

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 9 (1996)  
  
**Artikel:** Cultural patterns in dinner talk  
**Autor:** Blum-Kulka, Shoshana  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99924>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 27.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Cultural Patterns in Dinner Talk

Shoshana Blum-Kulka

This paper is about cultural patterns of communication in family discourse. More precisely, I compare dinnertime conversations in Israeli and Jewish-American families, exploring the relations between linguistic use and cultural codes, the role of discourse in shaping and evoking familial, social and cultural identities. Following traditions in sociolinguistics, the ethnography of speaking and pragmatics, I will attempt to show how the detailed analysis of discursive practices in particular settings and events can reveal the role of language as a form of cultural behaviour. The perspective developed here assumes (with scholars like Garfinkel, Sacks and Goffman) that even the most mundane instances of face-to-face interaction are complex social performances, and that social meanings are jointly and dynamically negotiated through talk.

Though there is by now a rich literature on various aspects of natural, face-to-face interaction, there are no more than a handful of studies that focus particularly on family meals or family gatherings.<sup>1</sup> The study discussed here is a comparative case study of family discourse in middle-class, Jewish-American, native Israeli and American born Israeli families of European origin. Two of the major general concerns that motivated the study will be discussed in this paper. The first concern is cultural variation in ways of speaking, as manifest in the dynamics of dinner talk. This concern is a quest for the degree of diversity in interactional styles between present-day Jewish communities sharing a common past. All the families in the study have Eastern European origins, yet the study demonstrates that within the course of one or at the most two generations they have developed culturally

---

<sup>1</sup> Scholars in this line of research have addressed issues such as building coherence in Italian-American multi-party talk (Erickson 1990), the culture of American familial talk (Varenne 1992), power in Swiss family discourse (Watts 1991), conversational transmission of knowledge in German families (Keppler and Luckman 1991), problem solving during Italian dinners (Pontecervo and Fasulo, forthcoming) and theory building through co-narration in American meals (Ochs, Smith and Taylor 1989; Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph and Smith 1992).

distinct interactional styles. We shall see how such differences emerge with regard to topical contributions, the language of control, and narratives.

A second concern is the role of dinner talk in pragmatic socialization. By "pragmatic socialization" I mean the ways in which children learn to use language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. To become competent conversationalists, children have to learn how to choose and introduce topics for talk, respond appropriately, tell a story or develop an argument. We know by now that cultures differ to a great extent in their beliefs and practices of language socialization, particularly with regard to pragmatic aspects of language use. Such diversity is also apparent between Jewish-American and Israeli families.

### Method and Major Findings

The data base of the study consists of three taped dinners and extensive interviews with three groups of middle-class families: native born Jewish-American (12), native born Israelis (11) and native born American-Israelis (12) who immigrated to Israel at least nine years prior to the start of the project. At the outset of the project the families in the three groups all had two school-aged children; all parents were occupied professionally outside the home. The families were taped in their homes in the presence of a member of the research team who came from the same cultural background as the family. Following initial contacts by phone, the observer visited the home and got acquainted with the family prior to recordings. The same observer stayed with the family through the research period. Hence the situation in which we are comparing the groups is that of families interacting with a semi-official guest. All dinner conversations were transcribed and analyzed from the perspective of different discourse dimensions, combining quantitative and qualitative methods.<sup>2</sup> In the following discussion, I focus on the similarities and differences between the Israeli and the Jewish-American families.

Two major findings emerged:

1. In the middle-class families studied, differing from many other cultures, family dinners constitute a particular type of speech event. It is an event that embodies unique inbuilt tensions between the construction of the event as activity-focused or talk-focused, its framing as essentially a sociable or as a critically socializing speech event.

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the project, see Blum-Kulka (1990); Blum-Kulka (1993); Blum-Kulka (1994) and Blum-Kulka (forthcoming).

2. These features reflect in part shared perceptions of the family dinner realized in similar thematic structures of the discourse. But simultaneously, family discourse in these groups also reveals unique, group-specific, cultural patterns of communication.

### Thematic Frames: Building Coherence at Dinner

The social construction of family dinner as an intergenerational speech event is a cultural construct, valid for some societies but not for others. At the outset of the project, we approached potential families asking them to allow us to tape family meals. None of the families questioned the underlying assumptions of this request; namely, that the family normally partakes in meals together, and that such events contain conversation that can be taped. As members of a Western middle-class culture, both we as researchers and the adults in the families approached the task with a shared set of background expectancies typically “seen but unnoticed” in everyday life (Garfinkel 22). We all took it for granted that children would be present at the dinner-table, that the event would occasion conversation, and that the children, in one form or another, would participate in the talk.

Though of course none of these assumptions is universally true they did prove true for these specific groups. Talk is the unmarked state, silence the marked one. All present participate, young children included. Yet participation is no simple matter; not all have the same rights nor do they use them in similar ways. Dinner-time in these families is talking time; families across all three groups frame and enact it as a sociable and a socializing speech event.

But can family dinner-table conversations be as truly sociable as are, supposedly, ordinary conversations? Ordinary conversation is – at least ostensibly – egalitarian, collaborative and not goal-oriented (Lakoff), whereas dinner-table conversations represent encounters between unequal intimates. They bring together members (children and parents) who are in a complementary nurturance-dependence relationship (Bateson). Family dinners are also goal-oriented in that they may have, at least for the parents, both instrumental and socializing goals. Yet during interviews parents foreground the sociability aspect of dinners: they talk about dinners as a social time, a getting together time. These comments frame dinners as geared to satisfy our human instinct of *sociability*, a “union with others” achieved in social gatherings where “talking is an end in itself” (Simmel 161).



Family dinners are a very special type of social event; they are *familial* “we” events shared with children and, as such, carry important *socializing* functions, ranging from the concern with table manners, to language socialization in the broadest sense. Parents’ comments echo these themes as well, framing dinners as occasions for sharing family news and making joint plans. Dinner-table conversations are critical contexts in which children become socialized to local cultural rules regulating discourse, such as the choice of topics, turn-taking, story-telling and politeness (Blum-Kulka and Snow 1992). As will be exemplified, it is in these discourse socialization domains that the groups studied show unique cultural patterns.

This double function of dinner-table conversations as sociable and socializing events sets them apart from ordinary conversation. The tension between these two opposing dimensions provides the key for understanding the building of coherence in dinner talk. One of the features of sociable, ordinary conversations, according to Goffman, is that they are a “period of idling” which has no reference to a fixed schedule or agenda (Goffman 14). At the other end of the continuum we have semi-ritualized speech events – classrooms, trials, news broadcasts and interviews, which often have pre-planned fixed schedules, and where participants will be expected to make their contributions with reference to this schedule.

At dinner, most of the talk is not scheduled in this or other ways. Talk constantly shifts from the realm of the immediate, instrumental task at hand, to a variety of other *seemingly* non-connected issues. Topics are sometimes initiated with no apparent link to anything that went on before. Yet family dinners are not quite like ordinary conversations. They are structured around a set of recurring thematic frames, which cohere only within this speech event. Together they reflect underlying socio-culturally motivated familial notions of relevance.

