"I'm Bigger!": Size Terms and Seniority in Datooga Children's Interaction

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Abstract

Pre-school age children in European contexts are known to use labels like 'big' and 'small' to orient to age differences, very often to highlight differences in physical and social competence (Häll 2022). This research report explores Datooga-speaking Tanzanian children's use of a set of polysemous words that can refer to physical size, age, and kinship-based seniority: *háw* 'big, old, senior', *mánàng'* 'small, young, junior', and *deen* 'be equal to in size or age'. Based on a video corpus of everyday interaction, the paper singles out these size-related terms to assess the extent to which children engage with lexicalized concepts relating to size and seniority. Results show that while young Datooga children pay a lot of attention to physical size, in my data children's only orientations to age and seniority using these terms occurred in conversations with adults. Unlike Datooga adults and Swedish preschoolers, Datooga children in early to middle childhood were not observed using size-based terms as a resource for negotiating (and leveraging) age difference.

Keywords: social relations; age; language socialization; Africa; Tanzania

About the author

Alice Mitchell is a Junior Professor in the Institute of African Studies at the University of Cologne. Her research to date focuses on language use in rural Tanzania, with a particular focus on the Datooga language. She has published on topics such as in-law name avoidance, swearing practices, the use of kinship terms, and children's understanding of kinship concepts.

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1 Introduction

How important are age differences in childhood? When do children encounter concepts of age and seniority, and for what purposes? Here the term 'age' is used in the sense of the relative temporal property of having been born before or after someone else. One salient context in adult-child interaction is adults' use of age-related categories to evaluate and control children's behaviour. Consider the following verbal exchange between a mother and her six-year-old son, recorded one morning in a Datooga-speaking household in rural Tanzania.[1] Just prior to this extract, the mother discovered that her son had secretly taken some food from her house:[2]

Extract 1

1	Mother	*éa mûy gídéa(ba) síidà (.) gágéanú gídá méeng'ôomsà*
		éa mûy gídéa(ba) síidà g-á-géanú gídá m-ée-ng'ôom-sà
		COP bad CONJ person AFF-3-take.CP thing NEG-IMPS-?-TERM.IS
		'It's bad that someone takes something that [uncertain of meaning]'

| 2 | | (1.5 seconds) |

| 3 | Younger brother | *siyaakiyea* |
| | | 'It was eaten' [unclear articulation] |

| 4 | | (1.1) |

5	Mother	*qáng'àlnyì jéeftá mánàng'í?*
		q-á-ng'àl-nyì jéeftá mánàng'í
		AFF-3-surpass-2SG.OBJ child small
		'A small child does better than you?'

| 6 | | (2.0) |

| 7 | Mother | *òorì* |
| | | 'boy' [vocative] |

| 8 | | (1.4) |

| 9 | Mother | *Gídáróopta* |
| | | '[name]' |

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[1] Ages of the children in this study were provided by their father or grandfather, who had generally memorized at least the month and year of their birth.

[2] I use an adapted version of the Datooga orthography with surface tone marking and <q> instead of <gh> for [q]. The morpheme glossing abbreviations follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules with the following additions: AFF = 'affirmative'; ANAPH.PRO = 'anaphoric pronoun'; CONJ = 'conjunction'; CP = 'centripetal'; IMPS = 'impersonal'; IS = 'inflectional suffix'; TERM = 'terminal'; PSN = 'personal name'; PREP = 'preposition'. I keep the glosses relatively minimal, since the focus is not on the grammar of the language, and in some places I omit them altogether where utterances are very simple. The numbers given in brackets denote the length of pauses in milliseconds. Underlining denotes emphasis. Question marks denote rising intonation. I have changed the children's names.

10		(1.9) [shifts gaze from fire to look at boy]

11 Mother *òogá Géejáru áa hâw ng'éahá?*
òogá   *Géejáru* áa   hâw   ng'éahá
2PL.PRO PSN   COP   big   who
'Of you and Geejaru, who is bigger/older?'

