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Offering alternatives as a way of issuing directives to children: putting the worse option last

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Short title: Directives with alternatives

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Abstract

In a corpus of c. 250 hours of recorded interactions between young children and adults in USA and UK households, we found that children could be directed to change their course of action by three syntactic formats that offered alternatives: an imperative, or a modal declarative, plus a consequential alternative to non-compliance (e.g. *come down at once or I shall send you straight to bed; you've got to stand here with it or it goes back in the cupboard*), or an interrogative requiring a preference (e.g. *do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed*). Formatted syntactically as *or*-alternatives, these can perform the actions both of warning and threatening. But they make a 'bad' course of action contiguous to the child's turn. We argue that adults choose this format because the interactional preference for contiguity makes the negative alternative the more salient one. This implies that adults attribute to children the ability to appreciate the flouting of preference organisation for deontic effect.

Offering alternatives as a way of issuing directives to children: putting the worse option last

How do people get each other to do things? Work on requesting in interaction (Lindström, 2005; Heinemann, 2006; Curl and Drew, 2008) has prompted an acceleration of interest in the varieties of ways of influencing others: from (to use rough glosses) hinting (Zinken, 2011), through advising (Shaw and Hepburn, 2013), to proposing (Stevanovic 2012, Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012), instructing (Antaki and Kent, 2012) and outright threatening (Hepburn and Potter, 2011; see also a quantitative survey of many these types in Takada 2013). As Stevanovic and Svennevig (this volume) say, this Special Issue adds to the body of research by reporting new work on the epistemic and deontic subtleties of the ways in which directives can be issued. In this article we explore how adults use an utterance the syntactic form of which offers children alternative courses of action to choose between; but which, on inspection of their deployment, can be seen to perform a less neutral action.

To prefigure the data that we shall analyse, examples of the three types of directives that we found in our survey of various data sources are: *you've got to stand here with it or it goes back in the cupboard; come down at once or I shall send you straight to bed; and do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed*. These directives use different syntactic formats, but the common thread among them is the action that the adult is performing: issuing an utterance that confronts the child with two exclusive courses of action. One of these courses is favoured; the other, not. The effect of the utterance is to issue a recommendation at best, or a threat at worst; but in any case, it is a directive, claiming some form of deontic authority, in the terminology suggested by Stevanovic (2012), and Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012). As we shall see, there is a puzzle about how the adults set out the alternatives in one of those formats, and solving it that will be the focus of our analysis.

*Requests, directives and alternatives*

As helpfully outlined in the introduction to this Special Issue (Stevanovic & Svennevig, this volume), the impetus for an interactional (as opposed to a syntactic or pragmatic) study of directives can be said to have come from Heinemann's 2006 work on requests to home helpers, but perhaps more significantly from Curl and Drew's (2008) paper on telephone requests to doctors' clinics and to family members. Curl and Drew identified two factors with which one could mark one's request: the degree of entitlement one had in making it, and the degree to which one acknowledged the contingencies that the recipient might face in carrying it out. Thus, they reported, a call for medical help could assert the caller's right to receive attention at home, irrespective of the inconvenience to the doctor; or, conversely, could be put tentatively to indicate uncertain entitlement and an acknowledgement of the imposition made.

Work on entitlement and contingency has subsequently been profitably extended, and since our interest is in adults' deontic authority over children, the direction that most concerns us is the work on imperatives during family mealtime conversations initiated by Craven & Potter (2010). Their focus on imperative formulations more starkly revealed participants' orientations to the management of deontic asymmetries. For example, contextual factors such as who was at fault or how urgently an action needed to be performed could be drawn on by speakers to provide a warrant for more entitled formulations (Antaki & Kent, 2012). Recipients, as well as speakers, designed their talk to display their deontic stance towards the projected course of action. When responding to parental directives, the timing and nature of a child's compliance could enable them to regain autonomy over their behaviour without openly defying the directive (Kent 2012). In other words, it was found that the struggle over deontic authority could play out in such a way as not only to identify what rights and entitlements are in play between the participants, but also what the possibilities and consequences of compliance or resistance might be.

In delving further into the possibilities and consequences of directives by a more extensive empirical survey of the formats that adults used, we were struck by

how the syntactic format of "or" alternatives could work as an action to get the child to do something (or stop doing something). So far as we know, this use of alternatives - although it has a hinterland in the pragmatics literature (see, for a comprehensive account of conditional connectives, Declerck and Reed, 2001) - has not yet been remarked on in the interactional literature on directives. As we shall see, its study throws up two intriguing issues in how adults manage their deontic authority: their flouting of the fundamental conversational norm of contiguity, and their ostensible privileging of the child's choice in complying with warnings and threats.

