

Suuga teeb suure linna,
käega ei kärbsepesagi*

HOW MUCH TALK IS EXPECTED FROM ESTONIAN CHILDREN?

Tiia Tulviste

Department of Psychology, University of Tartu

Abstract. Initial results from the comparative research on maternal regulatory speech used toward 2-year-old children in Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997) showed that Estonian mothers expected less talk from their children and tended to control their behaviour more than mothers from other countries. The present paper reports investigations aimed to find out whether Estonian mothers of older children (4 yr., 6 yr. olds, and teenagers) have a similar pattern of regulatory speech. Discussion focuses on the following questions: To what degree is the style of maternal regulatory speech determined by the peculiarities of language and/or culture; and to what degree does maternal regulatory speech style influence a child's language development, and cognitive/social development?

1. Introduction

Since the initial study by McDonald and Pien (1982), a number of studies have documented that English-speaking mothers differ in their intention to control or to converse with their children. I.e., some mothers are more concerned with directing their children's behaviour, whereas others are more concerned with eliciting conversational participation. Several cross-cultural studies have reported cultural influences on the ways mothers talk with their children (Bornstein et al. 1991, Dunn and Brown 1991, Fernald and Morikawa 1993, Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). However, none of these studies has focused on a direct comparison of maternal

* An Estonian proverb literally translated "He promises to build a great city with his mouth, but can't even make a fly's nest with his hand". It means that talking about doing something and getting it done are two different things.

regulatory speech across different societies. In the first study on cross-national comparisons of maternal regulatory speech, Junefelt and Tulviste (1997) looked at Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. They demonstrated that the maternal regulatory speech directed toward two-year-olds in Estonia differed from maternal regulatory speech in Sweden and the U.S. The study was conducted in the following way: mothers' interactions with their children were videorecorded in their homes, and interactions were transcribed. All maternal regulative utterances were identified from the transcripts and analysed according to a category system developed by Junefelt and Tulviste (1997). By this system, regulative utterances are separated into three different groups depending on whether their aim is to regulate a) the child's attention, (e.g. "vaata siin on notsu moodi auk" ["look, here is a hole shaped like a pig"]); b) physical activity, (e.g. "pööra lehm jalgade peale" ["turn the cow on to its legs"]) or c) verbal activity, (e.g. "kes see on kes annab lapsel piima?" ["who is it who gives milk to a child?"]). Thus, a distinction was made between attentional and behavioural directives. In McDonald and Pien's (1982) study, utterances regulating attention and physical activity were coded under the same category of "directive behaviour" and opposed to conversation-eliciting utterances. In addition, Junefelt and Tulviste (1997) coded regulative utterances according to sentence type: imperatives, declaratives and questions. The system revealed that mothers in Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. already differed when children were two years old in regulatory language used by them toward children. It should be noted here that there were individual differences in the amount and type of maternal regulatory speech in each country. Nevertheless, Estonian mothers used regulative speech most frequently. This more direct style of speech used by Estonian mothers while talking with their children involved comparatively larger number of imperatives. Indeed, the preferred sentence type used by Estonian mothers for regulating their children's attention and physical activity was the imperative, whereas American and Swedish mothers favoured questions and declaratives. Moreover, there were also cultural differences in how frequently children's attention, physical activity and verbal activity were regulated. Although there were no significant differences in the frequency of regulating children's physical activity, regulation of attention and verbal activity differed significantly across cultures. Estonian mothers regulated their children's attention more frequently, especially during puzzle solving situations, but regulated their children's verbal activity less frequently than mothers in Sweden or in the U.S. In sum, this research revealed that mothers of 2-year-olds in different cultures could already be differentiated according to their intent to converse with children. Estonian mothers were more concerned with controlling their children's behaviour than with prompting their conversational participation (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997).

