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### From Play to Art—From Experience to Insight

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## ARTICLES

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### From Play to Art—From Experience to Insight

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This article investigates the role of play and playlike activities (imagination, art) in developing and using symbolic tools. We understand processes of development of symbolic tools as coordination between two types of relationships: the subject–object relationships and the subject–subject relationships. This coordination begins when a new, playlike frame of activity is introduced in the interaction. The imaginary frame of activity changes relationships between the participants. Furthermore, the imaginary activity frame may enter into interaction with the out-of-play activity frames (“reality” frames). Structures and relationships built within the imaginary frames are then used to shape the actual understanding of the world (subject–object relationship) as well as the interpersonal relationships and identities of the participants.

Introduction and further development of imaginary frames is a recursive process that takes place on different but related time scales: from microdevelopment through ontogenetic development to cultural development. Our project was designed to demonstrate some of the key moments that occur in the symbolic construction, in an “untangled” manner. To that effect, we designed a drama workshop to outline and illustrate processes that take place at the point of introduction of a new, imaginary frame and at the point when this imaginary frame begins to interact with the out-of-play frames. The aim of the workshop was to magnify each stage in construction of semiotic tools by “walking” professional researchers through a series of playlike activities.

#### INTRODUCTION

I did not know, until now, that you can at the same time love and hate your mother!

— Girl, (age 3 years 11 months) upon seeing *Hamlet* in a live stage performance.

Watching a presentation of *Hamlet*, a young girl grasps the complexity of human emotions and relationships. She is able to express her thoughts and insights to her own mother. The dramatic piece she had just seen had cast a sharp light for her on issues that are often hard to conceptualize and to talk about even for the adults. How does art mediate such insights? What is the connection between art, imagination, and play, on one hand, and processes of mediation in the psychological development, on the other? This article is especially focused on investigating the role of play and playlike activities (imagination, art) in the construction and use of symbolic tools to mediate communication and comprehension. The first part of the article introduces the dynamic model of meaning construction developed in the course of an earlier study of metaphor in children (Marjanovic-Shane, 1989). Within this model, we introduce the notion of the "TOPIC,"<sup>1</sup> defined as a jointly constructed focus or an object of communication. We further show that the construction of the TOPIC and its shaping and reshaping involves building a separate activity frame akin to a play frame. The second part of the article explores particular steps involved in building imaginary frames and developing them further into structures that can be used in the construction of symbolic tools and, through them, in development of meaningful messages and relations.

Introduction, building, and further development of imaginary frames, as well as TOPICs within them, is a recursive process that takes place on different but related time scales: from microdevelopment, which lasts one episode or even less, through ontogenetic development to cultural development. Based in the notion of recursion, we have created a particular activity for the researchers, an activity that emulates steps in the development of a particular TOPIC. Designed as an investigative tool, the workshop activity leads adult participants through the steps involved in the construction and reconstruction of semantic tools: creation of an imaginary activity frame, developing a joint TOPIC in a series of acts within the imaginary frame, creating ways to refer to the TOPIC in a short but succinct way, and relating the TOPIC to the rest of the joint experience within the group and to the other audiences using acts and signs built within the imaginary frame. The experience of the participants in the workshop<sup>2</sup> and other ethnographic data are used to discuss various aspects of creating mediational symbolic tools through activities and processes similar or identical to play.

## Background

A connection between pretend play and semiotic development is hardly a novel thought. According to Duran (1987), symbolic play<sup>3</sup> is "a complex semiotic activity" based in "particular processes which determine the choice of symbolic means, building of play units and combinations of these units" (p. 32).

One of the most significant studies in this area is Bruner's (1983) analysis of play and games and their function in learning to use language. According to Bruner, some of the main

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<sup>1</sup>We use the capitals because it is a technical term specifically defined in Marjanovic-Shane's dynamic theory of metaphor. The definition is provided later in this article.

<sup>2</sup>The workshop was held at several professional conferences at Moscow, 2003; Belgrade, 2004; Philadelphia, 2004; and Sevilla, 2005.

<sup>3</sup>Free play of children in which they take different roles and explore various imagined scenarios is sometimes called "pretend" play, sometimes "symbolic," and sometimes "dramatic" play. These differences, which reflect authors' interests and orientations, are out of the scope of this article.

tools of the Language Acquisition Support System are language-like games. Bruner analyzed the interaction between games and language on several levels. Language-like games such as peekaboo, for instance, not only “provide the first occasion for the child’s systematic use of language with an adult” (p. 45) but, more important, there are structural and functional parallels between games and language as the symbolic system.

A study by Marjanović (1990) shows that drawing a child into the activity of speech and into the sphere of language may be done through play. Adults create playlike situations and activities that are particularly suited to engage a child and bring her or him into a dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Marjanović wrote,

An adult, who intends to engage a child in a conversation, does not do it in an every day situation. Rather, he or she creates a special situation, which is not connected to anything else but to the conversation itself. This situation is, in fact, a form of play according to all its characteristics, play which is in the process of being ritualized. . . . A very limited vocabulary might be used in this type of “conversation,” however it is a vocabulary which underlines every turn in play in a very precise and a very marked way. (Marjanović, 1990, p. 22)

Our study further explores ways in which playlike activity and playlike acts involved in the construction of play frames are used in building of symbolic tools.

## Exploration of the Significative System

### Prelude

Sunday morning. G. (3 years) and J. (6½ years) are in my bed. We are all still sleepy and slumberous. It is quiet for a while. G. is first to wake up. He starts to play. He sits toward the bed board, grabs it and, moving his hands over it, makes a rasping sound with his mouth. He says in Serbo-Croatian:

G: “I am sawing!” (He is pretending to hold a saw in his hand and moves it back and forth across the bed board.)

G.’s activity is very unpleasant to J. and me, since we would like to sleep a moment longer. J. is getting annoyed and he tells G.:

J: (irritated) “Hey, G.! Don’t saw!”

G: (looks J. closely in the face and with the matching irritability): “Don’t you saw with your mouth!”

