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Published online: 14 Jun 2010.

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The Dynamics of Family Dinner Talk: Cultural Contexts for Children's Passages to Adult Discourse

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Dinner-table conversations in urban middle-class families are critical cultural contexts in which children become socialized to local cultural rules regulating discourse, such as the choice of topics, rules of turn-taking, modes of storytelling, and politeness (Perlman, 1984; Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1990; Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992). Dinners create culturally different discoursal environments for children to listen to adult talk and engage in collaborative and individual topic initiation and storytelling.

Participation in family discourse may be a particularly important determinant of the development of both dialogic and monologic skills. Whereas young children learn turn-taking aspects of conversation quite early, so that they can sustain well-timed turn alterations with adults by

the time they are producing their first words (Snow, 1977) and with peers by at least age 3 (Ervin-Tripp, 1979), more subtle conversational skills—such as entering a conversation, maintaining one's turn, and most important perhaps, linking up coherently with previous talk— develop much more slowly (Corsaro, 1979; Sacks, 1982; Dorval & Eckerman, 1984). Once such skills develop, children are recognized by adults as good conversationalists: Schley and Snow (1992) found that among second to fifth graders, the children who produce more topic continuations and more sophisticated topic continuations, topic initiations, and responses are the ones who are identified as good conversationalists.

Mealtime conversations may well serve as social facilitators (cf. Snow, 1989) for the development of monologic skills as well. Whereas there is ample evidence to show how the ability to tell stories develops through mother–child interactions (Wells, 1981; Schieffelin & Eisenberg, 1984; McCabe & Peterson, 1991), recent studies of mealtime conversations suggest that children's participation in such multiparty talk is conducive for learning not only how to construct autonomous narrative texts but also how to choose tellable topics and tell stories in culturally appropriate styles (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Blum-Kulka, 1993). Imagine two families sitting down to dinner. In the first, all members participate, including young children. Yet the meal passes in silence, broken only by the moving of cutlery and dishes around the table and the instrumental business talk of having dinner. In the second, again all participate, but participation this time is oriented toward social speech; the necessary dinner talk is just one layer in the talk, superimposed by many other, conversational layers. The two examples illustrate the built-in tension of family dinners between dinner itself as an activity and dinner as a social, conversational event.

Families may vary individually, by social class or by culture, in ways of balancing the two components. The construct of family dinner as necessarily an integenerationally shared social conversational event is a sociocultural construct, one that seems empirically valid at least for many urban middle-class families around the Western world. But it cannot be expected to be found in other sociocultural contexts. It is only when dinner is construed as a social event, that it can serve as the socialization context in which children learn how to become competent conversational partners in intergenerational multiparty talk. The dinner conversations considered here were all taped in urban middle-class

Israeli and Jewish-American homes. They exemplify processes of conversational socialization, enacted against the background of the complex participation network of cross-generational talk.

The analysis to be undertaken here is part of a larger project on family discourse.[1] The data base for the project consists of three dinner-table conversations with 8 middle-class Jewish-American and 16 Israeli families. At the time of data collection, all Jewish-American families were residents of the Boston area, and all Israeli families lived in Jerusalem. The group of Israeli families is further divided into eight with native-born Israeli parents and eight with American-born immigrant parents who had lived in Israel for more than 9 years. All families participating in the project came originally from a European background (mainly from Russia and Poland) and hence share a Jewish Eastern-European heritage. The parent generation is college educated, native-born American or native-born Israeli.

The families were taped in their homes in the presence of an observer, a member of the research team who came from the same cultural background as the family: Jewish American in the case of Jewish-American families, and Israeli (native or immigrant) in the case of the two Israeli groups. Two meals were audiotaped and one videotaped. Following initial contacts by phone, the observer visited the home and got acquainted with the family prior to the recordings. The same observer stayed with the family throughout the research period. The families were told that the project was to compare Israeli and American family dinners, with details provided to those interested. An extensive interview with each family was conducted following the recordings. Both recorded conversations and interviews were fully transcribed and entered on computer files using CHILDES (McWhinney, 1991).[2]

One dinner per family was analyzed for topical control (setting the agenda of the conversation), choice of topics, and the relation between children's social roles and discourse roles. The participants in these dinners are listed in Table 1: There were 21 children present in the Jewish-American families, 23 in the Israeli families, and 24 in the American-Israeli families. The largest age group is of children between 7;6 and 12;6 (44 out of 68); 11 children are between 3;0 and 6;6 and 8 between 12;6 and 17;0.

The present analysis focuses on the dynamics of dinner talk, with a special concern for children's voices at dinner. Children's voices are heard against the background of many other voices at dinner: mothers

TABLE 1
Participants at a Single Family Dinner in 24 Families (8 Families Per Group)

	Americans	Israelis	American-Israelis
Parents[a]	16	15	16
Observer[b]	3	3	4
Other adults[c]	0	5	4
Adult Total	19	23	24
Preschool[d]	5	6	5
School age[e]	14	14	16
Other children	2	3	3
Children Total	21	23	24
All participants	40	46	48

[a]There is one single-parent family. [b]In subsequent analyses, these are considered as one "observer" per meal (8 observers per group). [c]"Other adults" include one grandparent (Israeli), one uncle (American-Israeli), and friends of the family. [d]Age range: 3;0–6;6. [e]By design most children were between 7;6 and 12;6 (12 Americans, 10 Israeli, 10 American-Israeli). 8 school-age children (2 Americans, 3 Israelis, 3 American-Israeli) were between 12;6 and 17;0.

and fathers, observers, occasional guests. To appreciate the way dinners may serve as critical contexts for children's passage to adult discourse, we need to consider their voices in the context of the dynamics of family discourse. This perspective raises issues such as the distribution of talk among participants by social role, the implications for language and power symbolized by such distributions, as well as the relations between social roles and discourse roles, as they emerge in different contexts of talk at dinner. These issues are considered here as reflected in the use of topical actions, namely verbal moves that affect the development of the talk agenda, such as topic initiations and shifts. The first central concern here is how children are socialized to gain passage to adult discourse within the multivoiced and thematically multilayered context of dinner.

A second concern is cultural variation in the dynamics of dinner talk, again with a special emphasis on children. Cultures may vary extensively in opportunities provided for children to participate, as well as in the ways they index gender or construe the role of outsiders. Such cross-cultural differences in turn may affect the relation between power and language and may result in different socialization agendas for children. These two themes are hence closely interrelated.

I argue that children's participation in middle-class family meals is contingent upon the sociocultural convention of the communities studied of treating children at shared meals as ratified participants, and

on the uniqueness of family meals in these communities as both a sociable and socializing speech event.

Consider the strength of sociocultural conventions. At the onset of the research 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 the researchers and the adults in the families approached the task with a shared set of background expectancies typically "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel, 1967/1984, pp. 7–9) in everyday life. 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.

Yet none of these assumptions is universally true. In some cultures, or even within other social groups in Israeli and American societies, meals may not even be shared intergenerationally. Or it may be the case that families who do report having regular family meals are like the rural French family depicted by Margaret Mead (1959) in her film *Four Families*, in which the meal is completely "business" focused, generating little or no conversation. In the film, we see a French rural family, comprising husband, wife, two school-aged children, a 4-year-old, and a baby, sitting down for lunch. Margaret Mead's voice-over asks us to focus on the differential treatment given to the boy and the girl, on the strict obedience requested from both older children, and to the pleasure these people seem to take in the food itself. As we watch the film we notice a clear male–female division of labor: It is the woman's task to cook and serve and the older children's to set the table, whereas the man plays with the baby prior to all sitting down at the table. But if we try to listen to the voices of the family only, we notice that there is not that much to which to listen. The meal passes in silence, broken only by instrumental food talk (such as the father's question "Isn't there anything to drink?," to which reacts by the mother sending the boy to get the pitcher). We have no way of knowing if a meal without the children would yield more conversation. But we do know that this is an instance of a sociocultural context in which family mealtime is not conceived as a social conversational event, an event occasioning sociability through conversation, nor does it serve for socializing children in conversational skills.

The case of our Israeli and American middle-class urban families contrasts sharply with the French example. In listening to the tapes, our difficulty is not in hearing the voices of family members, but to distinguish among them. 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 both a sociable and a socializing speech event.

Conversations among friends are a prime example of sociable events. They are, at least ostensibly, non-goal-oriented, egalitarian, and collaborative (Lakoff, 1990). However, many institutionalized events as, trials, therapy sessions, or specifically socializing events (e.g., classroom interactions; Cazden, 1988), are nonegalitarian, clearly goal-oriented, and vary in degree of collaboration. We asked parents in the interviews whether they had any agenda in mind for family meals: Did they try to achieve certain educational goals? Did they bring up certain topics on purpose? Their responses reveal a double perception of family meals as both sociable and socializing, at least as far as goal orientation is concerned.

MOT: It's a social time I mean it's a [time] we talk and you know just and not
       uh it isn't any kind of directed conversation it's not as if we sit down
       and everybody reports on their activities for the day or anything like
       it but we do talk uh about whatever happens to be on anybody's mind.
       (Interview: AM5; the children are 11 and 9.)

The quotation depicts dinner-table talk as belonging to the genre of ordinary conversation; it is a "social time" set aside for the occasioning of talk that is not "directed" (as would be a lesson, an interview, a service encounter, or courtroom discourse). On the contrary: It is a time when "we talk about whatever is on anybody's mind." The focus of such a conversation seems to be on the building of rapport rather than on the transmission of information or the achievement of instrumental goals. In the terms used by Brown and Yule (1983), the overall goal of the talk is framed as interactional rather than transactional. As we shall see, the actual enactment of dinner-table conversations does not quite match the idealized construct of dinner as purely "social" as presented in the

interview excerpted earlier. Yet the dinners are geared to satisfy, in Simmel's (1911/1961) terms, our human instinct of *sociability*, a "union with others" achieved in social gatherings where "talking is an end in itself" (p. 161).

But 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, as well as the enhancing of familial cohesiveness. Some parents' comments in interviews echo these themes as well, framing dinners as quite goal-directed.

MOT: Dinners are important; they [the children] learned how to eat properly. (AM6; the children are 16 and 12.)

MOT: We talk, we talk about what happened what everybody did during the day since we're all going in separate directions. *I like to know what they did in school* [italics added]. (AM7; the children are 10 and 7.)

