

Interruption in Mandarin Mother-child Conversation*

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the types and functions of mother-to-child and child-to-mother interruptions in conversation. The data analyzed are natural conversations from two Mandarin-speaking mother-child dyads. The children are about three years old. Goldberg's (1990) categorization of interruptions is adopted to examine the types of the mothers' and the children's interruptions. The results show that both the mothers and the children use more rapport-oriented interruptions than other types of interruptions; they tend to use interruptions to signal their involvement and interest and to construct shared topics cooperatively. In addition, the children's interruptions are further examined based on Dunn and Shatz's (1989) framework in order to investigate the semantic relations between the children's interruptions and the conversational discourse. The findings show that most of the children's interruptions contain relevant new information. Such interruptions are likely to succeed in getting the attention of and responses from the mothers.

Key words: interruption, mother-child conversation, language acquisition

1. Introduction

Interruption has long been regarded as a violation of turn-taking rules (Oetigan and Niederman 1975 and West and Zimmerman 1975). Based on the model of turn-taking proposed by Sacks et al. (1974), participants in a conversation should recognize the 'transition-relevance place' (TRP) at which the alternation of speakers is appropriate, so no more than one party talks at any one time. However, the requirement for minimal overlap is somewhat idealized. In naturally-occurring conversation, more often than not, interruptions and overlaps emerge, and such phenomena are by no means exclusive to adults' conversation. It has also been noted that intrusions form a considerable proportion of the talk of children less than three (Dunn and Shatz 1989). With its common nature, but deviant from the rules of the turn-taking system, interruptions in adults' conversation have been much investigated in relation to dominance and floor control, power asymmetry and imbalance, gender and cultural differences and so on (Murray and Covelli 1988, Nohara 1992, James and Clarke 1993, and Bresnahan and Cai 1996).

Although interruption has drawn much attention from researchers, there is not a consensus about the definition of interruption. West and Zimmerman (1975, 1977, 1983) characterize interruption as a form of simultaneous speech, which is defined as a violation of a speaker's turn to talk and as a device for exercising power and control

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in conversation. From the perspective of the interrupter, Esposito (1979) indicates that interruption occurs when a second speaker begins speaking at what could not be a TRP, and when speaker A cuts off more than one word of speaker B's unit type. From the perspective of the interruptee, Beattie (1981) states that interruption occurs when a speaker loses the floor before he has intended to relinquish it, leaving his current utterance incomplete. An idealized schema for interruption is provided by Drummond (1989:150), as shown in Figure 1.

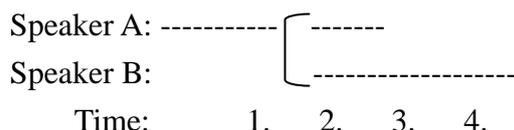


Figure 1. Idealized schema for interruption

According to this model, speaker A is producing an utterance (time 1) when speaker B interrupts by overlapping with speaker A's utterance (time 2). Speaker A subsequently relinquishes the floor to speaker B (time 3), who completes the turn alone (time 4).

Based on the occurrence of a speaker-switch, simultaneous speech, and the completion of the first speaker's utterance, Ferguson (1977) devises a categorization scheme for interruptions, as shown in Figure 2.

A smooth speaker switch occurs when the first speaker completes his/her turn and there is no simultaneous speech. In a simple interruption, simultaneous speech occurs and the utterance of the first speaker is left incomplete. However, an overlap is simultaneous speech in which the utterance of the first speaker is finished instead of being disrupted by that of the second speaker. An interruption without overlapping is a silent interruption; it is almost the same as a simple interruption except for the occurrence of simultaneous talk. In a butting-in interruption, an unsuccessful attempted interruption, the interrupter stops before gaining control of the floor.

The function of interruption is to prevent the first speaker from being able to finish what he/she wants to say, and to allow the second speaker to take over the floor (James and Clarke 1993). More negatively, West and Zimmerman (1983) describe interruption as having the potential to disrupt turns at talk, disorganize the ongoing construction of conversational topics, and violate the current speaker's right to be engaged in speaking. Therefore, interruption has long been regarded negatively and associated with dominance and power. Octigan and Niederman (1975) observe that an interruption is taken as a sign of conversational dominance. It is often interpreted as violating normal conversational rules and constituting an attempt to dominate and control the interaction through control of the floor and of the topic of conversation

