CHAPTER 6

Parent–Child Discourse

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Is that a burp? Huh? Or are you going to get the hiccups? Huh? You going to get the hiccups? Huh? Yeah. Hi, there. You look like you’re just concentrating so hard.

Kaye, 1980

INTRODUCTION

Parent–child discourse is often distinctive, as this example of speech to a six-week-old illustrates. This chapter focuses on interactions between children under six years and their parents, since most studies of detailed texts have focused on this age. Most studies have also been adult centered and have assumed the parent controls the structure and content of family discourse, with some exceptions such as Mitchell-Kernan and Ervin-Tripp (1977) and Schiefelbusch and Pickar (1984).

BACKGROUND

Baby-Talk Register. Are the features of early family discourse we all have seen in educated western families universal? The first linguistically detailed family discourse studies were descriptions of baby-talk register (BT). Ferguson’s seminal paper (1964) drew together the features common to BT in six languages. The earliest work in non-Western settings was based on linguists’ observations and interviews of native informants. Snow and Ferguson’s (1977) conference on BT included new work based on recordings that revealed further individual and situational variations.
Clinical and Input Studies. In the 1970s, disputes about the sources of variation in child language led to detailed correlational studies of features of parental speech to children and the rate of development of child speech, based on recordings of dyadic interaction (Barnes, Gutfridend, Satterly, & Wells, 1983; Cross, 1978; Harkness, 1975; Newport, 1977; Snow & Ferguson, 1977).

Dyadic Process. Researchers interested in infant development began studying videotaped infant interchanges with their mothers for continuities in the dynamics of conversational exchanges from infancy (Bruner, 1975; Kaye 1980; Lieven, 1980; Olsen-Fulero, 1983). These studies began the examination of the dynamics of discourse.

Ethnographic Research. The new field of the ethnography of speaking stimulated by Hymes (1967, 1974) eventually effected a new style of research on child language development both in non-western societies (Blount, 1972; Ochs, 1982; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin, 1979; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984; Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, in press) and in nonmainstream communities in the United States (Boggs, 1972, 1978, 1982; Eisenberg, 1982; Heath, 1982, 1983; Miller, 1982; Ward, 1971). These studies have gone beyond the mother-child dyad to examine the child's interaction network and to look at language acquisition as it is affected by beliefs about children, by the purpose of talk in families, and by the skills and values toward which the child is socialized. The characteristics of discourse between mothers and young children identified in the earlier research (including the use of BT) are not universal. Any generalizations about parent-child discourse have to be made conditional on specifiable cultural considerations.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE

Social Networks and Status of Children

In an unpublished analysis of anthropological studies of 165 traditional societies in the Human Relations Area Files, David and Nobuko McNeill found that in 80 societies small children were cared for primarily by other children, not adults; in many others, groups of adults were in charge. The Western prototype of a mother alone with her child is the rare exception, not the universal norm. Most children in the world hear talk in multiperson conversations, not dyads.

The low status of children in stratified societies can keep them silent, forbid them to initiate or discuss certain topics, prevent them from interrupting, or require them to use a special deferential variety of speech.
In such settings, parent–child discourse is strongly one-sided and must be complementary, not imitative.

Functions of Language in the Family

Behavior control. We found many reports of parent–child speech used to distract fussing children, call out to them, scold, threaten, give directives, or make corrections. The Kaluli commonly use a triadic structure to rebuke misdoers and at the same time teach the youngest children how to make assertions.

In the following example, mother, daughter Binalia (age 5), son Wanu (2.3), and cousin Mama (3.6) are dividing up cooked vegetables. Binalia keeps begging for more than her mother thinks she should have. The mother uses a routine question series.

(1) (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, pp. 292–293)

Mother: Whose is it? Say like that.
Wanu: Whose is it?
Mother: Is it yours? Say like that.
Wanu: Is it yours?
Mother: Who are you? Say like that.
Wanu: Who are you?
Mama: Did you pick it? Say like that.
Wanu: Did you pick it?
Mother: My G’m a picked it. Say like that.
Wanu: My G’m a picked it.
Mama: This my G’m a picked! Say like that.
Wanu: This my G’m a picked!