FAT: I guess like I view this as as uh one of the few times when we are all together . . . (AM4; the children are 8 and 4.)

The double function of dinner-table conversations as both sociable and socializing events transpires as well from parental attitudes toward children's participation. By definition, dinner-table conversations represent encounters between unequal intimates. They bring together persons (children and parents) who, in Bateson's (1972) terms, are in a complementary nurturance–dependence relationship. Hence they are structurally nonegalitarian; yet they may still practice egalitarian attitudes, if, in Goffman's (1981) description of ordinary conversation, "everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen" and "everyone is accorded the status of someone whose overall evaluation of the subject matter at hand—whose editorial comments, as it were—is to be encouraged and treated with respect" (p. 14, note 8). Children's participation at dinner talk is universally professed by the parents during interviews as a very important socializing goal. Asked what is expected of children in terms of conversation during mealtimes, parents said:

FAT: If they are at the table, they are part of the conversation. (AM4; the children are 8 and 4.)

> MOT: We expect them to be uh an active participant in the meal-time activities. (AM5; the children are 11 and 9.)
>
> FAT: And I think I approve of their being communicative about what they are doing . . . (AM3; the children are 10 and 6.)

Though the quotes depict the status of children as ratified participants ("they are part of the conversation"), thereby expressing egalitarian attitudes, it is constantly stressed that the status carries with it both rights and obligations. Children are expected to be "active participants," to get approval by "being communicative." As expressed by one mothers, one of the things she would object to is for a child to "just sit there and kind of pout or really take no interest at all [in the talk]." So children are invited to participate, yet parents reserve the right to accept or dismiss contributions and to pass judgment on their timeliness and relevance. Consider the following interview extracts:

> INT: What types of conversational behavior would you object to?
>
> FAT: I, I would say (   ) raise something totally irrelevant. So it's not a question of participation. It's a question of irrelevance. (AM6; the children are 16 and 12.)
>
> INT: What do you think of children joining in the conversation at dinner?
>
> MOT: I think it's important for children to join in a conversation when it's appropriate. But I think they have to wait until it's their turn.
>
> INT: Do you expect children to be quiet during certain conversational occasions?
>
> MOT: Yes. When it's something they don't know anything about, I'd prefer them to be quiet. I try, first of all, not to discuss something that I don't want my kids to hear, you know. But if they don't know anything about the subject, then I expect them to be quiet unless they have a specific question. (AM3; the children are 10 and 6.)

Criteria of relevance, conversational appropriateness, and knowledge are among those mentioned by the parents as crucial for controlling children's contributions to the talk; cumulatively these quotes express parental checks and balances on egalitarian ideologies expressed elsewhere. Children are granted talking privileges at dinner, but parents reserve the right and power to modify and withhold these privileges. The question then is, how much do children actually participate? What is their relative contribution to the talk agenda? Does it differ by age?

METHOD

Topical Actions at Dinner

We measured the children's contribution to dinner talk in terms of their "topical actions." The analysis of topical actions is grounded in a detailed microanalysis of 20 min from one meal per family. Topical action is defined by Bublitz (1988) as "actions which participants use to intervene in the development and the course of the [discourse] topic, and thus to contribute to a topical thread being initiated, maintained and completed" (p. 40). Such actions contribute to the achievement of discourse goals such as introducing a new topic, changing the topic currently on the floor, or shifting back to a previous topic after it has been closed or after a digression. The overall goal of this analysis is to map the structure and process of agenda setting in family discourse; namely to find out who introduces, changes, and shifts topics, and how these acts are achievable. Specifically, we are interested in the role played by children in each of our three cultural groups, but to single out their relative contribution, we consider the roles of age (children vs. adults) as well as culture (American vs. Israeli), gender (mothers vs. fathers), and family membership (being an outsider/insider) in affecting rate of success and degree of participation in the domain of topical actions. Note that in this approach, turns that contribute to the maintenance of the topic, and which constitute the bulk of conversation (Crow, 1983), are not coded, as the emphasis is on agenda setting rather than on the process of building local coherence.[3] In the scheme of topical actions, the turns singled out for analysis must accomplish a different or additional function to signal topical maintenance. Also excluded from this analysis were turns focused on instrumental dinner talk (e.g., "pass the salt, please"), such talk being considered by definition "nontopical" and hence subject to a different set of discourse norms for those operating for topical talk.

The unit of analysis for topical actions is thus content-oriented turns that (1) have an impact on the direction of the talk, (2) are noninstrumental, and (3) perform some function other than topic maintenance.

Types of topical actions coded include: Initiation, Elaboration, Backshift Digressions, Readaptation following a digression, and Clos-

ings. For each topical action we further noted whether it succeeded or failed. "Success" and "failure" were decided on the basis of manifest verbal or paralinguistic response by others signaling uptake. "Success" means that the topic was taken up by at least one co-participant, and "failed" means that it failed to be met with an uptake of any kind or was overtly rejected.

For each of the different coding categories of topical actions that follow, the examples were chosen because they show children to be active contributors to all types of topical talk.

Topic initiation is defined as any attempt at dinner to introduce a topic (see also Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976). The following examples show how topics are initiated with and by children. For example, at the dinner of American Family 1, recording begins with the Observer attempting (unsuccessfully) to initiate a conversation with 15-year-old Jennifer.

(1) AM1; Jennifer, 15f; Observer (Susan); Mother; Father.

> ((The conversation takes place as the family is preparing to sit down for dinner.))

1	OBS:	How are you?
2	MOT:	Well anyhow Susan's here.
3	OBS:	So Jennifer what's doing? How's school?
4	FAT:	It's all for ( ) all right she'll show up.
5		((Father is talking on the phone))
6	FAT:	Well if she wants to take the diagnostic before
7		Sunday she'll show up at the ( ) thank you
8		((hangs up, and faces the others))
9		They don't like my questions. I can tell when
10		they don't like my questions.
11		((turning to Susan))
12		Hello how are you?
13	OBS:	Good.
14	JEN:	All right (.) what was it?
15	FAT:	The information is you show up on Sunday.

When the observer's first attempt to initiate a conversation with Jennifer fails (partly due to the mother's announcement of her presence, in line 2), she uses a discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1987) ("so") and an address term for specificity of recipient design and uses semantics ("school") to narrow the topical area as well. She fails again, as no uptake comes forth, probably because Jennifer's attention is focused on her father's

phone conversation (see line 14), a conversation that must have been going on prior to Susan's entrance and the start of the recording. Following a short sequence engaging Susan (which can be construed as preventing Susan from pursuing her former topic, see lines 12–14) it is the father's conversation on the phone that then provides the background for the next topic on the family agenda.

In ordinary conversation, once the talk is underway, topical initiations are often marked explicitly by framing devices such as *by the way, I'll tell you what, listen to this,* address terms, or minimally a single discourse marker (*so*) (Crow, 1983). At the dinner table, initiations *are often accomplished with minimal transition markers,* or no markers at all, but involve a change in participation structure.[4]

(2) AM4; Jordan, 8m; Sandra, 4f; Father.

((The question is raised after Jordan has given a lengthy account of a soccer game and Sandra has reported on her day.))

```
1   FAT:   So, are you done telling us about your day?
2   SAN:   Yes.
3   FAT:   Jordan (.) would you like to tell us something? Other
4          than soccer, what happened today?
5   JOR:   Well. We had a mean (      ) teacher.
```

A change in topic at dinner may well entail, or be caused by, a change in participation structure. We have no way of knowing which comes cognitively first: attention focused on a co-participant, namely a parent voluntarily shifting attention from one child to another, or a shift of attention on a topic, turning to a specific co-participant because he or she is knowledgeable on the topic the initiator is thinking about. In (2), the father's question in lines 3–4 nominates Jordan as the next speaker, and though it establishes continuity with the general frame of the former topic ("one's day") it also narrows its scope, by delegitimizing talk about soccer practice. This topic-elicitor (Button & Casey, 1984) follows a long stretch of talk on Sandra's day. It keeps the talk within the general frame of family members' news, summoning Jordan as the deliverer of his news. Indeed Jordan complies by giving a lengthy account of the injustices he suffered that day from a substitute teacher.

Nomination of addressees by children seems to have a different

meaning. For children to gain entry to the floor, initiating a new topic, the child needs to work conversationally harder than an adult. Differing from adults, who can also announce a new topic to all present without naming the recipients (FAT: "I took the kids to see *The Flight of the Navigator*"), children's entry into the conversation tends to be explicitly targeted to align specific recipients.

(3) AM4; Jordan, 8m; Mother.

    1   JOR: Mommy (.) you know what?
    2   MOT: Yes dear.

The mother interprets Jordan's move as a bid for a turn and responds by granting him the right to speak on the topic of his choice. Consequently, Jordan raises the topic of why he can be excused from eating vegetables, calling cartoon characters to his aid ("As um Snappy Smurf would say I wish we did not have to eat the vegetables").

Targeting potential recipients by direct address summoning is common practice among both preschoolers and school-aged children: "Daddy? /Yes?/I've got a math question for you." Preschoolers also use a variety of other attention-getting devices, such as repetitions ("Mommy and Daddy. Mommy and Daddy, Mommy and Daddy, I") and paralinguistic (shouting) and nonverbal cues (pulling the mother's sleeve or even moving from an unattentive parent's lap to another, hopefully more attentive one).

Topical elaborations have been referred to in the literature alternatively as a "topic incorporating sequence" (Keenan & Schieffelin, 1976, p. 340), "topic shifts" (Maynard, 1980, p. 271; Bublitz, 1988, p. 125), and "shading" (Crow, 1983, p. 141). The shading metaphor captures well the subtle way speakers accomplish shifts in topical perspectives.

(4) AM1; Observer; Mother; Jennifer, 15f.

                            ((Mother and Observer are discussing the yearly mar-
                            athon in Cambridge, Massachusetts.))

    1   OBS: I thought it was in the fall and I thought it . . .
    2   MOT: I know that's the Bonny Belle. What used to be called
    3   the Bonny Belle now they call it the Bonny (   )
    4   OBS: Huh.
    5   →   MOT: We had a student once who was in it.
    6   OBS: Oh really.