In that moment I knew that I was witnessing the birth of a new meaning.<sup>5</sup>

(Field Note: Feb. 15, 82)

It is not a coincidence that pretend play and learning to use language in children begin and continue to develop simultaneously. We propose that operations and processes that take place

<sup>4</sup>Known examples of play and playlike situations come from observations of the activities with infants in various Western societies. This may not be true for other cultures and societies, but there are no systematic studies of the type of activities that we call “playlike” in this study.

<sup>5</sup>It is interesting that in the Russian language the verb *to saw* can be and is often used as an idiomatic conventional expression with the same meaning as was here “invented” by the children: “to talk stupidly and without substance.” In Serbo-Croatian, “to saw” is most often used in its “literal” meaning of cutting wood. I never heard it used like in this episode (E. Matusov, personal communication, April 2007).

in and around play activities also constitute an intrinsic part of semantic development, that is, development of the ability to use language to construct meanings. In fact, we examine playlike processes and acts by which these processes are realized in the context of building and using symbolic tools and in development of skills and functions involved in symbolic mediation.

In other words, if we accept Vygotsky's (1986) thesis that psychological development in humans is based in mediation by tools and symbols, then we need to further examine the nature of mediation itself and that of mediational tools. How does mediation actually work? Are there different kinds of mediation, and how are they interrelated? How is it possible for any organism to "insert" a mediating factor into biologically founded direct communication with others and the environment? How does one explain events of building meaning and complex relationships by using imagination and pretense? How can we understand processes that underlie the episode between two little boys and their mother/aunt on that Sunday morning?

### Conceptualization of Mediation

A brief survey of the literature on mediation reveals that there are at least three different ways to conceptualize "mediation." Although the differences derive from different analytical foci and concerns of particular authors, they are, in fact, complementary to each other. The concept of mediation appears to differ depending on whether the focus of the analysis lies more in the processes of production and labor organization (Engeström, 1989), on educational settings and learning as the main activity (Wells, 1999), or on development of symbolic processes and language itself (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). We show how different views of mediation relate to each other and can be seen as different aspects of the same system.

In Vygotskian theories of psychological development, mediation is a notion that "the development of the child's higher mental processes depends on the presence of mediating agents in the child's interaction with the environment" (Kozulin, 2003, p. 17). In Kozulin's view, mediating agents can be symbolic tools, organized learning activities, or other human beings (p. 17). Similarly, in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory theories of work and labor organization as well as learning activities, Engeström (2003) contends that "the relationship between the human agent and objects of environment is mediated by cultural means, tools and signs. Human action has a tripartite structure" (p. 1).

Mediation is, therefore, often seen as cultural intervention into the immediate relationship between the child and her environment, or the direct relationship between the "subject" and the "object." In other words, the relationship between an individual and her or his environment becomes indirect or mediated: Instead of a direct or immediate sensory-motor feedback loop, the nature of this relationship is changed by a mediational factor. Mediational factors are different cultural and social artifacts, which range from tools as material objects through special interpersonal acts to culturally produced symbols and symbolic systems (language). All of these mediators modify relationships of subjects (individuals) to objects of the environment.

On the other hand, the focus of inquiry is slightly different in linguistic theories, in particular in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Wells, 1999). What appears to be subjected to mediation in SFL and some educational theories is not the subject-object relationship. Instead it is the relationship between participants in communication. The

difference in the theoretical focus and the resulting difference in the concept of mediation were described by Hasan (2002):

To say that a tool mediates is to say that someone uses it to impart some force or energy to the business at hand: this is the content of mediation. With technological tools the content is material; what is imparted is material force/energy. With an abstract tool, the energy is semiotic; it imparts some semiotic force. The content/energy to be imparted is directed towards something/someone; it has a destination. *The technological tools direct the energy to the process of labour being carried out by the mediator-labourer; the abstract tool is directed toward another who is addressed by the mediator-speaker, and in this sense semiotic mediation is an inherently interactive process: there must be a conscious mediatee.* (italics added; p. 4)

Figure 1 is a schematic representation of this difference in conceptualizing mediation.

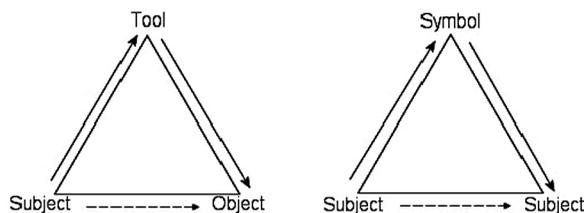


FIGURE 1 Different types of mediation.

Vygotsky (1978) also made a distinction between the tools and symbols. However, in contrast to Hasan, Vygotsky described symbols as having more than just an interpersonal regulatory function. He was especially interested in the self-regulatory function that symbols have. In other words, he was interested in the process that enables the subject as an agent to simultaneously be the subject-mEDIATEE.

In our investigation, it is of paramount importance to understand both the object-oriented relationships and the subject-oriented relationships, as well as how do they combine into a single activity system. Semiotic development is not only a development of communicational skills but clearly also a development of thinking related to the world. Following Vygotsky, our investigation focuses on how a communicative skill evolves into a cognitive tool and how in that process communication itself is transformed. Therefore, we start with communicative acts and we investigate the nature of mediation which transforms them into symbolic ones.

Cole (1996) also described interactions between the two mediating systems. His research focuses on how a system of interpersonal interaction leads to the construction of texts into mediating artifacts. At the start of the research, children's understanding of the world is mediated by the adults. Simultaneously, the adults used texts as mediators of their own understanding of the world. The educational and developmental goal is achieved when the mediating acts of adults coordinated children's activity with texts in such a way that texts became self-standing mediating artifacts for children. Figure 2 schematically depicts "the juxtaposition of existing and to-be-founded systems of mediation [dashed lines] that have to be coordinated." The established mediating system that children use is the one where the adults are interactive mediators. An educational goal for children is to construct texts as mediating artifacts. The right side of

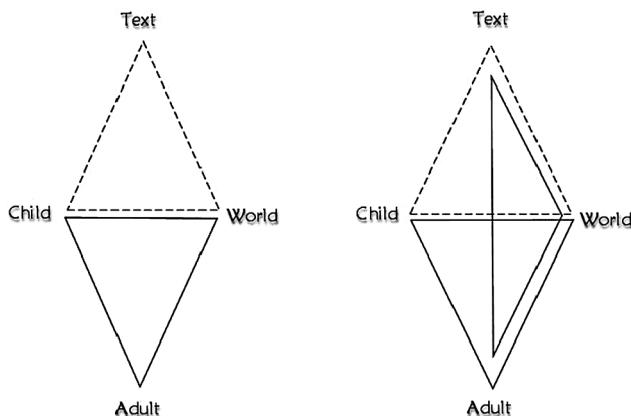


FIGURE 2 Transitions to new mediating systems, after Figure 9.5 (Cole, 1996, p. 276).

