

Abstract

We examined how mother-child communication is influenced by linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Narrative samples from American English monolingual mother-child dyads and Thai monolingual mother-child dyads were elicited using a prompted reminiscing task. Results revealed differences in conversation content and styles between the two groups. Comparisons of maternal language showed that American mothers used relatively more personal pronouns (e.g., I, me, mine) than group pronouns (e.g., we, us, our), whereas Thai mothers used relatively more group pronouns than personal pronouns. Thai mothers talked more about behavioral expectations and social norms (e.g., "It's not polite to stare") than American mothers, whereas American mothers talked more about their own thoughts and feelings (e.g., "I'm happy") than Thai mothers. Moreover, Thai mothers used more action directives (e.g., "Tell me more") than American mothers, whereas American mothers used more affirmations (e.g., "Yes!"), as well as more positive feedback (e.g., "That's right!") and negative feedback (e.g., "That's wrong") than Thai mothers. These findings suggest that differences in cultural norms are reflected in conversation styles. We conclude that mothers follow culture-specific pragmatic rules when interacting with their children.

Introduction

- Children acquire language through interactions with more competent social partners, usually their parents (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978).
- Linguistic input that children receive from caregivers varies cross-linguistically and cross-culturally.
 - Monolingual mothers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have qualitatively unique styles of interaction (e.g., Minami & McCabe, 1995; Mullen & Yi, 1995; Wang, 2001).

Research Questions

1. How do Thai and American-English monolingual mothers differ in the conversation *styles* used to support their child's narrative production?
 - e.g., do mothers differ in their use of feedback and affirmations?
2. How do Thai and American-English monolingual mothers differ in the *content* of their conversation?
 - e.g., do mothers differ in their discussion of behavioral expectations and social norms?



Permission to use pictures was obtained

Participants

	American-English monolingual mean (SE)	Thai monolingual mean (SE)	p-value
Children			
N (girl:boy)	21 (10:11)	21 (11:10)	-
Age (months)	52.43 (0.82)	53.19 (0.97)	0.55
Mothers			
N	21	21	-
Age (years)	37.16 (1.20)	37.66 (0.95)	0.74
Education (years)	18.00 (0.77)	18.55 (0.67)	0.59
Fathers			
N	21	21	-
Age (years)	39.01 (1.36)	40.03 (1.12)	0.56
Education (years)	18.09 (0.80)	18.92 (1.93)	0.40

Inclusionary criteria based on the *Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire* (Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushanskaya, 2007):