12		(1.9)

13 Mother *ah?*
[returns gaze to fire]

14 Son *qáawáschí hâw*
q-áa-wás-chí   hâw
AFF-1SG-be-IS big
'I'm bigger/older'

15 Mother *ák ábèeda*
'Well then'

16		(5.0)

17 Younger *háw ání*
  brother 'I older'

In the first line of Extract 1, the mother, who is preparing her fire for cooking, makes a straightforward moral judgement about her son secretly taking food: "it's bad that someone takes something that [uncertain of meaning]". She then extends her rebuke by means of two questions that orient to the age difference between her two sons, both present in the room: 'A small child does better than you?' and 'Of you and Geejaru [the younger brother], who is older?'. The first question criticizes her son by explicitly suggesting that the younger brother's behaviour surpasses the older brother's. When the older brother doesn't respond, despite two prompts to do so (lines 7 and 9), she turns to look at him and poses the second question, which simply asks the older child to identify which of the two brothers is older.[3] While not as explicit as the first question, the second question clearly implies reason to doubt the otherwise well-known fact that Gidaroopta is older, namely, that he has behaved worse than his younger brother. After a further prompt from his mother ('ah?'), he replies to the question, asserting quietly that he is indeed older.

Presumably the world over, adults expect normally developing children to behave more responsibly and competently than their younger peers. Such expectations mean that age concepts – often expressed through idioms of size like *háw* 'big' – provide a linguistic resource for socializing children. In some communities, an adult might refer to a child as a 'baby' to express a perceived lack of competence or immaturity and thus give a negative evaluation of that child's behaviour; see Hellman et al. (2014) for examples from a Swedish preschool. Hellman et al. (2014) also draw attention to the reverse tactic of praising

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[3] There is no comparative form of the adjective in Datooga.

a child by emphasizing how old they are (e.g., "Aren't you a big girl!"). This association between older age and competence or good behaviour can also be observed among the household members represented in Extract 1: on a different occasion, the same woman affectionately referred to her youngest son as *qèarèemánéeda* 'young man' after he finally managed to get up in the night to avoid wetting the bed.

While adults orient to the age differences between children for various strategic reasons, this short research report focuses on the extent to which children themselves attend to these differences. If, as Berman (2014, 2019) has argued, age and the state of being a child are to a large extent sociocultural constructs, then how do such constructs emerge in children's interactions, and what functions do they serve? I narrow my inquiry here to look at children's use of the specific lexical items *háw* 'big', *mánàng* 'small', and *deen* 'be equal to'. As in many languages, these size terms are used metonymically to refer to age and seniority (see Section 3) and thus provide some insight into children's understandings of these concepts. Extract 1 already demonstrates two relevant instances: in line 14, the elder brother finally responds to his mother's rebuke, stating that he is *háw* 'big, senior'. In admitting his seniority, he admits responsibility for his behaviour. Once the act of scolding is concluded, the younger brother then makes his own claim to seniority in line 17: *háw ání!* 'I'm older' or literally 'I big' (the boy is still learning to talk). This assertion suggests that the three-year-old child has already absorbed the idea that being 'bigger/older' is a desirable status. As this study will show, these orientations to seniority are in fact atypical in my corpus, with size terms used much more frequently with reference to physical appearance.

The empirical basis of this report is a corpus of 24 hours of transcribed video and audio recordings of the everyday interactions of Datooga-speaking children growing up in an extended household in northern Tanzania. I collected these recordings in 2017 over the course of a nine-month period of linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork. At that time, the household comprised an elder, two of his wives, the youngest of whom still had small children, and the elder's daughter-in-law plus her children. The number of people living in the compound fluctuated over the course of the year but eight children were permanently resident and ranged in age from 18 months to 13 years. None of these children attended school; instead they helped with herding duties, household chores, care of younger siblings, or, particularly for those under about six, hung around and played in and around the family compound.

For linguistic and cultural orientation, Datooga is a Southern Nilotic language (or more accurately a cluster of dialects) spoken predominantly in northern Tanzania. The dialect cluster is related to the Kalenjin languages of Kenya, as well as more distantly to the larger Tanzanian language Maa (or Maasai), belonging to the Eastern Nilotic branch of the family. Although the Datooga language is being abandoned by some speakers in favour of Swahili, it is still learned as a first language by children in rural areas (see Mitchell (2022) for more details). Like other Nilotic groups, Datooga people were formerly semi-nomadic cattle herders, though nowadays they are more sedentary and typically grow a few crops in addition to keeping livestock. Unlike many other Nilotic groups, Datooga do not have an institution of age sets, though they have a (disintegrating) system of generation sets, which once regulated social matters such as possible marital partners, as well as roles and responsibilities during ritual events. While older people can still identify the set to which they belong, the generation system appears to be largely defunct now.

In what follows, I first provide an overview of existing work on age differentiation in childhood (Section 2). I then present relevant

terminology for referring to age and seniority concepts in Datooga (Section 3), followed by an empirical look at how children use size terms (Section 4). Section 5 offers some closing discussion.

