Grammar in fantasy play in Greek Child Speech

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Fantasy (symbolic/pretend/role) play

Fantasy play is when children act out scenarios that are not literally happening. It involves:

→ 'signifiers' (e.g., a box/bed for boat)

→ language or actions to stand in for roles and situations (e.g., "I'm the captain).

Source of fantasy-play:

Any aspect of children's lived or imagined activities, i.e. *family-relations, school, pirates, mythology, wars, revolutions.*

Göncü & Gaskins, 2011

www.thegeniusofplay.org

Fantasy (symbolic/pretend/role) play development

Andrási, Schvajda, Király (2021)

- Symbolic play from around 18 months of age (Weisberg 2015)
- 18m.o. infants recognize simple pretend acts by other people (e.g., Bosco et al., 2006; Onishi et al., 2007).
- Early pretend scenarios usually involve object-substitutions, and pretending evolves into complex role-play appearing around **3-4 years old** (Lillard et al., 2011; Weisberg, 2015).

Credit: Lisa Tichané - stock.adobe.com

Fantasy play and child development

Piaget & Vygotsky discuss and explain fantasy-play through different lens:

- **Piaget 1946**: play is a form of representational assimilation
- **Vygotsky 1967**: more future-oriented, symbolic play arises from the tendencies that cannot be realized in the actual (here-and-now) world.

The views converge with respect to the importance of symbolic play:

> Interpretations of symbolic play enhance development of *consciousness*:

> Children begin to **detach their affectively significant experiences from their ordinary contexts and put them under their own control**.

This process begins with ***decontextualizations*** of lived experiences during infancy and becomes *increasingly complex and abstract both with regard to the sources of experiences and the means (e.g. language) represented.*

Göncü & Gaskins, 2011

Why is fantasy play relevant for linguistics?

Due to its **representational nature** and **its reliance on language** (Smith 2010), fantasy play is associated with language development (e.g. early literacy and metalinguistic awareness)

<div align="center">(Pellegrini & Galda 1982, 1991, Pellegrini 1984, Orr & Geva 2015, Creaghe et. al. 2021)</div>

Fantasy play has been linked with:
→ children's semantic diversity and organization.
→ syntactic development in the level of using syntax and combining words in a creative way to fulfill the needs of fantasy.
→ advanced competence in certain speech acts to help them participate and negotiate

However, no evidence for *causal influence of pretend play on language development* (Smith 2010).

<div align="right">(see Ha 2022 for an overview) 4</div>

Why is fantasy play relevant for linguistics?

Broad questions:

I. How does the *fantasy-reality* distinction change with age?
    (children are able to distinguish pretence from reality during the 2nd year of life, but the cognitive processes involved at each developmental stage are debatable; Leslie 1987, Martarelli et.al. 2015).

II. How does language reflect *different developmental stages of awareness* in fantasy play?

III. Is there a link between the development of certain linguistic constructions and engagement in fantasy play?

Fantasy (symbolic/pretend/role) play & language

In this talk:

i) What linguistic constructions are used in symbolic play, from simple play to *complex negotiations involving characters, scenarios, and scene setting*?

ii) Is there a higher proportion of modal constructions (mood, auxiliaries, attitude verbs) in symbolic play than in other contexts?

iv) How linguistic constructions in symbolic play differ and advance over age (3-6 years old)?

Roadmap

- Methodology: DireSpont Corpus

- Examples of role-play across ages

- Highlight three strategies employed in fantasy play:

  1. *kano oti = pretend that* (light verb *do* + *that*-clause)
  2. particle *tha* + present/past (*non-future tha*)
  3. *ke kala = (not-in-reality)*

- Concluding remarks & questions

DireSpont Speech Corpus

- We have collected data from 14 children (ages 2;7–5;11) and three siblings (data collection November 2023 – July 2025) [126 sessions (30'-60')]

- The children have been recorded in their home setting or at the kindergarten, during spontaneous play and interactions with other peers or adults (investigators or carers)

- The collected data are transcribed and annotated using the ELAN software and are evaluated by three different raters (ELAN-Version 6.9) [Computer software] (2024). Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive. Retrieved from https://archive.mpi.nl/tla/elan)

- The (so-far) annotated corpus consists of 81 files from 14 children. The duration of each annotated session is on average half an hour.

