J. Child Lang. **32** (2005), 241–247.
Printed in the United Kingdom

REVIEW

DOI: 10.1017/S0305000904006762

MASAHIKO MINAMI (2002) *Culture-specific language styles: the development of oral narrative and literacy*. Published in the series 'Child language and child development', series editor Li Wei. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

This book is concerned with language development and, in particular, with the construction of personal narratives by monolingual Japanese children at four and five years of age. Data considered are monologic narratives as constructed by the children of their own accord, mother–child co-constructed personal narratives, and mother–child interactions around book-reading activities. The aim of the book is to determine how much the development of narrative skills is universal versus language-specific; how far mothers and other caretakers influence this development; and how important cultural differences are for this development. The author hopes that the book will provide an accurate portrait of how early social interactions help children acquire communicative competence, and thus help them become competent members of society. In looking at Japanese children in particular, the author hopes to contribute a more cross-cultural understanding of the development of narrative skills. Results of the study lead into issues of the transmission from home to school situations and its effects on narrative skills; cross-cultural differences in expectancies about what a 'good' personal narrative is; problems for children being evaluated in a foreign language/culture, and problems for the teaching of narrative skills in a second language. The book has nine chapters. The main body of the book is followed by an extensive bibliography, and an index of subjects and authors.

Following Vygotsky's and Bruner's ideas on the child's cognitive development, Minami assumes that children need opportunities for cooperative verbal and nonverbal interactions with adults to become competent speakers of a language, and that it is through meaningful social interactions with those adults guiding and scaffolding the child's participation that the child develops socio-culturally appropriate ways of using language. Two of the typical early socio-cultural language practice situations are singled out in Minami's book: book-reading and personal narratives with or without scaffolding. The following hypotheses are investigated:

1. Narrative productions will show culture-specific patterns of social interaction.
2. Constructing a narrative involves the acquisition of a number of cognitive, conversational and linguistic skills. Development may be influenced by society, culture and age.

3. A particular caregiver's narrative style shapes – and is sometimes shaped by – the child's narrative style, contributing to differences in mothers' and children's styles within a given culture, but also contributing to cultural differences overall.
4. There are substantial cross-cultural differences in which children structure their narratives.

The author presents us with monologic personal narratives produced by Japanese children at age 4;0/5;0 in the presence of an experimenter, and similar narratives produced by their mothers. The age group was chosen purposefully because it allows one to include the transition from being mainly in the home situation towards being in a school environment. This transition is of great importance in all cultures, but the author emphasizes that in the Japanese culture the importance may be even greater, since the child moves from the '*amae* (undisciplined and indulgent)-based inside world to the outside world where many children share one teacher and, moreover, where subordination of the individual needs to collective goals is sometimes considered the dominant norm' (Minami, p. 55). As Minami explains, mechanisms of empathy, which are basic in the organization of all interactions in Japanese, may work slightly differently from one context to the other. Moreover, the use of specific markers of 'place in society' are restricted in the inside world in the sense that only a restricted number of different relations will occur in those worlds, whereas once entering the outside world of school, different types of relationships multiply rapidly in the child's world. Given the particularities of the Japanese language, such differences will lead to a different use of linguistic markers and of language in general in the Japanese child.

Questions asked to elicit the personal narratives were of the Labov 'scary incident' type (Labov & Waletsky, 1967; Labov, 1972), and more specifically for the child data: 'Have you ever gotten hurt?' Scaffolding in the monologic situation was restricted to the minimum, in order to get a clear idea about the actual narrating capacities of the child when left to his/her own devices.

A second type of data concerns narratives produced by the same children, but this time co-constructed by the child and his/her mother. In this mode, particular attention was paid to the relation between a mother's scaffolding and her child's responses in terms of narrative construction. In order to allow for a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural comparison, similar data from American mother–child dyads (four- and five-year-olds) and Japanese mother–child dyads in the States (five-year-olds only) were provided.

A third type of data consists of co-constructive 'reading' situations in which mother and child 'read' the *Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969). This type of book reading is studied here because 'it is believed that it may

encourage comprehension and interpretation of texts and teach children how to participate in discourse patterns to be expected in later school settings' (Minami, p. 63). Given that those discourse patterns will again be language- and culture- specific, analysing how mothers interact with their children may enlarge our understanding of the influence of mothers' styles on children's styles.

