The Expression of Affect in Mandarin Parent-child Conversation

Chiung-chih Huang (cchuang@nccu.edu.tw)
Graduate Institute of Linguistics, National Chengchi University
NO.64,Sec.2,ZhiNan Rd.,Wenshan District,Taipei City 11605,Taiwan (R.O.C)

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate language socialization of affect in Mandarin parent-child interaction. Natural conversations between Mandarin-speaking two-year-olds and their parents were analyzed, focusing on the lexicon of affect words and the conversational interactions in which these words were used. The results showed that the children tended to use the type of affect words which encoded specific affective states, with the children as the primary experiencers. The parents, on the other hand, tended to use affect words not only to encode affective states but also to express evaluative characterizations. They often used affect words to negotiate with the children the appropriate affective responses to a variety of stimuli or to socialize the children's behaviors into culturally approved patterns. In addition, it was found that the structure of conversational sequences served as a discourse-level resource for affect socialization. The findings were further discussed in relation to Clancy's (1999) model of language socialization of affect.

Keywords: language socialization, affect, Mandarin, parent-child interaction.

Introduction

Research on human emotions has received much attention in the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and linguistics. In the area of child language acquisition, the development of 'emotion talk' also deserves attention. In order to become communicatively competent, it is important for language-learning children to learn how to express and talk about feelings in appropriate ways, and to recognize others' moods and emotions (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

Previous studies have raised the controversial question of the role of nature vs. nurture in the development of human emotions. Hochschild (1979) contrasts two models of emotional development: the biological model and the socialization model. In the first model, emotion is related to biologically given instincts or impulses. In this view, emotions are regarded as organismic functions and are fixed or universal phenomena. In the second model, emotions are viewed as subject to socialization influence. As suggested by Hochschild (1979), 'we do feel, we try to feel, and we want to try to feel (p.563).'

Previous studies of emotions, however, have focused mostly on the measurement and development of emotional behavior, such as infants' facial expressions and the relationship of emotional expressions to particular situations (e.g., Izard, 1977; Malatesta & Haviland, 1982; Ortony et al., 1988; Scherer, 1982). The perspectives these studies adopted were derived mainly from the biological model. The ways in which emotions are socialized, however, have been less researched. In other words, we have little knowledge about how socialization shapes children's emotion experience and emotion expression.

Thus the purpose of this study was to investigate the socialization of affect in Mandarin parent-child interaction. Following Ochs & Schieffelin (1989) and Clancy (1999), I took affect to be a broader term than emotion; affect includes not only emotion but also feelings, moods, disposition and attitudes associated with persons and/or situations. While affect can be conveyed verbally or nonverbally, this study focused on how Mandarin-speaking children and their parents display affect through linguistic means. As pointed out by Schieffelin & Ochs (1986), language plays a very important role in this socialization process. While languages afford a variety of linguistic means for encoding feelings (Irvin, 1982), the affect lexicon is a major source and has received the most attention. For the purpose of this study, I focused on the affect lexicon and analyzed how affect words were used in parent-child interaction in the socialization process.

Methods

Participants and Data

The participants of this study were two Mandarin-speaking two-year-olds, LIN (a girl) and RON (a boy), and their parents. The children were visited in their homes. Natural parent-child conversations were audio- and video- taped to capture both the linguistic data and the contextual information. Both LIN's and RON's parents were college professors and the two families were of a similar socio-economic status. During the data collection sessions, LIN interacted mainly with her mother while RON interacted mainly with his father. The data analyzed in this study included four hours of recording from each parent-child dyad. The collected data were transcribed using the CHAT convention (MacWhinney, 1994) for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following Clancy (1999), every word with affective content or connotations in the speech of the parents and children were identified. The following types of affect words were included (p. 1400):

1. Predicates that encode a specific affective state and can take an experiencer as subject (e.g., *gaoxing* 'be glad').

2. Predicates that describe a referent in terms of the affect it evokes (e.g., *youqu* 'interesting).
3. Words having clear positive/negative valence (e.g., *hao* 'good), including evaluative characterizations of people and their actions (e.g., *yonggan* 'brave') and descriptions of physical properties or sensory perceptions with affective connotations (e.g., *haochi* 'delicious').
4. Predicates referring to actions with affective motivations (e.g., *ku* 'cry') and physical events or states with predictable positive or negative affective consequences (e.g., *shoushang* 'get hurt').
5. Formulaic expressions of gratitude, apology, and regret (e.g., xiexie 'thank you').