Japanese are indirect in correcting their children. In the following example, a triadic structure is produced by projecting speech onto a toy. The child was making too much noise firing pretend guns: Teddy bear is amazed. Teddy bear says "please stop." Say "I’m sorry." Teddy bear says "ouch." (Clancy, in press)

Administrative Talk. Families have to orchestrate activities like cooking, cleaning, raising crops, disposing of waste, taking care of children. This talk may involve issuing directives, reporting what has happened, and carrying messages to others (Gleason & Weintraub, 1978; Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, in press).

In this example, Gaby’s mother (Mexicana in the United States) cannot find a can of corn to give to Gaby (3) for lunch, so she tells her to go to her aunt’s to get one.
(2) (Eisenberg, 1982)

Mother: (Tell your aunt to give you—to—to give you a can of corn. A small one.) Dile a tu tía que te dé—que te—que te de un bote de elote. Chiquito.

Gaby: Una alote caquito? La de? una alote?

Mother: Elote chiquito.

Gaby: Una alote caquito?

Mother: Un bote de elote Aver, dile, “un bote . . .”

Gaby: Un alote caquito
(and so on).

This exchange includes an attempt to correct the child’s message and pronunciation through elicited imitation, which is unsuccessful after many tries.

Sociable Talk. Children who are included in playful sociable talk incidentally learn skill in particular types of interaction. Infants and children may become conversational partners for the mother’s pleasure and sociability, as in the example from Kaye (1980) at the beginning of this chapter.

Among American and Hispanic families, a sociable exchange grows out of question routines, helping children construct narratives about familiar events, or teasing them for adult entertainment (Eisenberg, 1982; Miller, 1982; Snow & Ferguson, 1977), as in the following exchange.

(3) (Lieven, 1980, p. 279)

Mother: Tell E. about the funny girls.

Child: Funny girls.

Mother: Did some funny girls come to lunch? Who were they? Were they school girls?

Child: They girls. Not school girls.

Mother: They were Jennifer’s girls, weren’t they?

Child: Jennifer’s girls.

Mother: Ooh they did make you laugh, didn’t they?

Child: Yes.

Questioning of children is noticeably absent in some groups for reasons such as unwillingness to treat children as conversational equals (Ochs, 1982), the sense that questions are intrusive (Scollon & Scollon, 1981), or the special use of questions to accuse (Boggs, 1972).

Intimate Talk. In some families there is talk about the feelings and personal ideas of the participants.
Socialization or Instruction Talk. Gleason and Weintraub (1978) suggest that in the United States, between the ages of four and adolescence, explicit instruction is used to teach the child the community's beliefs, morals or values, tasks and responsibility, demeanor and deference.

In most societies, children are taught people's names. Societies that value literacy tend to teach more labels for objects (Gleason & Weintraub, 1978; Heath, 1982, 1983; Miller, 1982; Ninio & Bruner, 1978) and practice aspects of interaction with books and print (Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Snow, 1979).

Questions and prompts about knowledge, and giving explanations and reasons are common in reports of middleclass but not working-class American socialization. Parents may include running commentaries on tasks and activities shared with a child, often promoting sex-role differences.

Means for teaching values are quite variable, ranging from the evening counseling sessions with parents in the high rhetorical register in the Solomon Islands (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, in press) to the Bible-story readings and moralizing personal narratives of American southerners (Heath, 1982, 1983).

The Kaluli teach children to tease, shame, request, and challenge by direct instruction (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), since they value assertiveness and self-defense, as do some other communities (Heath, 1983; Miller, 1982).

