JUNE FACTOR*
GWENDA BEED DAVEY**
University of Melbourne*
Deakin University**
Melbourne, Australia
j.factor@unimelb.edu.au*
gwendadavey@bigpond.com**

Tradition and innovation in Australian children's verbal folklore

In August 2004 the Australian Children's Folklore Collection was placed on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register. This extraordinary honour places the Collection among only eleven Australian documentary heritage items considered to be of national historical and social significance, including the *Endeavour Journal* of the explorer Captain James Cook.

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection is housed in the Victorian state museum (Museum Victoria), and is possibly the world's largest collection of its type. It developed from research begun in the 1970s by Dr June Factor and Dr Gwenda Beed Davey, and consists of more than 10,000 card files and other documents listing children's games, rhymes, riddles, jokes, superstitions and other kinds of children's folklore, as well as photographs, audio cassettes, video tapes, play artefacts and a number of specialist collections of children's lore. The archive continues to grow and is accessible to researchers. It is utilised by scholars from a variety of disciplines, as well as writers, journalists and others interested in childhood.

The Australian Children's Folklore Collection classifies children's folklore as either folklore *of* children, or folklore *for and about* children, depending on whether the main persons transmitting the lore are children or adults. Although the Collection includes some material culture such as home-made and other toys, it is principally verbal, and so may be considered to be of interest to this symposium on social communication. Both founders of the Collection will contribute to this paper.

June Factor: In the year 2000 Melbourne University Press published my book *Kidspeak: a Dictionary of Australian Children's Words, Expressions and Games*. In *Kidspeak,* I wanted to document some of the ever-changing traditions of language and play by which school-age children construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their sociable lives, and which are so richly represented in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection. In addition to the Collection, I drew on sources such as collection sheets sent out since 1991 to children responding to my request for information the in *Far out, Brussel Sprout!* Series (first published 1983), as well as media usage, unpublished memoirs and letters, and collections from individual informants and correspondents. The Dictionary has more than four thousand entries.

It is my intention in this paper to discuss some of the issues arising from the preparation of this work, and to highlight this important dimension of children's own lore, the folklore OF children themselves.

Problems of terminology: Children's folk speech includes names for objects, activities, places and human qualities; terms of pleasure, awe, frustration, rejection, contempt, abuse, amusement and ridicule; words intended to shock and euphemisms designed to avoid offence; acronyms and other abbreviations; expressions from particular youth sub-cultures; borrowings from other languages, including Aboriginal languages; terms from television, film, pop music and computers; language play, such as puns, rhyming slang and diminutives; and games and game-playing terms. It is both innovative and traditional.

Not all words and expressions included in *Kidspeak* are slang, but they are all colloquial and vernacular. These terms have slippery definitions and may arouse argument among experts. Increasingly, *colloquial* and *vernacular* have become, in everyday discussion of language, words of very similar meaning, namely, the informal language of a particular place, community of group. The term *slang* is often more sharply focused, and used to mark especially distinctive colloquial expressions, such as the Australian phrase used in adult speech to indicate that the speaker is busy: *I'm flat out like a lizard drinking.*

Regional and local variation: Among the young, variation in colloquial expressions is commonplace, despite a large common vocabulary. Expressions used in one area accentuate belonging, and may be totally incomprehensible to children from another district. Students from a Darwin high school in the Northern Territory are of varied ethnic origin, but they freely use Aboriginal words common in their area such as *budju* (good-looking boy or girl) and *nunga* (black), as well as the eighteenth-century English word for thieves' slang, *gammon*, which gradually came to mean untruth or lie and has currency among Aborigines in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The phrase *packing polenta* (shit scared) is found in an area of north-east Victoria (a southern State) where there are many families of Italian origin; among those who use this expression are teenagers with no Italian background.

A special, temporary kind of localism exists when children from diverse communities and neighbourhoods are placed together for a period of time, such as in a boarding school. The Australian researcher found that children placed temporarily in the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne used site-specific terms such as *bum-fluff,* the soft short hair that grows back on a child's head after the baldness caused by chemotherapy; *chuck-wagon,* the drug trolley, and *out!,* the exclamation which follows a third unsuccessful attempt to insert a needle in a child's vein (an alternative doctor or nurse must then continue the process).

***Sources of innovation: fashion and creativity*:** Passing fashions such as popular television programs play a significant role in more ephemeral colloquial use. The 1980s American cartoon series, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* popularised *cowabunga* and *bodacious,* but the words dropped from currency by the mid-1990s. Certain subjects seem always to be 'in'. As well as perennial interest in sex, there is a large vocabulary devoted to appearance, friendship, food and fighting. Food has sixty entries in *Kidspeak*, including a series of scathing terms for fast-food outlets, of which *Chucky Chicken* is probably the mildest. Another kind of continuing fashion is the stigmatising of those not 'in'. *Loony, dweeb, scrag, dickhead* and *spazo* are examples of more than three hundred and fifty insults in *Kidspeak,* of which fifty are racial epithets.