The frequency of affect words for each speaker was calculated, including all uses except for verbatim self-repetitions in the same conversational turn. In addition, the affect words were examined in terms of nonverbal contexts in which they occurred and their role in the structures of conversational sequences. As suggested by Freeman (1992) and Kuebli, Butler & Fivush (1995), the organization of the conversational sequence in which emotion words occur also provides opportunities for socialization.

Furthermore, the affect talk in the parent-child interactions was examined in terms of Clancy's model of language socialization of affect to see whether the model can also explain our Mandarin parent-child conversation data.

Results

Table 1 presents the total affect words in the parents' and the children's speech. As seen in the table, LIN produced 187 tokens of affect words while her mother supplied 578 tokens. LIN's mother used about 3 times as many affect words as LIN. RON and his father, on the other hand, provided 207 and 409 tokens of affect words, respectively. RON's father used about 2 times as many affect words as RON.

Table 1: Total affect words in the parent-child interaction

	LIN		RON	
	Child	Mother	Child	Father
Total Affect words	187	578	207	409

Further analysis was conducted to examine the types of affect words used in the children's and the parents' speech. A quantitative analysis was conducted to investigate the distributions of the five types of affects words; in addition, a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine how these affect words were used in the conversational interactions.

Children's Affect Words

The children's affect words were classified according to the five categories of affect words. Table 2 presents the token

and the percentage of each type of affect words in the children's speech.

Table 2: The types of affect words in the children's speech

Word Types	LIN		RON	
	Tokens	Percentage	Tokens	Percentage
Type I	129	69.0	143	69.1
Type II	24	12.8	11	5.3
Type III	14	7.5	40	19.3
Type IV	9	4.8	10	4.8
Type V	11	5.9	3	1.4
Total	187	100.0	207	100.0

As seen in Table 2, most of the children's affect words belonged to Type I (about 69% for both children). In other words, the children tended to use affect words to encode specific affective states, which was consistent with previous studies of Japanese-speaking children (Clancy, 1999) and English-speaking children (Brown & Dunn, 1991; Wellman et al., 1995). In addition, it was found that in these cases the primary experiencers of the affective states were the children themselves. These encoded affective states included positive emotions such as 'xihuan' ('like'), 'kuaile' ('happy'), 'gaoxing' ('glad') and negative emotions such as 'haipa' ('afraid') and 'shengqi' ('angry'), as seen in Example 1.

Example 1
*FAT: lai # RON.
    'Come here, RON.'
*FAT:zhe shi nide [= handing RON a doll].
    'This is yours.'
*FAT: zhe shi Daniel [%English], dui budui?
    'This is Daniel, right?'
*RON: xihuan ni [= holding the doll]. ←
    '(I) like you.'

In addition to encoding the positive and negative affective states, by far the most frequent Type 1 expressions, however, have to do with the children's wants and needs, that is, the use of the affective words 'yao' or 'xiangyao' ('to want').

While the primary experiencers of the affective states were the children themselves, the children sometimes may use Type I words to describe the affective states of the characters in the storybooks they were reading with the mothers or in the pretend plays they were currently engaged in. Stories appear to be rich contexts for affect talks. Similar results were also reported in research on English-speaking children (Bretherton and Beeghly, 1982; Beeghly et at., 1986; Brown and Dunn, 1991; Kuebli et al., 1995) and Japanese-speaking children (Clancy, 1999). By attributing

affect to the story characters, the children demonstrated the understanding of the appropriate affects in specific contexts. In addition, by describing the story characters' affective states, the children may expand their understanding of various affective states, which they may not have personally experienced.

Parents' Affect Words

In addition to the children's use of affect words, the parents' use of affect words were also examined. The parents' affect words were also classified according to the five affect word types. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: The types of affect words in the parents' speech

Word Types	LIN's mother		RON's father	
	Tokens	Percentage	Tokens	Percentage
Type I	226	39.1	107	26.2
Type II	104	18.0	43	10.5
Type III	158	27.3	189	46.2
Type IV	46	8.0	54	13.2
Type V	44	7.6	16	3.9
Total	578	100.0	409	100.0

As seen in the table, the distributions of the parents' affect words displayed different patterns from the distributions of the children's. While both children tended to use Type I affect words, the parents' affect words, on the other hand, belonged mostly to Type I and Type III.

