

PARENTING IN WORDS: LANGUAGE, CULTURAL NORMS, AND PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION IN SINGAPORE

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Parent-child communication does more than convey information. Through everyday language, parents communicate expectations about how children should behave, what makes a “good” child, how authority should be exercised, and when children should be encouraged to express independent views. Yet common distinctions between “positive” and “negative” parenting communication are often derived from self-report survey constructs such as warmth, autonomy support, psychological control, or harshness. Much less is known about how these qualities of parent-child relationship are accomplished through language in realistic parent-child interactions, particularly within Asian and multilingual family contexts.

This project asks:

How do parents and children in Singapore use language to construct, negotiate, and respond to support, control, and culturally meaningful parenting norms in everyday interaction?

The project will investigate the features through which different forms of parenting communication are expressed. These may include directives, questions, explanations, expressions of agreement and disagreement, expressions of approval and disapproval, moral and normative language, and linguistic strategies that invite or constrain children’s participation. Rather than assuming that particular linguistic forms are inherently “positive” or “negative,” the project will examine how their meanings depend on conversational context, developmental stage, interpersonal dynamics, and culturally situated expectations concerning parental authority, respect, autonomy, and family relationships. By studying parenting as a form of culturally situated discourse, the project aims to provide a richer account of how family language both reflects and reproduces changing ideas about childhood, parenting, authority, and autonomy in contemporary Singapore.

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

The PhD student will undertake an interdisciplinary programme of research examining language use within parent-child interactions in Singapore. The student will work with existing and ongoing observational datasets while developing an independent programme of research at the intersection of language, culture, and developmental psychology.

The student will be expected to work with transcribed parent-child interactions to identify conversational features associated with key relational functions. Particular attention will be given to how multiple features operate together rather than treating individual words or constructions as inherently supportive or controlling.

The student will receive training in behavioral and discourse coding, reliability assessment, quantitative research methods, and statistical modelling. Depending on the student’s interests and background, the project may additionally incorporate computational approaches to text and video analysis.

Importantly, the student will have scope to develop a more specialized dissertation direction within the broader project. The dissertation project will combine close analysis of naturally occurring language with quantitative developmental research, allowing the student to contribute

both a substantive account of Singaporean family communication and methodological tools for studying parenting through language.