2 Age differentiation in childhood

The production of age difference in childhood is little studied, particularly in comparison with other social variables like gender. One notable exception is Berman's (2014, 2019) ethnographic work among children in the Marshall Islands.[4] According to Berman, in this part of the world older age is associated with greater power and control over material resources, but also with the responsibility to provide for others. These socioeconomic patterns are familiar in African contexts, too. In the Marshall Islands, elders can control the actions of their younger relatives, who are supposed to defer to them, but they are also expected to be benevolent. Even among children, individuals 'fear' their older siblings, who in turn are supposed to be generous with their younger siblings. The flipside of this age-related power hierarchy is that younger children can differentiate themselves both from adults and from older children by exhibiting behaviours associated with immaturity, such as demanding things, refusing to give things, and being direct. To illustrate these dynamics, Berman (2014) recounts an episode involving a five-year-old boy and a lollipop. On seeing the boy showing off his lollipop, his ten-year-old relative demanded a lick, to which the boy briefly acquiesced, then snatched it back. Analysing this seconds-long, mundane incident, Berman shows how relative age is constructed in moment-by-moment interaction. In making a demand of the younger child, the girl positions herself as older, with the right to control access to material goods. At the same time, though, the form of the speech act reveals a kind

of childishness and closeness in age: adults would be unlikely to make direct demands of children in this way. The relinquishing of the lollipop represents an acknowledgement of the older child's seniority, but the snatching back functions as a challenge to this status and also an assertion of being a child. Ultimately, Berman argues, their direct struggles over the lollipop frame them as peers, that is, as close in age and, importantly, as children, who do not exhibit the self-control and generosity expected of adults. This episode also reveals how negotiations over juniority, seniority, and equality are contingent, complex, and open to change: children can vie for status as 'big', 'little', or 'equal' depending on the circumstances and desired outcomes.

While paying attention to the role of language, Berman's studies of the negotiation of age difference have a lot to do with material resources and sharing. Morita (2021) has also examined nonverbal demonstrations of age difference in Japanese families, specifically showing how older siblings assert status differences from their younger siblings in the ways they interact with material objects. In one sequence, a two-year-old girl attempts to give her older brother her soft toy to cuddle and put to sleep; instead, he karate-chops the toy and flings it to the floor. Morita argues that the brother's response to his sister's offer is a rejection of "assumed equality" (2021, 191). By demonstrating an entirely different stance towards the object than his sister, he highlights the distinctive social positions of the two siblings. Age itself is not necessarily a relevant dynamic in this particular act of status differentiation, but the other cases Morita examines all involve the older brother using material objects, such as a jigsaw puzzle, to emphasize his more advanced physical and/or cognitive abilities compared to his sister.

Conflict and, from an adult perspective, "being mean" (Morita 2021, 180) are likely to

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[4] Late on in the preparation of this paper I also came across the recent PhD thesis (in Swedish) by Häll (2022), which examines the meaning and function of age categories in preschoolers' interactions in Sweden.

be fruitful contexts for exploring how age differentiation emerges in everyday interactions among children, as Morita's examples demonstrate. One of the episodes in the Hellman et al. (2014) Swedish preschool study reveals how children of similar ages cast their peers as 'babies' to justify excluding them from social activities.[5] On the other hand, in cultures where sibling caregiving is the norm, such as those of rural Tanzania, practices of care and kindness may also help construct juniority and seniority. Frankenberg et al. (2013) focus on the socialization of caregiving in Tanzanian families, and though they are not concerned with age differentiation per se, the interactions they document, such as older children guiding their younger relatives in the process of eating, highlight competence-based differences that may become available as indexes of age difference.

Turning back to language, another rich place to look for acts of age differentiation is in practices of person reference (i.e., how children address and refer to one another). Clear structural asymmetries exist in how junior and senior relatives refer to each other across cultures, as has been thoroughly documented by Fleming and Slotta (2018): most commonly, kin terms are used 'upwards' (i.e., for the generations above one's own), and names are used 'downwards', for relatives of younger generations. Within a single generation, relatives may also address each other using kin terms that indicate relative age: for instance, children growing up speaking Thai can address siblings as 'older sibling' or 'younger sibling' (Howard 2007; see also Widlok this volume), thus clearly indexing age difference. Howard (2007) shows that, in practice, children tend to treat each other as equals, preferring names over kin terms. A striking exception to this comes with what she calls "compliance-seeking activities". She observes that "children's use of kinterms

occurred consistently in compliance-seeking activities" (2007, 214) and produces a satisfying analysis of how senior/junior relations are established among children precisely through this deployment of kinship terms. I have observed a similar phenomenon in Datooga children's interactions: kin terms are used extremely rarely (because names are the norm), but they do occasionally appear in contexts where children are asserting responsibilities and duties associated with kinship.

