we gaan BOUWEN! (.) oh BOUWEN!
		yes, we will BUILD! (.) oh BUILD!
19	Felix	op de slag (.)↑op [de slag]
		on the beat (.) ↑on [the beat]
20	Leon	[((rhytmically)) aan de slag!] [°aan de slag°
		[((rhytmically)) let's go!] [°let's go°

Felix picks up on Leon's exclamation of the rhythmic line ‘aan de slag [let's go]’ they often use together, and adapts it to ‘op de slag [on the beat]’ (l. 19). Singing or shouting rhythmically allows the two boys to engage with the blocks in a new way, which Felix alludes to with ‘op de slag [on the beat]’.

Leon rhythmically repeats the initial line ‘aan de slag [let's go]’ again (l.20), but eventually, the rhythmic engagement is extended to a new song, which Leon introduces in the next extract. This new song, Bob de bouwer [Bob the builder] topically matches the core activity of building:

Extract 5.2.3, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

21	Felix	[Bob de BOUWER!
		[Bob the BOUWER!
22	Leon	♫ ((rhytmically)) (we) kunnen maken ♫
		♫ ((rhytmically)) (we) can fix ♫
23	Felix	♫ Bo::b de bou::wer, >kunnen wij het maken<, Bo::b de bouwer, nou en of![(.) Bo]
		♫ Bo::b the bui::lder, >can we fix it<, Bo::b the builder, yes we can![7] [(.) Bo]
24	Leon	[of]
		[can]
25	Felix	o::b de bouwer (.) >kunnen wij het m[aken<, Bo::b de bouwer, nou en of! ♫]
		o::b the builder (.) >can we f[ix it<, Bo::b the builder, yes we can! ♫]
26	Leon	[a:ke:, Bo::b de bouwer kunnen of! ♫] ° waar moet die°
		[i:x, Bo::b the builder yes can! ♫] ° where shall this°
27	Felix	doe maar die ((unintelligible))
		put ((modal particle friendliness))this ((unintelligible))
28	Leon	deze [kan]niet
		this [can]not
29	Felix	**[m(h!]**
		(6.0)
30	Felix	[(bou:wen)
		[(bui:ld)

As singing follows so shortly after the disappointment about the prior tower's falling, it seems to have a motivating function here. When Felix exclaims ‘Bob de bouwer [Bob the builder]’ (l.21), this triggers Leon's association of the theme song of the TV series of the same name so that he subsequently starts singing ‘we kunnen maken[we can make/fix]’ (l.22). This line reminds of the original song. Leon seems less familiar with the song than Felix in the beginning of the extract. Felix sings the refrain of the song twice (l.23, l.25). While Leon only listens the first time and repeats the last word of the refrain after Felix sang it (l.24), he slowly joins in when Felix repeats the lines, yet arranging the words in a different way than in the original which Felix sings.

After some turns of talk revolving around the architecture of the tower (l.26–29), another child comes and plays on the mat, which I try to prevent in order not to make the tower fall again:

Extract 5.2.4, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

31	Marie (researcher)	**[((to another child, Leah who comes and plays with toy cars on the mat))** niet hier met die auto's (.) met die auto's kan je hier,kom **[not here with the cars (.) with the cars you can here, come (5.0)**
32	Leon	♫ Bo::b de bou::wer, >kunnen wij het maken<, [Bo::b de bouwer] nou ↑EN OF!♫ **♫ Bo::b the builder, >can we fix it<, [Bo::b the builder] yes ↑WE CAN!♫**
33	Felix	♫[°↓Bob de bou:wer] **♫[°↓Bob the bui:lder]**
34	Felix	♫ ((rhytmically)) nou en [of! nou en of! nou en of! nou en of! nou en of!] nou en of! nou en of! **♫ ((rhytmically)) yes we [can! yes we can! yes we can!yes we can! yes we can!] yes we can! yes we can!**
35	Leon	((joins in))[♫ of! Nou en of! Hehehheh of! °heheh of! nou en of!] (2.0) nou en of! **((joins in))[♫ can! yes we can! hehehheh can! °heheh can!yes we can!] (3.0) yes we can!**

As in extract 5.4, the singing starts again after an interruption by another child and a short silence of 5 s (l.31), it seems that singing and rhythmic engagement helps the boys to keep up the good mood and stay motivated throughout building the tower. In this sense, singing very much becomes a central part of the play: It reinforces the activity of building and the building reinforces the singing in turn.