We identified three major such contextual, or thematic frames at dinner: the situational, instrumental frame, comprised of topics of imposed relevance; the urgent familial, comprised of topics of personal and familial relevance; and the non-immediate frame, comprised of topics of general interest. Each of these frames assigns discourse roles in different ways and evokes its own rules of interpretation.

#### A. Instrumental needs: topics of imposed relevance

Malinowsky (1923) was perhaps the first scholar to draw attention to the embeddedness of talk in what he called “the context of the situation” and to

the function of language in the universe of practical action. Dinners are a prime example of a case where "language functions as a link in concerted human activity" (312). The situational frame at dinner dictates instrumental goals: minimally, food has to be brought to the table, accessed by or served to all present. Many of these activities are underscored by or assisted verbally by directives (*could you pass the salt?/ we don't eat lettuce with our fingers*), offers (*wouldn't you like some potatoes?*), and compliments (*this is wonderful*). The business talk of having dinner is woven through all our conversations. It is a most consistently recurring thematic frame, but also the one that needs the least coherence grounding work and can always be shifted back to with no marking word, giving it a kind of privileged status among other frames. Being in a research situation is another scene-based theme attended to within the situation frame in all families. Between 3% to 14% of the time in the first 20 minutes of each dinner, depending on family, the taping equipment (*I can see the light is on*), the goals of the research (*Who is going to listen to this?*), and metacomments of resurgent awareness (*You're on tape*) become topicalized.

Examples 1a to 1d and 2a to 2c exemplify several features of the use of directives within this frame.

### 1. Jewish-American middle-class families.<sup>3</sup>

- |     |            |   |
|-----|------------|---|
| 1a. | Father:    | Leave it Simon, put your fork down.               |
| 1b. | Father:    | Sweetie, if you touch it it will make a big BOOM! |
| 1c. | Mother:    | Could you pass the water?                         |
| 1d. | Sandra (3) | Mommy, can I have some more cookies?              |

### 2. Israeli middle-class families.

- |     |         |  |
|-----|---------|--|
| 2a. | Mother: | xagitush, spoons, xagitush             |
| 2b. | Father: | danile leave those bicycles now, okay? |

<sup>3</sup> Transcription follows the CHILDES system (MacWhinney 1987) for: < >=overlap; [>] & [<] mark direction of overlap; # marked pause; [/]=retracing without correction; [/]= retracing with correction; += interrupted utterance; +...=trailing off; +^=quick uptake; +=self completion; ++=other completion [=!text]= paralinguistic material; [%com]=contextual information. Italics are used to mark emphasis. Punctuation marks are used to mark utterance terminators. Two deviations from CHILDES were introduced: the use of capitals (to make reading easier) and the segmentation of the text by turns (the relevant units here), rather than utterances. Participants are identified by role (for adults) and by name (for children). Age and sex of child is given in parenthesis, in that order: Andrew (8m)=Andrew, aged 8 years, male. Conversational features (e.g. interruptions and overlaps) are marked approximatively on the English translations from Hebrew.

## 2c. Yoav (11): Can one go upstairs?

In all the families, the style used for directives is generally highly direct, the protoform being *do x* (as in 1a), or *please do x*. Yet indirect strategies (1b, 1c, 2c) are used as well. In all the families, parental status matters; we found variation by age, indexing asymmetry in power: parents are more direct than children, the latter often opting for indirectness when talking to their parents (1d, 2c). This high level of directness in the language of control seems licensed by the informality and intimacy of the event; yet embedded within it we also found cultural variation: Israeli speakers tend to soften direct forms with various devices, like question forms and nicknames (2a, 2b), whereas Jewish-American speakers avoid such practices, preferring instead to mark politeness through the use of conventional indirectness (1c) (Blum-Kulka 1990).

Themes of situational concern are spatio-temporally anchored in the here and now; the language is highly contextualized, contains many deictics decipherable only by being present on the scene and relatively long pauses. The choice of specific topics within this frame is often motivated by actors' perceived needs and noticed changes in the physical context, making this realm qualify, in Shutz's terms, as a case of topics of "imposed relevance." If not purely instrumental, talk in the frame of situational concerns is clearly focused on socialization, rather than sociability.

#### B. Urgent family concerns: topics of immediate personal and familial relevance

The second thematic frame contains themes of *urgent family concern*: "urgent" in the sense that matters talked about within this frame happened or were noticed in the very recent past of the last day, are recounted or discussed (at least for a specific aspect) for the first time, and may need further action. The unifying feature of this realm is its circle of authors and protagonists: in this "news" frame, the family attends to the most recent concerns of its members. Spouses tell each other about work, parents ask children about school and children volunteer stories about their day. In this type of talk the scene moves away from the home, bringing in the classroom, the office and the playground. The focus is often on action (*Mom, we went on a school trip today/ What did you do today at school?*) rather than on objects, as in the instrumental dinner talk. A child-centered ethos of Jewish middle-class urban families is also apparent here: as examples 3-6 show, all

families question the children on the day's activities, and all families yield the floor to children's initiations on their topics. Additionally, the adults also bring up child-focused topics not addressed to the children.

3. Jewish-American family 4; Sandra (4f).

Sandra: Mommy to who will I tell how my day goes?

Mother: Okay let's hear your day.

4. Jewish-American family 6; The children are Andrew (10m), Jessica (8f) and Joshua (3m). (This today story is the first, to be followed by several others at the same meal).

> 1 Father: Jessie, how was your day?

2 Joshua: Ooooh aaah

> 3 Mother: What was the best part of your day,  
Jessie?

4 Jessica: After lunch.

5. Israeli family 6; The family has twin girls aged 6, Lilax and Iris.

Father: Where did you go today during your "nature" lesson?

Lilax: To this hill we went to last time.

6. Israeli family 1; Yoram (11).

Yoram: Mom today we went to a school for teachers or something like it.

Mother: Where? To a Teachers' College?

[Examples 2, 5, 6 are translated from Hebrew]

The frame of immediate family concerns is prevalent in all the families; but the way it is enacted differs by cultural affiliation. For example, the highly ritualistic manner in which sharing the news of one's day is enacted in the Jewish-American families has no parallel in the other two groups. Consider example 3: the girl who asks *To who will I tell how my day goes?* is already aware of her rights of participation in talk about one's day, and focuses her efforts on the search for an audience. She has gained this knowledge through the recurring ritualistic talk about one's day in the Jewish-American families. The "today" ritual includes fixed opening formats (*What did you do today?* or *How was your day?* in 4) used to initiate stories, not curt answers. Several cultural values come to the fore. Parents ask children questions like *What did you accomplish today?* or (as in 4) *What was the best part of your*

*day?* setting days apart as time slots to be measured by achievements and contemplated for choosing their most tellable part. The Israeli families ask general questions like *Tell us what you did in kindergarten today* but mostly focus on specific happenings (as in 5) *Where did you go today during your "nature" lesson?* Israeli children may initiate their news-telling with pre-requests for attention such as *Mom, you know what happened today?* but more typically launch immediately into the narrative (as in 6) *Mom today we went to a school for teachers [. . .].*

In both groups, relevance in this frame is gained by membership rights: as a child or a spouse, a person is entitled to tell or be asked about his or her "news." But the set of rights and obligations is not equally divided: children do not, as a rule, question parents about their day (and if they do, it is not received as a "serious" question), nor do observers receive or initiate "today" frames (except to very young children). We learned from the interviews that this is the thematic domain least influenced by our presence; parents and children alike report engaging in "my/your news" themes regularly at meal times.