Beyond person reference, one salient linguistic resource for indicating relative age is words (typically adjectives, though in some languages verbs) such as 'young' and 'old'. In many languages, seniority (both age-based and kinship-based) can be, or may only be, expressed using size terms like 'big' and 'little' (see Section 3 for a discussion of Datooga). Size terms are of course relational or relative: they invoke comparisons between two things and thus are good places to look for acts of differentiation, hence my focus on these terms in this paper. While some work has explored children's semantic acquisition of these concepts (Ravn and Gelman 1984), I found only limited literature on children's deployment of these terms in social interaction. Above I mentioned Hellman et al. (2014), who considered the use of size terms, among other categories, in a Swedish preschool, and showed how distinctions were drawn between 'small' and 'big' children, often in relation to social or physical competence. In another study, also with Swedish preschoolers, Häll (2022) shows children using the category terms *stor* 'big' and *liten* 'small' to distinguish degrees of competence amongst themselves. Since competence and independence are desirable states in Swedish culture, being bigger/older is also positively valued. Häll observed how children would avoid using the term 'small' to describe themselves to other children, but

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[5] One reviewer raises the question of whether similar types of exclusion happen at the other end of the age spectrum. A recent book, *Social Exclusion in Later Life: Interdisciplinary and Policy Perspectives*, by Walsh et al (2021), addresses this topic.

made strategic use of this category with adults as a way to recruit help. I return to these findings in Section 4, comparing them with what I observed in a non-institutional context in a very different part of the world.

3 Seniority-related terminology in Datooga

Before considering children's language use, I briefly describe age- and seniority-related terminology in the Datooga language. Datooga distinguishes between children and adults by means of the terms *jéepta* 'child' and *síidá háw* 'adult' (lit. 'big person'). Stages within childhood can be differentiated with adjectives of size; for example, *jéeptá mánàng'* 'small child' would refer to children aged approximately four and under. While there are more specific ways to distinguish developmental stages, with expressions for a newborn baby, a crawling child, and so on, these terms did not occur in my corpus. The noun *jéepta* 'child' is the standard reference term for a large category incorporating babies, adolescents, and even unmarried adults and adults without children (at the time of my fieldwork I was often referred to as *jéepta*).

The polysemous adjectives of size and seniority that concern us here are *mánàng'* 'small, junior' and *háw* 'big, senior'. I assume that the physical size sense is basic and that the age and social order sense derives from it, given that the direction of semantic extension tends to go from the concrete to the abstract. I also assume that one meaning is activated while the other is backgrounded, and that the relevant sense is contextually determined. For instance, in line 11 of Extract 1, when the mother asks her son who is *háw* 'big', I assume that the child's physical size relative to his brother is irrelevant to the act of stealing food

and that the seniority sense is activated. The adjectives *mánàng'* 'small' and *háw* 'big' combine with kinship terms to indicate seniority: *qéamáttá háw*, literally 'big mother', denotes one's mother's older sister or father's senior wife; *gátmòodá mánàng'* means 'junior wife' (where juniority is determined by marriage order). That physical size is metaphorically extended into the social domain of birth and marital order – which is what defines kinship-based seniority – seems to be commonplace in human cognition. In Swahili, for instance, one finds the concepts *mama mkubwa* 'big mother' and *mama mdogo* 'small mother', for older and younger sisters of one's mother, respectively, while in English and other European languages 'big' and 'little' modify sibling terms to denote relative age. In Datooga, another important adjective that denotes size but not (at least conventionally) seniority is *háláati* 'huge', which was a favourite word among the young children of the household and one of the first words of the younger brother we encountered in Extract 1.

The Datooga adjectives 'big' and 'small' do not only combine with kin terms but can also independently denote age/birth order, as in line 14 of Extract 1 (*qáawáschí hâw* 'I am older'), and can modify person nouns like 'child' or anaphoric pronouns, as in example (1):[6]

(1) *dáa   háw ánéedá?*
     ANAPH.PRO   big which
     'Which is the big [=elder] one? [asked of two children]'

Another way of talking about birth order beyond 'big' and 'small' is indicated in (2) and (3). In this case the phrase refers to the child who immediately follows their sibling in the birth order:

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[6] In this example, the adjective clearly refers to an abstract property of the children, since the speaker can see both of the referents and can assess relative size herself.

