

## MOTHERS' CONVERSATIONAL STYLE IN A CHANGING DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

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**Abstract.** The societal changes in Estonia have altered the beliefs and values related to childrearing in the direction of stressing more autonomy and self-direction in children. This study addresses the question if and to what extent the amount of talk and communicative intents of Estonian mothers have changed over time period of approximately 25 years. With this aim, we compared mothers' interactions with two-year-old children in years 1992, 2000, and 2017. The results show that mothers have become less directive during puzzle solving but not at meals. Mothers' interaction with children has not changed in respect of the amount of talk produced by mothers and children. Moreover, the study demonstrated that mothers' conversational style, as well as changes in it over time, depends largely on interactional context.

**Keywords:** mother-child interaction, the amount of speech, mothers' conversational intents, cultural change, Estonian language

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### 1. Introduction

The study explores the extent to which societal change in Estonia that is evident in changing childrearing goals and values is reflected in the patterns of mothers' interactions with two-year-olds. Children acquire language through participating in conversational exchanges (Hoff 2006, Snow and Ferguson 1977). Because of that the speech addressed to children has received much research attention. Many studies support the notion that the amount of speech directed toward children (talkativeness) is a source of wide variability in children's early language skills (Hart and Risley 1995, Huttenlocher et al. 1991, Rowe 2012). Others have demonstrated that mothers' conversational style influences children's language development (Halle and Shatz 1994, Hoff-Ginsberg 1991, Tulviste 2004). For instance, two conversational styles

(conversation-eliciting vs. behavior directive) have been distinguished based on mothers' communicative intents (e.g. Hoff-Ginsberg 1991, Tulviste 2004). Mothers' provision of conversation-eliciting utterances rather than behavioral directives to children is theorized to facilitate language development (e.g. Chapman 2000, Hart and Risley 1995, Masur, Flynn, and Eichorst 2005, Vibbert and Bornstein 1989). The latter is due to mothers encouraging children's involvement in conversational interactions. Mothers' talkativeness and conversational style in turn are associated with the family SES. A frequent use of directives has reported to be a characteristic of low-SES families (e.g. Fernald et al. 2013, Hart and Risley 1995, Heath 1983, Hoff, Laursen, and Tardif 2002, Hoff 2006).

At the same time, there is a large cultural variation both in the extent and ways parents talk with their children (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Middle-class mothers with Euro-American background are much more talkative than the others (Bornstein, Tal and Tamis-LeMonda 1991, Heath 1983). Swedish middle-class mothers talk with their children as much as the USA mothers, whereas Estonian mothers talk significantly less than the others and are thus similar to the so-called silent Finns in this respect (Tulviste et al. 2003). Few studies to date have focused on cultural comparison of mothers' communicative intents and its link with language use and development in children (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997, Tulviste 2004). A comparative study indicated that Estonian middle-class mothers and their 2-year-old children talked less than mothers and children from the USA and Sweden, showing Estonian mothers to be highly directive and foremost concerned with controlling children's attention and behavior (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997).

There is considerable evidence that culture-specific patterns of mother-child interactions stem from cultural differences in socialization goals and values that, in turn, reflect the dominating cultural orientation in the society (Demuth 2015, Tulviste et al. 2016, Zhou et al. 2018). The prior study compared mother's everyday conversations with two-year-olds (Junefelt and Tulviste 1997) in the U.S. and Sweden – in the countries that are stereotypically individualistic (Budwig 2000, Greenfield et al. 2003, Keller 2007) and in Estonia. It was conducted in 1992, a year after the Soviet Union with its collectivistic ideology collapsed, and Estonia regained its independence. In the beginning of the 1990s, Estonian parents stressed conformity-related childrearing values and beliefs (see Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer 2012).

Today a quarter century has passed since Estonia regained its independence. Although the Estonian society has stabilized after the economic and political transformation in the 1990s, several changes have also taken place in this century. In 2004, Estonia became a member of the EU and NATO. Currently, educational reforms toward a child-centered democratic education are going on with the aim to rid schools from authoritarian teaching methods and to bring democratic relationships into classrooms. Considerable social changes are reflected in the shift in childrearing values and beliefs towards more autonomy and self-direction being expected from Estonian children (Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer 2012). Specifically, autonomy, self-direction, and self-enhancement are more valued by parents nowadays than before and are even as highly emphasized as by parents from Finland, Sweden, and

