Sex-differences in parental influences on children's story-telling skills


Abstract (Summary)

The hypothesis that sex differences would affect parental story telling and children's acquisition of story-telling skills was tested. Children's stories improved after hearing a parent tell the story.

Full Text (4363 words)

The pattern of conversation between parents and children can be affected by the sex of the parent (Fash & Madison, 1981; Kurth & Kurth, 1983; McLaughlin, White, McDevitt, & Raskin, 1983). That is, regardless of the sex of their children, mothers and fathers speak differently to them. Parent-child conversational patterns can be affected also by the sex of the child (Frankel & Rollins, 1983; Gleason, 1987). That is, regardless of the parent's sex, parents speak differently to daughters than to sons. For some situations, both the sex of the parent and the sex of the child affect the pattern of conversation. That is, mothers' and fathers' conversational patterns are not the same for their sons as for their daughters (McLaughlin, Schutz, & White, 1980; Mullis & Mullis, 1985). For example, mothers provide longer conversational utterances to their sons, whereas fathers provide longer conversational utterances to their daughters (McLaughlin et al., 1980). Such differences are presumed to affect gender socialization (Gleason, 1987).

It is generally acknowledged that children's narrative skills emerge in social interaction with adults (McNamee, 1979). Yet little attention has been paid to the examination of potential sex differences in either the child's skill or in the parent's contribution to the acquisition of the child's narrative skills. A goal of the present research was to initiate investigations of potential gender influences in the development of children's narrative skills.

The acquisition of narrative skills is an important aspect of a child's language development during the period from 3 to 10 years of age (Slobin, 1985). Narrative skills involve the ability to (a) describe and characterize actors, objects, and events; (b) identify and order the sequence of events; and (c) comprehend the relations between actors and actions (Heath, 1986). Although narrative skills are employed in many different conversational or discourse situations, all of the skills are represented in the cross-cultural process of story telling. Children in all societies must come to recognize, tell, comprehend, and respond to stories as part of their language development (Heath, 1986).

Stories, like other types of narrative discourse, have both structural organization (e.g., setting, problem or goal, obstacles to achieving the goal, resolution) and functional elements (referential and evaluative) (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletsky, 1967). The referential element involves the recounting of events in the temporal sequence in which they are inferred to have occurred. The evaluative element indicates the narrator's purpose, feelings, sociocultural values, and opinions about the events of the story. Evaluation moves the listener to adopt an attitude toward story events in concordance with the desires of the teller.

The evaluative function can be created by the use of certain structural devices such as quoting the speech of the actors, referring to the internal states of the actors, and posing questions to the listener (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). These linguistic devices make events more salient by either emphasizing or suspending action, thereby calling the listener's attention to specific events. Once attention has been obtained, the listener's attitudes may be affected by the teller's evaluative comments.

These structural devices seem to increase the child's memory and comprehension of a story (Mandler, Scribner, Cole, & DeForest, 1980) and facilitate development of the child's ability to organize a story structurally (Trabasso, Nickels, & Munger, 1989). Although children may use evaluative devices in conversations as early as 2 years of age (Miller & Sperry, 1988), it seems that it is only by age 5 that children begin to master the use of these evaluative devices to produce more complex narratives (Bamburg & Damrad-Frye, 1989; Kemper, 1984).
Harkins, Koch, and Michel (1992) found that 5-year-old children increase their story length and their frequency of use of evaluative devices as a consequence of hearing a similar story told to them by their mother. One interesting result of the Harkins et al. study was that sons exhibited somewhat more improvement in their story telling than daughters did after listening to their mothers. The present study was designed to determine whether mothers and fathers differ in their use of evaluative devices in story telling to their 5-year-old children and also whether the parent's sex influences the child's use of evaluatives when telling a story.

We expected that the child's story length and use of evaluative devices would increase as a result of hearing the parent's telling of the story. We hypothesized that mothers would use more evaluative devices in their story telling than would fathers and that the mother's use of evaluatives would facilitate the child's use of them. We expected that the children would increase the frequency of use of evaluatives after hearing their parents tell the story. However, we hypothesized that the increase would be greater after hearing the mother, rather than the father, tell the story. Also, we hypothesized that the length of the parent's story and the frequency of parental use of evaluatives would vary according to the child's sex.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Thirty 5-year-old children (15 girls and 15 boys) and their middle-class parents (12 mothers and 12 fathers) participated in the study. The children's ages ranged from 5 years 3 months to 5 years 11 months, with a mean of 5 years 6 months.