7	→	MOT:	( ) said she was a secretary ran a um . . .
8		JEN:	Her parents made her train?
9		MOT:	She said they interviewed her (be) cause that year
10			she was the youngest runner so they interviewed her
11			and she said she had just started a ( )

The use of cohesive ties in line 5 ("in it") makes the move as seemingly topic maintaining (in Keenan & Schieffelin's, 1976, terms, as "topic collaborative"), whereas actually a shift of focus occurs. This shift occasions "a new set of mentionables" (Maynard, 1980, p. 271) involving the student who was in the race. Note that though ostensibly only the mother and the observer occupy "center stage" (Varenne, 1992), actually 15-year-old Jennifer is not only a ratified listening participant but also an active one whose contribution (line 8) is treated with respect.

Children also participate in elaborating and shifting the focus of topics introduced by adults. Later at the same dinner, the family discusses Woody Allen films, and the mother mentions to the observer that the family had been to see *Broadway Danny Rose*. The adults discuss what it takes to appreciate Woody Allen (FAT: "You have to be from New York and grow up in Brooklyn to fully appreciate Woody Allen. He's like all the kids I went to school with"). Simon, Jennifer's brother, contributes to this discussion his views on another Woody Allen film ("*Annie Hall* was so funny") and is interrupted in telling the content of the film by his father saying, "No, don't talk about it, I am going to see it." It is a question by Simon that then shifts the talk from the plane of art appreciation (e.g., films) to that of gossip about Woody Allen.

(5) AM1; Simon, 13m; Jennifer, 15f; Mother; Father; Observer.

1	SIM:	Is he Jewish?
2	FAT:	What do you think?
3	SIM:	Yeah.
4	JEN:	Yeah.
5	MOT:	His name is Allen Koningsberg.
6	OBS:	Allen what?
7	SIM:	I thought he was Woody Allen.
8	MOT:	Koningsberg.

A *backshift* to a previous topic is a reintroduction of an earlier topic after one or more others have intervened. In ordinary conversation,

backshifts are often justified with framing signals such as *anyway* or
getting back to the subject of . . . (Reichman, 1978). In contrast,
topical actions at dinner are achievable by adults with minimal or no
signaling at all. In the next example, AM1 is discussing the African-
American comedian, Whoopie Goldberg.

(6) AM1; Simon, 13m; Jennifer, 15f; Mother; Father; Observer.

1		OBS:	Did you see *The Color Purple*?
2			((The movie *The Color Purple* with Whoopie
3			Goldberg))
4		MOT:	No.
5			((Simon comes into the kitchen where the family is
6			eating))
7		OBS:	Simon how are you?
8		MOT:	No no you have to sit there.
9		JEN:	What?
10		MOT:	You have to sit there.
11		FAT:	OK.
12		OBS:	OK.
13		FAT:	Is that OK?
14		OBS:	OK.
15	→	FAT:	Is that OK? Well (.) she did this thing the junkie.
16			Did you see her do this thing on Anne Frank?
17		OBS:	I don't think so.
18		MOT:	We have one bread so eat it slowly not all at once.
19	→	SIM:	Wow! ((said about the new VCR))
20	→	JEN:	Dad (.) I've started taping it.
21		FAT:	What? The news?
22		JEN:	Mmhmm.
23		FAT:	OK.
24	→	OBS:	I hear you're a basketball star now.
25		SIM:	A star is right.
26		OBS:	( ) guys play you played once . . .
27		SIM:	Yeah I got a basket.
28		FAT:	He scored two points. He scored a field goal for
29			the season.
30		OBS:	So now your record was uh . . .
31		SIM:	One thousand.
32		FAT:	For one shot he got it in. It's set very good.
33			Umm she did this thing on Anne Frank and . . .

The segment is typical of the way in which several items on both the
activity and the talk agenda demand attention simultaneously: Simon's
entrance interrupts the "Whoopie Goldberg" conversation, and the need
to seat him focuses attention on the activity of shifting chairs, signaled

verbally in lines 9 to 14. The backshift to Whoopie Goldberg is made by the father in line 14, minimally signaled by the discourse marker "well" (Schiffrin, 1987). But not for long: After a brief insert of dinner talk (line 17), the new VCR draws Simon's attention ("Wow") and occasions a side sequence (Jefferson, 1972) about taping the news (lines 18–22). Once closed ("OK" in line 22), the topic changes again, this time to basketball. But the father persists in bringing Whoopie Goldberg back. In lines 31–32, within the same turn he combines a third-party-addressed compliment to Simon about basketball ("For one shot he got it in. It's set very good") with the topical backshift, signaled minimally by "Umm" ("Umm she did this thing on Anne Frank and . . ."). For this segment, but not necessarily for all, topical shifts and backshifts are accomplished within a single floor (Erickson, 1990), with all present engaged (though with constantly varying degrees) in one topic at any particular moment.

The children in this segment are directly or indirectly responsible for distracting the conversation from the main topic of Whoopie Goldberg: first, nonverbally, by focus-of-attention shifting to seating Simon. Next, it is Simon and Jennifer who collaborate in initiating a side sequence by noticing the VCR ("Wow" in line 18, "I've started taping it" in line 19). As much as the father seems keen on continuing the subject of Whoopie Goldberg, it is noteworthy that the children's topic is clarified (line 20) and acknowledged (line 22). Furthermore, the father also collaborates on the introduction of a new topic by the Observer in line 23 by allowing Simon to occupy center stage for its short duration (lines 23–31). We see that children's contributions to dinner talk are accepted even if they distract attention from the main topic on the floor.

We considered as *digressions* cases in which, retrospectively, a change/shift in topics proves to be treated as a bracketed occurrence. Digressions are recognizable on closure, by a readaptation of the previous topic (Bublitz, 1988). During a narrative event, a recipient-initiated digression may well be perceived by the main teller as challenging his or her telling rights.

(7) AM2; Daniel, 6m; Marvin, 8m; Tamara, 3f; Father; Mother; Observer.

> ((The two boys are co-narrating the film *The Flight of the Navigator;* in the extract, Daniel acts as the main teller.))

1	OBS:	For an alien he seems like a friendly alien.
2	DAN:	No he's actually computerized.
3	FAT:	Ah ha!

4		DAN:	He's a computer ⌜living being
5		OBS:	⌞He's a robot?
6		DAN:	Yeah robot.
7		OBS:	Uh huhh
8		DAN:	He's called Max.
9		OBS:	Max?
10		DAN:	Because his first name is Maximillian.
11	→	MOT:	Wasn't that the name of the computer in *Two*
12			*Thousand and One*?
13		FAT:	I can't remember, it might be.
14		OBS:	Somehow that slips my mind.
15	→	DAN:	Anyway . . .
16		MOT:	Really?
17	→	DAN:	Anyway . . .
18		MOT:	Susan, such an important fact . . .
19	→	DAN:	Anyway when he goes up ( ) just stares at them

In this instance, the digression is forced on the child-narrator by the adults. The mother's question in lines 11–12 ("Wasn't that the name of the computer in *Two Thousand and One*?"), though not directly addressed to the adults, is understood as such by them (the wording "wasn't that . . ." may serve as signal here) and they promptly try to respond (lines 13–14). Sequentially, the question acts as a clarificatory insertion sequence (cf. Dascal & Katriel, 1979) that shifts attention away from the main story line. Interactionally, in its affective function, the adult's digression becomes competitive with the child's story, as the mother adopts an ironic tone clearly targeted for adults only (lines 16 and 18) while the child tries to continue his story. It takes Daniel two futile attempts to perform a *readaptation* of the navigator story line (lines 15 and 17) before he finally succeeds. Note that his attempts (repeating "anyway" three times in lines 15, 17, and 19) completely ignore the adults' comments, treating the latter as a mere disruption to be overcome. As in the case of initiations, here too the child at dinner has to work harder than the adult to achieve his or her conversational aim. The adults, conversely, at least for the duration of the digression, frame the child as a nonparticipant by creating a distanced perspective (on the topic of films favored by children) that the child is not expected to share. Such instances transform stories told collaboratively with children to stores told *around* children "as co-present others" (Miller & Byhouwer Moore, 1989, p. 432).

Closings are less routine. There are very few cases of overt topical closure. Yet this is not unique to family discourse. Bublitz (1988) noted that closing a topic in everyday conversation is often a component or a by-product of actions such as topical change, topical shift, and digressions. Occasionally, (re)initiating in everyday conversation occasions complex closing sequences, such as summarizing, evaluating, and paraphrasing the previous topic. Ends of conversations also call for closing procedures (cf. Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). But in dinner-table conversation, except for specific cases to be elaborated, the occurrence of explicitly marked closing is quite infrequent (0.5% of all topical actions for Americans, 5.8% for Israelis). It is a general feature of this talk that regardless of the general thematic frame, topics as a rule are suspended rather than formally closed.

Exceptions are of four kinds. First, closings associated with brief action sequences (request–compliance, offer–acceptance) as in extract 6 — Jennifer's announcement "I've started taping [the news]" — is interpretable as a permission request and is responded to as such by the father's "OK," which thereby closes the topic. A second way in which closure appears is through a negotiation of narrative codas, with or without shifts in participation structure. In a story to be analyzed in detail in the concluding discussion, Jordan (age 8) is complaining about his substitute teacher. The griping about the substitute teacher is concluded twice, first by the father helping Jordan to formulate the coda for this story (suggesting that the children want their regular teacher back because they are tired of the substitute, and having Jordan agree) and a second time by shifting the conversation from a child–adult interaction to an adult–adult one by the mother answering the observer's question to Jordan ("what's wrong with your teacher") by saying "Well, it's her kids who have the chicken pox," thus allowing for the observer's "Ohuh!" response as closure.