1. Current exposure to L2 (if any) ≤ 20%; AND
2. Proficiency in L2 (if any) ≤ 5 (0-10 scale).

Procedure: Prompted reminiscing

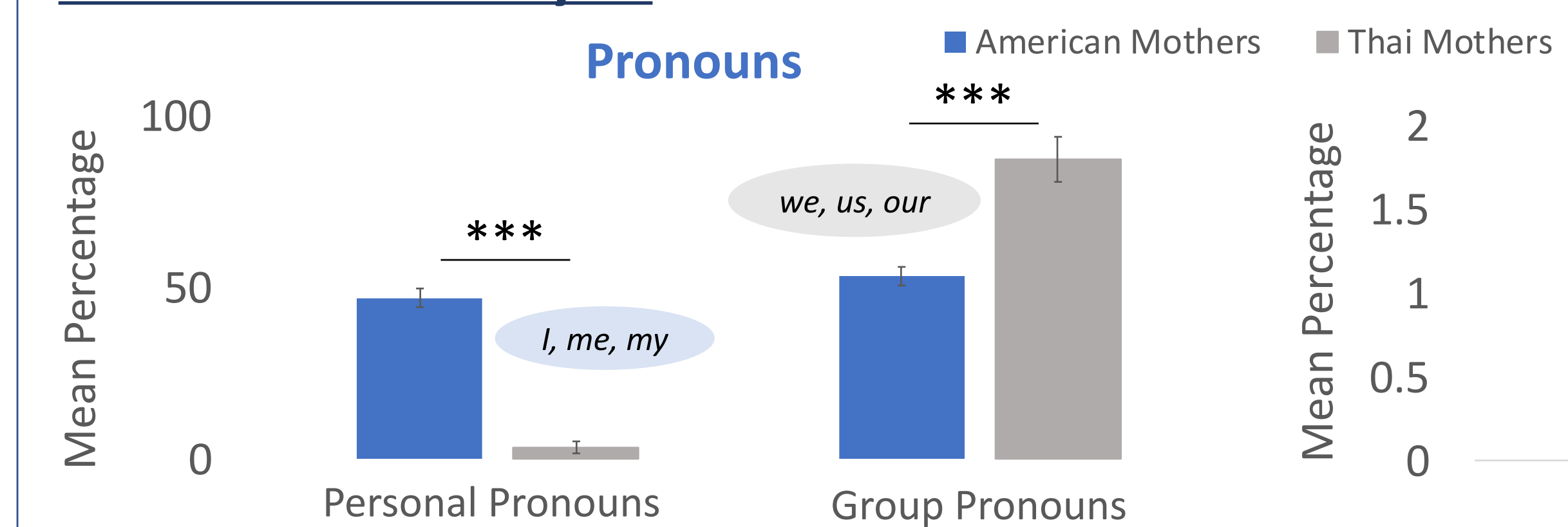
- All mothers were given a set of 11 word prompts as topics of conversation (Set 1 or Set 2). They were instructed to use the prompts to elicit past events experienced by the child.
- Mothers were instructed to go through each word and talk for as long as they would like about each topic.
- Interactions were video-recorded.
- Recordings were transcribed using Codes for the Analysis of Human Language (CHAT), available through the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES; MacWhinney, 2000).