The "news telling" frame is inclined towards stories of personal experience, assertive and expressive rather than directive speech acts, exchanges of varied length and in the case of adult-child interactions, participatory roles determined by a regulatory turn-allocation rather than a free-for-all turn-taking system. Again socialization rather than sociability comes to the fore. Note that when children share their recent news with their parents, whether in answer to a question or through their own initiative, they also allow for parental judgment on both the discourse and the content of their message. Parents may and do comment on the children's degree of adherence to conversational norms, (such as being informative enough), or challenge the truth of their propositions. Through such dialogic exchanges children gain conversational skills, while the parents, enhancing their status as children, remain in control (Blum-Kulka 1994).

### C. Non-immediate concerns: topics of social and cultural relevance

The third frame is less easily definable by one label. It basically occasions themes of family and personal relevance judged shareable in this event. As an approximation, I refer to this frame as *non-immediate concerns*, "non-immediate" designating a degree of distancing from the world of "here and now." Specific themes vary in dimensions such as the degree of shared information, spatio-temporal distancing, types of protagonists, key and



narrativization. Having a guest for dinner may (and did) occasion retellings of personal and family histories. Spatio-temporally this frame encompasses both recent and non-recent past as well as the future, and moves across many locations outside the home: an Israeli family's recent visit to Egypt, an American father's planned trip to Italy, and an American mother's complaints about working conditions at the college where she teaches. The general key of the interaction varies in degrees of seriousness: though many stories are meant to entertain, jokes are rare and mostly limited to children tellers striving for floor-space. The presence of an adult guest seems to have a decisive impact on shaping the discourse within this frame. It allows displaying "family fables" to a new audience, the exchange of adult-focused cultural information (books, movies, TV programs) and generally setting the key for framing the occasion as manifestly *sociable*. The non-immediate frame fulfills several of Goffman's requirements for ordinary conversations: there is no fixed schedule, and despite the inbuilt asymmetrical relations between parents and children, within this frame children's contributions are treated on a par with contributions from adults. It is here that family dinners most resemble ordinary conversations; hence non-immediate topics celebrate sociability.

Consider the following example:

7. Jewish-Americans 1; Simon (13m); Jennifer (15f). The family is discussing Whoopie Goldberg films.

1 Father: It's set very good, um she did this thing on Anne Frank and +...

2 Simon: It wasn't on, it was just a little bit about +/-

3 Father: Well # no # # it was really the central theme about # that thing with the junkie and +... and also telling funny stuff, you know. People laughing and then she visits Anne Frank, the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and the whole context of it xxx I mean # talk about a subject like that in the context of her performance, you know. I was ready to say "Oh *my God*, forget it, I'm not gonna watch this," but she does it. I mean she really pulls it off. She discusses, how do you discuss Anne Frank in a humorous context in a co +/-

> 5 Jennifer: But it wasn't humorous.

6 Observer: I don't think she was trying to be humorous.

7 Father: Well no, it's humour really in the best sense.

- > 8 Simon: On all her things she has like a *moral* for all of them.
- 9 Father: What was the moral of this?
- > 10 Simon: Her, you know, her image # that she should appreciate her things more.
- 11 Jennifer: That anybody could +...
- 12 Simon: That her everyday problems are much less than # you know.
- 13 Father: Yeah.
- > 14 Jennifer: And then the thing with the Valley Girls.
- 15 Mother: That was hysterical.
- 16 Father: I think she's a genius, I think she's a genius.

This example illustrates three typical features of non-immediate talk in family discourse. First, note that such conversations build on and expand the pool of cultural presuppositions shared by members of the family. The particular show in question is presumably familiar to all present, except to the observer. But to understand the father's concern with the show (Whoopie Goldberg's visit to the Anne Frank house) one has to be familiar with the story of Anne Frank in the wider context of the holocaust and be aware that Whoopie Goldberg is not Jewish. Whereas historical knowledge with regard to Anne Frank is assumed to be shared by all, the comedian's non-Jewish identity is actually clarified – in response to a question by Simon – earlier in the conversation. Mutual awareness of all participants' Jewish identity is another precondition all build on.

Secondly, we can see here how crucial issues of cultural identity are negotiated through ordinary talk. From the father's point of view, the issue is that of entitlement (Shuman 137-41): is a non-Jewish artist entitled to touch a subject like that in a humorous context? In other words, may an outsider give a comic twist to "our" tragic story? Notice that the issue is debated between the father and the children, the children challenging the father's tendency to highlight the Jewish angle, arguing that the show was not really about Anne Frank (turn 2) and by contesting that it was humorous (Jennifer, backed by the observer, turns 5 and 6).

Thirdly, note that it is 13-year-old Simon who formulates the coda for the story for all present (turns 8, 10 and 12), illustrating how for children in these middle-class families participation in non-immediate talk paves the way for full participation in adult discourse. Simon's interpretation – arguing that the show needs to be understood in the wider context of the



artist's other shows, changes the debate's perspective and minimizes the importance of the Jewish angle. With the father's encouragement, and Jennifer's support (turn 11), Simon then formulates for all the moral of the specific Anne Frank incident: it is one illustration of a higher principle (turn 12) which presumably Whoopie Goldberg is trying to transmit in all her work. This justification of Whoopie Goldberg accepted (turn 13), the talk can move on to discussing yet another Whoopie Goldberg show (turn 14).

In conversations such as this concerning non-immediate topics, children may talk less than when talking on topics of more immediate personal experience. Yet the socializing functions achievable are not less important. From the discursive point of view, such exchanges may serve as models for narratives and provide practice in the intricate skills needed for participating in multi-party talk. Simultaneously, there may be important implications for the development of self. While, as we have seen, adults maintain control over children's participation in child-centered topics, thereby implicitly enhancing their status as children, the children's contribution to "adult" topics grants them entry to the adult world, thereby implicitly acknowledging their maturity.

We have seen so far that although the overall thematic organization of the talk is shared across the groups, the enactment of each frame differs culturally.

### Topical Actions and Power

Cultural differences between the two groups are further revealed in modes of interaction between discourse roles and social roles at dinner. In other words, in the way being a child, mother, father or observer affects the distribution of speaking rights. Who may control the agenda at family dinners? Who has the right to initiate topics, change them, elaborate or digress?

Following Bublitz we defined "topical actions" as linguistic actions that have an effect on the talk agenda. We coded all topical actions in the first 20 minutes of one dinner and computed the relative contribution of each participant to the family's pool of topical actions as well as each person's overall contribution to the talk.

