
Persuasive discourse strategies used by Mothers at dinner time to persuade children to eat

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Abstract: This study examines the persuasive strategies used by Mothers in persuading children to eat during dinner time in Zimbabwe. Family interaction during dinner time both reflects and recreates the interaction of the larger society and as such, examining family persuasive discourse can yield informative results of the language practices people use to accomplish persuasive acts in other contexts. To collect data for the study the researcher observed ten Mothers of Grade One students at Avondale Primary School persuading their children to eat during dinner time and interviewed the Mothers after the observations. The results showed that the Mothers use different persuasive strategies to make their children eat dinner hence the need for them to strategically shape their communicative actions to achieve their overall discourse of persuading children to eat.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Persuasive Strategies, Dinner Time

1. Introduction

The study falls within Family Discourse and the area of study is significant not only because everyone experiences spoken interaction with family members or caregivers but also because the types of persuasive strategies found in discursive interactions within families are also evident in the larger society. The family as such, is a microcosm of the relationships and interactions in society at large. An understanding of the types of communication strategies which mothers use and the problems that can arise can inform human communication in all societies.

The researcher chose to examine dinner time persuasive strategies because dinner meal behaviors are one of the most frequently cited problematic meals by parents (De Vault: 1991). In every society, food is highly symbolic in the sense that members imbue food with particular kinds of qualities such as, sentimental, moral, religious and health related meanings. In Zimbabwe, most of the families in urban areas are westernized and they have adopted the European concept of dinner where family members always eat together on the same table. Sadza is the staple food in Zimbabwe and at dinner the majority of the families eat sadza with beef and vegetables, chicken or pork with vegetables. Rice and chicken is normally eaten on special occasions.

Meal times are important events for language socialization as children acquire socio-cultural competencies through language and other semiotic modalities. Food is important to long term health of children and this is particularly so, given the impact of nutrition on children's healthy growth and development. It is widely accepted that eating habits are established from a very young age (Birch: 1987) and that children are likely to maintain their habits from childhood into adolescence. However, despite widespread community awareness of the importance of healthy eating habits, recent studies have shown that many children have poor eating habits (Birch: 1987).

Individual differences in eating styles of children have been hypothesized to contribute both to underweight and overweight children (Marchi and Cohen: 1990). In such cases, parents identify such eating habits as problematic and find it difficult to persuade children to eat or not to eat certain foods. Researchers have identified several factors that influence children's eating habits, namely, innate preferences, siblings and peers, adults behaviors, adults communication styles, parental food preferences and beliefs (Campbell and Crawford: 2001). There are several possible causes of parental failure or success to achieve control over children's habits and one such main cause is the absence or presence of persuasive communication

strategies which encourage or discourage children's good eating habits. This study by examining verbal persuasive strategies such as, tag questions, directives, intensifiers, presuppositions, and deixis aims to contribute to literature on family discourse.

The researcher chose to focus on persuasive strategies used by Mothers because women are still generally responsible for the provision of meals in families (De Vault: 1991, Charles and Kerr: 1998). Mothers generally bear the responsibility of feeding children and it is reasonable to expect that mothers also use persuasive strategies to make their children eat. Women according to Van Esterik (1999) often base their identities and sense of self on their capabilities to feed their families. The activities that go with feeding family members according to Van Esterik (1999) are seen as 'womanly' operations and consequently, they contribute to gender relations in families. Food has a significant role in relations of women and children and in these affiliations; women are the ones in power leading them to feel obliged to persuade their children to eat.

Persuasive discourse is a well researched area in both social psychology and communication. Social psychologists refer to persuasion as a cognitive process during which a person's attitudes and, or behavior are changed as a result of stimuli (Cacioppo, Harkins and Petty :1981). In the discipline of communication, persuasive discourse is defined as, 'the non-reciprocal attempt or intention to change the behavior of one party, feelings, intentions or view point of another by communicative means' (Larkoff :1982,34) and a persuasive situation is any instance in which an active attempt is made to change a person's attitudes and consequently behavior. Mother to child meal time talk is a good example of the creative use of persuasive strategies which can be illustrated through language.

The concept of treating persuasion as a process involving purposive and conscious actions aiming to change others attitudes or behaviors' are reflected in many definitions of persuasion (Gass and Seite: 1999). Gass and Seite (1999:22) define an attitude as, 'a relatively endearing predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably towards something'. Attitudes are learned evaluations and not something people are born with, are changeable and they are presumed to influence behavior. The attempts to change attitudes according to Hovland et al (1953) can be made by using four variables namely, source factors (e.g. credibility, attractiveness, power), message factors (e.g. style, organization, content), channel factors (e.g. mode of communication) and receiver characteristics (e.g. intelligence). This framework postulated by Hovland et al (1953) is considered by many attitude theorists as the most important approach to studying persuasion.

While many Family Discourse Analysis studies have looked at family interaction involving young children (Gordon: 2002, Marinova: 2007, Kendall and Gordon: 2007) there are no studies in the Zimbabwean context which have looked at persuasive strategies used by mothers

at meal times. Following the lead of other researchers in discourse analysis in western contexts who looked at friend and family interactions at the dinner table (Blum-Kulka, 1997), this study aims to identify and examine the persuasive strategies used by Mothers in persuading children to eat during dinner time in Zimbabwe.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study uses a discourse analysis approach to examine the persuasive strategies used by mothers in persuading children to eat. Discourse analysis is defined as the study of social life, understood through the analysis of language and it takes language as a matter of practices rather than just 'structures' (Fairclough et al: 2001). Discourse analysis emphasises language use as social action, situated performance and as linked to social relation and identities (Gordon: 2002, Schiffrin:1994). Schiffrin(1994) approach to discourse analysis is important to this study as it proposes two goals of discourse analysis as, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Syntactic goals relate to sequential goals, while semantic and pragmatic goals are related to organization, meaning and use of particular expressions. Discourse analysis is relevant to this study because it brings out the complexity of day to day family discourse and adds on new methodological dimensions to family practice research by drawing on theories from a wide range of disciplines such as, social psychology and marketing.

