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## Abstract

The aim of the present study was to reconsider, theoretically and empirically, the communicative acts termed “meta-pragmatic comments”, suggested by previous research to be used for socializing purposes in the context of family dinner conversations. The corpus analysed consisted of videotaped recordings of dinner conversations in 19 Swedish families. The families were homogenous with regard to social and cultural circumstances as measured by a questionnaire, but differed with regard to the age spans of the children. In both groups, they had one child of age 10-11 years, referred to as the target child, but the families of group 1 included 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). The definition of the communicative act of “meta-pragmatic comment” and some of the principles for coding sub-categories of such comments were adopted from two previous inter-cultural studies but slightly revised. The purpose of revision was to give the act of comment a firmer foundation in speech act theory and to explicitly motivate the selection of sub-categories from a developmental perspective.

A calculation of percentages of comments of various types produced in the two groups of families showed that the group of older siblings made more comments totally, and considerably more comments on other persons not present, declarative comments, comments on linguistic behaviours and comments referring to non-immediate subjects than did the group of siblings younger than the target children. The first group with younger siblings, 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 behaviours. Parental comments also differed significantly between the two groups. Thus, the mothers of the first group with younger siblings made most comments totally within that group, to some extent confirming the hypothesis of comments serving a socializing purpose. In most sub-categories (except for imperative comments), they also made proportionally more comments than the fathers. Mothers in the first group also commented proportionally more on non-linguistic behaviours, especially on table manners, than mothers in group 2, and referred much more often to behaviours occurring in the immediate context than did mothers of the second group. This was an expected finding, supported by previous research on maternal speech, but they were also more indirect, which was not expected. On the other hand, the mothers of the second group made more declarative comments and they also commented more on behaviours that were not related to the immediate context, as suggested above. Finally, their share of direct comments (addressed to older children) was unexpectedly larger than that of mothers in the first group. The fathers were more passive in the production of comments, but they dominated regarding imperative comments. Some fathers also made certain kinds of indirect comments that might be perceived as sarcastic.

As for the use of comments among the children, some findings were expected, but others were not. There were differences between the groups, mostly giving higher percentages to the group with older siblings. Both target children and siblings in this group produced considerably more comments, more declarative comments, proportionally more comments on linguistic behaviours and on behaviours in the non-immediate context than did the children in the first group. Thus, at least regarding the use of comments, the target children within group 2 seemed to behave as their older siblings and they were actually the “target” of comments to a lesser extent than were the target children within group 1.

From these findings, some general conclusions may be drawn. First, the categories of comments selected proved to be sensitive to the age span of the children around the preadolescence years, although the variables were based on child language research primarily on pre-school children. Second, preadolescent children seemed to take advantage the presence of older siblings in their communicative activity, possibly because they were allowed to perform in the “zone of proximal development”, according to Vygotskij (1962). Finally, a comparison of the results from the present study with those of the two inter-cultural studies, mentioned above, yielded some interesting similarities but also considerable differences, not easy to interpret. For this reason, far-reaching conclusions regarding inter-cultural differences in the use of “meta-pragmatic comments” during family dinners seem doubtful at the present stage of research, considering the remarkable variations within similar but age-differentiated groups within the same culture.

## Introduction

Ever since the first speech input studies in the early 60ies, 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 been 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 in 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 behaviour 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 the definition of meta-pragmatic comments in Blum-Kulka, 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 behaviours in accordance with given socio-cultural norms. De Geer et al claim significant differences in the use of comments between different socio-cultural groups.

However, objections may be raised to the studies mentioned above 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 (c. f. 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 be defined with a developmental perspective in mind (as pointed out by Blum-Kulka 1997:13), by 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 makes quite 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, homogenous with regard to social and cultural circumstances checked by a questionnaire (see appendix 1) 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 to be 10-11 years, because this age marks an important borderline between early childhood and adolescence and because the most basic linguistic and pragmatic skills are acquired by this age. In addition, there are few studies devoted to this age, as well as 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 analysed by anchoring it in the speech-act theory and 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 distinguished 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 would be sensitive to the development of the children, this would be highly probable within the framework of an interactional theory of socialization. Were there differences between the parents of different sexes in their use of comments? Bellinger (1988) reports fathers to show 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 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, if that is excluded by their definition, communicative acts with similar pragmatic features) used for other purposes than regulating behaviour, 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 a study – like this and like previous – of the use of meta-pragmatic comments in family dinner conversation?

