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Language Use by Refugee Children

Abstract: My research project examines linguistic patterns between refugee caregivers and their children in Burlington, Vermont. The purpose of this research project is to gain further understanding about the role language plays for refugee children living in a primarily English-speaking city. I have been observing interactions between children, their caregivers, and staff at a program of the Visiting Nurses Association (VNA), a local program composed of both refugee and non-refugee families and their children. My research focuses on observations of specific aspects of language such as the quantity of child-caregiver interaction, the use of verbal discipline between adults and children, and the use of accommodation techniques during interactions.

My research indicates, perhaps unsurprisingly, that linguistic patterns of accommodation are different between refugee caregivers and non-refugee caregivers. For example, non-refugee caregivers tend to engage in more frequent child-directed speech than refugee caregivers, who tend to speak directly to their children less often. Non-refugee caregivers also make physical accommodations to facilitate face-to-face conversation, such as lowering to a child's height, a technique that was also observed less frequently with refugee caregivers in comparison to non-refugee caregivers. I have observed more general trends, including ways in which refugee caregivers' language patterns may be changing with their transition to a new culture composed of different linguistic styles and norms.

Although variations in linguistic patterns and socialization have been extensively investigated cross-culturally, the question of how linguistic practices are altered by the experience of being an immigrant or refugee has rarely been addressed. The broader contribution of this line of research is greater understanding of how communicative patterns are dictated and reinforced by culture, and how these patterns might change for refugee caregivers and their children in a new cultural environment. However, although refugee communicative patterns are certainly influenced by the expectations of their new community, many remain intact even in the absence of a wider context to reinforce them.