All societies appear to have a concern for their children's deference and demeanor. Most seem to teach politeness routines fairly directly by modeling what the child should say or prompting familiar formulae like greetings, thanks, and apologies (Blount, 1972; Eisenberg, 1982; Gleason & Weintraub, 1978; Heath, 1983; Miller, 1982; Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, in press), or polite small talk about the concerns of the conversational partner (Ochs, 1982). By 2½ years of age, American children use more deferent request forms to fathers and outsiders than to mothers (Ervin-Tripp, O'Connor, & Rosenberg, 1984).

Among Japanese speakers, communication is intuitive and indirect. "Children are taught to pay attention to others, to empathize with their feelings, to anticipate their needs, to comply with their indirect requests, and to experience the feelings which are expected in various social contexts" (Clancy, in press). The typical method for doing this is to provide a hypothetical statement about what the third person is thinking. Clancy cites an example of children, who, while playing hosts, were eating tangerines. The mother was concerned that the guests might want some and said, referring to the guests, "The girls are also saying 'We want to eat'."

In addition to providing explicit paraphrases of hints or contextual
cues, the Japanese mothers talked of their own feelings and those of others much more than American mothers to stimulate appropriate actions.

PROPERTIES OF PARENT–CHILD DISCOURSE

The Child as Weak, Vulnerable, and Needing Nurturance

Many societies that simplify and accommodate to speaking children have no BT to infants and rarely address them. In those societies with BT, speech to infants and young children is replete with special vocabulary, diminutives, and hypocoristic suffixes (doggie for dog, tummy for stomach), and euphemisms for body parts and processes (Snow & Ferguson, 1977). It is marked by special prosodic and phonological features including higher pitch, even falsetto, a wider pitch range, and singsong or marked intonation contours (Snow & Ferguson, 1977). Since these features are also found in speech to pets, dolls, hospital patients, lovers, and the elderly, they may indicate affection or protectiveness of the weak.

The Child as Relatively Immature and Lacking in Verbal and General Cognitive Competence

The parent–child relationship is inherently asymmetrical in knowledge and status. In some cultures, parents adapt to the child’s level of competence. We can distinguish four categories of exchange types: (1) simplifying exchanges, that is, accommodations to facilitate comprehension; (2) supporting exchanges, that is, moves to buttress the child’s own speech; (3) challenging exchanges, which demand that the child produce situationally and grammatically acceptable language; and (4) neutral exchanges, that is, unmarked speech.

Simplifying Exchanges. In accommodating communities, simplifications can be found at virtually every level of analysis of parent speech to children. Parents speak slowly, enunciate clearly, and exaggerate sentence and clause boundaries in response to evidence that the child is not understanding (Phillips, 1973). Ferguson (Snow & Ferguson, 1977) reports that the repertoire of phonological features and combinations of features is restricted in all forms of BT.

Semantic and lexical choices are restricted to objects, actions, and people thought relevant to the child (Fraser & Roberts, 1975; Phillips, 1973; Snow, 1977). Talk with children, like colloquial family talk, tends to be about the here and now (Sachs, 1979). Van der Geerst (as cited by Snow & Ferguson, 1977) notes that once children attempt to encode
a new semantic relation, Dutch parents accommodate to it, but they use
more advanced syntactic means to express it.

The use of pronouns and conversational implicature is reduced (Holzman,
1974). Information is less densely packed; there is a high incidence of
parental self-repetition (Snow & Ferguson, 1977).

The mean length of parental utterances increases with the child’s evidence
of comprehension and the child’s own sentence length (Bohannon &
Snow, 1979; Snow & Ferguson, 1977).

Adults seem to be able to adjust the level of difficulty of various
features like question types to maintain a relatively constant ratio of
successful interchange (Ervin-Tripp, 1978; Leifer & Lewis, 1983).

While utterances are shorter, they are not necessarily less grammatically
complex. Syntax, by and large, is affected as a secondary consequence
of changes in semantic complexity, focusing, or goals and functions (Ervin-

These types of adaptations to the partner’s comprehension capacities
can be extended to second-language learners, and metaphorically, as a
BT-like affective expression, to analogous partners like preverbal infants
(Kaye, 1980), pets, houseplants, and dolls.

