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ABSTRACT

This research study explores how sex role identity is related to the learning of communication and socialization processes in a Taiwanese kindergarten. The study hypothesized that undifferentiated baby-style verbal and nonverbal communication patterns are superceded with styles that become increasingly gender-linked, and language is viewed as a primary means by which children are socialized into gender roles and identities. This paper identifies related language and gender research studies and describes a specific study completed in Taipei (Taiwan) in 1984. Gender linked differences are illustrated in printed excerpts from two recorded children's dialogues. Results indicate that a patriarchal social order continues to exist in urban Taiwan. Gender roles that advocate inequality between the sexes are learned as part of verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, and children acquire and practice gendered meanings that indicate a developing understanding of their proper places in the larger social order. Tables and a 30-item bibliography are included. (JHP)

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THE GENDER OF CHILD DISCOURSE: SEX ROLES AND COMMUNICATIVE STYLES AT A
TAIWANESE KINDERGARTEN

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The Gender of Child Discourse: Sex Roles and Communicative Styles
at a Taiwanese Kindergarten [1]

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INTRODUCTION

What is the part that discourse plays in the construction and communication of Chinese gender identity and role? This work investigates how the communication or display of gender is practiced and acquired in a group of Taiwanese kindergarten children. A semiotic framework which locates the meaning of a sign in its interpretive effect, rather than in the object for which the sign stands, is used to describe and explain this process. Videotaped conversation in its natural setting is the data base, while spoken discourse, kinesic and proxemic displays are coded for each actor. It is hypothesized that an undifferentiated "baby-style" of verbal and nonverbal communication displays is gradually superseded (at about three years of age) with communication styles which become increasingly gender-linked, at the level of stereotype (i.e., at the level of native awareness) by school age (six-seven years) of age). This research is to be seen as an interpretive semiotic reading of verbal and nonverbal signs that mediate the social and psychological construction of the gendered Chinese self. Language use in context is placed at the center of analysis, and discourse is viewed as a primary means by which children are socialized into appropriate gender roles and identities. Specifically, an analysis

of how language socialization mediates sex role acquisition in a Chinese context can contribute to the current discourse on language, culture and gender, as well as lending a new direction to Chinese gender studies. We cannot understand gender as a social and historical construct, nor the ways in which gendered symbols affect and reflect individual's gendered conception of self and others, without a perspective on gender in the semeiotic system of a language.

Following Bambi Schieffelin and Elinor Ochs (1986), I distinguish between the study of language acquisition, the goal of which is to understand "what constitutes linguistic competence at different developmental points", and the study of language socialization, the goal of which is to understand "how persons become competent members of social groups and the role of language in this process". Socialization is seen as an interactive process in which "reality, including concepts of self and social roles, is constructed through social interaction." This perspective draws on symbolic interactionist and phenomenological approaches, and is compatible with "the Piagetian concept of the child as an active constructor of his or her own development" (1986:166-167). It is proposed that a focus on everyday discourse as a locus of sex role development can enrich and expand current sociological and psychological perspectives on the acquisition of sex and gender identity.

In the sections below, Chinese gender as a semeiotic system is