

Parent child interaction in Nigerian families: conversation analysis, context and culture

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Abstract

This paper uses a conversation analysis (CA) approach to explore parent child interaction (PCI) within Nigerian families. We illustrate how speech and language therapists (SLTs), by using CA, can tailor recommendations according to the interactional style of each individual family that are consonant with the family's cultural beliefs. Three parent-child dyads were videoed playing and talking together in their home environments. The analysis uncovered a preference for instructional talk similar to that used in the classroom. Closer examination revealed that this was not inappropriate when considering the context of the activities and their perceived discourse role. Furthermore, this was not necessarily at the expense of responsivity or semantic contingency. The preference for instructional talk appeared to reflect deeply held cultural beliefs about the role of adults and children within the family and it is argued that the cultural paradigm is vitally important to consider when evaluating PCI. Given a potential risk that such young children may be vulnerable in terms of language difficulties, we offer an example of how PCI can be enhanced to encourage language development without disrupting the naturally occurring talk or the underlying purpose of the interaction.

Key words: Speech and language therapy; cultural difference; conversation analysis; preschool; parent-child interaction

Introduction

Influence of culture and context on parent-child interaction

Every child develops within complex and interactive social relationships, located within social institutions and organisations such as families and communities. The immediate family environment of the child, where interactions occur, is the main learning site for most of the preschool years. As far as the early development of language and communication skills is concerned, the importance and influence of parent-child interaction (PCI) has been highlighted by many. Early work, comparing adult-child with adult-adult speech, laid claim to the existence of a particular mother-child language code called child directed speech, that differs in form and functional characteristics from adult-adult speech (Furrow, D., Nelson, K. and Benedict, H., 1979). Of particular interest to our study are the ways in which changes in parental linguistic input impact on language development (Girolametto, L., Weitzman, E., Wiggs, M., and Pearce, P., S., 1999).

Speech and language therapy (SLT) with preschool children, particularly those for whom English is not their first language, frequently focuses upon the parent-child relationship and interaction style. However, the applicability of PCI therapy to parents of ethnic minority communities has been called into question. Researchers express caution in that their findings may not be applicable to teachers, families or settings which are ethnically diverse (Girolametto and Tannock, 1994; Girolametto *et al*, 1999; Girolametto L., Weitzman, W. and Riet van Lieshout, D.D. 2000). The majority of intervention studies that examine the effectiveness of PCI therapy, have involved white, middle class families. Anecdotal and written evidence suggests that the PCI style of non-white and non-middle class families is markedly different from the norms that PCI therapy recommends (van Kleek, 1994).

Cultural differences in child rearing and interaction

For the purposes of this study, ethnic minority community is defined as a group of people distinctive from others because of common origins and unique cultural patterns. The term 'Nigerian' can describe a large number of different ethnic groups. Whereas around 500 different languages are spoken in Nigeria (Grimes, B.F., Pittman R.S. and Grimes, J.E., 1996) and there are over 300 separate people groups, the Nigerian community within London clearly has its own cultural context, separate to that of the country and ethnic group of origin. In our paper, therefore, the term 'Nigerian' will refer, unless otherwise stated, to those people of Nigerian origin currently living in north London.

Comparisons of parent-child interactions in Nigeria and Scotland have shown that there is a marked difference between Western and Nigerian PCI styles. Nigerian mothers typically talk to their very young children during daily routines such as feeding and changing times (Trevvarthen, 1988). West African (including Nigerian) parents are reported to perceive little direct link between early language stimulation and subsequent child development (Law, 1999). In West African societies a great emphasis is placed upon learning to be obedient and responsible; parents believe strongly that they need to teach their children to behave correctly (Law, 1999); children are taught at a very young age to do what they are told without asking for an explanation (Timyan, 1988). Parents are expected to take the lead as they are viewed as more experienced and knowledgeable.

Such attitudes clearly influence not only the types of linguistic input a child receives but also the parent-child relationship and the types of experience offered in the home. For instance, in the pre-school period, emphasis may be placed on attainment of specific objectives or early academic achievement rather than on developing the child's capacity to interact (Law, 1999). In West Africa it is common for children to spend a large part of the day together, away from parental supervision (Timyan, 1988). The mother is almost never the sole caregiver for the child and from birth the baby belongs to the whole family, frequently being looked after by siblings

and older women (Timyan, 1988). It is expected that older children will take an active role in both playing with the younger children and in teaching them (Law, 1999).