#### Data: sources

We searched for adults' use of alternatives in talking to children in two sets of sources: audio data deposited in the online resource *Talkbank*<sup>i</sup>, and video data held at Loughborough University, and at Keele University.

##### *a) Talkbank audio data*

From the CHILDES data in the Talkbank database (MacWhinney, 2007) we randomly selected six sources, representing about 240 hours of USA and UK recordings across a range of adult-child interactions, although the bulk of them are mother-child conversations. The age of the children in the recordings we sampled ranged from 1 year 9 months to 7 years 11 months.

##### *b) The Loughborough and Keele family-meal video datasets*

The Loughborough data are from three UK, native-English-speaking families with small children, representing about 12 hours of talk at mealtimes. The ages of children here were less precisely recorded than in the CHILDES dataset, but ranged between 3 years and 8 years old. The Talkbank and Loughborough datasets were used for our main survey, but later (as explained below) we also had recourse to a small corpus held at Keele University (the Beeston family-meal dataset, comprising 4 hours of mealtime conversations between 2 UK, native English-speaking families with children aged 3-11 years old). This latter small

collection was inspected for supplementary video evidence of children's visible compliance with the directives.

### Selection of cases

We were after cases where we understood that the child was being directed to do something (that is, where at least one course of action was being proposed) in an utterance syntactically marked by the connective *or*. That meant separating our set of cases from three neighbouring sets, using our native judgements as speakers (see Stivers, 2015, and Steensig and Heinemann, 2015, for a discussion of such quasi-coding procedures). One set was those *or*-marked offers that were not, in fact, directives - rather, they were apparently genuine enquiries about the child's preference between options about which the adult seemed to have no preference (e.g. *do you want to do Row Row or do you want to do Humpty Dumpty* in the context of a choice of playtime song) or where it would be unsafe (though possible) to presume such a preference (e.g. *do you want to do the jigsaw or just play with the bits*, in a context where there was nothing on the tape to indicate that the adult favoured one course of action over another). Another set were cases where, as Ariel (2013) observes, the *or* marked what were effectively yes/no questions inviting agreement to do a class of things (e.g. *would you like to go out for a meal or to the cinema?*, where this is understood as being an invitation to go out, and no requirement is made as to choosing the destination). We also discounted cases where *or* was in turn-final position (for a recent study of which, see Drake, 2013), since by definition the second item was unspecified. The selection of directives using *or* yielded 58 cases from about 252 hours of adult-child conversation in the TalkBank and Loughborough data. <sup>ii</sup>

### Data: basic types and their examples

The adults' use of *or* in their directives were exclusively and exhaustively separable into three syntactic formats: imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives (42%, 21% and 13% respectively, of our sample of 58 cases). In each case this meant the child being presented with descriptions of two courses of action. If we look to see what actual content is being inserted into the syntactic

frame, we see that in all cases, the options were asymmetric: one was more favourably (or less unfavourably) described than the other. Thus there would be the alternatives, for example, of *being silly* on the one hand or *eating properly* on the other, and so on. This asymmetry is a strong hint as to what the utterances were doing. Let us see examples of each format before going on to that interactional analysis.

*Imperative plus consequential alternative of non-compliance*

Here the adult directs the child by giving them an ultimatum, in the form of a direct imperative followed by an aversive consequence that would ensue were it not followed.

Example 1: Eng-UK/Thomas/3-00-14.cha line 1591 "be gentle"

```
1    Mot:      >n' look< Thomas, (.2) Thomas (.) Thomas don't.
2    →        be gentle with it, or you'll brea:k it.
3                (.3)
```

Example 2: Lboro Crouch 12 "Thank you Jesus" (note: Anna is a younger child who has been asked to say grace)

```
01    Anna:   HEy, (.5) (I'm going to say) thanks to Jesus.
02    Dad     ok,
03                (.8)
04    Kath:   °ok°
05                (1.5)
06    Kath:   I'm- (0.3) pu:tt[ing] some [chee:se on ] [ne::re!]
07    Dad:                [Wh-]          [>No no no.<] [Alwa- ]
08    → Dad:   say >thank you Jesus.< (0.3) So just stop, whatever
09    →        you're doing, or Anna will get stressed.
10                (1.0)
```

*Declarative plus consequential alternative*

In these cases, the directive is issued by an utterance in which a course of action described with a modal verb (can, may, will, need etcetera) is paired, again, with an aversive consequence that would ensue if it were not chosen.

