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# Multimodality During Shared Book Reading in Japan and the United States*

Moeko WAGA OZAKI

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Japanese and American parents and their children use multimodal expressions when enacting during joint picture-book reading. An extensive amount of research has indicated that shared book reading contributes to language development, socio-emotional understanding, early literacy, and the transmission of cultural knowledge (Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2020; Hutton et al., 2015; De Jong & Leseman, 2001; Isbell et al., 2004). Due to these educational advantages, shared book reading is a common activity routinely performed among parents and children in literate cultures. Both Japanese and US parents have been reported to read to their children at least several times a week, regardless of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status (Hindman et al., 2013; Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2019; Benesse Educational Research and Development Institute, 2016).

During shared book reading, both parents and children frequently deviate from the text, discussing objects in the book and the characters' feelings. One of the most frequent interactions is pointing out certain objects in the book by labeling them, such as, "That's an *X*." Ninio and Bruner (1978) maintain that, when parents label items, they tend to adhere to a strict conversational format that helps children learn the social and conversational rules of having a dialogue. Based on a detailed analysis of video recordings of a Caucasian boy from a middle-class family who participated in shared book reading from eight to 18 months old, Ninio and Bruner found that the mother and child's turns almost completely alternated. Strikingly, the authors noted, "Turn-taking in book reading is nearly perfect from the start, only about 1% of the two participants' phases occurring simultaneously rather than alternately" (Ninio & Bruner, 1978, p. 6).

While Ninio and Bruner's findings are monumental, and their study continues to be cited as a fundamental linguistic study on shared book reading, many studies have since aimed to rectify the deficiencies of Ninio and Bruner's research, namely its basis on observations of a single mother-child dyad (Crane & Fernald, 2016; Duursma et al., 2008; Fernald & Morikawa,

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1993; Fletcher & Reese, 2005). More recent studies targeting a wider range of communities have revealed that ethnicity influences the outcome of parent-child conversations (e.g., Chan et al., 2009; Luo et al., 2012; Rochanavibhata & Marian, 2020). Minami (1994) found that US mothers tend to be more evaluative, request more information from their children, and allow their children to take longer turns. Fernald and Morikawa (1993) observed that, during free play, US mothers focus on object names (e.g., "That's a dog. Do you like it? She's got a collar."), whereas Japanese mothers emphasize practicing social routines more (e.g., *Hai dōzo. Chōdai. Arigatō.* 'Here you go. Give it to me. Thank you.'). Such studies contribute to overhauling the Western predominance in the study of shared book reading.

Through such recent studies, parental utterances other than labeling have also been investigated. One such utterance type is comments on explicit and implicit characters' feelings, such as "he feels sad" or "how do you think he is feeling?" Compared to labeling, understanding fictional characters' feelings requires a relatively advanced level of cognitive skill since children must be able to displace themselves from the present and imagine themselves in someone else's position (Beaupoil-Hourdel, 2020), and empathy for other people's feelings is said to be acquired between three and four years of age (Hoffman, 2000). Therefore, when parents read to children who have not yet acquired this skill, these parents frequently act out the story's characters in order to more directly and overtly depict the characters' feelings.

The act of performing a fictional character's actions or emotions by creating their own dialogue for the character and acting out a conversation is henceforth referred to as *enactment* in this paper. Based on a cross-linguistic study of Japanese and English, Ozaki (2021) found that Japanese parents tend to immerse their children in a rich amount of enactments from as early as two months old. Then, they gradually decrease the amount of scaffolding they use as their children grow older, whereas US parents use the reverse order. However, studies on enactment during shared book reading are limited, and how and when such interactions take place are unclear.

