Playing Reality into Being

Linguistic regularities within LEGO play as a gateway to an analysis of meaning production.

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Introduction

In my paper I am tracing the processual and emerging character of the meanings of things and events within a community of Lego-playing children.

I carried out the fieldwork of this project in an after school program within two different schools in Norway. Here I offered the first grade children a big box of Lego pieces to play with. I did this once a week throughout their first two semesters. During the playing time I was there with them and I also made video recordings with a small hand held camera.

This is how one of the girls pictured me in the situation. Notice the camera in my hand.

To avoid a too chaotic play situation I actually picked schools that had relatively few first graders that year. In the school I will tell you about today there were 11 first graders. 8 of them took part in the after school program and in my project. The children were of course at any time completely free to do other things instead of joining the Lego play, but as it turned out, the regularity of a “LEGO-day”, so to speak, was quickly established as part of their weekly routine and as something they actually looked very much forward to.
When I made the recordings I did not know exactly what aspects of the situation would turn out to be important in the analyses, so I tried to vary the style of filming to avoid making systematic errors. For instance I sometimes held the camera and moved it relative to some of the Lego-events taking place, and I sometimes put it down in one spot.

The empirical material supporting this presentation is 20 hours of video showing of the eight children playing with LEGO's. Although not with all of the children present at all times.

In working the video's I chose to transcribe what the children say. I give a small example of how the transcriptions look:

Tim: her bortpå e leira demmes
Per: (med dinosaur) her e anatotitaner .. no tok'en en mann av legoene
Tim: nei .. dem kunne ikke det .. for at .. har du lyst til å være med på det slemme laget?
Per: ja .. e du slem?
Tim: nei e e snill
Per: (kaster fra seg dinosauren) e ikke med på det slemme laget .. e ikke med
Tim: men du .. at du kan styre den hvis du vil
Per: men...
Tim. ska e si dæ en ting at du e ikke med på det slemme laget hvis du styre den
Per: e e ikke med på det slemme laget

These transcriptions made it possible to code verbs and semantic subjects in the material as well. This is what the colours indicate.

Throughout the “conversations” with the videos and the transcriptions, the relationship between the actions of the individual child and the shared practice emerged as the core question to be dealt with in the analysis. It became clear to me that to be able to approach the produced meaning, I had to treat meaning as something basically shared. I thus chose to bracket the intentions of the individual child and consider the practice as a unity, as a body in itself.

This painting depicts dancing as a shared practice, and it illustrates fairly well how I want the Lego-practice to be apprehended.


Verbal language is a very efficient way of producing meaning, and I have found regularities characterizing the linguistic aspect of the practice of playing with LEGO’s to be a
useful gateway to the meaning production. But before turning to how I use linguistic regularities as tools, we need to add a perspective on what is produced. What are the core dimensions of shared practices like this? I will make a suggestion by turning to the way the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) mapped and classified our direct appearances as phenomenological categories. He termed this classification “phaneroscopy”. He found that the world of experiences we all share can be described in three categories: qualities, facts and thoughts. Other names used by Peirce to denote the categories are mood, reality and cognition.

Peirce defines three modes of being that are connected to the categories mentioned: firstness, secondness and thirdness. 

Firstness or mood is pure being. It is the quality of the immediate consciousness, and can be exemplified by the feeling of red. The smell of cabbage or the sense of a melody are other examples used by Peirce to exemplify firstness. A colour, a melody or a smell makes up an uncompound whole containing form and feeling and is necessarily vague and unspecific.

Secondness relates to facts. It comprises firstness and realizes it. We are made aware of the hard facts when experience forces us to act contrary to our unreflected expectations. Since every first experience is an experience of objects, secondness jars us to a sense of reality. The real forces itself upon us as something apart from our mind, and makes us discover the world. The third mediates between the first and the second, and thought is a mediating phenomenon of the third category. I give this as an illustration of a third. Magritte in his painting reflects upon the relationship between nature and our conception of nature.

http://www.humanitiesweb.org/perl/human.cgi?s=g&p=c&a=p&ID=1066

As the point of departure for supporting my analysis of the production of meaning during LEGO play, it is important to keep in mind that these three modes of being constitute the qualities of phenomenological appearances as such. They do not posit a cleavage between the inside and outside, between mind and matter, but relates to the body of shared practices.