MATERIALS

To provide a comparable story-telling experience for all children, we used a picture storybook, *Frog, Where Are You?* by Mercer Mayer (1969). Although the book contains no words, there are 24 scenes presented in an order that provides the referential elements for the story (i.e., the sequential and temporal order of events) and the structural elements of setting, goal, complications, and resolution episodes. The pictures are fairly rich in detail; consequently the teller is relatively unconstrained in the number of clauses used to describe the events. Because the book contains no words, storytellers are relatively free to use their own evaluative devices. Therefore, measurement of the child's use of evaluatives can reveal something of the enculturation process unconfounded by any weaknesses in story construction. Measurement of the parent's use of evaluatives can reveal some of the parent's sensitivity to the child's linguistic abilities.

The main characters of the story are a boy, a dog, and a frog. The story begins with the frog escaping from a jar while the boy and dog sleep. Upon awakening, the boy sets out in search of the frog. The boy and dog encounter several obstacles in the search (e.g., looking in a hole results in the boy's being bitten by a gopher). The story ends when the boy finds the frog living with a family of frogs and he and the dog return home with one of the frog’s offspring.

PROCEDURE

Potential participants were initially contacted via introductory letters describing the project and its general purpose; first-grade registration lists from several private and public schools in the Chicago area were used. After the informed consent was signed, appointments were made to visit the subject's home to collect the data. Although each home was visited only twice, data were collected four separate times over a 1-week period. During the first visit, each child told a story from *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969) to the experimenter (KJA). The child's story was recorded on audiocassette tape. The experimenter returned a week later to record the child's "story telling" a second time. During the intervening week for 24 of the 30 children, the child's parent (the father for 12 children) told the same story to the child, on two separate occasions, and recorded each telling on audiotape.

The book was not left in the home of the remaining six children (three boys and three girls) during the week between recordings of the child's story telling. This "no parent story" group served as a control for any improvements in the child's story telling between the first and second telling that were unrelated to hearing the story told by a same-or opposite-sex parent.

The audiotapes were transcribed, and each story was analyzed for the number of clauses and the frequency of use of different types of evaluatives. A clause was described as an utterance consisting of at least one explicitly stated subject and a verb. The number of clauses was used as a measure of the length of the story.

The following types of evaluative devices were measured: (a) reference to internal states of actors (RISA) (happy, sad, angry, thinks, wants); (b) reference to internal states of storyteller or listener (RISN) (I think that..., Remember when you...); (c) reference to absent characters, events, objects (RAC) (looking for the frog, jar is empty); (d) qualifying comments (QC) (seems like, maybe, almost); (e) quoted speech of actor (QSA) (e.g., "Be quiet, Rover!");
(f) causality (CAUS) (because, that, so); (g) Wh-questions (Wh-Q) (who, where, how); and (h) direct questions (DQ) (Did he find the frog?). These last two evaluatives (questions) suspend action and direct the listener to those aspects of the story determined entirely by the narrator’s desires. The first six types of evaluatives were derived from the listing of Peterson and McCabe (1983) as modified by Bamburg and Damrad-Frye (1989).

Intercoder reliability for number of clauses and each type of evaluative was greater than 80% (kappa coefficient) for stories from two children and two parents from each condition. To ensure greater reliability in the data, we coded every story for clauses and evaluatives by two coders and any disparities in the coding were settled by mutual agreement. The coders were blind to the experimental hypotheses and to the general research literature about narrative development.

The general experimental design consisted of two between-subjects factors (Child’s Sex and Parent’s Sex) and one within-subject factor (Child’s Story-Telling Episode: first and second telling). The children’s dependent variables were number of clauses; proportion of evaluatives (total frequency of evaluatives divided by total clauses for each story; this yields a percentage of clauses incorporating evaluatives); and frequency of use for each of the eight evaluative types for first and second telling. The parents’ dependent variables also were number of clauses, proportion of evaluatives, and frequency of use for each of the eight evaluative types for their first and second telling.

RESULTS

PARENTAL MEASURES

To determine whether parents differed in the length of the story they told according to either their own sex or that of their child, we used the previously described ANOVA design to examine the number of clauses used in each telling of the story. There were no significant differences in number of clauses as a function of (a) the sex of the parent (mothers’ M = 86.1, SD = 29.0; fathers’ M = 87.6, SD = 29.8); (b) the sex of the child to whom they were reading (daughters’ M = 87.8, SD = 27.6; sons’ M = 85.9, SD = 31.1); or (c) the parent’s first (M = 89.3, SD = 33.4) and second (M = 84.4, SD = 24.6) telling of the story. There were no significant interactions.