While the aforementioned studies have elucidated the degrees of social, economic, and cultural influences on shared book reading to an extent, Ninio and Bruner's finding that parents and children adhere to particular formats and alternate taking turns during book reading has remained unchallenged, and this finding has almost become a premise for studies on interactions during shared book reading. This development has most likely occurred because, during shared book reading, parents and children do indeed alternate, taking turns and avoiding any overlap. The parent is the only participant capable of reading from the book, so they tend

to be in a more controlling position compared to, for example, conversations at the dinner table (Kaderavek & Sulzby, 1998; Girolametto & Weitzman, 2002). Due to this tendency, children are less inclined to interrupt or overlap with their parents' utterances during shared book-reading.

At the same time, even if verbal utterances are exchanged in this manner, children are not necessarily completely silent and unresponsive when their parents deviate from a text. On the contrary, Beaupoil-Hourdel (2020) maintains that children contribute to the book-reading activity as much as their parents do through physical and vocal reaction, gaze, and gestures. Based on a comparative study of shared book reading in English and French, Beaupoil-Hourdel found that, in both languages, parents and children commonly embody characters through gestures and voices to scaffold a further understanding of the narrative and enrich parent-child interaction. The current paper further delves into this point by investigating what other gestures and gazes, besides embodiment, are exchanged between parents and children when parents verbally enact characters.

Based on these viewpoints, the current paper aims to investigate how Japanese and US parents and their children use multimodal expressions when enacting during joint picture-book reading. It hypothesizes that, even if parents and children adhere to sequential turn-taking in terms of speech, their gestures and gazes are exchanged frequently and simultaneously in both languages. The method employed for this study is explained in Section 2, and the results are described in Section 3. Finally, the implications and conclusions drawn from this study are discussed in Section 4.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Three US parents and one Japanese parent to children between two years and zero months old to two years and 11 months old were asked to video-record themselves reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to their children in their respective native languages. Participants were asked to read the book from beginning to end, as they usually did at home, and they were not given any restrictions regarding their posture, length of recording, time of reading, or camera angle. They were not informed of the study's purpose before their reading sessions in order to avoid an influence on the study's research outcomes.

Participants were recruited from the researcher's circle of friends and family, as well as through public posts on social networking services for a larger study cross-linguistically

analyzing empathetic speech during parent-child book reading. Initially, recordings were obtained of 38 American dyads and 16 Japanese dyads in the two years and zero-to-eleven months age group. Of these recordings, nine American dyads and eight Japanese dyads enacted a character, of whom three American dyads and one Japanese dyad were selected for a qualitative study in this paper, based on their unique characteristics.

Participants were given pseudonyms to respect their privacy. As shown in Table 1, participants had different backgrounds regarding their book-reading experience. Molly and John were close in age and had read the book many times. However, Isaac was slightly older and had been read to relatively less frequently than the other two children. He had also never read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* before. Meanwhile, the Japanese participant, Shun, was closer in age to Isaac, and he had been read to three to four times per week. Shun had never read the book before.

**Table 1**

| Ethnicity | Name | Child's age (year;month) | Reading frequency | Child's experience reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* | Version of the book |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| USA | Molly & mother | 2;0 | Every day | Many times | English |
| USA | John & father | 2;1 | Every day | Many times | English |
| USA | Isaac & mother | 2;10 | Every day | First time | English |
| Japanese | Shun & mother | 2;11 | 3–4 times/week | First time | Japanese |

**2.2 Book Choice**

*The Very Hungry Caterpillar* is a 22-page book written in the United States about a caterpillar being born from an egg, then consecutively eating fruits and junk food for six days until he eventually has a stomach ache. On the seventh day, he eats a green leaf, which makes him feel better. He then turns into a cocoon and "sleeps" inside for two weeks until he turns into a butterfly. This book was chosen for this study since the Japanese version is a relatively direct translation of the original English version. The only major difference in the texts is that, when the caterpillar has a stomach ache, the Japanese text explicitly explains that the caterpillar cried (*Sono ban aomushi wa onaka ga itakute naki mashita.* 'That night the caterpillar cried

because he had a stomach ache.'), whereas this crying is not mentioned in the original English version ("That night he had a stomach ache").

