

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of the most flourishing fields in cognitive and developmental psychology in recent decades has been the study of child language development. As Fromkin and Rodman (1998) elucidate, young children, before the age of five, already master most of the complex grammar system and acquire the communicative competence. The rapidity of children's language development has fascinated scholars throughout centuries; observations made on language development open a window to the world of language mechanism and representation.

As the research paradigm of child language shifted away from the syntactic and phonological aspects to the pragmatic and discourse dimensions, researchers began to be aware of the significance of the development of extended discourse during the preschool years (Karmiloff-Smith, 1986). Prominent among these developmental issues is the development of narrative skills, for children before three years of age are able to narrate the past experience (Miller and Sperry, 1988; Sachs, 1983). Through narrative activities, children express themselves and build up connections with others; through narratives, they learn and develop linguistic as well as social skills. Accordingly, the significance of narrative development has been widely recognized, because it not only sheds light upon children's socialization and enculturation, but also has implications for their later literacy development and academic achievement in early grades (Gee, 1991; Miller et al., 1992; Miller et al., 1997; Snow, 1983, 1991; Chang, 2000).

Narrative is not just one type of discourse, but a family of narrative genres, ranging from ongoing descriptions of everyday activities to lengthy fictional accounts. Genre is the means through which speakers both cognitively and linguistically

structure events in real-life and fictional contexts. As Wolf, Moreton and Camp (1994: 291) point out,

[G]enres are socially invented linguistic spaces that encourage different forms of human exchange, varying in the roles they suggest for speaker and listener, the amount of revelation they permit or forbid, and the way they open up or limit the range and intensity of emotion and/or intimacy carried by the act of narrating.

This line of reasoning relates narrative genre to the use of evaluative language in narrative discourse. Evaluative language plays an important part in the production of a narrative, which consists of the non-factual, perspective-building linguistic expression referring to emotion, attitude, belief and affect. It not only expresses the narrator's attitude, provides clues to help the listener to interpret the story, but makes the story more engaging and vivid.

Although some researchers have given attention to the development of evaluation in Mandarin-speaking children's narratives, they collect data from the tasks based on only one narrative genre: personal anecdote or fictional story. Given the assumption that children's narrative abilities follow different developmental paths, depending on the nature of the narrative activity (Shiro, 2003), and that different narrative tasks may trigger different kinds of language information, the present work tries to examine data from different narrative tasks covering different genres. Among various narrative genres, two genres, namely personal and fictional narratives, are of primary concern for the ease of comparing our findings with those from previous studies.

My focus is twofold. Quantitatively, this work aims to understand the effects of Age and Gender on the developmental pattern of evaluative language in

Mandarin-speaking preschoolers' narratives. In addition, the effects of different narrative tasks on preschoolers' use of evaluative language are also examined. Qualitatively, I try to explore the qualitative shifts in children's use of evaluative skills during the preschool years.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. The arrangement of these chapters is as follows. Chapter 1 is the introduction, highlighting the importance of research in narrative development, and presenting the purpose of the present study. Chapter 2 reviews related research on children's narrative development, and especially on evaluative language skills in narrative development. Chapter 3 addresses the methodology, including research questions, hypothesis, subjects, material, data collecting procedures, coding system, and data analysis. Chapter 4 reports and discusses the quantitative results of the experiments. Chapter 5 presents qualitative analyses of our findings. The last chapter summarizes the general conclusion, presents implications and limitations and offers suggestions for further research.