Figure 2 shows the transition where the mediating system practiced by adults using texts is used as a coordinating activity through which the children construct new relationships and usages of the texts.

Like Cole, we have assumed that symbols, signs, and other semiotic mediating artifacts (texts) gradually gain their referential (object-oriented) dimension within interactive communicative acts. However, we have also assumed that the object orientedness of communicative acts themselves represents a novel step in the development of communicational skills too. Langer (1979) discussed different ways in which some communicative devices are referential. She distinguished between signals and symptoms, on one hand, and symbols, on the other. The referentiality of signals and symptoms originates out of their internal relatedness to the objects they represent: They are an intrinsic part of them, or in some other way they are essentially related to the objects they signify. Like the sound of thunder and the lightning, they cannot be separated. Symptoms and signals are a part of an immediate situation they share with the referents. In contrast to symptoms and signals, according to Langer, symbols

are not a proxy for their objects, but are *vehicles for the conception of objects*. To conceive a thing or a situation is not the same as to 'react toward it' overtly, or to be aware of its presence. In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly "mean."* (italics added; pp. 60–61)

### Mediation in the Dynamic Model of Meaning Construction

Mediation in the development of symbolic tools, thus, is not a simple tripartite relationship between the subject–mediator–object nor between the subject–mediator–subject (mediatee). Symbolic mediation should be seen, rather, as coordination and dynamic interplay between, on one hand, the subject–object relationship and, on the other, the subject–subject relationship. Based on the analysis of metaphor development in children (Marjanovic-Shane, 1989), symbolic meaning was conceptualized as an activity, or more precisely as a dynamic system

of interpersonal relational acts. The basic analytic unit of meaning was described as a *propositional act* that establishes three communicative entities: an ME (an active subject), a YOU (a relational subject), and a TOPIC (a communicative object). Relationships between the three entities are established and shaped through a COMMENT, or a mediating act, described as a communicative gesture. Figure 3 depicts this model.

A propositional act as a unit of meaning can be performed (or merely implied) using different syntactic, prosodic, or pragmatic units of communication. In other words, the basic unit of meaning is not tied to any particular syntactic or pragmatic unit of communication. Within a propositional act, the TOPIC represents a negotiated, joint focus of attention, defined as that what the proposition is about for the participants. TOPICS are created, negotiated, and developed through COMMENTS—acts that simultaneously create/re-create relationships between the participants themselves and shape their understanding of the TOPIC. A simple way to establish a TOPIC is an act of pointing to an object/entity. The pointing itself is an act of bringing something into a joint attention. The “pointing act” can be achieved using different devices: from directing one’s finger to an object to using elaborate utterances. For instance, the following example shows the establishment of a TOPIC through consecutive propositional acts:

[J. (1 year 9 months) and an adult]

J. is intrigued by trains that pass near our house and could be seen through windows. But he is still small and needs to be picked up to look out of a window. When he hears a train passing, he excitedly runs to the nearest adult exclaiming:

J: “Foo-foo! Foo-foo!” (His word for “train”) [Proposition I, “Hear, train is coming”]

He holds his arms up in the air clearly indicating he wants to be picked up. [Proposition II, “Take me up, please”]

When picked up and taken to the window, he watches the train as it passes and utters one of the following:

1. J: “Foo-foo maye!” (in a high voice). (“Train is very small”) [Proposition III]

2. J: “Foo-foo aaa-goo!” (in a deep voice). (“Train is very big”) [Proposition III]

(Field Note: Feb. 1, 77; translated from Serbo-Croatian)

J.’s first propositional act (Proposition I: “Hear, train is coming!”) refers to the sound of a passing train. J. identifies the sound through his own expression for a train: “Foo-foo.”

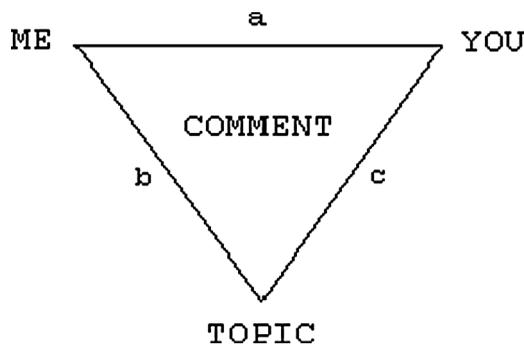


FIGURE 3 A propositional act.

This identification is a COMMENT about the sound (“It’s a train”) and at the same time it establishes the TOPIC (“train”) as a joint focus of attention between an adult and J. himself.

His almost-simultaneous rising of hands to be picked up leads to the creation of the second proposition. It is another COMMENT that establishes relationships between him, the adult, and the train (as a TOPIC). This act can be described as establishing a number of meaningful relations—“Pick me up to see the train,” “Let’s see the train together,” “Let’s see what kind of a train it is.”

Finally the third COMMENT establishes yet another proposition (Proposition III): “Train is very small” or “Train is very big.” This builds on the TOPIC itself and on the established relationships between J. (a ME), an adult (a YOU), and the TOPIC (“train” or “Foo-foo”).

In the dynamic model of meaning construction each one of the three established relationships is mediated by the other two. The TOPIC is an object of communication, and in that capacity it becomes a mediator in the relationship between the participants, that is, their relationship becomes a *relationship about something else*. Simultaneously, the relationship of each one of the participants toward the TOPIC is mediated by the other participant and the nature of their relationship. The TOPIC is not merely an object or an entity existing in the world at large. Rather, it is a joint construction with a particular meaning and a particular immediate significance for the communicating participants. Thus, symbolic communication is more than establishing joint foci of attention, it is about creating relationships and constructing entities with special significance within delimited frames. What we described here is the basic unit of making meaning through a COMMENT, that is, a communicational gesture of establishing (or embellishing on) the TOPIC about which the ME and the YOU create and re-create their relationship.