Third, narratives are an instance of a structured genre that require closings to show they have a point and are ultimately tellable. Jokes are another example of such a structure; in this case, the punch line if followed only by laughter constitutes the third type of closure in our data. The last type of closure is explicit, metalinguistic moves called "breaking off a topic" by Bublitz (1988, p. 133). Such closures may be one-sided or negotiated actions, performed as preventive acts against loss of face for self or others that is feared to ensue from continued talk on the same topic. In the family, there must be compelling moral

reasons for such closures to appear. This may happen especially within a topical frame that I refer to as that of immediate family matters, where topics based on personal experience may touch on sensitive issues. At the dinner table of AM6, for example, the topic on the floor at one moment concerns the Garbage Pail Kid™ stickers the children are collecting. Jessica, 8, cannot find her stickers and suspects they were stolen by one of her classmates ("I know someone who stole them"). This accusation occasions a socializing event focused on moral issues, which encompasses parental formulation of the principle involved ("stealing is not right") as well as discussion of the various alternatives for the morally correct (and practically efficient) ways of getting the stickers back. These include the suggestion "Maybe you talk to the teacher then ultimately ask his parents [to get them back]," which is interpretable from the child's point of view as to "tell on" the suspect, a recommendation that clashes with peer-group norms and thereby creates for her a serious moral dilemma. Jessica's response to this suggestion is: "Dad, can you talk about this some other time?" The father is slow in responding to the obvious signal of discomfort, asking, "When should we talk about it?" but the mother understands.

(8) AM6; Jessica, 8f; Father; Mother.

1		JES:	Dad, can you talk about this some other time?
2		FAT:	Well (.) When should we talk about it?
3	→	MOT:	Can I change the subject?
4		FAT:	Mm
5		MOT:	I want to talk to Gabe about his day because he said
6			it was horrible.

Procedure

One dinner conversation per family was coded. Coding began with the first substantial topic introduced (e.g., at the moment when talk concerned other than either instrumental tasks associated with dinner, such as seating arrangements, or purely phatic talk, such as greetings) and continued for 20 min of the talk. One person coded all the data, whereas another scored 15% of the data to test the reliability of the topical actions code. Using Cohen's Kappa statistic, the interrater reliability of identifying and classifying topical actions was computed.

Reliability was in the almost perfect range: for identification of topical actions $K = .88$, for categorization of topical actions, $K = .85$.

RESULTS

The children's and adults' topical contributions to dinner conversations were assessed by computing two measures: ratio of topical failure and level of topical contribution. The first measure is meant to reveal whether children are at a disadvantage at dinner talk: Are their topical actions met with the same or a different degree of success than topical actions performed by other participants? The ratio of failures was computed relative to individual numbers of topical action. The second measure was meant to assess comparatively children's overall contribution to the topical agenda of dinner talk; level of contribution was computed as the proportion of an individual's contribution of the sum of topical actions in the family.

Topical Failure

We expected both cultural variation and role constellations to have an effect on rate of failure. We considered culture, age, gender, and being a family outsider/insider to be critical for rates of topical success or failure. These expectations were tested by a series of univariate analyses for within-group effects of these variables. None of these effects reached statistical significance. Yet the general trends manifested (by considering percent failure in each role constellation) indicate possible influences of culture, age, gender, and being an insider/ outsider, as detailed in Tables 2a–2c.

In a multiparty conversation among equals, a speaker's rate of success in raising topics and having them accepted and elaborated may well index his or her degree of perceived power relative to others in the group, as negotiated in a particular interaction (Fishman, 1978). Rate of failure may further depend on cultural style of interaction. In a culture that favors collaborative overlaps in a high-involvement style that Tannen described as characteristic of Jewish New Yorkers (Tannen,

TABLE 2a
Percent Failed Topical Actions in American Families

	N People Present	N participants	n Success	n Failure	Percentage Failure
Mother	8	8	33	5	13.2
Father	8	8	62	8	11.4
Observer	8	6	10	4	28.6
Other adult	0	0	0	0	—
Adult Total	24	22	105	17	13.9
Preschool	5	3	7	1	12.5
School age	14	14	50	14	21.9
Other children	2	0	0	0	—
Children Total	21	17	57	15	20.8
Group Total	45	39	162	32	16.5

TABLE 2b
Percent Failed Topical Actions in Israeli Families

	N People Present	N Participants	n Success	n Failure	Percentage Failure
Mother	8	8	54	1	1.8
Father	7	6	12	1	7.7
Observer	8	8	48	3	5.9
Other adult	5	4	8	4	33.3
Adult Total	28	26	122	9	6.9
Preschool	6	4	10	6	37.5
School age	14	10	29	2	6.5
Other children	3	1	2	1	33.3
Children Total	23	15	41	9	18.0
Group Total	51	41	163	18	9.9

TABLE 2c
Percent Failed Topical Actions in American-Israeli Families

	N People Present	N Participants	n Success	n Failure	Percentage Failure
Mother	8	8	58	3	4.9
Father	8	8	37	4	9.8
Observer	8	8	43	2	4.4
Other adult	4	1	1	0	0.0
Adult Total	28	25	139	9	6.1
Preschool	5	5	14	11	44.0
School age	16	13	44	9	17.0
Other children	3	1	2	1	33.3
Children Total	24	19	60	21	25.9
Group Total	52	44	199	30	13.1

1984), we could expect more futile attempts at topical action and hence a higher rate of failure than in a culture favoring interturn pauses and disfavoring overlaps, which, in Tannen's (1984) terms is the "high considerateness" style she found typical of non-Jewish California speakers (p. 30). Though there are no studies that deal directly with discourse management in Israeli ways of speaking, there are several sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies of ways of speaking (particularly speech act behavior) that suggest that Israeli ways of speaking are oriented toward solidarity rather than deference and politeness, namely toward a high-involvement, distance-minimizing style (Blum-Kulka, Danet, & Gerson, 1985; Katriel, 1986). Against this background, we expected rates of topical failure to be higher (than American) around Israeli dinner tables, reflecting the presumed high-involvement style of this culture.

The failure rate for adults alone ranges among the groups from 6% (American-Israeli) and 7% (Israeli) to 14% (American). Surprisingly, the highest rate of adult failure is found in the American, not the native Israeli families. The reason may lie in the nature of cooperativeness expected in family discourse. Whereas in ordinary conversations lack of cooperativeness creates high social risks (such as face loss in being considered impolite, or the danger of a silence being misunderstood), in family discourse these regular social expectations have to be tempered to adapt to the developmental stage of children as social interactants. A parent's futile attempt to elicit a "how was your day" story from her 4-year-old son, for example, will technically be considered a "failed topical action" by the adult, yet it carries very different meaning than an adult's futile attempt to raise a topic at a friendly gathering. Analysis of the relevant text segments shows that the cultural difference in favor of Israeli adults' topical success reflects a higher rate of American adults' attempts to elicit talk from young children.

Children are at an obvious disadvantage in intergenerational gatherings not specifically tailored to their needs. We expected the asymmetries between children and adults to be reflected in rates of topical failure, with higher rates for children than adults. Children's rates of failure within the groups are indeed higher than those for adults. In the two Israeli groups, adults have more than a 10% advantage over children in chances for topical success, although in the American families the gap is diminished to 7%. The more difficult time children apparently have in performing topical actions is also witnessed by the higher level of nonparticipation on the part of children compared to

adults: Out of 66 adults present in the three groups, only 7 abstained from performing topical actions, whereas among 68 children there were 16 noninitiators.

Further relevant to children's topical failure at dinner are possible divisions along gender lines and between family insiders and outsiders. In appraising the children's rate of success in dinner conversations we need to know whether these conversations are male- or female-dominated and what chance outsiders stand in joining the talk. Any of these factors may in turn be related to children's rate of topical failure as well as to their level of topical contribution.

In view of the rich literature on speech differences between men and women (e.g., Swacker, 1976; Fishman, 1978; Gal, 1989; Tannen, 1990) we wanted to know if such differences show up within the family. It was found that the gender of the parent does not seem to have any bearing on the rate of topical failure, though as is shown in the next section, men and women differ significantly in degree of contribution to the family's pool of topical actions.

Having the observer and occasionally another guest present (the latter were family relatives and friends) creates a division between family insiders and outsiders. One of the questions pursued is whether this division affects in any way the rate of topical failure. Being a friend or relative at the Israeli dinner table carries with it a high risk of topical failure: 33%. However, being an observer in the American families carries with it a much higher rate of topical failure (29%) than being an observer in one of the Israeli groups (4%–6%). This pattern is consistent with other analyses of observer behavior, which all show culturally different patterns in the nature of the interactions between observers and the family.
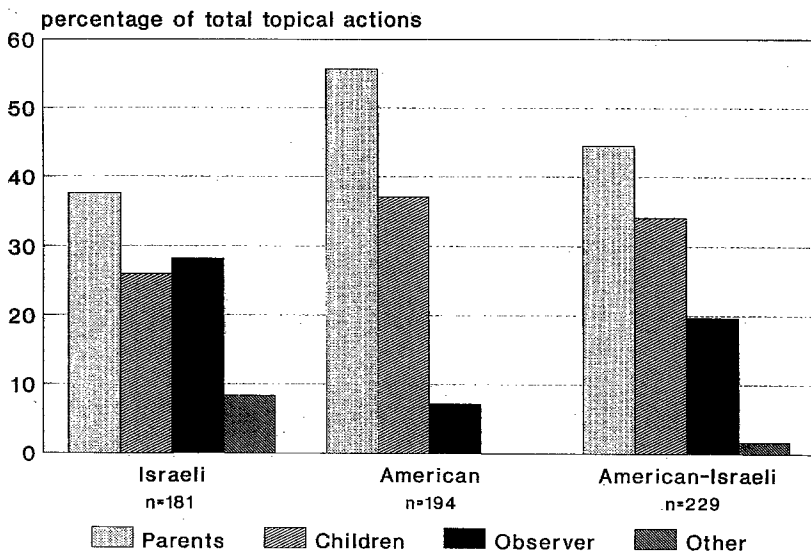
Topical Contributions

This analysis of topical contributions considers the degree of contribution made by each speaker to the family's agenda. The question considered is one of the relationship between role in the family and speech event, and level of topical contribution: How do adults compare with children, men with women, visitors with family members in the impact they have on the talk agenda? The word *impact* suggests effect, influence, power. Yet as is discussed in detail later, I argue that there is

no one-to-one simple correspondence between level of topical contribution and power (indexed or achieved) in family discourse. What the findings do indicate are unequal distributions among participants (by role constellations) in levels of topical activity.

The general trends shown through repeated measured analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were that the role of the speaker as an adult or a child, mother or father, a family member or a guest, all have an effect on levels of topical contribution, but that these effects may be manifested in different patterns across the three groups. Figure 1 presents a general picture of how topical contributions are divided in each group among parents, children, observers, and others present at the dinner table.

