Sunday Family Lunch: An Ethnographic Description

Vasiliki Saloustrou

King's College London (UK)

Abstract

The focus of this ethnographic description is on a Sunday family meal in Greece in my own household. Through participant observation, I attempt to investigate the cultural patterns of communication in family discourse, taking into account the *social situation*, defining this as the "full physical arena in which persons present are in sight and sound of one another" (Goffman 1981: 136). Taking as a point of departure the assumptions of the ethnographic tradition in sociolinguistics formulated by Gumperz and Hymes in the early 60s, I describe the setting, the participants, the sequence, the norms of interaction, the instrumentalities and every other aspect that constructs the communicative event on hand, using an emic or a worm's eye view. This allows me to ponder over a range of changes over time, from intra-family changes as children grow into adults through to social changes affecting hierarchical relationships between the generations and between the genders.

Keywords: communicative event, family meal, ethnography

Papers from the Lancaster University Postgraduate Conference in Linguistics and Language Teaching, Vol. 11. Papers from LAEL PG 2016–2017
Edited by Márton Petykó, Olena Rossi, and Shuo Yu

1. Introduction

"Man is by nature a social animal" (Aristotle, Politics, 1: 1253a)

We are involved in a vast number of everyday social situations. Among them, however, Sunday family meals are highly important in my community. At least for my own family, getting together with the children and grandparents for Sunday lunch is a weekly occurrence, a natural and integral part and parcel of weekly family routine. Routine events are not without interest though, given that these situations constitute the backbone of our everyday lives.

This leads us to the most important reason for my focusing on family meals: mealtime is thought to be an "opportunity space" –"a temporal, spatial and social moment which provides for the possibility of joint activity among family members" (Ochs, Smith & Taylor 1989: 238). At this point I shall make clear that I particularly focus on Sunday family lunch, given that Sunday is the only day nobody works and all are assembled around the table. This assembling is geared to satisfy our human instinct for sociability, a union with others, besides its material end of eating food for survival. Eating brings people together, and as a ritualized social event, Sunday meals maintain the group's coherence.

This intergenerationally social conversational event cannot but be considered as a sociocultural construct, if one assumes the variation in norms governing meals in different sociocultural contexts (Blum-Kulka 1997). When meal is construed as a shared social event, it can be a rich site for observing not only how culture is being constructed, negotiated, and even reinvented through talk in the realm of family, unfolding cultural meanings that are usually "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel 1984: 9), but also how mealtime serves for "socialization *through* language as well for socialization to *use* language" (Blum-Kulka 1997: 17). Several scholars have focused on mealtime interaction in an attempt to examine how parents socialize children to embrace family values, beliefs, and identities (Kendall 2007a: 8). This moves us to an understanding of how discourse at lunch (micro-level of situated interaction) is 'dialogically' connected with discourse at larger social and cultural settings (macro-level institutions) (cf. Goffman's "loose-coupling" 1983:11 as quoted in Zimmerman 1998: 88). It also offers glimpses over the "mutual infiltration" (Habermas 1989) between the private and the public sphere.

There is, finally, a methodological reason for the choice of Sunday family lunch as the event studied. This situated activity constitutes a well-known practice for me, as it has been a viable institution for my family for years. As a participant, I can therefore provide an in-depth

description, delving into even the slightest details of the event, which are taken for granted, using myself as a source of inside information.

In what follows, I first review past work on family discourse at mealtime, particularly Blum-Kulka's (1997) *Dinner Talk* and Tannen, Kendall and Gordon's (2007) *Family Talk.* I then describe in detail the communicative event of a Sunday family lunch, focusing on the setting, the participants, the structure, the goals, as well as on the norms, which regulate the participants' actions. Finally, I ponder over a range of changes over time, from intra-family changes as children grow into adults through to social changes affecting hierarchical relationships between the generations and between the genders, evident in the interactional patterns identified.

2. Literature review

A substantial amount of research on family discourse has focused on mealtime interactions (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1997; Erickson 1982; Ochs & Taylor 1995; Ochs et al. 1992; Pontecorvo & Fasulo 1999; Paugh 2005; Tannen, Kendall & Gordon 2007). In this section, I will focus on two seminal studies, namely Blum-Kulka's (1997) *Dinner Talk* and Tannen, Kendall and Gordon's (2007) *Family Talk,* on which the present study draws.

In *Dinner Talk,* Blum-Kulka examines dinner table conversations in native and non-native Israeli and American families, which, as an intergenerationally shared speech event, provide rich insights into culturally preferred interactional styles. The author introduces two analytical concepts to study the mealtime conversations in her dataset: *pragmatic socialization*, or "the ways in which children are socialized to use language in context in socially and culturally appropriate ways" (1997: 3), and *sociability*, which she correlates with "the overall organizational principles of dinner talk and the relations between social roles and discourse roles" (1997: 31). The author perceives of family dinners as a crucial site for both sociability and socialization. Combining ethnographic methods of participant observation with micro-discourse analytic methods, supplemented by interviews with the families about their attitudes and beliefs with regard to pragmatic socialization, Blum-Kulka attempts to identify the commonalities between the groups, as well as their cultural differences in the ways they negotiate issues of power and involvement through various acts at dinnertime.

