Child Talk, Adult Power: A Conversation Analysis of The Boss Baby Movie

Obrolan Anak-anak, Kekuatan Orang Dewasa: Analisis Percakapan Film The Boss Baby

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Article Information	ABSTRACT
	This study examines the interplay of language, authority, and identity in the animated film The Boss Baby through the lens of conversation analysis. Focusing on the film's unique premise, an infant who speaks and behaves like an adult. The research explores how linguistic features such as turn-taking, speech acts, and power dynamics are employed to construct and challenge traditional roles of childhood and adulthood. This research employs a qualitative method grounded in the principles of Conversation Analysis. By analyzing selected dialogues between the titular baby and other characters, this paper reveals how adult-like language is used to subvert expectations, assert dominance, and create comedic tension. The findings highlight how The Boss Baby uses conversation as a tool to blur age-based hierarchies, offering insights into how media narratives shape and reflect societal understandings of power and communication. *Abstrak* *Penelitian ini meneliti interaksi bahasa, otoritas, dan identitas dalam film animasi The Boss Baby melalui lensa analisis percakapan. Berfokus pada premis unik film tersebut, seorang bayi yang berbicara dan berperilaku seperti orang dewasa. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana fitur linguistik seperti giliran bicara, tindakan bicara, dan dinamika kekuasaan digunakan untuk membangun dan menantang peran tradisional masa kanak-kanak dan dewasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif yang didasarkan pada prinsip-prinsip Analisis Percakapan. Dengan menganalisis dialog terpilih antara bayi tituler dan karakter lain, penelitian ini mengungkap bagaimana bahasa seperti orang dewasa digunakan untuk menumbangkan harapan, menegaskan dominasi, dan menciptakan ketegangan komedi. Temuan tersebut menyoroti bagaimana The Boss Baby menggunakan percakapan sebagai alat untuk mengaburkan hierarki berbasis usia, menawarkan wawasan tentang bagaimana narasi media membentuk dan mencerminkan pemahaman masyarakat tentang kekuasaan dan komunikasi.*

1. Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that reflects identity, social roles, and power dynamics. In animated films, particularly those aimed at children, dialogue serves not only as a means of storytelling but also as a mirror of societal norms, humor, and character development. One film that uniquely plays with language

and power is *The Boss Baby* (2017), produced by DreamWorks Animation. This film centers around a peculiar infant who, despite his baby-like appearance, speaks and behaves like a corporate executive, creating an intriguing contrast between childlike form and adult authority.

The Boss Baby blurs the boundaries between childhood innocence and mature responsibility through its clever use of language. The film utilizes humor, linguistic incongruity, and role reversals to explore themes of power, sibling rivalry, and family dynamics. The protagonist's ability to shift between registers—alternating between "baby talk" and formal business jargon—offers rich material for conversation analysis, a method that examines how language is used in interaction (Giovanelli, 2018).

This study aims to analyze the dialogues in The Boss Baby using the framework of conversation analysis (CA), with a particular focus on how language constructs and reflects power relations between characters. By examining selected interactions between the baby protagonist, Tim (his older brother), and other characters, this research seeks to uncover how adult authority is linguistically encoded in a child character, and how humor and social roles are negotiated through speech.

Ultimately, this analysis not only contributes to the understanding of language use in animated media but also highlights how children's films can serve as platforms for complex linguistic and social commentary, cleverly disguised beneath playful and humorous dialogue. This study is limited to one animated film and does not represent the entire genre. Additionally, because the dialogues are scripted, spontaneity—often crucial in CA—is less prominent. However, the film's crafted language still provides valuable insight into how power and identity are linguistically constructed in fictional child characters.

Conversation Analysis (CA) is a qualitative method used to study the structure and pattern of spoken interaction. Originating from the field of ethnomethodology (Sacks dkk., 1974), CA focuses on the micro-level features of talk, such as turn-taking, sequencing, repair, and the use of pauses or overlaps. Its core aim is to understand how participants produce and interpret meaning through spoken language in social contexts.

In the context of media and film, conversation analysis has been employed to investigate how characters use language to negotiate relationships, express identities, and exert power (Toolan, 2001). Although most CA studies are conducted on real-life data, fictional dialogue—especially in animated films—offers a controlled yet insightful environment for exploring social interaction and discourse strategies. Animated characters are often exaggerated representations of social types, and their speech is crafted to emphasize particular communicative functions (Chiaro, 2006).