### 2.3 Coding

All videos were first transcribed. Any utterances that could not be deciphered within three passes were considered unintelligible. Next, any verbal and gestural expressions by the parents or children that acted out the characters or created their own dialogue for the character—such as saying, "Oh, my tummy hurts," or imitations of sobbing, chewing, and moaning—were coded as *enactments*. The sequence surrounding these enactments—particularly, from when the parent started reading from the text immediately before the enactment to when they resumed reading from the book after the enactment—were re-transcribed using the GAT2 transcription method proposed by Auer et al. (1998). These excerpts were carefully observed, and all utterances, gestures, facial expressions, and postures were additionally coded and subjected to further qualitative analysis.

## 3. Results

This section describes the results obtained from this study. A careful examination of the interactions between parent-child pairs showed that, in Molly and Izaac's cases, the parents initiated the enactment and the parent and child took turns exchanging verbal and gestural communication. By contrast, in Shun's case, the enactment was initiated by the child and the exchange of speech and gestures was simultaneous between the mother and her child. Finally, John's case merged Molly, Izaac, and Shun's cases, with John initiating the enactment but his father adhering to sequential turn-taking. These characteristics are further described in the following subsections. Subsection 3.1 covers turn-taking and parent-initiated enactment. Subsection 3.2 discusses simultaneous and child-initiated enactment. Finally, Subsection 3.3 describes John's case, which is a hybrid example of the cases presented in subsections 3.1 and 3.2.

### 3.1 Turn-Taking and Parent-Initiated Enactment

In both Molly and Isaac's recordings, the parents enacted the caterpillar while exchanging gazes to engage their children. For example, in Molly's case, her mother first read from the book, "The next day was Sunday again and the caterpillar ate through a nice green leaf and he felt much better," in lines 1–2. She then immediately proceeded to make chomping sounds while bringing the book to her face, pretending to eat the leaf. Molly then made an unintelligible

utterance while looking at her mother. Her mother then replied, “Yup, there he is,” in line 6 while looking at Molly and pretending to feed the leaf to her by bringing the book closer to her face. Molly drew back, indicating that she did not want to pretend. And then, after a brief pause, her mother resumed reading from the book.

**Excerpt 1. Molly (2;0) and Her Mother**

01 MOT: ↑!SO! the next day was Sunday ↑aGAIN, and the
02 caterpillar ate through a nice green leaf and he felt MUCH better.
*(Pointing to the text----------*
03 Shom shom
*------->)*

04 MOT: shom shom shom (..) shom shom shom shom shom
*(Pretending to eat the leaf in the book)*

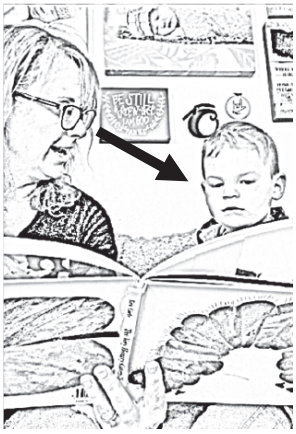
05 MOL: ((unintelligible, appr. 2 sec))
*(child looks at mother while speaking)*

06 MOT: = yu:p there HE ‘is
*(= pretends to feed the book to Molly while looking at her)*

A similar interaction took place between Isaac and his mother. In Excerpt 2, Line 1, Isaac’s mother read from the same page as Molly’s mother. While emphasizing “nice,” Isaac’s mother looked at Isaac and made chomping sounds after prefacing these sounds with “like this” in Line 2. After a series of chomping sounds, she briefly paused before going on to repeat the chomping sounds, at which point Isaac looked at his mother. Isaac then shifted his gaze back to the book and silently moved his mouth, copying his mother’s enactment of the caterpillar while tracing the illustration of a leaf with his fingers. After pausing for a second, the mother then resumed reading from the book.

