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行政院國家科學委員會補助專題研究計畫成果報告
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行政院國家科學委員會專題研究計畫成果報告

以漢語為母語的兒童如何在談話互動中組織言談主題
Mandarin-speaking Children's Management of Discourse Topics in Conversational Interaction

中文摘要

本研究探討說漢語的兒童在母子對話中組織言談主題的能力發展。語料包括六個三到五歲的兒童與其母親的自然對話。語料的分析包括言談主題起使與持續時的結構與溝通目的。分析中發現隨著語言言談能力的發展，兒童逐漸能夠更積極地參與言談主題的起始與持續。同時更能夠在主題持續時加入新的言談訊息。分析中也發現了母親言談中的調整現象。本研究認為此現象提供了有效溝通與語言發展的指引與支持。

關鍵詞： 言談主題、兒童語言習得、母子對話

Abstract

This study investigates the development of Mandarin-speaking children's skill of organizing discourse topics in child-mother conversation. The data consist of natural interactions between six children (3 to 5 years old) and their mothers. The conversation between each child-mother dyad was analyzed for the structures and the communicative intents of topic initiation and maintenance. It is found that with their development of discourse skills, children become more capable of active participation in topic initiation and maintenance. In addition, they become more capable of incorporating new information into the on-going topics. Maternal speech adjustments were observed in the data. It is suggested that such adjustments provide guidance and support for efficient communication and language growth.

Keywords: discourse topics, child language acquisition, mother-child conversation

Motivation and Purpose

The development of children's communicative competence has received much attention in recent years. In order to become competent speakers, children must acquire various linguistic devices and discourse skills. One of the crucial discourse skills children need to learn is the ability to organize discourse topics. That is, children need to learn how to successfully initiate and maintain discourse topics in the dynamic course of conversational interaction.

Some studies have been conducted to investigate discourse topic development in child language, mostly in English. By examining propositional relations in both child data and adult data, Keenan & Schieffelin (1976) identified two types of discourse: *continuous discourse*(which includes *topic collaboration* and *topic incorporation*) and *discontinuous discourse*(which includes *topic introduction* and *topic re-introduction*). Bernstein (1981) and Bloom, *et al*. (1976) also looked at the expression and organization of propositional information. These studies demonstrated various aspects involved in the development

of contingent propositional relations between utterances. Foster (1982), on the other hand, characterized how the ability to maintain and develop a topic emerges. In addition, Wanska & Bedrosian (1986) investigated pre-operational level children's discourse skill of topic performance and its relationship to communicative intent.

Although several studies have been done on discourse topic development, little is known about how Mandarin-speaking children acquire and use this discourse skill. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the development of Mandarin-speaking children's skill of organizing discourse topics in child-mother conversation.

Methods

The subjects of this study included six children and their mothers. Among the six children, two of them were three years old (3;4 and 3;7); two of them were four years old (4;5 and 4;8), and the other two were five years old (5;10 and 5;11). The children were visited in their homes. Natural child-mother conversations were audio- and video- taped to capture both the linguistic data and the contextual information. Each child-mother dyad was recorded for six hours within two weeks. The results reported here include six hours of transcribed data: one hour from each mother-child dyad.

Each utterance in the mother-child data was analyzed and coded according to discourse topic structures. The categories include the following (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976; Kertoy & Vetter, 1995):
1. Topic initiation:
   a、 Topic introduction: an utterance that is not linked with preceding topics
   b、 Topic re-introduction: an utterance that re-introduces a preceding but not immediately preceding topic
2. Topic maintenance:
   a、 Topic collaboration: an utterance that continues the topic by matching the proposition of the previous utterance

b、 Topic incorporation: an utterance that continues the topic by adding or requesting additional information

In addition, each utterance was also analyzed and coded for communicative intents. The classification was as follows (cf. Huang, 2002; Wanska & Bedrosian, 1986):
1. Informative: an utterance which gives information or comment in a declarative form
2. Question: an utterance which asks for information in a question form
3. Request: an utterance which asks for action to be performed in a question, declarative or imperative form
4. Acknowledgement: an utterance which recognizes the fact that the previous speaker has said or done something
5. Response: an utterance involving a yes/no response to a question or an answer supplied to a question asked

Results and Discussion

Analysis was conducted to examine the percentages and the numbers of the topic-initiating and topic-maintaining utterances contributed by the child and the mother in the six dyads. The results of the two dyads with the children of the same age were then averaged. Owing to the space constraint of this report, only the average percentages/numbers are reported.