The total number of evaluatives used in each of the parent’s two story-telling episodes was divided by the number of clauses used in that episode to reveal the proportion of evaluative use in the story telling. This proportion corrects for any differences that length of story might have on the number of evaluatives used. For descriptive statistical purposes, these proportions were then multiplied by 100 to create percentages. For analysis of variance, the proportions were arcsine transformed. The ANOVA revealed no significant differences in evaluative proportion between mothers (M = 55.2%, SD = 16.3) and fathers (M = 54.5%, SD = 14.4), or according to the sex of the child to whom they were telling stories (daughters’ M = 53%, SD = 14.5; sons’ M = 56.6%, SD = 16.1), or between the first (M = 56.3%, SD = 14.1) and second (M = 53.3%, SD = 16.5) telling. Also, there were no significant interactions.

There were eight different types of evaluatives identified for each parent story-telling episode. Table 1 contains the mean frequency of use of the eight types of evaluatives for the parents’ first and second story telling and the combined first and second telling by the parents. (Table 1 omitted) The mean frequency of use for each of the eight evaluative types differed significantly from zero (t test, df= 23, p < .001) for both the parents’ first and second story telling and for their combination. It is clear that most of the evaluatives were used two or more times per story telling by each adult.

The frequency of the parent’s use of each of these evaluative types was square root transformed and examined by a 2 X 2 X 2 X 8 (Parent’s Sex X Child’s Sex X Story-Telling Episode X Evaluative Type) ANOVA. This analysis would reveal potential differences in mothers’ and fathers’ use of evaluatives according to the sex of the child.

The only significant main effect was for type of evaluative, F(7, 140) = 45.1, p < .001, with the frequency of use higher for reference to absent characters (M = 15), quoted speech (M = 10), and references to internal states of the characters (M = 7.9) than for the other five types of evaluatives. The only other significant difference was that mothers and fathers changed the frequency of the types of evaluatives they used between their first and second telling, F(7, 140) = 2.7, p < .02. That is, mothers increased their frequency of references to absent characters and quoted speech between their first and second telling of the story, whereas fathers decreased their frequency of use of these two evaluative types between their first and second telling. There were no other notable differences in the type of evaluatives used in the first and second telling for mothers and fathers.

CHILD MEASURES

To determine whether the parent’s story telling had an influence on the child’s story telling, we examined the number of clauses and the proportion of evaluatives used in the child’s first and second story-telling episode with a 3 X 2 X 2 (Parental Reading Condition: mother, father, or no parent reading X Child’s Sex X Child’s Story-Telling Episode) ANOVA design. The number of clauses used in the child’s first and second telling of the story revealed no
Thus, use of evaluatives increased more when sons had listened to stories told by mothers and when daughters father's story telling led to a greater increase in the daughters' than in the sons' proportion of evaluatives from their first to their second telling, F(1, 20) = 68.5, p < .001. In contrast, the fathers' story telling led to a greater increase in the daughters' than in the sons' proportion of evaluatives from the first to the second telling, F(1, 20) = 5.2, p = .025. Also, daughters who listened to stories by mothers did not differ in their improvement of evaluative use from sons who listened to stories by fathers, F(1, 20) = .06. Also, daughters who listened to stories by mothers did not differ in their improvement of evaluative use from sons who listened to stories by fathers, F(1, 20) = .97. Sons who listened to stories by mothers, however, showed significantly more improvement in evaluative use than did sons who listened to stories by fathers, F(1, 20) = 5.7, p = .025. Also, daughters who listened to stories by fathers showed more improvement than did daughters who listened to stories by mothers, F(1, 20) = 56.7, p < .001. Thus, use of evaluatives increased more when sons had listened to stories told by mothers and when daughters had listened to stories told by fathers than when the parent's and the child's sex matched.

To examine the nature of the three-factor interaction, we conducted several simple effects ANOVAs. The data in Table 2 show the difference between the first and second story-telling episodes for mean percentage evaluative use for the four parent-child combinations. Mothers' story telling had more of an impact on the sons' than on the daughters' increase in the proportion of evaluatives from their first to their second telling, F(1, 20) = 16.5, p < .001, between the child's first (M = 33.7%, SD = 11.6) and second (M = 43.0%, SD = 10.8) telling. There was also a significant three-factor interaction, F(1, 24) = 3.9, p < .03, among child's sex, parent's sex, and the child's first and second telling of the story (see Table 2). (Table 2 omitted)

There were no significant differences associated with the child's or parent's sex or their two-factor interactions. The proportion of evaluatives, however, increased significantly, F(1, 24) = 16.5, p < .001, between the child's first (M = 33.7%, SD = 11.6) and second (M = 43.0%, SD = 10.8) telling. There was also a significant three-factor interaction, F(1, 24) = 3.9, p < .03, among child's sex, parent's sex, and the child's first and second telling of the story (see Table 2). (Table 2 omitted)

To determine if there was a relationship between parental and child use of evaluatives, we compared the frequency of the eight evaluatives from the parents' combined first and second telling with the frequency of their use for the children's first versus second telling. It should be cautioned that these analyses are only for illustrative purposes, because the sample sizes were 6 for each of the four parent-child groups.

