

ÅSA BRUMARK

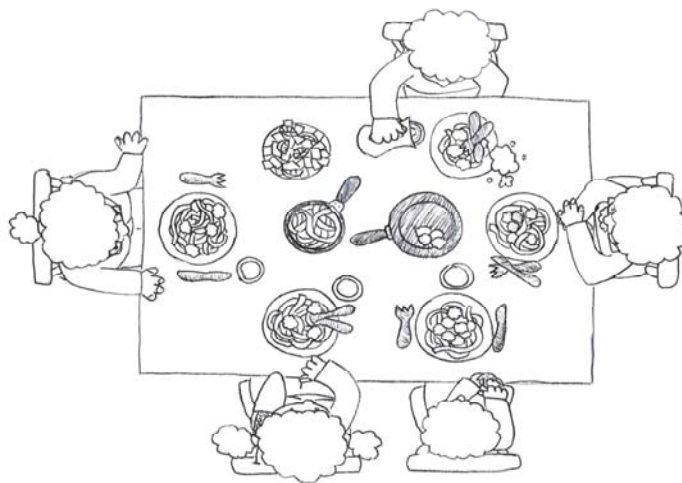
What do we do when we talk at dinner?

A study of the functions of family dinner table
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Abstract

This study was focused on the functions of family dinner table talk and conversation in twenty Swedish families with 1 – 4 children aged 7 – 17 years. As pointed out by a number of researchers (e. g. Blum-Kulka (1997), dinner conversation is a highly domain-specific activity, deeply impacted by contextual constraints. However, the different functions fulfilled by language during the dinner have hardly received any attention nor has the influence exerted on the conversation by such contextual factors as different age and number of the participants during the dinner.

The results suggested that two main functions considered, instrumental talk and non-instrumental conversation, as well as certain more specific functions (or conversational genres), such as co-narration, commenting and co-planning, varied considerably in the 20 conversations – though systematically and within rather constant ranges.

Thus, on the one hand, certain variables seemed sensitive to the age of the participating children: a larger share of utterances serving instrumental functions, a larger share of commenting utterances, as well as of attention and focus regulating utterances in families with younger children. Other variations appeared to be a consequence of the number of participants: more narrating and planning in “small” families and more regulating utterances in “big” families.

Some of these fluctuations seemed to be due to individual factors in the family settings (age of the children and number of participants) or circumstances turning up in the actual situation. But the results also suggested strong socially and culturally conditioned frames constraining the variations.

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Introduction

This paper presents a pilot study of a larger intercultural investigation focused on the functions of family dinner table conversations and the impact of certain contextual circumstances, namely age of the children and number of participants around the dinner table.

Dinner table conversations are situated, culturally conditioned social activities, deeply embedded in historical, cultural and political traditions. As other well-defined socio-cultural activities, dinner table conversations are governed by a host of explicit or implicit rules and norms. This means that there are conventions not only for how to perform and regulate the physical activity of having dinner but also for other nonverbal and verbal activities surrounding the meal (Goffman 1981).

Talking while eating is, however, not acceptable everywhere. And when it is, it is usually regulated by norms for what is appropriate to say, at which moment, to whom etc. In certain cultures, verbal activities during the meals are reduced to a necessary minimum, e.g. in certain rural families (see examples quoted in Blum-Kulka 1997). In most Western urban well-educated populations, on the other hand, dinner talk and even conversation (see distinction made below between talk and conversation) are not only permitted activities but also called upon and expected. However, the right to talk during the meal is generally not equally distributed between the participants, nor are all topics admitted, according to a comparative study made by Blum-Kulka 1997. Money, politics and sex are usually avoided as less proper themes for polite talk.

Family dinner as a socio-cultural event

Family dinners are, of course, not less embedded in socio-cultural routines and norms than other social events. But they also have some specific features. These can be brought out in contrast to e.g. public events. In a study of public events, Handelman (1990) pointed to four qualities distinguishing them from casual encounters like every day conversation between for instance friends: replicability, intentionality, symbolic formation and formality (quoted in Blum-Kulka 1997).

Replicability means the repetition of the same routinized pattern and the presence of approximately the same participants. *Intentionality* refers the presence of a rather strong goal-orientation. Public events also include a complex symbolism and a high degree of *formality* restricting the choice of lexical items.

Like public events, family dinners are characterized by replicability. And like public events but unlike casual encounters, the family dinner is further governed by an intentionality, namely to carry out an instrumental activity. Unlike public events, family dinners have a low degree of formality. A strong reason for this is, of course, that they include children of different ages as participants.

The participation of small children during the meal, furthermore, gives rise to an asymmetrical power relationship, which is displayed by the use of social control from the part of the parents. However, this may be potentially “face-threatening” (Brown and Levinson 1987). In Western middle-class families the need for social control is generally counter-balanced by a display of intimacy and affect, which reduce the face-threatening effect.

Even if family dinners tend to be quite informal in most Western cultures to-day, the degree of formality and the prescribed roles for the participants may differ considerably between different cultures as well as within the same socio-cultural context e.g. childrens' contributions also are more or less encouraged or "monitored" (Blum-Kulka 1997, p.3), Among other things, this reflects parental beliefs about the role of dinner activity for pragmatic socialization.

The family dinner as analyzed in this paper may be described as "an intergenerationally shared social conversational event" (Blum-Kulka 1997, p.9). As such, it is a socio-cultural construction, valid for urban middle-class families of the Western World. It derives its importance as a pragmatic socialization context, in which children become "competent conversational partners in intergenerational multiparty talk".

The functions of family dinner table talk and conversation

Family dinner talk also differs from other types of dinner table conversations by serving several specific functions. The most basic communicative function of dinner talk in general is that of regulating a joint meal by routinized comments. This includes such activities as laying the table, serving, passing dishes and spices and, eating. This "instrumental" talk accompanies the activity as a support for it and may either stand out as the dominant verbal activity or arise in the middle of other kinds of talk or conversation.

Apart from instrumental talk regulating the dinner routines, family dinner table conversations serve two other main functions: creating an atmosphere of social ambience (sociability, Blum-Kulka 1997) and helping socialization (Blum-Kulka, p. 34). More generally speaking, the sociability goal entails the use of talk for phatic as well as pure informative functions (van Dijk 1981). The socialization goal, on the other hand, is achieved directly and explicitly through pedagogic and regulatory talk. Indirectly, it is accomplished through all kinds of socio-culturally conditioned talk. This means that anything happening during the dinner might have an implicit socialization value. Family dinner table talk may thus be considered as an important part of "the ways in which children are socialized to use language in context in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (Blum-Kulka 1997, p.3).