The current article describes four studies that aimed to investigate this finding further. **Study I** (Tulviste and Raudsepp 1997) aims to determine whether Estonian mothers of older children (4 yr and 6 yr olds) whose linguistic abilities

are higher have a similar pattern of regulatory speech, and how the maternal use of regulatory language to children of different ages varies with context: at meals and during puzzle solving. **Study II** (Tulviste 1996) compares regulatory language used by adolescents and their mothers in Estonia and the USA. **Study III** analyses verbal comments made by mothers while interacting with 2 yr, 4 yr and 6 yr olds and adolescents about children's behaviour and talk to explore whether the socialisation of standards of behaviour is more valued in Estonia than standards of language use. **Study IV** deals with the question of whether the amount and style of maternal regulatory speech are related to differences in collectivistic tendencies and parental values (attitudes toward conformity, obedience, talkativeness, etc.) among mothers.

2. How much talk is expected from Estonian children of different ages?

It is widely recognised that serious socialisation pressure starts in the second year of life (Maccoby and Martin 1983). Our results (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997) showed that already the 2-year-old children in Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. received a different amount and type of regulatory speech. They made clear that Estonian 2-year-olds are encouraged to talk less than 2-year-olds in Sweden or the U.S. (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997). But how much talk is expected from older Estonian children? How universal is the finding that the goal of socialisation in Estonia, as opposed to other countries, is less verbalisation on the part of children? To answer that question, we investigated the regulatory speech used by Estonian mothers toward 4- and 6-year-olds, and toward teenagers.

Maternal speech to children has been shown to be shaped by the child's linguistic and cognitive abilities. Previous research has shown that mothers use more direct language when talking with small children. As children get older, mothers start to use less regulatory speech and begin to phrase directives more indirectly (Bellinger 1979, Schneiderman 1983). These findings led us to predict that the frequency with which mothers elicit talk from their children is related to the child's linguistic abilities. In Study I (Tulviste and Raudsepp 1997) we hypothesised that because 4- and 6-year-old children's linguistic and cognitive abilities are higher, their mothers would encourage them to talk more, provide less regulatory utterances, and direct the child's behaviour less frequently. We also expected that mothers of older children would use less direct regulatory language: fewer imperatives but more declaratives and questions than mothers of 2-year-olds.

The results of Study I indicated, as expected, that there was a marked decrease from 2 year-olds to 4-year-olds and from 4-year-olds to 6-year-olds as for the amount of regulatory language used by their mothers. Specifically, the frequency of regulating children's attention and behaviour decreased with age. However, there was no increase in the frequency of regulating children's verbal activity.

Mothers of 4-year-olds and 6-year-olds did not differ from mothers of 2-year-olds' with respect to the frequency of prompting children's conversational participation. Thus, the results did not support the hypothesis that the frequency of regulating children's verbal activity is connected with their linguistic abilities. Although there were significant age differences in children's linguistic abilities (mean length of utterances and the longest utterance), little talk was expected from 4- and 6-year-old children. In sum, mothers of children of all ages were more concerned with directing their children's behaviour than with eliciting conversation from them. This did not change as children's language abilities increased. Similarly, there was a decrease in the use of imperatives, but no increase in the use of declaratives or questions. In addition, mothers of all age groups preferred to use imperatives. Consequently, Estonian mothers continued to employ direct regulatory speech toward their children (Tulviste and Raudsepp 1997).

Do these patterns reflect the overall interaction between mothers and their teenagers? How much talk is expected from teenagers? To answer this question, we analysed in Study II mothers' interactions with adolescents at mealtimes (Tulviste 1996). In the teenagers study, audio-recorded mealtime conversations were used in addition to videorecorded dinner conversations, because it is likely that adolescents are more aware of being observed and may fall shy and silent while being videorecorded. Indeed, this characteristic is the reason why so little data about the ways mothers communicate with adolescents has been collected in naturalistic settings in previous research. The comparison of regulative speech used by mothers of teenagers with speech used by mothers of 2- to 6-year-old children, indicated changes in maternal conversational intentions. Unlike Estonian mothers of younger children, mothers of teenagers in Estonia tended to be more concerned with eliciting talk from their children than with controlling their behaviour. However, the tendency of Estonian mothers to attach attention to the control of behaviour was evident when we compared Estonian maternal speech to teenagers with maternal speech to adolescents in the U.S. This comparative study demonstrated that the behavioural control was more prominent and eliciting conversation was less prominent in Estonia than it was in the USA (Tulviste 1996).

