

## IS PARENTAL LANGUAGE SEXUALLY DIFFERENTIATED?

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### *1. Posing the problem*

The question of whether characteristics of verbal communication between parents and children are determined by role and sex is basically concerned with role training, is just one aspect of the more general topic of the socialization of sex-specific behaviour.

Until the close of the first half of this century, little attention was paid to such questions in scientific research, less because scientists were not aware of differences between male and female behaviour than because these differences were attributed to biological and physiological factors and therefore held to be genetically rooted. Any research in this field was limited to description of the differences.

With the changes in male-female role distribution especially over the last decades, more detailed research into these questions has been carried out. Results indicate that differences observed in general and communicative behaviour between men and women are not congenital but due to the influence of their environment and to a complex of interacting socialization variables and processes. Today it is widely assumed that a process of 'sex-typing' occurs, whereby male and female behaviour patterns typical for and sanctioned by a given society are acquired. This so-called process is also subject to a number of conditioning factors, the most important of which are:

- the direct influence of specific socialization variables such as type of education, family situation, social class, school and work environment;
- the result of interactions between these socialization variables;
- the chain of action and reaction due to the fact that the socialized individual takes an active part in the socialization process.

The acquired characteristics of verbal behaviour thus fall into the category of sex-typical but not sex-specific behaviour, as they are not based on biological/physiological sexual differences between men and women. Degenhardt and Trautner (1979:11f.) argue for this reason that the term 'sex-specific' be used for features only found in persons of one sex, whereas 'sex-typical' should refer to those characteristics that may occur in people of either sex but may vary in frequency or intensity of occurrence. In other words, sex-specific and sex-typical features may be attributed to intrasexual and intersexual variation respectively.

Most research on the differences between male and female verbal behaviour has been concentrated on precisely defining women's speech. Adler (1978:23) indicated that male language was usually taken as a basic form and that female language was defined in terms of its deviation from this standard. Similar conclusions were drawn by Andresen et al. (1979:3). The main object of analysis in such empirical research has been conversation between men and women; only rarely has men's or women's language been studied in isolation (cf. Zimmermann and West 1975). Furthermore, nearly all studies have only a weak empirical data base.

Studies of sex-typical communicational differences agree in maintaining that not only the verbal, but also the non-verbal differences between male and female behaviour cannot be attributed to chance. This is hardly surprising in view of the extent to which language can be affected by the social environment. The results of such studies imply that most non-verbal differences may be attributed to conversational strategy, which in turn is largely due to the socialization process. It appears rather strange that most researchers have been content with establishing and classifying differences rather than using the sex-typical role and its defining characteristics as the basis for new hypotheses, especially since male and female stereotypes and role patterns are familiar from literature on psychology (see Maccoby and Jacklin 1974, Keller 1978, Degenhardt 1979).

Virtually the only available studies on parent-child language have been based on baby talk, the so-called simplified register used by mothers when talking to small children. Oksaar provides a detailed discussion of the topic, while remarking that father-child language has hardly been the subject of any scientific research so far (1977:126). One exception that may be mentioned here is Gleason (1975).

The object of this study is to examine the hypothesis that mothers and fathers use different speech forms in verbal communication with their children; furthermore, that these differences cannot be attributed to the male/female sex of the parent but arise primarily from his/her social role as father or mother, so that we must speak of verbal communication at the father-child *and* mother-child rather than at the parent-child level.

### 1.1 Data background

The data for this study were collected under largely standardized situational and social conditions. Each mother and father played a given sequence of games with their child, individually but in the same environment and with a time lag of three days. Interactions were recorded by means of a video camera through a one-way mirror and a microphone hidden in the room. Parents knew that the games were being recorded, but they were not aware that the object of the study was the verbal interaction. Recordings of the second of the three games played, a game with a wooden train set, furnished the data evaluated here.

Data from five sets of parents were recorded for this pilot study. The children were aged between 5.3 and 5.8 years. The choice of this particular age group was based on the following considerations: Analysis of the data aims to establish whether fathers and mothers speak in the same sex-typical way with their children as in other speech act situations, or whether the situation is altered by the fact that they are speaking with a child, owing to their specific role as parent. For this reason verbal communication with very small children was avoided, as possible parallels and comparisons with adult language are then considerably reduced. On the other hand, as it is communication with the child that is being studied, the children should be at a pre-school age so that they have not had overmuch communicational contact with the environment outside the family.