the USA (Tulviste and Ahtonen 2007, Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer 2012). At the same time, values related to autonomy have not replaced Estonian parents' social conformity-related childrearing values. The latter continue to be of high importance as well (Tulviste, Mizera and De Geer 2012). Thus, parenting in Estonian families today can be described as following the cultural model of autonomous relatedness proposed by Kagitcibasi (2005), as mothers and fathers tend to stress autonomy-related values together with those of relatedness that were the only important ones before. The co-existence of different types of values in Estonians' socialization value system is found also in the World Value survey (Inglehart et al. 2014). For instance, in 2006, 69% of respondents with university education chose self-expression (in Sweden 42%) and 53.1% chose conformity among the qualities that they consider especially important to promote in children at home. In addition, some autonomy-related qualities expected in children, such as imagination, have become more important in 2011 than they were in 1996 (Inglehart et al. 2014). However, the finding that younger people tend to consider autonomy-related qualities in children more important and those of conformity less important likely reflects a shift in socialization values held by Estonians (Inglehart et al. 2014, Tulviste and Konstabel 2017).

The current study addressed the question to what extent are societal changes that have brought with them increased appreciation of children's autonomy and self-expression mirrored in the ways mothers talk with their children. The conversational pattern found to be typical of Estonian mothers – to talk little, expect less conversational participation from children, and to be directive – is likely to correspond to the socialization model of relatedness, and associated with hierarchical parent-child relation and socialization of conformity (Keller and Otto 2011). Such control-focused strategies of socialization teach children rather to understand requests and commands (e.g. be obedient) and be silent than to express their thoughts (Zhou et al. 2018). High control of children's behavior through frequent attentional and behavioral directives contrasts with autonomy socialization because it does not grant much self-directed activities to the child, and may lead to children's passivity and lessened initiative and engagement in interactions. A finding that Estonian four-year-old children were not as active conversational partners as, for instance, Swedish children, and they talked when asked by their mothers, may be seen as a consequence of directive conversational style of their mothers (Tulviste et al. 2016). Mothers' intent to engage children in conversations by frequent use of conversation-eliciting utterances, in contrast, seems to be related to their underlying socialization model of autonomy where autonomous behavior and self-expression are expected from children (Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff 2000, Kağıtçıbaşı 2005, Zhou et al. 2018). In this case, children are brought up to be assertive and self-confident, expressing their individual uniqueness and agency, performing self-selected activities, and expressing their thoughts and wishes. Anyway, it seems reasonable to expect that Estonian mothers today, when autonomy has entered into parents' childrearing goals and values, are more concerned with prompting children's conversational participation and less concerned with controlling children's attention and behavior than they were

over approximately 25 years ago. With the aim to test this prediction, we compared mothers' interaction with two-year-old children at meals and during puzzle solving videotaped in years 1992 (Tulviste and Raudsepp 1997), 2000 (Tulviste 2003), and 2017. We also looked at how mothers' speech with toddlers differed at meals and puzzle solving – in contexts frequently utilized in child language research. We focused on the amount of talk and mothers' communicative intents to direct the child behavior and attention vs. engage children into conversation, and examined the link between mothers' conversational pattern and the amount of words produced by children (talkativeness).

We expected that Estonian mothers have become over time more talkative and intend to elicit more talk from children. Based on the theory and prior research, we expected mothers' talkativeness and the frequent use of conversation-eliciting utterances to be positively, and the frequent use of attentional and behavioral directives to be negatively related to the amount of speech produced by children.

## 2. Method, participants and procedure

In 1992, ten (50% girls), in 2000 thirty (56% girls), and in 2017 thirty six (54% girls) 2-year-old children ( $M = 23.97$  months;  $SD = 1.52$ ) and their mothers participated. In 1992 55%, in 2000 55%, and in 2017 54% of mothers had graduated university. Other mothers had high-school education. All participants spoke Estonian as their native language.

Mother-child dyads were videotaped at their homes in two interaction contexts. The whole mealtime was recorded. Each time the same jigsaw puzzle of an animal farm was used in the puzzle task, and the recordings lasted until the puzzle was solved.

The category system for studying the communicative intents was based on the systems developed by McDonald and Pien (1982), and Hoff-Ginsberg (1991). In transcripts the mothers' utterances that intended to control the child's behavior, direct his/her attention, and converse with the child were identified and coded according to their communicative intention into following categories:

1. *Behavioral directives*: utterances that involved commands or permission, requests or encouragement of desirable action, or prevention of the child from acting („Eat properly!“);
2. *Attentional directives*: utterances used to attract, direct, or redirect attention („Look at the shapes!“);
3. *Conversation-eliciting utterances*: utterances that attempted to elicit a verbal response from the child („What's the cow say?“).