However, it is interesting to note that while both the parents used mostly Type I and Type III words, the two parents' affect words also presented different distributional patterns. As seen in the table, Lin's mother used Type I words more than Type III words (39.1% vs. 27.3%) but RON's father used Type III words more than Type I words (46.2% vs. 26.2%). In other words, LIN's mother tended to use Type I words to encode affective states while RON's father tended to use Type III words to express evaluative characterizations. Interestingly, in Table 2, we observed that RON also used more Type III words than LIN. It appeared that to some extent the children's use of affect words reflected the distribution patterns in the parental speech.

As Type I and Type III were the major affect word types used by the parents, the parents' uses of these two types of affect words were further examined. In the analysis of Type I words, it was found that while the children's Type I words were used mainly to encode the children's own affective states, only a few of the parents' Type I words were used to encode the parents' own affective states. Instead, the parents often used Type I words to query the children's affect, to attribute affect to the children, or to confirm, accept or reject the children's states of affect. The parents may also use Type I words to attribute affect to the children. In addition to confirming/accepting/rejecting the children's states of affect and attributing affect to the children, the parents used Type I words most frequently in the cases of querying the children's affective states.

Example 2
 *MOT: ni xi bu xihuan youyong? ←
        'Do you like swimming?'
 *LIN: xihuan -: .
        'I do.'

From the above, we observed that the parents used Type I words to negotiate with the children the appropriate affective responses to a variety of stimuli. In other words, through the use of Type I words, the parents socialized the children's understanding of who (including children themselves) would experience what affect in response to what stimuli.

As for the parents' use of Type III words, it was found that these affect words were mainly evaluative expressions which characterized the children or their actions, as seen in Example 3.

Example 3
 *FAT: o -: fang de dui ya.
        'Oh, you are arranging them in a right way.'
 *FAT: hen bang a.   ←
        '(You're) excellent.'

In addition, the parents also used Type III words in book-reading or pretend play contexts, in which the parents expressed affect through evaluating the story characters or the characters' actions.

Example 4
 *MOT: tamen yao gai fangzi o.
        'They want to build a house?'
 *MOT: keshi you shei a?
        'But who is there?'
 *LIN: huai yelang.
        'A bad wolf.'
 *MOT: huai yelang lai le o.   ←
        'A bad wolf has come.'

We observed that by evaluating the children and their actions and by evaluating story characters and the characters' actions, the parents thus used these Type III evaluative expressions to directly or indirectly socialize the children's behaviors into culturally approved patterns.

The Socialization of Affect Through Language

A model of the socialization of affect through language has been proposed by Clancy (1999). It is suggested that children experience the socializing potential of language in three ways: (1) through modeling, i.e., observing their parents' use of affect words, (2) through direct instruction, i.e. being told by their parents to say or refrain from saying particular affect words, and (3) through negotiation, i.e., participating in conversational sequences in which their parents react to their use of affect words. It appears that this model can also be applied to our Mandarin parent-child data. In our data, the children also experienced the

socialization of affect through modeling, direct instruction and negotiation.

Modeling As suggested above, through modeling the children can observe their parents' use of affect words. The data showed that in our Mandarin parent-child interaction, modeling can occur when the parents expressed their own affect, as shown in Example 5. In Example 5, the mother and the child were reading a storybook, the mother realized that she had misidentified some of the story characters so she said sorry to the child and then made a correction.

Example 5
*MOT: mami gaosuo le # duibuqi. ←
           'I made a mistake; I'm sorry.'
*MOT: zhege shi Xiaowanzi de hao pengyou #
           jiaozuo Xiaoyu.
           'This is Xiaowanzi's good friend, Xiaoyu.'
*MOT: zhe ge shi Xiaowanzi de jiejie.
           'This is Xiaowanzi's sister.'

As seen in the example, by saying 'I'm sorry', the mother modeled the use of the affect word in an appropriate context, thus providing the child with the information about the relationship between a particular stimulus, an experiencer, and a type of affect (Clancy, 1999).

The analysis showed that modeling also occurred when the parents attributed affect to third parties, as seen in Example 6. In this example, the child was stepping on a toy penguin.