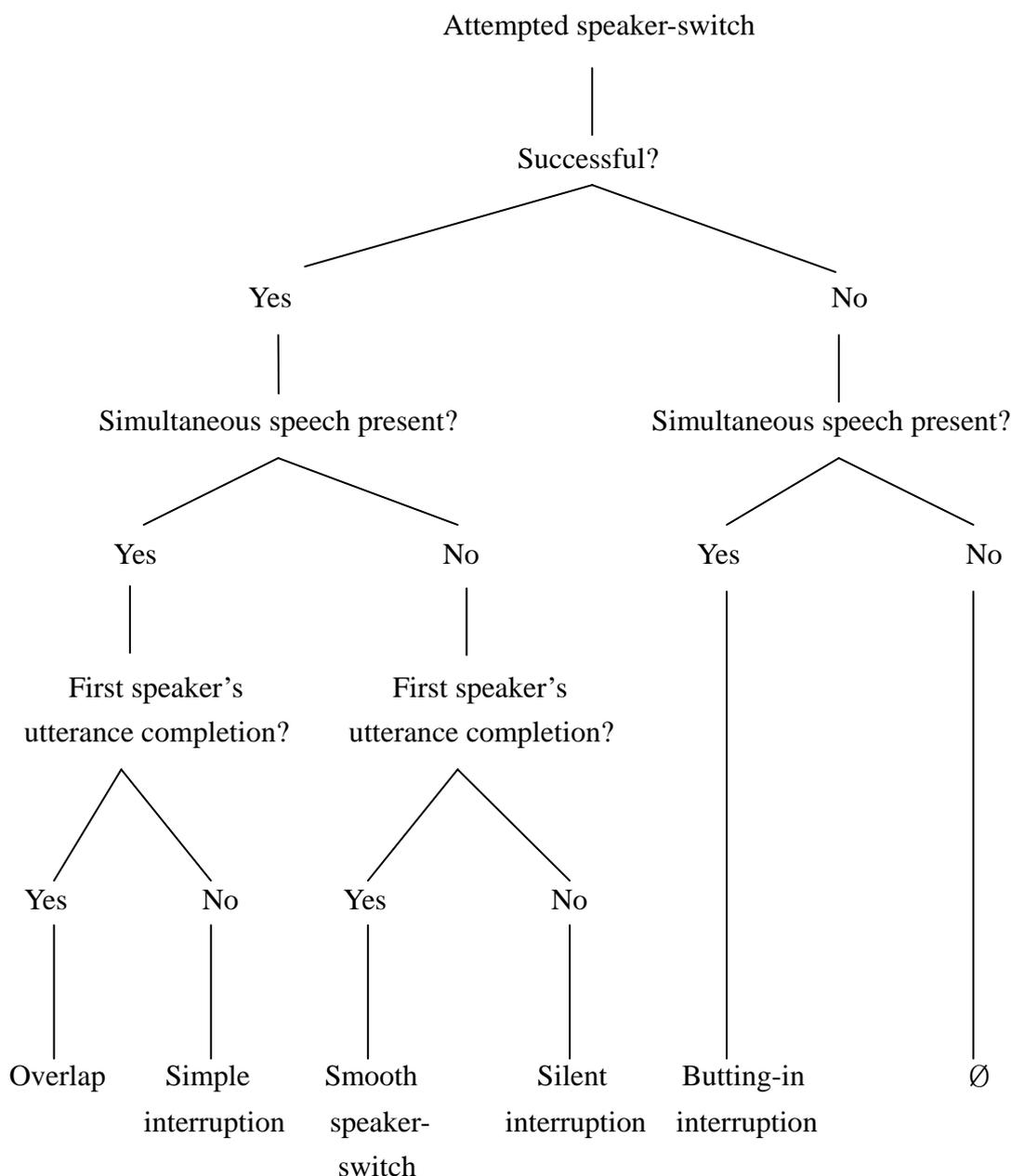


Figure 2. Ferguson's (1977) classification of interruptions and smooth speaker-switches

(James and Clarke 1993). That is, an interruption is considered a hostile, rude and disrespectful act, with the interrupter an aggressor and the interruptee an innocent victim.

In contrast with the previous view, James and Clarke (1993) point out that a significant percentage of interruptions in interaction may not be disruptive or dominance-related. Interruption, on the other hand, can be supportive and cooperative. With interruptions, speakers can work out a topic or a story together and produce a shared meaning. In other words, interruption may function to signal and promote solidarity between speakers (James and Clarke 1993). It is a way to indicate that one

is interested in, enthusiastic about, and highly involved in the conversation by providing feedback, information or elaboration on the current speaker's topic (Coon and Schwanenflugel 1996). Coates (1989) finds that comments and questions are often uttered with another speaker's talk, yet they are signs of active listening rather than attempts to 'grab the floor.' Moreover, interruption can function constructively in rescuing and promoting group discussion (Hung, Brooke and Dunne 1995). In many cases, it serves as a healthy, functional and confirming communicative role (Kennedy and Camden 1983).

In addition to being disruptive or collaborative, interruptions can sometimes be neutral, not being particularly associated with rapport nor constituting violations of the rights of others (James and Clarke 1993). For example, one might interrupt because of a problem with the communicative process, that is, one's failure in understanding what the speaker is saying. Under such a circumstance one may legitimately break in to ask for clarification. Similarly, certain types of situation require immediate speech, such as *Fire!* or *Don't touch, it's hot!*, and here the interruptions are appropriate. In addition, in a situation when A is explaining something to B, and in the middle of the explanation B gets A's point, it is also appropriate for B to interrupt A.

Interruption in child language has not been as much researched as that in adults' conversation; yet Dunn and Shatz (1989) provide great insights into this topic. Their study addresses the question of whether second-born young children attend to and understand the topic of talk which is not addressed to them by analyzing their intrusions into conversations between their mothers and older siblings. The results show that children become increasingly likely to take up opportunities to intervene in the course of the third year. They are obviously aware when they do not have their parents' attention and thus intrude to redirect parental attention and to show the desire to join the conversation. Their intrusions are likely to include new and relevant information, especially when the topic of the previous speaker's turn focuses on the child. Such new and relevant intrusions are most likely to be successful, that is, leading to a response. By providing new and relevant intrusions, children not only show their ability to bid for adults' attention but also prove their competence to trace and make contribution to the conversation. This observation is taken as evidence against the notion that children at age three are egocentric, that is, having difficulties grasping the interests and the perspectives of others (Piaget 1926).

In terms of power asymmetry between children and parents, Gleason (1987:197) finds that children's lack of power is shown by the fact that their speaking turns are more often interrupted by their parents. In terms of gender differences, Gleason and Greif (1983) report that fathers overall are more likely to interrupt their children than

mothers are, and both mothers and fathers are in general more likely to interrupt the speech of daughters than that of sons. In addition to gender, age is another crucial factor. Ervin-Tripp (1979) notes that the younger the child who intrudes, the more likely are the interruptions to be ignored because the young child seems too slow to follow what is being said by adults and is repetitious and unable to get attention. Besides, small children are interrupted more than are older children or adults due to the fact that the speech of small children is more repetitious and more predictable, that is, less newsworthy, than that of older speakers. However, it is found that by three or four years, children have developed the ability to repair when being interrupted by repeating the overlapped portions (McTear 1985).

As indicated above, little research has been done focusing on how children interrupt in conversation. Even less is known about Mandarin-speaking children's interruptions. Children's interruptions, however, reveal an important aspect of children's linguistic and communicative competence. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate Mandarin-speaking children's as well as their mothers' interruptions in natural mother-child conversation.

2. Methods

2.1 Subjects and data

The data analyzed in this study were natural conversations, which were collected in 2001, involving two mother-child dyads. One of the children was a boy and the other a girl; both of the children were the firstborns in the family. The boy was three years seven months old and the girl three years four months old at the time of observation. Both of the mothers had college educations. The interactions between the two mother-child dyads included various activities, such as book reading, playing with toys, role plays, and games, which were all taking place at their own homes. The interactions were video- and audio-recorded; a total of about six hours of recording was collected. The data were later transcribed following the CHAT convention (Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcriptions, see the Appendix).

2.2 Analytical framework

Interruptions can be disruptive, supportive or simply neutral. However, the interpretation of interruptions is "not a black-and-white matter, but rather a matter of degree" (James and Clarke 1993:241). Goldberg (1990) therefore classifies interruptions along the power-rapport continuum and provides a means for assessing

the meaning of each interruption. Based on Goldberg's model, the nature of each mother's and child's interruption is examined to see if they tend to be more power-oriented, rapport-oriented or neutral.