(2) *níi*   *q-á-bát*
     DEM.PRO   AFF-3-lie.on
     bàdáydá   *húda*
     back.POSS   girl
     'This one is the girl's next oldest sibling'

(3) *q-á-bát*   *bàdáydêa-nyu*
     AFF-3-lie.on   back-1SG.POSS.SG
     'S/he is my younger sibling'

The literal meaning of the expression *bat bàdáyda* appears to be 'to lie on the back of' (compare this with *qábát mùunda* 's/he lies/sleeps on a cowhide'). Assuming this translation is accurate, we are dealing with an idiomatic expression that, speculatively, perhaps relates to the practice of older siblings carrying their younger siblings around on their backs. Datooga also has lexicalized terms to denote the oldest and youngest children from the perspective of the parental generation: *dúuwêachèeda* 'firstborn' and *ng'àdánèeda* 'lastborn'.

　　Finally, the verb *deen* means 'be similar in size or quantity' as well as 'be close in age':

(4) *g-ée-dèenyi*
     g-ee-dèen-ji
     AFF-1PL-be.equal-IS
     'We are around the same age'

This verb is relational, denoting two entities as being roughly the same size, whereby the entities themselves are specified either linguistically – in this case with the first person plural verbal prefix (i.e., the speaker and whoever else is denoted by 'we') – or through a combination of words and gestures or other multimodal means, such as holding up one's hand to a certain height to indicate the extent of some referent (see also Extract 3). When I

once asked how to translate the question 'How old are you', I was given the following formulation using the verb *deen*:

(5) *gídêenéa*   *ng'èa?*
     g-í-dêen-éa   *ng'èa?*
     AFF-2SG-be.equal-IS who
     'How old are you?' [lit. 'Who are you equal/similar to in age?']

That is, the estimation of age is social and relative to others, rather than based on counting years.[7] In one recording in my corpus, two sisters meet each other for the first time in many years and one asks the other the question given in (5), presumably motivated by an impression of how much time has passed without seeing each other, and how they have aged. The elder sister responds to this question by saying that she has passed the age of their own mother (using the same kind of motion metaphor as English 'pass').[8]

　　With this terminology in hand, the next section reports on how children use the size-related words *háw* 'big' (and *háláati* 'huge'), *mánàng'* 'small', and *deen* 'be equal to'.

4 Children's preoccupation with size and indifference to seniority

The 24 hours of transcribed recordings referred to in the introduction amounts to around 53,000 words, of which just over 17,000 were uttered by seven children ranging in age from around three to thirteen years. In total I identified 115 tokens of the keywords *mánàng'*, *háw*, *háláati* and *deen* (though below I also discuss examples from an untranscribed recording). While searching for size terms in this corpus, I was initially most struck by the pleasure that

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[7] It is, however, also possible to ask someone the year in which they were born, and people talk about 'knowing their years', meaning knowing their chronological age.

[8] A reviewer points out that the women may be orienting to a concept of age here that is reckoned not in terms of time but in terms of status or competence (or perhaps experiences gathered). This is an intriguing point that would require explicit further discussion with speakers and must remain for future work.

young Datooga children (around seven years and under) appear to derive from talking about the size of objects. As mentioned above, the youngest child liked the word *hálǎati* 'huge' and used it so frequently (24 tokens in my small corpus of 1617 words for this child) that adults and older children around him also picked up on this favourite word and would use it with him humorously. Perhaps it was the extreme size denoted by the word *hálǎati* that conceptually appealed to him, but he also appeared to simply enjoy the sound of the word, as Extract 2 demonstrates. This extract comes from a recording made one evening inside the boy's mother's house, in which he simply repeats the words *hálaati* 'huge' and *mánàng'* 'small' without (as far as I can tell) referring to anything in particular. The sequence was triggered by his older brother uttering *hálǎat* (line 1):

Extract 2

1   Older brother   *hálǎati!*
                    'huge'

2   (0.8)

3   Geejaru   *hálǎa<u>ti</u>*:
                    'huge'

4   (0.7)

5   Geejaru   *alaatiihii* [target word: *hálǎati]*
                    'huge'

6   Older brother   *hálǎat=*
                    'huge'

7   Geejaru   *=míníng'ěa* [target word: *mánàng'*]
                    'small'

8   (1.3)