This time, Leon starts singing the song (l.32). He seems to have learnt or got reminded of its original lyrics from Felix's prior singing to which he tried to sing along, as he uses the lyrics in their original arrangement now. Felix joins in and starts a variation of engaging with the song: He keeps repeating the last line of the refrain rhythmically ('nou en of!'; 'yes we can', l.34). Felix joins him in this rhythmic play with the song toward the end of the first repetition (l.35), and then the two boys keep repeating the line together.

Lines 36-44 are excluded from the transcript here in order to save space. Across these lines, another child comes and makes a puzzle from a shelve fall onto Felix. While he and me discuss this incident, Leon keeps on rhythmically singing ('nou en of! [yes we can]'). After Felix orients to the tower again, some talk about its construction follows and then, Leon addresses me:

Extract 5.2.5, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

45	Leon	jij bent hoger dan die **you are higher than it**
46	Marie (researcher)	ik ben hoger dan die? maar nu ben ik kleiner dan die ((goes on to her knees)) en nu een stukje hoger ((kneels a bit higher)) **I am higher than it? but now I'm smaller than it ((goes on to her knees)) and now a bit higher ((kneels a bit higher))**
47	Leon	~ en ↑nu ben je, als je ↑↑staat ben je supergroot **~ and ↑now you are, when you ↑↑stand you're super-tall**
48	Marie	zo? ((stands up)) **like this? ((stands up))**
49	Leon	ja! **yes!**
50	Felix	kijk nou, nou wordt hij superhoog **look now, now it becomes super-high**

Leon realizes that I am taller than the tower (l.45), and I adapt my height by kneeling on different levels several times (l.46). After he exclaims that I would be 'superhoog [super-tall]' when I stand (l.47), and I demonstrate this (l.48), Felix seems to be spurred on by the comparison of my height and that of the tower. He relates 'superhoog [supher-high]' back to the tower and says that it would become this way now (l.50). The comparison seems to have fostered the motivation once more, which culminates in a canon-like singing of 'Bob de bouwer [Bob the builder]' in the subsequent extract. At one point, Felix also makes rhythmic sounds with two blocks which accompanies the singing (l.52):

Extract 5.2.6, transcription from recording on 24/02/2021:

51	Leon	♫((animated, faster rythm than before)) KUNNEN WIJ MAKEN [KUNNEN WIJ (.)Kunnen wij het maken, Bob! de bouw:er **♫((animated, faster rythm than before)) CAN WE FIX[CAN WE** **(.)Can we fix it, Bob! The bui:lder**
52	Felix	[Bo:b de((starts making rhytmic sounds with two blocks))BOU:WER (.) Bob!(de bouw:er) **[Bo:b** **the((starts making rhythmic sounds with two blocks))BUI:LDER** **(.) Bob!(the bui:lder)**
53	Leon	♫ [NOU EN ↓OF! Bo:b de bouw:er, kunnen wij het maken?] **♫ [YES WE ↓CAN! Bo:b the bui:lder, can we fix it?]**
54	Felix	♫ [WIJ MAKEN! Bo:b de bouw:er, kunnen wij het maken?] **♫ [WE FIX! Bo:b the bui:lder, can we fix it?]**
55	Leon	heheheh heheh (3.2) ((variation in notes)) ♫↑#de bouwer >kunnen wij het maken< Bo:b de bouwer >kunnen wij het ma:ken •hhh Bob de bouwer kunnen wij maken **heheheh heheh (3.2) ((variation in notes ♫↑#the builder >can we** **fix it< Bo:b the builder >can we fi:x •hhh Bob the builder can** **we fix<** **((they keep on building, Marie gets a car from behind Leon and** **asks him if she can take it (21.0)))**
56	Felix	zet'm (nog) hier op **put it here on top** **(6.5)**
57	Leon	hij is nog een stuk kleiner **it's still a bit smaller**

During the whole interaction throughout extracts 5.2.1-5.2.5, the boys use a song pertinent to the area of construction work to accompany and reinforce the activity of building a tower, and thereby their identity as builders. Singing this song adds another layer to their play as it enables them to be fully involved not only through carrying out physical building with the material blocks but also through relating to it in their singing. While their singing can align with their physical building activities, rhythmic and melodic engagement seem to be an expression of motivation and enhance the motivation at the same time. The two activities of singing and building become no longer distinct from one another but instead, both become central to the play in entangled ways.