Example 3: Eng-NA/Nelson/811220.cha line 178 "blanket"



01 Dad you have a good na:p hon,  
 02 (.4)  
 03 Chi ((squeals/[cries]))  
 04 Dad [you want Da:d to put the  
 05 blanket on you?  
 06 (.6)  
 07 Chi °( ) °  
 08 (.6)  
 09 Chi n::o:::~::~, ((whiny voice))  
 10 (.3)  
 11 Dad well then ((name?)), it's time for a nap  
 12 now.  
 13 Mom: ((off mike))(that's the only choice  
 14 you have) [( )  
 15 → Dad: [the only choice.=you can  
 16 → either ha:ve a na:p, 'n daddy's gonna  
 17 → put a blanket on you, 'r I'm  
 18 → jes' gonna walk out,

#### Example 4: Braunwald/2-06-15.cha line 59 "salt"

01 MOT: .hhh >that's< PLEnny:::, (.2) °thank you°.  
 02 (.4)  
 03 CHI: ('nk you)  
 04 (.4)  
 05 → MOT: that's enough, Laura=°or you won't be able  
 06 → to eat [the egg  
 07 CHI: [mm.

#### *Interrogative with alternatives*

Here the directive is issued in interrogative format, where the child is offered a choice or asked to express a preference between two courses of action.

#### Example 5: Eng-UK/Thomas/4-05-09.cha line 592 "go home" ("INV" is a visitor)

01 → INV: .hh ARE YOU gonna talk to me prop'ly or  
 02 → am I gonna have to [go home.  
 03 ? : [((cough))

#### Example 6: Eng-UK/ Lara.2-10-04.45 line 472 "neatly in the corner" <sup>iii</sup>

01 MOT: would you like to put them neatly in the corner  
 02 CHI: no

03 MOT: well  
 04 MOT: would you put them neatly in the corner for  
 05 mummy please  
 06 → MOT: or do you wanna go to bed  
 07 CHI: oh

To summarise: these three syntactic forms of offering alternatives to the child entail a choice between two manifestly differently-valenced courses of action. Clearly these syntactic forms are freighted with interactional meaning: these aren't bloodless alternatives, nor even proposals or suggestions; they are something deontically stronger.

### "Or" in the service of warning and threatening.

All of these syntactically-marked 'or' directives - imperative, modal or interrogative - are being issued with the extra force that identifying a *consequence* delivers. Bringing a foreseeable negative consequence onto the child's horizon is, as a speech-act analyst would immediately say, to issue something like a warning or perhaps even a threat. Indeed it seems to be grammatically as it were hard-wired into the format: as Declerck and Reed put it, when "the finite *or*-clause usually refers to post-present actualisation" - as indeed all of ours do - "it is always interpreted as a threat or warning, not as a promise" (2001, p 402). Here we can usefully take note of Hepburn and Potter's (2011) explicit speech-act inspired distinction, amply found in their adult-child data, between warnings - in which the consequence is not under the control of the speaker - and threats, where it is. Their discussion was based on if/then formats, of which this is an example:

### Example 7: Crouch 06 6:40 (An example of a warning, from Hepburn and Potter 2011)

01 Mum: [An]na?  
 02 (1.6)  
 03 Anna: U↑hhuhh ((more of a sob than a response))  
 04 (0.6)  
 05 → Mum: If you don' eat your dinner:, (0.4)

06 →                   there'll be no pudding.

Example 8 - an example of a threat, from Hepburn and Potter (2001) (part of their example 1, with lines renumbered, and transcription slightly simplified)).

01 Mum    'if you carry on whingeing and whining,=  
02           during breakfas'time I'll send you  
03           to the bottom step.

Note that Mum who has control over the consequences, so this comes off as a threat (in British English, a common current penalty trope is to be made to sit for a given period on the bottom step, or the 'naughty' step, of the staircase in the home).

Whereas Hepburn and Potter limited their analysis to 'if/then' formulations, it is easy to see that the 'or' format also allows the adult the freedom to state a consequence which can be either under their control or not. We have already seen three examples of 'or' directives rendered as warnings (*... or you'll break it; ... or Anna will get stressed; ... or you won't be able to eat the egg*, in Extracts 1, 2 and 4 respectively), which show how the second alternative can be construed as something negative but not under the adult's control. Here is another:

Example 9 An 'or' directive as a warning.

Eng-NA/Braunwald/2-03-XXb.cha 122 "drop the bird" (the topic seems to relate to a previous event when the father caught a bird; it's possible that the mother is echoing what she said to the child at the time).

01       MOT:    we stamped our feet, Laura.  
02                   (.4)  
03       MOT:    making loud noises.  
04                   (.8)  
05 →   MOT:    careful or [he'll drop the bird.  
06       CHI:                   [let me.  
07                   (.8)  
08       CHI:    ( ) m-me too

When the second alternative is under the speaker's control, then the 'or' works as a threat. Example 3 (*... or I'm jus gonna walk out*) was one such; here is another.

Example 10: An 'or' directive as a threat.