The four functional components of the communicational act we described (the TOPIC, the ME, the YOU, and the COMMENT) describe neither physical entities nor processes that exist outside of the communicational act, although each one of them is realized through an actual physical activity of the real people involved. Within each actual communication, the propositional acts flow one after another, building on each other and thus developing the nature of the TOPIC, its meaning and significance, as well as the relationships between the participants who both simultaneously and consecutively assume the role of the ME and the YOU.

## Play and Imagination

Play and playlike acts are in an essential way connected to the transition from direct communicative acts to the mediated ones. Vygotsky (1978) wrote about a particular characteristic of play acts: “In play thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things” (p. 97). The ability to “detach” from the immediate environment and to give another “meaning” to objects and to actions is, according to Vygotsky, a “transitional stage” toward creating meanings that are completely free of the immediate surrounding environment and events.

Play activity should be seen as a “dissipative structure”—a “self organizing system far from equilibrium”<sup>6</sup> (Capra, 1996, pp. 86). This self-organizing system on one hand negates the existing order between individuals and, on the other, calls for creation of new self-organizing activity systems (i.e., new identities, new roles, new rules, and new objects). Although they are forged in play, elements of fictive activity systems might become social and psychological tools used to create and to understand, that is, to mediate understanding of the actual activity systems.

This happens when a new metaphorical meaning is constructed in communication. When metaphors appeared in children’s speech, it was found that they were created using propositional acts that originated within imaginary frames but were used to address the “reality” (Marjanovic-Shane, 1989). In other words, propositional acts, which establish and maintain distinct frames of interpretation, like play frames, are sometimes used to bring the contents and the structures from within those frames of interpretation into relationships with the “unframed” activities, sometimes called “reality” or “real life.” This characteristic of propositional acts becomes particularly visible in the case of building metaphoric meanings where an act of making a comment originates in an immediately established play zone. This is actually what happened in the “Sunday morning episode” described earlier. In that episode, one can observe development from a single world of joint activity into two spheres or frames of activity:

- a Sunday morning lounging in bed, and
- a play activity that G. is beginning to construct—a world in which he pretends to be “sawing” something.

The two frames are clearly separate, yet they influence each other. “Sawing,” a term introduced to establish the play frame, becomes a term that transitions from the play frame into the “Sunday morning lounging” frame in the moment when J. asks G. to stop “sawing.” The next switch occurs when G. retorts, “Don’t you saw with your mouth!”—this time clearly taking the term “sawing” to a new level, from a phrase used to construct a play frame to a metaphoric insult that creates a new quality in the interpersonal relations: being annoyed with each other. During that transformation, one can also observe constant changes of the referent to which the word *sawing* points and constant changes in the act of commenting achieved through the use of the same term: from creating the play frame and a particular action within it (MOVE I), to pointing to the play frame as the whole and giving it a negative emotional tone (MOVE II), to insulting the other participant in the “Sunday morning lounging” frame through turning the term “sawing” into a metaphorical comment aimed to denigrate the other’s request (MOVE III).

The switches into and out of the play frame became important for interpreting and understanding interaction and communication as practiced both by children and by adults. These movements between the frames of communication are important for understanding processes of meaning construction in general. According to Bateson (1972), play is a framed activity in which rules of interpretation differ from the rules of interpretation “outside” the frame.

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<sup>6</sup>Capra (1996) presented “dissipative structures” through the work of Ilya Prigogine as self organizing systems *far from equilibrium*. A dissipative structure is a form of self-organization in which “the system has to act as a whole, producing a high degree of order through the coherent activity. . . . This coherent behavior emerges spontaneously at critical points of instability far from equilibrium” (pp. 86, 88).

Signs are created in play to stand for objects or acts that the play is about, but play signs themselves do not have the same relationship to their referents. Vygotsky expressed it in a different way, but he also pointed out the change in the relationship between the sign and the signified object/action. In Vygotsky's (1978) words, it is the "meaning" that dominates over objects and actions in play, while in the "reality" frame, objects and actions dictate their meaning. Therefore, "play" is a separate activity frame, a separate zone of existence in which space, time, relationships between participants and the roles they play, rules of behavior, and goals of activity are different and separate from the ongoing "here-and-now" existence. In one word, using Bakhtinian terminology, a play frame can be characterized as a distinct and a separate chronotope<sup>7</sup> (Bakhtin, 1994). Similarly, the out-of-play frame can also be characterized as a chronotope or, more likely, a collection of chronotopes. A chronotope is "a way of comprehending human life as materially and simultaneously present within a physical-geographical space and a specific point of historic time" (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 180). The notion of a chronotope implies more than just space–time continuum. It includes a third dimension composed of social and individual values and relationships. Throughout the rest of this article, the terms "play frame" and "play chronotope" are used interchangeably but always in the Bakhtinian sense as a distinct point in the time–space–value continuum.

In the study of metaphor as a symbolic tool, it became obvious that a closer look should be given to the interaction between the two chronotopes instead of either one of them taken separately. Focusing attention to the switches between the two frames of activity (chronotopes) was a significant breakthrough for understanding how metaphors are created. Construction of a play frame is not merely making of a distinct frame (a chronotope, a zone, a plane, or a world), but, more important, it is an act that creates a bifurcation point in the continuum of the "here and now" or the "reality" frame/chronotope. Furthermore, the bifurcation opens up a possibility, so to speak, to turn back on itself, that is, a possibility for the two frames of activity (the play and the nonplay) to interact with each other and, thus, to construct a new dimension in communication and comprehension. The new frame of activity can become a mediating tool in the relationships between the participants and in their perspectives of the world.

