



Children’s and Adolescents’ Use of Assertive and Affiliative Language With Siblings and Friends

Lauren A. Lalo, Megan K. McLafferty, Bridget A. Sovocool, Ramsha S. Ansari, Victor M. Borges, Maribeth E. Ebbers, Caitlyn M. Fisher, Brittney N. Richardson & Ganie B. DeHart, Ph.D

State University of New York at Geneseo

Abstract

As part of a longitudinal study, we examined 4-, 7-, and 17-year-olds’ use of assertive and affiliative language during sibling and friend interactions. Our results suggest that age and partner matter more than gender in children’s and adolescents’ use of assertive and affiliative language.

Introduction

Research on gender differences in children’s and adolescents’ use of affiliative and asser-tive language has focused primarily on interactions with same-sex peers. Based on these studies, researchers (e.g., Leaper & Ayres, 2007) have long suggested that boys use more assertive language than do girls and that girls use more affiliative language than do boys. Recent research, however, proposes that the relationship between language use and gen-der is more complicated (DeHart et al., 2011).

Sibling relationships provide a very different social context for language use and emo-tional expression than do peer relationships, as they may offer different situational op-portunities for the use of assertive and affiliative language. Perhaps most significantly, sibling relationships provide a setting in which naturally occurring mixed-sex interac-tions can be readily observed.

Relatively little is known about how boys’ and girls’ use of affiliative and assertive lan-guage changes over time or across interactions with different partners. In the current study, we extended past research to examine boys’ and girls’ use of affiliative and asser-tive language with siblings and friends, across three different points in development.

Method

Participants

- 28 white, middle-class boys and girls, living in western New York, at ages 4, 7 and 17.
- Target children were each paired with a sibling (15-30 months older or younger) and with a same-age friend.

Procedure

- Four-year-olds and 7-year-olds were videotaped during separate free play sessions with a sibling and a friend.
- 17-year-olds were videotaped making brownies and pizza with the same sibling and a friend.
- These video segments were then transcribed and coded for the use of assertive and af-filiative language.
- Assertive utterances were those used primarily to accomplish one’s own goal or objec-tive (e.g., expressing directives, commands, intentions, opinions, or rules).
- Affiliative utterances were those used primarily to establish or maintain social interac-tion (e.g., showing support, expressing agreement or inclusion, seeking contact or ap-proval).
- Assertive and affiliative utterances were further coded as mitigated or unmitigated; mit-igated utterances were those that softened the impact of the utterance.

Analyses

Rates of target child assertive and affiliative utterances per minute were analyzed using 3 (time) x 2 (partner) x 2 (target child gender) repeated measures ANOVAs.

Results

Assertive Language Use

Total Unmitigated

- There was a significant linear time effect such that targets used more unmitigated asser-tive language at time 1 than at time 3 ($F = 42.799, p < .001$).
- There was a significant quadratic time effect such that targets used more unmitigated assertive language at times 1 and 2 than at time 3 ($F = 19.760, p < .001$).
- There was a significant linear partner effect such that targets used more unmitigated as-sertive language with their siblings than with their friends ($F = 16.309, p < .001$).

Mitigated Assertive

- There was a significant linear time effect such that there is an increasing use of mitigat-ed assertive language as time goes on ($F = 39.645, p < .001$).
- There was a significant quadratic time effect such that targets used more mitigated as-sertive language at time 3, than at time 1 and 2 ($F = 24.547, p < .001$).
- There was a significant linear partner effect in which target children used more mitigat-ed assertive language with friends than with siblings ($F = 11.204, p < .05$).

Affiliative Language Use

Total Unmitigated Affiliative

- There was a significant linear time effect such that there was less unmitigated affiliative language used as time went on amongst target children ($F = 15.436, p = .001$).
- There was a significant quadratic time effect such that there was less unmitigated affilia-tive language used by targets at time 3 than at times 1 and 2 ($F = 21.661, p < .001$).
- There was a linear partner effect such that target children used more unmitigated affilia-tive language with their friends than with their siblings ($F = 6.488, p < .05$).

