Rituals, vocalisations, and creating comfortable spaces: A spatialised view of young children's language in museums

HACKETT, Abigail, MACRAE, Christina, SHANNON, David Ben, CHESTER, Robert, COOKE, Lucy, HALLBERG, Esther, SIMMONS, Georgina, SMITH-HIGGINS, Laura and TOON, Sally

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3c Rituals, vocalisations, and creating comfortable spaces: A spatialised view of young children's language in museums

Abi Hackett, Christina MacRae, David Ben Shannon, Robert Chester, Lucy Cooke, Esther Hallberg, Georgina Simmons, Laura Smith-Higgins, Sally Toon

Abstract

In this co-authored chapter, we describe a research collaboration between the Humber Museums Partnership and Manchester Metropolitan University, focused on families with young children visiting museum sites in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was motivated by the following questions: How might public places like museums shape children's language and communication? What role might Humber Museums Partnership play in supporting children and families in this context? This chapter focuses on how more-than-human soundscapes are involved in young children's languaging practices. Vignettes illustrate how children's vocalisations and words combine with movements and environmental sounds to produce meanings that are collective and entangled with place. Important themes coming out of the study were that children visiting the museum sites had the opportunity to experiment with different kinds of vocalisations, in different kinds of soundscapes, to playfully use communication rituals and language to create connection and a sense of belonging, and to do these things in an atmosphere that felt comfortable and hospitable. These themes can inform the work of museums in designing places that facilitate children's encounters with new spaces and soundscapes and their languaging as part of those encounters.

Abi Hackett: 0000-0003-4332-8594

Christina MacRae: 0000-0002-7756-8871
David Ben Shannon: 0000-0001-7642-0667

This chapter describes a research collaboration between the Humber Museums Partnership and Manchester Metropolitan University. Humber Museums Partnership (HMP) is a collaboration between different local authority museum services in the Yorkshire and Humber region of England, encompassing a wide range of indoor and outdoor museum and heritage sites. It comprises three participating local authority areas, where some of the authors work: Hull (Esther and Sally), East Riding of Yorkshire (Lucy and Robert), and North Lincolnshire (Laura and Georgina). HMP had previously worked with researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University (Abi, Christina and David) to understand the experiences of young children and their families visiting museums (Hackett et al., 2018). Continuing these conversations, this study focused more explicitly on language and sound, seeking to understand more about how families and young children experienced museum places and how this might shape or inform language and communication during the visits.

Young children's experiences of language and place in the afterlives of COVID-19

Children come into museums with unique sets of previous experiences. For example, each child is likely to have had different experiences of being in groups, encountering strangers, spending time in public indoor and outdoor spaces, and more. However, one of the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is that, in many parts of the world, including here in northern England, young children had unexpected and distinctive experiences of *place* during their earliest years. For many children, this might have included spending more time at home and less time in public spaces, playgroups, or nurseries, or interacting with unfamiliar adults or other children. Moreover, with different levels of closure, lockdowns, and movement restrictions operating in different parts of the UK during 2020 and 2021, these unique and unexpected experiences of place dominated the first years of some children's lives, while for others the implications were less drastic. Consequently, in the afterlives of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were encountering aspects of museums and other spaces from a distinctive perspective.

Another outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic in England has been an intensification of concerns about young children's language development, which was already high on the agendas of many organisations working to support children and families. Since the pandemic, the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Department for Education, 2024) and non-statutory Development Matters curriculum guidance (Department for Education, 2021) have further emphasised the development of communication skills as 'underpinning' all other aspects of learning and development – specifically, they mean English language skills (with the notable removal of the requirement for supporting non-English home languages in the revised, 2024 guidance). Moreover, since the pandemic, news outlets run headlines such as "Lockdowns hurt child speech and language skills" (Jeffreys, 2021), whilst England's chief schools' inspector said the delay to young children's development was "particularly worrying" (BBC, 2021). Certainly, there seems to be concern from several quarters about young children's language, but little consideration of experience of places and their potential relationship with language.