The results show that the groups differ significantly with regard to:

1. Attitudes to the observer; 2. The discourse role of women versus men; and
3. The discourse role of children (Blum-Kulka 1994).

### Observers

Israeli observers are active topical contributors, initiating as many topics as the parents, and manifest a high level of involvement in the ongoing conversation. Israeli observers are asked for and disclose personal information, act as mediators between parents and children and even take sides in moments of conflict with the children. Jewish-American observers' level of topical activity is much lower, as is the level of their general participation in the talk. Jewish-American observers act with caution, avoiding involvement in the conversation at moments of potential conflict. This dramatically different type of interaction with the observers in the two groups reflects unique cultural constructions of the role of the observer. In Israel, in keeping with the informal and intimate ambiance of family dinners – in the spirit of the ethos of solidarity politeness prevailing in this society – observers are treated as potential friends. By contrast, in the more formal atmosphere of the Jewish-American dinners, observers are self-perceived and treated as semi-official guests.

### Gender Roles

The construction of gender roles also differs dramatically between the two groups. In the Israeli families, women dominate the scene of topical actions and have a higher level of contribution to the talk than men. In the Jewish-American families, it is the men who play the more dominant role, initiating more topics and having a higher rate of overall contribution to the talk than women. But can we interpret these results as indicating power differences between men and women in the two communities?

There are two contradictory ways to interpret our findings. In the first, which is in line with current feminist claims, talk equals power. Women's powerlessness is symbolized by their silence. According to the credo of feminist literature, silence is to be deplored "because it is taken to be a result and a symbol of passivity and powerlessness: Those who are denied speech cannot have their experience known and thus cannot influence the course of their lives or of history" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985:11, quoted by Gal). In a more sophisticated version of this claim, women are powerless not because they are muted, but because they do not have access to certain forms of discourse, the very forms which happen to represent hegemonic, male-dominated worlds of discourse. From this perspective, it follows that in the Jewish-American families men are the powerful party at dinner; but note

that this interpretation leaves Israeli men as the "weak" party at dinner, an interpretation that does not quite make sense for this otherwise macho society.

In a second interpretation, it is silence that equals power. The paradoxical power of silence has been noted in several contexts: in all speech events where one party is accountable to the other – for example, in religious confessions, psychotherapy, gate-keeping interviews and police interrogations – it is the *silent* listener who has the right to judge and who thereby exercises power over the one who speaks. A teacher or a parent can exert power over a child in the way they respond to a child's account and men exercise power over women by withholding talk. This view of silence as power is congruent with Bateson's interpretation of American culture along the dimension of exhibitionism-spectatorship. Bateson claims that, given its hierarchical social relations, in America it is the powerless who are expected to display to the powerful (while in Britain the reverse would be true). Within this framework American women, Israeli men and all children would be seen as exerting power by withholding talk.

In fact, both of these interpretations err by assigning absolute value to the choice between silence and speech. As Gal states: "silence, like any other linguistic form, gains different meanings and has different material effects within specific institutional and cultural contexts. Silence and inarticulateness are not, in themselves, necessarily signs of powerlessness" (2).

The key to understanding the interrelations between culture and gender roles in these families seems to lie in different perceptions of the speech situation. Although from a macro-perspective family dinners in all groups are essentially a "private sphere" occurrence, the Jewish-American and Israeli families seem to differ in the boundaries they draw between the private and the public spheres and the gender roles assigned to each. The relative dominance of men in the Jewish-American families seems to indicate a more public, or "on stage" (Goffman) framing of the family dinner than that of the Israeli families. The question then is, who represents the family in this semi-public event? Tannen's observation that men feel more comfortable doing public speaking, while women feel more comfortable doing private speaking (Tannen 1990) holds true for both Israelis and Jewish-Americans. In the more public and formal Jewish-American families, it is the men who tend to take upon themselves the responsibility for keeping the conversation going, including entertaining the guest, and thereby appear to dominate the talk. And precisely because Israeli

families more clearly distinguish the public and private spheres – especially in terms of gender roles – women gain prominence in dinner talk.

We have asked ourselves if there are also gender differences in the choice of topics: do women or men in the two groups raise gender-specific topics? We found no such differences in the Israeli families: mothers and fathers equally share in the instrumental dinner talk, in eliciting the day's news from children, and in talk about general topics, including gossip and food. In the American families sports is an exclusively male topic: when father and son talk about soccer, the mother remains silent. Natural science is another topic that may be marked for gender. In case the woman of the family is a professional scientist, her authority is accepted as a matter of course. But in case neither of the parents has a professional claim to this domain, the issue of who may claim expertise can become a matter of debate. Consider the way a Jewish-American family solves a problem posed by eight-year-old Jordan:

#### 8. Sticks and Squares.

Jewish-Americans 4; Jordan (8m); Sandra (4f).

1 Jordan: Daddy?

2 Father: Yes.

3 Jordan: I've a math question for you.

4 Father: Yes.

5 Jordan: Not exactly a math question. You have sixteen or I mean seventeen # sticks. You make a pattern of six squares, right? Seventeen sticks make a pattern of six squares, right?

% comment: This utterance overlaps with food talk of mother and Sandra.

6 Father: What do you mean a pattern of six squares?

7 Jordan: Okay, you have seventeen sticks. It goes three across and two down, and # no, yeah three across and two down and make it six squares. Each &sqa, each square one by one.

8 Father: Oh! And that takes seventeen sticks? Okay all right.

9 Jordan: Right. Okay, how are you going to take away six sticks and have only two squares left?

10 Father: Take away six sticks and have two squares left.

11 Jordan: Right.

- 12 Mother: Stuff like that creativity test xxx +/.
- 13 Father: <With no moving of, no moving of any stick?> [>]
- 14 Observer: <That's xxxxxxxxxxxx creativity [laughs].> [<]
- 15 Father: No moving? You just take them away?
- 16 Jordan: <You take them away.> [>]
- 17 Observer: <Is that xxxxxxxx.> [<]
- 18 Jordan: <And everything that's left has to be part of the square.> [>]
- 19 Observer: <xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx of the course.> [<]
- 20 Mother: No, it's one of Torrence's creativity tests for children.
- 21 Father: All right. I'll have to +/.
- 22 Mother: And I give it to them when I talk about xxx.
- 23 Father: I'll have to get a piece of paper and make some drawings.
- 24 Jordan: I can't figure it out. I got, I got it where you have to take away five squares to get three. I mean um five sticks to get <three squares.> [>]
- 25 Father: <that's xxxxxx.> [<] Is it really seventeen? Three on the top three on the bottom is six two on the sides is ten. And then you need one two. # Ah <wait a minute wait a minute wait a minute! No, no, no, no!> [>]
- 26 Mother: <Three four five # six seven.> [<]
- 27 Father: You need one two # # three four.
- 28 Jordan: Five +/.
- 29 Mother: Five six seven.
- 30 Father: Oh right, I see.
- > 31 Mother: The squares don't all have to be of equal size.
- 32 Observer: That's one of the secrets.
- 33 Father: <Oh.> [>]
- 34 Jordan: <What> [<] do you mean they don't have oh +/.
- 35 Father: When you, when you, when you take away six to get two squares. The squares should need not be of the same size # is what Mommy's saying.
- > 36 Jordan: Well, *no!*
- 37 Jordan: You start out with +/.