Power in conversation is often expressed through control of the topic, interruption patterns, directive speech acts, and lexical choices (Fairclough, 1996), (Holmes, 2015). In films such as The Boss Baby, the dynamics of power are not only verbal but also embedded in the roles that characters assume. The baby character, while biologically a child, speaks with adult-like fluency and

authority, creating a humorous and ironic tension that reflects deeper social commentary on leadership, hierarchy, and competence.

Several scholars have explored language in children's media. For example, Lemish (2007) examined how children's television uses language to socialize viewers into specific cultural norms. Similarly, Crystal, (2003) noted that animated films often manipulate language—through accent, intonation, and register—to distinguish between characters and to convey personality, morality, or social class. These findings are especially relevant to The Boss Baby, where language becomes a tool not only for storytelling but also for role inversion and humor.

Previous research was conducted by (Gosen dkk., 2024), this study not only contributes to the growing body of Conversation Analytic research on classroom interaction but also deepens our understanding of how learning is interactionally managed in one-to-one educational settings. Contributions to conversation are fundamentally shaped by social context and unfold over time, so any evaluation of conversation should be capable of capturing these dimensions (Wilkinson, 2024). In addition CA was widely used in EFL classroom (Azennoud dkk., 2025), (Tsinghua University & Han, 2024), (Darong, 2024). Azennoud dkk. (2025) found that teachers employ techniques like other-initiated self-repair, scaffolding, and the use of missing units to steer student participation and maintain the flow of conversation.

Additionally, research by Bucholtz & Hall (2005) on identity and interaction suggests that speakers use language to construct and perform identities in relation to others. This theory supports the idea that Boss Baby's adult-like speech is a deliberate performance of power, constructed through specific lexical and pragmatic choices that contradict his physical identity as a baby.

In summary, this study draws upon theoretical insights from conversation analysis, pragmatics, and discourse studies to examine how language is used to perform power in The Boss Baby. Previous research has laid a foundation for understanding linguistic performance and identity construction in media, but there is still limited work focusing specifically on how children's films play with these concepts to entertain and subtly educate their audiences (Nafisah dkk., 2020), (Noorman & Nafisah, 2016).

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach using the framework of Conversation Analysis (CA) to examine how language is used to construct and perform power dynamics in the animated film The Boss Baby (2017). The focus is on the verbal interactions between characters, particularly between Boss Baby, Tim, and other supporting characters, to reveal how linguistic features reflect adult-like authority in a child figure.

This is a descriptive and interpretive study aimed at analyzing the conversational strategies and speech patterns in selected scenes of the film. The approach involves identifying sequences of dialogue that exhibit power relations, language incongruity, or role reversal, and then analyzing them based

on CA principles. The primary data is the official script and spoken dialogue of The Boss Baby (DreamWorks Animation, 2017). Specific scenes were selected based on relevance to the study's focus, particularly those where Boss Baby uses adult or corporate language, power relations shift between characters, humor arises from language use or role inversion. Video clips and subtitles were used to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions and timing of interactions.

The data collection was started from the film was viewed multiple times to identify key conversational exchanges. Then, dialogues were transcribed manually with attention to turn-taking, intonation, pauses, interruption, and lexical choice. The last, selected excerpts were grouped based on thematic categories such as commanding language, humorous exchanges, and role-based talk.

The data was analyzed using the tools of Conversation Analysis, including: a) turn-taking organization (Sacks et al., 1974); b) adjacency pairs (e.g., question-answer, command-compliance); c) repair mechanisms (self- or other-correction); d) power indicators such as interruptions, directives, and topic control. The analysis was further informed by discourse theories on power (Fairclough, 1996) and identity performance (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) to interpret how Boss Baby's language reflects adult authority despite his child identity.

3. Finding and discussion

There are several points in analyzing this movie using conversation analysis. Those points are Turn Taking**,** Adjacency Pairs, Repair Mechanisms, Power Indicators, and Adult-like Language in a Child's Voice**.**

Turn-Taking Organization

Turn-taking is a fundamental aspect of conversation analysis that refers to how speakers manage the flow of conversation—who speaks, when, and how transitions between speakers occur. Sacks dkk., (1974) described turn-taking as a structured yet flexible system that governs natural interaction. In *The Boss Baby*, turn-taking is used deliberately to portray character relationships, assert dominance, and create comedic timing.

1. Dominance Through Turn Control
   Boss Baby often controls the conversational floor, taking longer turns and interrupting others—especially Tim—to assert authority. For example:

   > **Boss Baby**: "Let me explain how this works."
   > *(Interrupts Tim)*
   > "No, no, no. I talk. You listen."