Sociability is displayed through topical actions (e.g., topic initiations, elaborations, shifts etc.), developing thematic frames, and telling stories. While children are active topic

contributors in all three cultural contexts, it is adults who perform the most topical actions and dominate the talk agenda, which indexes the power imbalance between them and the adults. However, this might also be due to their lacking the conversational skills needed for topical action (1997: 58-61). Moreover, native and American Israeli mothers are more active in topic and story initiation, while it is fathers at Jewish American dinner tables who talk more (1997: 60). This could be linked to the more 'public' framing of this event in the American setting (1997: 92). Cultural differences emerge in the comparison of the groups' narrative practices as well. Children are the main tellers and story initiators in the Jewish American families, while in the Israeli families it is adults who dominate the narrative space (1997: 137). Furthermore, native Israelis show a preference for multi-voiced, polyphonic narratives about both shared and unshared experiences, which relates to a high-involvement, interactive style. They also prefer narrating (recent or distant) past events. In contrast, Jewish Americans tell more 'today stories' (1997: 109), and display tale-ownership rights to stories through monologic accounts of both unshared and shared events (1997: 125), which is linked to the high value Americans place on individualism.

Pragmatic *socialization* is demonstrated mainly through politeness strategies and metapragmatic comments. Considering politeness markings, Israeli and American parents choose to mark their directives for politeness in different ways. The former tend to prefer solidarity politeness markers, which index their stance towards interdependence and the high value placed on family cohesion. In contrast, American Israelis and Jewish Americans tend to prefer conventional politeness markers, which signals their stance toward autonomy and independence (1997: 158-159). Interestingly, the performance of unmitigated direct forms is frequent, but it does not have to be considered impolite. It is instead justified by the informality of the event and the need for efficiency (1997: 154). As the author has aptly put it, "family discourse is polite but it enacts its politeness in culturally and context- and role-sensitive ways" (1997: 146). In terms of metapragmatic discourse, all the families share as set of conversational norms. However, the Jewish American families display a heightened meta-awareness paid to norms of discourse management (e.g., turn-taking), an awareness probably related to American individualism, while the Israeli families are mostly preoccupied by matters of language for historic reasons (1997: 219).

In their *Family Talk*, Tannen, Kendall and Gordon (2007) examine family discourse in four dual-career, white, middle-class American families, based on face-to-face interactions that occur in a wide range of contexts (2007: 3). Together, the chapters identify the ways in which

family members use language to navigate the tension between power and solidarity in the family domain; to constitute family, gendered and professional identities at home and work; and to socialize children into the family's beliefs and values, in an attempt to construct a shared family identity (Kendall 2007a: 4). Examining excerpts from two of the families, Tannen aptly demonstrates that power entails solidarity in the family domain, and that "speakers' utterances are complex interplays of both power maneuvers and connection maneuvers" (2007: 45). She therefore suggests that to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of family interaction, one should consider both dimensions, that is, the struggles for power and the struggles for connection.

The construction of gendered and parental identities in discourse constitutes one of the main focuses of the book. Analyzing excerpts from one family, Cynthia Gordon examined how the mother painted a portrait of herself as a parent by performing particular acts (e.g., soliciting/providing details about her daughter's life or assessing her daughter's behavior) (2007a: 96). These acts as well as the stances and alignments she takes up towards her co-interactants construct her as a mother, for they are both gendered and parental in this sociocultural context. In a similar vein, Marinova, examining one of the four families, shows how the father constructs himself as a concerned and responsible parent by evoking the caretaking frame, and by performing a series of acts (e.g., giving warnings, giving advice and asking for information) regarding his twenty-year-old daughter's lack of action as her study-abroad semester approaches (2007: 119).

In his study, Kendall focused on the construction of professional and parental identities in two of the four dual-income families. Notably, he showed that both women constructed themselves as primary caregivers and workers, while positioning their husbands as primary breadwinners and secondary caregivers (2007b: 153). These positions are indexicalized with a contemporary discourse of role sharing in the family that "preserves the role sharing of feminist discourses and the asymmetry of traditional discourses" (2007b: 154). In a similar fashion, Johnston demonstrates how both parents, in the family that she studied, portray the mother as the primary decision maker or gatekeeper with respect to food and nutrition, the child's daily routine, and choice of daycare (2007: 179), while they construct the father as the primary decision maker in the financial domain (2007: 189).

The last theme that emerged in the book is about the use of language to socialize children into family values and beliefs. With respect to this, Gordon examined how situated family interaction socializes children into political beliefs and in turn (re)constructs a family political

identity (2007b: 237). Finally, Tovares showed how "by intertextual repetition of television texts in family settings, family members educate their children, express their thoughts and feelings, and discuss their differences in attitudes and values" (2007: 306).

The setting and cultural context of the present study are distinctive, and quite different from Tannen, Kendall and Gordon's (2007) data. Moreover, there are some similarities and some differences from Blum-Kulka's setting. These will be hopefully made loud and clear in the description of the communicative event at hand.

3. Methodology

This empirical study was written during the Easter holidays, after I returned home from London. For data collection, I have relied on participant observation (Hymes 1978: 4), introspection, and on delayed note-taking. The present study is, thus, an ethnographic one with an 'emic' perspective, based entirely on qualitative research methods, on immersion in the local community, and on words as opposed to frequency scores (Miles & Huberman 1984: 15 as cited in Hammersley 1992). My being an integral part of the family, "an actor experiencing the situation" (Cameron et al. 1992: 9), means that my study depicts an 'insider's view', thus justifying the use of introspection. This ensures that all other 'observed' participants behave as if they were not being observed, which helps overcome the 'observer's paradox' (Labov 1972: 209). Moreover, it gives me access to all areas of life within the household, and helps to "explore the subtle interconnections of meanings in ways that the outsider could attain only with great difficulty" (Saville-Troike 1989: 90). However, even ethnographic work is not immune to "reactivity" (Hammersley 1992: 164), and questions about the bias of the researcher are raised, in case s/he plays "the double roles of a cultural insider -a participant as observer-, and of an outside researcher participating -an observer as participant." (Blum-Kulka 1997: 19). The development of "objectivity and relativity is thus essential" (Saville-Troike 1989: 126). This implies that I need to partly detach myself from the situation, so as to unravel the family dynamic. I have thus one goal: to "make the familiar strange" (Rampton 2007: 591).