In this co-authored chapter, we share some of the things we learnt from the study, which was motivated by the following questions:

- What might it feel like for families to begin visiting museums in the afterlives of the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How might public places like museums shape children's language and communication?
- What role might Humber Museums Partnership play in supporting children and families in this context?

Language as relational-material

The study took the perspective that language is *relational-material* (Hackett et al., 2021) and connected to place. From a relational-material perspective, we can think about places as a conglomeration of other humans, objects, ideas, how bodies feel and affect each other, and modes of engagement between these things. Each of us, adults and children, encounter places through the medium of how our bodies and minds feel and respond. When we describe language as being relational-material, we mean that language sits within this wider, multi-sensory, more-than-human conglomeration, and that bodily, sensory experience is an

important aspect of how, when, and why children use language and other communication strategies.

This chapter expands this understanding of language as relational-material, by focusing more specifically on how more-than-human soundscapes are involved in the emergence of young children's languaging practices. Attending to a more-than-human soundscape involves thinking about how human, non-human, and environmental sounds mingle and interact with each other, and what this means for speaking and listening. Taking greater account of the more-than-human soundscape could include attending to:

- How sounds (including human vocalisations) are produced and sensed differently in indoor or outdoor spaces.
- How human utterances are produced in response to sounds generated by non-human life (a dog, a tree) or non-living objects (a stone, a raindrop).
- How "back-and-forth interactions" (Department for Education, 2024, p. 10) might spring up not just between a human adult and a human child, but also with stray cats, bicycle bells, and footsteps.
- Utterances that children make that are not recognisable as words.

Sounds, including the vocalisations and words uttered by children and their grown-ups, are all entangled with place. Following this line of thinking, we propose that *new encounters with different kinds of spaces and soundscapes* are an important factor for considering young children's experiences of museums, and their languaging as part of these experiences.

Introducing the study

We were interested in what young children's experiences of museums, galleries, and outside space might have to teach us about the emergence of young children's language and its relationship with place. To explore this, we carried out collaborative research with families and young children in the diverse spaces across Humber Museums Partnership. We included a mix of indoor and outdoor spaces:

- A walled garden behind Wilberforce House museum, Hull (a session for babies and toddlers)
- The grounds and zoo at Sewerby Hall and Gardens, Bridlington (unstructured visits with families)

- The Medieval Gallery at Hull and East Riding Museum, Hull (staff-led visit for early years groups)
- North Lincolnshire Museum, Scunthorpe (dedicated under-5s session).

Sessions were organised by HMP staff in collaboration with their existing partner organisations and families. Researchers made repeated visits with participating families to these places, collecting field notes and continuous audio data via small wearable audio-recorders (mainly worn by the researcher or the child's grown-up, and carried around during the visit). The methodology involved analysing the written observations and audio recordings of young children and families as they experienced and explored HMP sites, with a focus on the children's language, vocalisations, and meaning-making. Below, we discuss four vignettes from this study in order to explore four themes: soundscapes, vocalisations, rituals and feeling, and creating comfortable spaces.

Language sits in a wider soundscape

We collected audio recordings and written observations of young children and their grown-ups exploring, moving, and playing in a range of indoor and outdoor museum sites. We expected that words would be only part of the children's communication, used in combination with gesture, gaze, objects, movements, and sounds. Listening back to the audio, in particular, emphasised how the children's words were tangled up with other vocalisations they made, the words and vocalisations of others, and a wider soundscape of all kinds of more-than-human noises such as the sounds made by toys, or water splashing in the water tray. In addition, our observations and field notes showed us the importance of gesture, movement, touch, and gaze to how children and families communicated.

Often, in traditional transcriptions, audio recordings are 'neatened up' to foreground words (or other noises and gestures that are easily articulated as words). We wanted to avoid this approach because privileging certain aspects of language over others (MacLure, 2013) limits the kinds of stories we can tell about what happens with young children, place, and language. As we have argued elsewhere:

> gestures, words and sounds produced by the children and by the place are inseparable and difficult to transcribe. This however is not a

> methodological inconvenience, but an important insight into the more-than-human nature of literacy and language practices. (Hackett, 2021, p. 77)

As an illustration of this, in vignette 1 below, the sounds of Henry and his 婆婆 (paternal grandmother) get caught up with and transformed by the sounds of his toy as they play in an indoor space in the North Lincolnshire Museum.

