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A Case Study on Parent-Child Interactions in Japanese Family Picture Book Reading Activities: Transformation of Picture Book Questions

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Abstract: This paper studies how textual questions in picture books are transformed into relevant questions in the process of storytelling by the parents. By looking at two examples from a dataset of picture book reading conversations, this analysis reveals how Japanese parents incorporate Japanese linguistic structures, embodied resources, and physical materials from picture books into their own actions, through which they easily engage children in reading activities and enhance their understanding.

Introduction

Picture book reading is an activity that is practiced in many countries. Psychological studies have highlighted the important role of parent-child shared book reading in children's language, cognitive, and interactional development. In particular, as very young children mainly interact with family members before formal schooling, picture book reading activity in the home provides early opportunities for developing children's interactional competence. However, although picture book reading is a mundane activity during early childhood, young children cannot easily understand and read picture books without support from their parents. When reading picture books to children, parents deploy many strategies rather than just being an "animator" or "sounding box" of another's words (Goffman, 1981; Goodwin, 2006). They sometimes link pages to the here-and-now situations (Takada & Kawashima, 2019), and sometimes, they read aloud in rhyme alongside the text and illustrations. Parents, who are the current speakers, quote a text from the picture book (=author), and the talk is directed toward their children (=listeners). This kind of phenomenon where multiple "speakers" or "voices" get involved in an interaction is conceptualized by Goffman's "production format." For this reason, the storytelling practice is constructed through the coordinated actions of different participants. These practices easily engage children in reading activities and enhance their understanding.

In this study, I focus on how textual questions in picture books are transformed into relevant questions in the process of storytelling by the parents. Originally, questions in picture books can be parts of the story and are designed by the picture book author to provoke the children's thinking and imagination. The parents' reading of these questions is usually considered a process of the reproduction of the text. However, it is not simply that, as the parents effectively apply these textual questions into turn-to-turn interaction by changing their lexical and prosodical forms. Also, the parents assume a particular stance toward what is done through that reproduction (Goodwin, 2006). Therefore, a question from a picture book is not to be heard as part of what the picture book/author says but instead as the current speaker's words. This is a process similar to Goodwin's analysis (2006) of a

speaker who quotes someone else's words as he/she produces his/her laugh tokens, thus displaying his/her affective stance. Likewise, parents incorporate linguistic structures, embodied resources, and physical materials from picture books into their own actions, through which they construct indexical meaning (Ochs, 1992). In reality, indexicality itself is deeply embedded in parent–child interaction, varying in frequency (e.g. repetition of questions), intensity (e.g. using direct/indirect question forms), and quality (e.g. asking questions rhythmically).

This paper applies the theoretical framework of conversation analysis (Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) and language socialization (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) to address the research question: How do the Japanese parents design and produce questions based on textual questions in picture books?

Data Collection and Methods

My dataset included ethnographic video recordings of approximately 12 hours of parent-child interaction during picture book reading, collected from April to October 2021. Four families from the Kansai region of Japan (with children aged 2– 3 years) participated in this study. All families were asked to read picture books for one recording session each month. Recordings were conducted by each family due to public health concerns. To allow for natural conversation data recordings, parents were instructed to try to invite their children to read picture books after setting up a camera, and each recording session lasted 30 minutes regardless of the children's engagement in the reading activity.

Analysis of the data was conducted based on the theoretical framework of conversation analysis and language socialization. By looking at the communicative resources embedded in utterances and sequential organization, I aim to examine how children learn to socialize and understand family values through the current reading activity.

Data Analysis

In this section, through the two conversation examples, I analyze how parents deploy multiple strategies to transform the textual questions from picture books into relevant questions. While transforming the textual questions, parents always reproduce new questions based on the original textual questions and their children's reactions.

In example 1, a mother reads a picture book to her daughter, Hon (assumed name). This book is aimed at teaching infants or toddlers about what a car should do when traffic lights turn red, green, and yellow. To stimulate children's imagination, traffic lights can be imagined to turn other colors. At the beginning of example 1, the mother asks her daughter what a car should do when the traffic light turns pink.

(Textual questions read by parents are marked with gray hatching.)
   Example 1
     01 M: Pikori, are: pinku ninarimashita.
           ((Once look at Hon then read the book again))
           NAME wow pink become-PST

Wow! Pikori (the traffic light) is turning pink!
((Once look at Hon then read the book again.))
02 Hon: **hh**
→03 M: Kore wa mezurashii! kuruma wa dou suru kana? ((Looks at Hon))
        this COP rare   car   COP how do I wonder
    This is rare! I wonder what the car should do.((Looks at Hon))
04 Hon: **(…)**
→05 M: Iku? ((Nods once))
         go
    (Should it) go? ((Nods once))
06 Hon: Iku. ((Nodding))
         go
    Yes. ((Nodding))
07 M: Pinku iku kana. ((Turns to the next page))
         pink go I wonder
    I wonder/Let's see if the car should go or not.
    ((Turns to the next page))

In line 1, the mother reads aloud with a high pitch, while pretending to be amazed that the traffic light is turning pink. After reading aloud the assessment sentence "This is rare!" from the picture book, the mother asks Hon "I wonder what the car should do." While asking the question, she looks at her daughter, trying to prompt Hon to answer the question. In line 04, Hon's response is not heard clearly, so the mother transforms the original, open question to a yes-no question by saying "Should it (the car) go?" The transformation upgrades the power of prompting her child to answer because the answer to a yes-no question is restricted to either go or don't go. After Hon responds with the word "go," the mother confirms her answer in line 06 and further comments, "I wonder if the car should go or not." The mother also turns to the next page at the end of line 07. The talk in line 07 is seen as a preparation to deliver the answer. Note that the word "kana" (translated as "I wonder") used by the mother is taken from the picture book textual question in line 03.