Methodology

Transcription and annotation for

Speech Act: Assertion, Question, Directive, Exclamative

Directive speech act Type: Types of direct or indirect directives, based on context and prosody

Mood-morphology: Imperative – Subjunctive / Positive – Negative/ Perfective – Imperfective – Neutral

9

Methodology

Modal / attitude Verbs

prepi, boro, hriazete / thelo / pistevo

Symbolic play whenever it starts >> Yes

- Children switch from role-play to actual conversations all the time
- In some cases, children introduce role playing as here

I will pretend I am the Little Red Riding Hood

- In other cases, children start out of the blue (typically younger children)

I am the Red Riding Hood

| 00:06:17.000 | 00:07:08.000 | 00:07:09.000 | 00:07:10.000 |

CHD004FCV	CHD004FCV		INV002FCV
θα ˈkano ˈoti ˈimi konoskuˈfitsa	caf +.. ˈprepi na ˈkanis ti jaˈja		aaa siˈɣnomi
θα κάνω ότι είμαι η κοκκινοσκουφίτσα	κι αυ +.. πρέπει να κάνεις τη γιαγιά		ααα συγνώμη
Assertions	Assertions		
	Instruction		
	Instruction		
	neutralSUBJ		
	prepi		
Yes			

DireSpont Corpus: Symbolic

Proportion of Symbolic play in the corpus

- Symbolic Play
- Total
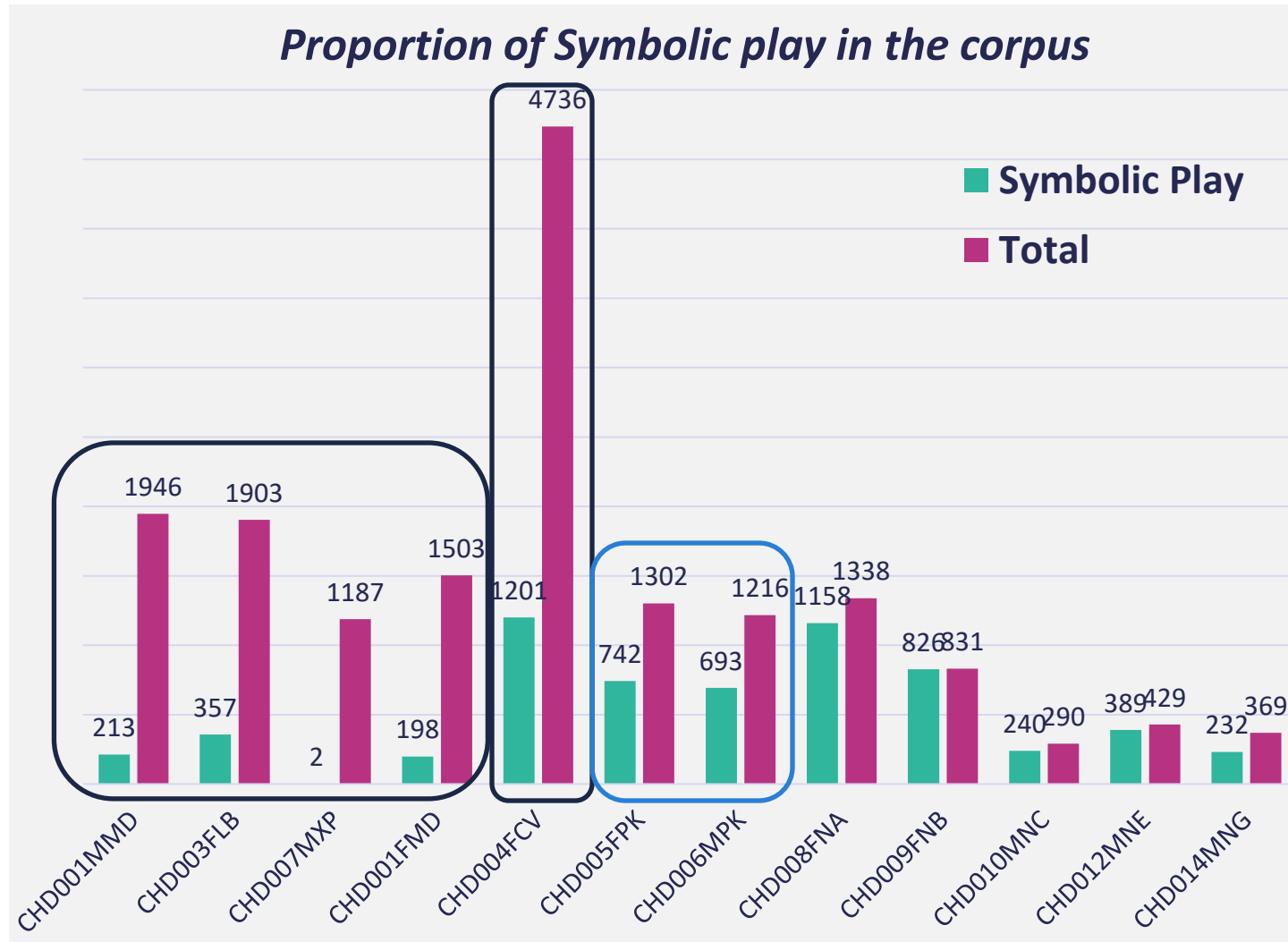
10526 out of **31709** utterances are symbolic play (1/3)

