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# She *thinks* in English, but she *wants* in Mandarin: Differences in Singaporean bilingual English-Mandarin maternal mental-state-talk

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**Abstract:** Chinese-speaking parents are argued to use less cognitive mental-state-talk than their English-speaking counterparts due to their goals in socializing their children to follow an interdependence script. To extend this research, we investigated bilingual Mandarin-English Singaporean mothers who associate different functions for each language as prescribed by their government: English for school and Mandarin for in-group contexts. English and Mandarin maternal mental-state-talk from bilingual Mandarin-English mothers with their toddlers was examined. Mothers produced more cognitive terms in English than in Mandarin and more desire terms in Mandarin than in English. We show that mental-state-talk differs between bilingual parents' languages, suggesting that mothers adjust their mental-state-talk to reflect each language's function.

**Keywords:** bilingualism; mental-state-talk; socialization

## 1. Introduction

In toddlerhood, children's primary socialization models are their parents [1]. Through their parents' input, toddlers can learn the sociocultural values and norms of their culture so that they can communicate and act in culturally appropriate ways [2]. For example, parents from individualistic societies tend to highlight the thoughts and beliefs of others compared to parents from collectivist societies, where independent thoughts and beliefs impede group harmony [3-5]. Instead, parents from collectivist societies may emphasize understanding others' desires to promote intergroup harmony. The language in which parents communicate the beliefs and desires of others is referred to as parental mental-state-talk.

Parental mental-state-talk has been found to affect several aspects of a child's social development, including, but not limited to, socioemotional competence and theory of mind reasoning, even after controlling for age and language [6,7]. Despite its positive effects on children's social development, parental mental-state-talk has been primarily examined in monolingual English-speaking populations, and only a few studies have examined parental mental-state-talk in bilingual populations [8-11]. There, only one of the parents' languages, English, was examined [10,11], and thus research on parental mental-state-talk has yet to capture bilingual parents' mental-state-talk in its entirety. If parents use language to transmit sociocultural values and norms, then differences between parents' mental-state-talk would arise where the two languages differ in sociocultural values and norms. The main aim of the current study was to examine if mental state expressions differ across languages in bilingual mothers.

In daily interactions, parents often highlight the thoughts ('cognitive' mental-state-talk) and wishes ('desire' mental-state-talk) of others through mental-state-talk. Mothers frequently talk about both desires and cognitions in child-directed speech [12-17]. Frequencies of and transitions between talking about desires and talking about cognitions may in part reflect mothers adjusting their speech to be suitable for their child's age and competence [13, 15-19] as children typically acquire words to refer to desires first and then acquire words to refer to cognitions [12,20].

Across cultures, one prominent difference in parental mental-state-talk is the frequency of cognitive mental-state-talk noted between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking parents [8,11,21-24]. This language difference is attributable to cultural differences, where English-speaking parents typically valuing independence, are more likely to describe and explain an individual's thoughts [5,25,26] and Chinese-speaking parents, typically valuing interdependence, are more likely to focus on social norms [25,27,28] and understanding the needs and desires of others [4]. Thus, the English-speaking culture focuses on thoughts while the Chinese-speaking culture focuses on one's behaviors and others' desires.

Some studies have examined differences in Chinese-speaking and English-speaking parents' mental-state-talk [8,10], but little can be concluded as to why these differences emerge because researchers have only compared maternal mental-state-talk in Chinese-speaking parents residing in Eastern, interdependent societies and English-speaking parents residing in Western, independent societies. In the present study, we take the initial step in investigating language-specific (or general) effects of maternal mental-state-talk in Mandarin-English bilingual mothers on their toddlers residing in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society: Singapore.

Singapore is a diverse society that prides itself in adopting modern Western values while also retaining traditional Eastern values [29]. A prominent example of how the Singaporean government strikes this East-West balance is through encouraging citizens to maintain at least two languages. From an early age, Singaporean children learn both English and their 'mother tongue' in their school. In Singapore, English is used as the common working language to unite communication among all Singaporeans and is the lingua franca for both business and instruction. By contrast, Singaporeans' mother tongues (Mandarin for Chinese Singaporeans, Malay for Malay Singaporeans, and Tamil for Indian Singaporeans) are used to promote a sense of cultural belonging and value. As such, mother tongues are primarily used at home and within one's ethnic community. By dividing the functions of English and mother tongue languages, the Singaporean government has attached different social goals and function to each language. Such division of social goals and functions may be reflected in Singaporean maternal mental-state-talk as Singaporean mothers may promote individualistic thinking in English but collectivist norms for their mother-tongue (Mandarin).