9   Geejaru   *míníng'ěa*   (0.7)   *míníng'ěa*   (0.5)   *míníng'ěa*
                    'small'   'small'   'small'

The young boy's pleasure in uttering these words is apparent from how he repeats them in quick succession, as well as in their prosodic delivery: these forms are relatively loud and high-pitched and in some cases drawn out (in lines 3 and 5 he extends the final, usually devoiced vowel of *hálǎati*). On another occasion, in an untranscribed recording, two older children engage in a communal chant of this little boy's *hálǎati-mánàng'* routine.[9] The three boys were playing with long maize stalks in the narrow space between two houses when Geejaru and his elder brother began rhythmically chanting the two-word phrase *hálàat mánang'* 'huge, small'. Another child the same age as the elder brother then joined in, though

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[9] Video file available on request.

the older two quickly lost interest and turned back to constructing things with their maize stalks. Geejaru, meanwhile, continued uttering the words over and over. The two older boys found momentary enjoyment in these words but clearly attributed the little chant to the younger child, rather than themselves, as suggested by how they mimicked his pronunciation of *mánàng'* 'small' as *mínìng'*. The keen attention this young child paid to physical size was also mirrored in patterns of language acquisition: 'big' and 'small' were among Geejaru's first words.

Beyond pure enjoyment in uttering these dimensional words, I often observed children orienting to the size of objects and people, comparing the length of their legs, for example, the size of people's hands, or discussing how tall adults are. Extract 3 very briefly captures such an episode (unfortunately I only turned the camera on part way through an ongoing conversation), illustrating how the three children present cooperatively imagine and physically attempt to embody adult height. The participants in this interaction are a preverbal toddler, a five-year-old boy, here named Gidabarda, and the six-year-old boy we encountered in Extract 1, here named Gidaroopta.

Extract 3

[Toddler and Gidaroopta stretching hands up to ceiling – see Figure 1]

1	Gidabarda	*àbà gíd-* (0.4) *àbà búunéedá hálàatì*
		àbà gíd àbà búunéedá hálàati
		PREP thing PREP people huge
		'What about, what about big people?'

| 2 | | (0.4) |

| 3 | Gidaroopta | *oo oo oo* |
| | | [interjection expressing surprise about how big they are] |

| 4 | | (0.7) |

5	Gidabarda	*gwádéenà*
		g-wá-déen-à
		AFF-3-be.equal.to-is
		'How big are they?'

| 6 | Gidaroopta | *ak gwá*(.)*dée:::n!* |
| | | 'They're this big' [jumps up to the ceiling] |

| 7 | Gidabarda | *gwádéen hêa* (.) *gwádéenà gwádéenà* |
| | | 'They're this big, this big, this big' [points with stick] |

Before I turned on the camera, the children were clearly already engaged in a discussion of somebody's height: Gidaroopta has his arm stretched upwards towards the ceiling and the preverbal toddler copies this action (see Figure 1).

The smaller boy, Gidabarda, then offers a new subject, 'huge people', by which I assume he is referring to adults. He asks Gidaroopta how big adults are using the verb *gwádéenà*. Note that, rather than *háw* 'big', this child also prefers the more excessive *hálàati* 'huge'. This subject is clearly bigger than whatever they were previously talking about, since Gidaroopta repeats the interjection *oo* to suggest surprise or wonder and then reaches his hand up again, adding a jump this time to reach even higher, while the younger boy follows the motion with his gaze. The older boy's corporeal efforts to indicate height (his stretching and jumping) are closely coordinated with the verb *gwádéenà* 'how big are they?'. He pauses momentarily after the prefixal material of the verb (*gwa-*), having bent his knees to prepare to jump, and as he utters the verb stem *déen* he jumps and articulates the verb with notably higher pitch and an elongated vowel, so that the syllable length matches the length of the jump. His verbal reference to size is thus completed through his bodily action; his jumping and stretching specifies the height visually. The younger child then adds his own interpretation of how tall grown-ups are by means of the material object he has in his hand, a stick, which he points up to the ceiling as he also says *gwádéenù* 'they are this tall'.

I share this example to illustrate children's interest in size as a property of objects and people. Like the young boy who chants 'big' and 'small', these boys are clearly enjoying enacting tallness in Extract 3, as their conversation is accompanied by giggles and smiling. In the cases discussed, and in many other examples I identified where children use the terms 'big', 'small', and 'be equal to', children were orienting to physical stature rather than using these terms in their extended senses of seniority, juniority, or equality, though, given the polysemous nature of these words, we cannot entirely rule out that age-based meanings are also active. In Extract 3, the accompanying bodily action strongly suggests that the