Home-settings

- 3-4y.o. children: 10-18%
- 4-5y.o. child: 25%
- 5-6y.o. children 57%

Similar findings in Smith & Connolly, 1980

Daycare with investigators

- 5-6y.o. children 86-90%

Fantasy play: Main Finding (descriptive)

All children (ages 2;7–6;4) participate in role-playing.

However, we find a sharp contrast between younger and older children:

<3.5years old: do not describe the setting or giving instructions on how to play

>3.7 – 6;4: use a range of linguistic constructions to set the scene or to describe their role-play or to negotiate with their peers (Tykkyläinen and Laakso, 2010)

Fantasy play: From Pretence to awareness

This observation is consistent with previous literature and relevant to the debate of the role of symbolic play in theory of mind development (3-4 years first-order theory of mind abilities).

Howes, Unger, & Matheson (1992): symbolic play doesn't necessarily imply metarepresentational abilities for children younger than 3years old.

Rakoczy, Tomasello & Striano (2006): only after 4-5years old children are explicit about pretence (i.e. they report a transition from *earlier implicit understanding of pretence* and *a later more explicit understanding – metaawareness)*

Fantasy play components and language mapping

Developmental trends/distinctions of pretend play				Age	Language
Fenson, Kagan, Kearsley, & Zelazo, 1976 (From Smith 2010)		Forbes, Katz & Paul 1986, **Garvey & Kramer, 1989**			Pellegrini & Galda, 1993, Howe, Petrakos, and Rinaldi (1998)
Decentration	Moving from self to others as the subject of an action	*Enactment*	actual role-playing	after 1.5-2years	Descriptive, Short reactions
Decontextualization	Using more imaginary objects.				
Integration	Combining pretend acts to a sequence of events and building narratives	*Emplotment*	Staging the scene, negotiating characters, scenario	after 3-4-5 years	Modality Pretend Attitude

Younger children: Enactment

CHD003FLB: 3y 3m 23d

Mother and Child are playing with dough. Child is making animal sounds:

Mom: Oh! What is this?

Child: Snake. *ˈfiði*

Mom: Snake?

….

Mom: do you remember when you had seen a real snake with your grandma?

Child: And this snake is real! *caˈxto ˈine ˈfiði… ma aˈxto ˈine aliθiˈno*

Mom: Aaa, and the one you saw was real. *aliθiˈno ˈitan caˈfto pu ˈiðes*

Child: It is real. *aliθiˈno ˈine*

Younger children: Enactment & decontextualization

CHD004FCV: 4y 6m 2d

Child and investigator are playing. The child has some pencils and pretends they are different types of tools (glue, keys, hammer, etc.)

Inv: What are you doing there? *Kale, ti kanis?*

Child: I paint with the brush. This is a brush.
vafo me pinelo. Afto ine pinelo.