## 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 since more than 30 years, with considerable repercussions on methods of both analysis and observations (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 behaviours are constantly interacting with its social environment on gradually more advanced levels of competence. Within this process, adults assist the child's in his/her development by adapting their verbal and nonverbal behaviours 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 them to perform somewhere between their actual and their potential communicative stage (i. e. the "zone of proximal development" according to Vygotski, 1968).

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 and, especially, meal situations, within the primary group, the family.

The context of 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) from 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, Blum-Kulka 1997) and socializing (Blum-Kulka, p. 34). More generally speaking, the sociability goal favours 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 might have an implicit socialization value. For this reason, it should not surprise 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, p.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 of everyday life of a family. On the other hand, there are other more general rules involved, 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 contributions 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 unintended violations or deliberate floatings of them. These maxims, however, do not seem to have a universally valid normative force. Observations indicate for instance differences between men and women regarding the adherence to them (Rundquist 1992). Some research has also been focused on children’s comprehension and production of speech according to the Gricean maxims. Not surprisingly, misinterpretations and violations were found to decrease with age, but with 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 be utterances. An utterance is usually defined by syntactic and by prosodic features. Now, “meta-pragmatic comments”, as the concept is used in the studies referred to, 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 superposed over several utterances. Further, different utterances may, according to the speech act theory, have a similar locutionary content and an identical syntactic form, but 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 in case of no joint engagement, helps the addressee to know what to do, 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).

Furthermore, the theory of speech acts, or communicative acts, has been found especially fruitful in theoretical and empirical research of early language development (e. g. Dore 1975, 1977, 1979). In studies involving older children, the perlocutionary force of parents’ acts of social control and meta-pragmatic comments has for instance been studied in terms of expected outcome, i. e. obedience (Blum-Kulka 1990).

From a perspective based on the speech act theory, the act of comment may be distinguished as 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 from a small party among close friends:

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



Such comments imply evaluating the aspects commented upon – positively or negatively – against socio-culturally conditioned norms, which may be elaborated within individual value systems.

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

(2) Mother: You must not put back your own spoon in the jar like that!

(3) Father: May I have an answer or are we going to mail? <sup>1</sup>

The first type of comments, mentioned above, carry the illocutionary force, or the explicit or implicit aim of evaluating, the implication of which may be identified through inference from the situational context.

The second type, illustrated by the 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 perlocutionary force of an utterance may be identified by an observer, by inference from contextual clues.

As for the concept of “meta-pragmatic”, this notion consists of the components “meta”, signifying “above” or “beyond” (c. f. meta-linguistic, see Caffi 1997) and “pragmatic”, derived from “pragma”, signifying “action”. The term “meta-pragmatic comment” would then signify comments, which are about or beyond situated actions (which are framed by situationally governed norms). Thus, for both types of comments mentioned above to be “meta-pragmatic”, they need an intended illocutionary force of “talking about” or “pointing to” socio-cultural norms or rules. Even though the addressee often succeeds to infer such an intention from the conversational implication of the utterance (Grice 1975), in combination with clues in the context, the external observer may meet with great problems in distinguishing and analysing it. As a consequence, a careful analysis of each communicative act in its context would be necessary to enable the sorting out of those, first which are comments, second, which are meta-pragmatic, and third, which might serve a socializing purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> This latter comment is a typical example of a father floating the maxims of quantity and manner, c. f. Rundquist 1992.

## Data collection

### Participants

The study was based on 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).<sup>2</sup> 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 shortly describing the study and distributed via elementary schools in the area.

In addition, a questionnaire inquiring about demographic data, attitudes to the functions of conversation during meals and to pragmatic socialization in general was distributed after video recording to check the socio-cultural homogeneity of the group.

### Recordings

The 19 families (table 1) having indicated willingness to participate were contacted and appropriate dates for video recording were decided. 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.

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 min (table 2).

### Transcription

The 19 recordings were transcribed using a modified version of the CHAT system (McWhinney 1991) for transcription of natural discourse (see appendix 2). The recordings were transcribed in their totality, exempting utterances that were clearly not part of the meal.<sup>3</sup> 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 whereas the interrater reliability amounted to 85% of the compared transcripts.

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<sup>2</sup> In one of the families, an adult sibling (23 years) was invited as a visitor but at the table, she is not included among the children in the study.