For the present study, we explored how bilingual mental-state-talk may differ between two languages. To elicit maternal mental-state-talk, mothers were asked to engage in two free-play sessions, where mothers were instructed to use exclusively English for one of the sessions and Mandarin for the other session. Free-play sessions were used over story-telling sessions for three reasons. First, a recent meta-analysis indicates that there are no differences in maternal mental state references between story-telling and naturalistic interactions [6]. Second, free-play is more likely to be a representative sample of mother and children's daily interactions compared to storytelling. Third, the study's focal interest is ad lib cognitive and desire mental-state-talk, which are more likely to occur in free-play than in constrained story-telling contexts [30].

We had two predictions. First, we expected to replicate previous findings showing that mothers frequently use desire mental-state-talk when engaging with their 18-month-old toddlers. Thus, regardless of language, mothers will produce more expressions of desire than expressions of cognition. Second, we expected the frequency of mental-state-talk to differ depending on the language spoken. Specifically, because English is promoted as the lingua franca for business and education, and mother tongues are used as the language for home and in-group interactions, in Singapore, mothers should produce more cognitive expressions in English than in Mandarin and more desire expressions in Mandarin than in English, reflecting each language's function and role in Singapore's society.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Thirty Singaporean-Chinese English and Mandarin bilingual mothers and their first-born toddlers (16 females,  $M = 19.3$  months,  $SD = 2.1$  months, age range = 15.8 months to 24.8 months) participated. Mothers were recruited through online forums and Facebook pages. Mothers had either a university degree (70%), a post-graduate degree (10%), a junior college/polytechnic diploma (13%), or completed secondary school (7%). Most mothers (73%) reported that their child's preferred language was English, but some (20%) reported that their child's preferred language was Mandarin or had no preference (7%). Mothers were compensated with a small monetary amount, and toddlers received a certified for their participation. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Nanyang Technological University (NTU-IRB-2014-11-010). All data have been made available at this URL: <https://doi.org/10.21979/N9/1KTUHC>.

Mothers were provided with a standard set of toys to use in the free-play session. These toys included a doll, a blank, a tea set (including a tea pot with a lid, two cups, two saucers, and two spoons), a toy cellphone, a train, a foam ball, and five nesting barrels as well as two storybooks, 'Guess How Much I Love You' and 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar.' The language of the storybooks matched the language of the free-play session (i.e., the English versions were provided for the English free-play session and the Mandarin versions were provided for the Mandarin free-play session).

Mothers first completed a demographic questionnaire. They were then asked to engage their toddler in two 10-min free-play sessions, where they were asked to speak exclusively in English for one session and exclusively in Mandarin for the other session. Language order for the two free-play sessions was counterbalanced across participants. Free-play sessions were video recorded.

Speech from the two free-play sessions was transcribed by one of four English-Mandarin bilingual research assistants using the Computerized Language Analysis (CLAN) program [31]. Each transcript was reviewed by at least one other research assistant, and any discrepancies in the transcripts were resolved through discussion. Standard orthography was used for the English transcripts, and Mandarin characters were used to transcribe the mandarin transcripts.

Mental state words were taken from existing studies on maternal mental-state-talk [15,32] and were categorized as either cognitive or desire mental-state-talk (Table 1). Cognitive words referred to any kind of thought process such as to "understand/了解" or to "believe/相信". Desire words referred to a wish and are expressed in words such as "want/要" and "hope/希望". Mandarin mental state words were adjusted to those that are more commonly used by Singaporeans. The 'kwal' command in CLAN was used to extract all utterances that contained a mental state word. Because of the age of the toddlers in the current sample, few produced mental state words. Thus, only mothers' mental-state-talk was coded.

**Table 1.** List of English Mental State Words and their Mandarin Translated Counterparts.

	English	Mandarin
<b>Cognitive</b>	Believe	相信, 信
	Expect	期望, 会, 会不会
	Forget	忘
	Guess	猜
	Know	知道, 会, 懂
	Pretend	假装, 装
	Remember	记
	Think	想 <sup>1</sup>
	Understand	了解, 理解, 明白
	Wonder	想
<b>Desire</b>	Care	关心
	Hope	希望
	Want	要, 想 <sup>1</sup>
	Wish	愿望

<sup>1</sup> Some Mandarin mental state words are polysemous, resulting in some mental state words appearing twice or even in different mental state categories [32].