Singing is also a means for peer socialization in this situation: Felix was the first to suggest to build a new tower and interjected the rhythmic line 'aan de slag! [let's go!] (l. 10)'. However, it is Leon who subsequently gives the lead and introduces the song. It is also Leon who starts to adapt it to just the rhythmic exclamation 'nou en of [yes, we can]' while Felix's singing follows in both cases.

Peer socialization into and through singing also happens in the next extract, where the singing has consequences for opportunities of participation and the organization of attention as well. In the next extract, singing becomes a part of imaginative play.

5.3. Singing as part of imaginative play

The following extract takes place in the so-called 'doll-corner' of the kindergarten, a space that is very popular amongst a lot of children, foremost amongst girls. The doll corner's equipment includes a table with four stools on children's height, a couch, a bed with several dolls, and items like cooking equipment and toy food.

The corner with its particular objects yields very specific forms of play, namely mainly imaginative play: Children take up roles of caring mothers and (more seldomly) fathers for the dolls and, for example take them to the doctor, bring them to bed, and feed them.

Children also pretend to cook and offer food to peers, teachers, and me. In the next situation, however, I was the one who offered toy food to Claartje (3;4), Kim (3;6), and Emily (2;1). Finja (2;4) joined us (l.3).

Extract 5.3.1, transcription from audio recording on 18 November 2020:

1	Marie (researcher)	↑Dames, gaan we taart eten? (1.0) **↑Ladies, shall we have cake? (1.0)** Ja? Zul ik die lekker klaarmaken? (.) **Yes? Shall I prepare it?** Ja? (0.5) Dan moeten de kaarsen hier nog [op] **Yes? Then the candles have to go here**
2	Claartje	[KIJK] **LOOK**
3	Marie (researcher)	wa::nt au (.) dat moet (.)↑oh Lea kom je mee taart eten? **si::nce au (.) this must (.)↑oh Lea you join us eating cake?**
4	Finja	=#nee **=#no**
5	Marie(researcher)	=nee! **=no!**
6	Finja	[=NEE **[=NO**
8	Kim	[♫ Lang zal [ze leven, lang **[♫ ((sings [Dutch birthday song))**
7	Marie (researcher)	[=Wil je thee drinken? **[=Do you want to have tea?**
9	Finja	=NEE::! **=NOO::!**
10	Kim	♫ zal ze leven,[lang zal ze leven in de o:lia, in de o:lia (.) in de o:lia♫] **♫ ((continues Dutch birthday song)) ♫**
11	Emily	**[((joins in with Kim with rhythmic sounds))** **[♫ eh eh o:i:a:, ie o:i:a., in de o:i:a:♫]**
12	Kim	**hiepe[piep HOERA::, hiephihiep HOERA::]**
13	Emily	**[iepiep RA: (.) HOE[RA:]]**
14	Marie (researcher)	**[AH:]** **hah hah ha •h hhh ((pretends to blow out the candles on the cake))** ↑lekker la:: taa:rt **↑yummy la:: ca::ke**
15	Claartje	↑oh en dan nog ene bij. ↓nog ene bij. **↑oh and another one. ↓another one.**
16	Marie (researcher)	heh heh heh lekker? **heh heh heh tasty?**
17	Emily	°ja° **°yes°**
18	Kim	wo:w met slagroom ↑kijk **wo:w with whipped cream ↑look**
19	Marie (researcher)	↑oh slagroom? echte slagroom? **↑oh whipped cream? real whipped cream?**
20	Kim	ik ook slagroom **me too whipped cream**

Here, my preparation of the cake leads Kim to start singing the birthday song '*Lang zal ze leven*' (l.8). I had previously observed one of the teachers perform the characteristic exclamation '*Hieperdiepiep Hoera* [Hip Hip Hooray]' which is commonly sung for birthdays in the Netherlands, with the according hand movements to another child when she gave her a piece of the toy cake. Potentially, Kim had also seen this, or she associated the toy cake with candles with birthday celebrations due to other previous socialization experiences,

potentially also in the home context. The birthday song '*Lang zal ze leven*' is also sung in the pre-school in the circle when it is a child's birthday, however, without a cake involved.