**Excerpt 2. Isaac (2;10) and His Mother**

01 MOT: The caterpillar ate through ONE (.) NICE green leaf.
*(Mother looks at Isaac)*



02 MOT: = Like this chom chom chom chom chom chom chom
03 (.) chom chom chom
*(Isaac looks at mother)*

04 MOT: chom chom (1.0) And ↑AFter that he felt mu::ch better.
*(Isaac silently moves his mouth, mimicking his mother)*

**3.2 Simultaneous and Child-Initiated Enactment**

The interaction between Shun and his mother was also highly interactive, but unlike the exchange of gazes during Molly and Isaac's readings, Shun and his mother simultaneously engaged in enactment without any overt turn-taking. In Excerpt 3, Line 1, Shun's mother began reading from the text (*Soshite getsuyōbi* 'And Monday'). While she pointed to the written text, Shun had already noticed the illustration of an apple on the next page. Then, just as his mother began reading *ringo* ('apple'), he pointed to the apple. As his mother continued reading from the book (*ringo wo hitotsu mitsukete* 'he found one apple and'), she also pointed to the apple so that both participants were pointing to the same illustration. Right after his mother pointed at the apple, Shun overlapped his mother's reading by saying *ringo* ('apple') and then removed his finger from the apple. After his mother finished reading the sentence in Line 4 (*tabemashita* 'he ate it'), she acknowledges her son's previous overlap by repeating *ringo i*n a high pitch, emphasizing register while also tracing the outline of the apple with her finger.

After a long, two-second pause, in Line 5, Shun's mother repeatedly said *paku paku* ('nom nom') while pointing to the apple. After the third *paku*, Shun pretended to take a piece of the apple with his thumb, index finger, and middle finger, bringing the imaginary apple to his mouth. Since his mother was repeating *paku paku paku* quickly, only a split second elapsed between the mother starting to say *paku paku* and Shun starting to pretend to eat the apple, making the actions almost simultaneous. Next, Shun's mother copied her son's gesture and pretended to eat the apple. She then pretended to feed the apple to her son in Line 7, to which

Shun reacted by saying *suppai* (‘it’s sour’). His mother repeated his utterance with a rising intonation *suppai?* (‘sour?’), but she met with zero uptake by Shun. So, after a one-second pause, she returned to reading from the book (*Hai. Mada onaka wa pekko peko.* ‘Okay. He was still hungry.’) in Line 9.

**Excerpt 3. Shun (2;11) and His Mother**

01 MOT: Soshite(.)getsuyōbi (2.0)
And Monday
*(Mother points to the text)*

02 MOT: ringo wo ↑HITOtsu [mitsukete]
He found one apple and
*(Shun points to the apple)*
*(Mother points to the apple)*

03 SHU: [ringo]
*(Shun removes his finger from the apple)*

04 MOT: tabemashita (.) ↑!RINgo::! (2.0)
He ate it. Apple
*(Mother traces the apple with her finger)*

05 MOT: ↑PAku paku paku paku paku paku
Nom nom nom nom nom nom
*(Mother points to the apple)*
*(Shun pretends to eat the apple)*

06 MOT: <pp> paku paku paku paku paku
Nom nom nom nom nom
*(Mother pretends to eat the apple)*

07 MOT: <pp> paku paku [paku paku paku]
Nom nom nom nom nom
*(Mother pretends to feed the apple to Shun)*

08 SHU: [Suppai]
It's sour

09 MOT: =↑Suppai?↑ (1.0) Hai. Mada onaka wa pekko peko.
sour? Okay. He was still hungry.

### 3.3 A Hybrid Example of Turn-Taking and Child-Initiated Enactment

An interesting example was presented by John and his father. Their reading displayed both the characteristics of the English samples in Molly and Isaac's cases and the Japanese sample in Shun's case. John had been born and raised in Japan by his US father and Japanese mother. At the time of this study's recording, John's primary language was English, although he could speak a few Japanese words. In the recording, John's father read the English version of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and talked with John, mainly in English—with the exception of one instance of code-switching, as shown in Excerpt 4.