Construction of the imagined (play) frame or chronotope among the adults is most of the time implicit and transparent because it is based on the many previously shared personal experiences and/or culturally established symbols that the participants can easily invoke. It becomes more visible and felt in special situations when the play chronotope needs to be fully constructed with a deliberate intention to induce changes in real relationships between the participants and their relationships or understanding of the world. This is what happens in metaphor: An imaginary frame is constructed and then immediately used to make a comment on the immediate (reality) chronotope (i.e., to create a particular effect in the way the participants in the communication think and feel about a segment of their "real" activity).

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<sup>7</sup>Bakhtin's (1994) notion of a chronotope unites space, time, and their valorization—in other words, a chronotope is not merely a neutral, empty, and uniform point in the continuum of space–time. On the contrary, it is a meaningful unity in which social and individual values and relationships reign supremely. For instance, "[temporal categories] are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories. [In the epic world] . . . in the past, everything is good: all the really good things (i.e., the 'first' things) occur *only* in the past" (Bakhtin, 1994, p. 182).

We can observe a deliberate and explicit construction of the play frame in the following example:

A lawyer friend of mine was hired to defend a large Southern utility against a suit by a small one, and he thought at first that he was doing fine. All of the law seemed to be on his side, and he felt that he had presented his case well. Then the lawyer for the small utility said, speaking to the jury, almost as if incidentally to his legal case “So now we see what it is. They got us where they want us. They holding us up with one hand, their good sharp fishin’ knife in the other and they sayin’, ‘you jes set still, little catfish, we’re jes going to gut ya.’” At that moment, my friend reports, he knew he had lost his case. ‘I was in the hands of a genius of metaphor.’” (Booth, 1978, p. 50)

### Art and the Dynamic Model of Meaning Construction

To better understand how mediating tools are built, one has to look not only at the processes of establishing, building, and shaping the imaginary frame but also at the activities and processes that take place when the imaginary frame is used to make an impact in the reality. This is the process that takes place in metaphors that we studied in children and in adult interaction. This is also a process that can be called art in the general sense. In fact, we are using the concept of “art” in two ways. First, we use “art” to refer to the patterns of relationships and the quality of the content created within the play frame/chronotope. We describe three qualities of the play frame, which have a particular significance for the relationship that can be established between play and nonplay frames.

Second, we use the term *art* to refer to the very processes and actions by which the play frame/chronotope is brought into a meaningful relationship with the ongoing reality chronotope. Vygotsky (1930/2004) argued that

products of imagination have a very long history ... [and that] their development takes a *circular path*. The elements out of which they are constructed were taken by the human inventor from reality. Within the mind of this inventor, in his thoughts, these elements underwent complex reworking and were transformed into products of the imagination. ... Finally, once they were given material form, they returned to reality, but returned as a new active force with the potential to alter reality. This is the *complete cycle followed by the creative operation of the imagination*. (italics added; p. 21)

We argue that constructing a play frame is not enough to create new symbolic tools. The TOPICs built in the play frame must be taken out of the play frame, externalized (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003), or used to change relationships and understandings beyond the play frame. Unless the acts from within the play frame can be used outside of the play frame, thus completing the “full cycle” (Vygotsky, 1930/2004), they cannot create full insights. Although within the scope of the imaginary play frame, participants can create vivid and strong lived-through experiences, it is only in the process of externalization that these experiences can be transformed into true insights, either cognitive or emotional. When and if externalized, experiences from within the play chronotope can have effects both on the culture and on the individual. In that sense, all symbolic mediational acts are by

definition miniature works of art. Just like the scene from *Hamlet* could crystallize the nature of human relationships to a little girl, mediational acts can “hold” the shared stories, the TOPICs shaped in specific ways, and make them into lenses through which the world, the others, and the self are understood beyond the imaginary frames within which they were forged.

### Three Aspects of the Play Frame/Chronotope

Construction of the play frame or play chronotope possesses three new qualities, features that are not present in the nonplay frame. First, play takes place when the interacting participants can introduce a change into their own interaction. This means that instead of acting and reacting to each other, they are able and willing to “play around” or “play with” their own interaction. Bateson (1972) called this a “meta-message,” or a message that creates a play frame. The first aspect of a play frame/chronotope is in the very fact that the participants do not interact with each other directly, but instead, they make their own interaction into a TOPIC *about* which they construct a play frame. Each participant’s act is not any more an “I do this to you” act, but instead it is an “If I do this to you” act. In other words, instead of being direct, the relationship between the participants in a play frame becomes mediated by a TOPIC. The TOPIC of a play frame is what the play frame is about, its *raison d’être*. There is no play without a TOPIC. Creating a TOPIC is synonymous with creating a play frame. A TOPIC exists only between the participants; it represents their focus within the play frame. Bretherton (1984), for instance, wrote that “the joint creation of a make-believe reality requires more than the message ‘this is play.’ In order to pretend with companions, children need techniques for negotiating about content: what theme or script is to be played, and where as well as how the theme is to be realized” (p. 25). The usual invitation to play is “let’s play XY,” as in,

“Pretend there is a monster coming, OK?” (Bretherton, 1984, p. 25).

“Let’s pretend you are my father and I am your daughter.” (a mother to a child) (Field Note: April 10, 81).

Second, the TOPIC of a play frame is never static. It is in constant development, changing from one moment to the next. It can grow from a mere imitation of a former behavior and a variation of the mode of interaction to a complex entity with its own rules and expectations. Previous COMMENTS—mediating acts which shape relationships within “me–topic–you” triad—become amalgamated parts of the TOPIC itself and subjected to new COMMENTS. This process is recursive and takes place on different time scales. A TOPIC develops within each instance of play (microdevelopment), it may develop over a larger segment of time and multiple repeated instances of play during a period in the life of a player or a group of players (ontogenetic development), and a TOPIC may be developed over a longer time and multiple players who do not have to be personally acquainted or related to each other (cultural development). An example of TOPICs that span long periods and multiple players are TOPICs of traditional games. Mainly studied by ethnographers of children’s folklore, play frames, play forms, and their corresponding TOPICs, which last over longer periods, are described as emergent, mutant, or shifting because of their use in

the interactions of different children, in different setting, and at different times (McDowell, 1999).