3. How much talk is expected from Estonian children in different contexts?

It is commonly believed that the amount of talk expected from children varies across different contexts (Sigel and McGillicuddy-DeLisi 1984, Sorsby and Martlew 1991, Tulviste 1995). In our studies mother-child interactions were videorecorded in two activity settings: during puzzle solving and at mealtimes. The puzzle solving situation was chosen because most of the studies on maternal regulation have used some joint problem solving situation. Mealtime was chosen because less research has been done in everyday activities, like eating. Maternal

regulations could differ across cognitively based tasks such as puzzle solving and home-based tasks such as eating a meal. Thus, we expected to find situational differences in maternal regulation of attention, physical activity and verbal activity across the two contexts. We expected that mothers would prompt children's conversational participation more frequently at meals than during puzzle solving because many researchers hold that mealtime is the best context for investigating conversations as people talk a lot at the dinner table. Further, some studies have found that the mother and child are able to engage in more complex linguistic behaviour in highly routine situations (see Sorsby and Martlew 1991). Our results for Estonian mothers' interactions with 2- to 6-year-old children did not confirm the hypothesis. Although no meals were eaten in absolute silence, mothers were not more eager to converse during meals than during puzzle solving. In addition, the stricture that one should not talk while eating was mentioned several times both by mothers and children. For example, a mother told her 2-year-old boy "Söögi aeg on ju ja sina siin räägid" ["It is mealtime, and you are still talking"] and a 4-year-old girl said to her mother: "Söö parem. Ära jutusta laua ääres" ["You better eat. Don't talk at the table"]. Our material shows that meals might not be the best situation for studying conversations in all societies, because in some cultures talking at meals is frowned upon. Estonian mothers also differed from American mothers in the puzzle solving situation (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997). Mothers in Estonia did not want their children to talk a lot while solving puzzles. Thus, overall, American mothers encouraged their 2-year-old children to talk while they ate or solved puzzles. They did not demand that their children concentrate only on the main activity. To some extent, it may be connected with the ideals of freedom of choice and personal independence typical of American culture (see Bellah et al. 1986). Estonian mothers, on the contrary, wanted their children to concentrate only on the ongoing activity and not do anything else simultaneously, even talk. The Estonian mothers' strategy of encouraging their children to be attentive and to concentrate on the ongoing activity made Estonian children more successful while solving the puzzle task than American children, whose mothers stressed freedom of choice (see Junefelt and Tulviste 1997). At the same time, the strategy used by Estonian mothers may not be the best for children's language development.

One of the aims of Study I was to see how the regulatory speech toward children of different ages varied with activity settings. Are situational differences the same in all age groups? Our data indicated that this is not the case. We found situational differences in maternal regulatory speech toward 2-year-olds and 6-year-olds, but not toward 4-year-old children. These situational differences appeared in the frequency of regulation of physical activity and attention, but there were no age and situational differences in the frequency of regulating children's verbal activity. To sum up, the common feature of maternal regulatory speech towards all three age groups in both contexts was that little talk was expected from children.