Ethical issues that may have arisen involve issues of collecting the data in an overt and transparent way, ensuring the protection of my participants' privacy as well as the reliability of my study. I attempted to overcome these by seeking permission from the participants to write about the communicative event on hand after it had occurred, as well as by informing them about my findings. At this point, I shall mention that the participants' retrospective commentary

did help me elucidate the illocutionary force of some speech acts. If I had asked for permission prior to the event, it may have affected the findings, as the participants may have consciously changed their behavior. They all consented to be included in this empirical work, and indeed they gave me permission for using some biographic information.

What follows is a detailed description of the communicative event of the Sunday family lunch, drawing upon the analytical frameworks of Levinson (1992), and of Hymes (1974), which helped me divide the main description of the event into sections.

4. Description

4.1. The Term "Communicative Event"

As Hymes (1974: 56) suggested, it is necessary in sociolinguistic description "to deal with activities which are in some recognizable way bounded or integral". He thus proposed the term 'speech event' to refer to situations which are governed by norms (Blum-Kulka 1997: 15-16), such as family meals; these indeed are "situated activities" or "circuits of interdependent actions" in Goffman's terms (1961: 96).

The term 'communicative event', however, is more accurate, on the grounds that speech is merely one out of many means of semiosis, as the process of meaning-making at lunchtime entails a variety of oral *and* visual signs cueing the participants' intentions (cf. Gumperz's "contextualization cues", 1999: 461).

It could alternatively be explained as what Levinson calls 'activity type': "culturally recognized units of interaction that are identifiable by constraints on a) goals/purposes, b) roles activated in the activity, c) sequential structure/stages, and to some extent on participants and setting" (Levinson 1992: 69).

This definition of the activity type reveals a significant feature of the communicative events: they are culturally recognized clusters of features of socio-linguistic life. This does have cognitive implications, besides the aforementioned cultural associations. It implies that activity types are cognitive templates/schemata we use to organize and interpret the data we produce and encounter in our everyday interactions. In fact, we very often have strong expectations about the setting, the participants, the structure, the goals, as well as about the norms governing family meals in a specific context. What could be inferred from this, is that they have an element of replicability. As Saville-Troike claims (1989: 142), "they should be events which recur in similar form and with some frequency, so that regular patterns will be more easily discernible."

What follows is an attempt to unveil these regularities, and the components of the spatiotemporally bounded communicative event of a Sunday Family Lunch in Syros (Greece).

4.2. The Setting

Our routine-based Sunday family lunches take place in our house in Syros, and more specifically in the dining room. The latter is connected to the kitchen as well as to the living room. One could imagine a spacious room with windows looking out at the sea, heavy curtains and carpets, wooden antique furniture, paintings and family photos; a living room, a dining room in the middle and a kitchen on the other side –all united through the open-plan design. The living room consists of big cushioned sofas, and a large bookcase, while the kitchen features wooden cupboards. A big sideboard, where my mother places the formal cutlery and crockery used in formal meals with guests, separates the kitchen from the dining room. The latter, as the locus of the ritual social event on hand, has a six-chaired wooden table, over which a religious icon of the Last Supper is suspended. The time is two o'clock in the afternoon. The reason why we have our lunch at this time, is because we have to wait for my father to return home from his Sunday coffee. These are the concrete physical circumstances (the *setting*) in which the *scene* of the meal takes place (Hymes 1974: 55). This physical landscape and the objects within it interact with the participants and their actions. As Kendon (1977: 180) has pointed out, "Activity is always located. A person doing something always does it somewhere and [their] doing always entails a relationship to the space which has in it objects or people with which the doing is concerned".

4.3. The Participants

The participants in this scene are the five members of my family; my mother, my father, my grandmother, my grandfather, and me. My grandparents live next-door, which explains their participation in all Sunday lunches. One could thus assume that the event studied is an intergenerationally shared activity, within which one may discern a conflicting convergence of old-fashioned and more modern styles of behavior; a junction of different habituses, which are contingent on the particular historical circumstances, within which they are acquired (Blommaert 2005: 222). This merger of socio-cultural conceptions will become salient in the following sections.

In terms of the biographic features or the transportable identities (Zimmerman 1998: 90) of the participants, they are all white, middle-class, and of Greek origin -born and bred in Syros. My mother is fifty-three years old, and she has been working as an accountant in the private sector. She is an excellent cook, and truly enjoys preparing meals for her friends and family. Without a doubt, she is the dominant figure in my family. As for my father, he is sixty-five years old, and he enjoys gardening and swimming; in the past, he owned a bookshop in the city center. Both of them used to be primary breadwinners in the family, while my mother was my primary caregiver as well. This relates to a hybrid discourse of role sharing in the family, since "[my parents used to] share the caregiving role, as in a feminist arrangement, [while my mother] maintained the position of primary caregiver as in a traditional arrangement" (Kendall 2007b: 143).

