



# “Don’t say it’s disgusting!” Comments on socio-moral behavior in Swedish families

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## Abstract

A previous study, which compared family dinner conversations in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden and was based on the same data as the present one, found that in the Swedish families, both parents and children made considerably more comments on the socio-moral behavior of others [J. Pragmatics 34 (2002) 1757]. The aim of the present study is to investigate: (1) which family members make the comments and to whom the comments are addressed, (2) what issues are raised, e.g., moral rules (justice, harm prevention, etc.) or social-conventional rules (appropriateness and correctness), and (3) what reactions follow on comments (agreement, resistance, negotiation, etc.). Mothers provide more than 50% of all comments, compared to fathers and children. Parents’ comments are mainly aimed at children, whereas children’s comments often are aimed at people not present at the table. Comments directed towards people present at the table mainly concern social-conventional rules, whereas comments on others’ behavior more often regard moral rules. Also, comments aimed at people present at the table are more indirect than comments aimed at people who are not present. Finally, comments on socio-conventional behavior appear to be more negotiable than moral rules, as children often question them.

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## 1. Introduction

In the process of child socialization, language plays an important, if not the most important, role. Language socialization has become the commonly used term to describe

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the integrated process of language acquisition and socialization (Ochs, 1996). Parents use language in order to convey norms and rules governing both linguistic and socio-cultural behavior. This conveyance can be direct or indirect, explicit or implicit and may appear in the form of direct instructions or commands of how to behave or in the use of language or behavior, in order to construct examples of linguistic and socio-cultural behavior. Adults' language constitutes an important means of socialization in the form of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990).

Pragmatic socialization is a term used to describe parents' specific focus on language and its use in different situations. The linguistic tool used in the process of pragmatic socialization is often referred to as a metapragmatic comment (Becker, 1988, 1990; Blum-Kulka, 1990). This is a comment used by parents in order to point out either lack of adherence to a norm, e.g., turn-taking rules, politeness phrases, etc., or it may be used as an explicit directive to encourage proper or desired behavior. It explicitly points at both verbal and non-verbal behavior in the immediate past or in the near or distant future.

A previous study, based on the same data as the present study (De Geer et al., 2002) concerned metapragmatic comments as well as comments on behavior other than pragmatic (table manners, moral rules, prudential rules, etc.). Comments were used with the explicit or implicit aim to make a conversational partner behave or speak or act in a certain way, i.e., to teach, or draw attention to, conversational or socio-cultural norms which are known to vary between different cultures (e.g., Tannen, 1981; Blum-Kulka, 1990, 1997; Blum-Kulka and Sheffer, 1993). It was found that comments concerned the immediate situation (the mealtime), previous or future occasions, as well as more general situations, and were directed both towards people present at the table and to those who were not. The study focused on family mealtime conversations in three neighboring countries: Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. The Swedish families were found to make more comments on non-linguistic behavior, and particularly on socio-moral behavior (39% of all comments, compared to 9–16% in the other groups). These comments regarded issues of fairness, justice, harm, teasing, other people, adherence to rules, etc. Estonian and Finnish families, on the other hand, made more comments on table manners than did the Swedish families. Such comments are of course of a moral kind too, in the sense that they express a social-conventional rule of how to behave, such as "Ät snyggt!" [Eat properly!]. Since the study focused on dinner conversation, such comments were likely to be frequent and were thus assigned a category of their own. In the Swedish families, comments on table manners often had a strong "flavor" of ethics and moral: A comment like "Det är bra att ni äter spenat!" [It's good that you eat spinach!] raises not only the question of norm adherence; the same goes for: "En grönsak är obligatorisk!" [One piece of vegetables is compulsory!].

Socio-moral rules are rules of social interaction and they are conveyed in social interaction, both inside and outside the home. The present study focuses on the use of comments on socio-moral behavior in Swedish families during dinnertime. Dinnertime situations provide families with the opportunity of joint conversation on a regular basis, and children can learn, be taught, and make inferences about, the norms and rules governing linguistic and social behavior. It is one of the few regular time frames for intergenerational gathering (Ochs and Taylor, 1992a; Blum-Kulka, 1997).

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