Mitigated Affiliative

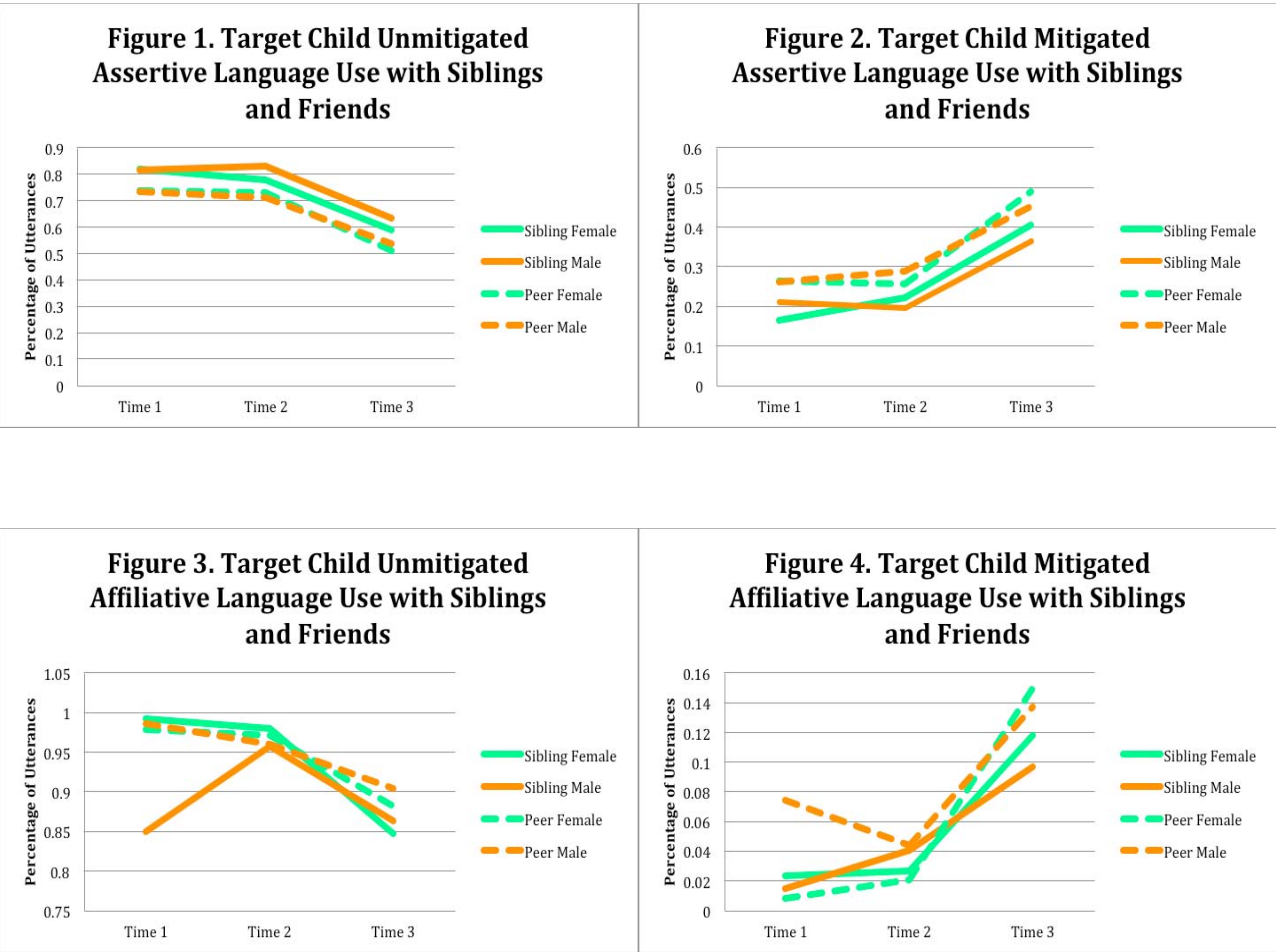
- There was a significant linear time effect such that mitigated affiliative language use in-creased as time went on amongst target children ($F = 50.152, p < .001$).
- There was a significant quadratic time effect such that the most mitigated affiliative lan-guage was used at time 3 compared to time 1 and 2 which were not significantly different ($F = 18.114, p < .001$).
- There was a significant linear partner effect such that more mitigated affiliative lan-guage was used with siblings than with friends ($F = 7.957, p < .05$).

Discussion

As predicted, use of assertive and affiliative language across development is more intri-cate than has been suggested by previous research. Variables such as the relationship of the partner to the target child and age of target child and partner significantly affected the target children’s language patterns.

Most significantly, these findings demonstrate that children’s language usage with their siblings and friends does not remain consistent over time. Rather, over the course of de-velopment, target children engage in less unmitigated assertive language with siblings and friends as their language use matures. Additionally, results suggest that mitigation use was consistent with more developed language patterns such that mitigated affiliative and mitigated assertive language use increased over time.

In future research, investigation into more detailed aspects of language use, such as the valence of assertive utterances (positive or negative) would further illuminate the ways in which assertive and affiliative utterances are used sibling and peer sessions.



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