Example 6
*RON: wo cai qi-e.
           'I'm stepping on the penguin.'
*FAT: ni buyao cai qi-e.
           'Don't step on the penguin.'
*FAT: qi-e hui tong.   ←
           'The penguin will feel the pain.'

As seen in the example, the father attributed the feeling of pain to the toy penguin, a third party. Through the modeling, the child not only observed the use of the affect word but also experienced the socialization process of behavioral appropriateness and empathy.

Direct Instruction In addition to modeling, the parents also used direct instruction for the socialization of affect. That is, the parents would directly ask the children to say or not to say particular affect words, as seen in Example 7. In this example, the grandaunt was visiting the family. As the grandaunt gave the child some chocolate, the father and the grandfather then taught the child what he should say in response.

Example 7
*FAT: you meiyou gen gupo xiexie?   ←
           'Did you say 'thank you' to Grandaunt?'

*GRF: yao xiexie gupo. ←
           '(You) have to thank Grandaunt.'
*RON: xiexie gupo.
           'Thank you, Grandaunt.'

In the example, we observed that both the father and the grandfather used direct instruction to socialize the child to use the formulaic expression of gratitude, namely 'thank you' to the grandaunt.

Example 8 demonstrates another case of direct instruction. In the example, the father and the child were playing with some toys and were involved in a pretend play.

Example 8
*FAT: ni naqu gei agong chi.
           'You serve Grandpa this.'
*FAT: shuo agong # zhe shi hen la hen
           la de niupai.   ←
           'Say "Grandpa, this is a very very very spicy
           steak."'
*RON: zhe shi hen la hen la de
           niupai [= giving a plate to Grandpa].
           'This is a very very spicy steak.'
*GFT: o # xiexie xiexie.
           'Oh, thank you, thank you.'
*GFT: aiyou # hao la hao la hao la.
           'Wow, (it's) very very very spicy.'

In this pretend play, we observed that the father directly taught the child what the child should say in the context. In line 2, the father used the verb 'say' to elicit the child's repetition of his own utterance 'Grandpa, this is a very very very spicy steak'. We observed that in line 2 the father in fact assumed the child's perspective and directly spoke from the child's perspective.

Negotiation In addition to modeling and direct instruction, the children also experienced socialization processes of affect through negotiation, which involved the children's use of affect words and the parents' reaction to these affect words. Such negotiations often followed some common conversational sequences.

Example 9 reveals one of the common sequences: Question (P)—Answer (C) —Acknowledgment (P). That is, the sequence involved a question by the parent, an answer by the child, and an acknowledgment by the parent, as seen in Example 9. In Example 9, the mother and the child were telling a story.

Example 9
*MOT: xiao laoshu you meiyou haipa?
           'Is the little rat afraid?'
*LIN: ta hao haipa.
           'He's very afraid.'
*MOT: hao haipa o.
           '(He's) very afraid.'

Another common sequence is shown in Example 10: Assertion (C) — Agreement (P). That is, the child's assertion was followed by the parent's agreement.

Example 10
*LIN: shizi shengqi.
          'The lion is angry.'
*MOT: /m/ ta shengqi le o.
          'Yes, he's angry.'

Example 11 shows another sequence: Assertion (C) — Counterassertion (P). Such sequence involved an assertion by the child and a counterassertion by the parent.

Example 11
*RON: agong de toufa tai shao le la.
          'Grandpa's hair is too little.'
*FAT :   buhui la # agong de toufa bijiao chang.
          'No, Grandpa's hair is longer.'

Discussion

This study has investigated the use of affect words in Mandarin parent-child interaction. Some interesting findings have been obtained from our analyses. As seen above, both the parents and the children frequently used Type I words to encode specific affective states, often with the children as the experiencers. Through the use of Type I words, the parents socialized the children's appropriate affective responses to a variety of stimuli. It appears that in Mandarin parent-child interaction, talking about the children's affective states, rather than the parents' or other third parties', is the focus in the affect socialization. The result is consistent with those reported in the studies of English parent-child interaction (Brown & Dunn, 1991; Wellman et al., 1995) and Japanese parent-child interaction (Clancy, 1999). The finding may reflect the children's ego-centricity in that the children may not be able to readily understand and express other people's affective states. However, the analysis also shows that stories or pretend plays can be good contexts for children to learn to talk about third parties' affective states. In addition, stories and pretend plays can expand the variety of affect experiences which can be talked about by the children and the parents, thus expanding the children's affect understanding. For some affective states, especially negative ones, stories and pretend plays may provide a less threatening context for the conversational interaction (Brown & Dunn, 1991).