4. Comparison of mothers' and children's regulatory speech

A crucial part of socialisation is children's acquisition of culture-specific patterns of communication. The literature suggests that children's use of language is similar to that of their mothers, including styles of verbal control (Putallaz 1987). Of special interest, in this regard, is the comparison of regulatory speech used by mothers towards teenagers with that used by teenagers themselves, because according to the literature, the major growth in pragmatic competence occurs during pre-adolescence. Therefore, teenagers' language use can, among other things, show how much they have internalised their parents' pragmatic norms. Based on previous work, we predicted in Study II that there would be similarities between mothers' and teenagers' use of regulatory language, both in Estonia and the U.S. The results supported the hypothesis. Both mothers and adolescents in Estonia used regulative speech more frequently than mothers and adolescents in the U.S. Both mothers and teenagers in America were less concerned with controlling each other's behaviour and more concerned with prompting conversational participation than Estonian mothers and teenagers. In sum, consistent with expectations, the pattern of regulatory speech of teenagers was similar to that of their mothers in both Estonia and the U.S. (Tulviste 1996).

5. Why are there differences in maternal regulatory language?

The direct style of maternal regulatory speech in Estonia can be explained by many different factors. First, it may depend on the language. What peculiarities of **the Estonian language** might determine the direct style of regulatory speech? In the Estonian language many grammatical forms tend to be carried in suffixes, which make it possible to express a meaning in fewer words than in Swedish or English. Junefelt and Tulviste (1992) compared an Estonian written text (part of "Inimese vari" written by Fr. Tuglas) with its Swedish and English translations and found that there were 1.5 times more words in the English translation, and 1.2 more words in the Swedish translation than in the original Estonian text. This result raises the question whether this difference should be considered in comparative assessments of cultural differences in mother-child interactions. For example, the amount that mothers and two-year-old children themselves talked was shown to be lowest in Estonia (Junefelt and Tulviste 1992) when words per minute was the measure. The comparison of written languages might suggest that only indices should be used to compare the amount of talk in Estonian, Swedish and American mother-child interaction. However, this solution is inadequate, because it has been apparent for some time that maternal speech to the child is distinctively different from the speech to other adults, and it is not possible to analyse spoken language by categories and units appropriate to the written language.

However, other research has suggested that not only language, but other cultural differences might determine the differences in the amount and type of maternal regulatory language. There are differences in maternal regulatory speech in English-speaking countries. Specifically, mothers from the USA used more indirect ways for regulating their children (Bellinger 1979) than British mothers (Halle and Shatz 1994).

What idiosyncracies of **Estonian culture** might determine the more frequently used direct type of regulatory speech? In the literature, the amount and type of speech is related chiefly to parental **socio-economic class**, as measured by occupational prestige, education and household income. Many studies converge in finding that working-class mothers tend to talk less with their children and to be more directive than middle-class mothers who provide more conversation-eliciting utterances (Bernstein 1965, Heath 1989, Hoff-Ginsberg 1991). Of course, social class measures may not indicate exactly the same thing in Estonia, Sweden and the U.S. It is difficult to separate social classes in Estonia on the same basis as in other countries, because the ethnically Estonian part of the population is more homogeneous in educational level than in most countries. Nevertheless, the cultural differences found by Junefelt and Tulviste (1997) and Tulviste (1996) cannot be ascribed to large socio-economic and educational differences, because the sample was more homogeneous: all mothers participating in the comparative study had at least college education and therefore fulfilled the criterion of belonging to the middle class. Consequently, the high frequency of regulatory speech in Estonian mothers' talk toward children, the large amount of imperatives in it, and the fact that they are more interested in the control of children's behaviour than in prompting conversational participation contradicted the view which considers it typical of working class mothers' verbal behaviour (Bernstein 1965).

