Attention to Language: Lessons Learned at the Dinner Table
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Abstract
The ordinary discourse of parents, and to a lesser degree young children, includes a surprising amount of attention to language. The dinner table conversations of 22 middle class families, each with a child between 2 and 5½ years of age, were recorded. Transcripts of these conversations were analyzed for the presence and function of language-focused terms, words such as say, ask, tell, and speak. More than 11% of mothers’, 7% of fathers’, and 4% of children’s utterances contained a language-focused term. Metalinguistic uses (e.g., reporting and commenting on speech) exceeded pragmatic uses (e.g., controlling when and how speech occurs). Mothers more than fathers, and fathers more than children, talked about language. Mothers’, but not fathers, use of language-focused terms was positively correlated with children’s use of language-focused terms. The findings suggest that in the course of routine social interactions, parents provide children with potentially important information about the communicative functions of language.

Keywords: Parent-child discourse; metalinguistics; pragmatics; linguistic socialization

Mother: So tell Dad the interesting anecdote.
Father: [laughs]
Child: If you want me to tell Dad, you’ll have to tell me what it [an anecdote] is.
Mother: An anecdote is a short . . . sort of a short story.
Father: Humorous story, mainly.

Young children learn how to talk long before they have any conscious understanding of what language is. When children enter kindergarten or the first grade they encounter explicit teaching about language. Even before that, they have developed some concepts about language and how it should be used. Part of that understanding derives from their own cognitive development and the insights that they gain on their own. However, since language is acquired interactively, through dialogue with others, children also learn about language through their social interaction with others (Gleason, 1988). While parents are engaged with children in social and interpersonal activities, such as conversing at dinner, they are also conveying to children both explicit and very subtle information about language. This paper examines in
depth the attention to language that is found in parents’ and children’s everyday conversations.

Parents are often active participants in their preschool children’s communicative development. They influence their children by encouraging them to talk, and by providing models of various discourse styles as they speak with their children about different topics and in varying situations (Ely & Gleason, 1995). An even more direct influence on children’s language is parents’ explicit use of language related to language itself: On some occasions parents actually tell their children when to speak and when not to, and what the form of their speech should be (Becker, 1994; Gleason, 1988; Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Schieffelin, 1990). Parents also make reference to language, both spoken and written, in their everyday discourse; for instance, they refer to what they or others have said in the past (Ely, Gleason, Narasimhan, & McCabe, 1995), and they talk about reading and writing activities. Although previous research has investigated the use of particular kinds of linguistic and metalinguistic exchanges between parents and children (explanatory definitions, for instance, Beals & Snow, 1994), few studies have looked comprehensively at the overall attention to language that is embedded in parents’ speech to children. In this paper we will discuss parents’ use of what we call language-focused terms, that is, words such as say, ask, talk, read, write, and spell that refer to language itself.

Parents’ attention to language has been investigated in the past in three distinct developmental domains: pragmatics, metalinguistics, and emergent literacy. Research in pragmatic development has focused primarily on the degree to which parents socialize children’s appropriate language use, by, for example, urging them to generate politeness markers (e.g., hi, thank you, and goodbye) appropriately (Becker, 1994; Gleason, Perlmann, & Greif, 1984; Snow, Perlmann, Gleason, & Hooshyar, 1990). Language socialization usually requires that the language system itself be mentioned explicitly. For example, in a study of parental prompts for politeness routines from preschool children, Greif and Gleason (1980) found the form of prompts produced by parents to be remarkably similar in their focus on language itself. At the end of a laboratory play session, parents and children were met by an experimenter who said ‘hi,’ gave the child a gift, and then said ‘goodbye.’ Although children’s spontaneous production of politeness routines was low, parental prompting was frequent, occurring in all but one of the 22 families studied. More importantly, 95% of all prompts contained the verb say, a language-focused term, in the form of: Say x, Can you say x, or What do you say? Data from other situations offer additional evidence of explicit attention to pragmatic language. For example, in a study of the Halloween trick or treat routine, Gleason and Weintraub (1976) found that young children who failed to utter one of the three key phrases (trick or treat, thank you, and goodbye) were usually prompted to do so by the parents who accompanied them as they went door to door. Again parents used the verb say in a variety of forms (‘Don’t forget to say thank you!’).

Similar instances of direct language teaching have been documented in a number of settings and populations (Becker, 1994; Snow et al., 1990; Schieffelin, 1990). In research particularly relevant to our study, Blum-Kulka (1997) investigated the use of what she termed ‘metapragmatic discourse’ in the dinner table conversations of Israeli, American Israeli, and Jewish American families. She identified 3 categories of comments: discourse management (e.g., allocation of turns), violations of Grice’s (1975) conversational maxims (e.g., relevance), and metalinguistic comments (e.g., discussions about word meanings). As a proportion of overall discourse, metapragmatic comments ranged from 1.5% in the Israeli families to 6.5% in the Jewish American...
families. Furthermore, in the Jewish American families, discourse management and conversational maxims represented 81% of all metapragmatic discourse, clearly overshadowing attention to metalinguistic concerns.

Other cross cultural research has highlighted how parents, particularly mothers, explicitly teach or ‘show’ children how to use language appropriately. In a detailed ethnographic study of linguistic socialization, Schieffelin (1990) described how pervasively Kaluli mothers’ use the expression elema (‘say like this’) to socialize their children’s language behavior. The Kaluli believe that language, unlike a number of other domains (e.g., dressing), must be explicitly taught, and this teaching frequently utilizes the phrase ‘say like this’ (elema), a phrase that explicitly refers back to the language system itself.