(and after a while, with another pencil)
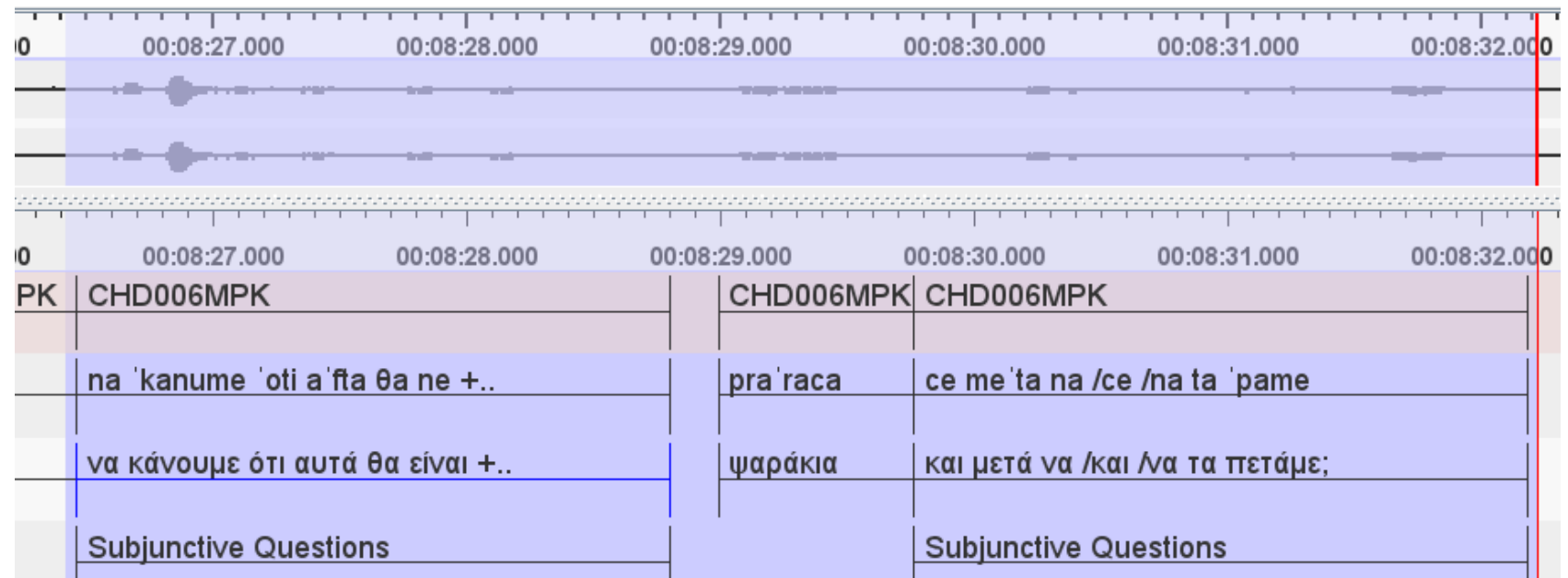
Child: Perfect this is my key!
Telia. Afto ine to kliði mu.

Older children: Emplotment & decontextualization

CHD005FPK: 5y 7m 4d
CHD006MPK: 5y 7m 14d

Two 5;8 y.o. play (pirates, sharks, mermaids). The boy proposes to pretend that some pieces of paper are little fish and they throw them