Table 1: The percentages/numbers of the topic-initiating and topic-maintaining utterances

	3 yrs		4 yrs		5 yrs	
	C	M	C	M	C	M
TI	33% *175*	67% *350*	36% *159*	64% *287*	45% *207*	55% *253*
TM	37% *1099*	63% *1860*	39% *1264*	61% *1947*	52% *1418*	48% *1330*

Note: TI: Topic Initiation; TM: Topic Maintenance

As seen in Table 1, for topic initiation, the mothers contributed more topic-initiating utterances than the children for all age groups. However, a developmental change is observed. We observe that among the children of different ages, the percentages are

relatively higher for older children. Similar distribution patterns are also observed in topic maintenance. Interestingly, the 5-year-old children even contributed more than their mothers in topic maintenance.

Table 2: The percentages of topic collaboration and topic incorporation

TM	3 yrs		4 yrs		5 yrs	
	C	M	C	M	C	M
Col	61%	39%	53%	38%	48%	33%
Inc	39%	61%	47%	62%	52%	67%
Tot	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Col: Collaboration; Inc: Incorporation; Tot; Total

Topic-maintaining utterances are further analyzed in terms of topic collaboration and topic incorporation. As seen in Table 2, while the mothers used mainly topic incorporation, the children employed mainly topic collaboration. However, a developmental change is also evident. We observe that the older children were able to use relatively more topic incorporation than the younger ones. Interesting, it appears that the older children's mothers also used relatively more topic incorporation than the younger children's mothers. In other words, as the child becomes older, both the child and the mother incorporate and add more new information in maintaining discourse topics.

Analysis was also conducted to examine the communicative intents of the topic initiating and topic maintaining utterances in the data. The results are displayed in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3: The percentages of communicative intents in topic initiation

TI	3 yrs		4 yrs		5 yrs	
	C	M	C	M	C	M
Inf	78%	36%	75%	41%	77%	33%
Que	10%	38%	11%	37%	13%	46%
Req	12%	26%	14%	22%	10%	21%
Tot	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Inf: Informative; Que: Question; Req: Request

As seen in Table 3, for topic initiation, the communicative intents of the children of all the three age groups were predominantly informatives. The result is consistent with the finding in Wanska & Bedrosian(1986). In contrast, the communicative intents of the mothers were relatively more equally distributed across the categories, with higher percentages in informatives and questions. Thus, it appears that in the mother-child interaction, the discourse topics are related more to asking or giving information than to requesting action to be performed. In Table 4, we observe similar distribution patterns of communicative intents for topic maintenance. In addition, a developmental pattern is also revealed in Table 4. Comparing the different age groups, we see that in topic maintenance the older children produced higher percentages of informatives than the younger ones. Interestingly, the older children's mothers also produced informatives more frequently than the younger children's mothers.

Table 4: The percentages of communicative intents in topic maintenance

TM	3 yrs		4 yrs		5 yrs	
	C	M	C	M	C	M
Inf	63%	36%	65%	45%	72%	47%
Que	7%	34%	9%	33%	5%	31%
Req	3%	12%	3%	10%	2%	8%
Ack	1%	8%	1%	5%	1%	5%
Res	25%	8%	22%	7%	18%	9%
Tot	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: Inf: Informative; Que: Question; Req: Request; Ack: Acknowledgement; Res: Response

Concluding Remarks

This study has analyzed how Mandarin-speaking children manage discourse topics in mother-child conversation. The findings have revealed not only the complex picture of the topic organization in mother-child interaction, but also several interesting developmental patterns. It appears that as children become older, they can participate more actively in topic initiation and maintenance. In addition, they can also incorporate more new information into the on-going topics. The analysis also reveals that the mothers were sensitive to the children's language abilities. It appears that the mothers' speech adjustments reflect the

development of the children's skills in managing discourse topics. From the social interactionalist perspective, such adjustments in maternal speech provide guidance and support for efficient communication and language growth (Bruner, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978).

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