To capture maternal mental-state-talk, researchers have calculated either a sum to measure absolute amount of mental-state-talk [15] or a proportion to control for speaker verbosity [33,34]. However, a recent meta-analysis has revealed that mental-state-talk frequency is the more sensitive measure than the proportion of mental-state-talk [6]. Thus, we calculated maternal mental-state-talk as a frequency variable. Only words that reflected a state of mind were extracted and tabulated towards the mental state word frequency count. Additionally, mental state words from fixed phrases or phrases from books (e.g., “He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening” from ‘Guess How Much I Love You’), repetitions within three utterances, and words with ambiguous meanings were excluded from the total tabulation.

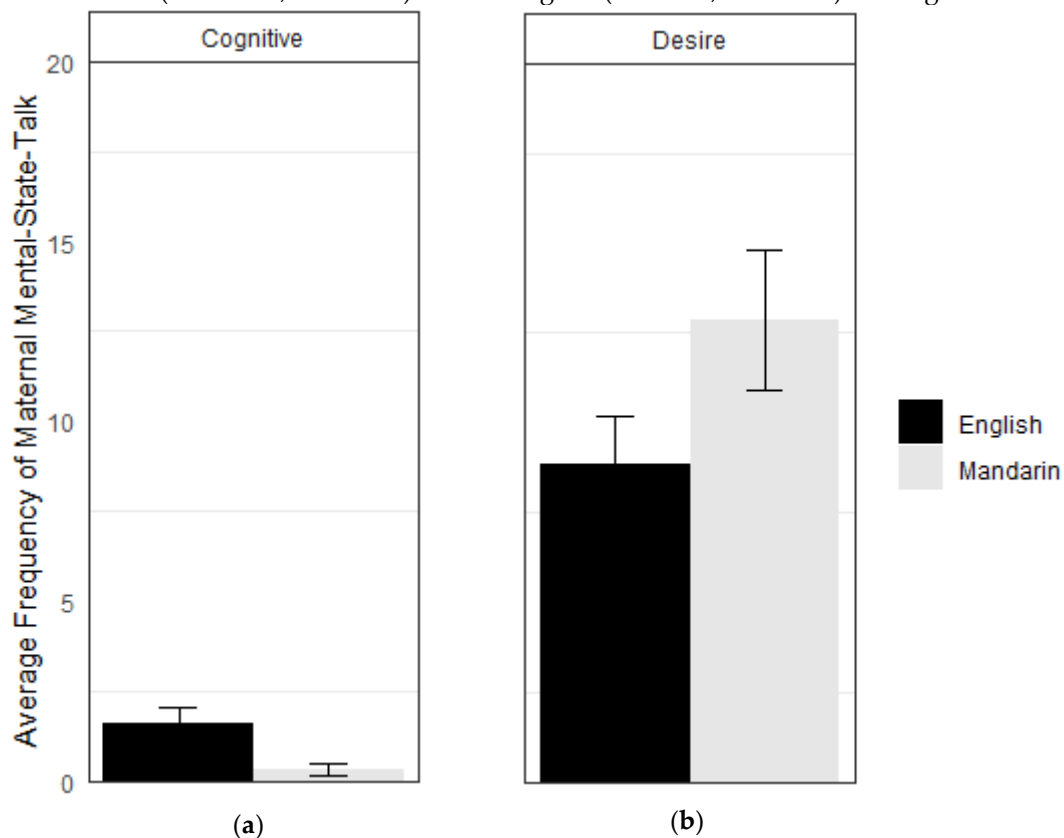
English and Mandarin words were first coded by two independent coders. A third coder coded both sets of transcripts. All coders reviewed all extracted words with the transcript and the accompanying video to examine how the targeted word was used. Cohen’s kappas, .87 for English and .73 for Mandarin, indicated high interrater reliability for both English (92% agreement) and Mandarin (84% agreement) mental state coding. The following analyses used the first coders’ mental state counts. Mental state type was calculated as frequency for each mental state category.

### 3. Results

Correlational analyses were conducted to examine relations between children’s age, maternal educational level, and the frequency of maternal mental-state-talk (cognitive and desire). There were no significant correlations between maternal educational level and children’s age and the frequency of mothers’ cognitive and desire mental-state-talk.