Unlike research on pragmatic development, research on metalinguistic development has paid less attention to the role parental input might play. Nevertheless, parents do affect the degree to which children begin to notice and pay attention to language, and in doing so, they may help children to view language both as a medium and as an object (Cazden, 1976). In some activities, parents highlight the nature of the language system itself: For example, many parents expose children to the complexities of the sound system of language through nursery rhymes. This practice appears to foster children’s ability to segment speech into its separate sounds or constituents. Segmentation is a phonological and metalinguistic skill that is important for the attainment of literacy (Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, & Crossland, 1989). Similarly, parents encourage and sometimes participate in their children’s language play (Dunn, 1988; Horgan, 1981; Martlew, Connolly, & McCleod, 1978), another form of discourse that has been shown to be positively associated with metalinguistic knowledge (Ely & McCabe, 1993). Furthermore, this play can sometimes lead to discussions of how the language system works, as was evident in a number of instances in our data (see p. 365).

Other forms of metalinguistic attention to language can be found in parents’ use of ‘explanatory talk’ (Beals & Snow, 1994; Davidson & Snow, 1995; Perlmann, 1984; Weizman & Snow, 1998) and reported speech (Ely et al., 1995; Ely, Gleason, & McCabe, 1996). Explanatory talk is a form of decontextualized discourse that often provides informal but rich vocabulary lessons, as can be seen in the following example (Beals & Snow, p. 338): ‘Child: What’s your highness mean? Mother: Somebody who’s really, really important, a queen and a princess or something . . . or a king; I think it’s a king.’ Children who are exposed to explanatory talk develop a deeper semantic understanding of words and concepts and are more likely to develop a larger vocabulary than are children who rarely hear such talk (Hart & Risley, 1995). Work on reported speech documents the degree to which parents talk about past speech events (Ely et al., 1995; Ely, Gleason, & McCabe, 1996). Parents not only quote their own speech and the speech of others, including that of their children, they also comment on past speech. In doing so, they explicitly mark speech as a reportable behavior, and one that is as worthy of comment as any other behavior. Children exposed to ‘talk about talk’ are likely to learn important lessons about how language is used—for instance that listeners are interested in what someone else said on a particular past occasion.

Finally, parents, particularly middle class parents, often encourage what has been called emergent literacy (Heath, 1983; Lancy, 1994; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Purcell-Gates, L’Allier, & Smith, 1995; Sulzby, 1985; Sulzby & Barnhart, 1992). Emergent literacy refers to children’s growing awareness of the literate environment in which they live. The ability to recognize and interpret environmental print found on billboards and signs, for example, represents one of the earliest forms of emergent
literacy. Parents are also likely to impart a sense of the various functions literacy can serve (e.g., writing lists, writing letters, reading for knowledge and pleasure). In some homes literacy is explicitly valued and emphasized (Anderson, 1994; Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995). Parents in such homes are liable to talk positively about reading and writing activities, and to encourage children to talk about their own literacy experiences (Gee, 1992; Goelman, 1996; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Gee (1992) has described how middle class parents are the ‘best teachers of school based literacy’ (emphasis in original) without the benefit of any formal training in educational practices. Parents, he wrote (p. 123), ‘play alphabet games, recite nursery rhymes . . . They ask their children “What’s that?” and “What’s that say?” of pictures in a book they’ve seen a hundred times (Heath, 1983) . . . and constantly relate what the children have seen or heard in books to the children’s daily experience of the world.’

This brief review has shown that parents promote their children’s attention to language. In some instances, the research shows that parental attention to language serves a pragmatic function: Parents are interested in ensuring that their children’s speech is appropriate. Other research has investigated parents’ focus on language, either in providing information about the system itself, or by encouraging children’s early forays into literacy. In this paper we set out to describe the totality of children’s exposure to language about language across these separate domains.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

All cultures develop a repertoire of socialization practices that reflect their indigenous values (LeVine, 1988). When applied to language behavior, socialization has as its goal communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), the ability to use language appropriately. Linguistic socialization can take a variety of forms, ranging from direct and explicit instruction as to what to say and how to say it, to extremely subtle patterns of interaction that mark the status and goals of participants (Gleason, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990). Linguistic socialization also varies in the degree to which socializing agents (e.g., parents) are consciously aware of the goals of their socialization practices. In some instances, parents are clearly aware of what they are doing, in, for example, insuring that their young preschool children master the polite forms for requests (Snow et al., 1990). In other instances, parents may be largely unaware of both the nature of their socialization behavior and its effects. Thus, for example, parents may be unaware that they preferentially encourage communicative skills in girls while discouraging similar skills in boys (Fagot & Hagan, 1991).

In this study, we sought to describe the degree to which language was a topic of conversation, and the degree to which linguistic behavior was socialized using language-focused terms. Our primary goal was to describe how parents and children talked about the language system itself, and to identify the functions such talk served in middle-class families. Although our study was descriptive in nature, we began with four hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that overall, parents would use more language-focused terms in talking about pragmatic aspects of language than they would about other linguistic domains (e.g., metalinguistics or literacy). Based on our past work on socialization and on the work of Blum-Kulka (1990) and the findings of Schieffelin (1990), we expected that parents would pay particular attention to developing pragmatic competence in their preschool children. For example, we anticipated that parents would be explicit in telling their children both how to speak (e.g., clearly; not with a mouthful of food) as well as when to speak (e.g., not when another person is speaking). Given the importance polite-
ness plays in many communities, we anticipated finding parents particularly concerned with politeness routines (Becker, 1994; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Gleason, Perlmann, & Greif, 1984; Snow, Perlmann, Gleason, & Hooshyar, 1990) and using language-focused terms to specify the form such routines should take.