- For data analysis, mean percentage was calculated by dividing total frequency of each measure by total number of words, to account for differences in length of conversation.

Stimuli

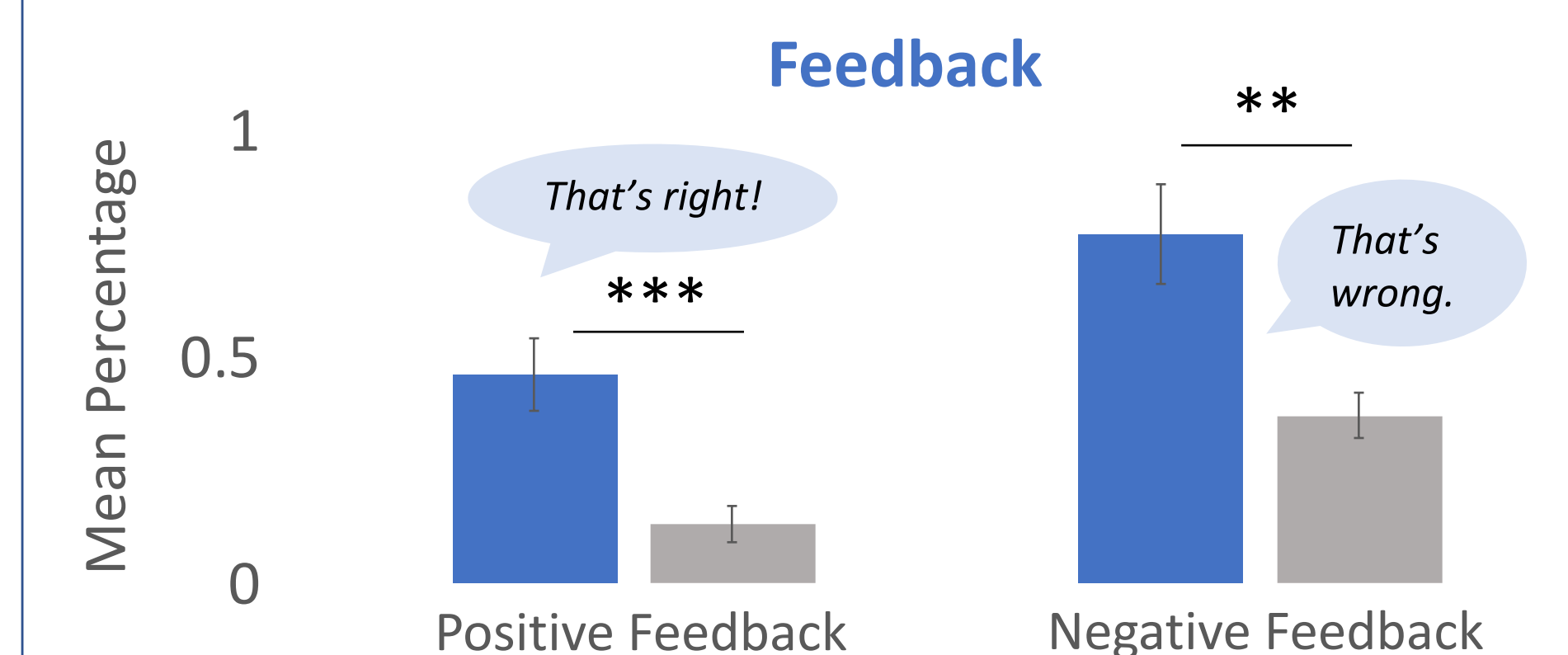
	Set 1	Set 2
1	Blood (เลือด)	Doctor (หมอ)
2	Cat (แมว)	Dog (หมา)
3	Airplane (เครื่องบิน)	Car (รถ)
4	School (โรงเรียน)	Yard (สนาม)
5	Lunch (อาหารเที่ยง)	Dinner (อาหารเย็น)
6	Boat (เรือ)	Zoo (สวนสัตว์)
7	Laughing (การหัวเราะ)	Friend (เพื่อน)
8	Blanket (ผ้าห่ม)	Kitchen (ครัว)
9	Butterfly (ผีเสื้อ)	Spider (แมงมุม)
10	Holiday (วันหยุด)	Summer (ฤดูร้อน)
11	Birthday (วันเกิด)	Party (งานเลี้ยง)