Figure 1: Stretching hands upwards to indicate size

children are using these terms to refer to physical size rather than seniority, though perhaps the children's wonder also extends implicitly to the referents' age. These examples raise the question of the extent to which children unambiguously orient to social seniority by means of these relative size terms. At least in the corpus data I have available, such orientations are very unusual, and are entirely absent in the peer interactions of the younger, pre-school age children. We have already observed that children do make seniority comparisons in contexts where adults make this social distinction salient, such as in the scolding example in Extract 1. Here, the older child admitted that he was senior to his younger brother, a claim that the younger brother then contested ('I'm bigger!'). On another occasion, the same boy made a similar claim to a slightly older child: 'I'm big/huge!' (he used *hálàati* again rather than *háw*). The older child strongly refuted this claim, saying 'no, you are small' several times in a row. However, this exchange follows another utterance, made by another child, about

the size of someone's arm and it seems likely that the children are referring again to physical size rather than social rank. Beyond Extract 1, there is no clear example in my corpus where a young child expresses their seniority relative to another child using these dimensional terms.

In the paper so far, I have distinguished adult-child interactions from children's interactions, categories that are analytically overly simplistic.[10] In particular, the child-child interactions I have been discussing are largely those of peers, i.e., children of similar ages who do not stand in caregiving relationships to one another. The focus has also been on what I have termed 'young' children, those in early childhood (up to around the age of seven). If we were to look at interactions between children with much more significant age gaps, perhaps a different picture would emerge. In my data, the most common companions of significantly different ages were a nine-year-old girl and her 18-month-old sister, whom she carried around and cared for during the day. None of my keywords appear in their interactions, however, though my data here is admittedly limited. Similarly, in his interactions with younger children, the ten-year-old boy of the household does not express seniority using size terms. However, in conversation with his mother, he does use the verb *deen* on one occasion to equate two individuals in age. I share this example here because it points to the significance of physical growth markers (specifically, molar teeth) for assessing age and shows an older child engaging with discourses about seniority. The topic of seniority is initiated by the mother, who again invokes this concept to comment critically on another child's behaviour, comparing her to two other children.

Extract 3

[Several household members have been discussing claims about a neighbouring girl's ability to carry water, which the mother disputes]

1 Mother   [unclear] gábá ng'àléechká sûut nìnyi
            g-á-bá   ng'àléej-gá   sûud   nìnyi
            AFF-3-be.of   nonsense-PL   surpass   3SG.PRO
            'She is full of nonsense'

2 Mother   néa gwándà *katikati* hìjí máhìtà Údáhásíin ákmàhín ôorjèan
            néa g-wá-ndà   *katikati* hìjí   m-á-hìt-a   U.
            CONJ AFF-3-be.LOC   between   here   NEG-3-reach.CF-IS   PSN

            ág-m-à-hín   ôorj-èan-i
            SEQ-NEG-3-reach.CP   boy-PS-DEM.PROX
            'And she's in between; she doesn't reach (=is not as old as) Udahasiin and she doesn't reach (=is not as young as) this boy'

3   (1.8)

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[10] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for underlining this point.

4 Mother   géejìi òorjêan néa nìnyì [disfluency] gòoftéad
            g-ée-jìi   òorj-êan-i   néa   nìnyì   g-òo-ftéad
            AFF-IMPS-give.birth boy-PS-DEM.PROX CONJ 3SG.PRO AFF-3-sit
            'This boy was born when she was sitting'

5 Boy   gàjéa ma- (.) gàjéa (.) gàjéa gwádéenêa Údámùhéaléedèeda: béa dáwìishàjì
            háadá [holds up four fingers]
            gàjéa g-wá-déen-êa   U.   béa   dáwìishàjì háadá
            FUT   AFF-3-be.equal.to-IS PSN ASSOC molar.PL   how.many
            'She must be, she must be the same age as that Udamuhealeeda with four
             molar teeth'

The mother's comment on the girl's age relative to two household members offers a justification for her assertion in line 1, where she dismisses the idea that the girl can carry so much water (thus linking physical strength with age). The mother uses spatial metaphors to talk about age, with the Swahili preposition *katikati* 'in between' and the verb of motion *hin~hid* 'reach; arrive'. She then identifies age based on developmental milestones: the neighbouring girl was already sitting up when her own son was born, and therefore must be older. The ten-year-old boy subsequently offers his own estimation of the neighbour's age using our keyword *deen*: he equates her with Udamuhealeeda, a cousin living in his household at that time, and comments on the number of molars they both have. (This leads directly to a discussion of how many molars he has.) This snippet of conversation illustrates a context in which an older child expresses age differences and how physical characteristics (namely, teeth) play a role in the way he conceptualizes age. While this is a clear instance of a child using a size term to refer to age and not size, the topic itself is initiated by an adult and the usage occurs in conversation with an adult rather than with another child. Further, this comment on age appears to hold no additional implications regarding ability, competence, behaviour, and so on, but rather makes a simple observation.