<sup>3</sup> Quite often, the meal was delimited by utterances like “Now we start!”, “That’s it!”, marking its start or finish.

Table 1  
Participants in group 1 and 2

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

## Method and coding procedure

### 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 behaviours) was used, since it usually matches an utterance (and sometimes the turn, when the force extends over more than one utterance), but above all, since it allows for a more thorough analysis according to the speech act theory.

### Turns

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

### Utterances

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).

<sup>4</sup> Two siblings in group 2 were aged 6 and 8 years respectively, but they did not produce any comments.

## **Communicative acts**

Communicative acts were defined as utterances serving specific communicative functions. This study was focused on the communicative act of comment, of which most were assumed to carry a potential meta-pragmatic function and some of which also were assumed to be regulative.

## **Addressors and addressees**

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

## **Coding categories**

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

These sub-categories were selected to match important data on linguistic and pragmatic development in children from early childhood, through the school years up to the pre-adolescence (see Brumark 1989 for a review). Regarding syntactic form of speech addressed to children, there is, for instance, a considerable amount of research, already from the earliest language input studies (see e. g. Snow 1977), indicating a large frequency of imperative and interrogative directives in the interactional context, especially in the speech of mothers (Snow & Goldfield 1982). The function of communication with children is also proved to be more directive than 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 & Schieffelin 1976).

The following presentation of coding categories is based on examples from the recordings, when necessary completed by describing the context or by explaining the situation.

## **Form and function of comments**

The form category included syntactic form in terms of sentence type of the main sentences, constituting the comments. In a developmental perspective, the underlying assumption is that adults (and older siblings) adapt their communication from using a high frequency of directives, syntactically formulated as imperatives or interrogatives, being direct and characterised by salient, response-demanding surface forms toward the use of non-salient declaratives.

### ***Syntactic form***

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

#### *Declarative*

Declarative statements, in some cases including a main modal verb (you may, you shall or you should etc, see imperative below):

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

In example 1, 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 can not move around all the time]

This comment is coded as a general statement.

### *Interrogative*

Interrogatives include wh-questions, yes- or no-questions and prosodic questions (statements marked by interrogative intonation), sometimes marked by an adverb (translated by 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, taking a modal verb like "may", "shall" or "should", i. e. a conventionalized form of imperative (cf the distinction between direct and indirect below):

- (10) Father: nä nä nä, sluta nu! nu e du ute å cyklar!  
[no no no, stop it! now you are wrong!]
- (11) Father: koncentrera dej på de här i stället!  
[concentrate on this for a change!]

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

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

### *Ellipsis*

Elliptic comments are formulated as fragmentary sentences:

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

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

Ellipses often occur as reactions to unexpected incidents.

### ***Directness of comments***

Comments may be expressed in different ways, i. e. 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 by using imperative form of the main verb, a modal verb (may, shall or should) and/or by explicitly naming the action criticized or commanded:

- (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, commented upon. In this case, the direct comment is modified by mitigating pluralisation of the addressee (“we”).

#### *Indirect*

Indirect comments may have the properties of directness mentioned above but 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, thus indirectly encouraging him to eat.

### **Focus of comments**

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

#### ***Non-linguistic behaviour***

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

##### *Table manners*

Comments on table manners concern the behaviour at 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 can]

### *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 is hot!]

### *Other*

Other types of comments of a more general character concern all kinds of behaviour to be criticized, 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 neighbour behaves toward children. However, comments may also be positive, encouraging appropriate behaviours of children as well as of adults, as in the following example:

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

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.

### *Linguistic behaviour*

Comments on linguistic behaviours 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]

This comment means that you must not use too strong or too many words, i. e. violate the maxim of quantity.

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

This comment is a reproach of adults trying to speak like youngsters, thereby violating the maxim of manner.

### *Other*

Comments on turn regulation and other linguistic behaviours were few and therefore collapsed into one category, for example:

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

### *Time of focused behaviour*

The nonverbal and verbal behaviours commented upon could immediately present to the addressor. But comments may also address behaviours in the past or expected in the future or in general, any time. In the younger group, more comments were expected to concern immediate behaviours than in the older one.

### *Immediate*

Comments could be focused on behaviours in the immediate (“here and now”) context:

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

The mother is blaming the child for spilling milk.

### *Non-immediate*

Often, however, comments non-verbal and verbal behaviours completed in past time or to be performed in the future:

- (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 to prepare the Christmas dinner.

