

## ABSTRACT

### Decontextualized Language Use in American and Chinese Caregiver-Child Interactions

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Decontextualized language (DL) refers to talk that is abstract or removed from the here and now, including recounting past events, envisioning future events, providing explanations, and pretense (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Snow, 1983). Caregivers' use of DL with toddlers and preschoolers is positively associated with children's later language development in American families (Demir et al., 2005; Rowe, 2012). These conversations also play an important role in early socialization (Heath, 1982). The limited work comparing caregiver-child DL across cultures has mostly focused on narratives about past events (e.g. Miller et al., 1997). However, little is known about cross-cultural similarities and differences in the amount and social functions of other types of DL, such as talk about future events. The current study compared American and Chinese caregivers' and children's use of DL and examined whether caregiver-child DL differs across cultures, and if so, how. Participants were 36 American families from the Northeast US and 40 Chinese families in North China. All caregivers had four-year-old children, were primarily middle-class, and were their children's primary caregivers. Parent-child dyads were asked to have a snack together as they normally would. The eight-minute snack time interactions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for DL. The findings also indicated cross-cultural similarities and differences in DL. Chinese and American dyads used a similar proportion of DL. Although the proportion of certain types of DL (e.g., past narratives) did not differ cross-culturally, there were clear cross-cultural differences in future talk. Specifically, a larger proportion of Chinese caregivers' and children's DL was about future events compared to that of their American counterparts. Further coding of future talk indicated that Chinese and American caregivers tend to use future talk for different functions. While American caregivers predominantly planed and elaborated on future events, Chinese caregivers were more likely to use future talk to *prepare* children for upcoming social interactions and events to ensure children behave in a socially desirable manner. Similarly, Chinese children were more likely to respond to caregivers' preparatory future talk than their American peers,  $p < .05$ . We argue that the divergent styles of future narratives reflected unique socialization goals in each culture.