- 38 Father: Yeah I know you start out when they are all the same size but # presumably when you take away the six # sticks you get two squares left, right? that's the # supposed to have two squares left?
- 39 Jordan: Yeah.
- 40 Father: And the squares are not, maybe don't have to be the, one of them might be a, a square that's two by two # and the others are squares that one by one. # # Suppose you'd have a one by one here # take away that stick. # # uhm # can you draw me a piece +... Let, let me get a piece of paper.  
[13 turns omitted: the father and Jordan discussing ways of solving the problem, but to no avail]
- > 53 Mother: Oh I can do that.
- 54 Father: Oh.
- 55 Mother: I can do that easily.
- 56 Father: <Maybe one in each corner?> [>]
- 57 Mother: <Want me to tell you what to do?> [<]
- 58 Father: Just a second! # just a second! We remove one two three +... Oh that's too many. All right, let's have +/. two three +... Oh that's too many. All right, let's have +/.
- > 59 Mother: Would you like to know the answer?
- > 60 Father: No!
- 61 Mother: [=!laugh].
- 62 Observer: [=!laugh].
- 63 Father: You must be kidding! Why would I want to know the answer? You must be kidding! Why would I want to know the answer? One two # three four five six. These two. One two three four five +...  
[Omitted: inserted sequence of talk about dessert, five turns].
- 64 Father: Okay Elise wise one. Which ones six do you take away?
- 65 Mother: You take away # four that form a cross on the interior +...
- 66 Father: Yeah?
- 67 Mother: And two at the corner.



- 68 Father: And you get two unequal size +/. Okay. Take away yeah? And now which other two?
- 69 Mother: Get out the square <xxxxxxxxxxx +/.> [>]
- 70 Father: <Oh wise one oh> [<] [with realization]! # Yeah # team! Oh you *knew* the answer beforehand?!!
- 71 Mother: Not this one.
- 72 Mother: It's a version of something I knew.
- 73 Jordan: <Wooow!> [>]
- 74 Father: <Wow.> [<] stick with her kids, and you'll go far. Wow. Gee and I thought all your brains came from me. Oh well +...

In the first part of the exchange (turns 1-22), since it is obviously the father who is appointed to solve the problem, all explanations and clarifications are addressed to him, with the mother and (female) observer showing no indication of participating in the discourse of problem-solving. This is evident in the mother's metacomment (turn 20). In the second part (turns 23-53), roles shift: the father admits indirectly having some difficulty (turn 23), and then joins the boy in a (futile) attempt to solve the problem. In this collaborative venture the mother participates minimally, making one highly significant contribution (turn 31). The father acknowledges the mother's point, but the child dismisses it. For him it is the father and the father only who is the knowledgeable adult found failing.

In the third part of the exchange (turns 53-74) the struggle over knowledge as power becomes clearly highlighted, with the father quite reluctant to admit failure. The father in this exchange manifests a gamut of characteristics attributed in the feminist literature to men only: fierce competitiveness, the reluctance to accept advice (grounded in the high value placed on autonomy and independence) and to admit failure, and the claim for status through monopoly on prestigious bodies of knowledge (Tannen 1990; Maltz and Borker). Granted that in the given case all of these characteristics might be linked just as much to personality as to gender, it is still instructive to analyze this example from the gender perspective. The exchange shows the extent to which admitting failure to live up to the son's expectation (by solving the problem) is perceived as a very serious *threat to face*. The fact that the exchange takes place in the family context is of crucial importance. What is at stake is not just competition between the sexes on the monopoly in the domain of science, but rather the struggle for the status of the knowledgeable parent in this domain. The father's emphatic



refusal to hear the answer (turn 60) signals his difficulty to relinquish the identity of the expert constructed for him by his son. The two women's laugh (61, 62) shows understanding of the issue at stake. Next, very reluctantly, using sarcasm as a face saving device, the father "allows" the answer to come forth (turn 64). The glorification of admiring exclamations (notice the two "ohs" in turn 69, and the "wows" and "gee" in turn 74), combined with an immediate attempt at minimization (70) keep signalling the father's difficulty. Once the boy joins in celebrating his mother's solution ("wow" in turn 73) the father reverts to irony for face saving, in a comment which though ostensibly addressed to the children, really seems to be meant for the two other female participants.

### The Role of Children

The discourse role of children at dinner represents a further dimension of cultural variation. Children make a significant contribution to family discourse in all the families. But children's participation is systematically lower than that of adults. Interviews with the parents reveal that dinner conversations in these modern families are indeed not perceived as truly egalitarian: though children are invited to participate and generally treated as ratified participants, parents reserve the right to channel and judge their modes of participation.

Cultural variation with regard to children's participation is manifest in parental modes of the channeling process. In the Jewish-American families, parents strongly encourage children to participate within the thematic frame of immediate family concerns, topicalizing their recent experiences at school and elsewhere, but seem to expect less child participation in "adult" topics. In the Israeli families, the overall participation of children is lower, but it is more equally divided between the immediate and the non-immediate thematic frames. Thus Jewish-American children are given more opportunities to display their verbal abilities around the dinner table, whereas Israeli children are more exposed to and involved in adult topics.

From the children's point of view, the relationship between topical actions and power is a complicated one. On one level, just having the floor to oneself is a significant gain, as expressed by a five year old: *I want to talk. I never talk.* The conversations are rich in examples of sibling rivalry over floor space (*You had a long turn, I'm going to have a longer one*) that show turns as commodities worth fighting for. Yet simultaneously, talking to

parents rests on the assumption of accountability: children may be challenged at every turn on the content and form of their contributions.

Challenging children's contributions often takes the form of metapragmatic comments. These are comments made in reaction to the perceived violation of the conversational norms postulated by Grice such as informativeness, factuality, relevance and manner as well as comments with regard to turn-taking and language. By asking for more detail, parents signal that a child's account is lacking in informativeness; by saying something like *Don't talk about this now* they challenge the relevance of the topic for dinner talk. Metapragmatic comments relate also to the manner in which something was said (as in responding to a request by *What's the magic word?*), to turn-taking (*It's not your turn*) and language (for example, correcting grammar).

All the families attend to these conversational norms. Of particular salience in the Jewish-American families is the attention paid to factuality. The next example (no. 9) shows that (as argued by Ochs et al. 1992), through co-narration and metapragmatic comments, families draw upon and stimulate cognitive and linguistic skills that underlie scientific discourse in the modern world.

#### 9. The Giant Turtle and The Blind Men and the Elephant.

Jewish-American family 3; Samuel, (10m), Joshua, (5m). Samuel is recounting a school trip he went on with his class the same day.