Vignette 1. North Lincolnshire Museum: Henry and the dinging ball game

Henry plays with a toy consisting of a piece of wood, with a rail coiling through, down which rolls a metal ball. As the ball rolls down the rails, Henry flaps his arms and jiggles his legs, his whole body undulating with glee. At the end of the rails, the ball strikes a tiny metal bell. Frequently, Henry says "ding" (or sometimes "bing"), slightly before or after the bell sounds. Henry's 婆婆 (paternal grandmother) watches as he plays. At first, she encourages Henry to describe the colours of the balls, or count them. However, as the game progresses, 婆婆 begins to join in with Henry's dinging, cackling wildly each time she does.

This episode provides an account of a museum soundscape and illustrates how words and vocalisations sit within it. Sometimes early years educators are given the advice that quiet spaces are more 'communication friendly' (Jarman, 2013). However, we found the situation to be more complex than that, and it was difficult to predict what kinds of words, vocalisations, and gestures children were likely to make in different kinds of places and soundscapes. Whilst quiet spaces might be more convenient for adults to hear a child clearly, they can often create feelings of being surveilled, and sometimes put pressure on children to perform the right kinds of talk, and on parents to performatively talk to children in very

particular ways. For example, in the vignette above, Henry's 婆婆 seems to approach the activity as an opportunity for rehearsing the kinds of language we associate with small children and early learning goals: specifically, numbers and colours. However, as the ding of the bell and Henry's playful 'ding' get the better of her, she starts dinging merrily along with him. Consequently, instead of seeking to develop generalisable rules for the 'right' kinds of spaces and soundscapes for children's communication, we found ourselves thinking about:

- The potential to provide a range of place and soundscape experiences for children and families.
- How to create atmospheres where different kinds of sound and movement feel welcome and comfortable.
- How to frame the spatial experience expansively: the journey to the museum, as well as the moving around the museum, including its corridors, entry spaces and views from windows, can all matter.

Questions for reflection

- How do spaces invite movement and possibility?
- What makes a space inviting?

The significance of vocalisations

As we wrote field notes and played back the audio recordings, we found it extremely challenging to put into words both the general soundscape and the utterances produced by children. For example, we might write 'ding' for the sound a bell makes, but the word falls short of how it sounded. Equally, when children vocalised, we became aware of our tendency to try to listen for words, or to sometimes think we had heard a word, but after repeated listening realised it was either not recognisable as a word, or a very different word to what we had thought it was. In this way, it was difficult to 'extract' discrete words from the wider soundscape and from place. Meaning was rarely embedded within the individual words or utterances of one child. Rather, it emerged collectively, between the humans involved, but also between the space, context, and movement of bodies in that space.

In vignette 2 below, we provide an example of how vocalisations, gestures, and single words bounced back and forth between two children and place, with connection and meaning emerging as part of this process.

Vignette 2. Wilberforce House Museum: Tree Babies – vocalising on the move

The Tree Babies sessions took place in a very special walled garden space. The enclosed outdoor space, centred around an ancient lime tree, invited children to move, without the usual adult anxiety about safety. Two children, who had not met each other before, became magnetised to each other, moving in tandem as if attached by an invisible thread. Both children had been identified as reluctant to talk in playgroup/nursery environments. In the garden setting, the children used some single words with each other – but more often they vocalised single yells or sometimes repeated whoops that were rhythmically punctuated. Although it was hard to describe the sounds they made, they seemed to 'mirror' each other's sounds. This mirroring also characterised the way they moved in tandem with each other, holding the same objects, and repeating each other's gestures to each other. The sounds they produced emerged with the rhythms and pace of their movements, and in response to the encounters that momentarily stopped them in their tracks.