The point of departure that I want to convey thus is that the sharing of cultural practices necessarily includes sharing certain qualities of experience. Basically this is a quality of pure feeling, of firstness. But in my choice of cultural practice; as soon as the LEGO pieces are released from their box, secondness is realized as well.

Playing with LEGO<sub>os</sub> is a bodily activity. The bodies taking part in LEGO play are lying, sitting, jumping, crawling and waving. The hands dig, find, build, pluck apart, hold on to and move the LEGO pieces. As the bodies move there is continuous talking and the rhythm
and melody of a virtual choir of voices distinguish the shared LEGO field. In this seemingly chaotic field of sound and movement it is possible to crystallize a certain order of linguistic constructions internally related to the realization of *firstness, secondness* and *thirdness*.

*Firstness* or mood is obviously operational when the participants of play mediate different voices and characters in the LEGO world. When such characters are talking the playing children alter their quality of voice as well as their manner of speech/dialect. When Karin utters in a deep voice: “Does anybody want to come along for cross country skiing?” The LEGO character in Ida’s hand answers in a voice just as deep: “We don’t have any skis.” Together with onomatopoetic sounds and exclamations “Uæææ!” “Oi!” “Boom!” and the flailing of arms, these changes in dialect and quality of voice are the basic movements in establishing the shared experiential sphere of playing with LEGO’s. It is common that the Lego-characters speak or act in the present tense.

The production of a *second*, of a *reality*, can also be distinguished by means of linguistic regularities. When the participants of LEGO play describe the ongoing events in the LEGO world, and when they give each other instructions on what to do considering these events, they do this in the *past* tense. The past tense within these frames does not refer to past events, as it does normally. Rather, the past tense utterance positions the subjective agent at the “and then” of the situation: “and then I threw a spear at your car”, and narrates the event as it takes place. So this is really past tense with a present reference, or at least with no past reference. In such utterances, where the participants of LEGO play speak in their own voice in the past tense but with no past reference, they perform acts of creation opening the shared mood of the first in a dyadic second.

I have picked one example to illustrate such a realization of secondness. Odin, Simen, Ida and Dan play together. When the episode starts Simen says to Odin:

Simen: *you know .. it was a .. the monkey met a bad one.*

The bad dragon in Odin’s hand is immediately rushing towards Simen and the monkey standing at the table.

Odin: *vraææe*

But Simen protests

Simen: *no you did not find us .. we*
were in the jungle .. the monkey ..

The dragon withdraws and switches places with another monkey holding a spear. The monkey makes monkey sounds and comes running towards the jungle.

Odin: \( vævæ \ vævæ \ vævæ \)

Simen protests as the monkey comes closer.

Simen: \( no \ .. \ you \ wanted \ .. \ you \ were \ .. \)

The monkey approaches and reaches the jungle in spite of the protests, and Odin, Simen and the monkeys discuss what will happen next.

Odin: \( I \ found \ you \)

Simen: \( no \)

Odin: \( yes \ .. \ 'cause \ this \ monkey \ knew \ where \ the \ jungle \ was \ .. \ and \ he \ knew \ .. \)

Simen: \( but \ they \ were \ not \ .. \ you \ did \ not \ know \ where \ this \ jungle \ was \ .. \)

\( \text{it was another jungle ..} \)

Odin: \( I \ knew \ where \ the \ jungle \ was \)

\( .. \ but \ I \ did \ not \ find \ you \ inside \ the \ jungle \)

\( ææææ \ ææææ \ ææææ \ ææææ \)

The monkey starts making monkey sounds again.
The example starts with Simen describing an event in the LEGO world - a monkey confronting someone bad. The event takes place through the description, and a bad dragon comes flying the very moment the words are uttered. But the dragon does not find the prey he is after. These are the hard facts of the situation confronting him. The dragon withdraws and a second monkey comes running, confronting the first one who is hiding in the jungle. Again the expectations of monkey one constitutes the hard facts of the situation facing monkey two, and vice versa. All the time the objections and arguments raised by the two monkeys are related to their local reality - the jungle and the relationship between themselves.

In this particular reality it is an important point that the monkey is the adversary of the dragon, and monkey one is the adversary of monkey two. The shared LEGO world is squeezed open through the mutual resistance constituted by the unreflected expectations of these LEGO characters. The subjectivities made real in the situation, through confronting each other thus, are the monkeys, not Simen and Odin. Simen and Odin are not part of what is going on within the world.