- 1 Samuel: Um, Jacob, xxx and then they tipped over and there was this, ya know, a *giant* turtle, it was coming right at them.
- 2 Mother: Where? On the lake?
- 3 Samuel: On the lake.
- 4 Mother: They have giant turtles on the lake?
- 5 Samuel: Yeah.
- 6 Father: I want to understand. In the lake they got a giant turtle that's only six inches across?!
- 7 Mother: Have you seen it?
- 8 Samuel: Oh, yeah.
- 9 Mother: How giant is giant?
- 10 Samuel: How giant is giant? About three feet.
- 11 Mother: Show me with your hands how big it is.
- 12 Samuel: I can't fit it. My arms aren't that big.
- 13 Mother: You really saw a *giant* turtle? In the lake?

- 14 Joshua: About this big? This big?  
 15 Mother: Were they like friendly?  
 16 Samuel: Its claws were like that long.  
 17 Joshua: xxx and its claws xxx I'm sure its fins are that big.  
 18 Mother: Did you see it, or did Jacob see it?  
 20 Samuel: Jacob saw it and I saw it too.  
 21 Mother: You saw a three foot turtle [challenging].  
 22 Samuel: I didn't say it was exactly three foot, but approximately three feet.  
 23 Mother: Was it like this?  
 24 Samuel: No. Is that three feet?  
 25 Father: Was it bigger than the plate you're eating?  
 26 Samuel: Much.  
 27 Joshua: Bigger than a house?  
 28 Mother: I hope not. I wouldn't want to meet that turtle.  
 29 Joshua: Me either. Yuk. A xxx! [making funny noises]  
 30 Father: I don't think xxx turtles grow that big.  
 31 Mother: If Jacob says he saw it, it doesn't surprise me.  
 32 Samuel: He didn't say it was three feet.  
 33 Mother: You said it was three feet.  
 34 Samuel: By the look of its head and tail it looked like three feet.  
 35 Father: By the look of its head, or did you see the body?  
 36 Samuel: I saw part of his body.  
 37 Father: But you didn't see its *whole* body.  
 38 Samuel: No.  
 39 Father: Now we have more of an understanding.  
 40 Mother: That's called an unconfirmed assumption. ## You know what that's worth?  
 41 Samuel: What?  
 42 Mother: Nothin'.  
 43 Father: xxxx  
 44 Mother: Do you remember the story of the four blind men and the elephant?  
 45 ?: xxxxx  
 46 Mother: Four blind men+\n  
 47?: xxxx  
 48 Mother: Hey, I started to tell Samuel the story.  
 49?: xxxx

- 50 Mother: I was about to tell you a story as I tell you now the part that's relevant to you is that four blind men were asked to describe an elephant+\
- 51 Joshua: Mom!
- 52 Mother: Wait, sweetheart. An elephant is very large. Each blind man was stationed at a different part of the elephant. And they each described him by what they were touching. So, one blind man was near his trunk and he said "Uh, it feels like a long tube with sharp points." That was the tusks. Another blind man was near his legs. "Oh my goodness, it's so tall, it must have very strong pillars." Another blind man was near his tail and said "Oh my goodness, it xx a very small tail, it feels very hairy. It must have lots of hair all over its body." The fourth blind man – what's left of this poor elephant? I guess was near his ear, and he thought, because the ear was very flat, that the elephant was covered with flat scale skin. And they all came to a different conclusion based on what area they were touching, because they didn't have the entire picture before them. Had they seen, which of course they couldn't do – that if you see the entire picture that's one thing and if you see parts of it you can't assume from that a whole picture if you only have certain parts of it. So, if you see a head of a turtle, and a little bit of its body, you can't assume that it's three feet if you didn't see the whole turtle.

Consider first how metapragmatic comments addressed to the factuality in the child's story serve to undermine the credibility of the tale while teaching a scientific principle.

Evidently giant turtles on the lake are not considered among the adults in this family a part of natural phenomena. Faced with the child's claim of having experienced an unnatural phenomenon, the parents put the burden of proof on the child. As a scientist claiming a new discovery, he is required to provide reliable evidence for his claim. As the exchange unfolds, the reliability of the evidence is challenged on several grounds, the challenge

culminating not only in total dismissal of the claim, but also in an explicit didactic statement defining the nature of scientific evidence in general. As the exchange opens, Samuel's use of the word "giant" as an attribute of the turtle he saw on his trip to the lake immediately triggers doubt, which gradually and systematically builds up to the explicit expression of disbelief. For a while, Samuel holds his ground, claiming experiential warrants for his story (turns 7 and 8). But with repeated questioning his account begins to lose credibility, and from the point he begins to admit doubt (hedging his claim for the turtle's size with "approximately," turn 22), his mother's challenge gathers momentum, systematically undermining each of Samuel's claims, till its final collapse (turns 33 and 34). As of turn 38, the mother takes it upon herself to both dismiss the account in unequivocal terms, to formulate the scientific principle behind the dismissal, and to illustrate the result of the lack of critical thinking through the story of the four blind men and the elephant, which she modifies from memory as she goes along.

This is a clear example of metapragmatic socialization for modern scientific thinking: through dialogue and story the point made is that one should have sufficient evidence for one's claims, and never judge the whole from the parts. Furthermore, the mother's version of the story of the blind men and the elephant is a revealing example of shifts of meaning through cultural transformation. Consider her version of the parable in the light of one of its written versions:

Six blind men once described an elephant that stood before them all. One felt the back. The second noticed pendent ears. The third could only feel the tail. The tusks absorbed the admiration of the fourth. While of the other two, one grasped the trunk, the last sought for small things and found four thick and clumsy feet. From what each learned, he drew the beast. Six monsters stood revealed. Just so the six religions learned of God, and tell their wondrous tales. Our God is One. (E.J. Robinson, *Tales and Poems of South India*. London: T. Wolmer, 1885)

From a parable told to highlight religious principles, the story is transformed by the mother into a Rashumon story that illustrates one of the basic tenets of modern scientific thinking, the need for sufficient observational evidence for one's conclusions. Note also that the story illustrates the affinity of oral story-telling to story-telling in fiction. As demonstrated by Tannen (1989), oral conversational story-telling is rich in poetic elements usually attributed to fiction only. The most salient features here are the teller's choice to tell in the mode of showing rather than telling, dramatizing each turn in the story

by direct quotes, and her use of repetitions to evaluate the high point of the story.

### Narrative Events

The story of *The Blind Men and the Elephant* as told by the mother constitutes a monologic performance by one individual teller. At the family dinners studied, such monologic performances represent one of the narrative modes typical of Jewish-American families. In considering narrative events at dinner, one of the essential questions is that of entitlement: who has the right to tell whose stories? In other words, what is the relationship between story ownership and story authorship? Does intimate knowledge of a certain experience, for example, grant the experiencer exclusive telling rights?

In a multi-party conversation, we can distinguish between two types of events and two modes of story-telling (Blum-Kulka 1993):

- Shared events: events known to at least some of the participants, such as the story of a family's trip abroad or the story of the cats the family used to own.
- Unshared events: events known to the teller only, such as an incident that happened the same day at work or at school.

We can further distinguish between two modes of telling:

- Polyphonic: the polyphonic mode refers to active co-construction of the story by several participants. All narratives told at dinner tend to be co-constructed, but there are differences of degree in levels of participation.
- Monologic: a monologic narrative is one told mainly by one teller, as in the story of the elephant. Note that although the teller has some difficulty in moving from the realm of conversation to the realm of telling (turns 46-52), once she manages to control the floor she presents the story with no support from the audience.