   In this scene, Boss Baby prevents Tim from taking a turn, enforcing a one-sided exchange. This reflects an asymmetrical power relation, similar to workplace hierarchies where a superior dominates the dialogue.

2. Overlapping Speech and Interruptions

Overlapping speech is used frequently to show competition for control of the conversation. Tim and Boss Baby often interrupt each other, particularly during moments of conflict or disagreement. This not only heightens the comedic tension but also reveals their struggle for control in the household.

> **Tim**: "You're just a baby—"
> **Boss Baby (interrupting):** "—With a plan and a briefcase."

This interruption signals a refusal to be dismissed and reinforces Boss Baby's constructed authority.

3. Coordinated Turn-Taking for Humor
   The film also features well-timed exchanges where characters hand over the turn smoothly for comic effect. These are often structured as adjacency pairs (e.g., question–answer, command–response) with punchlines.

> **Tim:** "You can talk?"
> **Boss Baby**: "Uh, goo goo gaga. No really, yes. I can talk."

The humor here relies on expectation and violation—first playing into the "baby talk" trope, then flipping it by immediately speaking in an adult tone.

4. Non-Verbal Turn Cues
   Since *The Boss Baby* is an animated film, non-verbal cues—such as pauses, gestures, or facial expressions—are also crucial in managing turn-taking. For instance, a raised eyebrow, a long pause, or a briefcase slam often acts as a signal to either initiate a turn or demand attention.

Turn-taking in *The Boss Baby* is far from random—it is a deliberate tool used to shape power relations, develop character dynamics, and create humor. Boss Baby's ability to take, hold, and interrupt turns reinforces his adult-like persona and contrasts sharply with his baby appearance, creating the linguistic tension that defines much of the film's humor and social commentary.

Adjacency Pairs

Adjacency pairs are fundamental building blocks of conversation, consisting of two related utterances produced by different speakers, where the first utterance calls for a particular type of response (Sacks dkk., 1974). Common adjacency pairs include question–answer, greeting–greeting, request acceptance/ refusal, and command–compliance/non-compliance. In *The Boss Baby*, adjacency pairs are used both to develop character relationships and to generate humor through expected and unexpected responses.

1. Question and Answer
   A classic adjacency pair occurs when one character asks a question and the other responds appropriately, establishing interaction and advancing the plot. Example:

   > **Tim:** "Who are you?"
   > **Boss Baby:** "I'm your new baby brother, but also a secret agent from Baby Corp."

   This pair sets up the premise and introduces the conflict. Boss Baby's formal and unexpected answer contrasts with Tim's simple question, signaling the unusual nature of the character.

2. Command and Compliance/Refusal
   Boss Baby often issues commands expecting compliance, which establishes his authority despite being a baby. Example:

   > **Boss Baby:** "Put down that toy."
   > **Tim:** "Why?"
   > **Boss Baby:** "Because I said so. Now move!"

   This adjacency pair shows a breakdown when Tim questions the command, leading Boss Baby to reinforce his power. The refusal or questioning of compliance creates tension and comedic conflict.

3. Greeting and Greeting
   Simple greetings in the film often carry undertones of power or role-play.

   > Example:
   > **Boss Baby:** "Good morning, Tim."
   > **Tim:** "Morning, boss."

   The use of "boss" in the response playfully acknowledges Boss Baby's self-imposed authority, turning a basic adjacency pair into a moment of role negotiation.

4. Offer and Acceptance/Refusal
   Characters often engage in offers and responses that reveal social dynamics.

   > Example:
   > **Boss Baby:** "Want to join my team?"
   > **Tim:** "Sure, sounds fun."

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The acceptance here signals a temporary alliance, crucial for plot development. Refusals or hesitations would create conflict and drive the story forward.

Adjacency pairs in *The Boss Baby* provide a structured way to analyze how dialogue shapes relationships and power dynamics. The film uses these pairs not only to maintain conversational coherence but also to subvert expectations through humor and role reversal. Boss Baby's adult-like responses to childlike questions or commands enhance the comic effect while advancing the narrative.

Repair Mechanisms

Repair mechanisms in conversation refer to how speakers address problems or breakdowns in speaking, hearing, or understanding during interaction (Schegloff dkk., 1977). Repairs can be self-initiated or other-initiated, and self-repaired or other-repaired. They help maintain the flow and coherence of conversation. In *The Boss Baby*, repair mechanisms highlight both the characters' communication styles and the humor that arises from misunderstandings between child and adult worlds.

1. Self-Repair
   Boss Baby often corrects himself to maintain his image as an efficient and knowledgeable "executive baby." For example:

   Boss Baby: "We need to increase the—uh, I mean, optimize the market share."