Our second hypothesis predicted that mothers would use more language-focused terms than would fathers. In our sample, as in many middle class homes, mothers were the primary caregivers, and we expected them to be more in tune with and concerned with their children’s behavior generally, and their speech behavior more specifically. Research in such settings has found that mothers more than fathers tend to encourage verbal behavior (Fagot & Hagan, 1991), and mothers spend significantly more time verbally interacting with their children than do fathers (Ninio & Rinott, 1988; Stoneman & Brody, 1981). Similarly, Schieffelin (1990) reported that the use of elema was largely restricted to mothers. Finally, our work on reported speech (Ely et al., 1996; Ely et al., 1995) has shown that mothers more than fathers talk about past speech, and ask questions about past speech, and we thought that this pattern might extend to other domains.

Our third hypothesis addressed the degree to which parents’ talk about language would be related to children’s talk about language. Again, based on their traditional roles as primary caregivers, we expected that mothers’, but not necessarily fathers’, use of language-focused terms would correlate positively with children’s use of language-focused terms.

Finally, our fourth hypothesis was that parents’ focus on language would vary with children’s age. We felt that it would be reasonable to expect that as children got older, parents would pay less attention to their pragmatic skills and more attention to evolving metalinguistic and literacy knowledge. Thus, we expected to find a negative correlation between parents’ reference to pragmatics and children’s age, and a positive correlation between parents’ reference to metalinguistics and literacy and children’s age.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 22 middle class families from the greater Boston area, with children, 11 boys and 11 girls, between the ages of 2;3 and 5;2. The parents were well educated, with most mothers and fathers having college degrees, and some parents having advanced degrees. The families were recruited through nursery schools and similar networks. The families were audio-recorded at home at dinner, where in some instances, siblings and other adults were present. Although only the speech of mothers, fathers, and the target children was analyzed, no attempt was made initially to identify (and subsequently exclude) speech on the basis of addressee. However, we did identify the addressee of all parents’ pragmatic uses of language-focused terms (see Results). Thus all parents’ speech was included in the analyses. In all families, mothers were the primary caregivers, with no mother working more than 20 hours a week outside the home. During the dinner time recordings, no observer was present.

**Corpus**

The corpus on which all analyses are based consists of transcripts of the dinner time conversations. The transcripts were made according to Child Language Data Exchange
System (CHILDES) guidelines (MacWhinney & Snow, 1990) and are available through CHILDES as the Gleason (1980) corpus. Dinners ranged in duration from 13 to 40 minutes, with a mean of approximately 23 minutes. The mean number of utterances produced by mothers, fathers, and children was 253 ($SD = 107$), 198 ($SD = 104$) and 203 ($SD = 76$), respectively.

**Coding**

**Terms.** In order to identify language-focused terms, we examined the list of all words used by all speakers. Words that referred to language (e.g., *say, tell, talk, ask, mean*) were identified, and each use of these words was analyzed in context. Words that referred to spoken and written language, as well as to the discourse role of listener (e.g., *hear, listen, understand*), were included. Words referring to literacy activities like reading and writing were also included. Examples of additional language-focused terms are listed in Table 1.

**Functions.** Drawing on our own past work as well as the work of others (Becker, 1994; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ely et al., 1995; Greif & Gleason, 1980; Gleason et al., 1984; Snow et al., 1990), we developed a coding scheme that was designed to capture the functional intent of parents’ and children’s uses of language-focused terms. We classified the uses of the terms into three broad categories (pragmatics, metalinguistics, and literacy) that captured the principal goals towards which these terms were applied. These three categories subsumed 11 individual codes. Table 2 provides definitions and examples of all codes.

As can be seen in Table 2, pragmatic uses of language-focused terms included the individual codes *control, clarification, elicitation,* and *specification.* In general, these

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<th>Table 1. Examples of Language-Focused Terms</th>
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<td>alphabet</td>
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<td>anecdote</td>
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<td>bitching and moaning</td>
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<td>conversation</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>speak</td>
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Table 2. Definitions and Examples of Coding Categories