- a. "Power-oriented interruptions" are generally heard as impolite, intrusive and inappropriate, conveying the interrupter's aggression, dislike, or apathy towards the interrupted speaker or the talk at hand. They are concomitantly treated as an act of conflict or non-involvement; they are off-topic or re-introducing topics, which contain few (if any) coherent-cohesive ties with the interrupted utterance.
- b. "Rapport-oriented interruptions" are generally understood as expressions of empathy, solidarity, or interest. They are viewed as acts of collaboration in that they encourage and contribute to the development of the talk by providing the interruptee with immediate feedback, filling in informational gaps, elaborating on the interruptee's topic or theme, inserting evaluative comments, or requesting the speaker to supply more remarks. Moreover, rapport-oriented interruptions hold "moves"¹ and stay on-topic.
- c. "Neutral interruptions" are those which address the immediate needs of the communicative situation. They may elicit a repair, repeat, or clarification of the interrupted utterance; or they may address an externally impinging event/issue which requires immediate attention before the conversation continues. Once completed, the discourse returns to its pre-interruption state by allowing the interrupted speaker to continue where s/he left off. Moreover, neutral interruptions may break in on an explanation, indicating that the interrupter has understood the point.

In addition to Goldberg's assessment of the types of interruptions, we also followed Dunn and Shatz's (1989) methodology to further investigate the semantic relations between the children's interruptions and the conversational discourse.² By doing so, we may understand better the children's linguistic development and their communicative competence, that is, at age three whether they are capable of being effective conversationalists to attend to the topics talked about and make contributions to the topics in their interruptions.

¹ "Moves" are the coherent-cohesive "fit" of the interrupting utterance with the interrupted utterance.

² Unlike Dunn and Shatz's research which investigates the child's interruptions in a multi-speaker interaction, the present study explores this phenomenon in a simpler structure, namely, the interaction between one parent and one child. Therefore, among the six categories which Dunn and Shatz propose, only three are adopted in this study.

- a. “Relevance”³: the child’s interruption is coded as (a) “relevant” if it is semantically related to the immediately preceding utterance of the adult’s, or (b) “semi-relevant” if it is only relevant to the child’s own previous turns but irrelevant to the adult’s. It is coded as (c) “not relevant” if it is an unrelated idea.
- b. “Information status”: the information in the child’s interruption is coded as (a) “new” if it contains new information which is not mentioned in all preceding conversational turns. The turn is coded as (b) “old” if it is essentially a repetition or a recast of previous information. .
- c. “Success”: the child’s interruption is coded as (a) “successful” if the adult answers the child directly or makes reference to the child’s interruption in the next speaker turn, or as (b) “unsuccessful” when the interruption is simply ignored, failing to draw the adult’s attention. .

Since an interruption is supposed to take over the floor and result in cutting off the turn of the interruptee, leaving his/her turn unfinished, the targets of investigation in this present study are simple interruptions and silent interruptions. Overlaps and butting-in interruptions are not taken into consideration because in the former the interruptee does not relinquish the floor and in the latter the interrupter fails to get the floor.

3. Results and discussion

In the mother-child conversations examined, a total number of 82 interruptions were identified, including 47 mother-to-child interruptions and 35 child-to-mother interruptions. The ratios of the interruption numbers to the total utterance numbers are listed in Table 1, showing that the children produced interruptions slightly more frequently in their conversations than their mothers did.

Table 1. Ratios of the interruption numbers to the utterance numbers

	interruption number	utterance number	percentage
Mothers	47	7,265	0.65%
Children	35	4,366	0.80%
TOTAL	82	11,631	0.71%

³ The purpose for examining the children’s interruptions in terms of “relevance”, “information status” and “success” was to investigate the children’s interruptions in relation to conversational coherency from the perspectives of linguistic and communicative development (Dunn and Shatz 1989 and Huang 2004). Thus, the mother-to-child interruptions were not analyzed here.

3.1 Rapport-oriented, power-oriented or neutral

Table 2 presents the numbers and percentages of the different types of interruptions made by the mothers and the children. As seen in the table, the mothers produced relatively more rapport-oriented interruptions than other types of interruptions: out of the 47 instances of interruptions, 25 (53.1%) interruptions were rapport-oriented, 18 (38.2%) interruptions were more related to power, and 4 (8.5%) were neutral. The children, like the mothers, also used more rapport-oriented interruptions than other types of interruptions: out of the 35 instances of interruptions, 18 (51.4%) interruptions were rapport-oriented, 14 (40%) interruptions were power-oriented and 3 (8.6%) were neutral.

Table 2. Nature of the mothers’ and the children’s interruptions

	Mothers		Children	
	token	percentage	token	Percentage
Rapport-oriented	25	53.1%	18	51.4%
Power-oriented	18	38.2%	14	40.0%
Neutral	4	8.5%	3	8.6%
TOTAL	47	100%	34	100%

It appeared that the distributional pattern of the nature of the mothers’ interruptions was very similar to that of the children’s interruptions. Both produced more rapport-oriented interruptions than power-oriented ones, indicating that in mother-child conversation, instead of competing for speaking turns and topic control, both parties tended to be cooperative in constructing a shared topic or supportive in showing interest and involvement.

3.1.1 Mother-to-child interruptions

3.1.1.1 Rapport-oriented interruptions

The mothers’ rapport-oriented interruptions often served the function of collaboration; that is, the mother and the child jointly constructed a proposition, as shown in the following example.

- (1) *CHI: 我有鐵門關起來.
- *MOT: 爲什麼?

- *CHI: 因為 [I] 因為沒有+/.⁴
→ *MOT: 沒有關起來喔.
CHI: I closed the iron gate.
MOT: Why?
CHI: Because (it) wasn't +/.
MOT: (It) wasn't closed.

In the above example, the mother's interrupting turn stayed on-topic. With the shared background knowledge the mother predicted what the child was going to say and interrupted and finished the utterance for him. In other words, via the interruption the mother and the child collaborated to produce a complete utterance and a shared meaning. Hence, the interruption here is supportive and cooperative.

Furthermore, the mother may interrupt to provide immediate evaluative comments on what the child has just said, as in Example (2).

(2) (The child was counting numbers.)