Whilst parent-based therapy interventions that seek to adapt and make changes to PCI clearly have positive benefits for language development, this may not apply to all children, particularly those from ethnic minority communities. Furthermore, it is unclear precisely which aspects of intervention are most beneficial; what are appropriate levels of specific parent behaviours and in what ways do these behaviours affect the child (Tannock and Girolametto, 1992)? The general stimulation approach involves teaching parents a variety of techniques which makes it difficult to be clear which are responsible for changes in the child. Sampling can be problematic: the children are often heterogeneous and sample size limits generalisability. Although imitation and expansion were the only examples of responsive and structural aspects of maternal language that significantly correlated with child improvement in Girolametto *et al.*'s (1999) study, other techniques may have proved significant with a larger sample size.

The aforementioned features of Nigerian parent-child style and attitude raise the possibility that the PCI of Nigerian parents may bear similarities in design to teacher-pupil talk. The various features, benefits and difficulties of instructional teacher-talk have been disputed. There are claims that a directive or teacher-talk style lacks semantic contingency and provides few opportunities for joint engagement, resulting in negative effects on language learning (McDonald and Pien, 1982; Olson-Fulero, 1982). A strong view is that directives that constrain behaviour and dominate turn taking are associated with negative, restricted and less complex language in children (Girolametto *et al.*, 2000). However, in a study of teacher's input to preschool children in a day care setting, no correlation was found between adult use of directive language such as test questions or yes/no questions and restricted child language output. In contrast, other researchers propose that directive language input can have a positive effect on language learning by facilitating engagement in conversation, particularly for less conversationally skilled children or younger children (Tannock, 1988; Pellegrino and Scopesi,

1990). Directiveness can be reinterpreted as a helpful strategy that scaffolds children's participation in ongoing activities and invites them to take part in conversation (File, 1994).

A further issue relates to the role of conversational initiative and responsiveness during interactions. The adult's domination of the topical agenda may be perceived as negative in the context of early interactions (Vigil, D.C., Hodges, J. and Klee, T., 2005) although other studies have contradicted this assertion (Girolametto *et al.*, 2000). Yoder and Kaiser (1988) suggest that one reason for such discrepancies may be the differing contexts in which language is sampled. The use of directives in adult-child conversation is undoubtedly highly context specific and directives used to refer to the task at hand and its context (for example, during book-reading or small group work) may produce more positive effects than directives used only in free play contexts (O'Brien and Nagle, 1987). The perceived discourse role of the activity (i.e. the underlying instructional purpose) is also an important consideration (Girolametto *et al.*, 2000).

Given the cultural bias of Nigerian parents for didactic teaching of correct behaviours and an anticipated teacher-talk style, it is expected that parents will respond to children's errors employing a style of exposing correction. During exposed correction, the co-participant's error is made explicit since the speaker supplies a corrected version (typically a lexical item) that contrasts with the erroneous version (Jefferson, 1987). The examination of parental response to child error is important given the potential role of corrective feedback in grammatical and lexical language development (Saxton, 2005). In social talk, there is a strong dispreference for drawing attention to the errors of a co-interactant (Pomerantz, 1984). Therefore, repeated, exposed correction could be viewed negatively by SLTs who ascribe to this cultural view. Embedded corrections (for example, reformulations embedded in side sequences) keep issues of incompetence away from the interactional surface. However, Radford., Ireson, J. and Mahon, M. (under review) argue that children experiencing problems learning language may find exposed corrective input more beneficial than embedded corrections because errors are made more salient,

and grammatical teaching is separated from the meaning of the utterance and lessens the child's processing load.

