



The role of parent-child conversational overlap on children's language development

Grace K. Kim, Rachel R. Romeo, Meredith L. Rowe

Background

- **Semantic contingency** is introduced as one of the key features of parental speech supporting language growth in young children, which can be best defined as “in which the child’s conversational partner responds through actions and speech to the child’s focus of talk” (Harkness, 1988, p. 54).
- **Children’s language growth** is facilitated when mothers scaffold by providing didactic and reciprocal responses that are characterized by its temporal aspects of contiguity and contingency (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014).
- **Parents’ repetitions and overlap** of children’s utterances contribute to early language development (Che et al., 2018; Conica et al., 2020).
- Addressing a clear relation between **socioeconomic status (SES)** and children’s language development, Rowe (2008) found differences in knowledge parents have for their child impacted their child-directed speech.
- However, few studies have focused on SES differences in the association between mother-child conversational overlaps and children’s language development.

Questions

- Do parents’ conversational overlaps, or repetitions of words from their children’s speech at the age of 3 positively predict children’s later language skills?
- Does the parent-child conversational overlap explain SES differences in children’s language development?

Methods

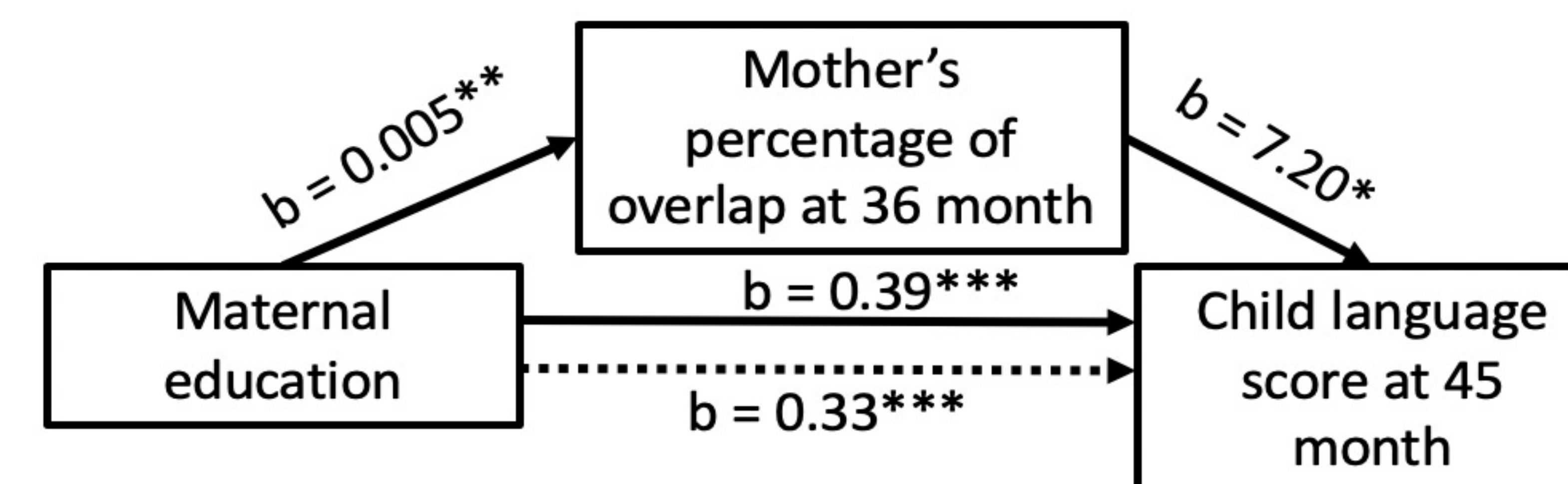
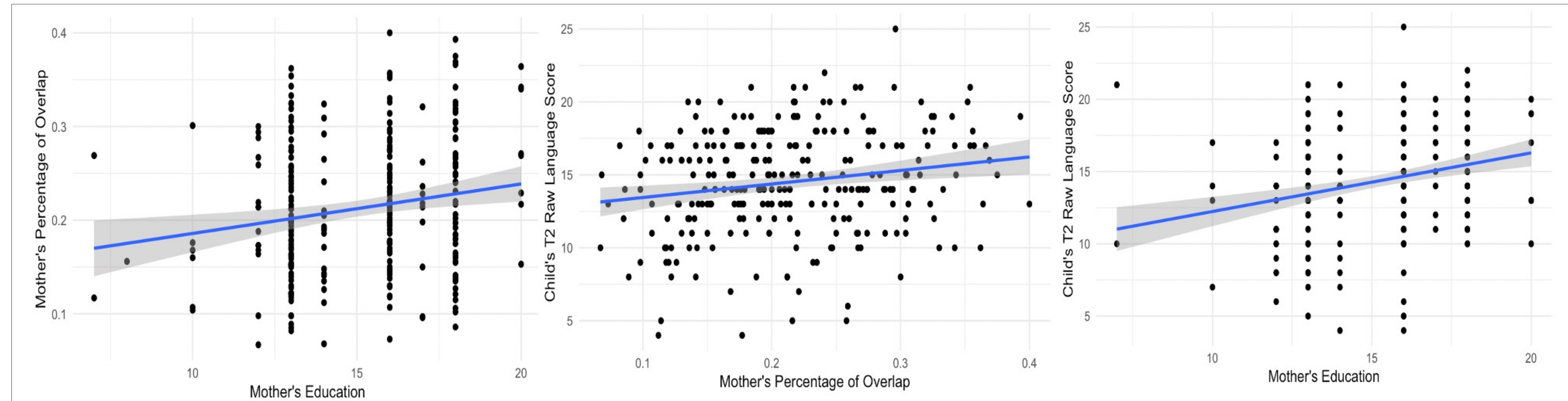
Participants:

- $n = 275$ SES-diverse mother-child dyads initially recruited at children’s age of 3 years, with follow-up visits 9 months later
- The sample’s ethnicity: White/Caucasian ($n = 249$), Black/African American ($n = 39$), Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 34$), Asian ($n = 20$), Native American/American Indian ($n = 1$), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ($n = 22$)
- All children and mothers spoke primarily English.
- At T1, children and mothers participated in a 7-minute free play session that was videotaped, and SES was indexed by maternal years of education.
- At T2, children’s language was measured using the NEPSY-II Comprehension of Instructions subtest, which assesses the ability to receive, process, and execute oral instructions of increasing semantic and syntactic complexity.

Analyses:

- Videos were transcribed verbatim at the utterance level in CLAN using CHAT conventions (MacWhinney, 2000).
- Within CLAN, the CHIP function (Sokolov & MacWhinney, 1990) was used to calculate the proportion of maternal words that overlapped in content with words the child said within the previous 6 utterances.
- The mediate package in R was used to examine whether mother’s proportion of repetitions mediated the relationship between maternal education and children’s language scores.

Results



SES (maternal education) was positively associated with mother's conversational overlap, and maternal overlap was in turn associated with children’s receptive language scores 9 months later.

Maternal conversational overlap partially mediated the association between SES and children’s later language scores.

Conclusions and Implications

- Findings from the present study suggest that adults’ conversational overlap is beneficial for preschooler’s language development and partially explains SES disparities in language development.
- Results suggest that children can benefit from early intervention programs focusing on increasing the semantic contingent attributes in parent-child interactions to close the achievement gap.

References

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