The monologic data were analysed in two ways: by means of a verse–stanza analysis (Hymes, 1981; Gee, 1985) and a high-point analysis (Labov & Waletsky, 1967; Labov, 1972; Peterson & McCabe, 1983; McCabe & Peterson, 1991). A verse–stanza analysis allows the researcher to see how information is hierarchically organized into smaller units (sentences, verses, stanzas). The high-point analysis is more content-based and involves an inventory of pre-supposed parts of a narrative such as an orientation, a sequence of actions, and an evaluation of the actions. It allows the researcher to see if different speakers/age groups/cultures pay attention to different types of information to be relayed in the narrative.

Minami's results show that children at 4;0 and 5;0 construct narratives that are largely of the same overall length and have the same level of richness in vocabulary, indicating that there is no clear development in length and vocabulary. The stanza analysis shows, however, that the stanza length (i.e. the hierarchical organization of information) changes with age. Whereas 2 and 3 verse stanzas are more frequent at age 4;0, 3, 4 and 5 verse stanzas are more frequent at age 5;0, as they are also more frequently found in the Japanese adult data. Five-year-olds therefore seem to structure their narratives more like the adult. However, the content of stanzas is clearly different in child versus adult narratives, a difference best shown by means of the high-point analysis. Thus, among all children there is a tendency to emphasize the sequence of actions with less emphasis on the orientation, or on the evaluation of events. The emphasis on the description of successive actions is strong both at 4;0 and 5;0, but at age 5;0 data do show slightly more evaluations. Five-year-olds thus start to look more like adults who contribute an important amount of attention to both orientation and evaluation in personal narratives.

Further results concern the children's acquisition of more language-specific linguistic means such as, for example, the markers *-masu* and *desu* (which express a range of things such as formal style, social distance, power relations and societal ranking), emphatic/assertive particles such as *yo* (I tell you), and the 'rapport' marker *ne*, which indicates a request for a reaction from the hearer which thereby marks the interest of the speaker for the hearer and regulates their interaction. It is shown that children acquire the form *ne* and its interactive functions relatively early. In the case of other similar markers, however, it is shown that children acquire the forms as early as 2;0, but do not grasp the functions until much later (sometimes

not yet acquired at 5;0), indicating that Japanese children do not necessarily acquire forms and the pragmatics that regulate their usage simultaneously.

Results concerning the interaction between mothers' scaffolding and children's narrating reveals that there is clearly some influence of the child's production on the mothers' choice of scaffolding devices. Thus, when children fail to produce a minimal sequence of events, mothers will request more reference to actions. When children fail to provide orientation material, mothers will request that they do so, etc.

Nevertheless, the interaction is less clear than one might suspect it to be on the basis of the previous paragraph. Thus, when comparing dyads in the three cultural environments, it can be shown that a mother's scaffolding is not only guided by the child's speech *per se*, but also by what the mother believes is necessary for a culturally acceptable narrative. This belief makes Japanese mothers in North America request more evaluations and allow the child to speak for longer stretches of time than Japanese mothers in Japan. Similarly, Japanese mothers in North America regulate turn-taking in the conversation more actively than English-speaking North-American mothers and give fewer evaluations than those mothers.

Japanese mothers' book reading styles and their children's book reading skills show mainly positive correlations. A clear pattern of three-part sequences amongst the mothers appears, in which the mother asks a question, the child answers the question, after which the mother provides more feedback. These three-part sequences remind the author of *Haiku*, a Japanese type of poem consisting of three lines.

Minami concludes on the basis of the various studies that clear socio-cultural differences exist in narrative discourse construction. Encouraged and guided by their mother's scaffolding from the start, children will acquire socio-culturally appropriate ways of telling a story and of communicating overall, allowing them to become full-grown members of their society.