Speech and language therapy services target resources within family settings in order to address issues of delay/difficulty that could impact on school learning. During family work it is important that therapists take account of the local interactional context of the parent-child dyad set within a wider cultural understanding of the family. In PCI research, a common technique is to adopt a pre-prepared coding system that seeks to capture the functional use of language, (Girolametto *et al.*, 1999; 2000). However, as coding decisions rely on subjective judgements about what should be looked for and what is appropriate, they risk being culturally biased and influenced by the researcher's expectations and cultural context. A conversation analysis (CA) approach is therefore taken in this study which is inductive, characterised by the researcher's unmotivated looking at the videotaped interaction. We seek to work only with what is seen, without making assumptions or predictions about the inner motives or feelings of participants. CA emphasises the practical, social accomplishment of an utterance in its sequential context within the discourse (ten Have, 1999). Our purpose in using CA, here, is to generate insight into what mother-child dyads are already doing and are doing well. We aim to enable SLTs to use such knowledge to develop and extend PCI in a culturally-sensitive and relevant way so that children start school equipped with the necessary receptive and expressive language skills to cope with the oral and written demands of the curriculum.

Method

The study involves three mother-child dyads who live in a London borough. The mothers were all born and brought up in Nigeria and moved to London in early adulthood. All the children were born in England; they were all boys aged between 22 and 40 months and had no recognised speech and language or learning disability. The mothers each spoke an African language (Ibo, Yoruba or Ibibio) whereas the boys were exposed mainly to English.

PLACE TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

Each family was initially sent a letter explaining the aims of the project and was asked to contact the researcher by telephone. Following verbal agreement to participate, a written consent form explaining in more detail exactly what was required was signed by each participant. A video session was arranged in each participant's home. At the beginning of the video session an introduction period of approximately 10 minutes was taken to explain the study, allowing the mother and child to acclimatise to the presence of the researcher and video camera and to feel relaxed. Background to the study was explained and the consent form and information sheet were shared. Mother-child dyads were then videoed within their home contexts for 15-20 minutes. They were asked to play and interact as they normally would. The choice of toys and activities was left up to the individual families in order to make the videos as naturalistic as possible.

Video-tape was chosen so that non-verbal as well as verbal communication could be analysed and as full a picture as possible could be gained of the conversational exchange. Initially, larger sections of the videos were transcribed and patterns in the data were looked for. As salient features became apparent smaller, more specific fragments of data were analysed according to CA procedures. Transcripts made of videotaped interaction clearly cannot fully record every detail of verbal and non-verbal interaction, so the authors sought to transcribe details that were considered to be analytically relevant. Transcripts of sections of data used to generate theory and make conclusions are now provided so that the reader can interpret our analysis and evaluate the conclusions drawn.

Results

Some of the key trends that emerged are now presented. One example is given of each interactional pattern, although all interaction types were exhibited by each dyad.

1. Tuitional Modelling

All three participating dyads demonstrated a number of instances of tuitional modelling (Lasky and Klopp, 1982). This can be separated into two sub-types: directed modelling, shown in extracts 1a and 1b, and modelling in the form of correction (1c).

Extract 1a (pair two)

→	6	M	clap for yourself (1.0) clap	directed modelling
	7	K	<i>(looks at M, frowns)</i>	
	8	M	[you don't want to clap?] <i>[(strokes K's head)]</i>	
→	9	M	(.) clap	directed modelling
	10	K	<i>(claps once)</i>	
	11	M	good boy heh heh	
	12	K	heh hehh	

Sequence 1a begins in line 6 with mother's request for action which is repeated after a one second pause. K's non-verbal response in line 7 is acknowledged by M's reformulation of her original request, as if she is requesting clarification in line 8. As the child continues not to respond whilst his head is being stroked, the directive is again repeated: clap. K's action (in 10) is treated as a correct response in line 11 with M's positive evaluation. In this extract the same directive is repeated three times. In other similar examples, parents both verbally and non-verbally model a physical action or specific behaviour, as if instructing their child to perform an action.

Extract 1b shows a variation of 1a, modelling of a specific verbal response, which represented a significant pattern for pairs one and two.