Two main trends emerge from the distributions presented. First, children in all groups are active topic contributors, but in all cases their levels of contribution are lower than those of the adults. In the family dinners studied, children are granted participation rights not only in responding to adult topical initiations, but also in trying to have an impact on the direction of the talk through their own initiatives. These rights are reflected in the overall proportion of children's contributions

FIGURE 1   Topical contribution by family role.

among all topical actions: 24% in the Israeli families, 39% in the American, and 34% in the American-Israeli. But the findings also indicate that to varying degrees it is the adults who dominate the talk agenda, performing in all cases the majority of topical actions (61%–76%).

The second general trend is that the observers' level of participation differs across the groups. Observers, as well as other guests, take a greater part in the two Israeli groups' discourse than they do in the American families'. It remains to be seen, though, to what degree each of these patterns significantly differentiates between groups of speakers by their role in the family.

Being a Child or an Adult

The degree of adult domination varies with culture. Univariate analyses of the adult/child effect yield significant effects for two of the groups only (see Table 3). Whereas within the Israeli families being a child or an adult proves to have a highly significant effect on level of contribution ($p = .002$), the effect is less marked for the American-Israeli families ($p = .05$), and no such effect emerges for the American families. In other words, in the two groups of Israeli families, adults take up a significantly larger part of topical space than children, whereas in the American families the gap between adults and children is much less noticeable (see Table 3). Yet what at first glance seems an unequal distribution of topical space between children and adults in the Israeli families may prove, as elaborated later, to reflect culturally different attitudes toward child participation.

The actual age of the child is a further factor to be considered. Young children are at a clear disadvantage in an adult–child multiparty

TABLE 3
Mean Percentage and Univariate Adult/Child Effects for Topical Contributions in Three Groups

Group	Adult			Child			F(1, 7)	p
	n	M %	SD	n	M %	SD		
American	122	21	7	72	15	8	1.68	ns
Israeli	131	21	3	23	10	6	22.35	.002
American-Israeli	148	19	5	81	12	8	5.24	.05

gathering both because they may not be cognitively able to follow the topical development of the talk around them and because even if they do, they still may lack the conversational skills needed for topical action (e.g., such as recognizing transition-relevant points for turn-taking; Ervin-Tripp, 1979). Hence, it is not surprising to find that the mean rate of contribution increases with age. In both the Israeli and American families, preschoolers have somewhat lower rates of topical contribution (means are 9% and 8%, respectively) than school-aged children (10% and 17%, respectively). However, in the American-Israeli families, the mean rates for preschoolers and school-aged children are highly similar (11% and 13%), suggesting a higher rate of general participation by preschoolers. Though none of the age differences reaches statistical significance, there are several indications of the younger children's difficulties. Consider the distribution of topical actions among the children in each age group. In both the Israeli and American families, topical participation by preschoolers (for the 20 min examined) was limited to three out of five American, and three out of six Israeli children. In the Israeli-American families, all five preschoolers participated. Participation in topical action was universal for American school-aged children; this age group contributed 33% of all the group's topical actions. But among the Israelis, 2 (out of 14) and among the American-Israelis 3 (out of 16) school-aged children made no topical contribution. In the Israeli groups, school-aged Israeli children contributed only 19% of topical actions, and American-Israeli children 25%. It seems tentatively, then, that beyond given age differences there might also be culturally different attitudes toward age, with American families allowing more topical space for the older children than native Israeli families, whereas the American-Israeli immigrant families divide such space more equally between the two age groups.

Gender of Parent

Children's participation in dinner talk is not limited to raising, changing, and elaborating topics. As some of the examples illustrate, they are also active in contributing to the maintenance of topics raised by others, or at least in showing active listenership. Hence for a full picture of their discourse role at dinner, we need to know whose topics are being maintained by others. Specifically, are there gender or role

differences in topical dominance? Do children (and others present) find themselves listening and supporting one parent more than the other? Or an observer more than a parent?

As discussed by Tannen (1990), the speech of women has been compared to the speech of men in many contexts, including semiofficial gatherings such as faculty meetings (Swacker, 1976), intimate talk between couples (Fishman, 1978), and in the talk of parents to young children (Gleason, 1987). Though many studies point to gender differences in speech, there is no agreement on interpretations, as the social meanings attached to such differences may vary with context and culture (Gal, 1989). Furthermore, research in this area does not address the issue of possible gender differences in topical action, in the context of intergenerational family gatherings. Hence we set out to examine the possibility of a gender difference in this regard, possibly a culturally differentiated one, with no specific expectations in mind.

The findings from univariate analyses of the effects of parent gender indicate that the gender of the parent affects the level of contribution differentially in the three groups (Table 4).

Israeli women make significantly *more* topical contributions than Israeli men ($p = .03$), whereas American women make significantly *fewer* topical contributions than men ($p = .04$) (see Table 4). In the American-Israeli families, as in the native Israeli families, the women tend to dominate but the effect does not reach statistical significance. Expressed as proportions of the couple's shared "topical pool," Israeli women create 81% of topics, American-Israeli women 61%, but American women only 35%.

Not surprisingly, when the effect of gender on topical actions is considered across the groups, the difference becomes neutralized (the mean is 25% for women, 22% for men). But being a man or a woman

TABLE 4
Mean Percentage and Univariate Parent/Gender Effects for Topical Contributions in Three Groups

Group	Mother			Father			$F(1, 7)$	p
	n	M %	SD	n	M %	SD		
American	38	20	9	70	37	17	5.87	.04
Israeli[a]	55	29	10	13	10	10	6.99	.03
American-Israeli	61	29	12	41	18	74	1.72	ns

[a]Based on seven families (single-parent family excluded).

means playing culturally different roles in terms of discourse participation. A two-way ANOVA for group and gender reveals no effect for gender alone, but it does show a significant interaction between group and gender: $F = 6.42$, $df = 2, 128$, $p = .007$; Wilks's Lambda = .60. The difference stems (based on Bonferroni t tests) from the contrasts between Israelis and Americans and Americans and American-Israelis. In other words, only two groups emerge, with the two Israeli groups following similar patterns.

Being an Outsider

The observers occupied a peculiar position at dinner; they were known to the family, either from previous visits or occasionally from former acquaintance, and in this respect fulfilled the role of a familiar guest. But because they were also visiting on official business, representing the research project, their presence may have introduced an element of formality and/or self-awareness into the proceedings. Such perceptions may in turn have had an effect on their interaction with the children and the degree to which children would participate in observer-raised topics. In all analyses of the observer's perceived and enacted role at the dinner table, the most consistent finding is that of cultural diversity: The Israeli families (including American-Israelis) differ dramatically from the Americans in orientations toward the observer. Consider the effect of the observer on topical contributions. For this analysis we compared the contribution by parents to contributions by the observer (see Table 5). Whereas in the two groups of Israeli families observers were not found to differ significantly on topical contributions from parents (means are 29% vs. 21% and 20% vs. 23% within the two groups), in the American families the observers contribution (7%) is

TABLE 5
Mean Percentage and Univariate Parent/Observer Effects for Topical Contributions in
Three Groups

Group	Parent			Observer			F(1, 7)	p
	n	M %	SD	n	M %	SD		
American	108	28	9	14	7	7	27.04	.001
Israeli	68	21	4	51	29	13	2.77	n s
American-Israeli	102	23	6	45	20	11	0.82	n s

significantly ($p = .001$) lower than the one for parents (28%). The high level of the observer's active participation (both in responding to others and in self-initiations) in the Israeli families has no equivalent in the American families.

These results show that being an adult or a child, a mother or father, outsider or insider will affect the speaker's level of topical contribution within the family and the cultural group. What they do not tell us, however, is how each of these factors (e.g., age, gender, and family membership) is affected by, or interacts with, group membership. That is, does acting as a parent, a child or an outsider have similar impacts on topical contributions across the groups? In order to assess the relative impact of both group membership and speaker role, a two way multivariate analysis of variance was carried out on the contribution scores of Group (Israeli/American/American-Israeli) $\times$ Speaker (parent/child/outsider), with Speaker as the repeated measure.

Highly significant multivariate effects were obtained for both Speaker ($F = 14.9$, $df = 2, 125$, $p = .001$; Wilks's Lambda $= 0.40$) and Speaker $\times$ Group ($F = 3.9$, $df = 4, 125$, $p = .009$; Wilks's Lambda $= 0.51$). The effect for Speaker is indicated by the level of parents' contribution across all groups being systematically higher (24%) than that of children (12%) and observers (12%). Of particular interest is the interaction effect between group membership and speaker's role. This finding suggests that being a parent, a child, or an outsider affects topical contributions differently depending on the cultural group of the speaker. But univariate analyses show that these three role constellations do not carry the same weight. The levels of both parents' (Israeli, 20%; American, 28%; and American-Israeli, 23%) and children's contribution (Israeli, 10%; American, 15%; and American-Israeli, 12%) are highly similar across the three groups, and neither of these factors reaches statistical significance. Being an outsider, by contrast, does have a cross-culturally differential effect on participation structures. Topical contributions by other than family members (mainly the observers) reaches higher levels in the two Israeli groups (20% and 12%, respectively) compared with that among the Americans (5%). Thus being an "other" carries the burden for the observed variation by speaker role across the three groups (for the factor of "other": $F = 6.28$, $df = 2, 16$, $p = .007$). It is further noteworthy that this factor yields a division into two groups: Bonferroni t-tests indicate that the Americans

differ significantly from both Israeli groups, but the two Israeli groups share similar patterns.

DISCUSSION:
THE DYNAMICS OF DINNER TALK

Our findings suggest that being a child, a mother, a father, or an observer affects the topical speakership at dinner in culturally differential ways. Children have less access to the floor than adults, but in the two groups of Israeli families they are exposed more to topics raised by the mothers than by the fathers, whereas the reverse holds for the Jewish-American families. In the division between adult and child participation, Israeli children compete with both parents and observers, whereas in the American families they compete mostly with parents. These results raise several important issues in regard to child participation: What are the social meanings associated with topical control? Is adult dominance in topical control an index for social power in the family? What are the social developmental gains associated with child participation in dinner talk? What are the language-socializing goals achieved in this context?