## Coding procedures

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



## Results and discussion

### Length of recordings (table 2)

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.

### Number of turns, and comments (table 2)

The number of turns and utterances 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 (total number: 5105 turns and 6245 utterances). Mean number of turns within group 1: 261 and within group 2: 277.3. Mean number of utterances within group 1: 308.3 and within group 2: 351.3. When accounting for difference, it must, however, be taken into consideration that group 2 (of older siblings) included two more children than group 1.<sup>5</sup>

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

Below, the results are based on percentages of the total number of comments of each group.

<sup>5</sup> However, these two children did not produce any comments and received only a few, see p. 16, table 4

The number of comments differed in the two groups: 149 within group 1 and 193 within group 2 (mean number 14.9 and 21.44 respectively). When the time factor was considered, the difference between the groups was still in favour of the second group: 1.1 comments per minute in group 2 (with older children) and 0.94 comments per minute within group 1. Even when considering the proportion of utterances and comments per participant, the share was larger in the second group.

These results differ from the data in De Geer et al (2002), probably because of a larger number of older children (in group 2) participating in this study. But the difference regarding frequency of comments in the Swedish groups of the two studies may also be an artefact due to the extremely large number of utterances identified in De Geer et al.

The proportion of comments out of all utterances was 4.8 % in the first group and 6.1 % in the second. These data are however more conform to those of De Geer et al, where the proportion amounted to 3 % in the Swedish and 7 % in the Estonian families, while the Finnish, Finnish-Swedish and Estonian-Swedish fall between these extremes.

### Addressors and addressees of comments (table 3 and 4)

A comparison between the two groups regarding addressors and addressees showed that mothers in 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 Swedish mothers, while 74 % were made by Estonian mothers (see further General discussion).

Table 3

Distribution of comments

*Distribution and percentages (in italics) of comments on addressors*

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

The fathers were not by far as active in these conversations as the mothers: out of all comments, 20 % were made by fathers in group 1, compared to only 10 % in group 2. Among the children, there were 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 interesting, 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 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 General discussion).

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

Within group 2, however, only 23 % of the target children were actually targets of comments and 60 % of the other participants at the dinner were commented upon. Remember 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 <sup>6</sup>
Other persons not present	8	17

Comparing these data to those in De Geer et al, 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.

<sup>6</sup> Four (ca 2 %) of these comments were directed toward siblings younger than the target child.

## Formal and functional features of comments (table 5 and 6)

As expected by the definition of comments, the most frequent *syntactic form* turned out to be the declarative, and 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, mostly made by fathers:

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

as a reaction to the target child's misbehaviour 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.

Comparing the age groups in their totalities, the use of interrogatives, imperatives and ellipses differed: 15 % of interrogatives in the first group, compared to 9 % in the second, 10 % of imperatives in the first group, compared to 5 % in the second and 9 % of ellipses in the first group, compared to 11 % in the second.

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

When comparing the data of the present study with those of De Geer et al (2002), group 1 show a similar pattern as 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. These differences may be explained by cultural factors but also by differences of distribution within age groups, which is not taken into consideration in the inter-cultural study (see General discussion).

A more careful look at the addressors of the comments in the present study provides, however, more interesting findings. Whereas, declaratives were made by mothers in 49 % of the cases in the group 1 of younger children, 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 % of interrogatives in the first group, mothers in the first group stood for 11 % of the cases, whereas fathers and siblings made 2 % each. In the second group, the share of mothers was only 5 %, while target children and siblings produced 2 % and 3 % respectively and the fathers none at all.

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

- (29) Sibling: jamen Kalle  
 Gr 1 [but Kalle]  
 Mother: va gör hand a?  
 [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?  
 [do you still do 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?]

Table 5

Form of comments  
*Syntactic sentence type*

Percentages of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Declarative, total</i>	66	75 <sup>7</sup>
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 <sup>8</sup>
Mothers	3	2
Fathers	4	1
Target children		2
Siblings	3	1
<i>Ellipsis, total</i>	9	11

<sup>7</sup> Significant differences between groups at the 0.05 level.

<sup>8</sup> “ “ “

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

However, this difference may be explained in different ways. Becker (1988) found for instance a large number of indirect criticizing or even sarcastic parental comments to make their pre-school children conform to the norms. Since modified directness was not considered as a separate category, but was coded as direct this might have affected the results of 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, from the same family in group 2).