Furthermore, for the purposes of this kind of study other social variables should be kept as constant as possible in the case of all test persons: they should be from roughly the same social class, have the same kind of family-internal work organization, come from the same geographic region and should not represent a minority sector of the population. For this study, these considerations led to the choice of middle-class and upper lower-class families where the father was employed and the mother a housewife. All families came from the Kiel area. The choice of middle-class families was thought to ensure a certain degree of intact role division within the family; this can no longer be assumed today for the upper classes, which must be considered to be in a state of change in this respect.

Before the results of the study are discussed, some reference should be made to traditional role concepts for fathers and mothers and to known differences in verbal communication style between men and women stated in the literature (see Maccoby and Jacklin 1974, Key 1975, Adler 1978, Eakins and Eakins 1978, Gottschalch et al. 1978, Keller 1978, Degenhardt 1979).

The father is thought to be primarily concerned with his job and with material considerations, is prepared to take risks, is more severe, has less time for the child and is more interested in its material achievements, is concerned

with facts rather than intuition, is dominating, active, independent and tends to be aggressive.

The mother is more concerned with care and attention, more anxious for the child's safety, less severe or strict, spends more time with the child, is more expressive, more centred on the family, more submissive, is dependent, passive and intuitive. A rough generalization of men's language indicates the following main characteristics:

- men more often begin a conversation
- men make more utterances
- men's utterances are longer
- men make more assertions
- men state fewer restrictions
- men speak less carefully
- men determine the topic of conversation
- men speak more impersonally
- men's choice of words is less feeling
- men use more vulgar expressions
- men use less diminutives
- men use more imperatives.

The language used by women is roughly a mirror image of these characteristics.

### 1.2 *The questions at issue*

What kind of verbal interaction is to be expected between a father or mother with these characteristics and his/her child?

The various hypotheses to be tested were largely determined within the theoretical framework valid for the analysis of the language used between mothers/fathers and their children. The relevant framework is found in the linguistic subdiscipline of pragmatics, and can be further narrowed down to the speaker-orientated, verbal aspects of communication — the theory of speech acts. As the quality of the recordings did not permit analysis of supra-segmental features, this study concentrates on the following components of speech act theory:

- The utterance act: formal grammatical parameters and lexical items; mothers are expected to differentiate formally and grammatically better than fathers, whose vocabulary relative to the game is probably more differentiated.
- The propositional act: parameters characterizing reference: fathers are expected to become more involved in the game, mothers to direct their attention and speech more immediately to the child.

- The illocutionary act: parameters characterizing the method of carrying out verbal action: fathers are expected to ask more questions and to use more negatives and imperatives than mothers, who tend to make more statements.
- The perlocutionary act: parameters characterizing behavioural pattern control: mothers are expected to interfere less with the game, to give more expression to passive listening and to use fewer emotional expressions of active participation in the game.

The description and discussion of the results is organized according to these components of the speech act (for a detailed description see Pieper 1981).

## 2. *Results*

During the games with the toy train set 610 utterances were produced altogether by fathers and mothers as their contribution to verbal interaction with the children. Of these utterances, 42% were made by fathers and 58% by mothers. The total number of words uttered by the parents amounted to 5 880, of which 55% were uttered by fathers and 45% by mothers.

First conclusions that can be drawn from this information are that mothers' speech interaction with the child is significantly more frequent than fathers', but that mothers use less words.

This can be summed up as follows:

- mothers tend towards communication via dialogues, in which their individual utterances are fairly short,
- fathers tend to speak monologues, which are usually longer than the mothers' utterances.

The mean values for the average number of words per utterance work out at 6 words for the mothers and 9 words for the fathers; the difference can be shown to be statistically significant. The distribution of the length of utterance for mothers and fathers shows that mothers produce far more utterances of up to 10 words than fathers, but then drop generally below the values for fathers. The range of utterances with 11 words or more is clearly dominated by the fathers. One-word utterances are particularly noteworthy in this respect, as they account for 20% of all utterances by mothers but only 11% of those by fathers.