Extract 1b (pair one)

	15	B	<i>(points to book)</i>
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	16	M	yes who is this? [that's Noah] [<i>(points to book)</i>]
→	17		say hello Noah
	18	B	[°hello°] [<i>(waves)</i>]
	19	M	good boy

directed modelling

In line 16, M acknowledges B's non-verbal topic initiation with a confirmatory yes and a topic-related question: who is this?. The question is answered immediately by the mother with an accompanying gesture, which ensures that she retains the turn. She follows this move, without pausing, with an enforced repetition: say hello Noah. B's joint verbal and non-verbal response in line 18 is treated as correct with a positive evaluation in line 19.

The next extract (1c) illustrates modelling in the context of correction, where parents simultaneously use modelling in order to repair a trouble source and correct the child's response. The pattern was available to all three dyads w examples of both embedded and exposed corrections.

Extract 1c (pair one)

	1	M	show me the cat then [where's the cat?]
	2	B	[<i>(points to book)</i>]
	3	M	no no no that's not a cat where's the cat?
	4	B	[<i>(points to book)</i>]
	5	M	no no let me show you [where's the cat?]
→			[<i>(points to cat)</i>]
	6	B	[<i>(points to cat)</i>]
	7	M	[it's the cat] [<i>(points to cat)</i>]
	8	B	[cat <i>(points to cat)</i>]
	9	M	<u>that's</u> the cat

modelling in correction

In line 1 M’s use of an imperative, show, is followed by a ‘wh’ question to which M already knows the answer, given that the picture is in front of her. When B indicates incorrectly in line 2, M’s response no no no clearly isolates the incorrect action from the attendant activity, thus exposing the correction. Her repeat of the question generates a further incorrect response in line 4. At this juncture M, (line 5), points to the cat, thus modelling the correct response whilst repeating the question for a third time. In line 6, B copies his mother’s gesture, indicating that he has noticed the exposed correction. In line 7, M simultaneously repeats her correct verbal and non-verbal model. B next repeats again the non-verbal model whilst also copying the lexical item cat which is finally confirmed by his mother.

2. Initiation – response – evaluation

Extract 2 shows a pattern, characteristic of teachers’ classroom talk, that is commonly known as initiation-response-evaluation or IRE (Ridley *et al.*, 2002). Each instance begins with an interrogative from the adult or computer, which is subsequently responded to by the child and evaluated by the adult. The evaluation either takes the form of affirmation and praise by repetition, verbal or non-verbal praise. All instances occurred during book-sharing or computer game activities.

Extract 2 (pair three)

→	7	Computer	how many lollipops are there?	initiation	
→	8	R	three		response
→	9	M	oh: you’re getting good at this		

3. Initiation – evaluation

Example 3 is similar to the IRE pattern, although it is the child who initiates the interaction. M treats the child’s initiation as an IRE-type response by receiving it with an evaluation.

Extract 3 (pair two)

→	3	K	[look look football]	initiation
			[(points to book, looks at M)]	
→	4	M	football mmm: ok	evaluation
			(nods,smiles)	

First K initiates topic with a verbal comment and accompanying gesture at the picture. In line 4 the lexical item is repeated (football) and non-verbal affirmation and praise is given (nodding, smiling) along with verbal affirmation. The topic then shifts in a different direction.

4. Initiation – confirmation – topic pursuit

The next pattern is also found in the context of child topic initiation. On this occasion M, rather than responding with an evaluation, displays receipt of the child’s initiation and pursues the child’s topic with an itemised enquiry related to the child’s agenda (Radford and Tarplee, 2000). This type of sequence could be described as initiation – confirmation – topic pursuit (ICT).

Extract 4 (pair two)

→	5	K	[my book]	initiation
			[(gets up to get book)]	
→	6	M	your book	confirmation check
	7	K	yeah:	
→	8	M	what happened to your book?	topic pursuit
	9		(.)	
	10		you want to get it?	
	11	K	yeah	
	12	M	ok(.)>go and play with your toys<	

K initiates topic with a simultaneous verbal and non-verbal move. This is received by M with partial repetition of K’s referent, as if she is checking her hearing or understanding, and her hearing is, indeed, confirmed by K in line 7. M next asks a question that is topically related to the

agenda originally initiated by K. M's enquiry itemises an aspect of your book for pursuing further topical information. As K does not take up the opportunity for pursuit at line 10, M next orients to K's earlier action (getting up) and seeks confirmation that she has interpreted K's intentions correctly.