Methods

1. Conversation Styles

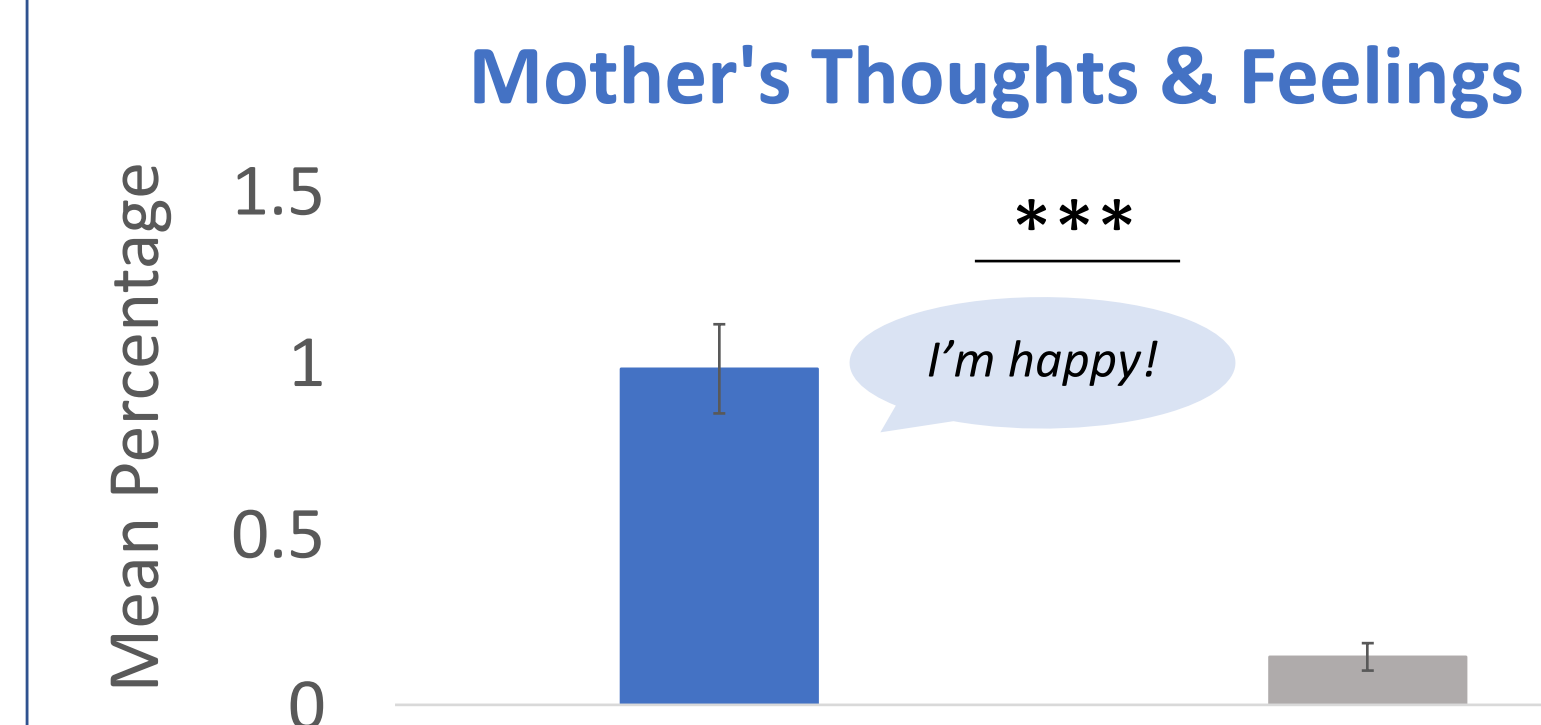


American mothers use relatively more personal pronouns than group pronouns, whereas Thai mothers used relatively more group pronouns than personal pronouns.



American mothers use more positive feedback and negative feedback than Thai mothers.

