

A question of choice

KARIN JUNEFELT*

TIIA TULVISTE**

** Stockholm University (Sweden)*

*** Tartu University (Estonia)*

In our previous comparative study on regulation and praise in American, Estonian and Swedish mother-child interaction (Junefelt, Tulviste 1997) we found that Estonian mothers of two-year-old children used few syntactical questions and preferred imperatives when regulating their children's behaviour. We also found that American mothers regulated children's verbal and physical activities foremost by questions, and they seemed to appreciate whatever answers their children gave to the questions. We decided to look deeper into the matter of questions. Previous research has shown that mothers use a lot of questions when they talk to their small children as a means of bringing their children into conversation (Olsen-Fulero 1983, Snow 1986). Among the questions used with small children there are lots of yes/no questions. This question type is positively correlated to the children's syntactic growth (see Hoff-Ginsberg, 1986). Another frequent question type in maternal speech is the so-called test question, i. e. question to which the mother knows the answer. They are used for language teaching purposes and for testing the children's competence and knowledge. Both the yes/no questions and the test questions may be regarded as closed questions in that they restrict the range of possible answers. It is more difficult to answer open questions, which could have almost any answer, than closed ones. In contrast, it is harder to ask closed questions than open ones. Therefore, one could expect to find few open questions in the mothers' speech and a fairly great amount of them in the 2-year-old children's speech. However, previous research has demonstrated that in highly routinized situations the mother and child are able to engage in more complex linguistic behaviour (see Sorsby, Martlew 1991). As a result one could expect to find more open questions than closed questions during mealtime than during puzzle solving. In many studies on questions used with children speech acts have been used as an analytical tool instead of the sentence type. But, Wierzbicka (1991, 27) stated that «the cultural norms reflected in speech acts differ not only from one language to another, but also from one regional and social variety to another». Is it the same with questions? Also, from Wertsch's (1991) sociocultural theoretical perspective, mediated action cannot be separated from the milieu in which it is carried out, and communicative and cognitive development is therefore socioculturally situated. We could therefore expect not only situational but also sociocultural differences in questions used by mothers and their two-year-old children. Thus, one of the purposes of the present study is to investigate if and how the mothers' use of different questions varies with activity setting and socioculture. Another purpose concerns the ability of two-year-old children to ask questions.

METHOD

Seven American, Estonian, and Swedish mother-child dyads were videotaped during meal-time and puzzle solving activities. The Estonian children were from Tartu, the Swedish children from the Stockholm area, and the American children from the Boston area. The parents were educated on an academic level or just below. When comparing these dyads from different socio-cultures we must bear in mind that Sweden and Estonia respectively are pretty homogeneous cultures, while the USA is regarded as being a heterogeneous socioculture due to immigrations.

The material was first transcribed, and then coded and analysed with regard to:

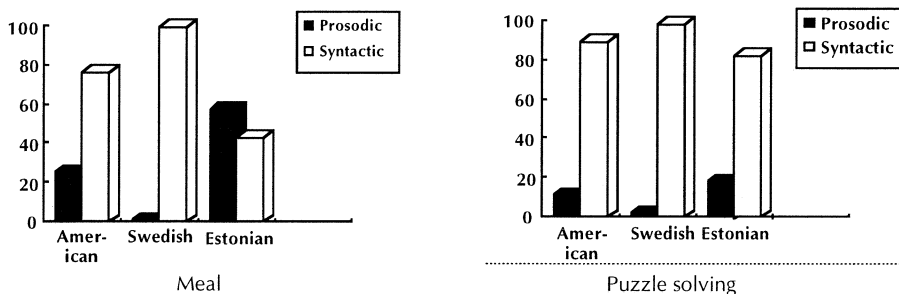
1. Syntactical and prosodic questions. By **syntactic** questions we mean a sentence or utterance with inversion of the subject and the first verb, or a sentence containing a question word, or a tag question. By **prosodic** question we mean a declarative sentence or utterance that is expressed by rising intonation pattern and aims to get a response from the other person;
2. a) **yes/no questions** – these are questions that only need a yes or no as an answer;
- b) **open questions** – these are questions that could have almost – and we mean almost, because of pragmatistical circumstances – any answer. Open questions differ from closed questions because they provide more of choice. They do not restrict the range of possible answers and put bigger cognitive demands on the person who answers;
- c) **test questions** – these are questions to which the person who asks already knows the answer.

RESULTS

Maternal questions. In total, the American group of mothers asked at meals 296, the Swedish 182 and the Estonian mothers 179 questions. During puzzle solving the American group of mothers asked 217, the Swedish mothers 175, and the Estonian mothers 208 questions.