Talk and Power

Are children gaining social power by raising topics at dinner? From a cross-cultural perspective, it is the sheer act of participation in intergenerational talk that deserves attention. Cultures vary dramatically in their beliefs and practices in the area of language socialization and, consequently, in the way they structure or encourage conversation with children. The evidence points to a high degree of cultural variation in the degree to and fashion in which young children are treated interactively. Whereas middle- and working-class White American mothers talk to their infants directly and address questions to them as potential conversational partners (Heath, 1983; Snow, 1984), working-class African-American adults engage young children in ritual talk but

do not see them as conversational partners in the same sense as middle-class adults do (Heath, 1983; L. Hemphill, personal communication, June 1993). Contrarily, Kaluli mothers in New Guinea (Schieffelin, 1990) rarely address talk at all (including questions) specifically to very young children, because they do not see infants as suitable partners for conversation. Though this line of research does not focus particularly on mealtimes, it does suggest a wide range of cultural variation in the developmental stage at which children are considered conversational partners, and such considerations probably carry over to family meals. Margaret Mead's (1959) film *Four Families,* one of the few documentations of family meals across cultures available, indeed depicts both semisilent (the rural French) and children-involved, highly interactive meals (rural Canadian). Accepting the children of all ages as ratified participants at dinner emerges as a cultural norm typifying Western, urban, middle-class communities.[5]

Children's participation at dinner talk is universally professed by the parents during interviews as a very important socializing goal. Yet the parents also expect the children to be "relevant," "appropriate," and to "wait for their turn." Interlocutors, at least within a given culture, seem to share common criteria that allow them to hold each other accountable for adhering to (or flouting) the principle of relevance, just as they share discourse management norms that tell them how turn-taking is accomplished. The adults at dinner are no exception. But the children do not necessarily share the adult criteria of relevance, nor read the subtle cues needed for smooth turn-taking. Hence the parental conversational demands imposed on children index parental power: They set the terms for entry into the hegemonic, adult world of discourse. Simultaneously though, as is exemplified later, parents engage in socializing practices to ease the children's passage into the adult discourse.

From the children's point of view, the relationships among talk in general, topical action, and power are even more complicated. On one level, just having the floor for oneself is considered a gain, as expressed by 5;5-year-old Josh: "I want to talk. I never talk." Turns at talk can become valuable commodities; the more you have, the richer and more powerful you are. Gaining floor space can become a competition, especially between siblings, as manifest in the following exchange between 7-year-old Marvin and his 6-year-old brother Daniel:

(9) AM2; Marvin, 7m; Daniel, 6m; Mother; Father.

1	MAR:	Can I say something? Is it my turn?
2	MOT:	I don't know.
3	DAN:	NO! ((shouting)) You have to wait until I finish.
4	MAR:	You had a long turn (.) so there. ((whining)).
5	DAN:	You had a longer one!
6	MAR:	No (.) I didn't.
7	DAN:	Yes, you did.
8	FAT:	Daniel, are you finished saying what you were
9		saying?

I argue that the relation between talk and power are more complex (than suggested by the last example) for all present at dinner.[6] For children, two sets of factors are of particular importance: what is being talked about when a child enters the conversation, and how conversational entry is accomplished. The first dimension is captured by considering the thematic structure of dinner talk. Dinner-table conversations are organized around thematic frames, each frame creating its own discourse genre. It is shown later that socializing goals vary with frame, each frame occasioning a different set of goals. The second dimension emerges from distinguishing among three modes of child participation: by self-initiation of a topic, by response to direct elicitation by an adult, and by collaborating in the maintenance of a topic raised by adult(s). Childrens' discoursal rights and obligations at dinner vary with the type of intersection between these two dimensions.

Frames Within Frames

Consider first the thematic structure of dinner talk. Topics at dinner unfold within a delimited spatiotemporal physical frame and are not dictated by any preset agenda; yet internally we can detect principles of organization. The topics raised can be seen as organized within macrolevel thematic frames; such frames are recognizable both by affinity in topics included and by genre of discourse. Each contextual thematic frame serves as "bounding a set of interactive messages" (Bateson, 1972, p. 191). Thematic frames "are defined as members of a class by virtue of their sharing common premises or mutual relevance" (Bateson, 1972, p. 188). Common premises, whether metacommuni-

cated or not, provide the cues necessary for interpretation. For dinner-table conversations, we identified three major contextual, or thematic, frames: the situational, the immediate familial, and the nonimmediate. Each of these frames occasions its own local topics, assigns discourse roles in different ways and evokes its own rules of interpretation, governing the way children's contributions are elicited, accepted, and appreciated.

Situational Concerns

Malinowski (1923) was perhaps the first scholar to draw our 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 act as a link in concerted human activity" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 312). The situational frame at dinner dictates instrumental goals: Minimally, food has to be brought to the table and assessed by or served to all present. Many of these activities are underscored by or assisted verbally by directives (*Could you pass the salt, We do not eat lettuce with our fingers*), offers (*Wouldn't you like some potatoes?*), and compliments (*This is wonderful*). The business talk of having dinner runs through all our conversations. It is the most consistently recurring thematic frame, but also the one that needs the least coherence-grounding work. It can always be shifted back to with no marking work, giving it a kind of privileged status among other frames. Thus, for example, interjected between the Whoopie Goldberg topic and the talk about the new VCR (see extract 6) the mother attends to dinner needs: "We have one bread so eat it slowly not all at once." The research situation is another immediate theme attended to within the situation frame in all families. Depending on the family, between 5% and 13% of the time in the first 20 min of each dinner, members topicalized the taping equipment ("I can see the light is on"), the goals of the research ("Who is going to listen to this"), and used metacomments of resurgent awareness ("You are on tape").

Other themes within the frame of immediate concerns emerge locally, such as when a baby dozing in the far corner of the room becomes restless, a neighbor comes to the door, a telephone conversation during dinner requires some further attention, or when a member of

the family is late for dinner. Themes of situational concern are spatiotemporally anchored in the here and now. The language is highly contextualized, contains many deictics decipherable only by being present on the scene (or viewing the video), and has relatively long pauses. In addition, the choice of specific topics is often motivated by actors' personal needs and noticed changes in the physical context, marking this realm, in Shutz's (1970) terms, as a case of topics of "imposed relevance."

Children have a privileged position within this frame. The nurturance–dependence link between them and their parents (Bateson, 1972) calls for heightened parental attention to their physical (especially food-related) needs at dinner. Hence to ask for a second serving, get a drink, reach for a dish, or refuse an offer for food, children do not need to struggle to gain conversational entry, as would be the case for any topic other than instrumental dinner talk. However, the manner in which children make requests may become an issue. From a socialization point of view, it is thus aspects of verbal and nonverbal politeness that become highlighted (Blum-Kulka, 1990). Across all families, situational concerns take up one-fifth of the time of the talk.[7]

Immediate Family Concerns

The second thematic frame contains news of *immediate family concern:* "Immediate" in the sense that matters talked about within this frame happened or were noticed in the very recent past of the last day, were being 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 protagonists and participants: In this "news" frame, the family attends to the most recent news of its members. Spouses tell each other about work, parents ask children about school, and children volunteer stories about "their day" (Blum-Kulka, 1993). 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 instrumental dinner talk. A child-centered ethos of Jewish middle-class families is also apparent here: All families question the children on their activities, and all families yield the floor to

children's initiations on personal topics. Additionally, the adults also bring up child-focused topics not addressed to the children.

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." In Sacks's (1978) terms, such news is "tellable," and it is the fact of her or "his involvement that provides for the story's telling" (p. 261). But the set of rights and obligations of participation 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" exchanges (except with young children) (Blum-Kulka, 1993). We learned from the interviews that this is the thematic frame least influenced by the observer's presence; parents and children alike report during interviews that they engage regularly in "my/your news" themes at meal times.

The "news-telling" frame is inclined toward stories of personal experience, assertive, and expressive rather than directive speech acts, great variation in length and genre (from short question–answer sequences to lengthy monologic narratives), and in the case of adult–child interactions, a style that is reminiscent of classroom discourse, in that within it parents, like teachers, tend to regulate turn-taking by children.

Within this news-telling frame, parents often act as a discussion leader, summoning the children by name and allocating them potentially extended narrative turns by asking open-ended "today" questions (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992; Blum-Kulka, 1993).

> (10) AM6; Jessica, 10f; Mother.
>
> | 1 | MOT: | Tell me about your day. |
> | 2 | JES: | My day? |
> | 3 | MOT: | Yes. |
> | 4 | JES: | What? |

Even when self-initiated in the display mode, children's topic development within the frame of immediate family matters is closely controlled by adults.

> (11) AM4; Jordan, 8m; Mother; Observer.
>
> | 1 | JOR: | Mommy (.) you know what? |
> | 2 | MOT: | Yes dear. |

```
     3   JOR:   As um Snappy Smurf would say "I wish we didn't
     4           have to eat the vegetables." I didn't (.) I just
     5           wish we could eat the little good things inside them.
     6   OBS:   Oh ((laughs)) Sounds like that commercial for
     7           Nutrasweet in vitamins.
     8   MOT:   (        ) put Nutrasweet in broccoli?
     9   JOR:   Mommy that's what Snappy Smurf said when Farmer
    10           Smurf told him that there are little good things in
    11           vegetables and that's why you had to eat them.
    12   MOT:   Oh.
```

Jordan's first turn is indeed interpreted by the mother as a bid for a turn and is responded to as such. Jordan's contribution is then appreciated for its "cuteness" by the observer, occasioning a brief exchange between her and the mother (lines 6–8), before Jordan can continue. The third-party-addressed comment by the observer sets the child's contribution apart, treating its originator not as a direct addressee, but rather as an inadvertent, nonofficial overhearer (Goffman, 1981, p. 132). It is only after re-establishing the mother as recipient by a direct summons ("Mommy" in line 9) that Jordan elicits a direct response to his contribution ("Oh" in line 12).

We can see that self-initiation in this display mode offers children opportunities to practice their discourse skills in a multiparty setting. But the presence of several adults endangers their participation rights, as at any given moment adults may talk over the child's head, thereby framing him or her, in Goffman's (1981, p. 132) terms, as an unratified participant. Furthermore, because children's topical initiations tend to be performed within the frame of immediate family matters, topicalizing issues of personal experience, they ultimately allow for parental control over both discourse management and content. Thus children's right to participate by self-initiation, conceived as power, is qualified by the adult gate-keeping rights to control conversational entry and show appreciation (or lack of it) for the content of children's contributions.