Earlier research on family dinner table conversation as context for socialization

Ever since the input-theory during the 60ies and through the interactionist approach of child language development during the last two decades, a large amount of research has been devoted to the study of emergent child language in the context of adult (mother) – child "conversations". Such conversations have been shown to start already during feeding and other care-taking situations with very small children (see Brumark 1989 for a review).

Actually, most research on dinner table conversations as context for the development of pragmatic and linguistic skills have been devoted to pre-school children. The focus has been pragmatic routines, conversational genres and skills, e.g. speech-acts as well as more purely linguistic achievements (certain syntactic structures).

There are, however a few studies focused on dinner conversations with school children and young adults. One of these has been carried out by Blum-Kulka with associates (1997). She found that family dinners, as already mentioned above, entail a very special kind of communication and that family members perform different more or less stereotyped roles. In spite of this rather special character, she concludes, they constitute an important context for pragmatic socialization of children of different ages.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the functions of table talk and conversation at dinner in families within a culturally rather homogenous group (as a contribution to the exploration of family dinner talk in different socio-cultural contexts). The aim of this specific study was to analyse similarities and differences between the participating families regarding how functions of dinner table conversations are accomplished by verbal and nonverbal means and what influence contextual or situational factors may have on the realization of the functions.

The assumption was that the similarities between the families would reflect a common basis of socio-cultural norm or rule systems which govern what to say, when and for what purpose. The differences, on the other hand, were supposed to depend on specific situational factors, such as age of the participating children. Since family dinners were assumed to be both adaptive and supportive contexts of socialization (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992), the dinner conversation would thus be sensitive to age-related differences of the children. Similarly, such variations in the settings as different number of participants would possibly influence the use of, for instance, instrumental talk during the dinners. Thus, the theoretical framework of general and specific functions to be presented below has been developed to reflect such variations within the frame of a supposedly homogenous socio-cultural context.

Methods and procedures

Participants

This paper was a preliminary exploratory part of a larger intercultural study of general and specific functions of the talk and conversation during family dinner, and thus focused on a culturally homogenous group.

The study was based on 20 Swedish monolingual families with one to four children of school-age (7 – 17 years), but (at least) one of which, named the target child since (s)he was specifically focused in the study, was preadolescent (10-12 years of age). In one of the families, an adult sibling (23 years) was invited as a visitor. The families were of urban middle-class and a similar socio-economic background, living in or in the neighbourhood of Stockholm. Appropriate families were recruited through letters giving a short description of the study and distributed to parents with children in elementary schools in the area (table 1).

In addition, a questionnaire asking for demographic data as well as beliefs about the role played by conversation during meals and about pragmatic socialization in general (appendix 1) was distributed after recording the meals. The purpose of collecting these data was to check the socio-cultural homogeneity of the group.

Recordings

The 20 families having indicated a willingness to participate were contacted and appropriate dates for video recording were decided. The dinner table conversations were recorded in their entirety, usually in the family kitchen by using a fixed position for the camera while the researcher was absent or waiting elsewhere in the house. The family members were told to act as normally as possible. The mean duration of the recorded meal was 17 minutes.

Transcription

The 20 recordings were transcribed using a modified version of the CHAT system (Mc Whinney 1991) for transcription of natural discourse (see appendix 2). All recordings were transcribed in their totality. Verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions having a clear communicative function relevant to the meal activity or the accompanying conversation as judged by two researchers were identified and coded by means of the coding categories presented below. Selected parts of the transcriptions were judged with regard to their accuracy by two researchers familiar with the actual transcription methods. The interrater reliability amounted to 85%.

Basic coding units

In the following, a distinction has been made between talk, i.e. speech used for instrumental and certain explicit pedagogic functions, and “pure” conversation, serving other functions.

For the segmentation of the recorded conversations, the units of turn and utterance were judged to be most appropriate.

Turn was defined as a verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions by which one participant holds the floor in the conversation (c. f. Sacks et al 1974).

Utterance was defined as a part of a turn corresponding to one prosodic clause and syntactically to one or more syntactic clauses (see for instance Hellspong 1988, Brumark 1989). A turn may, thus, consist of one or more utterances.

Coding categories

A preliminary distinction was made between two main general functions (c.f. Halliday 1970) of dinner talk:

- **instrumental** function, related to the routinized talk accompanying and monitoring the activity of having dinner (Blum-Kulka 1997), and
- **non-instrumental** function, i.e. all other types of conversation during the meal.

The non-instrumental function was subdivided into

- a **pedagogic** function, most typically accomplished by explicit instructive or regulatory utterances, serving as explicit “socialization” according to Blum-Kulka, 1997 (e.g. “It is not very polite to leave the table before we have finished the dinner.”),

The pedagogic function, relating to explicit “socialization”, may thus be effectuated by the use of explicit instructing devices. Notice, however, that socialization occurs not only explicitly by pedagogic speech, but also implicitly and indirectly through any communication that children are exposed to:

- a **phatic** function, corresponding to “phatic communion” (Malinowsky 1923), the purpose of which is not primarily to exchange information but to entertain the social relation between parties (e.g. “How are you?”) or give feedback (e.g. “Okej!”, “Mm”), and

- an **informative** function, explicitly demanding information (Brumark 1989, Beal & Snow 1994) but also by other conversational contributions not serving instrumental, pedagogic and phatic functions though appearing as conversation about various subjects within different “thematic frames” (c.f. Blum-Kulka 1997, p. 34).

The phatic and the informative function, corresponding approximately to the “sociability” function in Blum-Kulka (1997), may be considered characteristic for conversation proper.

As pointed out by Goffman 1981, even non-instrumental dinner conversations are governed by more or less explicit goals, corresponding to conversational functions or “genres” (Blum-Kulka 1997, p. 34). These genres are clearly delimited and defined by their specific functions in dinner conversations. The informative function thus included several more specific functions, related to different conversational sub-genres, to be presented below.

The **specific informative functions** considered were

- **co-narrative**, i.e. “telling” fictive or factive reports and stories (cf Beal & Snow 1994), or
- **co-planning**, i.e. collaborative planning the future schedule, of importance for one or more family members, or
- **commenting**, i.e. making of evaluative comments (commentives, see Brumark forthcoming) upon different kinds of nonverbal or verbal behaviours of the dinner participants or other people, relatives, friends etc (c.f. Blum-Kulka 1997). Commenting utterances differ from pedagogic utterances by the primary function of commenting, not teaching.

A fourth rest category included all other types of conversation, e.g. arguing or joking etc, here termed “**other**”.

Since this study approached family dinner table talk and conversation as a context for socialization, the exploration of general functions included one additional comprehensive function, the **regulatory function**, used to exert “social control” (Blum-Kulka 1997).

The regulatory function (see Brumark 1989, Brumark 2003), directing and controlling non-verbal and verbal actions and activities during the dinner, was supposed to appear in both instrumental and non-instrumental parts of the accompanying speech. Furthermore, the regulatory function often overlaps with the instrumental or explicitly expressed pedagogic function.

Correcting utterances directly related to eating behaviour were coded as instrumental **and** regulatory, whereas more general commenting upon the table manners was considered as either regulatory, pedagogic or commenting, depending on the regulatory strength or on specific circumstances in the situation (see examples 5 and 6 in Results).

Coding procedures

As a preliminary procedure, verbal and certain non-verbal behaviours produced in the dinner conversations were distinguished and segmented into turns and utterances, whereupon total amounts of turns and utterances, frequencies per minute and percentages or proportions were calculated.

The functional categories appearing in the conversational contributions of adults as well as of children were then coded, using utterance as basic unit. Total numbers of each category, means and standard deviations were calculated in order to get an overall picture of the general and specific functions served by conversation and talk during the family dinners.

In addition, to discern similarities and differences between the 20 family dinner conversations, the families were divided into **group 1 and 2**, defined by age of the participating children (younger or older than 12 years, see table 2 and 3), and **group A and B**, defined by the number of participants (2 – 4 or 5 – 6, see table 4 and 5).

In the following sections, the results will be presented and tentative explanations are discussed from a theoretical, socio-cultural and developmental perspective. In the examples illustrating the presentation, the utterances are given in Swedish with an English translation, marked by MOT (=mother), FAT (=father), CHI 1-4 (=target children and siblings) and COM for contextual information of importance for understanding the example.

Results

When looking at the video tape recordings of 20 family dinners, the first impression was the diversity of the individual settings by different housing conditions, different dinner routines and varying numbers and ages of the participating children. A second look, however, revealed a recurrence of similar patterns, some possibly culturally conditioned, others appearing to be more constant, and governed by the general features of the situation. On the other hand, the comparative analysis suggested a systematic variation of certain parameters between the sub-groups.

Similarities and differences in the 20 conversations

Instrumental talk

Instrumental parts of dinner talk concerned all kinds of utterances accompanying and guiding the main activity of eating, including ritual utterances (as in examples 1 and 2 below), requests for dishes or spices etc.

The proportion of instrumental utterances out of all utterances varied considerably in the 20 recordings and ranged between 1.3% and 48.4%. The total proportion amounted to 17 %, the mean to 18.4% and the standard deviation to 13.2%, which reflects the variation found between the families, especially in the group with younger siblings (figure 1).

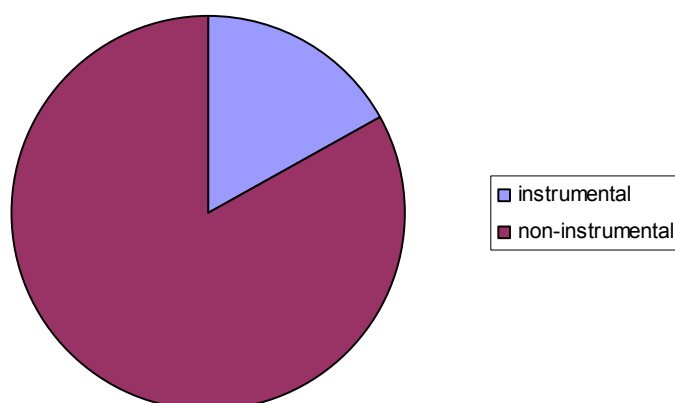


Figure 1. Proportions of instrumental and non-instrumental utterances in the 20 families.

As could be expected, these variations were related to the number of participants and to the age of the participating children. There was a clearly larger amount of instrumental utterances in the younger group (603 against 412, mean 54.8 against 45.9). But the differences diminished somewhat between the two age groups when the proportions of instrumental utterances out of all utterances were considered (20.4 % in younger group and 13.7 % in the older, table 6).

Furthermore, there seemed to be some evidence for assuming that there was more verbal monitoring of the main activity in dinners with more participants than four. For them, instrumental talk amounted to 17.8% against 16.7% for the other group. The groups did however not differ as much as expected (see table 7).

The meals were most often initiated and finished by instrumental talk, as in the following examples:

(1)

MOT:	Varsågod, lägger upp till dig först, hur mycket vill du ha gumman? How much,	Here you are, I'll serve you first
CHI:	Stopp	Stop
MOT:	Räcker de så?	Is it enough
CHI:	Mm	mm

COM (the instrumental dialogue continues through 15 utterances)

(2)

MOT:	Slut igen! (about the milk)	Finished again
CHI:	Tack för maten!	Thank you for dinner
MOT:	Varsågod!	You're welcome

However, parts of instrumental talk could appear anywhere during a meal and were most often smoothly alternating with or integrated in the non-instrumental conversation. While instrumental talk seemed to be required only to facilitate the dinner activity, non-instrumental dinner conversation was regarded as a natural element of social interaction. In some families, however, the parents did not encourage too much conversation during the dinner:

(3)

FAT: Koncentrera dej på de här (= the food) i stället!	Concentrate on this instead!
--	------------------------------

The ongoing non-instrumental conversation was thus often interrupted by instrumental utterances, called upon by the situation. These instrumental interruptions did however not always produce a change of the topic in the interrupted conversation. In example (4) the target child tries to reinitiate the subject, which is not immediately understood by the mother (marked by italics):

(4) ([CHI 1] = name of participant, [name] = name of other person referred to)

MOT	å så gick ja å hämta dej	and I went to get you
CHI 1	mm	mm
MOT	å då trodde ja att du va kvar i ditt klassrum	and I thought you was in your classroom, so I went there
	så ja gick däremellan du vet	mm
CHI 1	mm	mm
MOT	å då träffa ja [name]	and I met her
CHI 2	får ja säga dej en grej	can I tell something
COM	CHI 2 goes to MOT and whispers something	
MOT	men åt lite till bara	but eat something
	potatisen e bra	the potatoe is nice
CHI 2	näj ja orkar ingenting	no I cannot
MOT	ingenting mer?	nothing more
CHI 1	nej	no
CHI 2	bara vatten	only water
MOT	vill du ha lite mer [CHI1]	do you want more
CHI 1	ja vet inte	I dont know
COM	pause	
CHI 1	<i>men hur såg du de?</i>	<i>but how did you see</i>
MOT	<i>vadå?</i>	<i>what</i>
CHI 1	[name]	
MOT	nä men dom va inne i ett klassrum	they were in a classroom
	å dom skrek så	and they shouted
	å de lät så konstigt	and it sounded so odd
	så ja undrade	so I wondered
	va i hela världen håller dom på me	what are they doing
	men sen förstod ja	and then i understood
	att dom höll på å övade på en teater	they were doing theatre

Non-instrumental parts of conversation

The pedagogic and the phatic functions

Since the perspective was developmental to some extent, regarding family dinner as a context of socialization, the assumption was that there would be a certain amount of explicit pedagogic elements in the parents' contributions. The *pedagogic* function was however not easily discernable, but appeared nevertheless in 11 out of 20 conversations (amounting to about 3 % of all utterances), most often regarding table manners.

(5)

COM	CHI 1 stands up to leave the table	
CHI 1	-----	
MOT	ja vet	I know
	vi springer inte omkring	we dont run around
	vi sitter ner å äter klart	we sit down and eat
	sen springer vi iväg	then we run away

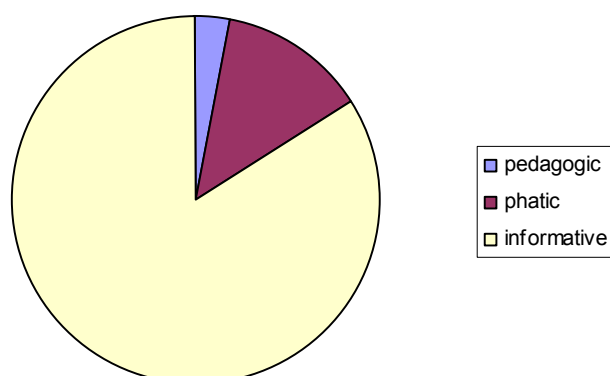


Figure 2. Proportions of pedagogic, phatic and informative utterances in the 20 families.

In these conversations the use of explicit “pedagogic” socialization varied considerably, ranging from 2.2 % to 14.5 % of the non-instrumental utterances.

Surprisingly, the occurrence of explicit ” pedagogic” utterances did not seem so clearly related to age of the children, as expected. The mean number of pedagogic utterances was 7, 8 in the younger group and 8, 8 in the older, but proportionally the group with younger siblings showed a slightly larger amount: 2.9 % against 2.6 % (table 6).

These unexpected findings could be explained in different ways. In family 20, for instance, the teen-age siblings sort of mock-corrected each other’s table manners (in italics):

(6)

CHI 1	<i>men [CHI2] först gästerna</i>	<i>first the guests</i>
COM	CHI 1 & CHI 4 (peer of CHI 1) are fighting for a spoon	
CHI 4	men de här da /pekar i wookgrytan/	but this then
MOT	ja vet inte	I dont know
CHI 1	<i>men [CHI2] gästerna tar först</i>	<i>but the guests serve themselves first</i>
CHI 2	men vi kan ta samtidigt	but we may serve ourselves at same time
CHI 1	nej [CHI2] tar sist	no CHI 2 is last to serve herself
CHI 4	ni får va artiga nu när de e films/ varieté	now we must be polite we are on the film

The *phatic* function has been considered important in most types of conversation, not least when some of the participants are young children (see Brumark 1989 for review). In the family dinner conversations studied, phatic utterances covered 11 % of all utterances and 13 % of non-instrumental utterances (variation between 5.2% and 21.4%, mean: 10.8 and standard deviation: 4.4, see figure 2). This result might to some extent be a consequence of classifying feedback expressions and attentions getting devices among phatic utterances (see discussion below).

(7)

MOT	hur e de	how are you
CHI	vet inte bra	I dont know fine

Sometimes, sequences of phatic utterances appeared when the participants seemingly lacked of anything substantial to say:

(8)

COM	pause 1 min	
MOT	mm	mm
CHI	mm	mm
MOT	de e skönt att börja skolan igen eller hur [CHI]	nice to start the classes again isn't it
	de har varit ett långt lov	the vacation has been long
CHI	mm	mm

When comparing the two age groups, the amount and proportion of phatic utterances turned out to be rather similar: 342 in the group with younger siblings compared to 306 in that with older siblings and proportionally 11.6 % versus 10.1 % of all utterances (table 6).

Similarly, there seemed to be only a slight tendency toward more phatic utterances in conversations with few participants, irrespective of age (11.1 % of the utterances in the four participant conversations versus 10.5 % in the five or more participant group, see table 7). The reason for this is open to speculations – possibly there would be more time left for cultivating the affective relation in a group of fewer participants.

It must, however, be observed that age groups and number groups are small and not independent of each other: the larger number of children in the family the greater the probability of younger children (see table 1 – 5). The result might also to some extent be a consequence of classifying feedback expressions and attentions getting devices among phatic utterances. Feedback, for instance, could be assumed to occur rather constantly over the groups, irrespective of contextual factors other than internal discourse relations (see further in Discussion).

The informative function

Among the non-instrumental parts of speech during the dinners, the largest part (83 % of all non-instrumental utterances, mean 83.6%) consisted of conversation, having a primarily informative function (figure 2). However, not all informative utterances had the goal of providing "true" information (see specific sub-functions below).

The informative function, furthermore, appeared as fairly consistent over all 20 conversations, though ranging 73.5 % to 92.6% of the non-instrumental utterances, but holding a standard deviation of 4.5%. Notice, for instance, that while the proportion of informative utterances remained quite constantly at about 80%, the share of phatic conversation varied more with the proportion of instrumental talk. The number of conversations was, however, too small for definite conclusions (see further Discussion).

At the same time, however, the informative function seemed to be the one most sensitive to contextual factors such as age and number of participants: the amount of informative utterances was considerably higher in the older group (mean 244.7 against 174.5).

This tendency also held on for the proportion of informative utterances out of all utterances in the two age groups (mean 72.6% against 65%, table 6). This difference diminished, however, if the share of informative utterances was related to non-instrumental utterances only (due to the fluctuating proportion of instrumental parts of the conversations): 84.6% against 82.5 %.

The number of participants did not seem to affect the share of informative utterances – both proportions and means of proportions are almost the same in the two groups (69.6% against 68.6% and 67.1% versus 67.2%, table 7).

Specific informative sub- functions

Three of the four informative sub-categories were rather evenly spread, comprising 10% - 25% of all informative utterances. The rest category, including jokes, arguing etc comprised about one third of the non-instrumental and 23% of all parts of dinner talk (though the standard deviation amounted to 24.3%).

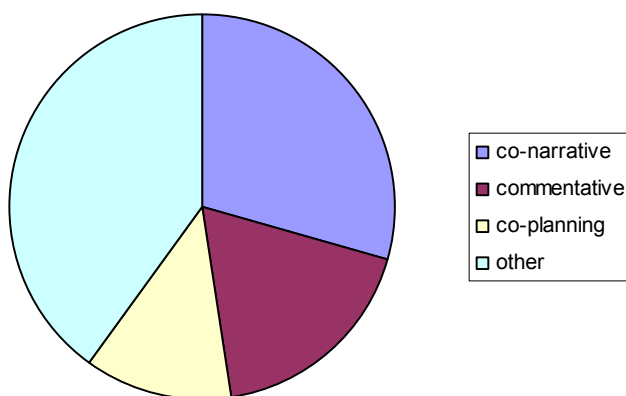


Figure 3. Proportion of co- narrative, commentive and co-planning utterances in the 20 families.

Co-narration

Co-narration (more extensively treated in Brumark 2003), seemed to be a fairly important ingredient in family dinner table conversation, amounting to a general proportion of 20 % of all utterances and 28 % of the non-instrumental ones. Family co-narration navigated through a limited number of macro-themes, of which the most popular were food, school, sports and other people.

In conversations with older siblings (13 years and older), the narrative parts tended to be rather long, over several exchanges, and consist of turns containing more than one or two utterances:

(8)

CHI 2	nej ja klarar mej ja klara mej galant i da de fanns fisk å välja på å vegetariskt å vegetarianer dom äter ju fisk å kyckling å ja åt faktiskt fiskgratäng i stället för järpar som fanns å ja älskar järpar	no I manage I managed today you could choose fish and vegetarians eat chicken and I took fish gratin instead of meatballs and I love meatballs
MOT	gjorde du?	did you really
CHI 2	ja ja åt fisk i stället	yes I had fish instead
MOT	åt du ordentligt dåra	did yoy eat enough
CHI 2	mm	mm

The narrative function appeared rather consistent over the two age groups covering a proportion of 29.2% versus 29.1 % of all informative utterances. This tendency is confirmed by a larger study on co-narration in family dinner conversation (see table 6).

On the other hand, the tendency to engage in co-narrative conversation seemed strongly influenced by the number of participants: 30.3% of the utterances in the smaller groups consisted of co-narratives compared to 23.1% in the larger groups. Most likely, other kinds of talk were considered more urgent in big families.

Commenting

In evaluative commenting, anything could be the subject, but there were certain favourite subjects, e.g. school (more exactly the children's behaviour at school) and other peoples' sayings and doings. Other people, e. g. peers, are most often commented upon by the older children:

(9)

CHI 1	dom som e me i den här har ridit typ i sju år	those in this group have been riding for 7 years
CHI 4	fast [CHI1] e bäst i den gruppen tycker ja hon e snabbast	but CHI 1 is the best in the group she is the fastest
CHI 1	ja har den snällaste hästen som e snabb	I have the nicest horse who is fast running
CHI 4	jaa /laughs/	yes
CHI 1	när ja rider så svänger dom av	when I am riding they are turning away
CHI 4	svänger hon då?	does she turn then?
CHI 1	alla svänger på mej	everyone turns toward me
CHI 2	de e bara ja som gör rätt alla andra gör fel	only I am doing right the others are wrong
CHI 2	dom rider ut i sanden	they are riding out in the sand
CHI 4	de gjorde [name] i da	that's what [name] did today
CHI 4	ja de gör dom faktiskt	yes they really do
CHI 4	dom rider på sidan å framför	they are riding aside and forward
CHI 1	ja blir så irriterad	I get so irritated
CHI 1	dom rider innanför spåret	they are riding inside the track

Furthermore, short instances of evaluative commenting appeared within co-narration (as in the example above), as well as within co-planning.

Evaluative commenting (amounting to 12% of the informative utterances and 8% of all utterances) was assumed to occur more frequently in families with older children, but the analysis did not support this assumption. The mean number of commenting utterances amounted to 29.6 in the older and 39.1 in the younger group, and a comparison of proportions showed an accentuated tendency: 12.1% in the older group and 22.4% in the younger group (table 6). A comparison between the number groups did not show the same differences

Co-planning

Co-planning occurred in all 20 conversations, covering about 17% of the informative and 12 % of all utterances (standard deviation 6.9), ranging between 1.6% and 19.6% of the dinner conversation time in the families. The joint planning of the future activities of one or more family members seemed highly dependent on individual routines – and priorities. There is a possibility that some families did not want to expose joint plans to research observations. On the other hand, it must be pointed out that only one recording from each family was analysed, which further constrains the possibility of making conclusions.

Co-planning most often concerned activities or travelling during vacations:

(10)

COM	pause > 1 min	
MOT	ska vi börja spara till sportlovet snart da	are we going to save money for vacations
CHI 1	vah?	What?
MOT	kom ni ihåg de	did you remember?
	vi skulle börja spara pengar till de?	We were going to save money for that
CHI 2	ja har redan börjat	I have already started
MOT	vi skulle ju åka till England	we were going to England
	på sportlovet bara vi tre	during the vacations only we three

Furthermore, co-planning seemed to be a more frequent activity in the younger group (13.2% of the utterances versus 9.3% in the older group), which could be expected. In families with younger children there would be more need for collaborative planning of the activities than in families with teens who probably do not require adult monitoring to the same extent as younger children (see table 6).

Comparing the two number groups showed a similar difference between the families of four participants and those of 3 – 4 children. Obviously, there is less time for joint planning in big families (see table 7).

The regulatory function

Similar to conversation in other contexts including children as conversational partners, the family dinners displayed some regulation of verbal and non-verbal actions. The proportion of regulatory utterances amounted to 7% of all utterances and ranged from 2.9% to 13.8% (mean 6.4% and standard deviation 3.7%). Since the regulatory function is more related to single utterances than other functions of dinner conversation, the share of regulatory talk was taken into account for each participant in the conversations.

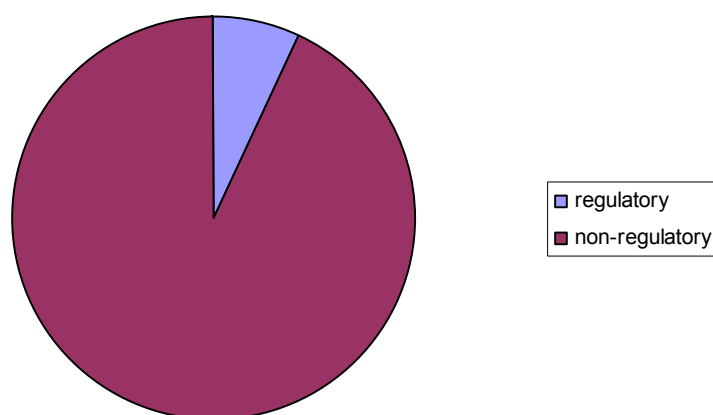


Figure 4. Proportion of regulatory utterances in the 20 families.

Among regulatory utterances, those regulating nonverbal actions covered 60 – 100% of all regulators (mean 89.8%), mostly actions related to the main activity, eating, covering about 70 % of all action regulators. Verbal actions or utterances were regulated in 2.8% to 25% of the cases (mean 9.8%):

(11)

FAT	ta de här	take this
	säg stopp	say stop

As expected, age appeared to be of some importance in influencing the use of regulating speech. Regulatory utterances covered 7.7% of all utterances in the younger group compared to 6.4% in the older.

A closer look on different regulatory devices, furthermore, revealed twice as many attention getting devices in the younger group (16% versus 8.8%), whereas the older group seemed to use more focus regulating devices (8.3% versus 2.6%, see table 8).

In the conversations with the youngest children (4 – 7 years), exchanges of attention and focus regulating devices could be observed (c.f. Ochs 1997, Linell & Gustavsson 1987, Brumark 2003):

(12)

CHI 1	mamma	mummy
MOT	mm	mm
CHI 1	vet du vad	you know what
MOT	mm	mm
COM	(the child initiates a narrative)	

There seemed to be some relation between regulatory utterances made by adults and the participation of younger children. A comparison suggested that mothers in the younger group regulated more often than in the older one (44% versus 42%), a tendency that seemed even more accentuated for fathers (14% versus 11%, table 8).

Fathers thus did not regulate their children's behaviour as much as did the mothers, but sometimes more directly:

(13)

FAT	nä nä nä sluta nu nu e du ute å cyklar	no no no stop it
-----	--	---------------------

Among the children, on the other hand, the target child in the older group showed more regulatory utterances (24% versus 19%), just as the sibling in the younger group (21% versus 15%). These results might reflect the circumstance that the younger siblings in both groups have to try hard to attract attention and make their needs responded to.

Also, the number of participants seemed to affect the use of regulatory utterances. A comparison between the two number groups showed a larger proportion of regulators (8.6% versus 6.3%) and a considerably larger share of both attention and focus regulating devices: 16% of attention regulators in the group of more than four participants against 10.7% in the smaller group, and 7.8% of the focus regulators in the larger group against 3.6% in the smaller. Thus, regulating attention or focus occurred, not unexpectedly, more frequently in conversations including more than four participants (see table 9).

Furthermore, the share of maternal regulation was less dominant in the group of big families (32% against 50%), to the advantage of the target child in this group (28% against 16%). These results suggest the great difficulty to make oneself seen and heard among the youngest children in families with more than four members.

In conclusion, the most frequent regulators were those monitoring the non-verbal activities during the dinner, whereas only few had the aim of regulating speech, mostly metalinguistic aspects.

Conclusions

As has been demonstrated by the results presented above, certain variables focused appeared to vary considerably in the 20 conversations – though within rather constant ranges (see tables 6 – 9). Some of these fluctuations seemed to be due to individual factors, such as systematic factors in the family settings (age of the children and number of participants) or circumstances turning up in the actual situation. But the results also suggested strong socially and culturally conditioned frames constraining the variations.

Thus, on the one hand, certain variables seemed sensitive to the age of the participating children: a larger share of utterances serving instrumental functions, of commenting utterances, as well as of attention and focus regulating utterances in families with younger children. Other variations appeared to be a consequence of the number of participants: a larger proportion of narrating and planning in “small” families and more regulating utterances in “big” families.

On the other hand, there were striking similarities between the conversations: phatic, narrative utterances (between age groups) and commenting utterances (between groups defined by number of participants) seemed to be fairly equally distributed, as well as the total share of regulating utterances in the two age groups.

A more extensive study of a larger material and a comparison with other cultural groups will possibly accentuate the patterns reflecting the socio-cultural impact on family dinner table conversation.

Discussion

Discussion of methods

The functional variables focused in the present study have been fairly well explored both empirically and theoretically as separate entities. In this section, I will however discuss some matters (problems) concerning their use in collaboration with each other as a general framework for comparing family dinner table conversations.

First, the difficulties of applying functional categories onto concrete interrelated utterances in discourse are well known to researchers dealing with studies of natural multi-party conversations.

Second, objections might be raised toward the differing degree of extension or generality of the functional categories adopted in the present study. The informative function would for example be considered as more abstract than the pedagogic function. A sequence of utterances may have a general function of providing information and being implicitly pedagogic at the same time. Further, when dividing the main, informative, function into sub-functions, such as co-narrative, commenting, co-planning and so on, these categories seem less extensive than the pedagogic function. As a consequence, the functions adopted have proved difficult to define as clearly separate categories. However, a certain overlapping between the categories, especially between the regulatory and the instrumental or the pedagogic functions, has been taken into account in the coding procedures by counting regulatory utterances separately. Furthermore, the interrater reliability amounted to about 85%.

Third, the functional categories adopted concern different levels of communication. The informative function, including informative sub-functions, may dominate whole sequences of alternating turns, whereas the regulatory function tends to be restricted to single turns, though influencing other turns, by entailing both an illocutionary and a perlocutionary force (see Austin 1962).

Another example of this problem is the classifying of feedback expressions and attention getting devices among phatic utterances. Feedback is an interactional unit and could thus be assumed to occur rather constantly over the groups, irrespective of contextual factors other than internal discourse relations, which might bias the results somewhat.

Finally, the reliability might be affected by the fact mentioned in Methods and Results that the age groups and number groups included in the study are small and not totally independent of each other. The larger number of children in the family, the greater the probability of younger children (see table 1 – 5). A larger material will most likely modify the data and provide more reliable results.

Discussion of results

The results of the present study suggest both expected and surprising similarities and differences between the 20 families. The phatic function covered, for instance, about 10 % of all utterances in both age groups and “number groups”. However, while the phatic function varied considerably within the range of 10% with the proportion of instrumental talk but not systematically over the sub-groups, the proportion of informative utterances showed a somewhat different pattern by a relative consistency over the material in its totality (about 80 %) in relation to instrumental utterances and small but systematic variations between age groups.

There are several possible explanations for these findings. The systematic variation between age groups of the share of informative utterances might result from the need of more instrumental talk in families with small children. On the other hand, the informative and phatic functions may be considered as basic and necessary in all kinds of natural discourse. Most conversations, apart from pure ritual exchanges, must contain parts carrying the main function of providing new information as well as instances of phatic utterances to keep the interaction going on. Thus, the relative relation between phatic and informative parts of dinner table conversation may be governed by inherent conversational constraints and possibly fairly resistant toward cultural factors in the context.

Similarly, the regulatory function seemed relatively constant, though varying somewhat as expected with age and number of participants (between 6, 3 % and 8, 6 % of all utterances).

However, certain regulatory categories, such as attention and focus regulating devices, appeared more context sensitive. Probably, these findings could be explained by the same reasons as for phatic and informative functions of discourse: there is a general need for a certain amount of regulatory talk, at least in certain types of conversations. In the light of earlier research on adult – child conversations (Blum-Kulka & Snow 1992) however, it might be reasonable to hypothesize some cultural differences.

In conclusion, the number of conversations of the present study was too small for drawing far-reaching conclusions. Nevertheless, the findings may be regarded as tendencies from which to formulate hypotheses as a point of departure for a larger intercultural study.

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Appendix 1

Projektet vuxna och växande – svenska, polsksvenska och polska familjer

ENKÄT OM DEMOGRAFISKA DATA

1. Familjens sammansättning

FAMIJLEMEDLEM	ÅLDER	UTBILDNING
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2. Val av språk

SPRÅK	SITUATION	GRAD AV TVÅSPRÅKIGHET
.....
.....

INSTRUKTION FÖR RESTEN AV ENKÄTEN

Läs igenom påståendena under punkt tre och fyra och markera med hjälp av skalan här nedan i vilken grad det stämmer med Dina åsikter.

0	stämmer inte alls
1	stämmer inte så bra
2	vet inte
3	stämmer ganska bra
4	stämmer helt och hållet

3. Idéer om språkutveckling och språkinläring

Föräldrar måste prata mycket med sina barn.

Barn ska lära sig att ”tala är silver och tiga är guld”.

Barn ska lära sig att uttrycka och förklara sina åsikter.

Barn ska lära sig att tala korrekt.

Barn ska utveckla förmågan att tala i alla möjliga situationer.

Det är föräldrarnas uppgift att stödja sina barns språkutveckling.

Skolan bör satsa mer på träning och utveckling av modersmålet.

4. Idéer om samtal under måltider

Under måltiden ska man ”låta maten tysta mun”, d v s inte prata i onödan.

Det är viktigt att lära barn att vara artiga vid matbordet.

Vid matbordet får alla familjemedlemmar ta upp vilket samtalsämne som helst.

Samråd, planering och diskussioner som rör familjen ska tas upp vid middagsbordet.

Det är viktigt att barn lär sig konversera som vuxna vid matbordet.

Barn lär sig och utvecklar sitt språk under måltiderna.

Måltiderna bör ägnas så mycket som möjligt åt konversation.

Tack för att ni besvarade enkäten!

Appendix 2. Modified version of the CHAT system for transcription

1. PARTICIPANTS

- *MOT = mother
- *FAT= father
- *CHI 1 = target child
- *CHI 2-N = siblings and peers
- *VIS = visitor
- *RES = researcher (if not participating in the meal)

2. VERBAL EXPRESSIONS

2.1. Speaking turns, utterances and words

Spoken **words** are written according to the norm system for written language but slightly modified to reflect casual speech, i.e. with reductions and assimilations common in spoken language.

A speaking turn constitutes the speech produced by one participant until another participant takes the floor. A speaking turn may include one or more **utterances** constituting syntactic units and delimited by prosodic signals, i.e. forming a prosodic phrase (se transcription and 3.2.1. below).

2.2. Prosodic signals

2.2.1. *Delimitation of utterances*

A new utterance is marked by shifting to a new line and delimited by a full stop, according to syntactic form, prosodic contour and terminal tone:

- . = declarative
- ? = question
- ! = exclamation

3.2.2. *Interruption*

Interrupted prosodic contours, i.e. when a participant interrupts his speech, either or not continuing another verbal construction, are marked by slashes / (se transcription).

3.2.3. *Pauses*

Pauses shorter than three seconds are marked by three points (...), se below.

2.3. Overlapping speech

Overlapping speech is marked by brackets [at the beginning of overlapping utterances.

2.4. Non-identifiable speech

Unidentified speech is marked by ----- but still counted as an utterance.

2.5. Translation

Translated utterances are put into brackets ().

3. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIVE EXPRESSIONS

Nonverbal and clearly communicative expressions are put within slashes, e.g. /nods/
More general supra-linguistic expressions are treated as nonverbal context, see below.

4. NONVERBAL CONTEXT

The symbol for nonverbal context is %COM (according to the Childes system Chat).
Pauses longer than ca 3 seconds are denoted by %COM and “pause”.

Furthermore, the symbol %COM is used to note any other incidence of interest that does not fit in under other headlines.

Table 2. Group 1 defined by participating children younger than 12 years

FAMILY	ADULTS			CHILD 1		CHILD 2		CHILD 3		CHILD 4		COMMENTS
	M	AGE	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
F 1	1	44	1	1								
F 2	1	41			1							
F 3	1	41	1	1	12		1	9				
F 6	1	36			11	1	9					4/5 of the time
F 8	1	28			11	1	7					
F 13	1	38	1		11	1	6					
F 14	1	41			11	1	7					
F 15	1	36			11	1	7					
F 16			1	33	10	1	7					
F 17	1	40			10	1	7					
F 19	1	39	1	1	10	1	7	1	8	1	11	
S:A ALL	10		5	4	7	2	7	1	1	1	11	
% OF ALL	55		50									
MEAN AGE		34,9			10,8		7,3			8		11

Table 3. Group 2 defined by participating children older than 12 years

FAMILY	ADULTS			CHILD 1		CHILD 2		CHILD 3		CHILD 4		COMMENTS
	M	AGE	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
F 4	1	41			1	14						
F 5	1	39	1		1	14		1	17			Father absent
F 7	1	52			1	14						
F 9	1	47	1	1	11	13						
F 10	1	41			11	14						
F 11	1	41	1		11	14	1	7				23
F 12	1	40	1	1	11	13		1	4			
F 18	1	36			10	14						
F 20	1	40	1	1	12	14	1	15		1	12	Peer of target
S:A ALL	9		5	5	4	4	5					
% OF ALL	45		50									
MEAN AGE		42			10,8		13,8			10,8		child

Table 4. Group A defined by four or less participants in family dinner table conversation

FAMILY	ADULTS		CHILD 1		CHILD 2		CHILD 3		CHILD 4		COMMENTS
	M	AGE	F	AGE	M	F	AGE	M	F	AGE	
F1	1	44	1		1	7	12				
F2	1	41				1	10				
F3	1	41	1		1	12		1	9		
F4	1	41			1	10		1	14		
F6	1	36			1	11		1	9		
F7	1	52			1	11		1	14		
F8	1	28				1	11		7		
F9	1	47	1		1	11		1	13		
F10	1	41			1	11		1	14		
F13	1	38	1		1	11		1	6		
F14	1	41			1	11		1	7		
F15	1	36			1	11		1	7		
F16			1	33	1	10		1	7		
F17	1	40			1	10		1	7		
F18	1	36			1	10		1	14		
S:A ALL	14		5		8	7		4	9		
% OF ALL											
MEAN AGE		40,1					10,8			10	

Table 5. Group B defined by five or more participants in family dinner table conversation

FAMILY	ADULTS		CHILD 1		CHILD 2		CHILD 3		CHILD 4		COMMENTS	
	M	AGE	F	AGE	M	F	AGE	M	F	AGE		
F5	1	39	1		1	10		1	17		Father absent	
F11	1	41	1		1	11		1	14			
F12	1	40	1		1	11		1	4			
F19	1	39	1		1	10		1	7			
F20	1	40	1		1	12		1	15		Peer of target child	
S:A ALL	5		5		1	4		2	3			
% OF ALL												
MEAN AGE		39,8					10,8			11,2	11,4	15,3

Table 6. Amount and proportions of functions in family group 1 and 2 defined by age of siblings

FAMILY GROUP	GROUP 1				GROUP 2			
	S:a	Mean	% of all	S:a	Mean	% of all		
Instrumental	603	54,8	20,4	412	45,8	13,7		
NoninstPedagogic	86	7,8	2,9	79	8,8	2,6		
NoninstPhatic	342	31,1	11,6	306	34	10,1		
NoninstInformative	1920	174,5	65,1	2202	244,7	72,6		
SUMMA	2951		100	2999		99		
InfoNarrating	560	50,1	29,2	640	71,1	29,1		
InfoPlanning	255	23,2	13,2	205	22,8	9,3		
InfoEvaluating	430	39,1	22,4	266	29,6	12,1		
InfoOther	675	61,2	35,2	1091	121,4	49,5		
SUMMA	1920		100	2202		100		

* Proportion of noninstrumental utterances

Table 7. Amount and proportions of cuncions in family group A and B defined by number of participants

FAMILY GROUP	GROUP A				GROUP B			
	S:a	Mean	% of all	S:a	Mean	% of all		
Instrumental	666	44,4	16,7	349	69,8	17,8		
NoninstPedagogic	104	6,9	2,6	61	12,2	3,1		
NoninstPhatic	443	29,5	11,1	205	41	10,5		
NoninstInformative	2778	185,2	69,6	1344	268,8	68,6		
SUMMA	3991		100	1959		100		
InfoNarrating	844	56,3	30,3	311	62,2	23,1		
InfoPlanning	369	24,2	13,3	136	27,2	10,1		
InfoEvaluating	471	31,4	17	225	45	16,7		
InfoOther	1094	72,9	39,4	672	134,4	50,1		
SUMMA	2778		100	1344		100		

Table 8. Regulatives in two groups defined by age of participating children

FAMGROUP	GROUP 1 + 2	GROUP 1											GROUP 2														
VARIABLE	s:a a	%reg	%utt	S:A	%reg	%utt	MO	%	FA	%	CH1	%	CH2	%	S:A	%reg	%utt	MO	%	FA	%	CH1	%	CH2	%	CHN	%
FORM																											
NONVERB	16	3,8	0,3	5	2,2	0,2	2	40			1	20	2	40	11	5,7	0,4	1	9	1	9	3	27	2	18	4	36
VERBAL	404	96,2	6,8	222	97,8	7,5	98	44	32	14	41	19	46	21	182	94,3	6,1	79	43	21	12	43	24	27	15	12	6,6
FOCUS																											
NONVERBA	321	93,3	5,4	172	93,7	5,8	81	47	24	14	31	18	35	20	149	93,1	5	68	46	19	13	37	25	20	13	5	3,4
VERBAL	23	6,7	0,4	12	6,3	0,4	9	75	3	25					11	6,9	0,4	8	73	1		1					
ACTION	344	81,9	5,8	184	81,1	6,2	90	49	27	15	31	17	35	19	160	82,9	5,3	76	48	20	13	38	24	21	13	5	3,3
ATTENTION	54	12,9	0,9	37	16,3	1,3	7	19	5	14	10	27	12	32	17	8,8	0,6	3	18	2	12	4	23	3	18	5	29
FOCUS	22	5,2	0,4	6	2,6	0,2	3	50			1		1		16	8,3	0,5	1				4	25	5	31	6	38
REG S:A	420		7,1	227	54	7,7	100	44	32	14	42	19	48	21	193	46	6,4	80	42	22	11	46	24	29	15	16	8,3

Table 9. Regulatives in two groups defined by number of participants

FAMGROUP	GROUP 1 + 2	GROUP 1											GROUP 2														
VARIABLE	s:a a	%reg	%utt	S:A	%reg	%utt	MO	%	FA	%	CH1	%	CH2	%	S:A	%reg	%utt	MO	%	FA	%	CH1	%	CH2	%	CHN	%
FORM																											
NONVERB	16	3,8	0,3	7	2,8	0,2	2	29	1	14	2	29	2	29	9	5,3	0,5	1	11	1	11	1	11	2	22	4	44
VERBAL	404	46,2	6,8	244	97,2	6,1	124	51	32	13	38	16	50	21	160	94,7	8,2	53	33	21	13	46	29	23	14	17	11
FOCUS																											
NONVERBA	321	93,3	5,4	195	90,7	4,9	100	51	25	13	30	15	40	21	126	97,7	6,4	50	40	19	15	35	28	16	13	6	4,8
VERBAL	23	6,7	0,4	20	9,3	0,5	15	75	3	15	2	10			3	2,3	0,2	1	33			1	33	1	33		
ACTION	344	81,9	5,8	215	85,7	5,4	115	54	28	13	32	15	40	19	129	76,3	6,6	51	40	19	15	36	28	17	13	6	4,7
ATTENTION	54	12,9	0,9	27	10,7	0,7	8	30	5	19	4	15	10	37	27	16	1,4	2	7,4	2	7,4	10	37	3	11	10	37
FOCUS	22	5,2	0,4	9	3,6	0,2	3	33			4	44	2	22	13	7,8	0,7	1	7,7	1	7,7	1	7,7	5	39	5	39
REG S:A	420		7,1	251	60	6,3	126	50	33	13	40	16	52	21	169	40	8,6	54	32	22	13	47	28	25	15	21	12

%reg = proportion of the category out of all regulative utterances

%utt = proportion of the category out of all utterances

MO% = proportion of mother's regulatory utterances out of all regulative utterances in the family

FA% = " father's " "

CH1% = " child " "