Despite young children's fascination with physical size, then, seniority distinctions, at least as expressed in size-based terms, appeared to be relatively unimportant to the young children of this household. While adults might try to control children's behaviour by appealing to seniority (as in Extract 1), children did not use size terms to draw social distinctions, even though they were fascinated by physical dimensions. These findings differ from Häll's (2022) and Hellman et al.'s (2014) observations among Swedish preschool children, who did make use of 'big' and 'small' terms, particularly in relation to the greater or lesser degrees of competence associated with age. Datooga children certainly orient to competence and comment on each other's abilities to do things, but in my data they did not explicitly link abilities with size/age.[11] While Hellmann et al. (2014, 342) were able to show how "age is a marker of status among [Swedish] children", physical size was more impressive to the Datooga children in this study. Possibly this difference relates to the highly institutionalized nature of childhood age-grading in Swedish culture (e.g., age-based preschool groups and school classes), as well as the cultural value placed on children's age (birthdays, "How old are you?" questions, developmental milestones) compared to Datooga. The lack of explicit reference to age differences among children in my study echoes Howard's (2007) findings regarding

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[11] For instance, on different occasions, the older brother in Extract 1 comments on how his younger brother 'fails' to eat properly or to speak properly, but also on how he is able to pronounce certain words.

Thai children's use of person reference and how they preferred to treat each other as peers rather than invoke seniority with kin terms.

5 Discussion

In summary, in the recordings available to me, children frequently oriented to physical size and seemingly derived great enjoyment from discussing the size of things, and in some cases simply from uttering the words 'huge' and 'small'. Unlike adults, though, who used words like 'big' and 'small' to try and exert control over their children's behaviour, I found no evidence of children using these same terms to draw age distinctions amongst themselves. So is it the case that age differences do not actually matter very much to Datooga children in their everyday lives? While there is no institutional age-grading equivalent to the Swedish preschool groups, and certainly very little interest in the number of years someone has been alive, age differences clearly do play a role in the organization of Datooga children's lives. Being older means bearing more responsibility, including for one's younger siblings, doing more household chores, and exhibiting more self-control (such as waiting for others before starting to eat from a communal dish). For boys, there is an age cut-off (around seven or eight) at which they no longer sleep with their mother but relocate to the men's house at night – a salient marker of a shift from early to middle childhood. Despite these behavioural distinctions, my data suggests that these children, at least in the contexts I recorded them, have little need to distinguish themselves along lines of age using the terms 'big' and 'small'. One reason for this may simply be that age differences in the context of an extended family are obvious: there is no need to claim seniority because everyone knows the order in which family members, and particularly siblings, were born.

With respect to kinship-based seniority, children are expected to defer to members of their parental generation, particularly to their father. I observed various manifestations of this awareness, such as a three-year-old child registering that his father receives the best food and gets to eat first. However, this kind of generational seniority seemed to apply only when the person in the senior category was also visibly older. I once witnessed two boys around the same age engaged in a physical fight. These boys stood in a classificatory relationship of father and son: one was the son of the head of the household and the other was his grandson. The head of the household was also watching the boys fight and commented to me that if they understood their kinship relationship, that one was father to the other, they would not be fighting. All this raises the developmental question of when seniority becomes relevant for how individuals interact with one another. As for *how* seniority becomes meaningful, I would hypothesize that elders, rather than age-mates, play a key role in socializing children into ideas about seniority, via the accumulation of everyday exchanges like the one in Extract 1.

Obviously there are many different ways to negotiate seniority beyond the use of words like 'big', 'small', and 'equal', and this paper has only scratched the surface of this topic. In Section 3 I discussed person reference, struggles over material resources, acts of meanness, and caring practices as potentially rich places to identify children drawing age and seniority distinctions. We may also be able to detect orientation to a seniority-based order in certain other patterns of language use: it is possible that children use more directives with younger than with older children (though in this particular household all children seemed to be constantly giving orders to each other regardless of age). To whom people address questions may also reveal seniority hierarchies: in Mitchell and Jordan (2021), we presented some data showing how younger children tend to position older children as more knowledgeable when posing general knowledge questions.

Future work on age differentiation in childhood will benefit from considering a range of different verbal and nonverbal practices. For now, though, this study of children's use of size terms suggests that, unlike Datooga adults and Swedish preschoolers, Datooga children in early to middle childhood have little need to use these terms as a resource for negotiating age differences in a household setting.

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