Child: *Shall we pretend this is fish and we throw it away (to the sharks?)*
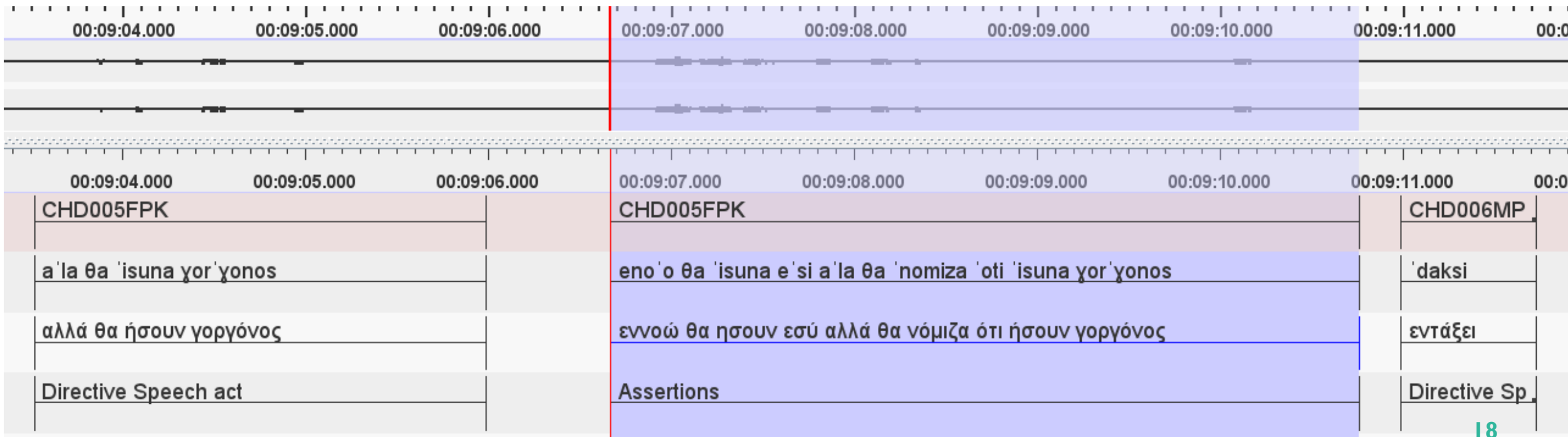
Older children: Emplotment & negotiation

Two 5;8 y.o. play (pirates, sharks, mermaids). The boy wants to be a shark and the girl says:

Boy: I am a shark

Girl: but you would be a male-mermaid. I mean you would be you but I would think that you would be a male-mermaid.

Older children: Emplotment & negotiation

CHD005FNA: *5y 5m 7d*

Two children and an investigator play a doctor-setting at the daycare. The girl says

Girl: ce kala she would have gave birth to this, ok?

Fantasy play and Language: Interim summary

Thus, we find **3** constructions uniquely used during ***emplotment.*** In adult grammar all of these constructions indicate a shift to a world distinct from the actual world.

1. *Kano oti* = pretend that

1. *tha + non-past / tha + past (X-marked construction)*

2. *Ke kala = an adverbial indicating that the prejacent does not hold in the actual world*

➢ *Older than 4* *Kano oti/ tha + non-past* *younger than 5* **>** *older than 5* *tha + past / ke kala*

Does it mean that children use these expressions to highlight this shift?
Is there a causal relation here between fantasy play and acquisition of counterfactuality?