The intersections between these two dimensions yield four possible combinations:

1. The event is shared, known to all present, and several participants share in the telling. This type of story-telling is equally popular in both Jewish-American and Israeli families' narrative events, constituting 33 (in Israeli families) to 41 percent (in the Jewish-American families).
2. The event is unshared, and the experiencer is granted privileged rights as the teller, with minimal participation from the audience. 40 percent of the stories in both groups fall into this category.



3. Several participants share knowledge of the event, but only one assumes (or is granted) the role of the teller. In this case the knowing audience, by abstaining from participation, celebrates the individual performer. The oral version of the Blind Men and the Elephant story seems to fall into this category, though we cannot be absolutely sure that the husband and the observer were familiar with the parable. This type of story-telling is much more popular in the Jewish-American families (12 percent) than in the Israeli ones (5 percent).

4. An unshared event, known to the teller only, is told with the active participation of the audience. 18 percent of the Israeli narratives fall into this category, a category almost absent from the Jewish-American narrative events (4 percent).

The Israeli trend for a high level of involvement in narrative events takes several forms: guessing the unfolding of the story and completing its fabula according to cultural scripts, contributions to formulating the story's point, and most notably discussing its meanings and providing the coda for the story. Note that in such cases the audience claims ownership of the tale through authorship, i.e. through participation in the act of telling, as in the following example.

#### 10. Saving a Watermelon.

Israeli family 4; Ruti (11f); Naomi (8f); Yaron (4m).

The father's story of Saving a Watermelon follows an account by the mother of a car accident she was involved in on the same day.

- |             |   |   |
|-------------|---|---|
| 1 Father:   | <ani etmol>[>] [/] ani etmol<br>hicalti avatiaux.   | <I yesterday> [/] I<br>saved a watermelon yesterday.  |
| 2 Observer: | O [=! laughs]   |   |
| 3 Naomi:    | ex [/] ex?  | How? How?   |
| 4 Ruti:     | ex hu hicil?  | How did he save?  |
| 5 Father:   | atem lo ta'aminu. ani<br>nasati li # hayiti<br>ba-boker<br># ze haya etmol # ken #<br>hayiti hare etmol<br>ba-boker ba-bank <lifnei<br>hacaharayim> [>] | You won't believe it. I<br>was driving, in the<br>morning, it happened<br>yesterday, yes, I was at<br>the bank yesterday<br><before noon> |
| 6 Mother:   |   | <avatiaux al ha-sakin><br>[%com literally means   |



- %com [<] o+...
- 7 Father: lo ze lo al ha-sakin. mazal. *watermelon by the knife;*  
an expression used by  
water-melon vendors]
- 8 Observer: ani mekava she-lo  
<sikanta et acmexa> [>] No, it's not by the knife.  
Lucky.  
[=!laughs] I hope you  
<didn't endanger> your-  
self [=!laughs]
- 9 Father: <ve-ani nosea li> [<]  
me-ha-super be-giva  
hacarfatit # ma at  
mekava? <And I'm driving> from  
the supermarket on  
French Hill # what do  
you expect?
- 10 [omitted]
- 11 Observer: she-lo sikanta et xayexa +\ that you didn't risk your  
life+\
- 12 Father: kimat. almost.
- 13 Mother: oy va-avoy li. =!exclamation
- 14 Father: be-super lemata le-kivun  
ha-ramzor ve-pitom ani  
roe holexet sham isha im  
ezo yalda ve-pitom ve-eze  
sakit matxila *lehitgalgel*  
ba-morad # ve-ha-yalda  
roca laruc <le-sham  
ve-coraxat> [>] ve-ha-ima  
maxzika ota+\  
yelling> and her mother  
is holding her+\
- 15 Observer: <ha-yalda xx[<] <the child xx>
- 16 Father: az ba-hatxala lo raiti ma  
ze aval ze hitgalgel  
be-merec. so at the beginning I  
didn't see what it was  
but it rolled with great  
vigour.
- 17 Ruti: avatiaux dafuk! [=!everybody laughs]  
shitty watermelon!
- 18 Father: raiti [/] raiti she-lo  
keday la'acor et ze im  
ha-oto ve-racti I saw that it's not  
worth stopping it with  
ha-oto, maher acarti et  
the car, so I stopped  
the car quickly and ran

- ve-hiclaxti litfos et  
ha-avati ax she-hitgalgel  
be-tox sakit # ve-lo kara
- ve-shalem hexzarti oto  
le-zro'ot ha-yalda.
- 19 Ruti: +> <ha-yalda  
ha-mityapaxat>. [>]
- 20 Mother: <acarta et ha-mexonit>>  
[<] [/] acarta et &ha-me+\
- 21 Father: avarti oto. acarti et  
ha-mexonit +\
- 22 Mother: acarta ve-yaradta  
me-ha-mexonit ve-hicalta  
et ha-avati ax?
- 23 Father: natati la avati ax  
ve-hicalti et xaye  
ha-mishpaxa sham.
- 24 Mother: ve-ma amru lexa  
ha-mishpaxa ha-zot?
- 25 Observer: [O [=! laughs]
- 26 Father: toda raba be'emet toda.
- 27 Mother: be-amerika ish lo haya  
ose et ze.
- 28 Father: be-amerika avatixim ze  
masoret lehacil.
- 29 Mother: ze rak be-arec <mishehu  
yored me-ha-mexonit> [>]  
out
- 30 Father: <ma at medaberet xx> [<>]  
dvarim kaele+..
- 31 Ruti: <be-amerika yesh xx xx  
<You have in the States  
xx>  
xx> [<].
- 32 Father: hem meod adivim ba-dvarim
- and managed to catch the  
watermelon that was  
rolling in the bag # and  
lo shum davar # bari  
it came to no harm, I  
returned it safe and  
sound into the arms of  
the little girl.  
<the sobbing child>
- <You stopped the car>  
you stopped the+\  
I passed it. I stopped  
the car +\  
You braked, got off the  
car and saved the  
watermelon?  
I gave her a watermelon  
and saved the life of the  
family there.  
And what did they say to  
you, this family?
- Thank you very much.  
In the States nobody  
would have done it.  
In the States there is a  
tradition to save  
watermelons.  
It's only here that  
<somebody would get  
of the car>  
<What are you saying>  
things like this +..  
<be-amerika yesh xx xx  
<You have in the States  
xx>  
xx>
- They are very polite in