A large portion of young children's vocalisations during the study were not easily recognisable as words. Often, dominant accounts of child development emphasise words, and this is reflected in recent anxieties about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood, including a worry that children have reduced vocabulary. Importantly, in our research, it did not seem like the children's vocalisations were always trying to be words. Rather, the vocalisations did something in their own right, as part of a wider assemblage of bodies moving through space and the sociality of being and moving together. Therefore, it is important to rethink the assumption that children's vocalisations are all attempts at words (with an accompanying rationale that adults need to correct or improve children's pronunciation) and instead consider what vocalisations achieve in their own right.

Viewing the vocalisations as part of a soundscape, where they combine with movements, words, and other sounds in the environment, showed how meaning was collective and

entangled with place. It seemed it was often in the gaps, silences, under the breath, and whispered into the wind, that new kinds of language emerged.

In order to value vocalisations just as much as words, we thought about:

- Creating welcoming spaces that invite and value all kinds of vocalisations, as far as possible.
- Offering activities and structures that have flexibility and space for different kinds of unplanned and unpredictable sounds.
- Asking "how much space can be left for noise?".

Questions for reflection

- What would happen if adults initiated less spoken language?
- How can we expand our view of communication to include more-than-words?

Language rituals and feeling connected

Previous research on young children in museums has identified how children participate in or create 'rituals' or repeated, shared ways of exploring or being in a particular location (e.g., MacRae et al., 2018; Wallis & Noble, 2022). In this study, we noted the role of language and sound in diverse, newly invented rituals, which were characterised by the playful and relational language used by children and families. Rather than language being functional or concerned only with information exchange, these verbal exchanges were often about feeling connected to each other in the moment, about pleasurable actions and the anticipation of a shared moment.

In vignette 3 below, Sasha and her mother call and return the phrase "waddle waddle" to each other, as they look for the penguins in the zoo at Sewerby Hall and Gardens.

Vignette 3. Sewerby Zoo: Penguins that go "waddle waddle"

As Sasha and her mum search for their favourite penguin, Sasha's mum asks "and what do the penguins do?" in a confident and firm voice, and Sasha answers immediately "waddle waddle", in a loud voice with a slight sing-song inflection. Her mother responds immediately, emphasising the sing-song element "waddle waddle". Speaking at a slightly

higher pitch, her mum's response sounds like singing and includes a slight laugh at the beginning of the utterance. Sasha immediately responds again "waddle waddle", this time in a flatter, less song-y voice, and her mum instantly repeats "ah…waddle waddle" in a deeper voice which seems to mark the end of the exchange.

Sasha and her mum's call and response of the phrase "waddle waddle" was not functional language or information exchange, but an intimate ritual that references their frequent previous visits to the zoo and their shared love of the penguins. Playfulness and rituals can emerge when we least expect it, often led by children, with a liveliness that is difficult to pin down. We see this in different ways in each of the vignettes provided in this chapter: as Henry and his grandmother repeatedly ding the ball and laugh (vignette 1), and as two toddlers mirrored each other's bodies and sounds (vignette 2). Often during the research, the moments when families were relaxed, or when there was enough time for lingering, experimenting, or making space to notice children's interpretations and experiments, were when beautiful examples of personal language rituals emerged.

In order to better value language play and rituals that spring up spontaneously between children and their grown-ups, we considered:

- The nature and balance of activities on offer; are the activities outcome-focused or are there opportunities for freedom of expression and creativity?
- Grown-ups' awareness of how rituals tend to emerge and change through repetition and over time.
- Striking a balance between building in predictability and cultivating openness. Families and children often appreciate structure and predictability for helping to create a sense of safety. So how can we create opportunities for spontaneity without losing the safety of structure?

Questions for reflection

- What are the best conditions for playfully being together in spaces?
- How can we plan for unpredictability?