Eng-UK/Thomas/3-01-14.cha 270 "eat those biscuits"

01 MOT: and what else did you have at the party today.  
 02 (.8)  
 03 CHI: what party,  
 04 (.4)  
 05 MOT: at (Eenas)'s house °(>surely you remember<)°  
 06 (.8)  
 07 CHI: ( )  
 08 (.4)  
 09 MOT: you're sitting [there  
 10 CHI: [talking.  
 11 (.4)  
 12 → MOT: sitting there ta:lking. >hurry up and eat  
 13 → those biscoits=>°(or I'm jus')<sup>iv</sup> going to take them  
 14 away°<  
 15 (2.0)  
 16 MOT: you had some pitta bread,

What we notice about these threats and warnings with the *or* format is that, like *if/thens*, they allow, or seem to allow, the child a free choice as to what to do (stacked though the options might appear); and both formats allow the speaker to predict either an (apparently) agentless consequence- *there'll be no pudding*, or a consequence explicitly under the speaker's control - *I'm jus' going to take them away*. We can go further<sup>v</sup>, and cast the action in epistemic and deontic terms: warnings imply a difference in epistemic authority (the adult knows more than the child what the consequences are), while threats imply a deontic authority (the adult is entitled to control what that consequence is going to be). Threats and warnings in both the *or* and the *if/then* formats share this feature.

But there is an important difference between the formats. Notice that all the examples we've see so far show the adult putting the negative consequence at

the end of their turn, be it warning or threat (... *or he'll drop the bird, ... or I'm jes gonna walk out*, and so on). The *if/then* and *or* formats differ radically in how strongly they constrain such placement. So for a speaker to choose one format over another is revealing.

#### Putting the worse alternative last

The adult doesn't *have to* use a directive format that puts the worse alternative last. The range of conditionals (covered comprehensively in DeClerck and Reed (2001), includes such connectives as *unless, until, lest, whether, in case* and so on, which vary in such permissiveness. This isn't the place to survey those conditional connectives exhaustively, but if we keep to *if/then* (for which we have empirical data from Hepburn and Potter, 2011) and *or*, we see a real difference between the two.

*If/then* is wholly permissive: you could put the negative consequence first, as in *if you're not gentle with it you'll break it* or second, as in *you'll break it if you're not gentle with it*. With *or*, on the other hand, two of the three formats that we have seen people use - imperatives and modal declaratives - are wholly restrictive. Consider the imperative *just stop whatever you're doing, or Anna will get stressed*; and the declarative *you can either have a nap, 'n daddy's gonna put a blanket on you, 'r I'm jes gonna walk out*. These cannot be reordered with the connective *or*. If you wanted to put the clause *Anna will get stressed* first, you would have to choose another connective - for example, *unless* (thus *Anna will get stressed unless you just stop whatever you're doing*). Or indeed *if/then*, thus: *Anna will get stressed if you don't just stop whatever you're doing*.

So to choose the *or* format, at least in its imperative or declarative form, is to choose a format which *must* present the child with the worse alternative last. While this is not true of the interrogative format - the adult could just as easily ask *do you wanna to go to bed or do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please* as they can *do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed* - if we look empirically in our collection, we find that it turns out that the latter order, with the negative

alternative last, is empirically twice as likely (14 cases to six; and all these six exceptions came from one parent-child dyad<sup>vi</sup>).

So all in all, although speakers are not obliged to do so, the adults in our survey used a format which either obliged them to put the worse alternative second (in the 38 cases of imperative or declarative formats), or usually to put it second anyway, even if there was a choice (in 14 of the 20 cases of interrogatives). Why is this notable?

### Flouting contiguity

It is notable because, as Sacks had established as one of the first principles to emerge from Conversation Analysis, the normative expectation is that one's addressee orient to the last thing one says (i.e., the most contiguous to her or his turn at turn at talk). Sacks (1987: 60) puts it this way: "it is a rather general rule that where two questions are produced, and you are going to have two answers, then the order of the answers is the reverse order of the questions". Evidence is legion; we may take as an exemplar Heritage and Roth (1995) who confirmed the pattern in news interviews, in which recipients "respond first to the final TCU of the prior turn, thereby treating it as the sequentially implicative component of the turn" (1995: 18), and the principle has passed into general acceptance as a background force in interaction.

For specific evidence in favour of the strength of the contiguity principle after 'or', we may turn to the work done by Koshik (2005), on alternatives as vehicles for repair-initiation. Here the desirability and undesirability of the two alternatives necessarily comes into play. They are embedded in a question format, in an environment signalling that there is something that needs repair in the previous speaker's turn. Koshik identifies two such usages - to indicate that the previous speaker has said something that requires mechanical checking, or, going step further, to use the question actually to suggest a correction. Here are examples of each variety:

An example of *or* in the service of a candidate hearing (Koshik, 2005, p 197):

## Example 11:

01 Ken: Bu-that convertible we went to Huntington Beach  
 02 an' he jumped. He jumped outta the convertible  
 03 goin sixty miles an hour.  
 04 [Big fat slob-  
 05 □ Roger: [Sixteen or sixty.  
 06 Ken: We-I-di-wu-we were on the f- on that Huntington  
 07 Coast Road?