- |              |  |   |
|--------------|--|---|
|              | ha-ele.  | these things.   |
| 33 Observer: | aval avatiaux, im ha-yalda<br>hayta raca la-avatiaux az<br>haya yaxol lihyot nora<br>mesukan.        | But a watermelon, if<br>the child had chased<br>the watermelon things<br>might have become very<br>dangerous. |
| 34 Father:   | lc. hayta sham beaya. zot<br><br>omeret ha-ba'aya shel<br>ha-isha hayta o ha-yalda<br>o ha-avatiaux. | No. There was a prob-<br>lem.<br><br>I mean the woman's<br>problem was either the<br>watermelon or the child. |
| 35 Mother:   | ve-hi hexlita ha-yalda<br><be-shlav dey mukdam>  | And she decided for the<br>child <quite early on>   |
| 36 Father:   | <hi hexlita ha-yalda> [<]<br># aval ha-yalda hexlita<br>avatiaux.                                    | <She decided (in favour<br>of) the child>, but the<br>child decided (in favour<br>of) the watermelon.         |

The story of Saving a Watermelon is offered by the father as a humorous counterpoint to a preceding narrative (not included here) by the mother, telling of her near escape from a car accident. The nature of audience participation changes with different phases of the story, culminating in the part focused on discussing its point (turns 19-36). The opening is highly collaborative (turns 1-13), but the main happenings of the event are recounted by its experiencer (turns 13-17). Yet once the happy ending becomes evident, the audience takes on a highly active part. Both dramatic evaluation of the event (turn 18) and counter-arguments concerning its main point are offered by all (turns 21-36). The process of multi-voiced co-construction culminates in the participants' reaching an agreement on the main point of the story (turns 35-36). Whereas in monologic story-telling of an event, ownership rights for the tale are reconfirmed through performance, in the case of a joint performance of an event (initially known only to one participant) ownership rights are generated performatively through the very act of participation in the telling. This highly involved style of Israeli narration has no parallel in the narrative events of Jewish-American families.

## Conclusion

I have argued that dinners in Jewish middle-class families are unique socio-cultural speech events, where the two cultural groups share basic organizational features of coherence, yet differ in the construction of discourse roles. We saw that Jewish-American and Israeli families are alike in the way they construe and contextualize this kind of event. It is a speech event that embodies inbuilt tensions between the framing of the event as an activity type and the framing of the event as a speech event, and another tension between sociable and socializing talk. These tensions are partially resolved by allowing a constant shift between different planes of talk: from the instrumental and socializing frame of having dinner, through urgent family concerns, to the dominantly sociable frame of non-immediate topics. Children are considered ratified participants by all the families, and dinner talk serves as a crucial site for pragmatic socialization. The commonalities in the discursive practices of these families seem related to their modern consciousness as Western, middle-class, urban and Jewish (Blum-Kulka, forthcoming).

The families all share an Eastern European background. Yet within the course of two to three generations, Israeli and Jewish-American families have each developed their unique cultural style. Despite the shared macro-structure, Israeli and Jewish-American dinner table conversations differ in many ways. The differences between the groups seem to reflect cultural variation in perceptions of the situation and the role expectancies built around it. Thus the more formal and somewhat public ambiance of the Jewish-American dinners calls for careful relations between observers and the family and for the dominance of men in agenda setting, whereas within the more intimate Israeli dinner event mothers dominate, and observers are accepted and self-perceived as potential friends. The cultural difference is also manifest in the discourse roles negotiated with children. Whereas both Jewish Americans and Israelis encourage child participation, Jewish-American families tend to draw clearer demarcation lines between adult discourse and child discourse, encouraging children to talk about their topics, but not necessarily to participate in adult topics. Israeli children participate less in dinner talk but their participation is more equally divided between all frames of discourse.

Styles of control and story-telling also differ culturally. Directness prevails in the language of control at all meals, but while Jewish-American families draw on indirectness for face saving, Israelis enact face saving

through markers of solidarity politeness, such as nicknaming. In narrative co-construction, one mode stands out as typically Israeli: only in Israeli narrative events is co-construction extended to unshared events, representing a culturally unique interpretation of the relations between the entitlement to tell and the ownership of the tale.

In a broader perspective, I hope to have shown that the study of family dinner talk is highly revealing for showing the intimate links that exist between language and culture, and in tracing the process by which – through discursive practices at dinner – families negotiate familial, social and cultural identities.

*Works Cited*

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1990). "'You don't touch lettuce with your fingers:' Parental politeness in family discourse." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 259-289.
- . (1993). "'You gotta know how to tell a story:' Telling, tales and tellers in American and Israeli narrative events at dinner." *Language in Society*, 22, 361-402.
- . (1994). "The dynamics of family dinner-talk: Cultural contexts for children's passages to adult discourse." *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 27, 1-51.
- . (forthcoming). *Dinner-Talk: Cultural Patterns of Sociability and Socialization in Family Discourse*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- , and C. Snow (1992). "Developing autonomy for tellers, tales and telling in family narrative-events." *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 2, 187-217.
- Bublitz, W. (1988). *Supportive Fellow-Speakers and Cooperative Conversations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Erickson, F. (1990). "The social construction of discourse coherence in a family dinner table conversation." In B. Dorval, ed., *Conversation Organization and its Development* (pp. 207-239). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Gal, S. (1989). "Between speech and silence: The problematics of research on language and gender." *Papers in Pragmatics*, 3, 1-39.
- Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. (First published 1967). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). "Logic and conversation." In P. Cole and J. Morgan, eds., *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.
- Keppler, A., and T. Luckman (1991). "'Teaching': conversational transmission of knowledge." In I. Markova and K. Foppa, eds., *Asymmetries in Dialogue* (pp. 143-166). Savage, Maryland: Barnes and Noble.
- Lakoff, R. T. (1990). *Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives*. New York: Basic Books.
- MacWhinney, B. (1991). *The CHILDES Project: Tools for Analyzing Talk*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

- Malinowsky, B. (1923). "The problem of meaning in primitive languages." In C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, eds., *The Meaning of Meaning* (pp. 296-336). New York: Harcourt Brace and World.
- Maltz, D., and A. Borker (1982). "A cultural approach to male-female communication." In J. Gumperz, ed., *Language and Social Identity* (pp. 195-217). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ochs, E., R. Smith, and C. Taylor (1989). "Detective stories at dinnertime: Problem solving through co-narration." *Cultural Dynamics*, 2, 238-257.
- , C. Taylor, D. Rudolph, and R. Smith (1992). "Storytelling as a theory-building activity." *Discourse Processes*, 15, 37-72.
- Pontecervo, C. and Fasulo, A. "Learning to argue in family discourse: the reconstruction of past events." In L. Resnick, R. Saljo, and C. Pontecervo, eds. *Discourse, Tools and Reasoning, Essays in Situated Cognition*. NATO Series. Springer Verlag, (forthcoming).
- Shuman, A. (1986). *Story Telling Rights: The Uses of Oral and Written Texts by Urban Adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shutz, A. (1970). *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1961). "The sociology of sociability." In T. Parsons, E. Shils, K. D. Naegle, and J. R. Pitts, eds., *Theories of Society: Foundations of Modern Sociological Theory* (pp. 157-163). New York: The Free Press. [Rpt. from *American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1911), 157-162].
- Tannen, D. (1989). *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You Just Don't Understand*. New York: William Morrow.
- Varenne, H. (1992). *Ambiguous Harmony: Family Talk in America*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Watts, R. J. (1991). *Power in Family Discourse*. Berlin: Mouton.