The importance of the incorporation of these socio-cultural values in narrative production can be seen in the fact that such productions are frequently used to evaluate pupils' language and other psychological skills in primary and secondary schools. And just as frequently, constructing a narrative in a culturally different way will lead evaluators to conclude that the child is lagging behind, failing. Another situation that Minami mentions as possibly being influenced by the socio-cultural specificity of narrative production concerns second language acquisition, for which he argues that simply learning the language-specific linguistic means will not suffice in teaching. Teachers will have to take it one step further and train their L2 learners in the ways of using the linguistic means for culturally appropriate communication.

The book provides us with a wealth of information about Japanese mother and child interactions, mothers' ways of scaffolding and mothers' ways of eliciting book reading. For any reader interested in learning more about narrative tasks and how they are taught and acquired by Japanese children, this book is of the highest interest. One important set of data is missing in this book, however, that would make it into a real cross-linguistic/cross-cultural study. That is, monologic narrative data from North-American children. The results could have been compared, e.g. with results in the McCabe & Peterson (1991) studies or the Minami & McCabe (1995) studies. Were the age groups not compatible? As a result, the reader may feel quite uncomfortable about some of the claims made. To mention some:

Minami points out the special importance of the age group he has chosen and how this relates to important changes in the child's life from the inside to the outside world (p. 55). As it stands, this is indeed an important change, and arguably very important in the Japanese language, which indicates such differences more systematically than other languages such as English. We are not explicitly informed about the latter, however. The point stands as far as the importance from home to school world in general is concerned, but without further information it would be very hard to state that the transition is more intrusive for a Japanese child than it is for an American child.

Similarly, a lot of emphasis is put on the fact that *Haiku* are an integral part of primary school narrative/co-construction teaching. This is undoubtedly true, and it stands to reason that this will influence narrative structure to some extent. However, we have no indication about how a North American child might produce narratives in answer to a question of the type 'Have you ever gotten hurt?' It might well be that such a question leads to an enumeration of events in English as well as it does in Japanese.

The conclusion as stated on page 105, 'Preschool children seem to have understood what the canonical narrative form is, and they gradually try to tell narratives in culture-specific ways', and all the conclusions concerning chapter 5 have the same problem: one can only conclude that Japanese children gradually come to tell narratives in more (Japanese) adult-like ways using the linguistic means provided by their language. There is no real conclusive evidence that their narratives are culture-specific since we have no comparison with narratives constructed in other cultures.

Finally, the three-part sequence (initiation-response-evaluation) found in Japanese mother–child book-reading situations might again be more generally acceptable cross-culturally, but we cannot judge this without comparison with the North-American mother–child dyads.

A final note concerns the problems that Minami raises in the last chapter concerning the evaluation of children who come from a different narrative

culture on the one hand, and teaching culture-specific narrative construction to L2 learners on the other hand. It has been shown repeatedly that constructing narratives needs more than a simple mastery of the linguistic means available in the language. It requires a thorough knowledge of the functions of these linguistic means on referential, pragmatic and discourse communicative levels before one can actually use language in a culturally appropriate way. In child language this takes years, as it does in second language acquisition (for studies in L1 see Hickmann, 2003; for studies in L2 see studies by Carroll, Murcia-Garcia, Watorek, and Bendiscioli, 2000, amongst many others). The most advanced speakers of a second language may still produce a hint of foreign-ness simply by not ordering information on a discourse level as expected in the L2. One question one may ask is: how close does one have to get to the target for the COMMUNICATIVE INTENTIONS to actually be understood, and if one gets to that level, is that sufficiently close for a speaker to be considered one of the society? It seems to me that Minami on the one hand is arguing for more cross-cultural freedom to appear in narrative productions of children in a foreign culture, and for their evaluators to be less strict, and less 'gate-keeping'. On the other hand, however, he calls for more in-depth teaching of those cultural differences in L2 since, as he says, one is only a member of the society when one can use language in a socio-cultural appropriate way.

In sum, Minami offers us very detailed and interesting insights into narrative discourse as produced by Japanese children and their mothers, from a socio-cultural paradigm. The book contains a wealth of interesting information, and should be read by all those who would want to enlarge their knowledge of the acquisition of Japanese as a first language, and the role of parents therein. Although the book certainly informs us of the process of language acquisition in another language, and it definitely gives us insight into what happens in another culture as far as language acquisition is concerned, one should take any claims about culture-specificity carefully, since important comparisons are not provided as systematically as one would have hoped for.

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