And here is an example of an *or* question to signal a correction (Koshik, 2005, p 203):

## Example 12:

01 Libby: hhh and in fact (0.2) the ones who  
 02. had no specialization (0.8) .h understood (.)  
 03 the re:vi:sed manual better and could  
 04 explain it.=  
 05 → Tamar: =revised 'r abridged.  
 06 Libby: u- well it was re[vised, it] wasn't  
 07 Tamar?: [ ]  
 08 Libby: abridged.=cause [they didn't shorten it.

For our purposes, notice that in both the checking and the correcting case, *it is the 'correct', desirable, alternative option that is listed second*. Koshik gives an interactional account thus: "[b]y offering an alternative to a term used by the recipient, one that cannot be understood as an alternate hearing, it suggests that the original term be reconsidered in favour of the alternative." (ibid, p 204). Tamar is offering, in line 5, a corrective repair initiator - she thinks that Libby meant that the book was abridged (not revised). (As it happens, Libby resists this and reasserts that it was indeed revised.) Libby's answer is less important to note than the preference expressed in Tamar's question: that the *second* alternative be the correct one.

Comparing these repair-initiations to our directives, then, the question that arises is this: if Koshik's analysis of repair-questions putting the desirable option second extends to directives, then the adult ought to put the desirable, positive

directed course of action (as they would a repair) in second, contiguous position. That would put, as it does with repair, conversational pressure for the recipient to confirm the positive option. But, as we have seen, this is the exact reverse of what happens in our adult-child directives. The second, contiguous, ready-to-be-responded to option is the worse one.

Somehow, then, the adult is achieving their goal of directing the child towards complying with the first option (not using too much salt and so on) by, in fact, inviting them conversationally to address the second, more contiguous, option (not being able to eat the egg and so on).

### Uptake

Do the children 'get it', and see that the adult is not, in fact, inviting them to take up the second alternative? It is not always possible to tell from the (audio) transcripts in the Talkbank data, because the child's compliance (that is, their orientation to the first rather than the second alternative) may go unremarked as such. In no case did we ever see the adult explicitly praise the child for carrying out the directive. There were plenty of cases, though, where business moves on, implying that the adult was satisfied. For example:

#### Example 13: Braunwald/2-06-15.cha line 59 "salt" (Expansion of example 4 above)

```

01    MOT:      .hhh >that's< PLEnny:::, (.2) °thank you°.
02                (.4)
03    CHI:      ('nk you)
04                (.4)
05 → MOT:      that's enough, Laura=°or you won't be able
06 →          to eat [the egg
07    CHI:      [mm.
08                (2.0)
09    CHI2:     daddy where's your salt.
10                (2.5)
11    Dad:      I just put a little on, (.5) a °little bit°.
12    Chi:      .hh AN' I WANT MY (egg [ )
13    Chi2?     [( )
14    MOT:      [here it is, sweetie.
15    Chi2:     ( ) daddy?

```



16 Dad: yuh,  
 17 (.8)  
 18 Dad: [(jus' a little bit of salt)  
 19 Mom: [(it) doesn't need a lot of salt.  
 20 (4.0)  
 21 Mom: so, what was the best thing about vacation.

The mother's injunction to stop salting the egg seems to be successful; although no-one comments on it as such, the absence of further directives and the apparently harmonious talk seems to indicate that matters were resolved satisfactorily. This matches the typical sequential pattern for parental directives described by Kent (2011) in which explicit orientations to completed compliance were almost entirely absent from the data. Instead, the most recurrent practice was for an unmarked transition to other topics of conversation following compliance.

For video evidence we may also call up some reinforcements from some further work we undertook with a new small sample (we are grateful to Michelle Beeston for collecting and transcribing these data):

#### Example 14 (Beeston: Morris\_01) "switch it off"

1 ((Jim turns away from the table and watches T.V  
 2 while chewing))  
 3 (4.5)  
 4 ((Mum notices that Jim is no longer facing the  
 5 table))  
 6 **Mum:** Jim.  
 7 (. ) ((Jim looks at mum))  
 8 →**Mum:** Turn round and eat your dinner or I'm going to  
 9 switch it off.  
 10 ((Jim immediately turns back to face the table  
 11 and continues to eat))

#### Example 15 (Beeston: Morris\_02) spits drink

1 ((Jimmy spits drink onto the table))  
 2 [(0.7) ]  
 3 ((Mum looks at Jimmy and raises her eyebrows))  
 4 →**Mum:** Don't Jimmy or you'll just go to bed.  
 5 ((Jimmy takes another drink and swallows it))

In both of these cases the evidence is that the imperatives work immediately (although we don't know if they would have done so had they been issued on their own, without the *or*-refaced consequence (... *or I'm going to switch it off; ... or you'll just go to bed*) being spelled out).