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

The target child in family 20, 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 sibling in family 20, group 2, tries to make her younger sister refrain from moving the hot terrine.

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

The sibling gets very upset by the manner of an older sibling admonishing her for her table manners, which to her opinion is not worse than usual.

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

In the example 33 above, the two utterances are analysed as direct comments because of their explicitly mentioning of the blamed behaviour, the first directed toward the maxim manner and the second being meta-linguistic and telling how to say. But remember, this is one of many examples of the ironic teen-age style, i. e. “mocking-commenting”.

Table 6

## Form of comments

*Directness*

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

Looking at the distribution of direct and indirect comments, there seems to be a tendency of mothers in group 1 to use a larger share of indirect comments (39 % indirect comments against 29 % direct ones) than for mothers in group 2 (17 % against 23 %), whereas fathers appear to more direct in both groups (12 % against 8 % in group 1 and 9 % against 2 % in group 2), as well as the siblings in both groups (4 % against 3 % in group 1) and (19 % against 8 % in group 2). The target children made approximately as many direct as indirect comments although their total amount of comments differed, as mentioned above. These findings support previous studies of directness in maternal and child directives (Ervin-Tripp at al 1990, Brumark 2003b).

These findings add further evidence to the assumption that the speech of teen-agers is more spontaneous and direct (Romaine 1984, Kotsinas 1994) than adult speech. But they also confirm the results indicating differences between the two age groups with regard to other sub-categories in this study and give some more evidence of older siblings being models to their younger siblings (c. f. Bublitz 1988, Ochs 1996, Brumark 2003c).

Compared with the cross-cultural results in De Geer et al, the first group shows the same pattern as the Estonian families for 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 the inter-cultural study, this incongruence between functionally coded directness and syntactic surface form is surprising though not unreasonable, since syntax is only one way in expressing directness.

<sup>9</sup> Significant differences between groups at the 0.05 level.

<sup>10</sup> 2 % of these direct comments were directed toward a younger sibling

<sup>11</sup> 3 % of these indirect comments were directed toward a younger sibling

### Focus of comments (table 7)

The behaviour mostly commented upon in both groups were non-verbal acts, but to a varying extent: 87 % in the first group and 75 % in the second. Among the non-verbal behaviours most criticized in the first group were those labelled “table-manners” (58 %), whereas other behaviours (52 %) were more often focused upon in the second group. In both groups table manners were most often commented upon by the mothers and only sometimes by the fathers. Quite often, however, the table manners of the older siblings in five of the families in group 2 were criticized by their younger siblings, as in the following examples:

- (32) 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?]
- (33) 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 manner?]  
 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  
 [look how I hold the fork, it looks very odd]  
 Target child håll handen över i stället  
 [hold the hand above instead]  
 du e så äcklig! ta lite taget bara, de får inte plats i munnen  
 [you are disgusting! take only a little, it does not go 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/.../]

Furthermore, language of the addressee or some other person was proportionally more often focused in comments in the second group (25 %) than in comments produced in the first group (13 %). 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 (7 %), possibly due to a certain competition for the floor in the group of older siblings and perhaps due to a more frequent occurrence of pragmatic discussions, as in the following example:



- (34) Target child: han e så konstig  
 Gr 2 [he is so odd]  
 han säger så här ”gör ... skjut bara”  
 [he says like this ”do ... only 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  
 [bu the 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 distinguish them is the size”]  
 å ”de ser helt sjukt ut”  
 [and ”that looks quite sick”]

That is, 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), except for the data in the group closest to the families in the present study, the monolingual Swedish families (which was expected). Thus, as we have seen in 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 gave the expected result, but with some interesting exceptions. As mentioned above, the mothers of the first group made considerably more comments about table manners than those in group 2 (37% against 9 %), just as the fathers in group 1, compared to group 2 (11 % against 3 %). There were no differences between the siblings regarding this category, but the target children in group 2, unexpectedly, commented as often as the mothers on how the participants behaved at table – with the address toward their older siblings. Comments on prudential matters were distributed almost exclusively among the mothers (5 % in group 1 and 3 % in group 2, where also one sibling produced one, see example 31 above).

Not surprisingly, comments on other non-linguistic behaviours 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 so eager in commenting on other behaviours – with one exception: the older siblings, who made 13 %, counted on all comments.