tha-marking in symbolic play


Proportion of tha across participant
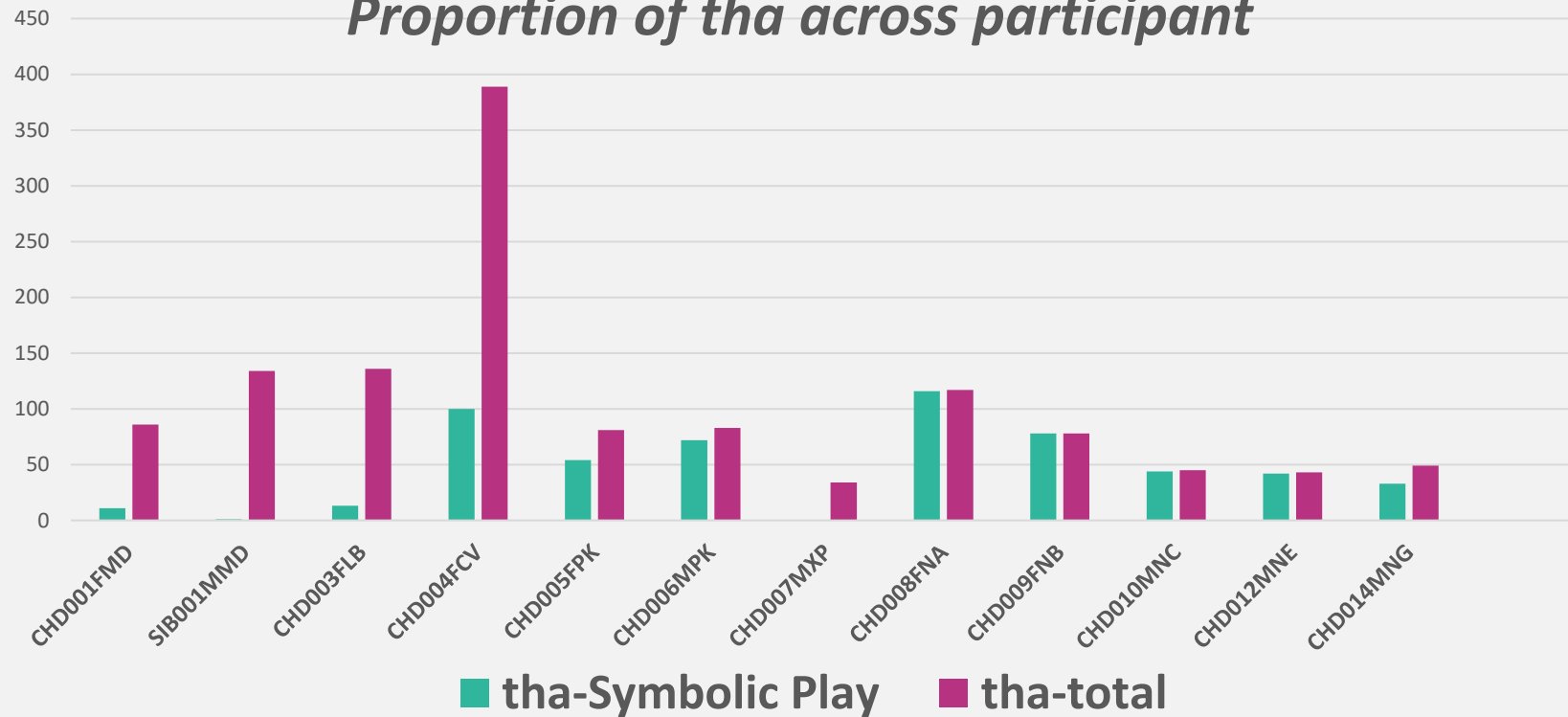
- ***tha+past*** (=x-marking in von Fintel & Iatridou 2023) already **from the age of 5** in symbolic play
- X-marking in counterfactual situations emerges later (Amsel & Smalley 2000, Buchsbaum et. al. 2012, Beck & Guthrie 2011)
- Acquisition of counterfactuals in Greek after the age of 7 (Amanaki & Tsakali 2025).

Fantasy play and Language: Findings

Contrary to previous claims, we do not find more constructions with overt modals or directives in symbolic play than in other constructions