Supporting Exchanges. Some communities help the child make mean-
ingful contributions of their own to the conversation. American, Dutch,
and English parents question, prompt, and elicit imitations. They interpret
burps, or single- or two-word constructions as if children have elaborate
intentions, confirming, expanding, and elaborating them, as the example
at the beginning of this chapter illustrates (Lieven, 1980; Scollon, 1976;
Snow, 1979). Values about verbal support are suggested by the fact that
middle-class parents increase expansions when outsiders are present
(Graves & Glick, 1978). The following example illustrates these moves.

(4)

Child: Doll
Parent: Yes, that’s your doll. [CONFIRM]
Can you say that? [PROMPT]
Can you say “That’s my doll”? [ELICIT
IMITATION]

Child: Susie doll.
Parent: Good. Who bought you that doll? [QUESTION]
Child: Grandma.
Parent: Yes, that’s right, Grandma bought you your doll.
Child: Grandma doll.
Parent: Grandma bought the doll. [EXPAND]
As the child’s competence increases, parents raise their demands and support more difficult, as-yet-unmastered constructions and discourse genres, such as narratives.

In many cultures, these sorts of expansions and interpretations do not occur. Ochs and Schieffelin (1984) offer three reasons for their absence from the Samoan parent–child discourse. Children’s speech is not considered intentional, but rather natural and spontaneous (as evidenced by the angry “sh*t!” believed to be the child’s first word). The Samoans do not believe in making hypothetical guesses about meanings, and accommodating to a child is inappropriate for an adult in the highly stratified Samoan society. Other combinations of social beliefs account for the absence of various BT features in the speech of small-town American blacks (Heath, 1983) and the New Guinea Kaluli (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984), and the high valuation of BT by Japanese (Fischer, 1970).

Challenging Exchanges. Challenges and neutral exchanges can coexist. In the small town of southern blacks studied by Heath (1982, 1983), boys were challenged by accusation and teasing and praised for smart retorts as early as 14 months of age, but girls were ignored until they could spontaneously participate. In other cultures, the child is simply told what to say by elicited imitation or indirect instruction, as in (1) and (2) above.

Neutral Exchanges. Where adults prefer to converse with other adults, it is deemed neither appropriate nor necessary to adapt the environment (including the linguistic environment) to the child, who is spoken to but not conversed with or used for entertainment by adults. American small-town blacks (Heath, 1982), Samoans (Ochs, 1982), and the Kaluli people of New Guinea (Ochs & Schieffelin, in press) do not use BT. They believe that such accommodations only teach “babyishness,” and children are left to their own devices to signal noncomprehension.

Timing

Where accommodation or helping exchanges are characteristic of parent–child discourse, what determines when they begin to appear and when they recede? In some cases the criterion is social—weaning, moving to the men’s house, going to school. In others, it is the perceived skill of the child. Blount (1972) says the BT features of the Luo in Kenya start around nine months, and Snow (1977) indicates that in the Netherlands slowed delivery begins around the time of first words, when children seem capable of comprehension. Schieffelin (1979) reports that the Kaluli, whose talk to children was minimal before, begin specific language instruction through elicited imitation when the child can say “breast” and “mother” in order to “harden” the child’s speech.
SUMMARY

We have described four types of discourse styles with children (1) ignoring them conversationally until they are older, (2) challenging them to participate, modeling what to say, and praising success, (3) accommodating to them by simplification and a special style of speech, and (4) helping them speak by prompts and questions. Many features of caregiver speech are not primarily responses to the properties of the child but rather are reflections of social beliefs about communication, status, and the purposes of socialization. The comparative evidence shows us that Western-educated styles of parent–child discourse are only one of several possibilities. The belief in developing children’s language skills by accommodating to them and conversing with them in a style adapted to children is not even universal in Western communities. It is a product of our own cultural assumptions.

REFERENCES