Even the audio records provide corollary evidence in the form of occasions on which the child seems to resist the directive, and things do *not* run smoothly. Compare that with what happens here, where the issue of the child putting on a blanket:

Example 16: Eng-NA/Nelson/811220.cha line 178 "blanket" (expansion of Example 3 above).

01 Dad you have a good na:p hon,  
 02 (.4)  
 03 Chi ((squeals/[cries]))  
 04 Dad [you want Da:d to put the  
 05 blanket on you?  
 06 (.6)  
 07 Chi °( ) °  
 08 (.6)  
 09 Chi n::o:~::~:, ((whiny voice))  
 10 (.3)  
 11 Dad well then ((name?)), it's time for a na:p  
 12 now.  
 13 Mom: ((off mike))(that's the only choice  
 14 you have) [( )]  
 15 → Dad: [the only choice.=you can  
 16 → either ha:ve a na:p, 'n daddy's gonna  
 17 → put a blanket on you, 'r I'm  
 18 → jes' gonna walk out,  
 19 Chi:? ((sniff))  
 20 Dad: with no °blanket°.  
 21 (.7)  
 22 Chi:? ((sniff))  
 23 (1.3)  
 24 Dad: [that's y'r choice.  
 25 Chi: [( )]  
 26 (.5)  
 27 → Dad: [blanket, or no °blanket°

28 Chi: [( )  
 29 (.3)  
 30 Chi: [(no:: hh / no: (bluh))  
 31 Dad: okay.  
 32 Chi: >hh< I LIE: [( .5) [(dow)  
 33 Dad: [w'11 [okay ( )

Unlike the salting-egg case, here there is turbulence after the directive. The adult is manifestly unsatisfied, and in a series of increments repeats the directive, in stripped-down form (*blanket or no blanket*, line 27). The episode seems to end in a compromise where the child lies down, but without the blanket; but it all runs off far less smoothly than when the *or*-formatted directive is understood and complied with immediately. Taken all together, the evidence seems to be that adults are justified in attributing to children - even quite young children - the ability to understand the flouting of contiguity when confronted by warnings and threats.

## DISCUSSION

We set out to examine how adults directed children by offering them alternatives. Put so baldly, 'offering alternatives' - with what one might imagine to be, syntactically, its default position of equality between the options - sounds egalitarian and respectful of the child's preferences, sensitively avoiding outright direction. But inspection showed that this was manifestly not so. These were all directives of a rather forceful kind.

This is to be set against Stevanovic and Peräkylä's (2012) observation that deontic authority over another person is something to be handled delicately. That was strongly implied in Curl and Drew's (2008) analysis of data from calls requesting house calls from out-of-hours doctors' clinics, where the caller had to negotiate the gap between their needs and the authority of the doctor, who had the decisive vote. Hence the caller's display of entitlement and awareness of contingency in the making of requests. Even when the request comes from the senior partner in an interaction, such sensitivities can still be of concern: in

Stevanovic and Peräkylä's (2012) study of colleagues in a work setting, the senior member, although institutionally higher in the official hierarchy, nevertheless did not simply issue bald instructions to the junior. As with calls to the doctor, there was a clear display of some degree of orientation to the other's agency, or choice in the matter (see a fuller discussion of responsibility for action in Couper-Kuhlen and Etelämäki's article, this volume).

The sensitivity to too-naked deontic authority in the exchange of requests (in Curl and Drew) and suggestions (in Stevanovic and Peräkylä) is an index of a relationship that is close enough in authority - between adults at work, or even in service encounters - to make the exercise of power negotiable. With parents and their children, the matter seems very different. Previous work on parents' directives (Craven & Potter, 2010; Antaki & Kent, 2012; Kent 2012) strongly suggested that negotiations were much more one-sided. And the research that we report in this article reveals that *or*-formatted directives are a vehicle for a particularly loaded way of issuing warnings and threats - while appearing to be sensitive to the child's freedom of choice.

In an *or*-formatted directive, the child is of course faced with a choice, and is being - ostensibly - left to make the decision between them on the basis of their own judgement and preferences (most explicitly in interrogative *ors*, where the appeal to the child's preferences can be actually built into the alternatives, as in, for example, *do you want to put them neatly in the corner for mummy please or do you wanna go to bed*).