Discussion

Instructional talk in context

Our analysis reveals that the PCI style in these Nigerian mother-child dyads bears similarities to classroom talk, in so far as it is highly instructional and often directive. This level of directivity may be perceived as negative by SLTs assessing PCI using checklists and observational coding systems based on a socio-interactionist model. However, considering the contexts of play chosen in these data samples and the perceived discourse role of the activities, there is no evidence to suggest that directive language or tutorial talk is inappropriate. In addition, although the tutorial aspect of the talk is most salient, there are many instances where child initiation is acknowledged and parental linguistic input is contingently responsive.

Tutorial talk, in these homes, is semantically contingent with the surrounding talk. Adult directive input facilitates engagement in the chosen activities. For example, directed modelling enables the child in (1a) to participate appropriately in a singing game with his mother and siblings. It also has a direct effect on child output, encouraging the production of specific words or actions; for example, the clapping of hands (1a) and saying 'hello' (1b).

Use of maternal corrections by these mothers is exposed and clearly separated from the surrounding talk (Jefferson, 1987). Parents design their turns with loudness and prosody, as well as clear lexical marking, to render child erroneous actions more salient. They are also positioned immediately after child errors as a direct contrast to the child's input. Correction was also closely related to the discourse role of the activity and the cognitive levels of the children. For example,

the mother in (1c) required a non-verbal response from her child and was expecting the child only to comprehend a lexical item and attend to her question (although he did also repeat the lexical item. This is consistent with findings elsewhere that Nigerian mothers use tutorial talk purposefully, sensitive to their child's language level and stage of development (LeBas, 1995).

Although the directive and instructional elements are prominent, elicitation of verbal responses and actions by parents was not at the expense of responsiveness to child initiation. Two response strategies were apparent: first, child initiations that seek to redirect the talk or activity away from adult control are treated with pursuit of the child's topical agenda (4). A second pattern involves child initiations where the action meets with approval by the adult (3). This is consistent with the finding that adults monitor children's talk and orient towards a child's utterance as a labelling turn, retrospectively building the child's turn into a linguistic display (Tarplee, 1993).

In both categories of response to child initiation, there is evidence of contingently responsive linguistic input by the parent. Non-verbal actions are linguistically interpreted and verbal initiations are imitated. As discussed above, a number of researchers have found positive correlations between features of language development in children and maternal responsiveness. It could be argued, then, that the responses made to the child in our data are sufficient to afford the level of contingent responsiveness necessary for good language learning.

Recommendations for practice

A key aim of the study was to gain deeper insight into PCI in Nigerian families so that advice can be given in SLT that is consonant with the given cultural context. It is crucial to enhance and encourage positive aspects of the Nigerian PCI style, rather than working to reduce or change well established behaviours. To provide culturally appropriate therapy advice, account must be taken of the context of an interaction, the parent's view of the purpose of the activity, and the cultural beliefs and attitudes underlying these practices. We recommend that a detailed and data-

driven study of PCI, using an approach such as CA, more fully represents the local richness of the interactants' behaviours. A further implication is that fuller understanding of the PCI exhibited by each individual family is necessary in order that SLT can be locally tailored to the current interactional practices of the child and the parent.

The instructional purpose underlying PCI, here, appears to be deeply embedded and important. Seeking to change or discourage this type of interaction is therefore unwarranted and, considering the context of interaction and the discussed benefits of some instances of directive talk, may even have negative consequences. A more effective strategy, therefore, could be to develop and build upon the naturally occurring talk in order to enhance rather than completely change the linguistic input. SLTs could recommend encouraging the adult to extend language at the point in the interaction where evaluation (E) typically occurs. Rather than simply giving praise, this would have the effect of expanding the child's utterance and providing syntactic or semantic models. Parents could be encouraged to build upon the child's linguistic attempts, so providing a structured model in the child's next zone of linguistic development (Radford, J., Ireson, J. Mahon, M., 2006). Studies already indicate that contingent responding is effective in enhancing language development (Girolametto, 1999). This approach would not disrupt the underlying instructional purpose of the interaction or require parents to change or adapt their beliefs or attitudes about their parental role or child development.