Total maternal mental-state-talk as the sum of cognitive and desire mental-state-talk for each language was calculated. Total maternal mental-state-talk did not differ between languages,  $t(29) = -.48, p = .63$ . A 2 (Language)  $\times$  2 (Mental State Type) repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. There was a main effect of Mental State Type,  $F(1, 29) = 58.52, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .67$ . Overall, mothers used more desire ( $M = 10.20, SD = 6.85$ ) than cognitive ( $M = .97, SD = 1.17$ ) words. There was also an interaction between language and mental state type,  $F(1, 29) = 8.54, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .23$ . Follow-up pairwise  $t$ -test comparisons revealed that mothers used more cognitive words in English ( $M = 1.63, SD = 2.67$ ) than in Mandarin ( $M = .30, SD = .79$ ),  $t(29) = 2.98, p < .01$ . There was also a marginal difference in the

frequency of maternal desire mental-state-talk,  $t(29) = -2.01$ ,  $p = .054$ ; mothers produced more desire words in Mandarin ( $M = 11.37$ ,  $SD = 7.04$ ) than in English ( $M = 9.00$ ,  $SD = 8.09$ ). See Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Average frequency of maternal mental-state-talk across languages with error bars representing  $\pm 1$  standard error of the mean. (a) Average frequency of mothers' cognitive mental-state-talk; (b) Average frequency of mothers' desire mental-state-talk.

#### 4. Discussion

Mental-state-talk research has been focused on how monolingual parents' mental-state-talk affects their children's development [7]. However, monolingualism is becoming globally less common [35], and thus more attention should be paid the effects of bilingual parental speech on their child's development. The current study is the first to explore how bilingual maternal mental-state-talk differs in two languages within the same individual. We found that, Singaporean mothers produced mostly desire expressions in both their languages, but the same mothers produced more desire expressions when speaking in Mandarin to their children and more cognitive expressions when speaking in English.

Before the child's second birthday, monolingual mothers typically use more desire vocabulary [36]; it is not until approximately their child's second birthday that monolingual mothers switch to using more words that refer to cognitions [12,13,15-17,20]. Like monolingual mothers, bilingual mothers in the present study produced more words referring to desires than cognitions regardless of the language, showing that expressions of desires in child-directed speech precedes other mental state expressions even in a bilingual population.

Although mothers as a group used desire mental-state-talk more frequently, bilingual Mandarin-English Singaporean mothers used more cognitive words in English than Mandarin and more desire words in Mandarin than in English. This difference in this context suggests that Singaporean mothers may be using mental-state-talk as a vehicle to transmit corresponding social norms for each language. Previously, Mandarin-speaking children have demonstrated precocious use of words pertaining to desires, but a delay in using words pertaining to cognitions compared to English-speaking children [32]. This difference has been argued to reflect mothers' disparate cultural goals in socializing child, as individualistic thinking is valued in independence-centric cultures but

is disruptive for interdependence-centric cultures [8,11]. To transmit such cultural goals, mothers are argued to tailor their mental-state-talk such that mothers from interdependent cultures (Chinese) rarely mention what another individual may be thinking [32]. We extended this line of research by investigating bilingual Mandarin-English Singaporean mothers who, due to the demands of the environment, associate different, yet specific, functions to each of their languages: English for business and education and Mandarin for in-group contexts.

Despite the unique contribution to understanding bilingual mothers' mental-state-talk, the current study has some limitations and raises several more questions. First, the study is cross-sectional, limiting our understanding of the development of bilingual maternal mental-state-talk and how it may later affect children's development. Future studies could implement a longitudinal design to address this limitation and examine the trends of bilingual maternal mental-state-talk. Second, the findings produced by this study may have emerged for an alternative reason apart from differences in cultural values transmission. For example, Singaporean mothers may have adjusted their speech according to their child's competency as most toddlers were reported to prefer English more and were also reported to be English dominant. Singaporean mothers' awareness of their child's language competencies may result in more sophisticated mental-state-talk (cognitive expressions) in English and simple mental-state-talk (desire expressions) in Mandarin. Given this framework, it would be interesting to examine if, and when, bilingual mothers switch between desires and cognitions, and whether transitions depend on children's respective language proficiency. Future research could investigate mental-state-talk in other bilingual Singaporean parents (e.g., Malays and Indians who speak Malay-English and Tamil-English respectively) to examine whether their speech within each language similarly reflects societal imposed functions. We would expect, if mothers socialize their children in the function of each language, then Malay-English and Tamil-English parents would also produce more cognitive words in English than in their mother tongue and produce more desire words in their mother tongue than in English as the Singaporean Chinese-English parents in the present study.

## 5. Conclusions

Extensive research has examined the significance of maternal mental-state-talk in children's development, but with bilingualism becoming increasingly common it is critical also to examine the characteristics of bilingual mothers' mental-state-talk. In Singapore, bilingualism is encouraged, but each language's functions differ. English is deemed as a common language that unites Singaporeans, and Singaporeans to Westerners, in public business and educational spaces. Mother tongues, such as Mandarin, are languages to be used at home or with an individual's ethnic group. This difference may contribute to variations in how the Singaporean mothers express mental states in each language, and thereby, socialize children to understand the different roles that each language plays in their society.

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