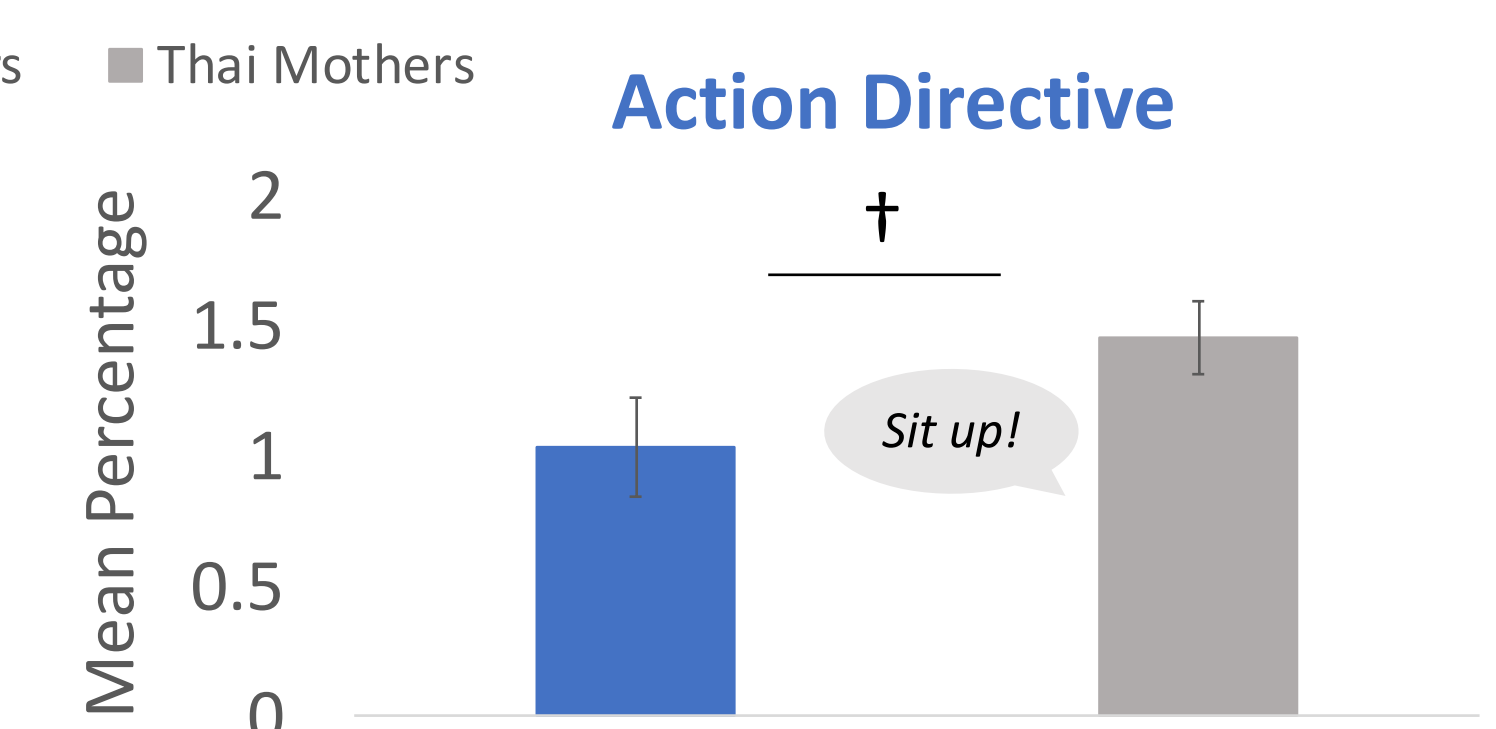
2. Content



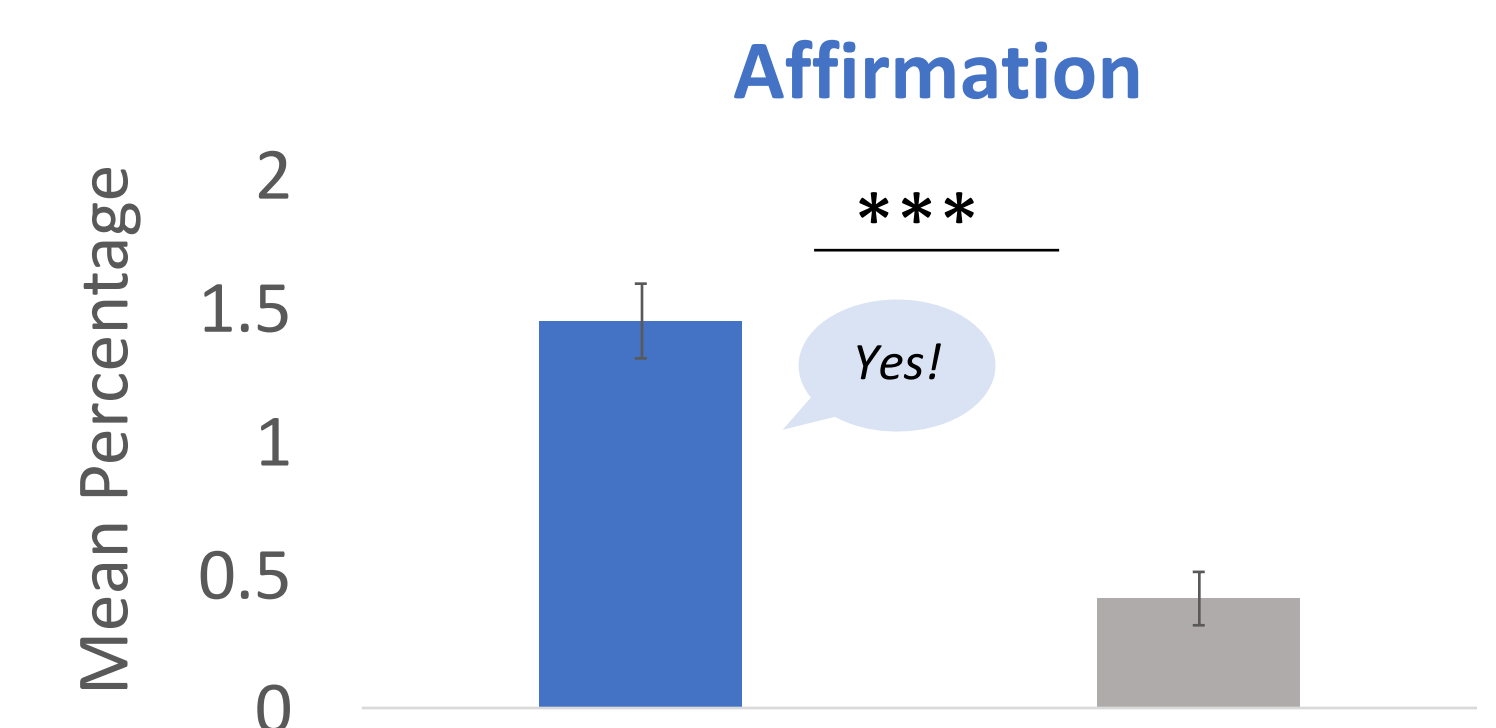
American mothers talk more about their thoughts and feelings than Thai mothers.