All transcriptions were coded by two independent judges with more than 94% agreement in all protocols. Disagreements were resolved through discussion, scrutinizing the video recordings.

### 3. Results

Table 1 presents the mothers' and children's amount of talk, and the frequency of mothers' attentional and behavioral directives and conversation-eliciting utterances at meals and puzzle solving in 1992, 2000, and 2017. To measure the amount of talk and communicative intents frequencies per minute, instead of the total number, were used in order to exclude the influence of the duration of the recorded interactions. Analyses were conducted using a Setting 2 (mealtime versus puzzle solving) X Time 3 (Time 1: year 1992 vs. Time 2: 2000 vs. Time 3: 2017) ANOVAs. Analyses observed no effect of gender or maternal education (divided into 2: high school or university) on any conversational measures.

#### *The amount of talk*

A Setting (2) x Time (3) ANOVA showed that there was a significant effect of Time,  $F(2,145) = 6.88, p < .01, \eta^2 = .09$ , and Setting,  $F(1, 145) = 36.14, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .20$ , and Time x Setting interaction,  $F(2,145) = 3.43, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$ , on *mothers' words per minute*. Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that mothers talked less at meals than during the puzzle solving. No Time differences emerged at meals, but mothers spoke during puzzle solving significantly less at Time 3 than at Time 2.

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations of conversational measures per minute for mothers and children**

	1992		2000		2017	
	Mealtime <i>M(SD)</i>	Puzzle <i>M(SD)</i>	Mealtime <i>M(SD)</i>	Puzzle <i>M(SD)</i>	Mealtime <i>M(SD)</i>	Puzzle <i>M(SD)</i>
<i>Mother</i>						
Words	22.43 (7.40)	70.71 (22.39)	46.82 (33.10)	77.98 <sup>3</sup> (33.06)	37.86 (12.51)	52.42 <sup>2</sup> (32.46)
Attentional directives	0.25 (0.16)	3.59 <sup>2,3</sup> (1.40)	0.42 (0.47)	1.50 <sup>1</sup> (1.23)	0.55 (0.56)	1.54 <sup>1</sup> (1.15)
Behavioral directives	2.10 (0.54)	7.92 <sup>2,3</sup> (2.92)	2.32 (1.18)	2.62 <sup>1</sup> (1.63)	2.30 (1.28)	2.68 <sup>1</sup> (1.85)
Conversation- eliciting	3.08 (1.79)	2.84 <sup>2</sup> (1.90)	2.19 (2.32)	5.96 <sup>1,3</sup> (2.50)	2.99 (1.56)	2.94 <sup>2</sup> (1.83)
<i>Child</i>						
Words	5.04 (4.33)	10.24 (5.63)	8.73 (8.12)	14.73 <sup>3</sup> (8.95)	7.48 (3.15)	9.41 <sup>2</sup> (6.37)

*Note.* Superscripts show significant differences between the ratings given at three Times during puzzle solving according to the Tukey HSD test at  $p < 0.05$ . Times are marked as follows: 1=1992; 2=2000; 3=2017.

The number of *children's words per minute* was higher during puzzle solving than during mealtime,  $F(1,145) = 12.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$ . The number of words per minute was significantly lower at Time 1 than at Time 2 and Time 3,  $F(2, 145) = 5.02, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$ . There was no Setting x Time interaction, and no differences over the years in the number of children's words per minute at meals. During puzzle solving, children talked significantly more at Time 2 than at Time 3.

#### *Mothers' conversational intents*

A Setting (2) x Time (3) ANOVA showed that there was a significant effect of Time,  $F(2,145) = 21.7, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .23$ , and Setting,  $F(1, 145) = 51.26, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .26$ , on the frequency of mothers' *behavioral directives*, and an interaction effect of Time and Setting,  $F(2,145) = 25.38, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .26$ . Post-hoc tests revealed no differences over the years in the frequency of mothers' use of behavioral directives at meals, but children's behavior was significantly more frequently regulated at puzzle solving in Time 1 than in Times 2 and 3.

For the frequency of mothers' attentional directives, the results showed significant effects of Time,  $F(2,145) = 8.61, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ , Setting,  $F(1, 145) = 106.11, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .422$ , and an interaction effect of Time and Setting,  $F(2,145) = 16.04, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .18$ . There were no significant differences over the years in the frequency of attentional directives used at meals, but during puzzle solving attention was regulated significantly more frequently at Time 1 than at Times 2 and 3.