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<th>Pragmatic codes</th>
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| **Control** | A speaker attempts to control if or when another person speaks or listens.  
Father: You can talk in just a minute.  
| **Clarification** | A listener requests clarification of what has just been said.  
Father: Green eggs and ham? Is that what you’re saying?  
| **Elicitation** | A speaker elicits a narrative or other information from another speaker.  
Mother: Did you tell Dad what we did today?  
| **Specification** | A speaker specifies the content of what he or she would like another speaker to say.  
Father: Say ‘Please could I have some ketchup.’  
|  
| Metalinguistic codes |  
| **Emphasis/formulaic** | A speaker emphasizes his or her current speech activity; a speaker uses a language-focused term in a formulaic (unanalyzed) form.  
Mother: Let me explain it to you so you know what has happened.  
Mother: The kitchen is hot, what can I say?  
| **Comment** | A speaker comments on current, future, or possible speech behavior.  
Father: I love the words you’re making up these days.  
| **Comment about past speech** | A speaker comments on past speech behavior. This code required both a report of past speech and a comment, often an affective evaluation, about the past speech.  
Mother: I’m glad you told me.  
| **Labeling** | A speaker makes references to names, what objects are ‘called,’ as well as to what words or utterances ‘mean.’  
Mother: That’s called smoke. You know what smoke is, don’t you?  
| **Reported speech** | A speaker makes a reference to past speech behavior not coded as comments about past speech.  
Mother: She said, ‘Stop it you guys.’  
| **Inanimate/generic** | A speaker makes reference to what has been ‘said’ generically, or a speaker makes reference to what an inanimate object (e.g., a sign) ‘says.’  
Father: They say he [President Carter] wasn’t a good peanut farmer . . .  
Child: My tummy’s saying ‘nothing.’  
|  
| Literacy code |  
| **Literacy** | A speaker makes reference to written language.  
Mother: I wrote a letter to Nicki recently saying what are you doing?  
| **Incomplete** | All utterances that included a language-focused term but were incomplete or unintelligible were coded as such.  

*Note:*  
aReports of past speech that served primarily pragmatic functions were coded under the appropriate pragmatic code. For example, in the following utterance a mother (speaking to her son) emphasized what the father had just said: ‘Edward, what did Daddy tell you?’ This utterance was coded *emphasis/formulaic.*  
bIn this utterance, the verb say (‘saying what you were doing’) was coded as *literacy,* as it could be glossed as ‘saying in writing’ and had the mother as subject.
pragmatic codes captured instances in which one speaker sought to affect the current speech behavior of another, usually a parent attempting to influence the speech behavior of a child. Thus, pragmatic codes largely captured the linguistic socialization of children by parents. These codes tended to encompass instances where parents sought to insure that their children spoke politely, clearly, and at a time and place that was pragmatically appropriate. In addition, we also included the rare occasions when speakers sought to affect their own speech behavior. For example, the following utterance from a child who sought permission to speak was coded as control: ‘Can I ask something, Daddy?’ Another example can be seen in a mother’s self-correction (‘There’s ice cream with frosting . . . I mean there’s . . . chocolate cake with frosting . . .’) which was coded as clarification.

Metalinguistic uses of language-focused terms included the individual codes emphasis/formulaic, comment, comment about past speech, labeling, reported speech and inanimate/generic (Table 2). Metalinguistic codes included instances where the language system itself was the principal focus of interest, and pragmatic concerns, if any, were secondary. Thus, utterances that quoted past speech, commented on speech behavior, or explained the meaning of words were coded as metalinguistic uses of language-focused terms.

The third major category, literacy, included only one code, also termed literacy, that covered all uses of language-focused terms referring to written language and reading. Finally, all utterances that included a language-focused term but were incomplete or unintelligible were coded as incomplete.

Although we made clear and mutually exclusive distinctions between pragmatic, metalinguistic, and literacy uses of language-focused terms based on their pedagogical function, we recognize that there are also subtle distinctions between the individual codes within each category. For example, parents’ use of language-focused terms to control when children spoke (‘So let’s not even talk about it’) was likely to offer clearer lessons in discourse skills than requests for clarification (e.g., ‘Is that what you’re trying to tell me’). Within the metalinguistic category, labeling (‘That’s called smoke’) was far more likely to be more explicitly pedagogical than was quoting past speech (reported speech). Thus, our coding scheme should be viewed as marking the dominant (rather than the only) function of speakers’ use of language-focused terms.

Reliability

All the data were coded by one coder. Twenty-five percent of the data that had not been used in the initial development of the coding scheme was independently coded by a second coder. The Cohen’s kappa coefficient for the coding categories was .87, representing ‘almost perfect’ inter-rater reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results

In the 22 dinner time conversations, there was a total of 1142 instances where mothers, fathers, and children used a language-focused term to talk about language itself. At the dinner table, each child heard approximately 43 instances of talk about language from his or her mother and father, and the child contributed about 8 additional instances. Thus, in total, there were on average 51 citations of language-focused terms.
per dinner. Across all speakers, there were 70 different language-focused terms (see Table 1 for examples). Using standardized rates (rates per 100 utterances), speakers’ focus on language represented a notable proportion of the overall dinner time conversation: 11.7 (SD = 4.5) for mothers, 7.3 (SD = 3.4) for fathers, and 4.3 (SD = 4.4) for children. Averaging across all three groups of speakers, the standardized rate was 7.8 (SD = 5.1; range .4 to 19.0). However, there was a wide range of individual differences, with standardized rates of use of all language-focused terms running from 2.5 to 19.0 for mothers, 1.8 to 15.0 for fathers, and .4 to 15.5 for children. In addition, there was also an appreciable degree of individual variation in the frequency of use of individual codes, as indicated by the relatively large standard deviations (see Table 3). Finally, as can be seen in Table 4, there was variation as well as in the number of participants using each code. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent analyses were run on standardized rates (rate per 100 utterances) in order to control for variations in talkativeness across speakers.