As already mentioned regarding the results presented above, these findings were not totally unexpected, bearing in mind that many of the older siblings were in their early teens and often engaged in the typical kind of speech found among youngsters (Labov 1972, Kotsinas 1994, see further General discussion).

Also meta-linguistic comments were more common (though comparatively few) in the second group and most often performed by mothers and the older siblings (opposite to the suggestion in De Geer et al), whereas the maxim category did not differ noticeably between groups and family members.

Table 7

Focus of comments  
*Focused behaviour*

Percentages of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Non-linguistic behaviour</i>	87	75 <sup>12</sup>
<i>Table manners</i>	51	23 <sup>13</sup>
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 behaviour</i>	13	25
<i>Meta-linguistic</i>	2	7
Mothers	1	2
Fathers		1
Target children		2
Siblings	1	2
<i>Maxims (Grice)</i>	10	11
Mothers	6	4
Fathers		
Target children	3	4
Siblings	1	3
<i>Other</i>	1	7

<sup>12</sup> Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level

<sup>13</sup> 7% of these comments on table manners were directed toward two younger siblings

## Time of focused behaviour (table 8)

As expected, comments focused on behaviours in *the immediate* context 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 compared to the non-immediate context, while the fathers made three times as many. In the second group, though, 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 but the target children referred less often to the immediate context (10 % against 14 %).

To find many comments referring to persons outside the immediate situation is hardly surprising, bearing in mind the conversational habits of teen-agers. Consider the following example, where an older sibling is blaming the target child's indoor bandy coach for incomprehensible instructions, which do not conform to a general idea of how coaches are supposed to act:

(35)            Sibling:        deras tränare verkar helknäpp han ba "på bollen, på bollen"  
                  Gr 2                [their coach seems crazy he 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 in the past.

However, the high frequency of non-immediate reference in comments among target children is more astonishing. These data, resembling the results of other sub-categories, might reflect the advantage with regard to the development of conversational for children interacting with older siblings compared to children with only younger siblings (see further General discussion).

Concerning the type of immediate reference of the comments, the findings of this study concur with De Geer et al, where 50-75 % of the comments occurring in the immediate context were focusing such behaviours as table manners and maxim violations (which was hardly surprising!).

Considering the different cultural groups of this cross-cultural study, however, the present study of Swedish families shows a similar pattern as the other coding categories considered: 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 Estonian and Finnish families respectively) and the second resembles the Swedish families in the cross-cultural study (47 % aiming at the immediate context, compared to 50 % in the cross-cultural study).

Table 8

Focus of comments

*Time of focused behaviour*

Percentage of comments	Group 1	Group 2
<i>Immediate</i>	74	47 <sup>14</sup>
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

The difference between general time and immediate time may be illustrated by the following example, where the mother focuses on the target child's table manners by using a general comment (even if related to the immediate context) and the child answers by referring to the individual case and the immediate situation:

- (36)           Mother:       jamen så där gör man inte  
                   Gr 2           [but you (generally) do not do lika that]  
                   Target child: men JA gör så NU!  
                                   [but **I** am doing like that just NOW!]

<sup>14</sup> Significant differences between groups on the 0.05 level.

## General discussion of methods and results

### Discussion of the analysis of speech acts of “meta-pragmatic comments”

As mentioned in the introduction, the functional definitions 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 seem to give the necessary consideration to the complications related to their operational analyses of the concept of “meta-pragmatic comment”.

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

- (37)
- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| Father: | de e bra att se svenskarna stå å diska                        |
| Gr 1    | [it’s good to see Swedish (men) clean 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. But its social and pragmatic implication probably is the general opinion among Swedes that Swedish men are more willing to participate in the household work than men from other cultures, which is positive and worth noticing. The reason for including such a comment in a study of pragmatic socialization would be its assumed socializing effect as part of a long-range way of attitudinal influence. But this effect may be uncertain, and is probably even more doubtful in the following example:

- (38)
- |          |                                 |
|----------|---------------------------------|
| Mother:  | äter du så många (fiskbitar)!   |
| Gr 1     | [are you eating so many!]       |
| Sibling: | ja ja har käkat jättemånga      |
|          | [yes I have eaten a great many] |
| Mother:  | de e bra                        |
|          | [that’s good]                   |

Here, the implication would be a common though unconscious idea among parents that a child should eat as much as possible of what is offered at dinner (even when it comes to fish). Common to the examples above is drawing attention to behaviours judged as “good”. Thus, the comments fit well into the definition of “meta-pragmatic comments”.