   Here, the quick correction from "increase" to the more corporate-sounding "optimize" reflects Boss Baby's attention to professional language, reinforcing his adult persona despite being a baby.

2. Other-Initiated Repair
   Tim, as the older brother but less confident about Boss Baby's secretive language, frequently asks for clarification or expresses confusion, prompting Boss Baby to repair his speech. Example:

   Tim: "Wait, what's 'market share'?"
   Boss Baby: "It means more babies getting love than puppies."

   This repair helps bridge the gap between Boss Baby's corporate jargon and Tim's childlike understanding, making the dialogue accessible to the audience while emphasizing the language contrast.

3. Overlapping Repair
   Sometimes, repair happens during overlapping speech, reflecting interruptions or eagerness to clarify.

Tim: "So you're saying we need to—"
Boss Baby (interrupting): "Exactly! Focus!"

This abrupt repair and interruption reassert Boss Baby's dominance in the conversation, highlighting power dynamics through control of the repair process.

4. Repair for Humor
   A major source of comedy in the film lies in linguistic incongruity. The mismatch between the form (a baby) and the function (an adult speaker). This incongruity is exemplified in lines such as:

   Boss Baby: "Put that cookie down. Cookies are for closers."

   This line parodies a famous quote from the adult-targeted film *Glengarry Glen Ross*, repurposed in a children's context. The humor stems from the unexpectedness of a baby quoting a business drama, and reflects what (Chiaro, 2006) describes as intertextual humor—when humor arises from references across genres or cultural contexts. Such intertextual references appeal to adult viewers while introducing children to structured humor based on speech patterns, exaggeration, and role inversion. These moments serve both comedic and narrative functions, enriching the film's multi-layered audience engagement.

   Repairs in *The Boss Baby* are often used comedically, drawing attention to the absurdity of a baby using complex adult language or concepts. Example:

   Boss Baby: "Deploy the fleet—uh, I mean, the baby mobiles."
   (pauses and whispers) "That sounds cooler, right?"

   This playful self-repair adds humor and breaks the fourth wall slightly, inviting viewers to enjoy the language play.
      Repair mechanisms in *The Boss Baby* serve multiple functions: they help clarify meaning between characters, maintain conversational flow, and contribute to humor and characterization. Boss Baby's frequent self-repairs and Tim's requests for clarification highlight the tension between adult authority and childlike innocence, reinforcing the film's central theme of language as a site of power and identity negotiation.

Power Indicators

Power in conversation is often communicated through subtle and overt linguistic features that reveal social hierarchies, control, and dominance (Fairclough, 1996), (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In *The Boss Baby*, despite the main character's infant appearance, his language consistently signals adult authority

and power. The film uses various power indicators to emphasize this role reversal and create humor.

1. Directive Speech Acts
   Boss Baby frequently uses imperatives and commands to control the actions of others, especially his older brother Tim.

   > **Boss Baby:** "Drop that pacifier and listen carefully."
   > **Tim:** *(hesitates but complies)*

   Commands like these highlight Boss Baby's authoritative role, asserting dominance by controlling the topic and actions within conversations. This mirrors workplace dynamics where supervisors give orders and expect compliance.
   Other example is when Boss Baby frequently uses imperatives and directive speech acts to assert control, especially over Tim, his older brother. For example:

   > **Boss Baby**: "You're going to help me. We have a schedule to keep!"

   This directive not only reflects power but also mirrors workplace hierarchy, with Boss Baby assuming the role of a manager giving orders to a subordinate. As noted by (Fairclough, 1996), control over speech acts is a key marker of power in discourse. Tim, on the other hand, often responds with resistance or questioning, reflecting a shifting power dynamic. However, Boss Baby consistently regains control through assertive language, agenda-setting, and refusal to engage in childish play, which contrasts sharply with his appearance.

2. Interruptions and Overlapping Speech
   Boss Baby often interrupts Tim and others to take or regain control of the conversation.

   > **Tim:** "You don't understand—"
   > **Boss Baby (interrupting):** "No, I do. Now focus!"

   Interruptions signal a power imbalance, as the interrupter attempts to dominate the conversational floor. In this film, Boss Baby's interruptions reinforce his role as the one in charge despite being a baby.

3. Topic Control
   Throughout dialogues, Boss Baby steers conversations toward his agenda, often redirecting or dismissing other characters' contributions.

   > **Tim:** "But what about fun and games?"
   > **Boss Baby:** "Fun is for after the mission. Priorities first."

Controlling the topic is a subtle form of power, showing who sets the conversational and narrative agenda.