- *MOT: 喔還有呢?
*CHI: +, 五六七+/.
→ *MOT: 哇 -: 怎麼這麼棒!
*MOT: 你怎麼這麼棒!
*CHI: +, 一二三四五六七.
MOT: And then?
CHI: Five six seven +/.
MOT: Wow! You are great!
MOT: You are great!
CHI: One two three four five six seven.

Being interrupted by a complimentary comment, the child in (2) was encouraged to continue his activity; the mother's comment was a sign of active listening, which did not compete for the floor nor change the topic.

The mothers' rapport-oriented interruptions could also serve to show acknowledgement of the children's utterances or to show acceptance of the children's proposals beforehand. In Examples (3) and (4), based on the common ground the mother anticipated what the child was about to utter and thus cut off her turn with the *okay*. In (4), after the *okay* the mother further completed the child's previous unfinished interrupted turn. Such immediate feedback, as in Examples (3) and (4), facilitated and supported the children's speech.

⁴ +/. symbolizes interruption. For a more detailed CHAT format, see the Appendix.

- (3) *CHI: 我現在要看一個 +/.
- *MOT: 好 # 來.
- CHI: Now I want to see +/.
- MOT: Ok, let's do it.
- (4) *CHI: 我要你救+/.
- *MOT: 好 # 我去救公主啊啊你要自己 <先出來> [?] 我幫你救公主啊.
- CHI: I want you to rescue +/.
- MOT: Ok, I will rescue the princess; you need to come out first, and I will help you rescue the princess.

In addition to signaling acceptance beforehand, the mother's rapport-oriented interruptions could also be used to express refusal, as shown in Example (5). In this example, the mother and the child were engaged in a game. During the game, the child intended to sell the building blocks to the mother. The mother did not wait until the child finished the turn to reject this proposal. The rejection demonstrated the mother's active listening and high involvement, as shown in her prediction of the child's intention and her response in advance.

- (5) *CHI: 那個 # <積木> [/] 積木 +/.
- *MOT: 不要我要買電動車啊.
- CHI: That block, block +/.
- MOT: No, I want to buy the motor car.

In Example (6), the mother interrupted to pose a question which requested the child to supply more information. This interruption was deemed rapport-oriented because it revealed that the mother was involved in and interested in the child's speech. Through responding to the mother's elicitation, the child made elaboration on the topic. Therefore, the mother's interruption helped the development of the shared topic.

- (6) *CHI: +^ 這是他的爸爸 [% picking a large piece of color paper] +/.
- *MOT: 那爸爸是哪一張呢?
- *CHI: 這一張 [% lifting the largest one] .
- CHI: This is his daddy +/.
- MOT: Which one is the daddy?
- CHI: This one.

It is evident that all the mothers' interruptions above show listener-ship, joint

attention, and high involvement because only with active listening could the mothers anticipate what the children were going to say and thus make comments, provide quick answers, or request more information in their interruptions. Therefore, these interruptions were essentially supportive and cooperative.

3.1.1.2 Power-oriented interruptions

Power-oriented interruptions are defined as interruptions that change conversational topics and contain few coherent-cohesive ties with the interrupted utterance. However, in examining the mothers' interruptions, it was discovered that there were only a few cases in which the proposition of the mother's interruption was utterly off-topic, irrelevant to that of the child's turn. In other words, along the continuum of power-rapport interruption, the mothers' interruptions were not situated at the extreme power-oriented end; they seldom drastically introduced a new topic. However, the disruption and disregard of the children's utterances could still be perceived in the mothers' interruptions, and these were categorized as power-oriented interruptions.

The mothers' power-oriented interruptions were often found to be questions, especially test questions, which were used by the mothers to control the development of the conversation. Such questions could be used as pedagogical tools to elicit performance from the children, to teach them knowledge about the world, and to enhance their language development. Such a phenomenon is illustrated in the following example.

- (7) *MOT: 這個是什麼?
*CHI: e # <這個也可以> [/] 這個也可以+/.
→ *MOT: 這個是什麼?
*CHI: 這個也可以 +/.
→ *MOT: 那叫什麼?
*CHI: 不知道..
MOT: What's this?
CHI: Eh! This can also [/] this can also +/.
MOT: What's this?
CHI: This can also +/.
MOT: What's that called?
CHI: I don't know.

In Example (7), the same question *What is this?* was repeated twice and it was not

a real question which sought information the mother did not know. Instead, it was a didactic question which aimed to teach the child to do labeling. However, the first attempt failed to elicit an answer, so the mother interrupted the child's utterance which did not directly respond to the question. The second attempt failed as well so another interruption occurred. Finally at the third time the mother got the answer: *I don't know*. Interruptions under such circumstances could be "tangential markers" (Kennedy and Camden 1983) that functioned to bring the tangential or irrelevant utterances back to the right topic.

The mothers' power-oriented interruptions could also serve the function of getting and redirecting the children's attention, as seen in the following example.

(8) (The child was playing with a toy plane and throwing it forward.)

*CHI: ## 那飛機+/.

→ *MOT: 媽媽告訴你喔.

*CHI: /m/.

*MOT: 這個船喔+...

*MOT: 可以開喔.

CHI: That plane +/.

MOT: Let me tell you something.

CHI: /m/.

MOT: This boat...

MOT: It can be sailed.

In Example (8), the mother's interruption *Let me tell you something* drew the child's attention to focus on what she was going to say. By doing so, the mother terminated the child's undesirable behavior of playing with a toy airplane alone in the corner of the living room, and redirected his attention to what the mother preferred.

There are other situations in which the mothers may ignore the children's utterances and interrupt them. In the following example, the mother and the child were competing for speaking turns during the mother's story-reading.

(9) *MOT: 他說他長的好奇怪喔一點都不可愛.

*MOT: 還有其他有人就說啊+...

*CHI: 這一點都 <不可愛> [>].

*MOT: <對啊 -: > [<] 是啊 [/] 是啊.

*CHI: 媽媽 -: <這一點都> [>] +/.

→ *MOT: <其他都說> [<] <對啊是啊> [>].

*CHI: <這一點都> [<] +/.

- *MOT: 對啊 [/] 對啊.
*CHI: 媽媽+...
*CHI: 這兩個都不可愛.
*MOT: 喔不可愛,, 是嗎?
MOT: He says he looks strange and is not lovely at all.
MOT: Some also say...
CHI: It's not lovely at all.
MOT: Right. Yes, yes.
CHI: Mom! It's not +/.
MOT: The others say right, yes.
CHI: It's not +/.
MOT: Yes, yes.
CHI: Mom...
CHI: The two aren't lovely.
MOT: Oh, they aren't lovely, are they?