Hence, Kim's singing of this specific song while we are playing with a toy cake thus shows socialized knowledge. Beyond that, it also has interactional implications: Firstly, it shifts the attention away from Finja's opposition toward becoming part of our imaginative play, expressed in her three utterances of '*nee [no]*' which gradually increase in volume (l.4, l.6, l.9). I stop asking Finja questions, or engaging with her more generally, and she stops expressing her opposition shortly after Kim starts to sing. We both direct our attention to the singing that is going on. Secondly, singing adds a new content layer to the situation: Due to the intertextual nature of the song which is commonly sung in the context of birthdays, it turns a situation which initially seems to revolve around eating cake in general into a festive birthday celebration. The young peer Emily joins in Kim's singing with own rhythmic vocalizations (l.11, l.13), even though she only generally speaks a few understandable words. This shows how singing can enable joint peer action and be a means for peer socialization.

Children use songs as a resource to shape imaginative play. Singing, then, can be an expression of and give directions to enacted imaginations like a birthday.

6. Discussion

Free play constitutes an important site for an exploration of creative language use and language play for young children (Cekaite, 2017; Cook, 2000), and singing can be considered a part thereof. The instances presented explore how singing gains meaning as language socialization in pre-school. Children use songs as intertextual resources which are linked to a specific context, like birthdays (Section 5.3) or knowledge sharing (Section 5.1). These contexts get closely connected to singing and to the specific songs through the regular every-day singing that is firmly rooted in the pre-school's routines.

Singing itself is an important means of communication, learning, ritualizing, and celebrating within the sociocultural environment of the pre-school, and also teachers sing frequently. The meaningfulness of singing resonates in children's non-formalized interactions: Songs sung in the pre-school serve children as resources which they agentively draw on to make interactional moves (Sections 5.1 and 5.3). So, for example, the song about the prickliness of hedgehogs from Section 5.1 had firstly ben introduced within formalized interaction in the circle, where singing the song didactically served as a vehicle for learning. The way that the child Daniel sings the song spontaneously to pass on the knowledge and talk about the fall items at hand, reproduces this specific form of conveying information in an accessible way, linking music, factual and sensory information through singing, the engagement with objects and body movements.

By singing spontaneously in interaction, children actively take part in language socialization co-operatively with peers and adults in the pre-school: They explore the social functions which singing specific songs can have. When doing so, children use the intertextual affordances of specific songs, and thereby not only demonstrate the communicative meaningfulness of songs and singing within interaction to peers, but also experience the social consequences of their own singing themselves, e.g., when child Kim manages to recruit peers to sing together with her. Thereby, she manages to shape the imaginative play at hand from an eating situation toward a birthday situation, jointly with peers and me, the researcher, upon her initiative, in resonance with the sociocultural framework of birthday songs.

While this paper focuses on singing in pre-school, it also becomes clear that the pre-school is embedded in a wider societal context and that language socialization happens across this context. As such, it is also mediatized, which can be seen in the example of 'Bob the builder', a song that child Felix supposedly picked up in the TV series and introduced into peer play in the pre-school in Section 5.2.

Singing takes place in Dutch, and not in dialect, which conforms to ideological language hierarchies in early education in Netherlandic Limburg which Cornips (2020) describes. Driven by language ideologies rooted in Dutch society, where the national language Dutch is seen as the language for economic (and other) success and upward mobility, teachers commonly exclusively use Dutch in group situations, especially in the context of knowledge transfer and instruction, whereas they reserve the regional language Limburgish for one-one-one contexts (Cornips, 2020). Singing within formalized interaction can have instructive purposes, and is also used as a way of teaching, e.g., about the seasonal topic of fall and fall items. Within formalized interaction in the pre-school, singing is a didactical means to evoke everyone's attention, so that the presence of Dutch and absence of dialect in singing in the bilingual pre-school in Dutch Limburg contributes to the dominance of Dutch generally, and, more specifically, to the socialization of a language ideology which portrays the national language Dutch as superior.