This leads us to the third characteristic of the play frame/chronotope—a possibility to yield TOPICs that can become larger than a particular instance of play taking place between particular participants. In other words, a play frame may cease to be private and provisional and may itself become a tool for sharing complex meaning structures. One may even see each particular individual player as becoming a participant in developing a culturally relevant topic. In that sense, semantic development of an individual is, at the same time, an instance of the cultural development of a particular semantic tool. A person who reads a book or watches a play or a movie becomes a participant in the development of a particular culturally relevant topic. Describing transmission of children's folklore, McDowell (1999) stated that “longitudinal studies reveal the gradual acquisition of competence in the traditional forms of children's folklore, whereby narratives are given artistic shape and poignancy, and riddles eventually incorporate authentic kernels of linguistic or conceptual ambiguity” (p. 60).

“Am I easier to be play'd on than a pipe?” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2)

Investigating various manifestations of this process, we decided to observe how a “single” TOPIC might be introduced and developed from a “hazy hunch” of an indescribable live experience in play to a very elaborate idea and possibly a profound insight. Activities through which any TOPIC might be developed demand various strategies to introduce and sustain playlike frames, as well as use them as mediators in the development of new communicative patterns and cognitive structures.

In an attempt to “unpack” a possible scenario in the construction of symbolic tools, we created a drama workshop for the adult professional participants.<sup>8</sup> Each part of the workshop is meant to investigate a distinctive “stage”<sup>9</sup> or an aspect in the development of a particular TOPIC. A complete development of a novel TOPIC, from its induction to its most complex forms, could be seen as a movement through at least four “stages” that we are going to exemplify in the next section:

1. Bifurcation point: Introduction of a game in which participants' relationships and activities are controlled and shaped by a simple set of rules (“good form”). The game is a new activity frame/chronotope in which the participants assume new roles and relationships and live through new experiences. The TOPIC of such a game is not a given; rather, it begins to form within the game as it is played.

<sup>8</sup>This workshop was first created for a presentation at the Conference on Creativity and Imagination in Education and Methods of Mastery Moscow, November 2003. It was then developed and used in the special workshop at the Seminar for Educators in the opening of the Cultural Educational Center “ZMAJ” in New York, May 2004; at the BITEF Polyphony Festival/Conference, Belgrade, September 2004; and at the First Congress of ISCAR, Seville, 2005.

<sup>9</sup>We are using the term *stage* both to mean a “stage in development,” a level, or a degree and in its theatrical use as an “arena” or a “set.” We do this because at this point we are aware that individuals and groups can move between the stages of the development of a TOPIC in many directions and not only in one way; however, each movement builds on the TOPIC, and so it does develop and grow.

2. Exploring the possibilities of a new TOPIC through introducing variations into the imaginary frame leading to the destruction of the original “good form” of a ritualized game. Instead of definite rules, roles and turns “prescribed” by a known game, this stage involves creation of new, more elaborate and intricate rules and activities within the imaginary frame. This takes a form of make-believe or pretend play, where all rules, roles, and activities are in constant negotiation and exploration. This is achieved by creating increasingly elaborate pretend “scenarios” with potential to act out whole stories.
3. Simultaneously, the negotiation and planning for the make-believe frame necessitate frequent switches between the pretend-play frame and the negotiating activity frame. This opens up a possibility for the creation of a new “good form” in the communicational activity: the construction of referential means to point to particular entities within the imaginary frame, which can convey the whole experience of a TOPIC in one gesture or a “frozen picture” from within the imaginary frame.
4. Making new connections—or transcending fictive, imaginary frames. A group of participants, who are constructing TOPICs within imaginary frames, can transcend their own lived-through experiences. This can happen in two ways: first, when their privately constructed imaginary frames are enriched and enhanced by existing culturally established symbolic tools including art. Second, it can happen when the participants of a privately constructed play frame can connect their “frozen pictures” to experiences of other audiences beyond their immediate group.

The workshop investigates these stages by guiding the participants into creating imaginary frames, exploring them from within, and providing them with culturally constructed tools to enhance their creations. The participants emerge from each stage of the dramatic activity to a self-reflective examination and discussion. In that sense, we are using a dramatic improvisational activity not merely as an object of the study but also as a means of casting light onto each aspect or “stage” of our object, that is, the construction of semantic tools and mediated meanings. The drama workshop is meant to both magnify and unpack processes that are otherwise automatic in expert language users and to condense time usually needed for a complete development of a semantic tool—in a life of a person or a community.

We now describe principles, assumptions, materials, and activities, which we use to lead the participants through all the stages of the workshop.

### Bifurcation Point: “Red Gloves”—A Traditional Game

Human beings are introduced into play and playlike behaviors through certain ritualized social interactions with their caregivers. Some of these have been described as traditional games—for instance, a game of “peekaboo” (Bruner, 1983). Others have been gathered in the form of traditional nursery rhymes (Opie & Opie, 1975). Traditional games are culturally created play forms, which focus on specific matters of importance in human relationships and interaction. Each game has a potential to explore a particular domain of interpersonal relationships and a particular range of emotions. By playing the game, the players are given certain ready-made rules of relating to each other, they assume certain ready-made roles, and they can start to discover the built in logic of such behavior and the relationships that it affords.

Traditional games have developed over generations into sets of clear and easy rules and materials (songs, sayings, and sometimes material artifacts) that, taken together, can be recognized as examples of what in the dynamic theory is known as “good form” (Capra, 1996). The distilled rules of a traditional game, its “good form,” make a core of the game, or what Bruner (1983) and Marjanović (1990) have called “deep structure.” A more precise way to describe these rules is as the game’s invariables or constants: The rules cannot be changed for the game to stay the same game. They are impersonal, but they delineate particular roles and relationships to be taken by players. However, by playing the game and using these rules and roles, the players also bring their own ways, strategies, and idiosyncrasies into the game. They explore, discover, and create their own concrete roles and relationships and thereby weave a particular “surface structure.” Each instance of playing the game means making the abstract, impersonal rules into concrete, personal events. The players discover what the game can mean for them and to them, that is, they create their own TOPIC—what the game is all about.