But with *or*, the alternatives are set out such that the negative one is placed last (by definition in the case of imperatives and declaratives, and, in our sample, by the adults' general preference in the case of interrogatives). It is this that differentiates *or* from *if/then* and other conditional connectives. A directive with *or* necessarily makes the negative alternative highly salient, making the child orient to something expressly bad. The child has (as it were consciously) to ignore the highly salient, contiguous, negative alternative being dangled in front of them, and choose the earlier non-contiguous option. Adults assume that the

children will understand this flouting of the contiguity principle, and the children seem to do so.

Although it might be unlikely to see this loaded use of alternatives in more symmetric relationships, where deontic authority is not quite so unevenly distributed, and no threat or warning seems to be at issue, we have found a telling case of contiguity being flouted in an interrogative in a very different, adult, environment. Heritage & Roth (1995), in their analysis of news interviews, include this example (see example 17, below).

Example 17: (DLP 4: Lansman:1-2 from Heritage & Roth, 1995, p19)

1 IR: If you do lose, are you going to quit.  
 2 (.)  
 3 IR: Is that um- <(uh) what I want to know is,>  
 4 are you <going t'go> on:: with this campaign,  
 5 or is that the- th' zenith of the- (0.2) of  
 6 th' le:ft.  
 7 IE: °.h° U::h, (.) <what. is-> hhhh I mean I- (.)  
 8 I sincerely hope <it isn't> th' zenith <o'th'  
 9 left an:- certainly we w'l go on: campaigning,  
 10 .hh because, I mean:,

First notice the ordering of the two options in the interviewer's question: 1) are you going to go on with this campaign *or* 2) is that the zenith of the left? (lines 4-6). Clearly 'going to go on with a campaign' is what would be (from the interviewee's point of view) the desirable choice (showing determination and resilience and so on), while to accede to the second alternative would be to give up, and accept that their party is on the way down. So the second alternative is a worse one. This is the answer that is contiguous to the interviewee's turn - but s/he rejects it. S/he deals with the two alternatives in reverse order: 1) *I sincerely hope it isn't the zenith of the left* and 2) *certainly we will go on campaigning* (lines 8-10). Like the children ignoring the offer of doing or suffering something undesirable, and complying instead with the non-contiguous part of the adult's utterance, the news interviewee recognises the trap and steps away from it neatly.

It is that sense of a rhetorical trap that the children are alive to when confronted by the parent's *or*-formatted directive - especially when we notice that all the directives we found mark a fault of some kind. Just as in our examination elsewhere of imperatives issued to children and to adults with intellectual impairment (Antaki and Kent, 2012), the *or*-directives here would be reactive to something that the issuer considered unacceptable or inopportune: not eating or not eating properly, being too rough, not talking clearly, taking too much of something, and such catch-alls as 'being silly'. So the environment favours an urgent directive, set up in such a way that the child ends up heeding the warning (or threat) and choosing the course of action that the adult favours<sup>vii</sup>.

Warnings and threats can be thought of as privileging two different kinds of authority that the speaker has over their recipient: warnings imply greater epistemic authority (the speaker claims more awareness the consequences of the action) while threats imply greater deontic authority (the speaker advertises their greater, perhaps sole, control over the consequences of the action). It is possible to identify cases where it is arguable that the adult is issuing the directive somewhat ambivalently, disguising a threat (with its greater deontic load) as a mere warning (where the asymmetry is only epistemic). Here is an example:

Example 18 Eng-UK/Thomas/3-07-03.cha 274 "have to move"

01 Chi : and now we can play outside (uk-)=couldn't we,  
 02 far:ty (.) pants.  
 03 (.4)  
 04 Mot: >er=excuse< me don't call me farty [pants.  
 05 Chi: [ehheh.  
 06 (.6)  
 07 Chi: ((coughs))  
 08 (.4)  
 09 Chi: .hh (it is-)  
 10 Mot: so you sit there [now=an' be careful  
 11 Chi: [fa:rty pants,  
 12 (.4)  
 13 Mot: in fact the sun's so bright, I'm having  
 14 a job to see [outside  
 15 [((thudding sound))

16 → Mot:      no:, (.3) Thomas, no kicking or you'll  
 17 →            have to move,  
 18                (.3)  
 19      Mot:      .hhh (.3) look, can you see all those plants  
 20                that we planted in the tub in the summer,

An environment of fault is established by the child's addressing his mother with the naughty term "farty pants" at line 2. The mother admonishes him with two direct imperatives at line 4 and 10; nevertheless the child repeats the term, in overlap with the mother's second imperative. She seems to let this go in favour of changing the subject, but the child overlaps the end of her turn with some kicking. It is at this point that the mother issues the *or*-formatted declarative *no kicking or you'll have to move* (lines 16-17). The consequential clause *you'll have to move* is ambiguous as to the need for movement; it is given as an impersonal contingency, but it is not hard to read it as a threat over which the mother has control. Such disguise is at its most transparent in such warnings as ... *or it goes back in the cupboard* and ... *or you'll be in trouble* (extracted from cases in our sample, but not presented in full here). The surface of the directive is seemingly an exercise in epistemics (the mother merely predicting what will happen), but its force is effectively a deontic one.