**Pragmatic versus metalinguistic references.** Because we had anticipated that parents would be particularly concerned with monitoring the pragmatic aspects of their children’s language, in our first hypothesis we anticipated finding more references to pragmatics than to metalinguistics. Contrary to our expectations, across all speakers, metalinguistic uses of language-focused terms were far more frequent than were pragmatic uses. This pattern was true for mothers (metalinguistic (M = 7.4, SD = 3.5), pragmatic (M = 2.8, SD = 2.0), $F(1, 21) = 29.88, p < .0001$), for fathers

| Table 3. Frequencies of Codes (per 100 utterances) with Standard Deviations and Univariate Effects of Speakers |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------|----------|
| Codename           | Mother (M, SD) | Father (M, SD) | Child (M, SD) | $F^1$    | $p <$  |
| Pragmatic codes    |                 |                  |              |          |        |
| Control            | .7 (.8)         | .3 (.4)          | .2 (.3)      | 4.43     | .05    |
| Clarification      | .6 (.6)         | .7 (1.0)         | .4 (.7)      | 1.10     | ns     |
| Elicitation        | .8 (1.0)        | .5 (.6)          | .2 (.4)      | 3.00     | .06    |
| Specification      | .7 (1.0)        | .6 (.8)          | .0 (.1)      | 5.17     | .01    |
| Metalinguistic codes |               |                  |              |          |        |
| Emphasis/formulaic | .7 (.5)         | .5 (.6)          | .2 (.4)      | 5.96     | .005   |
| Comment            | 2.3 (1.8)       | 1.4 (1.4)        | 1.1 (2.1)    | 2.48     | .10    |
| Comment on past speech | .1 (.3)     | .0 (.1)          | .0 (.0)      | 5.15     | .01    |
| Labeling           | .6 (.8)         | .6 (.7)          | .3 (.6)      | 1.56     | ns     |
| Reported speech    | 3.5 (2.5)       | 1.5 (1.3)        | 1.1 (1.9)    | 8.98     | .0005  |
| Inanimate/generic  | .2 (.4)         | .1 (.4)          | .3 (.5)      | .44      | ns     |
| Literacy           | 1.5 (2.0)       | .9 (1.5)         | .5 (.7)      | 2.94     | .07    |
| Incomplete         | .0 (.1)         | .2 (.4)          | .0 (.1)      | —        | —      |
| Total              | 11.7 (4.5)      | 7.3 (3.4)        | 4.3 (4.4)    | 17.61    | .0001  |

**Note:**

1 Degrees of freedom = 2, 63.

a, b, c Frequencies noted with different subscripts are significantly different from one another by post-hoc Fisher PLSD tests.
Table 4. Pervasiveness of Use of Individual Codes by Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mother N = 22</th>
<th>Father N = 22</th>
<th>Child N = 22</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pragmatic codes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>15 (68)a</td>
<td>8 (36)</td>
<td>7 (32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>16 (73)</td>
<td>11 (50)</td>
<td>8 (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elicitation</td>
<td>15 (68)</td>
<td>11 (50)</td>
<td>5 (23)</td>
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<td>Specification</td>
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<td><strong>Metalinguistic codes</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis/formulaic</td>
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Note:
aFigures in parentheses represent percentages.

(metalinguistic ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 2.3$), pragmatic ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.7$), $F(1, 21) = 15.64$, $p < .001$), as well as for children (metalinguistic ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 3.6$), pragmatic ($M = .8$, $SD = 1.1$), $F(1, 21) = 9.72$, $p < .01$).

We also identified the addressee of all pragmatic uses of language-focused terms. As might be expected, the overwhelming majority of uses by mothers (81%) and fathers (75%) were directed toward the target child. Parents directed the balance of terms to one another, as well as to the small number of other adults and siblings who were also at the dinner table in a few families.

**Specific types of talk.** The most frequently occurring individual type of talk about language across all three speakers was reported speech. As we had noted earlier (Ely et al., 1995), parents and children regularly made references to past speech. The second most frequently occurring category was comment, instances where parents and children commented on speech behavior, sometimes speculating on what they might say in the future, and at other times offering judgments about current or routine speech activity. The third most frequent code across all speakers was literacy, talk about reading, writing, and spelling. Together, these three codes represented more than 60% of all mothers’, 50% of all fathers’, and 60% of all children’s talk about language.

**Differences among mothers, fathers, and children.** As predicted in our second hypothesis, across all speakers, mothers ($M = 11.7$, $SD = 4.5$) made more references to language than did fathers ($M = 7.3$, $SD = 3.4$) or children ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 4.4$) (Table 3).
In terms of pervasiveness, all speakers made reference to language at least once at dinner (Table 4). To assess the degree to which there were differences in the frequencies with which speakers used categories of codes as well as individual codes, multiple analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were run on the pragmatic and metalinguistic codes, and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on the third category that was represented by the single code literacy.

There was a significant main effect of speaker in the group of pragmatic codes, Wilks’ lambda = .73, approximate F(2, 63) = 2.61, p < .05. This effect was due to significant univariate effects of speakers in the codes control and specification, and a trend toward an effect in elicitation, as can be seen in Table 3. Results of post-hoc tests (Fisher PLSD) are also noted. Mothers used control more than did fathers and children. Mothers and fathers also used specification more than did children, and there was a trend for mothers to use elicitation more than did children.

There was also a significant main effect of speaker in the group of metalinguistic codes, Wilks’ lambda = .59, approximate F(2, 63) = 3.55, p < .0005. Again, as can be seen in Table 3, this effect was largely due to univariate effects of speaker in the categories emphasis/formulaic, comments about past speech, and reported speech, and a trend toward significance in the category comment. Mothers and fathers used emphasis/formulaic more than did children; Mothers used reported speech and comments about past speech more than did both fathers and children. Mothers also tended to use comments more than did their children. Finally, in the category literacy, constituting only one code of the same name, there was a trend for mothers to talk more about literacy than did their children.