To create this stage in the process for the workshop participants, the first activity is a traditional game of “The Red Gloves” (“Crvene rukavice” in Serbian/Croatian; “Ladushki” in Russian). The rules and the roles of the game explore a particular interpersonal act, but the TOPIC of the game is not explicit. Each pair of players is given a chance to further develop and explore potential emotional and cognitive meanings in the game. This game was chosen because it contains a seed of a particular TOPIC, which gets its most complex structure in a scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (a scene between Guildenstern and Hamlet used at the end of the workshop). Like in all traditional games, the rules and the roles in the game of “The Red Gloves” exist independently of particular players. They are the game’s constant or “deep structure.”

In the game, the two players keep switching between the roles of the “predator” and the “prey.” To start the game, the players assume a face-to-face position and one of them, in the role of a “predator,” extends his or her hands with both palms up. This looks like an offer or an invitation. The other one, in the role of “prey,” places his or her hands palms down over the first player’s hands, but not touching them. The goal of the “predator” is to suddenly pull her or his hands from underneath and attack the other one by slapping her or his hands from the top. The other player has a chance to avoid the attack. If the predator succeeds in hitting the prey’s hands, the game starts over with players in the same roles. If the predator misses, the players switch the roles so that the one who was the “prey” becomes the “predator” (see Figures 4 and 5). The game repeats as long as the players like.

The beginning of the game represents a bifurcation point for each set of the players. They create a new activity frame and simultaneously they observe themselves from the standpoint outside of the play frame. However, to make this dual point of view explicitly present, the players in the drama workshop are grouped in sets of two pairs. While one pair plays the game, the other pair assumes the role of observers. The pairs eventually switch. This arrangement creates dual planes/worlds/chronotopes for each group of four (see Figure 6).

The “inner structure” of each game carries a seed of exploring and understanding a particular human relationship. This potential of the game is further explored, developed, and understood by actually playing the game. The game itself becomes the TOPIC of the participants’ relationship to each other. Participants are invited to make the TOPIC their own by



FIGURE 4 Starting to play Red Gloves.



FIGURE 5 Moves in the Red Gloves.

introducing and exploring variations while still keeping the rules of the game. Through a series of activities designed to foreground chosen aspects of their roles/relationships, they create joint private experiences of the TOPIC and start to change ways they relate to each other.



FIGURE 6 Two pairs.

### Creating a Story—Opening Up the “Good Form” of the Traditional Game

The scope of traditional game has its limitations for the development of the TOPIC. It allows the players use its “good form” to create experiences that are felt and lived through (“perezhivanye”) and that create new possibilities in the participants’ actual relationship. However, to develop the TOPICs beyond this initial tentative stage, the players need to break out of the limiting frame of the traditional game. This is done through an invitation to explicitly state a TOPIC (“What is this game about?”) and to create a story that should highlight the TOPIC in a particular way the participants’ want to stress.

This phase is similar to children’s pretend play activity. In contrast to the traditional game with strictly structured rules, roles, relationships, and goals, there are no explicit rules of play, roles, or outcomes. In fact, it could be claimed that an implicit objective of this activity is to jointly create and establish new rules, roles, and relationships regarding the TOPIC. There is a great amount of freedom in the shaping of the TOPIC. Although the participants in our workshop were told to create a story to further explore the TOPIC emerging from the “Red Gloves,” each group of participants created a very different story, giving different meanings to the TOPICs they inferred from the traditional game.

For instance, one of the stories created in the workshop in Belgrade 2004 was about a bullfight in which a toreador lures the bull into an attack just to suddenly spring back and kill the bull. The story was enacted as a pantomime (see Figures 7 and 8).

Another group of the participants invoked the fable of “The Fox and the Raven,” where the fox and the raven play similar roles of the predator and the prey. The fox lures the raven into believing that he has a nice voice, only to make him drop the cheese when he starts to sing.



FIGURE 7 Bullfight: Luring the bull.



FIGURE 8 Bullfight: Killing the bull.

### “Frozen Pictures”—Reinventing a “Good Form”

Creating a pretend play story requires another bifurcation into two more separate frames of the activity: There is a division into the planning and the enactment frames of the activity. The two frames are usually not separated in time into a planning phase and the enactment phase. Rather, they are intermingled, and the participants (children or adults) frequently switch between planning and the enactment, yet they manage to keep them as separate frames.

The planning frame represents an activity of negotiating various points regarding what is happening or going to happen in the story—the enactment frame. All the actions within the planning frame are pointing to or referring to the fictive play frame. Thus the planning activity involves creating ways to refer to one or another aspect of the imaginary frame. These acts are acts of creating connections between two activity frames, and to achieve that, they have to be particularly suitable or well formed. Sometimes, that is achieved by pointing to various parts of the imaginary frame iconically through a physical enactment or a gesture. On other occasions, this must be achieved by creating a metaphor. For instance, this is how Chevillie (2006) described the process of development of spatial concepts relevant for playing a smooth basketball game:

As Jenny, a junior reserve center described, the coaches often used metaphorical allusions to help players move from a mechanical reliance on ball movement to an internalized felt sense: “Coach teaches guards the ‘string concept’—You’re not supposed to get closer than maybe 10 or 12 feet. When this person cuts through, you stay on the string. If she cuts away from you, she’s pulling you with her . . .” (p. 31)

In the drama workshop, we made this process into a separate, explicit activity, an exercise in creating new referential means. The participants were given a task to reexamine the story they had created and to find a way to represent it through a “frozen picture.” The frozen picture had to embody the essence of the story, to represent the “condensed moment,” the epitome of the meaning of the story. Making a frozen picture is an effort to create a new “good form.” The frozen picture becomes a symbolic representation, a gesture that is forged into a symbolic tool to communicate the meaning created within the imaginary frame. As a gesture, the frozen picture is a “snapshot” of the most representative moment of the story. For instance, the photographs chosen for this article (see Figures 7 and 8) are such frozen pictures. However, a frozen picture can be any other act or a material thing: a musical representation (tune), a sound, a movement (an actual physical gesture), a material object related to the play chronotope, or an utterance (i.e., a word or a phrase). Such frozen pictures mediate TOPICS that are jointly created and/or experienced within the imaginary frame/chronotope for the immediate participants.