My grandmother, -a seventy-seven-year-old woman-, is a typical Greek grandmother; she is occupied with the household chores, and she loves cooking for the whole family. When I was a child, she was engaged in my rearing, since both of my parents used to work outside the home. My grandfather is eighty-five years old, but he is still an active member of the local cultural club.

I am twenty-three years old. Before I came to London to pursue my postgraduate work, I studied Philology and Linguistics in Greece. I am currently living in London, and thus I go to my hometown only at Christmas, Easter, and during the summer holidays. However, I am still considered a central member of the dense family network, given the transnational links forged and maintained through opportunities offered by the new digital social media.

4.4. The Ends

As it has already become clear, Sunday family lunches are not just coordinated task activities (Goffman 1981: 142), which generate no extended conversation but only remarks associated to the task of having lunch. In stark contrast to task activities, talk is the unmarked state in Sunday family lunches, silence the marked one. It is a 'social time' when participants talk about whatever is on their mind, aiming at building a rapport rather than achieving the instrumental goal of having lunch (Blum-Kulka 1997: 36).

What is remarkable, is that apart from this major goal, subordinate ones are also served through Sunday family meals; first, we inform others about our "breaking news", in Georgakopoulou's (2006; 2007) terms, through narratives (cf. 'today stories' and 'recent past'

stories in Blum-Kulka 1997); second, my father tells jokes, and my grandfather often sings to entertain the audience. Last, but not least, my socialization into the social and cultural norms (such as table manners or conversational norms) used to be a salient goal of my parents and grandparents in my childhood (cf. Blum-Kulka 1997). This is no longer relevant, but it is worth-mentioning, given that it underscores the non-static, ever-changing, and contingent on the particular historical moment texture of the event's ends (Hymes 1974: 55-56).

4.5. The Sequence

The event begins half an hour before the agreed time, when my father returns from the café, and I stop studying to go to the dining room. For my mother, who is responsible for cooking the food, however, the event starts at around eleven o'clock. We do not usually wear formal outfits, although we are not supposed to be dressed in our pajamas. This is because our Sunday family meals are placed "on a continuum between mundane informal encounters and formal public events" (Blum-Kulka 1997: 8). My grandparents always arrive on time, as they are hungry earlier. It is interesting that the event is "ritually bracketed" (Goffman 1981: 130), given that a ritual opening is marked by greetings to each other, two kisses, and by smiles. Moreover, my father asks the others "how was your day?" This is a way of setting the tone, gauging the moods of people, as well as knowing what seems appropriate to discuss. This ritualistic question sets off particular kinds of expectations. It serves as an interactional ritual (in Goffman's terms) that contributes to the maintenance of social relationships in the family, while indexing reciprocal interest and affect in the family context (Blum-Kulka 1997: 119-120). Moreover, it probes the participants to conform to a particular conversational demand, that is to say, to provide an expected narrative.

Following this, my father is the one who sets the table -without following the table setting etiquette-, while my grandmother helps my mother serve the food. The latter is the one who has control over the portions, which are all quite big, notwithstanding my never eating a lot. She also takes into account the participants' preferences; as a result, she respects my father's preference for more traditional Mediterranean dishes. Both my mother and my grandmother once encouraged me to help share out the dishes, socializing me through language to conform to society's norms of expecting women to be involved in the household chores. They no longer need to do so, as it has become part of my habitus; an ingrained disposition I acquired through participating in the Sunday family lunches for years (Thompson 1991: 12). My grandfather,

however, who has been raised in a traditional patriarchal society, where men never get occupied with the household activities, blows a whistle at our pet bird, admires the view of the sea, and starts eating before we are all at the table; this attracts my mother's attention and she responds by giving my grandfather disapproving looks and rebukes, which my grandfather never takes seriously though.

When the food is served and everyone is seated, my grandparents make the sign of the cross and urge us to do the same; my parents sometimes conform to this directive, while I tend to ignore it. At this point, I have to mention that all the dishes are served at once; the salad, the appetizers (such as olives, cheese, and meatballs), and the bread -all on big share plates- come together with the main dish, and we thus simultaneously have bits of everything, accompanied with local wine in small glasses. Even as a child, I was encouraged to take a sip of wine, although I normally had to drink water. We then clink our glasses together, and my grandfather says "(Stin) ijà mas" (Cheers), which we all have to echo.

According to Tannen (1990: 85), "talk is the glue that holds relationships together", and this is truly applicable to our Sunday family lunch ritual. The first comments are usually about the food. If sometimes nobody comments on it, my mother asks "Do you like the food?" Indeed, she attaches great importance to her husband's evaluations, establishing thus a social order where the husband is given higher priority. As for my evaluations, positioning herself as a mother and not as a wife eager to succumb to her husband's opinion, she believes that her food is nutritious; hence, she expects me to finish my portion, and she advises me persistently to eat vegetables. Since I was a child, my mother has been the primary decision maker (gatekeeper) with respect to nutrition in the family. She also positions herself as a nutritional expert towards me and her husband (Johnston 2007: 179). In doing so, she shows that she cares about us, while simultaneously monitoring and controlling our diets. One could therefore assume that my parents occupy the top of the family hierarchy, while I am placed at the bottom of it, as I am expected *but* not obliged to submit to my mother's authority. This implies that I have the prerogative to negotiate and even disagree with my parents' directives, which is indexicalized with a person-oriented family model (Bernstein 2003 [1971]: 119). It is worth-mentioning that even as a child I used to have some freedom of action, therefore not being forced to comply with my parents' directives.

The aforementioned hierarchy is not omnipresent or omnipotent, and thus everyone "is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen" (Goffman 1981: 14, note 8). This structural egalitarianism explains the reason why all members are entitled to initiate potential topics of

discussion. Although I used to be an active topic contributor in the past, my levels of contribution were lower than those of my parents (cf. Blum-Kulka 1997). Notably, my mother has always been more active topic contributor than my father. This shows that she is the dominant figure in both instrumental terms, as well as in keeping the conversation going (cf. Blum-Kulka 1997: 107).

My parents are the ones who often start talking about the weekly news. Although talk is not scheduled, it seems that there is a "we-agenda", a cluster of particular topics which are repeatedly raised across all Sunday lunches. Among these topics of "imposed relevance" (Schutz 1970: 114), national politics is the first to be thoroughly explored, given the prolonged financial crisis linked to our politicians' corruption. With the exception of my grandmother, who is not interested in politics, all other participants discuss this topic. My parents and grandfather would be classed as center-right politically. On the other hand, I am more left wing. Not surprisingly, political discussions at lunch often feature the ideological clash between us. However, my parents used to socialize me into the political beliefs of the family in the past (cf. Gordon 2007b).

When this topic ends, I usually take the floor to share news about my life in London as well as my future plans. All family members are interested in this, especially my grandmother who has been preoccupied with my safety ever since I left for college. She then raises issues concerning relatives, the weather, and my grandfather's health. My grandfather never follows his doctor's advice when it comes to maintaining a balanced diet. Later, my grandfather remembers the famine that raged through Greece in wartime (1940), and he starts reciting stories dating back to the early 20th century. These stories are usually co-authored by my grandmother, while my parents and I listen to them carefully. Needless to say, when I was a child, more topics were child-focused, in the sense that they were addressed to me, or concerned my daily life at home and school (cf. Blum-Kulka 1997:68). What is more, the practice of telling stories *about* my doings during the day to my father and grandfather was prominent in the discourse of my mother and grandmother in the past. Albeit being present, I was not famed as a co-author, but as a recipient of my 'own' stories. Interestingly, my mother still asserts 'authorship' for my stories, which she often narrates to guests, talking about me in the third person (cf. Blum-Kulka 1997:89).

In terms of the "key", that is the "tone, manner or spirit" of speech acts (Hymes 1974: 57), it shifts depending on the topic; as a result, it is formal when politics is addressed, and informal when personal experiences are shared.

My mother usually finishes first and she gets up to serve sweets to everyone. My father and I clear the dishes off the table and put them in the sink to be washed later by my mother. After we finish our desserts, my grandfather makes the sign of the cross again, and whispers the words "ðòksa to θeò" (Thank goodness), which indicate that the meal is over. My grandparents then leave uttering "ɟà" (Goodbye), which ritually closes the event at around four o'clock, and my parents and I go upstairs to our rooms to have our siesta.

4.6. The Norms of Interaction

As it has become clear, our Sunday family lunches are social events governed by constitutive 'rules', which are repeatedly followed almost by everyone, and they thus "congeal over time to produce the appearance of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990: 33 cited in Cameron 1995: 15).

Initially, our Sunday lunches serve communicative purposes, and constitute a motive for the family to meet and discuss specific topics. The frame of talk is thus an interactional one, within which people enhance their solidarity, notwithstanding the mentality clash and distance. This means that not all potential topics are acceptable; taboo topics, such as sex and atheism, which may generate quarrels among participants of different generations are avoided in order for a cooperative tone to be maintained. As my grandmother claims, the family meal is a "sacred" moment, which all should respect. For this reason, we should not be devoted only to food, but we are expected to display a social behavior; the latter also implies that we are not allowed to watch television or use our phone and/or computer. Being occupied by such devices at mealtime is seen as inconsiderate and threatening to our co-interactants' positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987); so is the use of obscene words, especially in the presence of elderly people and children.

Politeness norms expand to involve good table manners, such as eating quietly and slowly. Moreover, speaking with our mouths open, eating from shared dishes or drinking from shared glasses is frowned upon. Needless to say, no one is allowed to smoke, to eat using his/her hands, to lean on others while eating, or grab a shared dish while others are using it. Last, but not least, we are not allowed to start eating before everyone is at the table, nor can we leave the table before everyone has finished eating. If someone behaves in any of the aforementioned disrespectful manners, s/he is admonished.

However, interruptions in conversation are not met with disapproval although they are considered as breaks of conventional turn-taking norms (Sacks 1974: 721), and threats to the

hearer's negative face (Brown & Levinson 1987: 67). Interruptions are common in spontaneous conversation and, instead of threatening the interlocutor's face, they could be seen as generating a "we-voice" in the case of co-authored story-telling; as a way to intermingle with the 'other' speaker's voice and corroborate their sayings (Tannen 1990: 190). In parallel, mitigated directness in the performance of directive speech acts, such as requests ("*Mummy*, pass me the salt"), is more frequent than conventional indirectness ("*Could* you give me the bottle of wine?") in the discourse of women, while unmitigated directness is preferred by both male participants. In the discourse of the former, direct speech acts are mitigated by the use of positive politeness strategies, particularly in-group identity markers, which redress face by following the discourse of solidarity. Among them, emotionally-colored terms of address are the most frequent. These emphasize involvement and indicate an affective stance (Brown and Levinson 1987: 70; Blum-Kulka 1997: 152). In terms of the men's preference with respect to the performance of directives, they too express a preference for directness, without mitigating the act though. This should not be considered impolite, however, since it could be justified by the informal character of the event, the need for efficiency in mealtime, as well as by the intimate relationship between the participants. As Blum-Kulka (1997: 150) has argued, "Unmodified directness is neutral or unmarked in regard to politeness" in the domain of family. It is also worth to note that immediate compliance with the participants' requests is favored over rejection. This is especially the case with children's requests, owing to "the general tendency to accommodate young children" (Blum-Kulka 1997: 164).

This preference for involvement can also account for the widespread use of other-repairs, in case the speaker makes a mistake, although it is conventionally deemed as dispreferred and face-threatening (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks 1977: 379). What is more, the conventional politeness markers "thank you" and "please" are hardly ever uttered by the participants in the event at hand, without it being considered impolite though. However, when I was a child, my parents encouraged me to say "please" and "thank you" when addressing our guests at mealtime. This might show that they correlate the use of these politeness markers with discourse in more formal contexts than that of the family lunch.

Another important point is that people speak in a remarkably loud tone throughout the communicative event. This is a typical feature of speech in my community indicating an eagerness to speak, although it could be perceived as domineering in other sociocultural contexts. What is more, nonverbal pointing to food or wine with the fingers is often used in the place of explicit directives (such as, "give me a napkin"). Such deictis are thought to be rude,

however, and they attract gazes of disapproval. In terms of the language of women, this does not appear to include any of the linguistic features that have been correlated with a powerless style (e.g., hedges, tag questions).

Finally, there is a fixed sitting arrangement, revealing the roles participants occupy. Specifically, my father sits at the head of the table, while my mother sits on his right, something that points to their close relationship. Moreover, this seat gives her access to the kitchen, which is indicative of her role as the cook. I sit next to my father on the left, opposite to my mother, which helps me to have a direct view of her. This is convenient because I speak with her the most. As for my grandparents, they sit next to each other; my grandmother sits next to her daughter, with whom she is more allied, while my grandfather sits next to me, which again indicates a sense of allegiance. As a matter of fact, we enjoy playing cards together.

4.7. The Instrumentalities and Genres

Regarding the forms and styles of speech (Hymes 1974: 58-60), the channel of communication is exclusively oral. Gesticulation, including gazes, postures, and pointing with the fingers, is also indicative of attitudes and moods, such as pleasure, excitement or anger. As it has already been mentioned, the register of the event is informal, as designated by the situation and the domain of family. This means that code-switching between the Standard Modern Greek (SMG) and the local dialect is a common practice. To become more specific, my grandparents almost exclusively use the dialect, which I do not speak, but instead use SMG with some slang phrases -but only the slang which all participants can understand. My parents, however, switch between the SMG and the local dialect, tailoring their style of speech to each particular audience (Bell 1991 as cited in Bell 1997: 242).

Although informality is prevailing, some topics do require a more formal register. According to Holmes (2013: 25), people may select a particular code as "it makes it easier to discuss a particular topic", regardless of where or to whom they are speaking. "At home, people often discuss work or school for instance, using the language associated with these domains, rather than the language of the family domain" (Holmes 2013: 25). As a matter of fact, we talk about the national politics, or about my academic life, which are both tied to the use of SMG in a less casual register.

To conclude, there are also some common *genres* (Hymes 1974: 62) of talk, which are repeated on a weekly basis during our meals; among them, announcements of future plans,

jokes, and co-authored narratives of past events, or co-constructed 'small stories' of recent past events (Bamberg 2006a, 2006b; Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007) -serving the subordinate end of amusing the audience- are the most dominant. Self-talk in the form of response cries, such as "Oops! Eek!" occurs when the speaker attempts to save face after misbehaving or misspeaking, "providing evidence to everyone who can hear that their observable plight is not something that should be taken to define them" (Goffman 1981: 136).

5. Discussion

In the previous section, I described the "full physical arena in which persons present are in sight and sound of one another" (Goffman 1981: 136). Family meals in my community, as intergenerationally shared activities, provide rich insights into a range of changes as children grow, as well as into social changes with respect to asymmetrical relationships between genders and between age groups, evident in the interactional patterns identified.

There are interesting things to say here about a range of changes regarding the event's goals and conversational norms as children grow up. To begin with, socializing children into the family's values and beliefs, as well as into the conversational norms that govern family interaction, is no longer relevant as children turn into adults. Since they no longer lack in conversational skills and are aware of the pragmatic norms that govern family interaction, they are active topic contributors and story initiators, and they often dominate the talk agenda. This does not mean, however, that there is no power imbalance between parents and children, as the latter grow. My parents still encourage me to consider their opinions and advice, since I am not considered mature and experienced enough to deal with serious problems. Moreover, they construct themselves as concerned parents and try to control or monitor my actions by giving advice, issuing warnings, asking for information regarding my plans, expressing concern, providing reasons, and by assessing my behavior (cf. Marinova 2007). However, I do construct the identity of the concerned child and try to monitor their actions by performing the same actions, which I was not licensed to do in the past as a young child. These acts should be considered as both power maneuvers and connection maneuvers, since, by performing them, we do not only seek to determine the others' actions, but we also aim at achieving a result that would be beneficial for everyone (Tannen 2007). What is more, my mother still positions herself as a nutritional expert towards me (e.g. by encouraging me to eat vegetables) and tries to control my diet. Interestingly, I too construct myself as an expert with respect to diet and nutrition, by

advising my parents to eat healthily, and by commenting on the food. Again, power is intertwined with connection and care. Needless to say, as a young adult, I can freely express my opinion with respect to politics, and openly disagree with the other family members. Finally, I am licensed to criticize my parents' and grandparents' behavior, when they violate politeness norms (e.g. when they talk too loudly around the table, when my father and grandfather start eating before everyone is at the table, or when they eat from shared dishes, and when my grandfather repeatedly interrupts the others without listening to their opinion).

Family has been often described as society in miniature. In this sense, family mealtime interactions can provide glimpses over a range of social changes affecting hierarchical relations between genders and between generations. Observing the Sunday family lunch under discussion, one would portray my grandmother as a 'traditional' mother, who used to stay home full-time and devote herself exclusively to her children and husband. In her own family, her husband was the only breadwinner, while she was exclusively engaged in housework and childcare. This division of labor is evident in the event on hand, in which my grandmother always helps my mother cook or serve the food, while my grandfather is not expected to provide any help. In contrast, my mother constructs herself both as a caregiver and as an independent breadwinner, therefore aligning with the feminist discourse of role sharing at home. This egalitarian role sharing is apparent in the Sunday family lunch at hand, in which my father, albeit not being responsible for cooking, sets and clears off the table, and he sometimes washes the dishes. However, my mother has always been the primary housemaker and caregiver, as is shown in the event on hand. She therefore orients to a contemporary discourse of role sharing in the family, since both parents engage in caregiving and housework, while it is the mother who is regarded the main parent and housemaker (Kendall 2007b: 143). These discrepant images of 'mother' and 'woman' are indeed reflected in the way the two women talk during the event on hand. As I have mentioned, my mother dominates the talk agenda in the event on hand, and usually initiates a variety of topics, including politics, business etc. In contrast, my grandmother does not perform many topical actions, nor does she participate in conversations about abstract subjects, such as education or politics. She is even regarded as not having an opinion on such issues. Interestingly, my grandfather often interrupts her while talking, and grabs the floor (cf. 'dominating interruptions', Tannen 1994). In light of the above, one can easily surmise that my grandfather occupies the top of his family's hierarchy, while my grandmother is placed at the bottom of it, as was the case in the majority of the 'traditional', patriarchal families of the past. The semi-egalitarian role sharing between my mother and father,

however, reflects a social change, inspired by the 'second wave of feminism', which gained momentum in the 70s. This form of feminism focused on "integrating women into the public sphere without delay, […] assuming all the privilege and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men" (Thornham 2000: 30). Nevertheless, as I have argued, this "truly equal partnership" remains a desideratum in my family, since it is the mother who is the main parent and housemaker, while working full-time. One could therefore place my parents' family somewhere between the 'traditional' and 'feminist' discourses, while my grandparents' family would occupy the 'traditional' edge of the continuum.

6. Conclusions

"Approaching familiar questions from an unfamiliar angle" (McNeil 1990: 132), as my goal were, enhanced my understanding of the family dynamic, as it made me observe the common sense practices. As it has become clear, what seems natural is configured socially. So, what I have described so far is indicative of the particular socio-cultural context in which our Sunday family lunches take place, and my aim is not to generalize, given that the groups are heavily contextualized. Instead, the readers are welcome to wonder whether or not the present patterns are familiar to their society.

What I should also make clear, is that my description could not even be seen as demonstrative of the whole community's Sunday lunchtime habits. As far as I know from personal experience, many families follow a less traditional way of life, choosing to have their Sunday lunches in front of the television or computer. They do not even invite the grandparents to join them, nor do they indulge in long conversations, thus putting only slight emphasis on family bonding. Alienation seems to have replaced socialization. However, it is not always a matter of conscious choice, but it can be due to external factors, such as busy schedules.

In fact, this is the reason why our everyday meals are less organized. My mother is always at work at lunchtime, and as a result my father and I are eating together with my grandparents. Our dinners, on the other hand, include only the nuclear family members, and are held with the television on. There is still some latent organization, as we all have to be present at the dining room at ten o'clock, take our fixed seats, and discuss the day's activities -especially my mother's work. The presence of guests again necessitates a distinct organization of meals.

This intra- as well as intergroup diversity in family mealtime practices shows that even the most ordinary and widespread communicative events, as family meals are, do not follow general

and predicted patterns, given that participants and circumstances are always different and unique. The setting and cultural context are distinctive, since mealtime interactions in Greece constitute an under-researched area within ethnographic research, to the best of my knowledge. What is more, the study is unique in the fact that I am a member of the community under discussion, thus being able to observe how the family changed over time, as well as how social changes have affected the asymmetrical relations between genders and between generations in the realm of this family. And it is at this point that my empirical study might be considered as making an original contribution. It is quite different from Tannen, Kendall and Gordon's (2007) study of family talk in America; and there are some similarities and some differences from Blum-Kulka's (1997) cross-cultural study. However, the same broad themes emerged in all three studies: the tension between power and connection in the family domain; the construction of parental and gendered identities within the realm of the family; and the socialization of children into the family's beliefs and values.

Space and time prevented any detailed analysis of linguistic data that would help validate my observations, and allow a glimpse over the potentially highly revealing micro-interactional aspects (Harris & Rampton 2009). This constitutes a limitation of the present study. My intention is to further my ethnographic study of family meals in this particular 'Community of Practice' (Eckert & McConnell Ginet 1992: 464), by collecting first-order data to supplement my first-hand knowledge about the community's socio-cultural and interactional norms (Hymes 1978: 4).