In Example (9), the mother was reading the lines from a story book. After her first two utterances, the child provided a comment. However, the child's feedback was in the middle of the mother's story reading, so she ignored his remark and kept on reading, which led to overlaps and interruptions. It was not until the mother had finished reading the lines on that page that she finally accepted and responded to the child's remark, as seen in the last utterance of the example. By ignoring and interrupting the child's talk, the mother might send a message to the child that 'although your remark is relevant to the story, it will not be appropriate until I finish my lines'. It appears that interruptions could be used to teach children the principles of turn-taking; that is, speaking at an inappropriate time may result in interruption.

The interruptions discussed in this section are very different from those in the previous section in nature and function. They are no longer a sign of active listening and involvement; instead, the mothers' power and dominance can be detected from these interruptions. For example, interruptive questions were employed by the mothers to control the development of the conversation and to teach the children about world knowledge. In other situations, disruptive interruptions may redirect the children's attention to a new topic or instruct them about the principles of turn-taking. These mothers' interruptions all showed apathy and non-involvement towards the children's interrupted utterances.

3.1.1.3 Neutral interruptions

Neutral interruptions are non-relational. Their occurrence has nothing to do with wielding power or showing rapport. Instead, they are interruptive requests for clarification, which elicit repairs and solve communicative problems so that understanding can be guaranteed, or they may address an externally impinging event which requires immediate attention.

In our data, only 4 instances of neutral interruptions were identified and all of them served to deal with externally emergent events. In Examples (10) and (11), the baby sister's action drew the mother's attention and required the mother's immediate reaction. Thus the mother interrupted the child's ongoing utterance and focused her attention on the baby sister.

- (10) *MOT: 真的喔我們要畫形狀 xxx 是形狀.
 *CHI: 我要畫 -: 我要 <畫 -: 我要畫一個> [>] +/.
- *MOT: <哇哇哇> [<] 啊你把它打開來啦 [= speaking to SIS].
 MOT: Really? Let's draw the shape of xxx.
 CHI: I want to draw...I want to draw... I want to draw one +/.
- (11) *CHI: 好多圓形好多 +/.
- %sit: SIS starts crying again.
- *MOT: xx 可以了 [= speaking to SIS].
 *MOT: 不行不行 [= speaking to SIS].
 *MOT: 來來 [= speaking to SIS].
 *MOT: 還有呢還有哪些是圓形?
 CHI: So many circles +/.
- MOT: xx is fine.
 MOT: No no!
 MOT: Come here.
 MOT: And then? What else are circles?

Since in neutral interruptions, the interrupters simply addressed the externally urgent events but had no intention to grab the floor and control the conversation, it naturally followed that once the incidents had been taken care of, the interrupted discourse could return to its pre-interruption state. Such a situation can be observed in Example (11), in which the mother transferred her attention back to the child and continued to talk about the interrupted topic after handling the baby sister.

3.1.2 Child-to-mother interruptions

3.1.2.1 Rapport-oriented interruptions

In Example (1), we have seen that the mother would employ interruptions to jointly construct a proposition with the child. It was found that the children were also capable of using interruptions to serve the collaboration function, as shown in Example (12). In the example, the mother and the child were role-playing.

- (12) *CHI: 那醫生不要不要給妳看了啦.
*MOT: 好啊 那怎麼辦 那醫生 +/-
→ *CHI: 醫生要睡覺了.
CHI: Then the doctor won't won't check on you.
MOT: Alright, then what should we do? The doctor +/-
CHI: The doctor is going to sleep.

In this example, the child cut off the mother's turn, took over the floor and finished the utterance. The topic remained the same and the cohesive ties were held. That is, through the interruption the child and the mother collaborated to produce a complete proposition. Therefore, the child's interruption manifested the ability to track and understand the topic talked about and to make a contribution to the conversation. However, while the mother may seek confirmation from the child to check if the meaning she conveyed in the interruption accorded with what the child had in mind⁵, as shown in Example (1), this was not observed in the child's interruptions. In other words, despite the fact that both the mother and the child would use interruptions to jointly construct complete utterances, it appeared that the child did it in a more egocentric way.

In addition to collaboration, the children's rapport-oriented interruptions could also be used to show involvement in the current activity, as shown in the following example.

- (13) *MOT: 喔好那我們來坐 -: 火車去救公主好不好?
*CHI: 好!
*MOT: 火車找火車啊
*MOT: 看誰的 +/-
→ *CHI: 火車 [% CHI 找到火車]!

⁵ An utterance final particle or a tag question may be added to the interruptions by the mothers to seek confirmation and give back the speaking turn.

- MOT: Oh. Ok, then we take the train to rescue the princess, alright?
 CHI: Ok!
 MOT: The train, look for the train.
 MOT: See who +/.
 CHI: The train!

In Example (13), the mother and the child were searching for a toy train in order to continue their play. In the middle of the mother's utterance, the child interrupted to declare her finding with excitement. The child's interruption was not only a sign of her ability to track the topic but also a revelation of her joint attention, high involvement and interest in the interaction with the mother.

As in the mothers' interruptions, request for more information is another function of the children's rapport-oriented interruptions. In the following example, the mother was assembling toy trains and tracks. The child interrupted the mother's turn and asked for information. With this interruptive question, the child revealed his interest in the activity the mother was engaged in.

- (14) *CHI: 媽媽你幹嘛把他拆掉?
 *MOT: 我現在要接啊.
 *MOT: 接車+/.
 → *CHI: 媽媽那爲什麼把 [] 把他拆掉再接啊?
 CHI: Mom, why did you disassemble it?
 MOT: I am assembling it now.
 MOT: Assembling the car +/.
 CHI: Mom, why did you disassemble it and then reassemble it?

3.1.2.2 Power-oriented interruptions

It has been mentioned that the mothers rarely ended the previous common topic abruptly and introduced a new one in their power-oriented interruptions. However, in comparison with the mothers' power-oriented interruptions, the children's appeared to be more direct and intrusive in indicating their intent to end a topic/activity. Consider the following example. The mother and the child were playing with numeral-shaped magnets.

- (15) *MOT: 你先講對 [] 你先講對再來.
 *CHI: 變魔術.
 *MOT: 好那給你自己+/.

- *CHI: 我不要跟你玩了 [% going away from MOT and lying on the sofa] .
MOT: You should answer it right; you should answer it right first.
CHI: [I'll] play a magic.
MOT: Ok, then you yourself +/.
CHI: I don't want to play with you anymore.