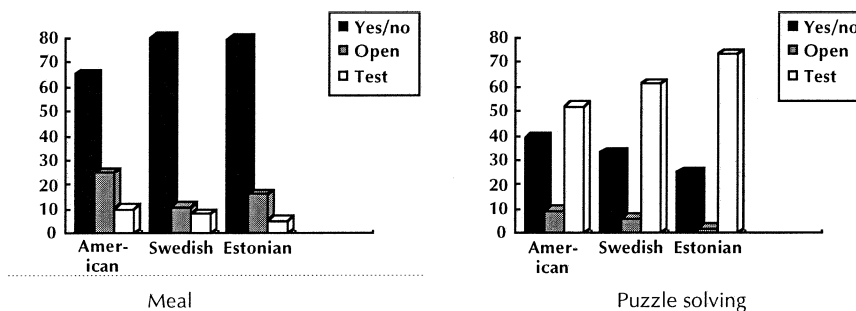
1. There were cultural differences as to the use of **syntactic** and **prosodic** questions (see Figure 1). In both activity settings, the Swedish mothers asked mainly syntactic questions. The American mothers asked significantly more syntactic questions than prosodic questions. But, at meals the Estonian mothers asked more prosodic questions than syntactic questions.

Figure 1. Per cent of prosodic and syntactic questions used by mothers during meal and puzzle solving.



2. There were cultural differences in the use of different questions types (see Figure 2).
 - a) At meals, **yes/no questions** were dominating in all three cultures;
 - b) There was more **open questions** during mealtime than during puzzle solving in all three cultures. But the American mothers used them in both activities more often than the other mothers;
 - c) In all three cultures few **test questions** were used during mealtime, but they dominated during puzzle solving.

Figure 2. Per cent of question types used by mothers during meal and puzzle solving.



Children's questions. In total, the children of the American group asked more questions than the children in the Estonian and Swedish groups. As it is seen on Figure 3, two-year-old children asked mostly syntactic questions. Figure 4 shows, as expected, that they used mainly open questions. An unexpected finding was that the Estonian children used so many

Figure 3. The number of prosodic and syntactic questions asked by two-year-olds during meal and puzzle solving.

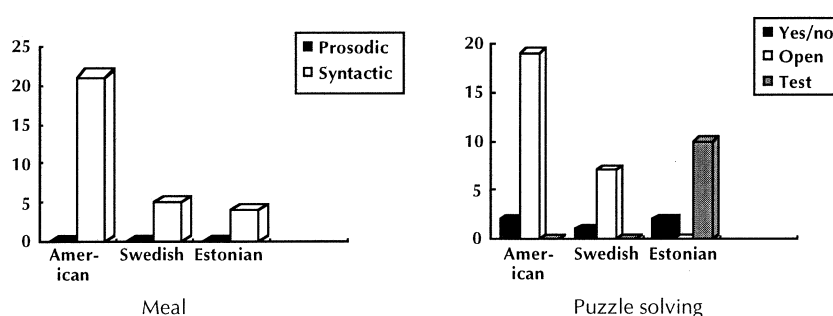
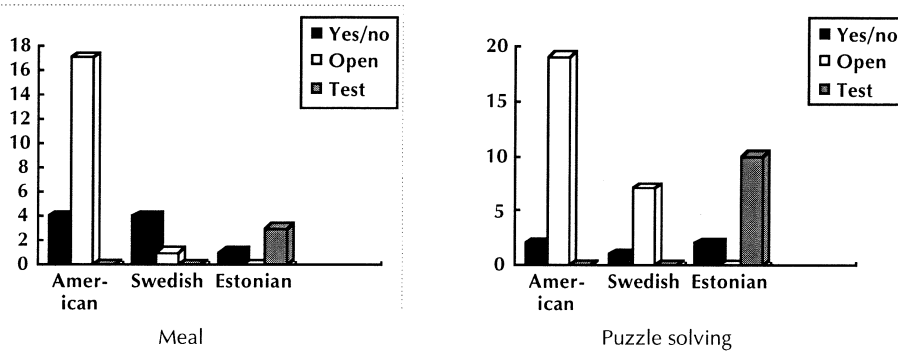


Figure 4. The number of different types of questions asked by two-year-olds during meal and puzzle solving.



DISCUSSION

The results were supportive of the hypothesis that the mothers of two-year-olds ask more closed questions than open ones, and that the children themselves ask mostly open question. These findings maybe explained by a low level of linguistic and cognitive development of two-year-olds. Since it is much more difficult to answer open questions than closed questions, there is no sense asking open questions to two-year-olds. As for the two-year-olds themselves, they are not able to formulate closed questions because of lack of needed preknowledge. An interesting result was the finding of cultural differences in the use of open questions, which were most frequently used by the American mothers. It might be explained by the findings of previous research that American mothers pay more attention to socializing their children into active conversational partners than mothers from other cultures. Also, they do not restrict the possible answers from their children by asking a great number of closed questions. It is possible that asking questions, and among them open questions, may have an effect on the development of communicative abilities in children. Since closed questions put less cognitive demands on the person who answers, it seems plausible that the mothers who ask more open questions encourage their children to think at a higher level than the mother who asks more closed questions.

In conclusion, the study shows that *the use of language is highly contextually bound*. Prosodic questions can not be learned nor understood out of context, out of use in different activity settings. The children from the different cultures are given different options for answering a question. The American children are offered more questions of choice than the other children. In that way one could say that cultural norms reflected in questions differ not only from one language to another, but also from one activity setting and socioculture to another.

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