References

Bamberg, M. (2006a). Biographic-narrative research, quo vadis? A critical review of 'big stories' from the perspective of 'small stories'. In K. Milnes (Ed.), *Narrative, memory and knowledge: Representations, aesthetics, contexts* (pp.63-79). Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield.

Bamberg, M. (2006b). Stories: Big or small? Why do we care? *Narrative Inquiry, 16*, 147– 155.

Bell, A. (1997). Language style as audience design. In N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: A Reader and Coursebook* (pp.240-249). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bernstein, B. (2003). C*lass, codes & control. Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Blommaert, J. (2005). Bourdieu the ethnographer: The ethnographic grounding of Habitus and Voice. *The Translator, 11* (2), 219-236.

Blum-Kulka, Sh. (1997*). Dinner talk: Cultural patterns of sociability and socialization in family discourse*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* London: Routledge.

Cameron, D. (1995). *Verbal hygiene*. London: Routledge.

Eckert, P. & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Palo Alto: Annual Reviews.

Erickson, F. (1982). Money tree, lasagna bush, salt and pepper: Social construction of topical cohesion in a conversation among Italian-Americans. In D. Tannen (Ed.), A*nalyzing discourse: Text and talk. Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1981* (pp.43-70). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press

Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2006). The other side of the story: Towards a narrative analysis of narratives-in-interaction. *Discourse Studies*, *8,* 265-287.

Georgakopoulou, A. (2007). *Small stories, interaction and identities*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates.* New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gordon, C. (2007a). "I just feel horribly embarrassed when she does that": Constituting a mother's identity. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.71-101). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gordon, C. (2007b). "Al Gore's our guy": linguistically constructing a family's political identity. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.233-262). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gumperz, J. (1999). On interactional sociolinguistic method. In S. Sarangi S. & C. Roberts (Eds.), *Talk, work and institutional order* (pp.453-471). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere. An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Hammersley, M. (1992). Deconstructing the qualitative-quantitative divide. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *what's wrong with ethnography?* London: Routledge.

Harris, R. & Rampton, B. (2009). Ethnicities without guarantees: An empirical approach. In M. Wetherell, (Ed.), *Identity in the 21st century: New trends in changing times* (pp.1-15). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Holmes, D. (2013). *An introduction to Sociolinguistics*. USA: Routledge.

Hymes, D. (1974). *Foundations in sociolinguistics. An ethnographic approach.* London: Tavistock.

Hymes, D. (1978). *Ethnography, linguistics, narrative inequality: Toward an understanding of voice*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Johnston, A. (2007). Gatekeeping in the family: How family members position one another as decision makers. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.165-193). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kendall, Sh. (2007a). Introduction: Family talk. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.7-23). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kendall, Sh. (2007b). Father as breadwinner, mother as worker: Gendered positions in feminist and traditional discourses of work and family. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.123-163). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kendon, A. (1977). *Studies in the behavior of social interaction.* Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Levinson, C. S. (1992). Activity types and language. In P. Drew, P. & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings* (66-100). Cambridge University Press.

Marinova, D. (2007). Finding the right balance between connection and control: A father's identity construction in conversations with his college-age daughter. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.103-120). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.

McNeil, P. (1990). Theory, science and values. In P. McNeil, (Ed.), *Research methods* (pp.115-132). London: Routledge.

Ochs, E., Smith, R., & Taylor, C. (1989). Detective stories at dinnertime: Problem solving through co-narration. *Cultural Dynamics, 2*, 238-157.

Ochs, E., & Taylor, C. (1995). *The "Father knows best" dynamic in family dinner narratives. Gender articulated: Language and the socially constructed self*. New York and London: Routledge.

Ochs, E., Taylor, C., Rudolph, D., & Smith, R. (1992). Storytelling as a theory-building activity. *Discourse Processes 15*(1), 37–72.

Pontecorvo, C. & Fasulo, A. (1999). Planning a typical Italian meal: A family reflection on culture. *Culture and Psychology 5*(3).313–335.

Rampton, B. (2007). Neo-Hymesian linguistic ethnography in the UK. *Journal of Sociolinguistics, 11* (5), 584-607.

Sacks, H. (1974). An analysis of a course of joke's telling in conversation. In R. Baumand & J. Sherzer (Eds.), *Explorations in the ethnography of speaking* (pp.337-353). Cambridge: CUP.

Saville-Troike, M. (1989). The ethnographic analysis of communicative events. In N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: A reader and coursebook*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Schegloff, E. A., Jefferson, G., & Sacks, H. (1977). The preference for self-correction in the organisation of repair in conversation. *Language*, *53*, 361-382.

Schutz, A. (1970). *Reflection on the problem of relevance.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand*. USA: Ballantine Books.

Tannen, D. (1994). *The relativity of linguistic strategies: Rethinking power and solidarity in gender and dominance. Gender and discourse.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Tannen, D. (2007). Power maneuvers and connection maneuvers in family interaction. In D. Tannen, Sh. Kendall, & C. Gordon (Eds.), *Family Talk* (pp.27-48). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tannen, D., Kendall, Sh., & Gordon C. (2007). *Family Talk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thornham, S. (2000). *Second-wave feminism. The Routledge critical dictionary of feminism and postfeminism*. New York and London: Routledge.

Thompson, J. (1991). Editor's introduction. In P. Bourdieu (Ed.), *Language and symbolic power* (pp.1-31). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Zimmerman, D. (1998). Identity, context, interaction. In C. Antaki & S. Widdicombe (Eds.), *Identities in talk* (pp.87-106). London: Sage.