The first is the common mood. The second is the reality of monkeys and dragons. A third, as well as the first and the second, can be traced in certain aspects of the linguistic pattern. When the auxiliary verbs shall, will, must or can stand in the present tense together with another verb in the infinitive, they constitute the future tense in Norwegian. The combination of future tense, and the voice of the child, is a lead to the realization of a third in this context of playing with LEGO’s. We are going to take a closer look at an example.
Simen, Odin and Dan are sitting on the floor. Odin and Simen are discussing the qualities of a certain boat when Dan breaks into the conversation between the other two:

Dan: *Odin, I have an idea about ..*  
The others don’t seem to hear him and he repeats.

Dan: *you! I am going to tell you something*¹  
.. you! *Odin! I have a great idea .. this was the water .. right? And here the crocodile can lie*

Odin: *no .. you must not do this .. you must do like this ..*

Dan: *the crocodile is supposed to lie here*²

Odin: *that was a good idea Dan .. I know of something even better ..*

Simen: *no .. what Dan did was smart .. because then they can just walk up you know .. tu tu tut*

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¹ In Norwegian "skal si" (shall say)  
² In Norwegian "skal ligge" (shall lie)
He demonstrates how they walk.

.. towards the sea

When Dan launches his idea of where to place the crocodile, we sense something new. Through using the past tense and thus evoking the landscape of the LEGO world, Dan makes his idea explicit. We can easily picture the water in front of us, and have no problem understanding that it would constitute the perfect place for a crocodile. Only he is not absolutely sure. The questioning way of describing the water diminishes the “fact value” so to speak. It thereby also reduces the likeliness of facing heavy resistance from other LEGO characters with other expectations. The fact value is kept at a low level when the crocodile is positioned in a *possible* location through the use of the auxiliary verb “can.” In the negotiations between Dan and Odin that follow, they use more auxiliary verbs in future tense constructions, suggesting different possible ways of arranging the scene such that the auxiliary verbs now constitute the axis of resistance in the interaction. It is all a matter of “can”, “must” and “will”. Rather than *opening* a world of facts, the present resistance thus allows the possibility of *different events taking place* in a factual world already open.

We see this world of possibilities realized when Simen brings a new kind of argument to the shared situation. This is an argument picking one solution over the other on the grounds of the possible *future* actions of the LEGO characters:

Simen: *no .. what Dan did was smart .. because then they can just walk up you know .. tu tu tut .. towards the sea*

Now we have a situation where the *future* possibility of the LEGO characters walking towards the sea regulates the *present* way of arranging the LEGO reality. The future can modify the past only through a third, according to Peirce. Such a third is now collectively created between Dan, Odin and Simen.

So we have seen how auxiliary verbs in future tense constructions open the LEGO reality as a spatiotemporal world with a future and a present. The third thus mediates between the mood of the first and the perceived reality of the second. Since the mediating third now place the first and the second in relative positions as well, it opens the possibility of altered mood qualities and of alternative realities.

In our example both quality and reality changes slightly when Simen makes suggestions to Odin, or Odin protests something suggested by Dan. I particularly want to point to the new layer of factuality that materializes, with the engaged and arguing individual
child in the subjective position instead of monkeys and dragons. The monkeys and dragons are still there, but they are now moved from the subjective position to an object position within the shared perceptual field. When this altered mood-reality opens its middle to a second third, the entire triadic reality of monkeys and dragons enters this perceptual field, and lends itself to a new kind of reflection performed by the playing children.

I will end this paper by illustrating this last point with another small episode where Trine comments on the voice mediated by Ida during LEGO play.

Several LEGO characters in Ida’s hands are talking to each other.

Ida: our sweethearts ..

A second character states her opinion.

Yours must talk too

a third one agrees.

oh I agree .. it is so x ..

Trine has been listening to the conversation mediated by Ida in different voice qualities. Now she comments with admiration in her voice.

Trine: I think the one of you who said “oh I agree” .. you know ..

she .. who said that .. that was a very good voice you used ..

What we see is that in addition to shared moods and to subjects with a common spatiotemporal world, the Lego-practice also produces its own reflecting meta-perspective.

References:

