

RECONSIDERING COMMENTS IN FAMILY DINNER CONVERSATIONS

by
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The present study reconsiders the acts of 'meta-pragmatic comments', occurring in the context of family dinner conversations and suggested by previous research as being used for socializing purposes (Blum-Kulka 1997; De Geer et al. 2002). Dinner conversations were video recorded in nineteen Swedish families, differing with regard to age spans of the children. The families were divided into two groups, each group including one child of age 10-11 years, referred to as the target child; the families of group 1 had siblings who were younger (mean age 8.4) than the target child, while the families of group 2 included siblings who were older (mean age 13.5). Results showed that the group including older siblings made more comments totally, and considerably more comments on other persons not present, declarative comments, comments on linguistic behaviors, and comments referring to non-immediate subjects than did the younger siblings' group. The latter, on the other hand, had more comments addressed to the target child, more interrogative and imperative comments, more indirect comments, more comments directed toward non-linguistic and immediately performed behaviors. Parental comments also differed significantly between the two groups. Thus, the mothers of the first group (younger siblings) made most comments totally within that group, to some extent confirming the hypothesis that comments serve a socializing purpose. Finally, a comparison of the results from the present study with those of previous inter-cultural studies yielded some interesting similarities but also considerable differences.

1. Introduction

Ever since the first speech input studies in the early 60s, a considerable amount of research has been devoted to the social context of early language acquisition (e. g. Snow 1977; see Brumark 1989 for a review). However, the conditions for later language development in older school children do not seem to have attracted a similar attention. Actually, most studies of linguistic and pragmatic skills during the school years have focused on language use in institutional (mostly educational) settings or on certain aspects of spontaneous conversations in peer groups, such as narrating (Labov 1972), arguing (Labov 1972; Wirdenäs 2002), or joking (Ohlsson 2003). But, although

older children indeed spend a lot of time with their primary group, family discourse remains relatively unexplored as a context of later language development.

There are, however, some recent studies of family discourse including older children which compare language socialization in different cultural groups. Blum-Kulka (1990; extended and revised as a monograph, 1997) has studied 'cultural patterns of communication in family discourse' in dinner table conversations in Israeli and Jewish American families. Taking the view that linguistic behavior is socio-culturally conditioned and using discourse analytical methods, Blum-Kulka focused on pragmatic socialization through 'acts of social control' and 'meta-pragmatic comments'. According to her definition, these comments are made 'to sanction a perceived lack of politeness, to encourage "proper" behavior and to prompt the use of politeness formulae' (Blum-Kulka 1990).

De Geer et al. (2002), extending Blum-Kulka's study of 'meta-pragmatic comments', mentioned above, to other ethnic communities, but with some extensions of the coding system, compared the use of 'comments', as they term them, during family dinners in five socio-culturally defined groups: Estonian, Finnish, and Swedish families living in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden respectively, as well as Estonian and Finnish families living in Sweden. In this study, they elaborate Blum-Kulka's definition of meta-pragmatic comments, by specifying them as speech-acts used 'with the explicit or implicit aim to influence a conversational partner to speak or behave in a certain way' and in order 'to teach, or draw attention to, conversational or socio-cultural norms'. According to this functional definition, comments involve a short or long term purpose to regulate behaviors in accordance with given socio-cultural norms. De Geer et al. claim to have found significant differences in the use of comments between different socio-cultural groups.

However, objections may be raised to the above studies because of their rather vague and theoretically unfounded definitions of the act of 'meta-pragmatic comment'. Also, there are problems related to the collection of data and the coding methods used. In both studies, the families observed were reported to include 'target children' ranging from 9 to 13 years (De Geer et al. 2002) or from 6 to 17 (Blum-Kulka

1990), as well as younger and older siblings. Although these age differences, both among target children and among siblings within each cultural group, can be assumed to affect the use of comments for socialization purposes during the family dinners (cf. Perlman 1984), they were not explicitly accounted for in any of the studies. This lack of differentiation of the children into age groups is unfortunate, since the categories of comments observed seem to have been defined with a developmental perspective in mind (as pointed out by Blum-Kulka 1997:13), as seen from the explicit mentioning of teaching conversational or socio-cultural norms. Such a differentiation would have been desirable also for the reason that the comments made by the children were included in the quantitative results.

Furthermore, the sub-categories selected might be sensitive also to social differences within the cultural groups (Bernstein 1961), but none of the studies make it sufficiently clear if the social backgrounds of the parents in these families from different countries and cultures are equal, or at least similar.

The aim of the present study is to reconsider, theoretically and empirically, the relationship between the age spans of the children in the families and the frequency, type, function, and distribution of communicative acts termed 'meta-pragmatic comments' or simply 'comments' used in the context of family dinner conversations. For this purpose, the study focuses on two groups of families, homogeneous with regard to social and cultural circumstances, as checked by a questionnaire, but differing by the age spans of the children.

The families in both groups have one child of age 10-11 years, referred to as the 'target child'. However, the families of group 1 include siblings who are younger (mean age 8.4) than the target child, while the families of group 2 include siblings who are older (mean age 13.5). The age of the target child was set at 10-11 years, because this age marks an important borderline between early childhood and adolescence and because the most basic linguistic and pragmatic skills have been acquired by this age. In addition, there are few studies devoted both to this age and to the years immediately before and after.

In the present study, the definition of the conversational act of 'meta-pragmatic comment' and some of the principles for coding sub-

categories of comments have been adapted from De Geer et al. (2002), but the 'comment' (as it will be termed) will be more precisely analyzed by anchoring it in speech-act theory; also, the sub-categories of comments selected will be explicitly motivated so as to allow for a developmental perspective. Furthermore, the results, including the comments made by the children in both groups, will be accounted for and discussed from a developmental as well as a functional perspective.

Assuming a potentially socializing function of 'meta-pragmatic comments', my hypothesis was that differences would emerge between the two age groups regarding use, distribution, and other characteristics of the comments. Considering these premises, I posed the following questions.

First, could differences be established between the two age groups as a whole regarding the comments produced in the dinner conversations? That is, would the use of comments be affected by the different age spans among the children of the two groups?

Second, did parents use more comments, or more comments of certain kinds, in the younger group than in the older one (Becker 1990)? Supposing that the sub-categories selected are sensitive to the development of the children, this would be highly probable within the framework of an interactional theory of socialization. In addition, were there differences between the parents of different sexes in their use of comments? (Compare that Bellinger (1988) reports fathers as showing a more direct style toward their children).

Third, what kind of differences could be found between the children concerning the use of comments? Did older siblings use more comments than did younger siblings and did they use more comments addressed to their younger siblings (i. e. the target children in group 2) or referring to persons not present (Ochs 1986)? Did the target children in the two groups show the same or different patterns?

Finally, were the comments (or, in general, communicative acts with similar pragmatic features) used for other purposes than regulating behavior, or drawing attention to or teaching social rules (Blum-Kulka 1997)? This last question gives rise to a follow-up question of a more general scope. What specific methodological

problems should be addressed in studies of the use of meta-pragmatic comments in family dinner conversation?

2. Theoretical framework

The fields of research that are of special interest for this study concern 1) the social context of language socialization (or development), especially in older children, 2) the speech event of family dinner conversation, and 3) the theory of communicative acts in natural discourse.

The theoretical view of language acquisition of this study, the interactional view, has influenced research in several aspects for more than 30 years, with considerable repercussions on methods of both analysis and observation (see Brumark (1989) for a review).

From an interactional perspective, the acquisition of linguistic and pragmatic skills may be looked upon as an integral part of the process of general socialization (Ochs 1996). In this process, the child's linguistic and pragmatic behaviors are constantly interacting with its social environment on gradually more advanced levels of competence. Within this process, adults assist the child in his/her development by adapting their verbal and nonverbal behaviors to the child's linguistic and pragmatic competence. As children get more skilled as conversational partners, adults may for instance move the topical focus from the immediate ('here and now') context toward other thematic fields, increase the use of declarative utterances at the expense of utterances with more salient and response-demanding surface forms, or engage in social conversation rather than more directive and instructive communication. This means that adults in interaction with children adapt their communication to the perceived level of development, thus allowing the children to perform somewhere between their actual and their potential communicative stage (i. e. in the 'zone of proximal development', as Vygotskij (1968) has called it).

Though often focused on verbal features of communication between parent and child, the 'interactionist approach' to language socialization also draws attention to other aspects of the situational context and the interaction between environmental factors, such as

setting and socio-cultural background. As a consequence, early language socialization as well as later development of linguistic and pragmatic skills is often studied in selected natural situations of communication, such as leisure activities, especially meal situations, within the primary group, the family.

The context of the family dinner, focused on in this study, has been assumed to play a culturally distinctive role in pragmatic socialization. Dinner conversations are shared social speech events, where children learn how to become competent conversational partners in intergenerational multiparty talk (Blum-Kulka 1997). However, family dinners differ from other kinds of speech events in a number of ways. First, the participation of small children during the meal gives rise to an asymmetrical power relationship, which is displayed by the use of social control (though most often mitigated, see Ervin-Tripp et al. 1990; Blum-Kulka 1990; Brumark 2002) on the part of the parents.

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. Apart from the regulative function, family dinner table conversations serve two other main functions: creating an atmosphere of social ambience (sociability) and socializing (Blum-Kulka 1997:34).

More generally speaking, the sociability goal favors the use of talk for phatic as well as pure informative functions (van Dijk 1981). The socialization goal, on the other hand, is achieved in a conspicuous way by means of regulatory and meta-pragmatic comments. But it may also be accomplished through all kinds of socio-culturally conditioned talk, which means that anything happening during the dinner may have an implicit socialization value. For this reason, it should not surprise us that family dinner talk is considered an important part of 'the ways in which children are socialized to use language in context in socially and culturally appropriate ways' (Blum-Kulka 1997:3). Of interest here are, furthermore, theories of the rule and norm systems governing verbal and nonverbal activities within this situational context.

The rule systems framing speech events, such as dinner conversations, include, on the one hand, socio-culturally determined

norms of how to behave at table, how to talk, about what matters and by whom (if talk during dinner is allowed at all), as well as an infinite number of 'micro-norms' concerning this important and common situation in a family's everyday. On the other hand, there are other, more general rules, which must be observed by participants in a discourse in order to obtain an optimal communicative exchange.

Grice proposed (1975) four linguistically and culturally universal maxims for successful communication: Quantity (make your contribution as informative as required), Quality (tell the truth), Relation (be relevant), and Manner (be brief and clear). Most empirical research on these maxims seems to have focused on either their unintended violation or their deliberate floating. The maxims, however, do not seem to have a universally valid normative force. Observations indicate, for instance, that men and women differ in their adherence to the maxims (Rundquist 1992). Some research has also focused on children's comprehension and production of speech in relation to the Gricean maxims. Not surprisingly, misinterpretations and violations were found to decrease with age, but at a different rate and to a varying extent in different contexts (Pellegrini et al. 1987).

Of considerable importance for the present study was also to find a suitable theory dealing with the problem of delimiting the minimal conversational contributions from which to identify the comments. In the studies referred to above, the basic units for the coding of 'meta-pragmatic comments' seem to have been utterances. While an utterance is usually defined by syntactic and prosodic features, 'meta-pragmatic comments' seem to be determined and defined by certain inherent components (such as a speaker-based aim and a communicative function in the actual context), which can be superimposed over several utterances. Further, different utterances may, in accordance with speech act theory, have a similar locutionary content and an identical syntactic form, yet imply a different illocutionary force or communicative function, depending on the situation (Austin 1962). In addition to the illocutionary force of, for instance, a regulative comment, there may also be a varying perlocutionary force, which may be defined as the expected outcome of that comment in the actual situation (Searle 1977). A comment with a regulative function would thus be successful with regard to effect or outcome if it attracts the

attention of an appropriate partner, helps the addressee to know what to do (either explicitly, or implicitly by the aid of contextual clues), is persuasive and convinces the addressee to act, and establishes or maintains an appropriate social relationship (Ervin-Tripp 1982).

Speech act theory has been found to be especially useful not only in theoretical and empirical research of early language development (e.g. Dore 1975, 1977, 1979), but also in studies involving older children, where e.g. the perlocutionary force of parents' acts of social control and meta-pragmatic comments has been examined in terms of expected outcome (in this case, obedience; Blum-Kulka 1990).

From a speech act theoretical perspective, the act of comment may be divided into two functionally different types. The first type includes communicative acts, most often formulated as declaratives or 'constatives', according to Austin, and directed toward a conversational partner in the immediate communicative context, as a reaction to some immediate or past actions or utterances of that partner (or another present or absent person), as in the following example, taken from a small party among close friends:

- (1) Hostess: My! Why do you come dressed up like that?

This kind of comment implies an evaluation – positive or negative – of the target of the comment against socio-culturally conditioned norms, elaborated within a particular value system.

The other type may be characterized in the same way, but with two potential supplementary functions: on the one hand, that of regulating immediate or future behaviors of the partner, and on the other hand, that of pointing out improper behaviors or reinforcing proper ones, thereby potentially teaching conversational or socio-cultural norms. The following extracts may serve as examples:

- (2) Mother: You mustn't put back your own spoon in the jar like that!
- (3) Father: May I have an answer or are we going to write letters?¹

The first type of comment as in (1) above, carries as its illocutionary force an explicit or implicit evaluation, the implications of which may be identified through inference from the situational context.

The second type, illustrated by examples (2) and (3), adds a contextually determined and conventionalized illocutionary force of regulating or 'teaching', as well as a perlocutionary force aiming at an expected goal; the latter may be identified by inference from contextual clues.

Both types of comments are 'meta-pragmatic' in the sense of Caffi (1997): they are about, or go beyond, situated actions (framed by situationally governed norms), their intended illocutionary force being that of 'talking about' or 'pointing to' socio-cultural norms or rules. In contrast to the addressee, who often successfully infers such an intention from the conversational implicature of the utterance (Grice 1975), in combination with clues in the context, the external observer may encounter serious problems here. Careful analysis is needed to sort out the communicative acts in their contexts, and to determine, first, which are comments, second, which are meta-pragmatic, and third, which might serve a socializing purpose.

3. Data collection

3.1. Participants

The study is based on conversations in 19 Swedish monolingual families with one to four children of school age (7-17 years), where (at least) one of the children, named the target child, was preadolescent (10-12 years of age).² The families were of urban middle-class and a similar socio-economic background, living in, or in the neighborhood of, Stockholm. Appropriate families were recruited through a letter briefly describing the study and distributed via elementary schools in the area.

In addition, a questionnaire inquiring about the families' demographic data and their attitudes to the functions of conversation during meals and to pragmatic socialization in general was distributed after

video recording in order to check the socio-cultural homogeneity of the group.

3.2. Recordings

The 19 families having indicated willingness to participate were contacted and appropriate dates for video recording were decided on. In all, 18 mothers, 10 fathers and 46 children of age 6 to 17 participated in the dinner conversations. The total number of participants thus amounted to 74, or approximately 4 (3.9) members of each family. (See Table 1).

The dinner table conversations were recorded in their entirety, usually in the family kitchen 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 meal was 17 mins. (See Table 2).

3.3. Transcription

The 19 recordings were transcribed using a modified version of the CHAT system (McWhinney 1991) for transcription of natural discourse. The recordings were transcribed in their entirety, with the exception of utterances that clearly had nothing to do with the meal.⁴ Verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions having a clear communicative function relevant to the conversation, as judged by two researchers, were identified and coded by means of the coding categories presented below. Selected parts of the transcriptions were checked against the video recording by two researchers familiar with the actual transcription methods; interrater reliability amounted to 85% in the compared transcripts.

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Table 1. Participants in group 1 and 2

	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Number</i>		
Mothers	9	9
Fathers	5	5
<i>Children, target</i>	10	9
Girls	4	5
Boys	6	4
<i>Children, siblings</i>	12	15 ³
Girls	9	9
Boys	3	6
<i>Children, total</i>	22	24
<i>Participants, total</i>	36	38
<i>Mean ages</i>		
Parents	34.9	42
Children, target	10.8	10.8
Children, siblings	8.4	13.5

Table 2. Basic data for coding

*Length of recordings,**Number, mean number and percentage of utterances, turns and comments*

	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Length of recordings</i>	9-25	9-20
Mean length of recordings	17	17.77
<i>Number of turns</i>	2610	2495
Mean number of turns	261	277.3
<i>Number of utterances</i>	3083	3162
Mean number of utterances	308.3	351.3
Number of utterances/minute	19.52	19.48
Number of utterances/participant	85.6	83.2
Percentage of utterances/total number	49.37	50.63
<i>Number of comments</i>	149	193
Mean number of comments	14.9	21.44
Number of comments/minute	0.94	1.1
Number of comments/participant	4.1	5.1
Percentage of comments/utterances	4.8	6.1
SD of mean number of comments	3.4	3.4

4. Method and coding procedure

4.1. Coding units

For the segmentation of the recorded conversations, the units of **turn** and **utterance** were considered to be most appropriate, both from an informative and an interactional perspective, since these units reflect the physical stretches of verbal and nonverbal contributions to a multi-

party conversation. For the identification and further coding of comments, the basic unit of speech act (here termed **communicative act**, including both verbal and nonverbal behaviors) was used, since it usually matches an utterance (and sometimes a turn, when its illocutionary force extends over more than one utterance); above all, speech act theory allows for a more thorough analysis.

Turns

'Turn' is defined as the ensemble of verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions by which a participant holds the floor in conversation (cf. Sacks et al. 1974).

Utterances

'Utterance' is defined as the part of a turn corresponding to one prosodic clause; syntactically, it corresponds to one or more syntactic clauses (see for instance Hellspong 1988; Brumark 1989).

Communicative acts

Communicative acts are defined as utterances serving specific communicative functions.

In the present study, focus is on the communicative act of comment; while most comments were assumed to carry a meta-pragmatic function; in addition, some of them functioned in a regulative manner.

Addressors and addressees

In order to detect possible differences between the two groups of subjects regarding the use of comments and their distribution among the participants (i.e., who made comments and to whom), both addressor and addressee were identified for each comment.

4.2. Coding categories

All utterances/communicative acts identified as comments, both those of the adults and those of the children, were coded into sub-categories according to the communicative acts' form, function, and focus.

These sub-categories were selected to match important, available data on linguistic and pragmatic development in children from early childhood through the school years up to pre-adolescence (see Brumark 1989, for an overview). There is, for instance, a considerable amount of research on the syntactic form of speech addressed to children, beginning with the earliest language input studies (see e. g. Snow 1977), indicating a high frequency of imperative and interrogative directives, especially in the speech of mothers (Snow and Goldfield 1982). Similarly, communication with children has been shown to be more directive than is the case for communication between adults (Cross 1977; Snow 1977). Further, there is evidence of reference focused on the immediate context, especially on the child's nonverbal and verbal activities, rather than on matters outside the actual situation (Keenan and Schieffelin 1976).

The coding categories presented below are based on examples from the recordings, when necessary completed by a description of the context or the situation.

4.2.1. Form and function of comments

'Form' here refers to the syntactic form of the main clause of a comment.

4.2.1.1. Syntactic form

In order to describe the surface realization of the comments, they were analyzed according to their syntactic form.

Declarative

In addition to 'plain' declaratives, declarative statements sometimes include a main modal verb ('you may', 'you shall', 'you should' etc.; cf. on the imperative below):

- (4) Target child: du hade inte ställt klockan för du trodde de va helg
[you did not set the alarm because you thought it was a weekend]

In this example, the target child is commenting on the mother's failure to wake up the children.

- (5) Mother: man kan inte hålla på å flytta hela tiden
[you cannot move around all the time]

This comment is coded as a general statement.

Interrogative

Interrogatives include wh-questions, yes-/no-questions, and prosodic questions (statements marked by interrogative intonation), sometimes marked by an adverb (translated as a tag question in English):

- (6) Mother: de brukar du aldrig göra, va (ironically)
[you never do that, do you]
- (7) Mother: var tar all maten vägen?
[where does all the food go?]
- (8) Mother: men är du fortfarande hungrig
[but are you still hungry?]
- (9) Mother: du brukar väl aldrig gilla grönsaker?
[you never like vegetables, do you?]

Imperative

Imperatives are generally marked by a verb in imperative form, but may also have the surface form of a statement, especially with modal verbs like 'may', 'shall', or 'should' (indirect, conventionalized forms of imperative; on directness, see Section 4.2.1.2, below):

(10) Father: nä nä nä, sluta nu! nu e du ute å cyklar!
[no no no, stop it! now you are all wet!]

(11) Father: koncentrera dej på de här i stället!
[concentrate on this for a change!]

This latter comment is triggered by the child doing other things than eating.

(12) Mother: nä ni ska inte äta soya
[no you must not eat soy]

Ellipsis

Elliptic comments are formulated as fragmentary sentences:

(13) Mother: oj oj oj, ja just de
[my my my, that's okay]

(14) Mother: å inte så där!
[and not like that!]

Ellipses often occur as reactions to unexpected happenings.

4.2.1.2. Directness

Comments may be expressed in different ways: formally, more or less direct; and functionally, more or less conventional. More directness was expected in the younger group.

Direct

Direct comments may be formulated using an imperative form of the main verb, a modal verb ('may', 'shall', or 'should'), and/or by explicitly naming the action criticized or ordered:

- (15) Mother: vi springer inte omkring
 [we do not run around]

The comment in example (15) is uttered as a declarative, but may nevertheless be direct by naming the undesirable action. In this case, the direct comment is mitigated by the inclusive plural of the addressee ('we').

Indirect

Just like the direct comments mentioned above, indirect comments may be modified by mitigation strategies. They may also – and more typically – be conventionally indirect, produced as interrogatives, or non-conventionally indirect, by the use of idiosyncratic expressions which derive their meaning from the context:

- (16) Mother: du gillar potatis och du gillar korv
 [you like potato and you like sausage]

This comment is made as a reaction to the child's reluctance to touch the food offered at dinner, and thus indirectly encourages him to eat.

4.2.2. Focus of comments

All comments were also coded according to their main referential focus, which could be either a non-linguistic or linguistic behavior. Non-linguistic and linguistic behaviors were further distinguished into sub-categories, as exemplified below.

4.2.2.1. Non-linguistic behavior

Comments on non-linguistic behavior were coded into three sub-categories:

Table manners

Comments on table manners concern behavior at the table in a broad sense:

- (17) Mother: nämen de e inge trevligt att stoppa ner gaffeln i burken
[but it is not nice to put your fork into the jar]

Prudential

Prudential comments make the addressee realize what has to be done in order to prevent harm or loss:

- (18) Mother: akta de e varmt!
[watch out it's hot!]

Other

Other types of comments of a more general character concern all kinds of reprehensible behavior, whether in obvious conflict with general rules or social norms or not:

- (19) Target child: han e helt rubbad
[he is out of his mind]

This utterance comments upon how an adult neighbor behaves toward children. However, comments may also be positive, encouraging appropriate behaviors in children as well as adults, as in the following example:

- (20) Target child: du är så klok mamma
[you are so wise, mommy]

The child is praising her mother for handling a conflict diplomatically.

These categories, considered to be developmentally relevant, were based on the assumption that there would be more comments on table manners, prudential comments, or comments on violations of the Gricean maxims in the younger group than in the older one.

4.2.2.2. Linguistic behavior

Comments on linguistic behaviors were coded into three sub-categories:

Meta-linguistic

Meta-linguistic comments concern the language system or language use:

- (21) Sibling 2: du ser helt 'sjukt' ut – försök säga de där på svenska istället
[you look 'sickly' – try to say that in Swedish instead]

Maxims

Comments on maxims concern violations of the Gricean maxims:

- (22) Mother: man ska inte överdriva
[you must not exaggerate]

– meaning that one must not use too strong or too many words, thus violating the maxim of quantity.

- (23) Target child: nä de låter bara larvigt
[no it sounds just silly]

This comment chides adults for trying to speak like youngsters, thereby violating the maxim of manner.

Other

Comments on turn regulation and other linguistic behaviors were few and are therefore collapsed into one category, as in (3) above (here repeated along with the Swedish text):

- (24) Father: kan man få ett svar eller ska vi brevväxla?
 [may I have an answer or are we going to write
 letters?]

4.2.2.3. Time of focused behavior

In some cases, the nonverbal and verbal behaviors commented upon were directly observable by the addressor. But comments may also touch on behaviors in the past, in the future, or in general, at any time. In the younger group, more comments were expected to concern immediate behaviors than was the case for the older group.

'Here and now'

Comments may be focused on behaviors in the immediate ('here and now') context:

- (25) Mother: men Kalle va gör du?
 [but Kalle what are you doing]

The mother is blaming the child for spilling milk.

Remote

Often, however, comments touch on non-verbal and verbal behaviors in the past time, or which are expected to occur:

- (26) Mother: du orkade inte sätta upp dem
 [you gave up putting them up]

In this case, the mother is blaming the child for not having helped her prepare the Christmas dinner.

4.3. Coding procedures

All coding of comments, both on non-linguistic and linguistic behaviors, was determined by checking the previous and following conversational context. The codings were further cross-checked by two researchers who were familiar with the method used.

5. *Results and discussion*

5.1. Length of recordings

The length of the recordings varied in and between the two groups: 9-25 (mean length: 17 minutes) within group 1 and 9-20 (mean length: 17.77 minutes) within group 2. (See Table 2).

5.2. Number of turns and comments

The number of turns (total number: 5105) and utterances (total number: 6245) did not differ much in the two groups: 2610 turns and 3083 utterances were produced in group 1, and 2495 turns and 3162 utterances in group 2. The mean number of turns in group 1 was 261, and in group 2, 277.3. The mean number of utterances within group 1 was 308.3; in group 2, 351.3. When accounting for these differences, it must be taken into consideration that group 2 (older siblings) included two more children than did group 1.⁵ (See Table 2).

Table 2. Basic data for coding (repeated here for convenience)

*Length of recordings,**Number, mean number and percentage of utterances, turns and comments*

	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Length of recordings</i>	9-25	9-20
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Number of comments/minute	0.94	1.1
Number of comments/participant	4.1	5.1
Percentage of comments/utterances	4.8	6.1
SD of mean number of comments	3.4	3.4

The results in Table 2 are based on percentages of the total number of comments of each group.

The number of comments differed in the two groups: 149 within group 1 and 193 within group 2 (mean numbers: 14.9 and 21.44, respectively). Plotted against time, the difference between the groups was still in favor of the second group: 1.1 comments per minute in group 2 (with older children) as against 0.94 comments per minute in group 1. Even when considering the proportion of utterances and

comments per participant, the individual shares were larger in the second group.

These results differ from the data in De Geer et al. (2002), probably due to the larger number of older (group 2) children participating in the present study. But the differences between the two studies could also have been produced artificially, by the extremely large number of utterances identified in De Geer et al.'s work.⁶

5.3. Addressors and addressees

A comparison between the two groups regarding addressors and addressees showed that mothers in the first group produced 68 % of the comments in this group, whereas the mothers within group 2 only produced 40 % of the comments. These findings may be compared with the study of De Geer et al. (2002), according to which 53 % of the comments identified were made by the Swedish mothers, while 74 % were made by the Estonian mothers (see further Section 6, General discussion). The fathers were not by far as active in these conversations as were the mothers: out of all comments, 20 % were made by fathers in group 1, and only 10 % in group 2.

Among the children, there were even more striking differences. Not unexpectedly, the older siblings within group 2 produced considerably more comments, 26 % of the total amount in this group, compared to 7 % of the comments made by younger siblings within group 1. (The mean age of the siblings within group 2 was 13.5 compared to 8.4 within group 1).

More interestingly, the target children within group 2 made 24 % of the comments in this group, compared to only 5 % among the target children within group 1, although this group included one target child more than did group 2. The target children were of the same age in the two groups (mean age 10.8 years in both). The most likely explanation is that they were encouraged by the example of their older siblings to make comments (see further Section 6, General discussion).

Table 3. Distribution of comments

Distribution and percentages (in italics) of comments on addressors

	Group 1	Group 2
Total number	151	222
<i>Percentage of all comments</i>	<i>40.5</i>	<i>59.5</i>
Mothers	102	88
<i>Percentage of comments in group</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>40</i>
Fathers	31	24
<i>Percentage of comments in group</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>10</i>
Children, target	8	53
<i>Percentage of comments in group</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>24</i>
Children, siblings	10	57
<i>Percentage of comments in group</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>26</i>

If mothers were the most active addressors of comments, the target children were by far the most often addressed, at least within group 1 (50 %). Other persons at the table received comments in 42 % of the cases while persons outside the meal situation did so in 8 % of the cases.

Within group 2, however, only 23 % of the target children were actually targets of comments, compared to the 60 % of the other participants at the dinner that were commented upon. Recall also the large proportion of comments made by both target children and older siblings within group 2. Very often, these older children commented on each other (see further examples (29) and (30) below), but they also made many comments on sayings and doings of other people not present. This latter habit seems to be a characteristic conversational strategy among teenagers.

Table 4. Distribution of comments

Addressees of comments

Percentage of comments	Group 1	Group 2
Target child	50	23
Other participant at table	42	60 ⁷
Other persons not present	8	17

Comparing these data to those in De Geer et al. (2002), there seem to be similarities between the younger group in this study and the Estonian group in the inter-cultural study, whereas group 2 in this study resembles the Finnish-Swedish group in the intercultural study.

5.4. Formal and functional features

As expected, the most frequent *syntactic form* for comments turned out to be the declarative, particularly so in the second group (75 %, compared to 66 % in the first group). The two categories of interrogative and imperative, however, did not seem to be used so often for commenting. The few imperatives found were of the following types, (comments mostly made by fathers):

- (27) Father: sluta!
Gr 1 [stop it!]

as a reaction to the target child's misbehavior at the table

- (28) Father: koncentrera dej på de här i stället!
Gr 1 [concentrate on this instead]

in order to direct the child's attention to the main activity, i.e. eating her meatballs.

An overall comparison of the age groups shows that they differ in their use of interrogatives, imperatives, and ellipses: 15 % interrogatives in the first group, compared to 9 % in the second; 10 % imperatives in the first group, compared to 5 % in the second; and 9 % ellipses in the first group, compared to 11 % in the second.

Viewed in a developmental perspective, this difference was to be expected. In an early semi-experimental study, for instance, Bellinger found a decrease of imperative and response-demanding (interrogative) directives in maternal speech as children grow older (Bellinger 1978).

When comparing the data of the present study with those of De Geer et al. (2002), group 1 shows a similar pattern to the families in the three cultures with regard to interrogatives, whereas the frequency of imperatives (and also, to some extent, of ellipses) differs considerably, the interrogatives ranging from 13 % in the Swedish families to 36 % in the Estonian families and the ellipses from 6 % in the Swedish families to 19 % in the Estonian ones. These differences may be explained partly by cultural factors, partly also by differences of distribution within age groups, a factor not taken into consideration in the De Geer's et al.'s inter-cultural study (see further Section 6, General discussion).

A more careful look at the addressors of the comments in the present study, however, provides more interesting findings. Whereas declaratives were made by mothers in 49 % of the cases in group 1 (younger children), as compared to only 27 % in the second group, the children in this latter group produced considerably more declaratives: 21 % were produced by the target children and 19 % by the siblings in group 2, compared to 5 % and 3 %, respectively in the first group.

The same tendency can be seen for interrogatives. Out of the 15 % interrogatives in the first group, mothers in the first group stood for 11 % of the cases, whereas fathers and siblings represented only 2 % each. In the second group, the share of mothers was a mere 5 %, while target children and siblings produced 2 % and 3 %, respectively, and the fathers none at all.

RECONSIDERING COMMENTS IN FAMILY DINNER CONVERSATIONS

Table 5. Form of comments

<i>Syntactic sentence type</i>		
Percentages of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Declarative, total</i>	66	75 ⁸
Mothers	49	27
Fathers	9	8
Target children	5	21
Siblings	3	19
<i>Interrogative, total</i>	15	9
Mothers	11	4
Fathers	2	
Target children		2
Siblings	2	3
<i>Imperative, total</i>	10	5 ⁹
Mothers	3	2
Fathers	4	1
Target children		2
Siblings	3	1
<i>Ellipsis, total</i>	9	11

Concerning the imperatives, on the other hand, the fathers in the first group were the most active producers, 4 %, whereas 3 % were made by (a) sibling(s) – (most of them produced by a girl, annoyed by her older brother, who was constantly kicking her foot (example (26))). In group 2, most of the imperatives (2 %) made by target children were directed toward behaviors of their (older) siblings (see examples (29) and (30)).

- (29) Sibling: jamen Kalle
 Gr 1 [but Kalle]
 Mother: va gör han da?
 [what does he do then?]
 Sibling: sparkar på fot
 [kicks my foot]
 Mother: sparka inte på hennes fot, vah
 [dont kick her foot, please]
 Sibling: Kalle!
 Mother: gör du de fortfarande?
 [are you still doing that?]
 Sibling: men Kalle!
 [but Kalle!]
 Mother: va gör du nu da?
 [what are you doing now then?]
 Sibling: sparkar på min fot
 [kicks my foot]
 Mother: gillar du Lisa, Kalle? (smiling)
 [do you like Lisa, Kalle?]

Regarding the distribution of *direct* and *indirect* comments, there was an unexpectedly larger amount of direct comments within group 2 (63 % against 47 % in group 1).

This discrepancy may be explained in different ways. Becker (1988), for instance, found that parents frequently used indirect, critical or even sarcastic, comments in order to make their pre-school children conform to the norms. Since in our study, modified directness was not considered a separate category, but was coded as direct, this may have affected the results for group 2.

Furthermore, a considerable amount of direct comments made in group 2 were produced by the children, both target children and siblings (see Table 6 and examples (30) - (33) below, all from the same family in group 2).

RECONSIDERING COMMENTS IN FAMILY DINNER CONVERSATIONS

Table 6. Form of comments

Directness

Percentage of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Direct, total</i>	47	63 ¹⁰
Mothers	29	23
Fathers	12	9 ¹¹
Target children	2	12
Siblings	4	19
<i>Indirect, total</i>	53	37
Mothers	39	17 ¹²
Fathers	8	2
Target children	3	11
Siblings	3	7

- (30) Target child: men Lena, gästerna [ska ta] först!
 Gr 2 [but Lena, the guests [are supposed to serve themselves] first!]

The target child here (group 2), is blaming her older sister for violating the rules of hospitality.

- (31) Sibling: låt den stå där den står!
 Gr 2 [let it be where it is!]

In this example, the group 2 sibling tries to make her younger sister stop moving the hot soup tureen.

- (32) Sibling: va du e elak!
 Gr 2 [how mean you are!]

Here, this sibling gets very upset by the manner of an older sibling reprimanding her for her table manners (which, in her opinion are not worse than normal).

- (33) Target child: va dum du e som säger fel! (faking anger)
 Gr 2 [how silly you are to say the wrong word!]
 du ska säga P å J!
 [you must say P and J!]

The two utterances in example (33) are analyzed as direct comments because of their explicit mentioning of the blamed behavior, the first directed toward the maxim of manner, the second being a meta-linguistic comment on how to say things. (Recall, though, that this example is one among many of teenage ironic 'mocking-commenting').

As for the distribution of direct and indirect comments, there seems to be a tendency among mothers in group 1 to prefer indirect commenting (39 % indirect comments against 29 % direct ones), compared to the mothers in group 2 (17 % against 23 %). In contrast, the fathers in both groups appear to be more direct (12 % against 8 % in group 1; 9 % against 2 % in group 2), and the same goes for the siblings in both groups (4 % against 3 % in group 1; 19 % against 8 % in group 2). The target children made approximately as many direct as indirect comments, even though their total amount of comments differed, as mentioned above. These findings support previous studies of directness in maternal and child directives (Ervin-Tripp et al. 1990; Brumark 2003b).

The findings add further strength to the assumption that the speech of teenagers is more spontaneous and direct (Romaine 1984; Kotsinas 1994) than adult speech. But they also confirm results indicating differences between the two age groups with regard to other sub-categories in this study and provide further evidence of older siblings being models to their younger siblings (cf. Bublitz 1988; Ochs 1996; Brumark 2003b).

Compared with the cross-cultural results in De Geer et al. (2002), the first group shows the same pattern as do the Estonian families with regard to direct and indirect comments, whereas the second group in

this study resembles the Finnish-Swedish families in the cross-cultural study (De Geer et al. 2002).

As pointed out in this latter study, such an incongruence between functionally coded directness and syntactic surface form is surprising, though not unreasonable, since syntax is only one among many means of expressing directness.

5.5. Focus

The behaviors most often commented upon in both groups were non-verbal acts, but to a varying extent: 87 % in the first group and 75 % in the second (see Table 7). Among the non-verbal behaviors most criticized in the first group were those labeled 'table-manners' (58 %), whereas other behaviors (52 %) were more often focused upon in the second group. In both groups, table manners were most often commented upon by the mothers, as against only sometimes by the fathers. However, the table manners of the older siblings in five of the families in group 2 were quite often criticized by their younger siblings, as seen from the following examples (34) - (35):

- (34) Target child: sluta, sluta ät me händerna!
 Gr 2 [stop it, stop eating with your hands!]
 Sibling: ja äter väl inte me händerna
 [I am not eating with my hands, am I?]
- (35) Target child: nä måste du ha ett sånt bordsskick?
 Gr 2 [do you have to have such [bad] manners at the table?]
 Sibling: va? Vadå bordsskick?
 [what? What do you mean by table manners?]
 Target child: hålla i gaffeln å skära
 [hold the fork and cut]
 Sibling: ser du hur ja håller i gaffeln bara, de ser ju inte klokt ut
 [just look how I hold the fork, it looks very odd]
 Target child: håll handen över i stället

- [hold your hand up instead]
 du e så äcklig! ta lite (i) taget bara, de får inte
 plats i munnen
 [you are disgusting! take only a little at a time, it
 does not fit into your mouth]
- Sibling: ska du säga
 [who are you to tell me]
- Target child: ja för ja tog såna här små bitar /.../
 [yes because I took such small pieces like
 these/.../]

Comments in the second group focused proportionally more often on the language of the addressee (or some third person) than was the case in the first group (25 % vs. 13 %). The comments addressed Gricean maxims (quantity, quality, relevance, and manner) in about 10 % of the cases in both groups, whereas meta-linguistic comments occurred more often in the second group (7 % against 2 %).

The category of other linguistic comments was quite small in the first group (1 %), but somewhat more prominent in the second group (7 %), possibly due to a certain competition for the floor on the part of older siblings in that group; also, metapragmatic discussions were more frequent here, as in the following example:

- (36) Target child: han e så konstig
 Gr 2 [he is so odd]
 han säger så här 'gör ... skjut bara'
 [he says like this 'do ... just shoot']
 så as-sur
 [so awful sour]
 'ja vill inte höra av dej' å så as-sur
 ['I dont want to hear from you' and so awful
 sour]
 jah han e helt rubbad
 [yes he is quite crazy]
- Mother: men de kan han inte ha sagt
 [but he could not have said that]
 men hur sa han då?

[but what did he say then?]
 Target child: han sa 'ja alla har ju såna där'
 [he said 'well everybody wears things like that']
 'de enda man kan se skillnad på e storleken'
 ['the only thing to distinguish them is the size']
 å 'de ser helt sjukt ut'
 [and 'that looks quite sick']

Here, the adult person mentioned is criticized for saying rude and impolite things to children.

All these categories scored lower than the corresponding variables in the cross-cultural study of De Geer et al. (2002), with the exception of the scores for the group closest to the families in the present study, viz., the monolingual Swedish families (as expected). Thus, as we have seen for other variables as well, the families of the present study place themselves between the Estonian and Finnish families on the one hand and the Swedish ones on the other.

A comparison between the groups of the present study gave the expected results, but with some interesting exceptions. As mentioned above, the mothers of the first group made considerably more comments about table manners than did those in group 2 (37 % against 9 %), similarly to the fathers in group 1, as compared to group 2 (11 % against 3 %). There were no differences between the siblings regarding this category, but unexpectedly, the target children in group 2 commented just as often as did the mothers on how the participants behaved at table – their remarks being addressed to their older siblings. Comments on matters of prudence occurred almost exclusively among the mothers (5 % in group 1 and 3 % in group 2; in group 1, there was also one sibling who produced one, see example (31) above).

Not surprisingly, comments on other non-linguistic behaviors were by far most common in the second group and mostly made by mothers (17 % in group 1 and 22 % in group 2). Fathers and children did not seem as eager in commenting on other behaviors – with one exception: the older siblings, who scored 13 % across all comments.

Table 7. Focus of comments

<i>Focused behavior</i>		
Percentages of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Non-linguistic behavior</i>	87	75 ¹³
<i>Table manners</i>	51	23 ¹⁴
Mothers	37	9
Fathers	11	3
Target children	3	8
Siblings		2
<i>Prudential</i>	5	2
Mothers	5	1
Siblings		1
<i>Other</i>	31	52
Mothers	17	22
Fathers	5	6
Target children	7	9
Siblings	2	13
<i>Linguistic behavior</i>	13	25
<i>Meta-linguistic</i>	2	7
Mothers	1	2
Fathers		1
Target children		2
Siblings	1	2
<i>Maxims (Gricean)</i>	10	11
Mothers	6	4
Fathers		
Target children	3	4
Siblings	1	3
<i>Other</i>	1	7

As already mentioned, these findings were not totally unexpected; also, one has to bear in mind that many of the older siblings referred to were in their early teens and often engaged in the typical kind of speech found among youngsters (Labov 1972; Kotsinas 1994; see further Section 6, General discussion).

Also meta-linguistic comments were more common (though comparatively few) in the second group and, contrary to what De Geer et al. have suggested, most often performed by mothers and the older siblings; the maxims involved did not differ noticeably by category between groups and family members.

5.6. Time of focused behavior

As expected, comments on behaviors in the *immediate* context occurred more often in the first group (68 %) than in the second (47 %). The mothers of the first group made twice as many comments referring to immediate context as compared to the non-immediate context, while the fathers made three times as many. In the second group, however, the mothers referred more often to the non-immediate context (23 % against 16 %), whereas the fathers in this group referred more often to what was going on in the immediate context (7 % against 4 %). Among the children, both target children and siblings of the first group commented more often upon the immediate context (4 % and 5 % respectively, against 1 %). In the second group, however, both target children and siblings made considerably more comments, while the target children referred less often to the immediate context (10 % against 14 %). (See Table 8).

Table 8. Focus of comments

<i>Time of focused behavior</i>		
Percentage of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Immediate</i>	74	47 ¹⁵
Mothers	49	16
Fathers	15	7
Target children	4	10
Siblings	5	14
<i>Non-immediate or general</i>	26	53
Mothers	19	23
Fathers	5	4
Target children	1	14
Siblings	1	13

That one should encounter many comments referring to persons outside the immediate situation hardly surprises one, if one bears in mind the conversational habits of teenagers. Consider the following example, where an older sibling is blaming the target child's indoor bandy coach for not making sense during training, a behavior which does not conform with the general idea of how coaches are supposed to act:

- (37) Sibling: deras tränare verkar helknäpp han ba 'på bollen,
 på bollen'
 Gr 2 [their coach seems crazy he only says 'go for the
 ball, go for the ball']

The comments of older siblings often criticize people not present at dinner for actions or utterances having occurred in the past.

The high frequency of non-immediate reference in comments among target children is more astonishing. These findings are similar to the results in other sub-categories and could reflect the advantage that children interacting with older siblings have, as compared to children interacting with younger siblings only (see further Section 6).

Comparing the findings of this study to those of De Geer et al. (2002), where 50-75 % of the comments occurring in the immediate context focused on such behaviors as table manners and maxim violations, we are faced with a similar pattern: the first group (of younger children) resembles the Estonian and Finnish families (74 % of the comments targeting actions in the immediate context, compared to 75 % and 73 % in the Estonian and Finnish families respectively), whereas the second group resembles the Swedish families in the cross-cultural study (47 % aiming at the immediate context, compared to 50 % in the cross-cultural study).

- (38) Mother: jamen så där gör man inte
 Gr 2 [but one does not do like that]
 Target child: men JA gör så NU!
 [but I am doing like that NOW!]

6. *General discussion*

6.1. The speech act of 'meta-pragmatic comment'

As mentioned in the Introduction, the functional definition of 'meta-pragmatic comment', formulated in the two previous studies referred to, has been used as point of departure also for this study. However, this definition has the inconvenience of being too vague and therefore too inclusive. Furthermore, these previous studies do not pay due attention to the complications arising from the operationalization of this concept.

First, the definition used seems to include all comments drawing attention to socio-cultural norms, making the definition too wide to be of interest in a study of meta-pragmatic socialization. According to this definition, a meta-pragmatic comment might be any 'constative' (to use

Austin's term) or declarative, evaluating any socio-cultural feature. Consider the examples below:

- (39) Father: de e bra att se svenskarna stå å diska
 Gr 1 [it's good to see Swedish (men) do the dishes]
 Mother: oj oj oj ja just de
 [my my my yes of course]
 Father: de e annat än dom gör på kontinenten
 [that's something other than they are doing on
 the Continent]

In this example, the father draws attention to his own activity by a comment. Its social and pragmatic implications probably reflect the general opinion among Swedes that Swedish men are more willing to participate in household work than are men from other cultures – something which is positive and worth noticing. The reason for including such a comment in a study of pragmatic socialization is its assumed socializing effect as part of a long-range attitudinal influence. But this effect may be uncertain, and is probably even more doubtful in the following example:

- (40) Mother: äter du så många (fiskbitar)!
 Gr 1 [are you eating so many (pieces of fish)!]
 Sibling: ja ja har käkat jättemånga
 [yes I have eaten an awful lot]
 Mother: de e bra
 [that's good]

Here, the implication would be the common (though unconscious) idea that parents have, according to which a child should eat as much as possible of what is offered at dinner (especially when it comes to fish). Common to the examples above is that they draw attention to behaviors judged as 'good', and thus qualify as 'meta-pragmatic comments'.

Second, certain comments that draw attention to behaviors of the addressee may certainly influence his/her behavior, and thus have a 'regulative' function in the immediate context. In some of the

examples, this regulative force is expressed by canonical imperatives (as in example (38)); in others, we find interrogatives (conventionally regarded as being regulative; cf. example (42)) and again, in others, the force may be expressed by certain hints (example (43)).

Such hints (as e.g. in example (40)) require quite a lot of inference to be drawn from nonverbal clues and other aspects of the context, not only by the addressee but also, and even more, by an observer who is interpreting the utterance as a comment.

Certain utterances may be categorized as meta-pragmatic comments because they appear to be critical responses or reactions to a preceding nonverbal or verbal action and its (explicit or implied) illocutionary force:

- (41) Father: nä nä nä sluta nu!
 Gr 1 [no no no stop it now!]

This comment is directed to the target child fretting at the dinner table.

- (42) Mother: varför är du så sen?
 Gr 2 [why are you coming so late?]

The comment in example (42) is directed toward an older sibling who is late for dinner. While the utterance is possibly intended as an information request, the child reacts to it as if it were a blaming comment.

- (43) Father: om du visste vad söt du är när du sitter så där!
 Gr 1 [if you knew how cute you look sitting like this!]

This utterance, addressed to the same target child as in example (41) above, is a typical example of the sarcastic hints made by some of the fathers. While such hints surely may be analyzed as meta-pragmatic comments, their regulative, including their socializing, effect is doubtful (cf. Becker 1992), at least in the immediate context. Regulative utterances, formulated as comments, may also aim at effects in a more remote, future, context, but in these cases the outcome is

uncertain, despite a possible immediate affirmative or negative response (like in example (48) below).

Other comments, despite being analyzed as meta-pragmatic, actually function as a possible social contribution to the dinner conversation. Consider:

- (44) Target child: om man heter Alice får man inte säga fel!
 Gr 2 [if one's name is Alice, one had better not say the wrong name!]
 Sibling: men om man heter Anna får man säga fel!
 [but if one is called Anna, one may say the wrong name]

The first utterance comments on the child's use of the wrong name for a spice, passed on to the mother. This comment may be analyzed as meta-pragmatic, as it initiates a meta-linguistic discussion on naming. Even so, this is a very common type of joking or ironic sparring in the families with older children; it is hardly meant to function as a socializing comment.

Third, in a study of pragmatic socialization, the most important function of meta-pragmatic comments is, by definition, their assumed socializing function of pointing to, or 'teaching', socio-cultural rules and norms. However, from an interactional standpoint, anything said to, or done with, children may have a socializing function, whether explicitly or implicitly (Blum-Kulka 1997). Furthermore, communicative acts that otherwise are identical to acts analyzed as meta-pragmatic comments may occur in conversations without any obvious socializing purpose (cf. examples (45) and (47) below). The question may even be posed whether the majority of these comments serve a socializing purpose or function at all, either implicitly or explicitly (when uttered in the presence of the children participating in the conversation).

In conclusion, the analysis of the meta-pragmatic comments poses some unresolved problems; in particular, the pragmatic force of acts, supposed to be meta-pragmatic and entailing regulating or teaching functions, needs further operational analysis, as will be seen in the following.

6.2. 'Meta-pragmatic comments' and their sub-categorization

As pointed out in the Introduction, the sub-categories in De Geer et al. (2002) seem to have been chosen from a developmental perspective, but without accounting explicitly for the different ages of the siblings. Depending on the perspective taken, quite a few utterances analyzed here as comments could have been classified in other sub-categories. Consider the following examples:

- (45) Mother: va tyst du e, Jonathan
Gr 1 [how quiet you are, Jonathan]
- (46) Father: ni behöver väl inte bli så tysta bara för att det
finns en kamera
Gr 1 [you need not be so quiet just because there is a
camera]

Several similar examples may be drawn from the recordings of this study. Most plausibly, they could be classified as drawing attention to the maxim of quantity ('the child(ren) is(are) saying too little'). From a socio-cultural perspective, however, this comment might be interpreted as a request for participation in the dinner conversation (following the cultural norm of being polite at the dinner table) – in other words, as a comment upon table manners.

Furthermore, the subcategories of comments studied were found to interrelate. That sentence type and directness correlate is hardly surprising, since one of the criteria used in most linguistic analyses for determining directness is precisely the imperative form of the main verb. As pointed out by De Geer et al. (2002), however, directness may be expressed in other ways, too, as in the following example:

- (47) Mother: opsi daysi de där va INTE bra!
Gr 1 [oops that (i.e. cleaning) was NOT properly
done!]

The mother is commenting on the father's careless handling of the dinner plates while doing the dishes.

Further, although direct comments were likely to focus on table manners, this was not always the case. Especially mothers in both groups often used indirect comments to draw attention to behaviors at table (not only the children's, but also the fathers' undesirable behaviors). As a consequence, directness is also often related to the immediate situational context. However, not all direct comments referred to behaviors performed in the immediate context:

- (48) Mother: inte göra fler hål
 Gr 2 [don't make more holes (i. e. by piercing)]

This example shows a mother's reaction to a 13-year old boy's suggestion that he is planning to have his tongue pierced.

6.3. Results of the present study regarding comments

From the data presented above, it becomes obvious that the two groups of families studied here differ in most relevant aspects. In addition, they differ from the inter-cultural groups studied in De Geer et al. (2002); this difference may be due to our more thorough differentiation of the data in accordance with the ages of the children.

First, all utterances analyzed here as comments (only a small proportion, ca. 5 %, of all dinner conversations in the 19 families) were taken into consideration, i. e. even those of the children. Further, not only addressors, but also addressees were accounted for, which means that both active and passive participation with regard to comments was taken into account. That mothers were the most active producers, especially within group 1, was conform with the hypothesis of pragmatic socialization and thus hardly surprising; neither was the fathers' shyness (also confirmed in other studies, e. g. Bellinger 1979). What was less expected was the finding of the high rates among the children, especially in group 2; in some families, the children even took over the conversation, leaving little space for their parents.

Not unexpected, however, was the high frequency of declaratives, given the definition of comments, and neither was the difference in frequency between the two groups to the advantage of the second

group (older siblings). Regarding this category, the findings of the present study contrast remarkably with those in De Geer et al. (2002). Were these differences a consequence of the children's different ages? At present, we can only guess.

More surprising was the high percentage of direct comments in the second group, especially among the mothers and the (older) siblings. This corresponds, however, with a high rate of indirect utterances among mothers in the first group (younger children), and is supported by previous studies (Bellinger 1979; Ervin-Tripp et al. 1990; Brumark 2003b). Furthermore, as to the youngsters' speech, both directness (through explicit directives, many of which function as comments), and indirectness (through ironic hints) are among their special characteristics.

Among the special features of teenage speech is also their habit of commenting on other persons, especially on absent friends (c.f. Kotsinas 1994); thus, the high frequency of reference to the category of 'other' was hardly surprising. More unexpected was the habit of some target children in the second group to comment upon the table manners of their older siblings. However, this might be a consequence of the competitive situation in families with many children (some of them in their teens) – a feature which also shows up in their high rate of comments on language rules (e.g. of turn-taking) and usage. The frequency of violations of, and commenting on, the maxims was, however, rather low compared to the data in De Geer et al. (2002). While the findings of the present study do not confirm theirs, again, this may be a result of the age variations within their families.

In general, the most interesting finding of this study is that the target children of the same age seem to show different patterns, depending on their siblings' age. One possible explanation is that older siblings contribute to the socialization of their younger, preadolescent siblings, partly perhaps as a result of a certain competition for attention within the family. However, it has to be stressed that the number of subjects in the sub-groups, as well as of the items within the sub-categories, was small; thus, too far-reaching conclusions cannot be drawn. Even though a comparison of the results of the present study with those of De Geer et al. (2002) yielded some interesting points, the differences are not easy to interpret. One of the things that the present

study has shown is that linguistic-pragmatic comparisons between small sub-groups belonging to different cultures and speaking different languages may be hazardous.

7. Conclusions

As the results presented above have shown, the two age groups studied differ remarkably and significantly in their use of comments during dinner conversations.

The group with older siblings produced considerably more comments totally, more comments on other persons not present, more declarative comments, more comments on linguistic behaviours, and more reference to non-immediate subjects than did the group with siblings younger than the target children. That group, on the other hand, had more comments addressed to the target child, more interrogative and imperative comments, more indirect comments, and more comments directed toward non-linguistic and immediately performed behaviours.

The parents' use of comments also differed significantly between the two groups. Thus, the mothers in the first group (younger siblings) definitely made most comments totally within that group (68 %), and proportionally more than did the fathers for most sub-categories¹⁶ (except for imperative comments). Mothers of the first group also commented proportionally more on non-linguistic behaviors, especially on table manners, than did mothers in group 2. They also referred much more often to behaviors occurring in the immediate context than did mothers of the second group (72 % in group 1 against 58 % in group 2); in addition, they were also more indirect, which was not expected. On the other hand, mothers of the second group produced declarative comments more often (82 % in group 2 against 68 % in group 1) and they also commented more on behaviors that were not related to the immediate context. Finally, their share of direct comments was unexpectedly larger than that of mothers in the first group.

The fathers were more passive in producing comments, but they dominated regarding imperative comments. Some fathers also made

certain kinds of indirect comments that might be perceived as sarcastic (cf. Becker 1992, and see Section 6, above).

As for the use of comments among the children, some findings were expected, while others were not. There were differences between the groups, mostly to the advantage of the group including older siblings. Both target children and siblings in the second group produced considerably more comments, more declarative comments, proportionally more comments on linguistic behaviors and on behaviors in the non-immediate context than did the children in the first group. However, there were no large differences between them regarding the proportions of direct and indirect comments, with one unexpected exception: the siblings in group 2 made almost three times as many direct as indirect comments. Thus, at least regarding the use of comments, the target children within group 2 seemed to behave as their older siblings; they were actually the 'target' of comments to a lesser extent than were the target children within group 1.

From the summary of these findings, some general conclusions may be drawn. First, the categories of comments selected proved to be useful for comparing two groups of families which differed only with regard to the age span of the children around preadolescence (taking into account that the used variables were based on child language research on primarily pre-school children). Second, preadolescent children seemed to take advantage of older siblings, possibly because they were allowed to perform in a 'zone of proximal development', in Vygotskij's terms (1962). Third, conclusions regarding differences between intercultural groups, like those in De Geer et al. (2002), seem doubtful, considering the remarkable differences between similar but age-differentiated groups within the same culture, such as those studied in the present work.

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Notes

1. This latter comment is a typical example of a father flouting the maxims of quantity and manner (Rundquist 1992).
2. In one of the families, an adult sibling (23 years) was invited as a visitor at the table; however, she was not included in the study.
3. Two siblings in group 2 were aged 6 and 8 years respectively, but they did not produce any comments.
4. Quite often, the meal was bounded by utterances like 'Now we start!', 'That's it!', marking its start or finish.
5. However, these two children did not produce any comments and received only a few (see Table 4).
6. If we consider all of the utterances, the proportion of comments is 4.8 % in the first group and 6.1 % in the second. These data are slightly more in keeping with De Geer et al.'s results, where the 3 % in the Swedish and 7 % in the Estonian families (the Finnish, Finnish-Swedish, and Estonian-Swedish families) fall in between these extremes.
7. Four (ca. 2 %) of these comments were directed toward siblings younger than the target child.
8. Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level.
9. Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level.
10. Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level.
11. 2 % of these direct comments were directed toward a younger sibling.
12. 3 % of these indirect comments were directed toward a younger sibling.
13. Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level
14. 7 % of these comments on table manners were directed toward two younger siblings.
15. Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level
16. Even taking into consideration the different number of fathers and mothers participating (see Table 1), the mothers still made proportionally more comments within most sub-categories.

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