

**FRAMING GAMES: AN EXPLORATION INTO  
THE SPEAKING ACTIVITY OF A CHINESE-ENGLISH  
BILINGUAL CHILD**

Thomas J. Nowalk

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
In  
Education

Judith L. Shrum, Chair  
John W. Burton  
Cosby S. Rogers  
Susie Murphy  
Donald M. McKeon

March 1, 1999  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Bilingualism, bilingual education, ethnography

Copyright 1999, Thomas J. Nowalk

# **Framing games: An exploration into the speaking activity of a Chinese-English bilingual child**

**Thomas Nowalk**

## **(ABSTRACT)**

The study applies an ethnography of speaking to the study of a bilingual child, with the construct of a frame as the unit of analysis. The child was observed and tape recorded playing a commercial game in Chinese with her mother, and in English with her father. Both activity frames and conceptual frames were analyzed toward answering (1) what frames were performed during game play (2) how those frames differed between Chinese and English (3) what conceptual frames were produced in languages spoken and (4) how those conceptual frames differed between each language. In brief, the study applied an ethnographic perspective toward describing how the organization of activity and language compared between both languages, through the play of a single game.

The study discovered that each parent enacted different roles with the daughter during the play of the game. Whereas the mother, who had previous experience with game, performed an expert-novice role during game play, the father with his lack of experience in playing the game, took a novice-expert stance with respect to the daughter. The activity frames and conceptual frames followed accordingly, with the games in Chinese dominated by frames featuring directing and reporting on the part of the mother. In contrast, the English games reported the daughter dominating talk with informing and reporting functions of frames. Of the conceptual frames, Chinese presented game objects and events as changes of state; objects were evaluated according to notions of permission and convention. Conversely, English conceptualized objects as independent things existing with attributes, and events as discrete objects with defined spans of time. The study discovered a tight relationship between utterance, its function, and its frame for embedding topic-relationships. This relationship hints at dual activity-conceptual systems among bilingual children, warranting further attention by educators to integrate three dimensions into language classroom instruction: grammar form, speech function, and conceptual contents. As this study demonstrates, bilingual children do much more than talk in two languages.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A chorus of voices sings through the printed lines of this work, of voices assisting me in countless ways with so many requests. The clearest of those voices is that of my wife, Xiao Hong, who has given me so much and much more while tolerating missed meals, periods of inattention, and bouts of grumpiness as I completed this work. This achievement is hers, too. To my daughter Meng Yi who participated in this work, here's your book. You and your sister Tian Yi have spread sunshine throughout this project. There is also the voice of a mother-in-law, Cheng Li, who sustained me with enough onion pancakes, steamed buns, and green tea to move the work forward.

The ideas and methods here are the result of years of dialogue with my committee. To my advisor and chair, Dr. Judith Shrum, a huge thanks for your constant willingness to give advice, critique documents, and steer me back into a more focused direction. Dr. Susie Murphy was critical for the early stages of this work, uttering those necessary words: "Try it." Dr. Cosby Roger's rich insights into child behavior and developmental theory benefited all stages of this work. Dr. John Burton opened my eyes to schools of thought often untouched by graduate students, but critical for conducting this study. And a warm, special thanks to Dr. Don McKeon who, through countless office chats, shared Chomsky and observations gleaned from over thirty years in ESL.

