

A Study of Reported Speech by Preschool Japanese Children: Implications for Theory of Mind

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In this paper, we mainly analyze reported speech in Japanese narratives, which are told by 10 four-year-old Japanese children while reading a picture book (Berman & Slobin, 1994). In discussing the results, we also refer to the corresponding English-speaking children's narratives (Hickmann, 1993). As a conceptual framework, we draw on semiotic anthropology (Lucy, 1993) and theory of mind (ToM) (Astington, 2006; Naito, 2004; Perner et al., 2005). Our point is argue against a "linguistic determinist" position in which the development of metarepresentational abilities presupposes mastery of the syntax of complementation (e.g. "He thinks the chocolate is in the cupboard") (de Villiers, 2005). Against the determinism, we argue that metarepresentational abilities should not be simply measured by the degree of morpho-syntactic complexity.

Our empirical focus is on a "re-enacting mode" in Japanese discourse in which there is no explicit marker for reported speech (RS) as an "un-framed" type of quotation (Hickmann, 1993). In the literature on Anglo-American children, when they can structurally separate reported content from reporting context with framing devices such as verbs of saying, they are considered to be more "developed". Thus, the re-enacting mode, which shows no boundary between reporting context and reported content, is seen as "less developed".

Although our results are consistent with Hickmann's (1993), who found that there is a clear preference for the re-enacting mode and the descriptive mode in the four-year-old English-speaking children's narratives, we argue against the assumption that "the more formally explicit, the more developed". Specifically, we found that in Japanese, 34 tokens are instances of the re-enacting mode in 251 clauses. Considering that Japanese adults also use framing devices in RS less frequently than English-speaking adults, we argue that Japanese children's metarepresentational abilities are not "underdeveloped" just because of the lack of morpho-syntactic marking. Instead, the marking of Japanese reported speech is more contextually-oriented and less formally-explicit. Assuming that development in metarepresentational abilities is often implicit at the preschool stage and generally comparable across cultures (Naito, 2004), we support a "non-determinist" position in ToM (Perner et al., 2005). In conceptual terms, RS should be theorized as part of a multi-modal system with both functions of "intra-individual" representation and "inter-individual" communication (Astington, 2006).

In sum, we suggest that metarepresentational abilities should be measured from a semiotic perspective by taking the notion of "context" ecologically, which requires different kinds of data across languages and cultures.

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