**Correlations between children and parents.** In our third hypothesis we had predicted that mothers’, but not fathers’, talk about language would be correlated with children’s talk about language. Mothers’ overall use of language-focused terms (tokens) was correlated with children’s use of language-focused terms, r(22) = .49, p < .05. In contrast, fathers’ use of language-focused terms was unrelated to children’s use.

**Child gender and age effects.** There were no gender differences in children’s use of individual codes, or in the overall frequency with which they talked about language (M girls = 4.6, SD = 5.2, M boys = 3.9, SD = 3.6). There were also no child gender effects on mothers’ use of talk about language. In other words, mothers did not vary systematically the frequency with which they used particular codes when talking to boys or to girls. There was one child gender effect in fathers: Fathers talking to boys (M = .7, SD = .7) elicited narratives and other information more than did fathers talking to girls (M = .2, SD = .3), t(20) = −2.30, p < .05. Finally, there was no support for our fourth hypothesis, which had predicted that there would be a negative correlation between the child’s age and parents’ pragmatic use of language-focused terms, and a positive correlation between the child’s age and parents’ metalinguistic and literacy uses of language-focused terms. Correlations between the child’s age and mothers’ and fathers’ use of pragmatic, metalinguistic and literacy codes were not statistically significant.

**Summary.** A notable proportion of dinner table conversation focused on language itself, and more of this talk about language was concerned with metalinguistics than with pragmatics. Reported speech, comment, and literacy were the three most frequently occurring codes across all speakers. Overall, mothers more than fathers, and fathers more than children, talked about language. In individual codes, mothers used control, reported speech, and comments about past speech more than fathers, and
mothers’ use of language-focused terms was significantly greater than that of children in 8 of the 11 individual codes; in contrast, fathers’ use of individual codes significantly exceeded that of their children in only 2 categories. Mothers’, but not fathers’, use of language-focused terms was positively correlated with children’s use of language-focused terms. There were no gender differences in children’s talk about language. Fathers of boys were more likely to use elicitation than were fathers of girls. Finally, there were no effects of child age on parents’ use of language-focused terms.

Discussion

Our study demonstrates that in middle class homes, dinner table conversations contain relatively frequent and sometimes important lessons about language. Embedded in the ongoing discourse are instructions about when and how to speak, comments on speech activity, reports of past speech, and conversations about literacy activities like writing and reading. In our discussion section, we focus first on the extent and content of parents talk about language. We then turn to differences between speakers, particularly differences between mothers and fathers. We touch briefly on the absence of child age effects. Finally, we identify some of the limitations of our study, particularly the degree to which our findings may be specific to the types of middle class families that were observed, and the implications these limitations have for future work in this area.

Extent. The most important finding to emerge from this study of middle class family dinner time conversations is the degree to which these parents and children focus on language itself. When averaged across all three groups of speakers (mothers, fathers, and children), 7.8% of all utterances included a language-focused term, a rate that exceeds the highest rate reported by Blum-Kulka (6.5%; 1997) in her sample of dinner table conversations.1 In fact, our study actually underestimates the amount of speech that was focused on language, since we limited our analyses to utterances where speakers used a language-focused term. These utterances were often embedded in a series of utterances that had language as their topic, although the surrounding utterances did not contain a language-focused term (and, hence were not counted) as can be seen in the following exchange.

Father: No, you’re gonna have stew.
Child: Stew what?
Mother: No, special stew for you!
Child: [laughs]
Mother: That rhymes, uh?
Child: Stew.
Child: You.
Child: For you.
Mother: Stew.
Mother: A special stew for you.
Child: You is the word in that rhyme.

Here, a mother and child engaged in playful conversation about rhyming that carried over a number of utterances and contained two instances of a language-focused term (rhyme) that were coded comment. This example illustrates how the standardized totals reported in Table 3, and the proportions derived from them, represent less than a complete count of the total amount of discourse that was focused on language.

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Obviously, we can not assess to what extent children were attending to all the exchanges that involved language-focused terms, particularly those mother-father exchanges that did not directly include the child as interlocutor. Nevertheless, the high degree of exposure to such talk, when repeated frequently as part of children’s daily routine, is likely to influence their language behavior as well as their knowledge of the language system itself.

**Content.** Not only was there a surprising amount of talk about language, but more of this talk was metalinguistic than pragmatic. This was in contradiction to our first hypothesis, which had predicted that parents would pay more attention to pragmatics in their use of language-focused terms than they would to metalinguistics or to literacy. This finding was also unexpected given the attention pragmatic concerns appear to play in a variety of settings and cultures, particularly attention to politeness routines (Becker, 1994; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Gleason, Perlmann, & Greif, 1984; Schieffelin, 1990; Snow, Perlmann, Gleason, & Hooshyar, 1990). It also was in contrast to the data reported by Blum-Kulka (1990) for Jewish-American families, where more than 80% of the metacommunicative discourse was focused on pragmatic concerns (disourse management and maxim violation).² In contrast, in our data, less than a third of the metapragmatic and metalinguistic utterances (i.e., excluding utterances in the literacy category) constituted pragmatic concerns (27.5% for mothers and 32.3% for fathers). It turned out that parents, and to a lesser degree children, were more focused in discussing past, present, and future language behavior than they were with directing and controlling the ongoing conversation.