For the frequency of mothers' *conversation-eliciting utterances*, there was a significant effect of Time,  $F(2,145) = 5.41, p < .01, \eta^2 = .07$ , Setting,  $F(1, 145) = 9.14, p < .01, \eta^2 = .003$ , and an interaction effect of Time and Setting,  $F(2,145) = 16.38, p < .00001, \eta^2 = .18$ . No differences were observable at meals, but during puzzle solving mothers used significantly more conversation-eliciting utterances at Time 2 than at Times 1 and 3.

#### *Relationships between conversational measures*

Table 2 reports that mothers' attentional and behavioral directives were significantly and highly intercorrelated ( $p < .001$ ). Mothers' conversation-eliciting utterances were significantly correlated ( $p < .001$ ) with mothers' and children's words per minute.

Multiple linear regression analyses on children's words per minute indicated that approximately 26% of the variance could be accounted for by mothers' words per minute, and mothers' conversational intents. Mother's words per minute,  $\beta = 0.37$ , and the frequency of using conversation-eliciting utterances,  $\beta = -0.31$ , made independent predictions.

**Table 2. Intercorrelations between the conversational measures for mothers and children**

	Mother Words	Attention directives	Behavioral directives	Conversation-eliciting
Mother				
Attentional directives	0.63***			
Behavioral directives	0.37***	0.68***		
Conversation-eliciting	0.65***	0.16	-0.14	
Child				
Words	0.44***	0.18	0.11	0.41***

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

#### 4. Discussion

The study explored to what extent and how the patterns of Estonian mothers' speech used during conversations with children have changed over a time period of approximately 25 years. Results add to the literature by showing the relative consistency of mothers' culture-specific conversational style. Despite the extensive changes that have taken place in Estonian society, particularly in childrearing goals and values, only some changes were observable in mother-child everyday interactions. The study did not support the assumption that Estonian mothers and children have become more talkative, and that mothers expect more verbalization from children than before. The data on talkativeness suggest, on the contrary, that the amount of talk produced by mothers and children at meals and during puzzle solving remained similar when comparing the amount of talk produced at Times 1 and 3. The exception was the puzzle solving context in Time 2, when both mothers and children produced bigger amount of talk than during interactions at Time 3. In Time 2, mothers used the puzzle solving context for providing good opportunities for language learning, and asked children a lot of questions about animals depicted on the picture puzzle ("who is it now in here?", "what does the horse say?"). At the same time, mothers have become less directive over time, as there was a decrease in the use of both attentional and behavioral directives after the first measurement time. These differences can be explained by the changes in socialization beliefs and goals as parents in Estonia have started to emphasize the promotion of autonomy and self-direction in children (Tulviste, Mizera, and De Geer 2012).

In line with others (Hoff-Ginsberg 1991, Tulviste 2003, Yont, Snow, and Vernon-Feagans 2003), the results demonstrate that mothers' speech with their children

depends largely on interaction contexts. In all three points of time, both mothers and children were less talkative at meals, and mother's speech contained significantly less attentional and behavioral directives and conversation-eliciting utterances than during puzzle solving. Moreover, the pattern of Estonian mothers' speech during puzzle solving (but not at meals) had changed over time. In 1992, Estonian mothers put considerably more effort into directing children's attention and behavior than eliciting their conversational participation. This was, however, reversed in years 2000 and 2017.

The frequencies of mothers' production of conversation-eliciting utterances, on the one hand, and behavioral and attentional directives, on the other hand, were unrelated. The result supports the notion that the tendency to be concerned with controlling the child's behavior versus eliciting his/her conversational participation is distinct conversational styles. It has been theorized that mothers' talkativeness and more frequent use of conversation-eliciting utterances may facilitate children's language development through stimulating children's language production. The study found that the amount of maternal speech and maternal conversation-eliciting utterances were indeed significant predictors of how much children talked. Thus, the findings were in line with the previous findings (Hoff-Ginsberg 1991, Huttenlocher et al. 1991, Rowe 2012).

A major limitation of this research is the small sample size that decreases the more generalizing use of the findings. In spite of this limitation, the study reaches further from the previous studies by showing that the cultural practice of talking with children has changed over time in respect of the mothers' use of less directives, but the amount of speech produced by mothers and 2-year-olds during such conversations has remained rather stable. Moreover, the results demonstrated that maternal conversational style as well as the changes in it over time depended largely on interactional context.

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