What are the idiosyncracies of Estonian culture that might determine mothers' desire to control the behaviour of their children but not to converse with them as much? One hypothesis derived in the literature is that these cultural differences reflect differences in **collectivistic/individualist tendencies**. According to this view in the literature, parenting differs between individualist and collectivist countries. Parents in collectivist cultures tend to emphasize obedient, reliable, and proper behavior in children, whereas parents in individualist cultures tend to emphasize self-reliant, independent, and creative behavior (Kohn 1987; Triandis 1989). These differences in individualistic/collectivistic tendencies might be reflected in the type of regulatory speech used by mothers so that less individualistically oriented mothers fall below the more individualistically oriented mothers in their emphasis on the child's own intention and possibilities for action. Americans are often characterised as the most individualistic people (Bellah et al. 1986; Triandis 1993). Sweden has been found to be moderately individualistic (Daun 1991). Can the prevalence of utterances aimed to control the child's behaviour in maternal regulatory speech in Estonia be explained by the

mothers' collectivistic orientation? The only problem with this argument is that it is not clear that Estonians are collectivistic. Although Estonia has been labelled as a collectivist country by Triandis (1993), recent results (Realo et al. in press) contradict this view. However, the hypothesis that differences in collectivistic tendencies among mothers can be related to the amount and type of regulatory language they use toward their children can be tested on the individual level. According to this hypothesis, mothers with stronger collectivistic tendencies should be more directive: they should use more regulatory speech, should include more imperatives, and should be more concerned with the control of children's behaviour than less collectivistic mothers. To test this hypothesis, in Study III we asked mothers of 6-year-olds to complete the ESTCOL Scale (Realo et al. in press). The results indicated that the answers to the ESTCOL Scale were not significantly correlated with the frequency of different types of regulative utterances by mothers.

6. A "doer" or a conversational partner?

Is the aim of socialisation in Estonia really to socialise the child to be a "doer" rather than an active conversational partner? Does it mean that Estonian mothers value the child's good conversational skills less than obedient and "proper" behaviour? Which values do mothers hold highest? To answer this question, in Study III mothers of 6-year-olds were given in Study III questions concerning **parental values** (maternal attitudes towards conformity, obedience, talkativeness, etc.). Analyses of the mothers' answers showed that children's communicative skills were highly evaluated by all mothers. Mothers who were more concerned with controlling children's behaviour in their regulating utterances did not hold the child's obedient and "proper" behaviour higher than their communicative skills. However, mothers' evaluations of parental values were related to the answers they gave to the ESTCOL questionnaire. Correlation analyses showed that both collectivism toward family and collectivism toward peers were significantly correlated with the values of obedient and "proper" behaviour. On the other hand, collectivism toward society was related to valuing children's communicative skills. The general collectivism score was significantly positively correlated with both communicative skills and obedient and "proper" behaviour. It can be speculated that mothers with higher collectivistic tendencies place higher demands on their children than other mothers. They want their children to be perfect in everything, both in conversational skills and in behaviour. However, it should be noted here, that the small number of subjects (20 mothers of 6-year-old children) who answered to both the parental attitude questionnaire and the collectivism scale means that the results of Study III should be treated as pilot data that can identify suitable target for more systematic study with larger samples.

Thus, the answers to the parental beliefs questionnaire did not indicate that Estonian mothers value obedient and "proper" behaviour more than conversational skills. However, our findings on maternal regulatory speech showed that mothers attached less attention to socialising their children into being active conversational partners than mothers in Sweden and the US. This tendency was evident not only in the amount and type of maternal regulatory speech, but also in **verbal comments** made at the dinner table. In Study IV we analysed comments made about each other's behaviour and talk by mothers and children to explore whether appropriate behaviour was more valued than following conversational rules. The coding system we used was described by Blum-Kulka (1990). All verbal comments were identified and distinguished into comments on a) behaviour ("sit properly, darling, you are spilling"), b) talk regulation ("listen, listen, listen"), c) violation of Grice's (1975) maxims of quality ("that's more accurate"), quantity ("you said that already"), relevance ("you are starting it again"), and manner ("watch how you talk, you are so rude"), and d) language ("what does it mean – antiseptic?"). The results were similar to those we obtained for maternal regulatory speech. Mothers directed more verbal comments toward younger children than toward older children. There was also the pattern of using comments on behaviour more frequently with younger children and comments on language use and language with older children. Mothers of 2- to 6-year-olds attached more attention to "proper" behaviour and less to following conversational maxims. According to our comparative study of adolescent-mother interaction in Estonia and the U.S. (Study II), "proper" ways of behaviour were less important for both mothers and adolescents than following conversational maxims. The total number of comments was significantly larger in Estonia than in the U.S. It might be that in a country like America, which stresses individual independence, it is not as typical to comment frequently on others' behaviour and language use as in other countries. The Estonian participants deemed conversational norms less important and "proper" behaviour more important than the American ones. It was true as much for mothers as for adolescents. The American mothers made fewer comments on language than Estonian mothers. Thus, analysis of verbal comments made at the dinner table showed that Estonians attached less attention to following conversational norms and more attention to "proper" behaviour than Americans (Tulviste 1996).