In Excerpt 4, an interesting phenomenon can be observed. John's father followed a turn-taking pattern closer to Molly and Isaac's cases, but the child was leading the enactment in a pattern similar to Shun's case. In Line 1, John's father read from the book ("That night he had a stomach ache") and began turning the page. At this point, John interrupted and said *e:::n* ('boo hoo') while putting his index fingers to his cheeks to mimic crying gestures. This gesture typically represents crying in Japan and is commonly used among children, as well as in public media, such as anime and comic books. John's father then repeated John's utterance by saying *e:::n* while finishing turning the page, and then he briefly looked at John before returning to the previous page. He then reaffirmed John's previous utterance by saying, "That's right. He's going *e:::n*," in Line 5 while pointing to an illustration of the caterpillar with an unhappy face. After a long, two-second pause, John's father resumed reading from the book in Line 6. This interaction is interesting since John interrupts the reading to enact the caterpillar crying, similar to the simultaneous and child-initiated enactment that Shun displayed; however, John's father adhered to a pattern similar to Molly and Isaac's parents, acknowledging John's utterance and then looking at the child, waiting for John's uptake.

**Excerpt 4. John (2;1) and His Father**

```
01   FAT:  That 'night (.) he had a STOmachA:che
           (Father begins turning the page)
```

02 JOH: e:::n↑

Boo hoo

*(John puts both index fingers to his cheeks to mimic crying gesture)*

03 FAT: <<laughing> e:::n↑>

Boo hoo

*(Father looks at John, finishes turning page)*

04 FAT: = that's right (.)
*(returns to the previous page)*
05 he's going e:::n↑
He's going boo hoo
*(Father points to an illustration of the caterpillar)*
06 (2.0)↓The NEXT day was SUNday again.

**4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper sought to investigate how Japanese and US parents and their children use multimodal expressions when enacting during joint picture-book reading. Molly and Isaac and their parents continuously jointly constructed the book-reading activity through an exchange of words, gazes, and gestures. Molly and Isaac's examples show that what seems like spontaneous enactment actually follows a specific pattern beginning with the parents' prefacing through gazes, pointing, or speaking, and this pattern was further motivated by the children's

gazes. In this sense, a similar pattern to the conversational format between a mother and a child maintained by Ninio and Bruner (1978), in which the mother and child's turns almost completely alternated, could also be identified in multimodal communication.

In both Molly and Isaac's cases, the exchange of gazes and responses served as a key factor in their interactions. These children's shifts in gaze from the book to their parents when their parents were enacting indicate that their center of attention had moved away from the book-reading activity to the conversational exchange between themselves and their mothers. This shift serves as a cue for parents to continue expanding their enactment, motivating parents to expand their enactment either by waiting for their children's autonomous enactment or by assisting their children in copying their gestures or vocalizations. After this exchange is successfully achieved, both the mothers and children shifted their gaze back to the book, indicating that their center of focus changed from the mother-child conversational exchange to the book-reading activity.

By contrast, in Shun's case, the pattern was unclear since Shun and his mother jointly constructed their interaction by building upon each other's vocalizations and gestures without meeting each other's gazes and, simultaneously, engaging in a form of roleplay. Unlike Molly and Isaac, Shun was the first to point out the apple and enact the caterpillar eating it. The moment his mother saw this enactment, she overlapped his gestures and started pretending to eat the apple herself, and Shun's engagement in the book-reading activity was confirmed not through a preface by gaze or gesture but, rather, by Shun and his mother's co-participation in the same gestural activity. Shun's mother then expanded the interaction by pretending to feed her son, again with no verbal or gestural prefacing, which her son naturally accepted by stating that the imaginary apple he had just eaten was "sour." In this case, gazes and verbal communication are no longer cues for further expansion. The high-paced co-construction between the mother and child itself served as a cue that both participants wanted to digress from the book before returning to the book-reading activity. This sequence was abruptly and explicitly closed by Shun's mother's "okay," with which Shun complied by ending his gesture and staying quiet so that his mother could read from the book again. This example shows that, while a conversational format is a useful tool to categorize different patterns of parent-child conversations, it is by no means universally applicable. Simultaneous speaking and gesturing, almost as if the parent and child are holding monologue-like conversations at the same time, can be a pattern in themselves, depending on context. In Shun's example, turn-taking, gazes, and speech were backgrounded and the simple understanding that both participants were enacting at the same time enabled this conversation.

