Cross-cultural differences in maternal communication with preschool-age children in the United States and Thailand

Julia Borland, Sirada Rochanavibhata, and Viorica Marian
Northwestern University

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 style 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; Wong, 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?

Participants

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

Inclusion criteria based on the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushansky, 2007):
1. Current exposure to L2 (if any) ≤ 20%; AND
2. Proficiency in L2 (if any) ≤ 5 (0-10 scale).

Results

1. Conversation Styles
   - American mothers use more relative pronouns than group pronouns, whereas Thai mothers used relatively more group pronouns than personal pronouns.

2. Content
   - American mothers talk more about their thoughts and feelings than Thai 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 & Kaushansky, 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.

Permission to use pictures was obtained

FOR QUESTIONS AND REPRINTS, CONTACT JULIABORLAND2020@U.NORTHEASTERN.EDU
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