Individual creativity and verbal play, including the deliberate turning upside-down of everyday reality (eg *wicked* is used to mean 'wonderful'), is a powerful force in children's language development and usage. The wit, humour, poetic devices and love of pun and absurdity which abound in Australian youngsters' colloquial speech underline the importance of non-referential uses of language to the human species. *Sultanas* are dead flies, a *snot block* is a vanilla slice (a small square cake with custard filling and icing on top), a marble which is blue with white splotches is a *galaxy*; menstrual pads are *surfboards* and *nutcrackers* refer to a boy's tight bathing costume. The playful reconstruction of words for humorous effect leads to *penisbutter, vaginamite, bastardball* and *dwimp* ('a cross between a *dork* and a *wimp*'). Rhyming slang, an inheritance from our early London settlers, lives on in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, where children *horse and cart* (fart), and *pickle and pork* (walk) across the *frog and toad* (road).

Such verbal lore provides children with a stable, secure repertoire of language forms on which they may call at will. It is a means of experiment and imaginative invention which expands children's linguistic and cognitive horizons as it knits them ever more tightly into the culture of their peers.[1]

Gwenda Beed Davey. Much of the communication between adults and children takes fixed, folkloric forms. From birth, adults communicate with infants through lullabies, nursery rhymes and baby games such as the game played with an infant's toes, *This little piggy goes to market.* Throughout childhood, much of children's enculturation is through folk tales, although adult intervention (and bowdlerisation) over a few centuries has changed much of their original content and moral or ethical component. (See for example, Zipes 2000).

It is my intention in this paper to discuss one common type of folklore FOR children which involves idioms used by adults and directed to children, such as threats, retorts, reprimands and other formulaic statements. There has been little scholarly attention to this interesting dimension of children's folklore which might be described as 'traditional family sayings', with the notable exception of Widdowson's 1977 Canadian study from Newfoundland , *If you don't be good: verbal social control in Newfoundland.* Some of my own collection of family sayings have been published by Oxford University Press as *Snug as a Bug* (1990) and *Duck under the Table* (1991). My collecting has all been in Australia and includes items similar to those quoted by Widdowson in Canada, for example:

> *If the wind changes [while you're pulling that face, etc], you'll stay that way.*
> *If you don't be good, Santa won't come.*
> *Do you want the back of my hand?*

These traditional formulae encode both adult folk beliefs about children and adults' expectations about children and their behaviour, and they are by no means confined to Anglophone communities. As well as threats such as the above, verbal folklore used by adults with children includes homilies such as:

> *Don't care was made to care,*
> *Don't care was hung;*
> *Don't care was put in a pot*
> *And made to hold his tongue.*

It also includes warnings such as *If you cry on your birthday, you'll cry all the year,* reprimands such as *Little pigs have big ears* or *Your eyes are too big for your belly,* exhortations to *Eat your crusts or your hair won't curl,* pacifiers such as *Don't get off your bike* or *Don't get your knickers in a knot.* It includes tricks and jokes such as:

> *I'll tell you a story*
> *About Jack-a-Nory.*
> *Shall I begin it?*
> *That's all that's in it.*

There is a surprising similarity between the more than one hundred different languages spoken in Australia as regards the jocular and sometimes sharp parental retorts to children's persistent questions such as *What's for dinner, Mum?* A Greek mother might say *My liver and kidneys!* and a Croatian mother *Cakes with honey*, whereas some English-language answers to *What's for dinner?* are *Duck under the table* or *bread and scrape.* I have also collected in Australia traditional replies to children's requests to know how old an adult is; *As old as my tongue and as young as my teeth* is Anglo-Australian and *Twenty-five years per leg* is Italo-Australian.

How might these family sayings be classified? Widdowson's study has only concerned itself with verbal social control, usually expressed in the form of threats. He describes (p 27) some of the characteristics of the threats thus:

[1] Much of the content of this section is from the Introduction to June Factor's book *Kidspeak* (2000).

The threats warn of three principal retributive consequences, either singly or in combination:

1. *The intervention of some real or imaginary external figures, to which responsibility for punishment is delegated and which will take the child or harm him in some way.*
2. *Alienation of parental affection and revocation of familial security.*
3. *Physical punishment by the parent or other adult.*

I believe that the whole genre of traditional family sayings for children has much wider ramifications than simple social control. It is true that some of these traditional sayings are used for purposes of social control, as Widdowson has asserted. It is also true that some sayings are used among adults as a form of verbal humour. However, as regards their use by adults with children, I can identify eight major functional categories, and I believe that this type of traditional family verbal lore can involve the following characteristics:

Direct control
Evasion or obscurantism
Comment or reflection
Bonding or affection
Enjoyment of verbal display or performance
Adult mystique
Tension reduction
Education, training

Examples of each are as follows:

Direct control (eg *If you don't be good I'll drop ya – like a sparra on the Yarra*)
Evasion (eg What *are you making? A wigwam for a goose's bridle*)
Comment (eg *Money doesn't grow on trees*)
Bonding (eg *You're a sight for sore eyes*)
Performance (eg *Two heads are better than one, even if they are only sheep's*)
Adult mystique (eg *Little pitchers have big spouts*)
Tension reduction (eg *What do you think this is? Bush week?*)
Education (eg *Put your best foot forward*)

I acknowledge that there is overlap between the categories. I have no belief in infallible systems of classification, but have devised the above as an indication of the limitations of Widdowson's over-emphasis on 'social control' as the primary explanation of these traditional verbal folkloric forms which adults use with children. Children's folklore, whether folklore *of* children or folklore *for* children, demonstrates the fundamental principles of continuity and change which pervade many aspects of culture, including verbal communication between adults and children and between children themselves.

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