To reduce some of the biases resulting from small sample sizes and multiple comparisons, we present only those relationships that met the following criteria. The child's use of the evaluative for both the first and second story-telling episodes must have been significantly greater than zero (t test, df = 29, p > .05). During the children's second telling, only one (reference to the internal states of the narrator) did not differ from zero (t test, df = 29, p > .05). During the children's second telling, only one (reference to the internal states of the narrator) did not differ from zero. The frequencies of the remaining seven were significantly different from zero (p < .02).

**PARENT-CHILD CORRELATION MEASURES**

To determine if there was a relationship between parental and child use of evaluatives, we compared the frequency of the eight evaluatives from the parents' combined first and second telling with the frequency of their use for the children's first versus second telling. It should be cautioned that these analyses are only for illustrative purposes, because the sample sizes were 6 for each of the four parent-child groups.

To reduce some of the biases resulting from small sample sizes and multiple comparisons, we present only those relationships that met the following criteria. The child's use of the evaluative for both the first and second story-telling episodes must have been significantly greater than zero (t test, p < .05). Also, the correlation between the parent's use and the child's use had to have occurred only during the child's second telling episode. For example, a significant correlation between the parent's use of some evaluative (e.g., quoting speech) and the child's use of an evaluative (e.g., qualifying comments) during the second story-telling episode would not be reported if parent's quoting speech was also related to child's qualifying comments for the child's first story-telling episode.

Few relationships met these criteria, and there was no discernible pattern in the parent-child use of evaluatives. However, the use of quoted speech by sons was related to the mother's use of references to absent characters (r = .78, df = 5, p < .07); quoted speech (r = .75, df = 5, p < .09); and the number of clauses used in the mother's story (r = .79, df = 5, p < .07). Also, there was a negative relation (r = -.79, df = 5, p < .07) between the mother's use of wh-questions and the number of clauses in the child's story. There were no significant relationships between mother's and daughter's use of evaluatives.
In contrast, the son’s use of reference to absent characters was related positively to the father’s use of references to absent characters \( (r = .74, df = 5, p < .10) \) and negatively to the father’s use of distancing comments \( (r = -.79, df = 5, p < .07) \). The son’s use of references to the internal states of characters was related positively to the father’s use of references to absent characters \( (r = .73, df = 5, p < .10) \) and negatively to the father’s use of quoted speech \( (r = -.79, df = 5, p < .07) \). The daughter’s references to the internal states of characters seem to be related negatively to the father’s use of direct questions \( (r = -.90, df = 5, p < .02) \).

**DISCUSSION**

There were no notable linguistic differences between mothers’ and fathers’ story telling in number of clauses or in evaluative use. Also, mothers’ and fathers’ story telling did not differ as a function of the sex of the child. Of course, mothers and fathers may be using nonverbal and paralinguistic patterns of communication differently with sons and daughters. Nonverbal and paralinguistic cues may vary when fathers tell stories to sons versus daughters and when mothers tell stories to daughters versus sons. Unfortunately, the recording procedure employed in this study largely ignored such features.

As was expected, 5-year-old children increased the length of their story from their first to second telling. Also, as was expected, the proportion of evaluatives increased in the child’s second telling only after having heard the parents’ telling of the story. There was, however, an interesting sex difference in this study. Sons increased their use of evaluatives more after listening to their mother’s than their father’s story telling, and daughters increased their use of evaluatives more after listening to their father’s than their mother’s story telling.

There were some potential differences among the four groups of parent-child story-telling dyads regarding how parent’s use of evaluatives was related to child’s use of evaluatives. There was, however, no discernible pattern among the differences. Although opposite-sex pairs showed more improvement in the child’s use of evaluatives, there was no similarity in the relation of father-daughter evaluative use to that of mother-son use. Nor was the pattern similar between the same-sex dyads. This issue requires more systematic study with much larger sample sizes.

Our results show that no matter which parent is the primary storyteller in a family, the story-telling experience will differ for daughters and sons. Male and female children seem to acquire certain aspects of language differently. In some cases, this sex difference could result from differences in the linguistic environment that parents provide for their sons and daughters (Gleason, 1987). Sex differences, however, may arise in other ways.

A sex difference could derive from the child’s perception of the similarity or dissimilarity of gender between parent and child. This perception could result in the child’s differential attention to the linguistic environment offered by one parent versus the other. It might be predicted, then, that children who are unaware of the gender relations between themselves and their parents would not show either cross-sex or same-sex parental influences on the development of their story-telling skills. Researchers should continue to investigate whether sex differences in adult-child story-telling routines affect children’s acquisition of narrative skills.

**REFERENCES**


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