### *Hamlet*: Transcending Private Imaginary Frames

The last block of the drama workshop introduces a scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 2). Participants were given a short script of this scene. They were asked to create a little theatrical play and to present it to the others.<sup>10</sup> In this scene, Hamlet lures Guildenstern into believing that he (Hamlet) wants him (Guildenstern) to play a flute, only to use Guildenstern’s own excuse of having no skill (in playing flutes) to “hit” him back with: “‘Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me.’”

By introducing Shakespeare’s text, we created an opportunity for the participants to transcend the privacy of their own jointly constructed experience and thus to develop their TOPICS even

<sup>10</sup>In Seville, where the participants were of multiple nationalities, we had the scene in several languages: English, Russian, Spanish, and Serbian. This produced another interesting twist in the play.

further. In other words, we let them encounter another kind of fictive play frame in the form of dramatic art and use it as a cultural mediator to enhance their own concepts and experiences.

A scene from Shakespeare's play works in two ways to enhance experiences forged in small groups during their own plays. On one hand, it gives the participants a fully developed and culturally well-known script that, like a perfect tool, can bring their own experiments and experiences into a sharper focus, giving them a new intensity. It also introduces the author of the script, Shakespeare, into their inner group. This enables the participants to collaborate with someone whose status in the larger society elevates the significance of what they are doing to a culturally important level.

Second, because drama is an art of performance, it puts the participants in a position to have to communicate experiences from their private, inner circle to the audience that is "outside" of their inner group. This final request is what gives the whole activity of creating a play an additional new dimension—a focus and an intensity that are strong enough to communicate the "point" of the play both to the external audience but also to the players themselves. For instance, one of the participants in the Seville conference said that she was lost during the rehearsals of the scene from *Hamlet*, but everything suddenly came into focus for her at the final presentation of the scene for the others in the workshop. Having to create a presentation for an audience outside the "inner group" of the immediate participants, requires making new connections between own (group or individual) experiences and generally known cultural lore. This means creating new symbolic tools or communicational gestures that span two activity frames or chronotopes—the fictive and the "real" one. By creating a whole dramatic play based on a well-known (or a novel) script and presenting it to an external audience, one can weave a multitude of joint experiences into a new way of seeing, feeling, and understanding.

## DISCUSSION

We described an outline of a theory of semantic development in which processes similar or identical to the ones in play, imagination, and art occupy the central role. Construction of meaning and construction of the semantic mediators is seen as a dynamic activity that simultaneously takes place on different time scales and has both a more local and a more universal scope in human development. Symbol systems and the symbolic meanings they produce are viewed as continuously developing, dynamic, and relational activities, which enrich and build cultural lore while building and developing knowledge, understanding, and the sensibilities of each person.

This theoretical model addresses that what Vygotsky (1986) saw as the point of convergence of two psychological functions: the cognitive function and the communicative function—the point at which language and cognition unite into a new cognitive function that he called verbal thought. How are these two separate orientations and functions coordinated? What are the new conditions under which relationships that an individual creates both to the world and to other people become not only coordinated with each other but also mediated by culturally developed semiotic tools?

We see the introduction of play and playlike activities as a significant turn in both communicational and cognitive development. Introduction of the play frame/chronotope represents a point of "bifurcation" in the chronotope of the "here and now" into two independent but

functionally related chronotopes: “play” and nonplay. Whether in a game of a peekaboo with a small infant, or in a more elaborated traditional game between children and adults, the participants agree to frame a segment of their activities and create new rules, roles, and relationships within. This delimited segment of activity is understood by its participants as temporary and not binding for their “real” or actual relationships. However, although it is a framed activity, it has an indirect, mediational impact on the “real” nonframed relationships and experiences.

Regarding communication, a play frame/chronotope introduces a moment of change in the interpersonal relationships: from direct reactions to each other’s actions, the relationships between the participants becomes mediated and reflective, a relationship about something else that is being jointly built within an imaginary frame. As for cognition, the subject–object relationship also changes from direct sensory-motor interaction with the environment to building a fictive TOPIC, a jointly constructed “object,” which is not a given but instead can be shaped, felt, and imagined in the perspective of interpersonal relationships within the imaginary frame.

The fictive play frame is a chronotope in the Bakhtinian sense of the unity of the space, the time, and the values and relationships between the individuals. In fact, the imaginary play frame is a construction zone not only for the TOPIC; it is also a construction zone for the particular roles that the participants assume within the frame and thus can be used for developing their own sense of self (ME) in the perspective of the other (YOU).

Building an imaginary playlike frame is an activity that places the participants in a special bond of collaboration, thus creating an inner group of people that share something no one else does. An inner group is a social zone within which participants organize their collaboration on building the imaginary frame/chronotope. It is a collaborative unit that jointly develops all of the conditions, the rules, and the roles for the play chronotope. More important, it creates shared experiences that the members of an inner group can later evoke using simple gestures or phrases from the imaginary frame (i.e., using frozen pictures). Vygotsky (1986) uses the scene from Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, in which Kitty and Levin declare their love for each other using only the initial letters of the words, to exemplify the power of shared experience.

The privacy of the experiences shared within an inner group is overcome when the cognitive and social systems built within the imaginary frame can be used to coordinate and to structure cognitive and social processes in the actual world and beyond the limit of the immediate group. New ideas and new ways of understanding the world and each other are created when the imaginary and the actual worlds are brought into a resonant interaction. In other words, the reality becomes mediated by the imaginary, jointly built play frame or chronotope with its power to establish TOPICs of mutual interest and bring the participants into relationships in which they assume special roles. The acts needed to bring the two frames together represent semiotic tools, acts that give significance and perspective to the world we live in.

These processes, as we mentioned, take place recursively on different time scales and different degrees of “explicitness.” They are “packed in” the words of languages we speak, melodies we sing, paintings and photographs, rituals and winks—as frozen pictures of the imaginary frames worked out by generations of inner groups. They are visible in the reconstructive processes in the play and imagination of every individual child or adult. They are also always “in the works” when new ideas and sensibilities are forged and when deliberate metaphors make us aware that the reality is illuminated by visions.

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