The topics adults tend to raise with children in this frame usually concern the children's lives. It is over responsibility for this private space that the negotiation for the meaning of talk takes place. Whereas in the case of the display mode, the emphasis in gaining power through talk is on the Gricean maxim of quantity in terms of simple length (how many words/turns) in the case of elicitation it shifts to the maxim of quantity

in terms of informativeness (Grice, 1975). For children, being informative about their lives in frameworks set up by the adults is risky: It may elicit challenge as well as support, invite intervention as well as concern. The next example illustrates that parental support is not granted automatically.

(12) AM4; Jordan, 8m; Sandra, 4f; Father.

((The Father's question interrupts Jordan's lengthy account of a soccer game; see also extract 2.))

1	FAT:	Jordan (.) would you like to tell us something?
2		Other than soccer what happened today?
3	JOR:	Well.
4		((Simultaneously mother and Sandra are engaged in
5		negotiating food.))
6	JOR:	We had a mean ( ) teacher.
7	FAT:	You what?
8		((Overlaps with Sandra softly singing to herself.))
9	JOR:	Our teacher got mean.
10	FAT:	Your teacher (.) the substitute got mean?
11	JOR:	Yes.
12	FAT:	Why what did you do to her today?
13	JOR:	Nothing but she, Mrs. Yeomans, you know we have
14		gym today. Mrs. Yeomans always lets us go out (.)
15		but our substitute didn't.
16		((The last phrase overlaps with Sandra's request for
17		milk.))
18	FAT:	She didn't let you go out outside for gym?
19	JOR:	She didn't let us go outside for recess!
20	FAT:	Why not?
21	JOR:	Right!
22	FAT:	Why not?
23	JOR:	Because she said we had gym. And all the kids
24		protested and said "but b- b- but Mrs.
25		Yeomans always let us!" But she said, "Mrs.
26		Modden doesn't."
27 →	FAT:	When is Mrs. Yeomans going to be back?
28	JOR:	Well me and Darren are praying that it's going to
29		be tomorrow.
30	FAT:	Because you you're tired of the substitute?
31	JOR:	Yes. Mhmm. Very.
32	OBS:	What's wrong with your teacher?
33	FAT:	Well (.) it's her kids that have the chicken pox.
34:	OBS:	Ohuh!

First, in response to the announcement of a "wrong" done by an institutional representative (the substitute teacher) the parent half-jokingly, by the tone of voice, sets himself up as a prejudiced judge by assuming a causal link between the teacher's "meaness" and the kids' behavior (line 12: "Why what did you do to her today?"). Next, regarding the controversy brought forward by Jordan between the institutional version quoted (substitute teacher holding kids in class-room by power of her authority alone, i.e., in lines 25–26, "Mrs. Modden doesn't [allow kids out]" and the child's version (substitute teacher is breaking the norm established by regular teacher, lines 23–25), the parent chooses to withhold judgment. At this crucial point, where Jordan has expanded the warrants for the complaint, thereby setting up a request for support, the father changes the focus of the discussion. Although his question "When is Mrs. Yeoman's going to be back?" (line 27) is an indirect admittance of Jordan's plight, it is by no means a challenge of institutional authority. Teachers are teachers are teachers, even if ostensibly unjust.

In this elicited mode, meanings of talk and power may get reversed. As pointed out by Goody (1978), adult questions to children are easily interpretable as impositions. On the involvement–independence comple-mentary continuum suggested by Tannen (1986; following Bateson, 1972), "How was school?" may be interpreted as signaling positive involvement, just as well as it may be perceived as a serious invasion of privacy. In the latter case, there is power in not responding coopera-tively, thereby challenging the presumption of accountability parents seem to take for granted (Varenne, 1992). Thus the expressed parental wish of "I want to hear what happened to them" may be translated by children as a face threat. It is an instance where cooperating can be perceived, in Bateson's (1972) terms, as being cast in the role of the powerless "exhibitionist" called upon to display to the powerful adults. The extreme examples for this phenomenon in the dinner-table conver-sations come from interactions with young preschoolers, for whom their developmental stage in mastering conversational competence combines with a reluctance to provide information when asked for it ("How was school?/Pleasant/Did you play?/Yes./What else did you do?/Noth-ing"). In conversations with older children, the ambivalence associated with responding to "conversational demands" (Dascal, 1983, p. 109) finds expression in more subtle ways.

(13) AM5; Beth, 10f; Dana 13f; Father.

```
 1   FAT:    Do you have any projects coming up Dana?
 2   DAN:    I have to do a very very uh don't don't get
 3           excited. (          ) a report on A Tale of Two Cities but
 4           it has to=
 5   FAT:    =You already did, you already read A Tale of Two
 6           Cities.
 7   DAN:    I know (.) I have to do another report on it.
 8   FAT:    What's it about?
 9   DAN:    A Tale of Two Cities! ((irritated))
10   FAT:    Yeah but what subjects? How long (        )?
11   DAN:    (        )
12   BET:    Oh ((laughs))
```

None of Dana's responses to her father's question is fully cooperative. She qualifies her informative first response (lines 2–4) with a warning ("don't get excited"), which seems uncalled for (though there might be a family history behind her comment). Retroactively, her warning proves justified by her father indeed showing excitement: Note the latched interruption (lines 4–5) at the point of what might have been the most informative part of Dana's utterance ("it has to"). In line 7, she provides the required clarification, but the referential misunderstanding in lines 8 and 9 (whether "it" refers to the content or subject of the report) restores the challenging, adversial key of the whole exchange. Dana seems to interpret her father's questions as a challenge to her status as a student, in the sense that Labov and Fanshel (1977) defined the notion: "If A asserts a proposition that is supported by A's status, and B questions the proposition, then B is heard as challenging the competence of A in that status" (p. 125). The next round of questions (line 10) is circumvented by Dana turning to her sister (line 11) with an utterance (unintelligible on tape) that causes laughter. As the conversation develops, Dana continues to circumvent her father's questions and offers for help — "Dana, Dana, let me know if you want help (   ) and I can help you on Saturday, OK?" — by addressing her comments to Beth — "Do you know how long this (   ) has to be?/Twenty pages?/Yup" — and accompanying her comments with laughter. A metacomment by the father at this point ("That's not very helpful Dana") confirms that dissatisfaction with the direction of the conversation is mutual. The conversation then goes on in the same adversial key (with both parents joining in), focusing on attempts to advise Dana how to get the project accom-

plished well and finished on time. On other occasions, or in other families, we may encounter a mutually cooperative, fully supportive key for a similar interaction. Yet the risk of a nonsatisfactory unfolding of such conversations is inherent in their structure.

The frame of immediate family concerns provides important opportunities for discoursal socialization. Both by display and elicitation, children practice adherence to conversational norms, turn-taking as well as narrative skills. The dialogic form of many narratives in this frame provides children respondents with practice in building coherence through question–answer sequences and learning to adhere to the demands of turn-taking rules, as well as providing opportunities for the construction of autonomous texts (for the latter, see Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992). Furthermore, the topical focus on personal experience involves necessarily the negotiation of moral issues as well: For example, both Jessica's "theft" story (extract 8) and Jordan's story of the substitute teacher (extract 12) concern justice, in the first case as applied to peers (who presumably stole Jessica's collection of Garbage Pail Kid™ stickers) and the second as applied to teachers. These socialization goals are achieved despite the complex structure of multiparty talk at family dinners, in which children are not necessarily always at the center of supportive attention. Immediate family concerns occupy an important place at dinner, taking up over one third (35%) of talking time.

Nonimmediate Concerns

The third theme is less easily definable by label. It basically occasions topics of family and personal relevance shareable in this event. As an approximation, I refer to this frame as that of *nonimmediate concerns,* "nonimmediate" designating a degree of distancing from the world of here and now (see also Perlman, 1984). Specific themes vary on dimensions such as degree of shared information, spatiotemporal distancing, types of protagonist, key, and narrativization. Having a guest for dinner may and did occasion retellings of personal and family histories. Spatiotemporally this frame encompasses both the recent and nonrecent 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, 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 young tellers striving for floor space. The presence of an adult guest seems to have had a decisive impact on shaping the discourse within this frame. For example, it allowed for the display of a genre that can be called *family fables*, namely repeated stories based on shared memories to a new audience, as well as for the exchange of adult cultural information (books, movies, T.V. programs). Conversation within this frame is manifestly sociable. We encounter here several of Goffman's (1981) idealized requirements for ordinary conversations: There is no fixed schedule, and contributions by all participants are "treated with respect" (Goffman, 1981, p. 14, note 8). Thus despite the inbuilt asymmetrical relationships between parents and children, within this frame children's contributions are treated equally with those from adults.

It is only within the third frame of nonimmediate topics that children's contributions are freed from power-ambivalence. This is the mode whereby children make a successful contribution to an exchange primarily sustained by adults. Participating in this mode carries a special bonus for child-participants: Having your contribution seamlessly woven into the ongoing discourse is a powerful signal of being accepted as an equal, full-fledged conversational partner in the adult discourse world. In the following extract, conversational competence is expressed via the ability to collaborate in phatic talk (performing a topical shift) about the weather.

(14) AM7; Alena, 7f; Mother; Observer; Father.

1	MOT:	We had no heat at my office today.
2	OBS:	This is the ⌈coldest day of the year
3	MOT:	⌊That is the reason I cut it out early.
4		I couldn't stand it there. I was absolutely freezing
5		this morning.
6	ALE:	Lisa (.) our student teacher is always cold. She's
7		always freezing.
8	FAT:	Speaking of Lisa, I think I saw her on the sidewalk
		today at Harvard Square.

Alena's contribution (line 6) ties in seamlessly with that of the others: It's both coherent ("on topic") and cohesive (through lexical reiteration, repeating both "cold" and "freezing" in a new context). The topical

change accomplished by her father consequently (line 8) is based on her contribution, acknowledging it ("Speaking of Lisa") as well as using it as the springboard for the shift in focus.