Could this contrast be a cultural tendency? Although the answer is difficult to determine just from the study of a few cases, several aspects point toward a likely affirmative response. Shun and Isaac are only one month apart in age, both children are male, the book reader was their mother in both their cases, and neither Shun nor Isaac had read the book before, yet they displayed very different interactions. One possible reason for this difference is the influence of economic background, although this is unclear since the participants were not asked to directly state their income at the time of the study's data retrieval. However, since Isaac's mother was an elementary school teacher and his father held a significant position at a local company—and since Shun's mother was a nurse and his father was also working as a specialist in the medical field—both families were likely of middle- to high-class economic status. Previous studies have indicated the influence of low incomes on book reading (Haynes & Saunders, 1999), but the influence of economic status among middle-to-high-class families remains unclear.

Another aspect that could have influenced the book-reading sessions is participants' postures. Molly and Isaac were sitting next to their mothers with the book in between them, making eye contact with their children easier for these mothers. Meanwhile, Shun was sitting on his mother's lap, so making eye contact would have been more difficult. However, the choice of posture is also an important aspect of parent-child communication (Norris, 2014), and Molly and Isaac and their mothers could have valued communication through gazes more than Shun and his mother did, hence choosing their respective postures.

If socioeconomic backgrounds and postures did not cause the different interactional patterns in Molly, Isaac, and Shun's cases, the room for other influential factors becomes narrower, leading in the direction of cultural differences. This possibility is further supported by John's case, which can be considered a hybrid style of Shun, Molly, and Isaac's cases. John interrupted his father by abruptly pretending to cry when his father was already starting to turn the page. This interruption implied that John knew that his father also understood the meaning behind his crying gesture and its relevance to the text. Without any verbal or gestural cue, John used his enactment to begin a conversation with his father related to—but outside of—the book-reading activity. However, his father did not co-participate in this enactment but, rather, acknowledged his son's gesture as a turn by first briefly looking at John and then reaffirming John's gesture by saying, "That's right," while pointing to the caterpillar. This remark indicated that, while John's father was acknowledging his son's reaction to the story, he was also distancing himself from the enactment and objectively pointing out that the caterpillar had cried. Thus, this sequence displays that John's father did not choose to co-participate in the enactment,

which put an end to John's enactment. Therefore, although John's father waited for two seconds before resuming his reading from the book, expecting John to take the next turn, this pause was met with zero uptake.

The discrepancy between John and his father's interactions can be best explained by the different patterns that John and his father were adhering to. John could have anticipated simultaneous participation in the enactment, as in Shun's case, whereas John's father may have been trying to co-construct the conversation by taking turns, as displayed in Molly and Isaac's cases. John and his father's use of different patterns may have stemmed from their upbringing in different cultures. John was born and raised in Japan, while his father had spent most of his life in the United States, which could have led merged John's use of a more Japanese-catered co-participation pattern with his father's more joint construction pattern oriented to speakers of US English.

In conclusion, this paper hypothesized that, even if parents and children take turns speaking in sequential order, they exchange gestures and gazes regularly and simultaneously in both Japanese and English. This paper's findings have shown that, indeed, conversational patterns during shared book reading do not always comprise alternative turn-taking—which is especially apparent in non-verbal, multimodal communication during enactment. The patterns that parent-child dyads adhere to can be simultaneous and child-initiated, as this study's Japanese example showed. Although the findings of this study should only be generalized with caution, they may suggest that the preference for a particular pattern over another could be culturally influenced. However, further research based on a larger volume of data is necessary to generalize this study's findings.

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