We now present an example of how CA can be used to identify potential areas for improvement in PCI. Extract 6 finds pair two engaged in free play with bricks and trains. These sequences would typically include repetition, correction and praise (and be analysed as IRE). Yet, there is evident potential for M to add a follow-up move (F) that could facilitate the learning of syntax and vocabulary. These contingent linguistic moves provide opportunities for both syntactic and semantic expansion as well as reformulation of the child's utterances, called elsewhere 'zones of negotiation' (Radford *et al.* 2006). In Table 1, three points in the interaction (→) have been selected to illustrate how established patterns of PCI could be enhanced to

encourage the next stages of language development wherein M could offer more elaborate versions of the child's syntax and semantics.

Extract 6. Extending repetition, correction and praise turns

	1	K	<i>(plays with bricks)</i> (5.0) ouch na na ouch na na na ouch orr oss (2.0) che che (2.0) right (1.0) ne ne ne (14.0) I can't open it <i>(passes bricks to M)</i>	
	2	M	I can't open it? <i>(moves closer to K)</i> you do it <i>(nods)</i>	A specific action is requested.
	3	K	<i>(takes bricks apart)</i>	
→	4	M	oh: good boy <i>(moves away from k)</i>	M praises completion of K's action. → Vocabulary could be added to this sentence offering a linguistic model linked to the behaviour e.g. <u>Oh good boy you broke open the bricks</u>
	5	K	<i>(plays with bricks)</i> (2.0) one two <i>(looks at M)</i>	
→	6	M	one two <i>(nods and smiles)</i>	M repeats the child's comment. → M could use expansion to give models of number e.g. <u>one, two, three</u> or vocabulary e.g. <u>one brick, two bricks</u>
	7	K	<i>(plays with bricks)</i> bight (1.0) da do ram (2.0) sh shs hs	

			hh (1.0) AAAYY <i>(looks at M)</i>	
	8	M	don't worry sorry good boy	
	9	K	<i>(plays with bricks)</i> (2.0) I DID TRAIN	
→	10	M	you did train good boy	M repeats and praises the child. →M could enhance linguistic input by adding vocabulary e.g. "you did a big train"

Some caveats

Despite the fact that our study presents data from a relatively small number of parent-child dyads, we believe that the results have external validity. Close examination of the interactional patterns and the many instances of talk within the data potentially display wider social phenomena, characteristic of other CA studies (Seedhouse, 2005). However, we acknowledge that not all mother-child dyads will share similar awareness of the macro-context nor may they share the same social goals. Although this study has shown that the ethnicity paradigm is a procedurally consequential one for the participants during their interactions (Schegloff, 1992), different aspects of context may be relevant to other participants at other times, so it cannot be assumed that any single contextual feature will remain relevant. Generalisations within the Nigerian community should therefore be made with caution. The 'social machineries' driving each parent-child dyad are unlikely to be identical in each case. The relevance of certain aspects of context to the participants must be evaluated before assumptions about the importance of a particular feature are made (Schegloff, 1992).

Conclusions

There is clearly a need to further explore the applicability of PCI based SLT to parents from ethnic minority communities, particularly in cases where SLT makes generalised suggestions for improvements to PCI rather than highlighting individual differences. A deeper understanding of the linguistic input necessary for language development would also be helpful, particularly for children growing up in non-mainstream cultures. Further studies of PCI based on a CA approach, taking into account not only adult linguistic input but also the meaning, form and function of interaction would be beneficial. There is a continued risk that culturally biased assumptions influence the practices of SLTs. The current study has further supported the view recognised by others (van Kleeck, 1994; Le Bas, 1995; Law, 1999), that SLT based on the socio-interactionist perspective is not always appropriate for all families. PCI is clearly not a static and universal concept and is influenced by a number of inter-related factors, including ethnicity. Many gaps in our knowledge of this complex area still remain and continued research would help to achieve what is surely the ultimate goal of all SLTs, the provision of effective and appropriate SLT for all children, including those from ethnic minority communities.

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Table 1: Participant details

Pair	Mother	Age of child	Home language of mother
One	B	22 months	Ibo
Two	K	36 months	Ibibio
Three	R	40 months	Yoruba