Older children may make meaningful contributions not only to phatic talk about the weather, but also to the negotiation of meaning of topics concerning moral issues as well as cultural identities. The Whoopie Goldberg conversation, quoted earlier (see extract 6), continues as follows:

(15)   AM1; Simon, 13m; Jennifer, 15; Mother; Father; Observer.

1		FAT:	It's set very good, um she did this thing on Anna
2			Frank and=
3		SIM:	=It wasn't on it it was just a little bit about=
4		FAT:	=Well (.) no (.) it was really the central theme
5			( ) the junkie and . . .
6			((6 turns omitted: Father is making sure Jennifer
7			has seen the show.))
8		FAT:	Eh she was this junkie using all this foul language
9			and also telling funny stuff you know. People
10			laughing and then she visits Anne Frank the Anne
11			Frank house in Amsterdam and the whole context
12			of it (.) I mean, talk about a subject like that in
13			the the context of her performance you know. I was
14			ready to say "Oh my God forget it I'm not gonna to
15			watch this" but she does it. I mean she really
16			pulls it off. She discusses (.) how do you discuss
17			Anne Frank in a humorous context?
18	→	JEN:	But it wasn't humorous.
19		OBS:	I don't think she was trying to be humorous.
20		FAT:	Well no it's humor really (.) in the best sense.
21	→	SIM:	On all her things she has like a moral for all of
22			them.
23		FAT:	What was the moral of this?
24	→	SIM:	Her image (.) that she should appreciate her
25			things more.
26	→	JEN:	That anybody could=
27		SIM:	=That her everyday problems are much less than (.)
28			you know.
29		FAT:	Yeah.
30	→	JES:	And then the thing with the Valley Girls.
31		MOT:	That was hysterical.
32		FAT:	I think she's a genius. I think she's a genius.

Several cultural and conversational presuppositions form the basis of this conversation. The particular show in question is presumably familiar to all present, except 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 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.

From the father's point of view, the issue is that of entitlement (Shuman, 1986, pp. 137–141): Is a non-Jewish artist entitled to touch "a subject like that" in a "humorous context"? In other words, can an outsider give a comic twist to "our" tragic story? It is noteworthy that both children challenge systematically the father's tendency to highlight the Jewish angle, and his insistence on the comic twist: first, by debating the centrality of Anne Frank in the show (line 3: "It wasn't on it it was just a little bit about") and next by contesting that it was humorous at all (Jennifer, backed by the observer, lines 15–16). Moreover, it is Simon who insists on the need to interpret Whoopie Goldberg in the wider context of her other shows (line 18: "On all her things she has like a moral for all of them"), thereby changing the debate's perspective and minimizing the importance of her dealing with Anne Frank on this specific one. With the father's encouragement, and Jennifer's support (line 23), Simon (lines 24–25) then formulates for all the moral of the specific Anne Frank segment: It is one illustration of a higher principle ("that her everyday problems are much less than you know") that presumably Whoopie Goldberg is trying to transmit in all her work. This justification of Whoopie Goldberg accepted (line 26), the talk can move on to discussing yet another Whoopie Goldberg show ("And then the thing with the Valley Girls").

In conversations concerning nonimmediate topics (like the last example), children may talk less than when talking (by initiation or elicitation) on topics of more immediate personal experience. Yet the socializing functions achievable are not less important. From the discoursal point of view, such exchanges may serve as models for narratives and provide practice in the intricate skills needed for participating in multiparty talk. Simultaneously, there may be important implications for the development of self. Whereas, as we have seen,

adults maintain control over children's participation in child-centered topics, thereby implicitly enhancing their status as children, the child's contribution to "adult" topics grants him or her entry to the adult world, thereby implicitly acknowledging his or her maturity. Furthermore, as indicated by the Whoopie Goldberg conversation just cited, this frame is rich not only in terms of referential focus, or explicit topics, but also in terms of its underlying messages. Thus by partaking in deliberations on the cultural limits of humor (what can be presented in laughable matter by whom and to whom), as in extract 15, children are becoming partners in the negotiation of cultural identities within the family.

The complex interaction among children's mode of participation, thematic frame, and power sheds an interesting light on the observed cross-cultural differences. The results showed a more equal distribution of topical actions between children and adults in American than Israeli families. This means that American children have a higher overall level of topical contribution and general participation in family discourse than do Israeli children. But American children tend to participate by displaying their own topics and by responding to adult elicitation, whereas Israeli children's participation is more equally divided between display, elicitation, and collaboration with adult topics (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992). This also means that American children are incorporated in the circle of conversation mainly in the second frame of immediate family concerns, whereas Israeli children take a greater part in the third frame of nonimmediate topics. As within the second frame, discourse management at all levels remains basically a matter of adult control, paradoxically, comparing the two groups, we see that the more talkative[8] and topically active American children seem to have less access to adult discourse and are treated more in a nonegalitarian manner than the less active Israeli children. Socialization gains also differ: Actual participation in child-centered topics allows for scaffolded practice in the construction of dialogic and monologic discourse (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992), whereas exposure and contribution to adult-centered topics promote understanding of the adult world.

CONCLUSION

Dinners in Jewish middle-class families constitute a socioculturally unique speech event. Despite many differences in style, American and

Israeli families are alike in the ways they construe family dinners. They are a speech event that embody built-in tensions between activity goals and talk goals, sociable talk and socializing talk. As a result, they allow for the simultaneous co-existence of different planes of discourse, resolving the tensions partially by allowing for constant shifts among the instrumental, the family-focused, and the world-focused discourse frames. These frames in turn evoke different genres: the highly contextualized, regulatory discourse of the instrumental task of having dinner; the spatiotemporally here-and-now anchored discourse of immediate family concerns, which assigns topical relevance by family membership and is highly sensitive to socializing goals; and finally, the discourse of nonimmediate topics that unfolds in the most sociable, ordinary conversation-like manner, accepting with equal respect contributions from all participants, regardless of role in the family.

In theory, with some qualifications parents believe in egalitarian talking rights for all participants. Yet in practice both talk and agenda setting (topical actions) are not equally distributed, favoring adults over children, Israeli women over men and American men over women, and cross-culturally, Israeli observers over their American counterparts. But these unequal distributions do not index power in a simple way. The meanings associated with talk depend on a complex relation among perceptions of the situation, level of topical contribution, frame and mode of participation. For the differences between children and adults, notions of power are subject to variation by frame and mode of participation: Whereas for children acting as topic initiators in the display mode, power is directly associated with quantity of talk, in responding to adult elicitation the meaning of the talk becomes ambivalent, as it is informativeness about one's own life that is at issue, not just quantity. Both modes are manifest within the frame of immediate family concerns, a frame in which ultimate control over discourse management remains the prerogative of adults. Children gain equal rights in the frame of nonimmediate concerns, within which their contributions are accepted on a par with those of adults. As noted, although American children take a more active part in the discourse than Israeli children, their activity tends to be confined to the frame of immediate family concerns, where adults are in control, and hence paradoxically it is the less active Israeli children, with equal participation in both frames, who gain an easier access to adult discourse worlds.

Observing children of various ages participating in dinner talk in

different cultural groups is informative on several accounts. In the terms used by Ochs (1986), the focus on dinners allows us to look at both aspects of language socialization: socialization through language and socialization to use language. Construing dinner as an intergenerational social event, children's participation is constrained not only by their communicative disadvantage, but also by the power asymmetries built into the situation. On the first account, dinner talk is hence an arena for the negotiation of social power, for developing the social skills necessary to interact in multiparty situations where both age discrepancies and intimacy matter. On the second account, because dinners expose children to the reception of and practice in a wide range of culturally molded speech genres (e.g., directives, stories, explanations) it is conducive to the development of both monologic and dialogic discourse skills. On a third account, we need to consider the role of culture: As touched upon but certainly in need of further elaboration, family dinners also revealed culturally sensitive events, through which children acquire culturally embedded ways of speaking. It is in this triple function that middle-class family dinner talk can be seen as providing children with repeated rites of passage to adult discourses.

NOTES

1 For more information on the project see Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1989), Blum-Kulka (1990), Blum-Kulka and Katriel (1991), Blum-Kulka and Snow (1992), Blum-Kulka (1993).

2 The data were originally transcribed following the CHILDES system (McWhinney, 1991) and then adjusted to accommodate *ROLSI* readers, adopting a weak version of the Jefferson system. The following conventions from the original transcripts were retained: In example headers, families are identified by group (AM1 = American Family 1); participants are identified by role (for adults) and by name (for children). Age (rounded in years) and sex of the child follow in that order: Andrew, 8m = Andrew, aged 8 years, male. Three-letter headers are used to identify the speaker (e.g., MOT = Mother, FAT = Father, INT = Interviewer, JEN = Jennifer). The text is segmented and numbered by turns, which are the relevant units here.

3 For discussion of topic continuity (local coherence), see Keenan and Schieffelin (1976), Reichman (1978), Brown and Yule (1983).

4 For discussion of participation structures (also called "participant frameworks") see Goffman (1981, pp. 124–160), C. Goodwin (1981), Levinson (1987), Erickson (1988) and M. H. Goodwin (1990).

5 There are some findings to suggest that in American working-class families children's participation at family dinners (at least in storytelling) actually diminishes with age, whereas in both Israeli and American middle-class families it increases with age (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992).

6 Because the focus here is on children's participation, two findings are not discussed any further: the effects of gender and of being an "outsider." Briefly, I attribute the gender differences in the two cultural groups to a difference in the perception of the speech event, which foregrounds women in the less formal, private-like discourse world of the Israeli families, and foregrounds men in the more formal somewhat public-like discourse world of the American families. For observers, the contrasts between cultures seem to center on the negotiation of intimacy: Israeli observers are mutually perceived as potential friends, whereas American observers are mutually perceived as semiofficial guests.

7 Proportions of talk in the different frames were calculated by assigning each segment between two topical actions (including here instrumental dinner talk) to one of three categories: instrumental, immediate family concerns, or nonimmediate.

8 "Talkativeness" was measured by calculating (excluding instrumental dinner talk) the mean number of topical utterances for each role constellation. The results corroborate the trends depicted for topical actions: For Americans, the mean number of utterances for adults is 71, versus 54 for children; for native Israelis, 63 for adults versus 29 for children; for American-Israelis, 55 for adults and 36 for children.

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