

Different Child-directed Speech in Urban and Rural Areas in China and Its Effects on Children's Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Clark pointed out, "language use varies with social class, with socioeconomic status." Different social backgrounds may influence child-directed language, then language acquisition. Inspired by this, the subsequent investigation focuses on the utterances of the caretakers and children from urban and rural areas in China, striving to figure out the correlation between language input and output and the difference between the two backgrounds. As shown by the results, caretakers in the urban area speak with their children using a more extensive vocabulary, more topic-continuers and more minor directives. Relatively, children in the urban area also perform better in language acquisition. Hence, to realize better language acquisition, caretakers are suggested to stimulate their children with child-directed speech at a higher quantity and quality level.

Keywords

Chinese; Children; Language.

1. Introduction

People with similar wealth, privileges, and opportunities often have similar entertainment, attitudes, and values that distinguish them from those above or below them. (J.K.Chambers, 1996:29) These features also influence language. Psycholinguists long believe that different cultures would have different kinds of child-directed speech, influenced by the local language environment and nursing concepts. As Clark (2009) stated in First Language Acquisition, social class, socioeconomic status (SES) and factors like earned income, formal education and type of job can affect their speaking and therefore, their children's language acquisition.

Owing to the specific condition of China, the effects of different SES are significant in rural and urban areas. So one question naturally arises: do adults from urban and rural areas talk to their children differently in quality and quantity? What does this difference influence children's language acquisition?

The present studies towards domestic situations have explored some features of child-directed language and the correlation between the input and output in child language acquisition. So the purpose of this investigation is to figure out these features in both rural and urban areas in current China and then make a comparison which may be a better choice for language input towards children's language acquisition.

2. METHOD

2.1. Subject

Child A is a two-year-old girl, whose mother is a nurse and whose father is a teacher of primary school. The family has a total yearly income of 200,000 RMB. Both her parents had completion of college. They live in a good community in the city, with a five years older son. Besides, the family put high emphasis on the girl's physical and mental development.

Child B is a three-year-old boy. His father is a factory worker, and his mother is a housewife. Their total yearly income is 80,000 RMB. Both of the parents only finished middle school and were poor-knowledge. Besides, they live in the countryside with the girl's grandparents. So her grandmother, who also lacks formal education, will also look after or accompany her for much time.

2.2. Procedure

To collect as naturalistic corpus as possible, we ask the parents to record their daily conversation with neither child's nor themselves' attention. For instance, they start the recorder, leave it here and do their daily business naturally. Due to the time limitation, the material ends up to about three hours and the context includes eating, dressing, getting up, playing, reading. Except listening, we use an app for transferring the records into words for better statistical handling. The analysis bases on these recordings and their textual version.

Measures of child-directed speech. In short, the investigation about child-directed speech extend from the following aspects.

The rate of speech means the overall number of utterances by caregiver per minute on average. An utterance counted here means one complete sentence which is correct in grammar. The richness of the vocabulary relates with the average sum of different words per minute. The same or highly similar expressions do not count. For example, “好的” and “好” would be regarded as the same word. The grammatical complexity depends on the mean length of utterance (MLU) per minute. The contingency of child-directed speech is calculated as the percentage of topic-continuing words replied by the caretaker. Here a topic-continuing reply is confirmed as a child-directed utterance immediately after children's utterance and keeps talking about the subject. (e.g., The child: I'm handsome. Mother: Why?) We believe in this way, children can be guided to utter more words. As for the functions of child-directed speech, the percentage of child-directed speech that served as instructions or conversation-stimulating questions is employed for assessment (e.g., “Say hi to your teacher”). An address like this can play a role in developing social and communicative abilities.

Measures of child language development For the assessment of lexical development, we count the averagely length of child utterances per minute, for children's ability to construct sentences and the usage of grammar are reflected in their length of utterances. The most widely used method of children's grammatical ability is the sentence length or MLU. Hence, to estimate grammatical development, we count MLU in measures of child-directed speech.

Table 1. Detailed meaning

Categories	
contingent	Continue the topic of previous caregiver's utterance (Mother: Do you want to take shower now? Child: OK.)
non-contingent	Does not continue the topic of last utterance (Mother: What are you watching on TV? Child: The ice-cream tastes good.)
imitative	Complete or partial imitation (Mother: How much is this? Child: How much?)
indeterminable	An utterance with unrecognizable meaning and cannot be inferred from the context

A speaker producing topic-relevant words has better abilities in conversation. Children's speech was generally categorized as adjacent or nonadjacent in the present research. So we assess children's conversational skills by the percentage of adjacent speech. Adjacent words are mainly classified as contingent, non-contingent, imitative, or indeterminable. Detailed implications are as follows.

3. Results

Means for the characteristics of caregiver's words are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean value of carer's terminology characteristics

	Urban	Rural
Rate of utterances	21.78	15.93
Words	53	37
MLU	45.14	9.7
Topic-continuing	40.2	28.5
Directives	16.3	27.8
Questions	36.4	21.5

The total number of words of caretakers shows a strong effect of SES. Urban caretakers produce longer utterances than rural counterparts. The urban caretakers produce more words per minute, use a larger vocabulary, keep talking on their children's topics more, raise fewer directives but more interrogative sentences than rural caretakers.

Lexical development. The average number of words per minute and object labels these two children use are as follows, revealing a significant influence of SES on the quantity of children's utterances. Also, the urban child uses richer vocabularies and more object labels than the rural one.