During the 28-second interaction, the mother reads aloud the textual questions from the book in her own way, but later, she changes the form of the questions and reuses some parts of the textual questions to sustain the reading activity.

Such practices of the transformation of textual questions are also observed in example 2. In example 2, a Japanese mother reads a story to her child named Ika (assumed name). It is a story of a white bear Shirokuma, who loses his underpants. His friend, Nezumi offers to go search for his underpants together, and later they find a colorful pair of underpants, which belongs to the zebra Shimauma.

Example 2
01 M: Att. (1.1) Osharena <shimashimano pantu:>
        ((Gently strokes on an underpants icon in the book))
        INTJ   stylish   striped   underpants

Oh. Here is a beautiful pair of striped underpants.
((Gently strokes on an underpants icon on the new page))

02 Ika: **((Touches the underpants icon))**

→03 M: Kore, shimakuma no pantu? ((Gets her head close to Ika))
　　　　this white bear of underpants
　　　　Is it the white bear's underpants? ((Gets her head close to Ika))

04 Ika: **[Un.　]**

05 M: [Umm.] Chigau=
　　　　No　　different
　　　　No, it isn't.

06 Ika: =Att ((Turns to the next page and is surprised at the content of the
　　　　　　new page))
　　　　INTJ
　　　　Att ((Turns to the next page and is surprised at the content of
　　　　the new page))

07 M: Jya, dare no pantu kana?
　　　　then who of underpants I wonder
　　　　I wonder whose pair of underpants it is?

08 Ika: **(…) ((Constantly points at the page))**

→09 M: Da::re? ((Lays her right hand on the page))
　　　　who
　　　　Who is he/she? ((Lays her right hand on the page))

10 Ika: **(…)mura**

11 M: **<Shimauma>**
　　　　zebra

12 Ika: **Shimauma u**
　　　　zebra

13 M: Un. Shimauma no <shimashima pantu>
　　　　INTJ zebra of striped underpants
　　　　Yes. It is a striped pair of underpants from the zebra.

14 Ika: **((Turns to the next page))**

15 M: Ne?
　　　　PRT
　　　　Isn't it?

　　　Example 2 is similar to example 1. In example 2, before asking a question, the mother expresses surprise at seeing a pair of underpants on the page. In line 01, the mother says, "A beautiful striped underpants here" and gently strokes on the underpants icon. This action is similar to example 1, which works as a preparation for an upcoming question. Later, the mother gets close to her daughter Ika when producing a question, which shows that the question is directed to Ika and is meant to prompt her to respond. This action doesn't elicit a proper response from Ika, and the mother continues to read the book. She presents an answer to the former question by saying, "No, it isn't." As she is just about to read the next question,

"Then whose pair of underpants is it?" she is interrupted by Ika as she rushes to turn to the next page. Receiving this, the mother continues asking the question she had in mind. Since Ika had turned to a new page, the production of the question in line 07 is seen to be replied to in the mother's memory on the former page. Note that the original question written in the book is: "Whose pair of underpants is it?" However, in her speech, the mother transforms it into "I wonder whose pair of underpants it is?" The "kana" (translated as "I wonder") basically indicates a speaker contemplating or expressing doubts in the Japanese language (Matsugu, 2005). By saying "kana," the mother not only expresses her uncertainty to Ika but also invites Ika to think of whose pair of underpants it is. In line 08, Ika constantly points at the page to show something, but her response is regarded as insufficient by the mother. The mother later puts her hand on the character to specify her question. Her question only includes a simple "Who?" Therefore, example 2 also sees a transformation from and an addition to the original question by the caregiver.

Discussion and Conclusion

We have observed how questions in picture books are transformed and practiced in the process of storytelling by the parents and looked at two cases of parent–child shared picture book conversations. From what we have observed from these cases, by voicing a textual question from a picture book, parents are not always amorphous but assume a particular stance toward what is done through that transformation. By doing so, parents lay the foundation for their children to easily understand the forthcoming questions. These practices of the transformation of questions from books are not only constituted through language but are also constructed through multi-resources, such as gaze, hand gestures, organization of language and story structure, and stance within an utterance. Additionally, picture book reading activity is a social interaction that is different from one person reading stories. Parents always confirm children's understanding and make sure they are properly engaged in and pay local attention to the reading activities. These findings suggest that, as these practices are accumulated through children's daily life, children are provided early opportunities to learn communicative skills (e.g., question-response interaction and various bodily behaviors) and socialize as competent individuals. The findings also suggest that to further examine how these practices would influence children's language and communicative development, more case studies in various contexts and a longitudinal study are in need.

Appendix

(…)   Inaudible talk
(())   Analyst's comments or descriptions
:   Prolonged vowel or consonant
[]   Start and end of overlapping speech
=   End of one TCU and the beginning of the next with no pause in between
< >   Slowing down
hh   Outbreath
→   TCU of particular interest (added by the analyst)

Interlinear Gloss Abbreviations for Japanese

COP   Copula
INTJ   Interjection
PST   Past tense
PRT   Particle

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