Second, certain comments “drawing attention to” behaviours of the addressee may certainly influence him/her to behave or talk in a certain way. Thus, they may, according to the definition used, also have a “regulative function” in the immediate context. Now, this might be the case in some of the examples, where the regulative force is expressed either by canonical imperatives (example 36 above), by interrogatives conventionally regarded as regulative (example 40) and, maybe, also by certain hints (example 41).

However, many hints, similar to that presented in example 38, require quite a lot of inference drawn from nonverbal clues and other aspects of the context, not only by the addressee but also, and even more, by an observer, interpreting the utterance as a comment.

The reason for analysing the utterances as “meta-pragmatic comments” in these examples would be their appearance as critical responses or reactions to preceding nonverbal or verbal actions, i. e. judging by their perceived illocutionary force:

- (39) 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.

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

The comment in example 40 is directed toward the older sibling, coming late to dinner. In this example, the utterance might as well be intended as an information request, but the child reacts upon it as if it were a blaming comment.

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

This utterance, addressed to the same target child as in the example 39 above, is a typical example of the sarcastic hints made by some of the fathers. Such hints surely may be analysed as “meta-pragmatic” comments, but their regulative, as well as socializing, effect is doubtful (c. f. Becker 1992).

But regulative utterances, formulated as comments, may also aim at effects in the more remote future. In these cases, like in the example 46 below, the outcome is uncertain, despite a possible immediate affirmative or negative response.

There are however comments, which may be analysed as “meta-pragmatic”, but actually might function as any social contributions to the dinner conversation. Consider the example presented below:

- (42) Target child: om man heter Alice får man inte säga fel!  
Gr 2 [if your name is A you are not supposed to say the wrong name!]  
Sibling: men om man heter Anna får man säga fel!  
[but if you are called A you may say the wrong one]

The first utterance is commenting on the sibling using the wrong name for a kind of spice, passed to the mother. This comment might, according to the definition, be analysed as meta-pragmatic, initiating a meta-linguistic discussion on denomination. However, this is an example of a very common type of joking or ironic wrangling in the families of older children and hardly meant as or functioning as a socializing comment.

Third, in a study of pragmatic socialization, the most important function of the meta-pragmatic comment would, per definition, be their assumed socializing function, i. e. pointing to or “teaching” socio-cultural rules and norms. However, from an interactional standpoint anything said or done together with children might have a socializing function, whether explicitly or implicitly (Blum-Kulka 1997). Furthermore, communicative acts, identical to acts analysed as meta-pragmatic comments may occur in conversations, without any obvious socializing purpose, as demonstrated by the examples 43 and 45 below.

The question may be posed whether the majority of these comments serve a socializing purpose or function at all, even implicit and even when children participating in the conversation are exposed to them.

In conclusion, there are several remaining problems to consider concerning the analysis of the “meta-pragmatic comments”. Still, the pragmatic force of acts, supposed to be meta-pragmatic and entailing regulating or teaching functions needs further operational analyses.

### Discussion of the sub-categorisation of “meta-pragmatic comments”

As pointed out in the introduction, the sub-categories in De Geer et al (2002) seem chosen from a developmental perspective without accounting explicitly for the different ages of the siblings. Furthermore, quite many utterances analysed as comments could be classified within different sub-categories, depending on the perspective taken. Consider the following examples:

- (43) Mother: va tyst du e, Jonathan  
Gr 1 [how silent you are, J]
- (44) Father: ni behöver väl inte bli så tysta bara för att det finns en kamera  
Gr 1 [you need not be so quiet because of the camera]

Several similar examples may be drawn from the recordings of this study. The most plausible classifying of them would be as drawing attention to the maxim of quantity, i. e. the child is saying too little. From a socio-cultural perspective, however, this comment might be interpreted as a request for participating in the dinner conversation, i. e. follow the cultural norm of being polite at the dinner table. Thus, it could be analysed as a comment upon table manners.

Furthermore, the subcategories of comments studied were found to interrelate. Some examples will be discussed below. That sentence type and directness correlate is hardly surprising, since one of the criteria used in most linguistic outlines for determining directness is just 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:

- (45) Mother: opsi daysi de där va INTE bra!  
Gr 1 [oops that (i. e. the way of cleaning) was NOT well done!]