Although parents did make attempts to control and correct their children’s speech, these efforts were not as frequent as we had anticipated, and were far less frequent than other concerns. We had been led to our first hypothesis by the salience of parents’ socialization of appropriate language behavior. Past work has documented how parents seek to elicit politeness routines. Exchanges around politeness routines often stand out (Father: ‘You don’t get any until you say the magic word, wise guy’), and can be relatively frequent in certain contexts (Greif & Gleason, 1980; Gleason & Weintraub, 1976; Snow, Perlmann, Gleason, & Hooshyar, 1990). Nevertheless, specification, the coding category that included parents’ direct socialization of politeness routines, was only second in frequency in the group of pragmatic codes for both mothers and fathers (and essentially tied for fifth overall with several other coding categories for both mothers and fathers).

For mothers, elicitation was the most frequently appearing pragmatic code. Elicitation directed toward the child typically took the form of tell Daddy x.

Mother: Did you tell Daddy who had supper with us last night?
Mother: Can you tell Daddy about the doll that Denise had?

Although mothers did much of the eliciting of narratives and other information, fathers also encouraged their sons and daughters to share stories about past activities (Father: ‘You didn’t tell me about the swan boat ride yesterday’). For fathers, clarification was the most frequent pragmatic use of language-focused terms, a finding that may reflect their greater difficulty in understanding their children’s speech (Weist & Kruppe, 1977). Furthermore, in contrast to the usual patience with which narratives were elicited from children, fathers’ requests for clarification were sometimes brusque (“What does that mean?”; “Say that again”; “I didn’t hear you”).

Metalinguistic uses of language-focused terms far exceeded pragmatic uses across all three groups of speakers. Unlike pragmatic uses, metalinguistic uses were an end
in themselves; that is, their primary function was to draw listeners’ attention to language itself, rather than to alter or elicit language. For mothers and fathers, the most frequently employed metalinguistic use of a language-focused term was to quote past speech, a practice we have reported on in depth (Ely et al., 1995). The second most frequent metalinguistic use, again for mothers and fathers, was comments, instances where speakers made observations about the language system, or about current or future speech behavior. Some of these comments were specifically about the child’s speech (Mother: ‘It’s a good thing all her friends don’t use toilet words; otherwise I think we’d be in the toilet’), and some were about the speech of children more generally (Mother: ‘They [toddlers] say “no” to everything’). Children overheard parents talking about conversations that they would like to have had (‘I would have enjoyed the opportunity to discuss with her . . . her attitude toward family planning and population control’), or remarks that they felt should be made (‘I feel as if you ought to tell Ralphy that’). They commented on how people usually spoke (‘Notice how she already has a New York accent’), and talked about four different languages (Hebrew, German, Spanish, and English). A separate but related category, comments about past speech, included relatively rare remarks, often affective in nature, about what had been said in the past, as illustrated in the following exchange between two parents:

Mother: See, that’s why it would’ve been nice if you’d taken me seriously when I first started talking [laughs].
Father: Hmm.

In general, language-focused terms that were used as comments were embedded in utterances that provided children with rich metalinguistic information. Although, as we have previously noted, we cannot assess the degree to which children took advantage of these data, they could potentially learn much about the language system itself, and certainly more than children who experience little or no exposure to such information.

A more explicitly pedagogical form of talk about language was found in the category label. Utterances coded as label included a number of instances where parents provided definitions of words or concepts. Parents also asked children to label objects, and corrected them when they responded incorrectly. For example, a child who had originally mislabeled blueberries as strawberries was urged to consider their color in coming up with the correct label:

Father: What do you call this, those?
Child: Strawberries.
Father: No way, try again. What color are they?
Child: Um, bwue [blue].
Father: So what do they call ‘em?
Child: Blueberries.
Father: Right . . .
Child: Blueberries.

Children themselves asked for, and were provided with, the names of a variety of objects, including scallops, snooze alarms, and drawer pulls. They also came up with their own idiosyncratic word definitions:

Child: It tastes lumpy.
Father: Lumpy?
Child: That means good.
In addition, there was much discussion about proper names, with children being asked who was called what, as well as one instance in which a child was questioned about what appeared to be an unusual name (Father: ‘Is there really a girl named Space at your school?’). In another instance, a father provided his son with an explicit lesson about gender-appropriate names (‘Ted’s not a girl name’), and in yet another, a mother points out that her daughter gets called three different names (Nadine, Nicki, and Nick), to which a sibling comments, ‘Oh, that’s a boy’s name.’ Although the category label was relatively infrequent, it was pervasive, appearing at least once in 18 (82%) out of the 22 family dinner time conversations. Furthermore, despite its low frequency, it, along with the pragmatic code specification, appeared to reflect particularly conscious attempts on the part of parents to provide language lessons to their children. As such, unlike most other codes, parents’ use of language-focused terms for specification and label occasioned a pause in the flow of conversation while they focused attention directly on language itself.

**Differences among speakers.** Overall, mothers, more than fathers and children, were the principal users of language-focused terms. Mothers’ use of language-focused terms exceeded that of fathers’ in all but two categories (clarification and label), although in only three categories (control, reported speech, and comments about past speech) was the difference statistically significant. In contrast, as noted earlier, in most categories, the frequency of fathers’ use of language-focused terms did not significantly exceed that of their children. Thus, mothers played the dominant role in bringing dinner table conversation back to language itself.