In the example, the child employed an interruption to express his unwillingness to continue the activity, which he already felt bored with. This phenomenon is accordant with Hsu's (2000) observation that children younger than five would often interrupt others whenever they feel the present topic boring. Therefore the child had manifested the ability to use an interruption to control the progress of the interaction and to behave as an active participant in the conversation by revealing his dislike for a topic with an effective means.

Besides using interruptions to directly terminate the current activities, the children also used interruptions to express their boredom or impatience toward a topic in a milder way: to change the current topic to something they found more interesting. Such a situation can be demonstrated in the following example.

- (16) (The mother was hurrying the child to answer a question concerning number recognition.)
*MOT: 快一點.
*MOT: 你先 [/] 你先+/.
→ *CHI: 變啊.
*CHI: 變魔術喔.
*MOT: +^ 好你先說.
*CHI: 變魔術喔.
MOT: Hurry up.
MOT: You first [/] you first +/.
CHI: I'll perform.
CHI: I'll perform a magic trick.
MOT: Ok, you tell me first.
CHI: I'll perform a magic trick.

The mother in the example was being didactic, making the child recognize numerals via playing with numeral-shaped magnets. However, the learning and practicing process gradually wore out the child's interest and attentiveness, so he interrupted the mother's request for performance and focused on what he considered more interesting: the child transformed the magnets from tools for learning into tools

for performing a magic trick. However, such going astray could not last long. After several turn exchanges, the mother, as the dominator of the interaction, redirected the child's attention back to the learning and practicing after the child's magic show.

Sometimes, the children's power-oriented interruptions resulted from being interrupted earlier and attempting to grab the floor back, as shown in Example (17).

- (17) *MOT: <全部都去> [<] 去中央大學啊?
 → *CHI: +^ 他要 +/.
 *MOT: 去別的地方啊.
 *MOT: 你看他這個 +/.
 → *CHI: 他(/2) 要去找小朋友.
 *CHI: # 他要去中央大學找小朋友.
 MOT: All go to the Central University?
 CHI: He's +/.
 MOT: Why not go to somewhere else?
 MOT: See, he's +/.
 CHI: He he's going to find the kids there.
 MOT: He's going to find the kids there.

During the play, the mother and the child were discussing where the boat was heading, and in the middle of the child's utterance the mother broke in to make a suggestion. Though being interrupted, the child did not relinquish his intention to speak; instead, he interrupted the mother's talk afterwards and resumed his unfinished utterance. As McTear (1985) points out, by three or four years, children have developed the ability to repair when interrupted via repetition. This child at age three not only repaired his interrupted utterance by resuming and repeating it later on but also actively interrupted the mother and grabbed the floor back.

3.1.2.3 Neutral interruptions

It has been mentioned previously that when A is explaining something to B and in the middle of the explanation B gets the point, it is appropriate for B to interrupt A. B's interruption is regarded as neutral because it does not involve power or rapport. Such a situation can be observed in the children's interruptions, as shown in the following example.

- (18) *MOT: 你去拿張衛生紙放在這裡.
 *CHI: /hm/ ?

- *MOT: 你去拿一張衛生紙 <放在> [>] +/.
- *CHI: <好啦> [<].
- MOT: Go fetch tissue paper and put it here.
- CHI: What?
- MOT: You go fetch a piece of tissue paper and put +/.
- CHI: Alright.

In Example (18) the mother made a demand but the child did not get it at first. In order to solve the communicative problem, the mother repeated her request. However, in the middle of her repetition, the child broke in and responded to the request, showing his understanding. The child did not intend to take over the floor or control the discourse with interruption. The interruption occurred because the communicative problem no longer existed and the mother's repetition was not needed. The child, by cutting off the 'news-worthless' utterance, helped the conversation progress more efficiently.

3.2 Relevance, information status and success

An important aspect of children's communicative development is the ability to demonstrate conversational contingency and topic relatedness (Huang 2004). Thus, further analysis was conducted to examine the semantic relations between the children's interruptions and the conversational discourse in terms of relevance, information status and success from the perspectives of linguistic and communicative development (Dunn and Shatz 1989). The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Table 3, which displays the token and percentage distribution of the total 35 child interruptions. The table shows that the children's interruptions were most likely, over 80% of chances, to be relevant, new and successful in the three categories, respectively.

Table 3. Child’s interruption in terms of relevance, information status and success

		token	percentage
Relevance	Relevant	28	80.0%
	Semi-relevant	5	14.3%
	Not relevant	2	5.7%
TOTAL		35	100%
Information status	New	31	88.6%
	Old	4	11.4%
TOTAL		35	100%
Success	Successful	29	82.9%
	Unsuccessful	6	17.1%
TOTAL		35	100%

3.2.1 Relevance

To relate one’s own utterance to the preceding utterance of another speaker appropriately and in a semantically related way is an essential component of conversational skills, but is a later-emerging ability in children’s linguistic development. They acquire this important ability of topic relatedness with difficulty and over a long period of time (Ninio and Snow 1996). Therefore, analyzing the children’s interruptions in respect of relevance can help us understand if the children at age three are capable of achieving topic relatedness in their interruptions.

The following example displays a “relevant” interruption. In the example, the mother asked the child to drink some water after having some sweets.

- (19) *MOT: 喝點水吧.
 *MOT: 因爲你吃了這麼多糖果沒有喝水.
 *MOT: 吃完糖果要怎麼樣?
 *MOT: # 要喝水,, 對不對?
 *MOT: # 要不要喝水?
 *MOT: 那你如果吃+/.
 → *CHI: 我吃一個糖果然後喝水.
 MOT: Have some water.
 MOT: Because you have eaten so many candies but haven’t drunk any water.
 MOT: What should you do after having candies?
 MOT: Drink some water, right?
 MOT: Do you want some water?

MOT: If you eat +/-.

CHI: I eat one candy and then drink water.

The mother's first few utterances all aimed at having the child drink some water; however, before she could finish her conditional clause which was another paraphrase of the same message, the child interrupted and expressed his understanding. This semantically related interruption was a relevant interruption. Such interruptions occupied the majority of the children's interruptions: 28 out of 35, or 80%. This indicated that the children at age three possess the ability to relate their own utterances to the preceding utterances of another speaker appropriately.