### 2.1 *The utterance act*

Differences between mothers and fathers may be observed in the number and type of finite verbs used. Although the mean value of two finite verbs per utterance for fathers is significantly higher than that of one finite verb per

utterance for mothers, there is high correlation in both cases between the number of words and the number of finite verbs, so that the greater number of verbs used by fathers is hardly surprising as they also use more words. If the number of finite verbs is related to the number of words used, the difference between mothers and fathers is negligible; the finite verbs account for about 16% of the total words uttered by both sexes. In the case of clause length and the use of diathesis, mood and tenses, the differences between the speech of mothers and fathers were not found to be statistically significant. There are, however, lexical differences in the use of finite verbs: mothers use a wider range of different verbs to refer to the game action than fathers.

In the case of substantives, much the same applies. Here too the mean value for fathers, at one noun per utterance, is significantly higher than the zero value for mothers. However, here again the difference is no longer significant if related to the number of words per utterance: the proportion of nouns in the total number of words is approximately 8% for both sexes. Again, the differences in use by fathers and mothers seem to be of a lexical nature, although this time it is the fathers who employ a wider range of words. However, the choice of the games played for these recordings may have had an effect on the words used here, and also it must be added that the data forming the basis of this pilot study are insufficient for detailed lexical analysis.

Altogether not many attributive adjectives occur, and other attributive word classes such as demonstratives, possessives, ordinals and participles are even less frequent. No significant differences in fathers' and mothers' use of attributives could be established when a statistical examination was carried out.

The use of intensifying words such as verb-qualifying and adjective-qualifying adverbs was rare and no differences could be established between mothers' and fathers' speech. These words are altogether too seldom occurring to permit any lexical analysis of their occurrence.

### 2.2 *The propositional act*

Referential factors considered were the definite and indefinite article, 1 sg., 2 sg. and 1 pl. personal pronouns and elements of temporal and local deixis. Both fathers and mothers use locative expressions much more than temporal ones, and deictic expressions altogether are used significantly more frequently by fathers than by mothers.

Variation in the use of articles and personal pronouns was also found to be significant. Fathers clearly prefer the indefinite, mothers the definite article.

The 1 sg. pronoun form is used slightly more often by mothers than by fathers. However, fathers' use of 1 pl. form is significantly higher than that of the mothers', who clearly prefer 2 sg. form.

### 2.3 *The illocutionary act*

The parameters characterizing the illocutionary act were not only the relation between statements and questions/imperatives, but also the negated utterances. As the analysis was based on utterances and not on syntactically defined sentences, it must be realized that for the following interpretation one utterance may contain more than one question, more than one imperative and/or more than one negated form.

Altogether, fathers were found to dominate in all three parameters, and the number of questions, imperatives and negations was significantly higher for them than for mothers. A differentiation of imperatives into categorical and descriptive imperatives showed that fathers used the categorical form of the imperative significantly more often than mothers. Differences in the kind of questions asked are also highly significant: mothers ask far more intonation questions, i.e. questions only recognizable as such by virtue of the rising intonation but lacking the syntactic features of a question, whereas fathers ask more pronominal questions, requesting specific information in the answer.

### 2.4 *The perlocutionary act*

The following variables were taken into account when assessing characterization of control over behaviour patterns:

- form of address
- speaker signals
- type of modal verbs used
- qualifying particles
- interjections
- interruption of the child.

The forms of address were divided into use of the child's first or given name and use of nicknames or forms of endearment. Use of any form of address did not occur often by either mothers or fathers; when a form was used, fathers tended to use nicknames or a form of endearment while mothers preferred the child's given name.

Speaker signals were defined as single words and particles like *ne*, *nicht* (both corresponding to question tags), *hm*, *ja* 'yes', mostly found at the end of an utterance with rising intonation, and tag questions. Mothers were found to use this kind of speech signal significantly more frequently than fathers.

Modal verbs were found to occur with roughly the same frequency in the speech of mothers and fathers. The verbs *dürfen* 'may' and *mögen* 'like to' were rare; fathers used *wollen* 'want to' and *können* 'can' significantly more often than mothers, who used *müssen* 'must' significantly more often than fathers. Both

sexes used *sollen* 'ought to' less often and no significant differences in use could be observed.

Use of personal pronouns together with the modal verbs *wollen*, *können*, *müssen* is distributed as follows: 1 sg. pronoun is seldom observed with any of these three verbs; 3 sg. and pl. forms are most frequent of all, except with *wollen*, where they do not occur at all. Mothers significantly more frequently combine *willst du* 'do you want to' — *du mußt* 'you must' — *wir können* 'we can/could', whereas fathers use *wollen wir* 'shall we' — *wir müssen* 'we must' — *du kannst* 'you can/could'.