7. Potential consequences of differences in maternal regulatory speech

Of particular interest is the question of what consequences, if any, the direct type of regulatory speech used by Estonian mothers might have on child development? A number of studies have found that pre-schoolers whose parents are more controlling have lower achievement test scores, IQ scores and achievement motivation (see Beyer 1995). From the studies of parenting styles it

is known that too little control is also bad. Children whose parents control too little have been shown to have problems with self-control, self-regulation and self-confidence. As to language development, negative correlations between maternal directiveness and the rate of early vocabulary development has been documented (see Pine 1994). All these findings raise the question concerning the optimal level of parental control. Do Estonians control their children's behaviour too much? Do they encourage them to talk too little? Our data do not allow us to answer these questions. At the same time they speak in support of the view that cultural differences in how much and what kind of talk is expected from children exist (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). From our data it is clear that Estonians expect less verbalisation from their children than people in Sweden or the U.S.

Cultural differences in the amount and type of regulatory language may, of course, sometimes cause problems in intercultural communication. For example, Estonians may appear impolite or unfriendly (not wanting to talk) or maybe even stupid (not knowing what to say). Because speakers from other cultures often use less direct forms of speech to attain their goals, Estonians might seem also very rude.

The studies reported here only investigated the amount of talk expected from children. No attention was paid, for example, to elaboration of talk, sophistication of topics, or preference of decontextualized topics. Previous research has demonstrated that mothers who talk more have children whose vocabulary is bigger, which, in turn, is necessary for speech fluency. On the other hand, what we say is also important. The literature suggests that not only the amount of parental talk, but also the elaboration of talk (e.g. the preference for more decontextualized topics) influences child language development. Therefore, one of the tasks of future studies is to compare the sophistication of Estonian talk to that of people from other cultures. For example, one can compare semantic complexity by asking how many low-frequency words are used. It would also be interesting to compare vocabulary diversity, and to measure the extent to which topics are decontextualised. Finally, it is important to find out whether the rapid political, societal and economic changes in Estonia are changing the ways people talk. For example, there are programs on radio and TV where people are asked trivial questions about their name, occupation, etc., and even the most trivial answers get positively reinforced. Some of these programs are addressed to children. Some people have expressed their fear that the traditional balance of silence and speaking is in danger.

8. Conclusions

The article analyzes the amount and type of regulatory speech used by Estonian mothers while interacting with their children. Of specific interest was how much talk was expected from Estonian children, since an earlier study

revealed that Estonian mothers of 2-year-olds prompted children's conversational participation less than mothers from Sweden or America. Findings from similar studies of mothers' interaction with older children supported this conclusion. We found several situational and age differences in the type and amount of maternal regulatory speech but did not find differences in the elicitation of children's conversational participation. From our research it is clear that Estonian mothers expect less verbalisation from their children than in Sweden or America.

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Address:

Tiia Tulviste
 Department of Psychology
 University of Tartu
 Tiigi 78-341, EE2400 Tartu, Estonia

Phone: (372) (7) 430063

E-mail: tiiat@psych.ut.ee

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