In other situations, the children's interruptions were primarily related to their own previous turns but irrelevant to the mothers'. These were "semi-relevant" interruptions. In Example (19) the mother was guiding the child to write numbers.

- (20) *MOT: <好四呢> [>] ?
*CHI: <因爲是> [<] 他的爸爸媽媽。
*MOT: 喔他是他的爸爸媽媽喔 - : .
*CHI: /m/ .
*MOT: 好四+/.
→ *CHI: 這是爸爸+...
*CHI: 這媽媽。
MOT: OK, how about four?
CHI: Because these are his mom and dad.
MOT: Oh, his mom and dad.
CHI: /m/ .
MOT: Ok, how about four +/-.
CHI: That's the dad.
CHI: And that's mom.

In addition to number writing, the child extended this topic to talk about the relationship between numbers. It appeared that the mother and the child had different topic focuses and competed for the topic control. Therefore, the child's interruption was primarily related to his own previous utterances but not relevant to the mother's utterances. Such "semi-relevant" interruptions were not common in our data: 5 out of 35, taking up 14.3%.

The following example, which we have seen earlier, represents a "non-relevant" interruption. The mother was teaching the child to recognize numbers via playing with number-shaped magnets:

- (16) *MOT: 快一點.
 *MOT: 你先 [/] 你先+/.
 → *CHI: 變啊.
 *CHI: 變魔術喔.
 *MOT: +^ 好你先說.
 *CHI: 變魔術喔.
 MOT: Hurry up.
 MOT: You first [/] you first +/.
 CHI: I'll perform.
 CHI: I'll perform a magic trick.
 MOT: Ok, you tell me first.
 CHI: I'll perform a magic trick.

When the mother asked the child to answer what number it was, she was interrupted by the child's sudden claim of performing a magic trick. However, the interruption was semantically unrelated to the previous topic; that is, the child's intention of performing a magic trick was unrelated to the number-learning game they had been engaged in. Hence, this was a non-relevant interruption. The number of such semantically unrelated interruptions was very small: 2 out of 35, occupying only 5.7%.

3.2.2 Information status

Although the provision of topic related utterances is an essential component of conversational skills, it will still be impossible to develop a conversation successfully if children fail to provide new information. Since an interruption cuts off the turn of another speaker and takes over the floor, important or urgent new information is expected to be revealed in the interruption. So if a child fails to provide new information in his/her interruption, there may be a higher chance that the interruption would fail to get attention. It has been suggested that the younger the child who interrupts, the more likely are the interruptions to be ignored because of the repetitious nature of the interruptions (Ervin-Tripp 1979:399).

In Example (21), the mother said she was going to draw bananas for the child, and then the child interrupted and asked for cherries to be drawn as well. In this case, the child's interruption elaborated and expanded the content of the previous turn and added new information to the topic.

- (21) *MOT: 媽媽幫你畫香蕉.
*MOT: 畫這個香蕉是 +/.
→ *CHI: 還要畫櫻桃喔.
*MOT: 好.
MOT: I'll draw you bananas.
MOT: The bananas will be +/.
CHI: Will you also draw cherries?
MOT: Ok.

It was found in our data that the children's interruptions which contained new information took up 88.6% of interruptions, revealing that at age three, the children were already capable of making contributions to the conversation by providing new information.

In contrast, in Example (22) below, the child's interruption contained "old" information because it was simply a repetition of his previous utterance.

- (22) *MOT: 好我們再來玩一次.
*CHI: +^ 你眼+//.
*CHI: 你眼睛閉起來.
*MOT: 喔 -: +//.
*MOT: 不要.
*MOT: 我(/2) 我給你 [/] 我給你玩.
*MOT: 來我媽媽藏 [/] 我媽+/.
→ *CHI: 你眼睛閉起來.
*MOT: 糖果躲貓貓快點 [/] 快點+...
MOT: Let's play one more time.
CHI: Your eyes +//.
CHI: Close your eyes.
MOT: Oh +//.
MOT: No.
MOT: I'll I'll play with you.
MOT: Mother will hide mother +/.
CHI: Close your eyes.
MOT: Candy, hide and seek, hurry [/] hurry ...

In Example (22), the child made a request to the mother to close her eyes but the request was rejected. The child repeated the request again via interruption. Although the interruptive self-repetition highlighted the child's intent, the interruption was

ignored by the mother.

3.2.3 Success

Two possible situations may occur after a child's interruption. First, the interruption may successfully get the mother's attention, being answered directly, and reference is made to it in the speaker turn. Or it may simply be ignored without receiving any response. By observing the children's successful and unsuccessful interruptions, we can see in what ways the mothers accepted and responded to the children's interruptions, and under what situations the mothers chose to ignore them.

Examples (23)-(24) below exhibit successful interruptions. It was found that the recognition of the child's interruption by the mother was often realized by repeating the whole or part of the child's interruption: over 40% of the successful interruptions in our data involved repetition in the responses. This is because via repetition, one can not only show his/her participatory listener-ship and acceptance of other's utterance but also ratify other's contributions (Tannen 1989). Sometimes the repetition might be accompanied by an utterance final particle, as in (23), or with a tag question, as in (24) to seek confirmation from the child.

- (23) *MOT: 好了他們就要趕快回家囉 趕快跑回家囉 xx 半夜 +/-
 *CHI: 我們就坐坐那個 坐坐坐坐那個 飛機載他們回家.
 → *MOT: +^ 喔 要坐飛機載他們回家呀.
 MOT: Ok, they will hurry home, run home in a hurry xx midnight +/-
 CHI: We'll take take that, take take take that plane to send them home.
 MOT: Oh, take the plane to send them home.
- (24) *MOT: 會害怕是嗎?
 *MOT: # 那 <你> [>] +/-
 *CHI: # <要> [<] 要大人陪.
 → *MOT: 要大人陪,, 是不是?
 MOT: Are you afraid?
 MOT: Then you +/-
 CHI: I need an adult to accompany me.
 MOT: An adult to accompany you, right?

The second common device the mothers used to ratify the children's interruptions was a single word acknowledgement *hao* 'OK', occupying more than 20% of the responses to the successful interruptions. Similar to the use of repetition, *hao* could also signal the mothers' listener-ship as well as acceptance of the children's

interruptions, as shown in Example (25) below and Example (21) above.

- (25) *CHI: 咬 <她> [= SIS] 的嘴巴 要咬她 要咬她咬她.
*MOT: 好 那就 +/.
*CHI: 咬她.
→ *MOT: 好 # 好.
CHI: Bite her mouth, bite her bite her.
MOT: Ok, then +/.
CHI: Bite her.
MOT: Alright, Ok.