There is a comparison that is worth making, and that is with the familiar practice (especially in routine medical settings, as documented by Heritage and Stivers, 1999) of asking 'no-problem' or 'optimistic' questions. Where these involve alternatives, the contiguous alternative would be a no-problem one, inviting the patient to confirm that all was well. This of course is just the opposite of the directives we report here, but there is a variant of the no-problem case that is instructive. Antaki and O'Reilly's (2014) study of mental health practitioners' questions to children in psychiatric history-taking revealed a large proportion of what seemed at first sight to be these no-problem questions, where the latter alternative was (comparatively, in psychiatric terms) mild. For example, *you want to kill yourself.. ((child nods)) ... is it really wanting to die, or is it anger*. Interactionally, this favours the second, more tractable alternative (an agentless "anger") - but this has the advantage of making the child's choice of the serious

alternative (really wanting to die) a deliberate resistance to the 'easier', more contiguous, answer, and so more diagnostically valuable. The theme this shares with our directives is that it privileges - for very different reasons - the child's own choice in the alternatives being presented to them.

We might conclude with a speculation about children's understanding of a conversational normative rule being flouted. If our interpretation is right, then at least in the interrogative format of *or*, we seem to be seeing unusually young children appreciating irony in conversation<sup>viii</sup>. In the psychological literature, a child's understanding of others' private intentions and beliefs, as displayed in the Theory of Mind false belief task (Lang and Perner, 2002) puts it at about 4 years - whereas some of the children in our data sample were well below that age (Lara, for example, whose mother contributed 21 of the directives, was aged between 1 year and 9 months to 3 years and 3 months). There is an echo here of the interactional competences of children revealed in the close analyses by Wootton (for example Wootton, 2010) and Forrester (for example, Forrester 2008) who - unlike the case of most researchers in Theory of Mind work - study children's talk *in situ* rather than in experimental settings.

In sum, then, the data we report here identifies three formats for using alternatives as a vehicle for directives which warn and threaten. The interactional effect is that they seemingly preserve the child's choice and agency, while tipping the balance heavily in favour of the adult's preference. To come off successfully, they rely on the child being able to decode a flouting of the normative conventions of contiguity in conversation, adding a further piece of evidence to our appreciation of the early understanding of interactional exchanges.



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## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Available online at < <http://talkbank.org/>>.
- <sup>ii</sup> In other words, use of "or" alternatives in talk was not very frequent, as Stivers (2010) found in a survey of American English conversation.
- <sup>iii</sup> Data from the "Lara" source are not available in audio, and the transcription here is preserved from the *Talkbank* original.
- <sup>iv</sup> Repeated listening suggests that what the mother says might be "otherwise" rather than "or" (thus *otherwise I'm jus' going to take them away*). "Otherwise" is a much more infrequent conditional connective - there is no other example in our sample.
- <sup>v</sup> We are grateful to the Editors for this insight.
- <sup>vi</sup> There were 6 exceptions to the principle that the negative option be presented second. They came from just one speaker, and formed about half of the directives that she issued in the interrogative format (not in imperatives or declaratives). (We may add that these *ors* here are still in the service of directives - they are not the disinterested enquiry into the child's preferences.) Here is an example:

Lara.2-08-23.180 silly sensible 1

01 MOT: if you're gonna be silly I'm gonna put the book away  
 02 MOT: right  
 03 MOT: shall I put it away then  
 04 MOT: shall I  
 05 MOT: are you gonna be silly or sensible  
 06 MOT: come on then  
 07 MOT: look  
 08 MOT: he's on a big mat .

The five others can be listed in summary form: *are you going to be silly or are you going to be sensible* (in different episode form the one shown above); *are you going to harass your sister all day or are you going to be a good girl*; *are you going to be silly or not*; and *do we say I want my dolly or do we say please may I have my dolly, mummy*. This speaker also uses the pattern established in the majority of cases (i.e. negative alternative second); so it may be simply that this adult speaker on occasion reverts to the default principle of making the contiguous part of the turn the 'desirable' one. One possibility for the mother's switch between formats is that the girl might be at an age (two years and eight months) where it's not always clear that she is able to cope with the irony of putting the negative element last.

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<sup>vii</sup> On this point, it is worth noting that in the Talkbank data, directives were very rare in recordings where the adult was joining the child in pretend play. One explanation may be that in pretend play the child may genuinely be allowed to have the epistemic and deontic upper hand about what is going on, compared to the business of finishing one's dinner.

<sup>viii</sup> As one of the reviewers pointed out, this would not be true of *or* when in the imperative format, as in "gently *or* you'll break it", which does not require any appreciation of irony.