The mother is commenting on the father’s careless handling the dinner plates when cleaning them.

Further, direct comments were likely to focus on table manners, though not always. Especially mothers in both groups often used indirect comments to “draw attention to” behaviours at table (not only those of the children but also undesirable behaviours of the fathers). As a consequence, directness was also often related to the immediate situational context. However, not all direct comments were referring to behaviours performed in the immediate context:

- (46) Mother: inte göra fler hål (i. e. by piercing)  
Gr 2 [do not make more wholes]

This example shows a mother’s reaction to the 13 years old boy’s suggestion that he is planning to pierce his tongue.

## Discussion of the results of the comments found in the present study

From the data presented above, it becomes quite obvious that the two age groups of families of this study differed in most of the aspects studied. They also differed from the inter-cultural groups in De Geer et al (2002), possibly due to a more thorough differentiation of the data according to the ages of the children in the present study.

First, all utterances analysed as comments (which were proportionally few during the dinner conversations in the 19 families: ca 5%) 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 analysed. That mothers were the most active producers, especially within group 1, was conform to the hypothesis of pragmatic socialization and thus hardly surprising, neither was the shyness of the fathers (confirmed in other studies, e. g. Bellinger 1979). But, the finding of the high rates among the children, especially in group 2, was more unexpected. 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, neither was the difference in frequency between the two groups to the advantage of the second group with older siblings. Regarding this category, the findings of the present study contrast considerably with those in De Geer et al (2002). Were these differences of the results a consequence of different ages of the children?

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

Among these special features of teen-agers may also be counted the habit to comment on other persons, especially on absent friends (c. f. Kotsinas 1994). Therefore, their high frequency of reference to the category of "other" was hardly surprising. More unexpected was, though, the habit of some target children in the second group of commenting 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 which in their teens, which also shows in their high rate of comments on language rules (e. g. of turn-taking) and usage. The frequency of violations and commenting on maxims was, however, rather low compared to the data in De Geer et al (2002). Again, the findings of the present study do not confirm theirs, which might possibly be a result of the age variations within their families.

There are also some general conclusions to discuss regarding the results of the present study. The most interesting finding of this study is its suggesting that the target children of the same age show different pattern depending on age of their siblings. One possible explanation might be that older siblings contribute in supporting the socialization of their younger preadolescent siblings, perhaps partly as a result of a certain competition for the attention within the family. Finally, it must, however, be stressed that the number of subjects within the sub-groups as well as of items within the sub-categories were small and that to far-reaching conclusions cannot be drawn. Therefore, comparing the results from the present study with those of De Geer et al (2002) yielded some interesting points, though not easy to interpret. Perhaps the data of the present study show that linguistic-pragmatic comparisons between small sub-groups of different cultures and different languages may be hazardous.



## Conclusions

Considering the results presented above there seems to be reasons for concluding that the two age groups studied differed remarkably and significantly in their use of comments during the dinner conversations.

The group of 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 of siblings younger than the target children. The first group with younger siblings, 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 behaviours.

The use of comments of the parents also differed significantly between the two groups. Thus the mothers of the first group with younger siblings definitely made most comments totally within that group (68 %) and proportionally more than the fathers regarding most sub-categories<sup>15</sup> (except for imperative comments). Mothers of the first group also commented proportionally more on non-linguistic behaviours, especially on table manners, than did mothers in group 2, and referred much more often to behaviours occurring in the immediate context than did mothers of the second group (72 % in the group 1 against 58 % in group 2), but 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 behaviours that were not related to the immediate context, as suggested above. Finally, their share of direct comments was unexpectedly larger than that of mothers in the first group.

The fathers were more passive in the production of comments, but they dominated regarding imperative comments. Some fathers also made certain kinds of indirect comments that might be perceived as sarcastic (c. f. Becker 1992, see General discussion).

As for the use of comments among the children, some findings were expected, but 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 upon linguistic behaviours and upon behaviours 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 and 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 the two groups of families, differing only with regard to age span of the children around the preadolescence years, although the variables were based on child language research primarily on pre-school children. Second, preadolescent children seemed to take advantage of older siblings, possibly because they were allowed to perform in the “zone of proximal development”, according to Vygotskij (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, like those in the present study.

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<sup>15</sup> Taking into consideration the different number of fathers and mothers participating (see table 1), the mothers nevertheless made proportionally more comments within most sub-categories.

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