In some participants, we find a higher proportion of indirect speech acts, but we need to further test this because it is not observed across all participants.
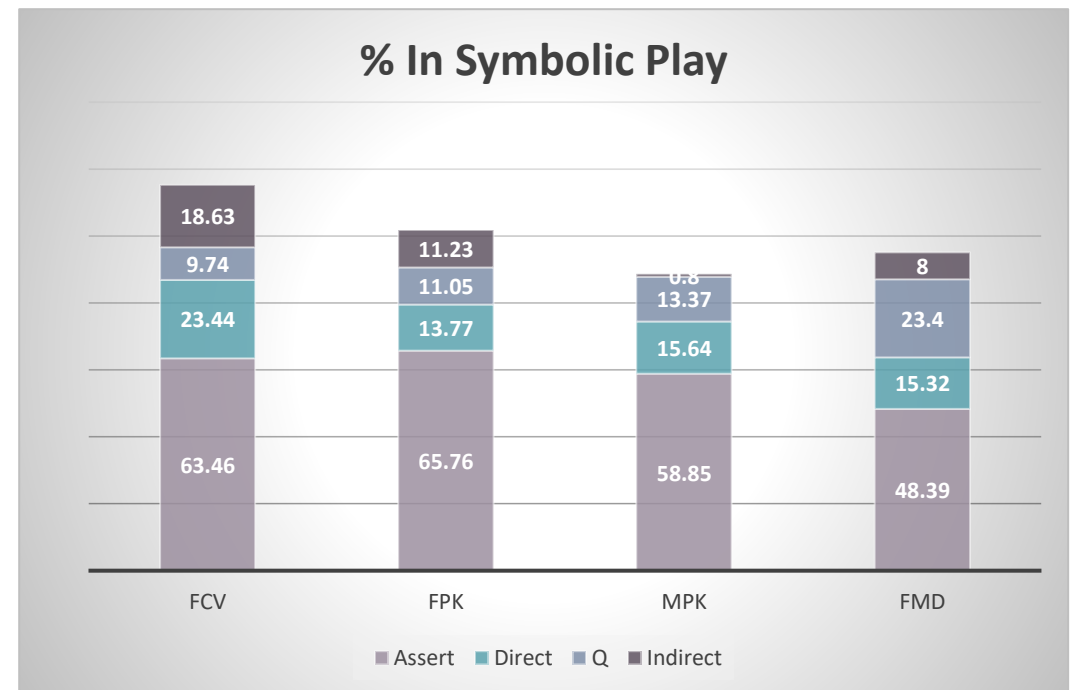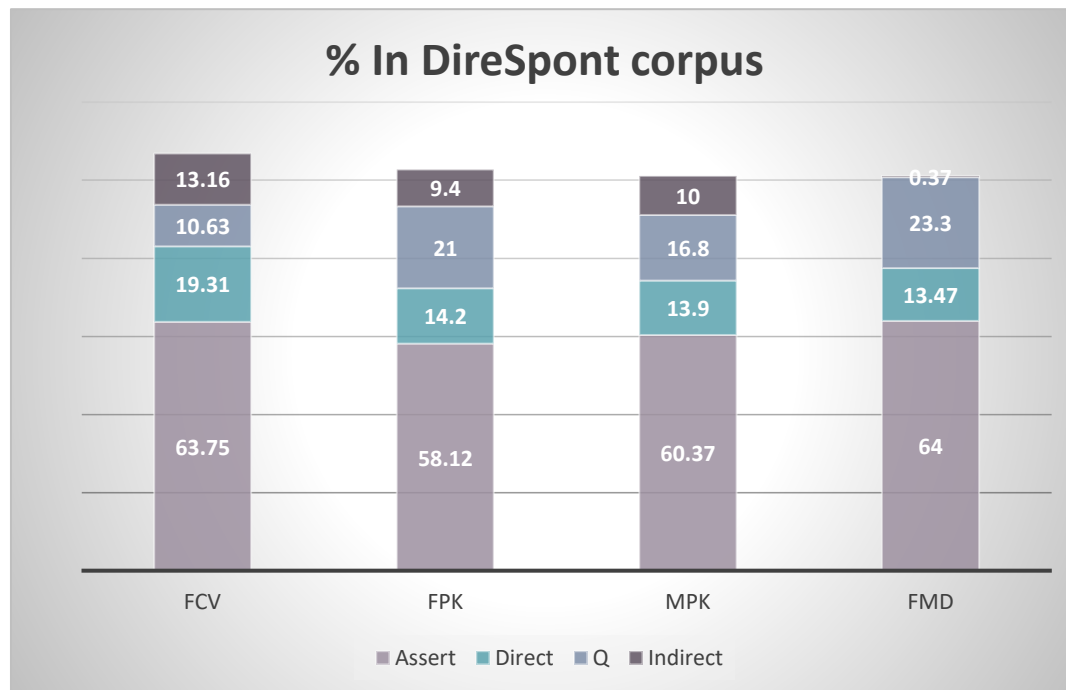
Fantasy play & language: Concluding remarks

- The use of special *pretend grammar* to describe the setting coincides with the developmental stage in which children seem to have a clear distinction between real and fictional worlds (Martarelli et. al 2015)

- Children start using expressions which convey pretence and to a certain extent the meaning of non-actuality after the age of 4;6

  Older than 4 *Kano oti/ tha + non-past* *younger than 5* **>** *older than 5* *tha + past / ke kala*

- We do not find more directives in emplotement environments, although in some cases we may find an increased number of indirect speech acts (primarily assertions or questions, interpretated as invitations or instructions.

- More research is necessary to understand the meaning of the non-actuality expressions in child language.

THANK YOU!!!
Organizers & reviewers @ ICGL25

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For comments, questions please contact us at despina.oikonomou@uoc.gr

https://direspeech.philology.uoc.gr/

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