Mothers’ attention to language may reflect in part their role as primary caregivers (Fagot & Hagan, 1991; Ninio & Rinott, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990; Stoneman & Brody, 1981). As primary caregivers, mothers may have felt particularly responsible for their children’s speech. Mothers both encouraged and responded to children’s language-focused utterances, and did so more than fathers, a finding that was reflected in the significant correlation between mothers’, but not fathers’, use of language-focused terms and children’s use of language-focused terms. However, in explaining these findings, we cannot completely dismiss the possible effects of gender (rather than simply the caregiving role) as a contributing factor to mothers’ greater use of language-focused terms. Research on gender differences in language has shown that girls and women are more concerned with language and devote more of their energies to language related activities than do boys and men (Gleason & Ely, in press). Thus, mothers’ greater attention to language in the conversations analyzed here may reflect a more general phenomenon in our culture, one that sees language and literacy as predominate female domains.

**Absence of age effects.** Although we had expected that parents’ pragmatic use of language-focused terms would drop with the child’s age and that, conversely, parents’ metalinguistic and literacy uses would increase with child age, none of these predictions held up. It may be that the degree to which families talk about language is more a matter of family style. Some families, and some individual family members, may be more focused on and more interested in talking about language, as exemplified in the exchange cited earlier about rhyming. Such exchanges were relatively frequent in some families, and largely absent in others. Likewise, some parents may be more concerned with polite behavior than others, and such concerns may transcend any effect the child’s age might otherwise have.

This interpretation is supported by an examination of the frequency distributions. When the data for both parents are averaged and aggregated into fourths (quartiles),
12 families (54.5%) fell into the lowest quartile for pragmatic uses of language-focused terms (and only 1 family (4.5%) fell into the highest quartile). In other words, in more than half the families, mothers and fathers devoted little attention to managing the dinner table discourse. In contrast, nearly a third of families (7 or 31.8%) fell into the highest quartile for metalinguistic uses of language-focused terms. In these families, more than 7% of mothers’ and fathers’ utterances had language as a topic. Importantly, the overall use of language-focused terms followed a normal distribution. Furthermore, there were no correlations between pragmatic and metalinguistic uses; in other words, frequent attention to the pragmatic aspects of language was not associated with either greater or lesser attention to the language system itself (metalinguistics).

Clearly, children growing up in households where metalinguistic talk at the dinner table represents more than 7% of parents’ discourse are being exposed to a very different sort of language experience than those growing up in household where such talk is relatively rare. In short, the range of cross-family variation that has been documented in explanatory talk (Beals & Snow, 1994; Davidson & Snow, 1995; Perlmann, 1984; Weizman & Snow, 1998) may extend to other language-focused domains as well. Thus, the rates with which speakers focus (or do not focus) on different aspects of language may reflect enduring individual and family styles, rather than typical developmental patterns.

**Conclusions.** This study has shown that during the course of an ordinary dinner, middle class American parents and their preschool children engage in many and varied conversational interchanges that deal with language: Mothers, in particular, included a language-focused term in more than one of ten utterances. This number underrepresents the attention paid to language in these family dinners, since utterances containing language-focused terms were often part of a larger metalinguistic or metapragmatic exchange.

Although our study has shown that language-focused utterances constitute an appreciable proportion of dinner table conversation, this finding may be limited to the types of middle class families that were examined. The adult participants in this study were all well educated. They had agreed to participate in a study of children’s language development that required their being observed in a laboratory setting and audio-recorded at home. The attention they paid to language may reflect the degree to which they valued language. Teaching a preschool child the meaning of the word *anecdote*, or clarifying for a preschool child what the technical meaning of the word *pull* is when used to refer to drawer hardware are not language-focused activities likely to be found in all homes. Detailed discussions about the meanings of words, the nature of rhymes, or what could have, or should have been said are likely to be specific to parents who particularly care about language and literacy.

In this regard, our study touches on a potentially important question that could be addressed in future work. We have shown that some families more than others talk about language. The nature of our sample does not allow us to identify the origins of these individual differences, or, more importantly, their effects on children’s language and literacy development. However, work by Hoff-Ginsberg (1991) and Hart and Risley (1992, 1995) has demonstrated how individual and social class differences are associated with differential child outcomes. The amount and the quality of input that children receive appear to be important antecedents for optimal vocabulary development, and are related to later measures of child intelligence. Similar findings exist for studies of emergent literacy. Children growing up in homes where literacy is valued,
practiced, and presumably talked about enter school with a distinct advantage over children who are not exposed to these types of preliteracy experiences (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Thus, certain forms of talk about language, *labeling* for example, or the use of language-focused terms for *elicitation*, as well as talk about reading, writing, and spelling may be indices of input that is particularly advantageous to young children’s linguistic and intellectual development. For some preschool children, such input is likely to occur as part of their ongoing social interactions with parents and other family members in a variety of contexts, including at the dinner table.

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**Notes**

1. Furthermore, it appears as if Blum-Kulka’s (1997) data encompassed comments that did not necessarily include language-focused terms (see examples pp. 181–182).
2. Data from the other two cultures studied indicate that conversation focused on discourse management and maxim violations constitutes a smaller percentage of overall dinner table conversation, 65.5% for American Israeli families, and 42% for the Israeli families (Blum-Kulka, 1997, p. 183).