All instances of spontaneous singing discussed in this paper emerged while the children engaged with material objects like autumn items (Section 5.1), building blocks (Section 5.2), or a toy cake (Section 5.3) within social interaction. This resonates with Young's (2006) results, who has found that children's spontaneous singing allows for engagement with the body, the social world, and materiality. In fact, in the tower building in Section 5.2 for example, singing becomes a central part of play and enables the children to engage with another core activity in new ways through intertwining it with the deployment of a topically pertinent song. The children play with blocks, but they also play with and through the song and its melody and rhythm. Consequently, their play unfolds as an entanglement of these two activities which merge into one another as the children's bodies move to build the tower, produce sung and spoken utterances, and interact with the surrounding and me, the researcher, in the ideologically-structured pre-school environment.

From these observations, I come to an understanding of children's singing in the pre-school as part of co-created semiotic assemblages (Pennycook, 2017) in which material objects, bodies and place stand in inter-relation with the deployed musical and other linguistic resources. Sensory engagement through touch and gaze complemented with experiencing the song through singing/listening and body movements, makes the (non-)prickliness of fall items understandable in the interaction presented in Section 5.1. Singing as part of imaginative play happens while engaging with a toy cake in the doll-corner, a space which frequently yields imaginative forms

of play due to its particular material equipment in general (Section 5.3).

Understanding the research setting from assemblage thinking also blurs a separation of the researcher and the research subject(s) (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020). I, the researcher, have contributed to the emergence of the semiotic assemblages discussed in this paper. This contribution does not only consist of my verbal participation, but also of my embodied presence, e.g. when, as discussed in Section 5.2, comparing the tower with my height served as an incentive for further building, enforced by singing and simultaneously enforcing further singing.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I investigated the meanings and functions of children's spontaneous singing of songs in a pre-school in Dutch Limburg. It became clear that children exploit the social and interactional affordances singing offers within their interactions. The way children use songs as a resource fits into the sociocultural environment of the pre-school, where singing also comprises a meaningful social practice in formalized interaction between teachers and children. Within non-formalized interaction, children then use songs in agentive ways to shape their interactions and their play. Children experience socialization in the pre-school in actively, meaning that they take part in their own and their peers' socialization also by singing and by experiencing to which consequences their singing leads in social interactions. As such, the children agentively take part in their language socialization and the socialization of singing in a way that resonates with the sociocultural arena of the pre-school. In the pre-school, singing is valued as a musical and artful practice, and additionally used for specific social purposes, which intersect with musical education.

Across interactions, singing songs gains meaning as part of co-created assemblages (Pennycook, 2017) in which material objects, bodies, social and ideological structurings, and places stand in inter-relation with the deployed musical and other linguistic resources.

The focus on already established songs highlights intertextual sensitivities that children display in their spontaneous singing. However, questions regarding the meanings and functions of songs that children invent themselves and use in their interactions, remain for future research.

Singing as a formalized practice is firmly rooted in the every-day routines of the kindergarten, and has been an important pedagogical characteristic of the concept of the kindergarten since its very beginning (Kalantzis & Cope, n.y.). The socialization happening throughout formalized singing contributes to the meanings of spontaneous, non-formalized singing on the spot. As such, spontaneous singing is a result of socialization into *languageculture* (cf. Agar, 1996; Cornips et al., 2017), and constitutes a socialization into *languageculture* at the same time.

Transcription conventions

Throughout the extracts, the Jefferson Transcription system developed by Gail Jeferson was used. The conventions are taken from a detailed description in Atkinson and Heritage (1984), and have been lightly adapted for this article.