***p<.001, **p<.01, †p<.1

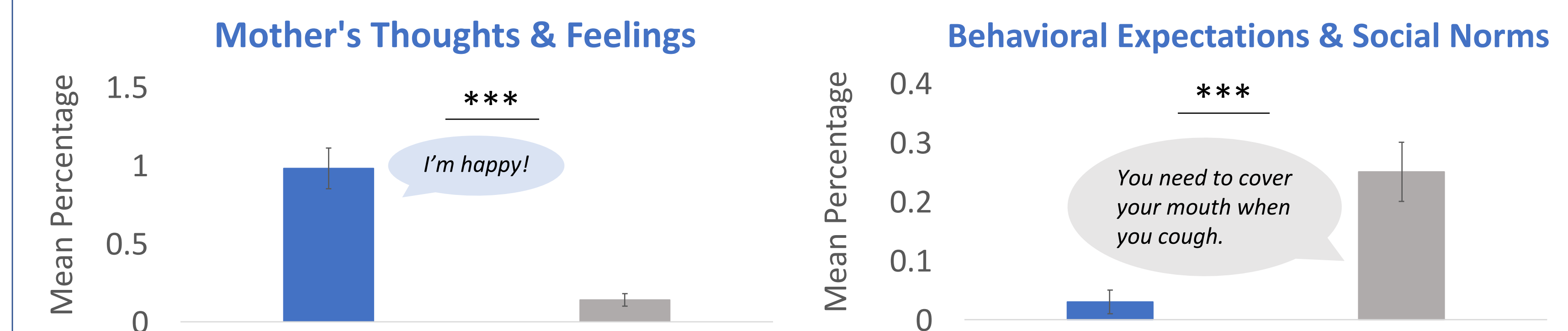
Results



Thai mothers use more action directives than American mothers.



American mothers use affirmations more than Thai mothers.



Thai mothers talk more about behavioral expectations and social norms than American mothers.

Discussion

1. *Conversation styles* reflect cultural differences. American culture favors use of affirmations, as well as positive and negative feedback, which may indicate an emphasis on self-competence, autonomy, and self-expression in the American culture (Wang et al., 2008). Differences in the use of first-person singular and plural pronouns in conversations may reflect differences in self-construal and cultural values (Marian & Kaushanskaya, 2004), specifically that the emphasis is placed on the individual in American culture, and on the group in Thai culture.

2. *Content* of conversation also illustrates socialization goals. Greater discussion of thoughts and feelings by American mothers compared to Thai mothers, and more discussion of behavioral expectations and social norms by Thai mothers compared to American mothers may be indicative of differences in individualistic and collectivist cultural values (Mullen & Yi, 1995).

Conclusion

Cultural background plays a key role in shaping the communicative patterns that mothers use when talking to their children.