Creating comfortable spaces for early language

Early childhood language is impossible to separate from the strong messages educators and families receive constantly about the 'best' kinds of talk, appropriate pace of language development, 'quality' interactions, and the necessity of these things for children's future well-being and success. In many public spaces, parenting is policed and grown-ups can feel pressured (both implicitly and explicitly) to perform certain kinds of parenting and to encourage children to participate in this performance. Likewise, when early years educators bring groups of children from their settings to the museum, they are likely to feel a performative pressure in slightly different ways, as they use the visit to connect to the areas of learning specified by the early years curriculum.

In vignette 4 below, Finn asserts and re-asserts his refusal to engage in the activities his Daddy would prefer him to do, while playing in an indoor space at the museum.

Vignette 4. North Lincolnshire Museum: Finn's Escape!

Finn escapes from the Dudley's Den. He runs around a small island exhibit, making sure to keep it between himself and his Daddy, while laughing, non-stop. If his Daddy gets too close, he squeals in protest. The other children start singing "Wind the bobbin up." "We're not going to do wind the bobbin up?" asks Daddy. "Drawings!" Finn demands, followed by a howl of protest as Daddy tries to pick him up. "Oh dear," says Daddy, glancing at me from the corner of his eye. Eventually, the background singing transforms into the Bye-Bye Song. Finn flops down firmly on his bottom: "I sit down!". Finally, the Bye-Bye Song is over, Daddy expressing that we've "missed it". He tries to ease Finn up, who shrieks and flops backwards, almost hitting his head.

Here, Finn refuses Daddy's request and the lure of the Bye-Bye Song, not by saying 'no' but by using his whole body: he flops down, declares that he is sitting down, requests "drawings!", and shrieks in protest. Whilst the current climate for families with young children is characterised by anxieties about the 'proper' language and development of young children, it needs to be recognised that correcting or praising children for using words or playing in a certain kind of way has effects and produces certain kinds of atmospheres. Attending here to Finn's bodily refusal of the group singing activity shows the communicative value of transgressive, mobile, and emotive forms of communication that exist outside of narrow confines of 'proper' development.

Museum-based groups and spaces may have a particularly important role to play here. Families at several sites told us they preferred the museum sessions to other local playgroups because they viewed it as "less cliquey" or "not judgemental" and because they felt "comfortable". Whilst this may seem like a pleasing aside to the emergence of language in these spaces, our research points to the centrality of how people feel, how bodies move, and how people and bodies are able to relate to each other, to the emergence of language. In spaces where families and children spend time together, shifting power dynamics and atmospheres shape what kinds of movement, talk, and vocalisations feel possible or welcome in the space. Rubbing up alongside this potential are feelings and (sometimes) myths about the performance of proper kinds of parenting or 'being an educator' in public spaces. It is important to be conscious of and work to deconstruct or reframe these feelings and myths with families.

In thinking about how to create unpressurised spaces of welcome to families, we considered:

- Weaving hospitality into the atmosphere and physical design of the place, for example through relaxed blocks of time, thoughtfully arranged spaces, and trusting relationships.
- Creating conditions for children to experiment with movement and sound, which welcome vocalisations and noisiness, and invite playful language for connection and belonging.
- Prioritising meaningful relationships between children, their grown-ups, staff, and spaces, instead of privileging word production between adults and children.

Questions for reflection

- How can we prepare and plan to build a sense of hospitality in the spaces where we work?
- In what ways can configurations of space and time offer unique forms of hospitality?

Conclusion

Our research shows how young children's language is bound up with place, body, movement, and collectivity when visiting museums. Viewing language as relational-material was useful for identifying the ways in which different museum spaces were relevant and beneficial to

how young children used and experimented with language. The opportunity to experiment with different kinds of vocalisations, in different kinds of soundscapes, to playfully use language to create connection and a sense of belonging, and to do these things in an atmosphere that felt comfortable and hospitable, were all important themes coming out of the study. By emphasising the role of place in how, when, and why children used language, our research highlighted important implications for the role museums have and could play in the everyday lives and language practices of children and families. Public, free spaces that welcome moving, sounding children and families, are valuable in their own right, and the afterlives of the COVID-19 pandemic have foregrounded this even more.

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