(.)	Micropause
(0.7)	Timed pause in absolute seconds
[ ]	Overlap of speech
> <	Quickened pace of speech
< >	Slowed down pace of speech
( )	Unclear section
(( ))	Transcriber's comment
word	Emphasis
↑	Rising intonation
↓	Dropping intonation
WORD	Loud/shouting
.hh, hh	in breath (with preceding fullstop), outbreath
#	Creaky voice
~	Shaky voice
♫	Singing voice
°	Speech quieter than surrounding speech by the same speaker
=	Latching.
: : :	Stretched sound

Funder information

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 - Research and Innovation Framework Programme under the H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions grant number 847596.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Leonie Cornips, Gunther De Vogelaer, Christine Arnold as well as two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

References

Agar, M. (1996). *Language shock: Understanding the culture of conversation*. New York: William Morrow.
Atkinson, M., & Heritage, J. (1984). *The structure of social action*. Cambridge: CUP.
Cekaite, A. (2017). Microgenesis of language creativity: Innovation, conformity and incongruence in children's language play. *Language Sciences, 65*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2017.01.007
Cook, G. (2000). *Language play, language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Cornips, L. (2020). The impact of preschool attendance on children's bidialectism in the Netherlands: Why toddlers may stop speaking a regional language (Limburgish) at home. *Language in Society, 1–23*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404520000275
Cornips, L., de Rooij, V., & Stengs, I. (2017). Carnivalesque language use and the construction of local identities. A plea for languageculture as a field of research. Jahrbuch für Europäische Ethnologie. *Die Niederlande, 12*(3), 61–90.
Eckert, P., & Wenger, E. (2005). Communities of practice in sociolinguistics. What is the role of power in sociolinguistic variation? *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 9*(4), 582–589.
Forrester, M. A. (2010). Emerging musicality during the pre-school years: A case study of one child. *Psychology of Music, 38*(2), 131–158. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735609339452
Frick, M. (2013). Singing and codeswitching in sequence closings. *Pragmatics, 23*(2), 243–273. https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.23.2.03fri
Fröbel, F. (1904). In D. Appleton (Ed.), *30. Pedagogics of the kindergarten: Or his ideas concerning the play and playthings of the child*.
Ghoddousi, P., & Page, S. (2020). Using ethnography and assemblage theory in political geography. *Geography Compass, 14*(10), Article e12533. https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12533
Haugen, E. I. (1972). *The ecology of language: Essays selected and introduced by Anwar S. Dil*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Kalantzis and Cope, n.y.Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (n.y.). Froebel's Kindergarten. Retrieved from newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-8/froebels-kindergarten.
Kultti, A. (2013). Singing as language learning activity in multilingual toddler groups in preschool. *Early Child Development and Care, 183*(12), 1955–1969. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.765868
Mang, E. (2000). Intermediate vocalizations: An investigation of the boundary between speech and songs in young children's vocalizations. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, (147), 116–121.
Ochs, E., & Schieffelin, B. B. (1986). Language socialization. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 15*, 163–191.
Oxbury, R. (2020). The forms and functions of "Breaking into song" during in-group conversations. *Text & Talk, 40*, 195–218. https://doi.org/10.1515/text-2020-2058
Pennycook, A. (2017). Translanguaging and semiotic assemblages. *International Journal of Multilingualism, 14*(3), 269–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2017.1315810
Pica, R. (2015). *Jump into literacy: Active learning for preschool children*. Gryphon House Inc.
Rampton, B. (2006). *Language in late modernity: Interaction in an Urban School*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Rickert. (2022). *Bidialectal pre-school: Enacting participation frames through linguistic and other semiotic means* (under submission).
Schwartz, M. (2018). Preschool bilingual education: Agency in interactions between children, teachers, and parents (introduction). In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Pre-school bilingual education. Agency in interactions between children, teachers, and parents* (Vol. 25, pp. 1–26). Cham: Springer.
Stevanovic, M., & Frick, M. (2014). Singing in interaction. *Social Semiotics, 24*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2014.929394
van de Weerd, P. (2019). "Those foreigners ruin everything here": Interactional functions of ethnic labelling among pupils in the Netherlands. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 23*(3), 244–262. https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12344
Vygotsky, L. S. (2004). Imagination and creativity in childhood. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology, 42*(1), 7–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10610405.2004.11059210
Young, S. (2002). Young children's spontaneous vocalizations in free-play: Observations of two- to three-year-olds in a day-care setting. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, (152), 43–53.
Young, S. (2004). Young children's spontaneous vocalising: Insights into play and pathways to singing. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 36*(2), 59. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03168200
Young, S. (2006). Seen but not heard: Young children, improvised singing and educational practice. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 7*(3), 270–280. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2006.7.3.270