The voices of the Nowalk clan stand firmly behind these lines. To my parents Thomas Paul and Lourdes, your faith, love, and determination have been a son's greatest blessing. And to my siblings, my greatest of friends, Belle, Katie, Mary, Tishie, Andrew, and Joseph, your fountain of support has been much appreciated. My final toast is to the memory of Grandpa Joe Woehl, who delighted in life and learning. I raise my glass to him.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Study	
1.1 Three Perspectives on Bilingualism .....	2
1.2 Research Questions .....	4
1.3 Introducing the Study.....	5
1.4 Definitions .....	5
1.5 Assumptions .....	7
1.6 The Parent as Researcher .....	8
1.7 Delimitations .....	9
1.8 Analytical Framework .....	9
1.9 Summary of the Study Proposed .....	11
1.10 Organization of the Study .....	12
Chapter 2. Literature Review	
2.1 Political Pressures .....	13
2.2 The Politicized Research .....	18
2.3 Theoretical Controversy.....	20
2.4 Summary of the Controversies .....	31
2.5 Proposing an Anthropological Solution .....	31
Chapter 3. Methodology	
3.1 Pilot Study .....	35
3.2 Rationale of the Study .....	36
3.3 Data Collection .....	37
3.4 Transcription .....	38
3.5 Constructing Frames for Analysis .....	39
3.6 Validity and Reliability .....	45
3.7 Methodology Summary .....	47
Chapter 4. Results	
4.1 Framing the Chinese Gaming Activity .....	48
4.2 Framing the English Gaming Activity .....	54
4.3 A Comparison of the Chinese and English Gaming .....	58
4.4 Analysis of the Functions Coded .....	58
4.5 Functions and Conceptual Frames for the Chinese Gaming .....	61
4.6 Functions and Conceptual Frames for the English Gaming .....	67
4.7 Summary of the Form Classes .....	72
4.8 Conclusion for the Results Chapter .....	73
Chapter 5. Discussion	
5.1 A Review of the Research Questions.....	75
5.2 The Parent-Researcher Question .....	77
5.3 Revisiting Agar's Frames .....	80

5.4 Teaching in Three Dimensions.....	80
5.5 Implications of the Study .....	81
5.6 Directions for Future Research .....	83
5.7 Final Conclusion .....	83

## **LIST OF FIGURES FROM CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE**

### Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Cummin's Model of Language Proficiency .....	16
2.2 Theoretical Positions of Mind-Language Debates .....	20
2.3 Piaget's Language Functions .....	22
2.4 Skinner's Taxonomy of Language Functions .....	28

### Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Halliday's Taxonomy of Language Functions .....	36
3.2 Marking the Chinese Tones .....	39
3.3 Agar's Transcription Symbols .....	40
3.4 Frame Analysis Chart .....	42
3.5 Example of a Completed Frame Analysis Chart .....	43
3.6 Example of a Completed Substantive Utterances List .....	43
3.7 Example of English Concept Frames for the Jenga Game .....	44
3.8 Example of Chinese Concept Frames for the Jenga Game .....	44

## LIST OF RESULT TABLES FROM CHAPTERS FOUR AND FIVE

### Chapter 4. Results

4.1 Chinese Game Activity Frames .....	49
4.2 Chinese Game: Comparison of Mother-Daughter Talk.....	49
4.3 Chinese Game: Comparison of Who Initiated Each Frame .....	50
4.4 Table of Openings for the Chinese Description Frames .....	50
4.5 Example Sequences for the Chinese Describing Frame .....	51
4.6 Die Roll Acts and Speech Forms in the Chinese Reporting Frame .....	52
4.7 Example Sequences for the Chinese Game Reporting Frame .....	53
4.8 Example Sequences for the Chinese Directing Game .....	53
4.9 English Game Activity Frames .....	54
4.10 English Game: Comparison of Father-Daughter Talk.....	55
4.11 English Game: Comparison of Who Initiated Each Frame .....	56
4.12 Examples of Utterance Sequences from the Confirming Frame .....	56
4.13 Examples of English Game Recommendations and Requests .....	57
4.14 Examples of Utterance Sequences for the Recommending Frame .....	57
4.15 Examples of Utterance Sequences for the Requesting Frame .....	58
4.16 Samples of Functions and Grammatical Forms .....	59
4.17 Most Frequent Chinese Functions .....	60
4.18 Most Frequent English Functions .....	60
4.19 Paraphrase Table for the Chinese Choice Function .....	61
4.20 Paraphrase Table for the Chinese Evaluating Function .....	62
4.21 Paraphrase Table for the Chinese Identifying Function .....	63
4.22 Sample of Commands Featured in the Ordering Function .....	64
4.23 Paraphrase Table for the Chinese Permit Function .....	65
4.24 Paraphrase Table for the Chinese Reporting Function .....	66
4.25 English Paraphrase Table: Directing Turns .....	67
4.26 English Paraphrase Table: Identifying Games .....	68
4.27 English Paraphrasing Table: Explaining Game Actions.....	69
4.28 English Paraphrase Table: Informing What's Known .....	70
4.29 English Paraphrase Table: Permitting Game Acts .....	71
4.30 English Paraphrase Table: Reporting Events .....	72

### Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of the Research Findings .....	76
5.2 Recoding Samples According to Halliday .....	78
5.3 Recoding with Skinner's Functions .....	79