Unsuccessful child interruptions are overall rare in our data, 6 out of 35, or 17.1%. With only these limited cases, it was found that the reasons leading to the mothers' disregard of these interruptions seemed elusive. However, by observing certain examples, we might be able to get a glimmer of it. Consider the following example in which the mother, the child and the baby sister were playing with jigsaw puzzles together.

- (26) *CHI: 啊 xx 我不要拼 我不要拼了 不要跟妳們玩了.
*MOT: 啊 那 <我們> [= referring to MOT and SIS] +/.
*CHI: 我不要跟妹妹玩了!
→ *MOT: +, 我們來拼 好 這個 xx xx 的耳朵在這裡.
*SIS: 這裡!
CHI: Ah xx! I don't want to play. I don't want to play. I don't want to play with you anymore.
MOT: Ah, then let's +/.
CHI: I don't want to play with sister.
MOT: Let's play. Ok, this xx xx ear is right here.
SIS: Here!

In the example, the child was aggravated by her younger sister's participation in the game, so she repeatedly claimed that she did not want to play with the mother and the sister anymore. Her complaint even interrupted the mother's utterance. However, it appeared that such willful uncooperative behavior was dispreferred, so the mother chose to ignore it and resumed her interrupted utterance and continued to play with the sister.

Example (22), which we have seen earlier, presents another child interruption which failed to get attention. The unsuccessful interruption *Close your eyes* was a

repeated request, and the initial one had been directly rejected by the mother. Although the child adopted the strategy of self-repetition to emphasize his intent, the mother simply ignored it, paying no attention at all. That is to say, without giving new information in the interruption, the child failed to get a response.

From the above examples, we can see that unsuccessful interruptions might result from old information of the children's interruptions or their undesirable behavior. On the other hand, the children's interruptions which included relevant and new information were likely to lead to attention getting.

4. Summary and conclusion

Earlier studies have reported that adults are more likely to interrupt children, assuming that the powerful one interrupts the less powerful one (Gleason 1987). However, the findings of this study showed that the mothers did not interrupt more than their children. In fact, the children may be even more likely to interrupt their mothers. This may result from the children's less compliance with the turn-taking principles and their inability to observe the transitional relevance places. Moreover, it was found that a greater proportion of the mothers' interruptions were related to rapport rather than power. Most of the mothers' interruptions resulted from active listening and high involvement, and resulted in encouragement and facilitation of the children's speech. The findings were in contrast to the view that interruptions manifest dominance and power (James and Clarke 1993) but were consistent with the view that interruptions can be supportive and cooperative (James and Clarke 1993). We may speculate that the mothers' interruption behaviors may also reflect the mothers' socio-economic status (SES). As pointed out by Romaine (2001), language use varies with social classes. It has been suggested that different SES parents interact with their children in different ways in book reading and free plays (Snow et al. 1976 and Hoff-Ginsberg 1991). For example, parents from the upper-middle class produce more open-ended questions and fewer yes/no questions than parents from low and lower-middle classes; in addition, parents from higher SES tend to use fewer directives (Snow et al. 1976). Thus, it is possible that the two mothers' more rapport-oriented style of interruptions was associated with the fact that both of the mothers were from the upper-middle class. However, since this can only be a speculation in this study, further research is needed to systematically investigate the relationship between parental interruption behaviors and social classes.

As for the children's interruptions, it was found that the children at age three also produced relatively more rapport-oriented interruptions. Like their mothers, the children would also use interruptions to collaboratively construct propositions with

their mothers or to request more information. However, the children also made power-oriented interruptions, in which the children may reveal their intent to discontinue the current topic or they may simply initiate a new topic.

In terms of relevance and information status, our findings showed that the children's interruptions were more likely to include relevant and new information, which indicated that the children at this stage were capable of tracking the current topic and making contributions to the conversation. Such interruptions were likely to succeed in getting the attention of and responses from the mothers. The ability to relate one's own utterance to the preceding utterance of the interlocutor contingently and in a topic-related way is an essential component of conversational skills and is an important task for language-learning children (Huang 2004). It has also been reported that the development of children's conversational skills can be characterized by an increasing ability to supply new information in order to maintain discourse topics (Bedrosian 1985). In this present study, it appeared that the children's ability to provide interruptions with relevant and new information demonstrated the children's communicative ability of topic management, and the skills of assessing the listener's perspectives and the new/given information status.

Despite all the findings, this study leaves room for improvement and further inquiry. First of all, the number of subjects and the tokens of interruptions were limited. Therefore, to better our understanding of interruption in Mandarin adult-child conversation, the access to a larger amount of data is needed. Moreover, as previous studies indicate, gender may have an effect on how often interruptions are made and how the interruptions are treated. Although the child subjects of this study included a boy and a girl, the number of interruptions in our data was not large enough to analyze the children's interruptions appropriately in terms of gender differences. Thus, further studies on the relationship between gender and interruption behaviors are needed in order to obtain a more complete picture of interruption in Mandarin adult-child conversation.

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Appendix

CHAT symbols

(adopted from MacWhinney, 1995)

.	period
?	question
!	exclamation
0	action without speech
„	tag question
-:	lengthening
+...	trailing off
+/.	Interruption
+,	self-completion
+^	quick uptake
#	pause
%sit	situation coding
[?]	best guess
[/]	retracting without correction
[//]	retracting with correction
[=]	explanation
[%]	comment on main line
[>] [<]	overlapping utterance
xxx/xx	unintelligible speech

漢語母子對話中打斷現象之研究

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本研究的目的為瞭解母子對話中的打斷現象，分析的語料來自於兩對以漢語為母語的母子對話，兩位小孩皆為三歲。首先，為瞭解母親與孩子打斷句之本質，我們採用 Goldberg (1990) 的分類來做判斷，結果顯示兩者在對談中皆大多使用 *rapport-oriented interruptions*，代表在母子對話中，兩方傾向在打斷句中表達對對方話語的興趣與投入，並藉由打斷來一同建立談話主題。再者，小孩的打斷句更進一步使用 Dunn and Shatz (1989) 的研究方法來分析其與對話言談的語意關連，結果發現小孩的打斷句大多包含了與之前相關並且新的訊息，而這類的打斷句是最有可能得到母親的注意與回應。

關鍵字：打斷現象、母子對話、語言習得