In addition to Type I words, it was found that the parents also used Type III words frequently. In fact, RON's father used more Type III words than Type I words. As observed above, the parents used Type III words mainly to evaluate the children or their actions; it appeared that these words were used by the parents to socialize and control the children's behavior. In other words, it is the most overt form of 'socialization through the use language' (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). The fact that RON's father used more Type III words than LIN's mother may reflect the differences between maternal and paternal speech. Differences between fathers and mothers in the style and amount of talk to children are well documented (e.g., Pine, 1994; Snow, 1995). Brachfeld-Child, Simpson & Izenson (1988) reported that fathers make greater efforts than mothers to control the situation and to direct their children's behavior. Thus, we may speculate that the different distributions of affect word types in our parental speech data may reflect the different speech styles fathers and mothers use to socialize the children's affect and their behavior. That is, fathers may tend to discipline and evaluate their children more often than mothers do; thus, more Type III words can be found in father's speech. However, another possibility should be noted. Since LIN is a girl and RON a boy, it is possible that parents tend to talk to their sons and daughters in different ways in affect talk. That is, socialization of affect experience may proceed differently for girls and boys (Leaper, Anderson & Sanders 1998; Kuebli et al., 1995). Thus, our results may reveal that parents usually try to control their sons' behavior more often than their daughters', thus using more Type III words to their sons. Therefore, from the analysis we may speculate that parents' and/or children's genders influence the frequency of the parents' use of the different types of affect words. However, since we have only limited data, with one mother-daughter dyad and one father-son dyad, the study was not designed to yield conclusive results concerning the effect of parents' and/or children's genders. Therefore, further studies focusing on gender differences will be needed in order to investigate gender-related patterns in parent-child affect talk.

Interestingly, while RON's father used more Type III words than LIN's mother, RON also used more Type III words than LIN. It appeared that to some extent the children's use of affect words reflected the input distribution patterns. In fact, in the data we observed that RON shared extensive affect lexicon with his father, and LIN, with her mother. A number of studies have reported early gender differences in children's talk about emotions (Cervantes & Callanan, 1998; Dunn, Bretheron & Munn, 1987; Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Thus, whether our finding also reveals child gender differences in affect expressions is worth further investigation. Furthermore, while the finding may reflect parental input distribution and child gender differences, it may also have to do with conversational topics. We observed in the data that the parents' and the children's affect expressions often occurred in clusters as affect-related topics were the focus of talk, a finding also reported in Clancy (1999). It appeared that when talking about affect-related topics, both the parents and the children tended to use the same types of affect words in the interaction.

As for the model of socialization, we have analyzed three ways of socialization: modeling, direct instruction and negotiation. As suggested by Clancy (1999), modeling is a major source of information about the relationships between particular stimuli, experiencers, and types of affect. Thus, modeling of affect words is probably the primary basis for

the acquisition of the affect lexicon by children. Direct instruction, on the other hand, involves didactic teaching. Thus, it can be regarded as a direct method of socialization (Saarni, 1993), and is also the most overt form of what Schieffelin and Ochs have called 'socialization to use language' (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). As for negotiation, it has been suggested that in negotiation, the parents provide socialization via 'reinforcement contingencies' (Saarni, 1989). That is, negotiation occurs while the children's attention is focused on affect, and can involve acceptance or rejection of the children's affect from the parents (Clancy, 1999). Thus, the parent's responses were contingent to the children's affects and can reinforce the children's understanding of the affect expression. In addition, the predictable conversational sequences in negotiation can also serve as a discourse-level resource for affect socialization. Therefore, negotiation can be a powerful form of socialization.

Given that so little research has been done on affect talk in Mandarin parent-child interaction, it is hoped that this study has shed some light on our understanding of the socialization process of affect expressions and affect lexicon in Mandarin child language. For further research, longitudinal studies are needed in order to discover the developmental patterns of affect talk. Furthermore, as mentioned above, future studies should also investigate how parental and child genders may influence affect talk in parent-child interaction.

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