Taking the general sex-typical preferences for certain modal verbs into consideration, we can establish the fact that *du mußt* is typical of mothers, *du kannst* — *wollen wir* of fathers.

The qualifying participles subjected to closer scrutiny are *aber* 'but', *auch* 'too/also', *denn* 'for/as', *doch* 'after all', *ja* 'you know', *mal* 'just', *schon* 'already/in the meantime', *vielleicht* 'perhaps', *wohl* 'I guess' (which are hardly translatable in isolation). These forms were only considered when they had a qualifying function, not as conjunctions or adverbs. They were used significantly more often by mothers than by fathers.

Only forms such as *oh*, *aha*, *ach* etc. were counted as interjections, but not onomatopoeic words. Interjections occurred significantly more often in the speech of the fathers.

The child was considered to have been interrupted if father or mother began an utterance before the child had finished what he/she was saying. One-word interpolations were not counted as interruptions. There was a weak tendency for the fathers to interrupt more often than the mothers.

### 3. Summary and conclusions

Altogether the results of the data evaluation support the main hypothesis under review here: father-child language and mother-child language are clearly different.

In the case of the various minor hypotheses discussed, the following trends may be observed:

- The utterance act: the father speaks at greater length but is involved in less verbal interaction with the child, which may be interpreted as his being less personally orientated towards the child. He tends to use more specific nouns in relation to a given situation, which may indicate greater interest in the topic or may equally well show that he is less able to adapt to the child's level than the mother, who is more inclined to differentiate the finite verbs.

- The propositional act: the fathers' clear preference for 1 pl. personal pronouns and the mothers' for 2 sg. forms may be seen to show that fathers take more active part in the game itself while the mothers tend to focus on the actions of the child. The frequent use of the definite article by mothers may be interpreted as an indication that they intentionally avoid involvement in the game, thus maintaining their distance and guiding the child through the game.
- The illocutionary act: fathers ask more questions than mothers, who — at least in the one-word utterances — prefer affirmation. This indicates less initiative on the part of the mothers, who tend to comment on the child's actions rather than interacting with him/her.
- The perlocutionary act: the frequent use of nicknames and forms of endearment by fathers could be considered representative of the fact that playing games with their children is a much less usual activity for them than for the mothers. On the other hand, fathers' more frequent use of interjections probably indicates that they concentrate more on the game and become more involved in it. The mothers' way of guiding the child through the game is reflected in their frequent use of *du mußt*.

These trends permit a more detailed picture of the verbal behaviour of mothers and fathers than was hitherto possible. However, if we compare this picture with the characteristics considered typical for the speech of men and women, the following picture emerges:

Men are more inclined to begin a conversation than women and speak more often. It should be noted that this is not true of the fathers studied here, whom we found to interact less with the children than the mothers did. This means that if women tend to be less active in conversation with men, but speak more frequently than men when in the role of mothers, this would seem to be characteristic of the role. Conversely, it would appear typical for the role of a father that he participates less frequently in verbal interaction than is normally the case for men.

Men tend to produce longer utterances than women, which is also true in their communication with children. Women produce as women and as mothers shorter utterances than the men/fathers. This indicates that length of utterance is to be considered a sex-typical but not a role-typical characteristic of speech.

Men make more assertions, speak with less restrictions and use more imperatives than women. All these characteristics are retained in the role of father. Similarly, women in the role of mother retain sex-typical speech characteristics: fewer imperatives and more qualifying particles occur in their speech both as women and as mothers. Male self-assertion, that is expressed in a man's language when speaking to a woman, is also observable in a father's speech with his child. The submissive role of the woman and her tendency to comment

on the man's conversation rather than take an active part in it is also reflected in a mother's speech with her child.

Summing up, with the exception of the differences observed with reference to the actual number of utterances produced, the data discussed here permit the conclusion that women as mothers and men as fathers largely avail themselves of the same speech registers as are observed in other sex-typical speech variations. In other words, although father-child language and mother-child language are clearly to be distinguished, the reasons underlying this differentiation are to be found in the sex-typical socialization process rather than in the parental role. If this is so, it implies that sex-typical characteristics of verbal behaviour and communication outweigh the differences due to the role of parent.

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