4. Lexical Choices and Register
   Boss Baby uses formal, corporate, and technical vocabulary that contrasts with typical child speech.

   Boss Baby: "We need to strategize our next move immediately."
   Tim: "What does that mean?"

   The elevated register not only signals authority but also positions Boss Baby as a competent leader, further establishing his power through language.

5. Non-Verbal Power Signals
   In addition to speech, Boss Baby's confident posture, direct eye contact, and use of props like a briefcase visually reinforce his authority.

Power indicators in *The Boss Baby* function to blur the conventional boundaries between childhood and adulthood by giving a baby linguistic and social dominance through language. The use of commands, interruptions, topic control, and elevated vocabulary constructs Boss Baby's authority and drives the film's humor and narrative tension. These linguistic markers help the audience perceive the baby not just as a child but as a powerful figure, highlighting how language can perform and negotiate power regardless of physical appearance.

Adult-like Language in a Child's Voice

One of the most striking features of Boss Baby's speech is his use of adult, professional, and corporate jargon. This creates a humorous contrast between his physical appearance and linguistic behavior.

   Boss Baby: "I'm on a mission from Baby Corp. We're losing market share to puppies!"

In this line, the use of terms like *mission*, *Baby Corp*, and *market share*—typically used in corporate settings—demonstrates a deliberate performance of adult identity. According to Bucholtz & Hall (2005), identity is constructed through interaction; Boss Baby's choice of language positions him as an authority figure, despite being biologically a baby. This role inversion is key to the film's humor and narrative structure. His ability to speak like an adult allows him to command others, gain control over situations, and shape how other characters perceive him.

Discussion

The analysis reveals that *The Boss Baby* uses language to deliberately challenge conventional associations between age, power, and authority. The title character constructs his dominance not through physicality, but through linguistic strategies typically reserved for adults: directives, business vocabulary, sarcasm, and register shifts. This interplay of child and adult speech highlights the film's thematic core: growing up, leadership, and sibling dynamics. Moreover, it shows how children's films can serve as fertile ground for examining sociolinguistic themes, where humor and power intersect in ways that entertain and subtly educate (Mubarok dkk., 2022), (Mubarok, 2021).

By portraying a baby with the verbal skills of a CEO, the film blurs the lines between childhood and adulthood, reminding viewers that power can be performed—linguistically—regardless of physical age. According to Hamann (2025) children tended to reject or withdraw when parents directly criticized or highlighted shortcomings. In contrast, supportive and long-lasting conversations occurred when the child initiated the discussion and the parent responded in kind. These findings emphasize the importance of child-led post-match conversations to support ownership of their development in sport (Hamann dkk., 2025). In addition, unresponsiveness in peer interactions, particularly involving participants on the autism spectrum, cannot be accurately understood through predefined categorizations alone. Instead, a conversation analytic approach reveals that unresponsiveness becomes meaningful only when there are differing participant orientations regarding the relevance of a response. By analyzing both speaker and recipient perspectives, researcher can more precisely identify when unresponsiveness holds interactional significance. Thus, this study highlights the value of using conversation analysis to uncover the nuanced, participant-driven dynamics of communication in inclusive settings (Kilpiä dkk., 2023).

The film presents a unique interplay between childlike language and adult authority, challenging traditional power dynamics through dialogue. It suggests that the study will explore how adult-like power and control are enacted through the speech of a baby character, using conversation analysis to uncover how language is used to construct, negotiate, or subvert social roles typically defined by age. it provides insight into how language can blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. By analyzing the film's dialogue, the study helps illuminate how power and authority can be constructed through speech, even by child characters. This can benefit researchers, educators, and media analysts by offering a deeper understanding of how conversational strategies shape perceptions of age, identity, and social roles in media representations

4. Conclusion

This study has explored how language is used to construct power and identity in the animated film The Boss Baby through the lens of conversation analysis. The findings reveal that the film strategically employs adult-like language, directive speech acts, and linguistic incongruity to create humor and emphasize role reversal between children and adults. Boss Baby, as a character, uses verbal strategies typically associated with adult authority

figures—such as corporate jargon, commands, and sarcasm—despite his physical appearance as a baby. This not only entertains the audience but also offers a layered commentary on how language constructs social roles and power. The humor that emerges from these contrasts is accessible to both children and adults, making the film effective in delivering both entertainment and subtle linguistic messages. By analyzing specific dialogues in the film, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how animated media can reflect and reshape sociolinguistic norms. It also highlights the value of applying conversation analysis to fictional discourse, especially in genres where language is stylized for narrative and comedic effect.

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