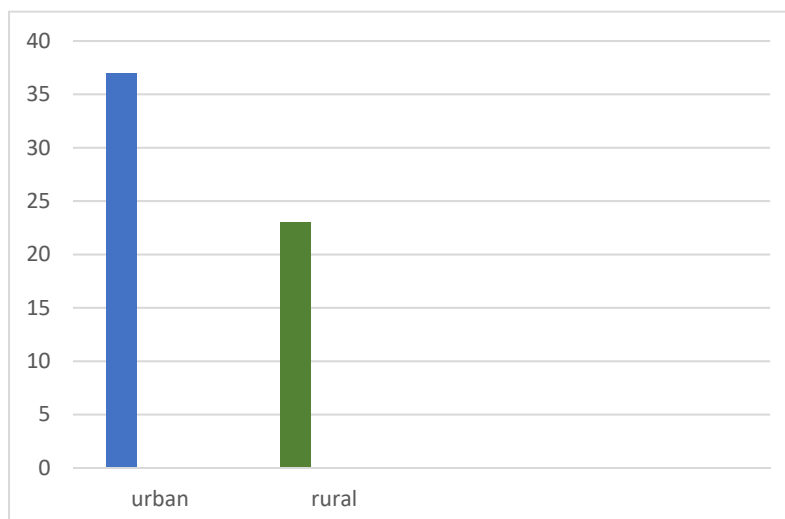


Figure 1. Mean number of words per minute

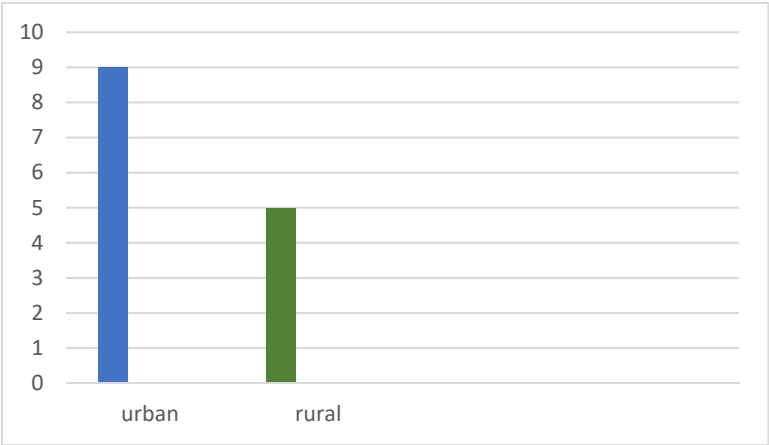


Figure 2. Different object labels

Grammatical development. Figure 3 is the mean MLU of the two children. It shows a considerable effect of SES, for the child in urban area outperforms the rural child who is even half a year older.

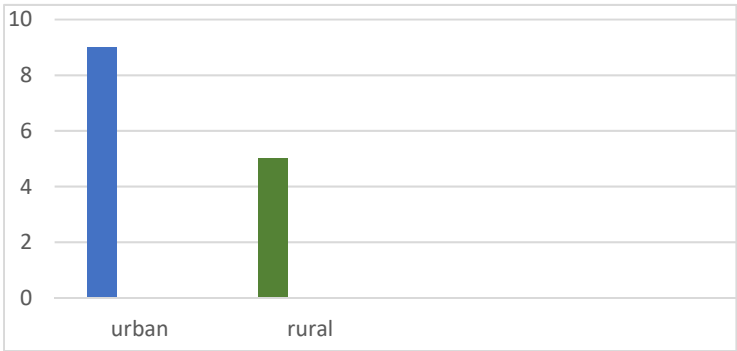


Figure 3. Mean MLUs of child speech

The development of conversational skills. Figure 4 is the mean frequency of different kinds of adjacent speech. We can see that the urban child utters more adjacent speech.

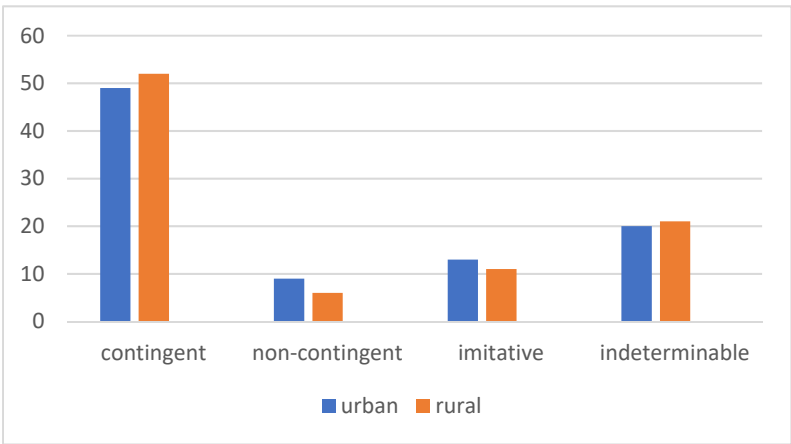


Figure 4. Mean percentages of adjacent speech uttered by children

In conclusion, the effects of different SES in language development are that the urban child performs better in both vocabulary and grammar while varies little in their development of conversational skills.

4. Discussion

Family SES will affect child-directed speech and thus in the language acquisition of their children. The environment also influences grammatical development, and again, the advantage goes to the urban group with better living and educational conditions. For the learning of conversational skills, we can only attribute it to the fact that the rural child is half a year older than the urban child, resulting in more advanced conversational skills.

Facts indicate that children with lower SES may perform worse in school and ultimately in academics than those with higher SES. Also, vocabulary size can benefit the learning of reading. Therefore, it is crucial for lower SES caretakers to stimulate their children by child-directed speech at a higher quantity and quality level, which facilitates their children's language acquisition at an early age and avoid poor academic performance in the long run.

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