Persuasive discourse is defined by Larkoff (1982, 43) as the nonreciprocal, 'attempt or intention of one party to change the behavior, feelings, intentions, or viewpoint of another by communicative means'. Persuasive utterances by Mothers can be interpreted as speech acts in which the Mothers intention is to make the Children to eat and to commit themselves to eating. Speech Acts as action performed via utterances was first developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) who argued that language is used to perform actions. Searle's Speech Act Theory is important to this study because it proposes descriptive terms for different kinds of speech acts such as, apology, promise and thanking which are expanded on by the current researcher to also include persuasion.

Speech Act Theory provides a framework to identify the conditions underlying the production and understanding of persuasive utterances of the Mothers as a particular linguistically realized action. The concept of speech act is relevant to this study as it helps to account for what the Mothers mean, what the Mothers intend and what the children understand and the rules governing the linguistic elements in the persuasive utterances (Searle: 1969, 21). In other words, the Speech Act Theory is important to this study because it explains what the Mothers do with the language and the functions of their persuasive utterances.

3. Method

The data for this study was gathered from direct

observations and short interviews. The researcher was first granted permission by the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sports and Culture and then the School Headmistress of Avondale Primary School. The researcher distributed consent forms to 40 Grade One students in one class who then took the forms to their Mothers. The consent form explained the nature and benefits of the study and also informed the Mothers that the study was going to be anonymous as no names were going to be used and that the study was purely for academic purposes. The Mothers then signed the consent forms to indicate their willingness or unwillingness to take part in the study.

Of the forty consent forms distributed to students, 32 were returned and of the 32 returned forms, 15 parents declined to take part in the study. Of the 16 Mothers who accepted to take part in the study, 6 of them were not the biological Mothers of the children. Three of the Mothers were step-mothers and three were foster mothers. The researcher was then left with 10 participants. The ages of the Mothers ranged from 27 years to 38 years and they were all employed. All the Mothers were professionals and had gone through the formal education system.

All observations and interviews were made in the child's home and on average each observation took about 12 minutes and the interview an average of about 7 minutes. The time for the observation and interviews which were conducted immediately after the observations were decided on the basis of what would be the most convenient arrangement for the participants. All the observations and interviews were conducted between 6:00pm and 7:30pm.

The observations and interviews were conducted in the Low Density affluent area of Avondale East and Avondale West. All the Mothers indicated that they were comfortable with the interviews being conducted in English which is the official language in Zimbabwe. The mothers used English and Shona in persuading their children to eat even though most of the mothers preferred to use English. There was a balance in gender, as 6 of the children were female and 4 were male.

The Direct observation method used in this study has also been used by Moes and Frea (2000) and Woods et al (2004) to observe family discourse at mealtime. The researcher coded the observations using a modified Mealtime Interaction Coding System (MICS; Dickstein, Hayden, Schiller and San Antonio: 1994), a global coding system that allows reliable coding features of the mealtime discourse such as, task accomplishment, behavior control to meet the objectives of the study to code the data from the observations. The short interviews conducted after the observations allowed for the flexibility of a conversational style and specific follow up to issues identified in the observations.

The researcher encountered some problems when collecting data for the study which need to be noted. Out of a class of forty students, 15 Mothers declined to be take part in the study while 6 of the Mothers could not be observed because according to the objectives of the study b

they were not the biological mothers of the children. It is not possible to estimate the impact of the mothers who declined to take part in the study on the results of this study therefore care must be taken in generalizing from the results of this study.

Secondly, measures of persuasion are problematic as the presence of the researcher at dinner time can change or influence the mother's persuasive strategies or food intake of the child. It is also important to note that the study did not seek for information regarding the Mothers age, level of education or family economic status which could be assumed to also influence the type of persuasive strategies used. These limitations are acknowledged but it is believed by the researcher that the study provides some insights into the persuasive communication strategies used by Mothers.

4. Findings

The findings are based on interviews and observations of ten Mothers, Mother A, Mother B, Mother C, Mother D, Mother E, Mother F, Mother G, Mother H, Mother I and Mother J persuading their children to eat. All the Mothers except Mother C and Mother G were successful in persuading their children to eat.

Conversation 1 below is an example of a successful persuasive interaction in which Mother A successfully persuades her Child to eat. Conversation 2 is an example of an unsuccessful persuasive interaction in which Mother C failed to persuade her Child to eat.

4.1. Conversation 1

Mother: *Emily chiuya udye sadza rako mwanangu* (Emily come and eat your sadza) [The mother calls the child who was watching television to come and eat her sadza in the kitchen].

Child: *Ndirikuuya mhamha, dakupedzisa kuona macartoons* (I am coming mother, i want to finish watching cartoons)

Mother: [The mother goes into the dining room and fetches Emily] *Chigara, udye sadza rako nenyama kana wapedza ugonoono macartoons.* (Seat down and eat your sadza and meat and when you are finished you can go and watch your cartoons)

Child: *Mhamha, i am full handisi kuda sadza ndakaguta* (Mum, i am full i do not want to eat sadza.)

Mother: *My beautiful daughter, can you pray first as what you were taught at school?*

Child: [Emily prays] *Mhamha mudumbu mangu muri kurwadza handisi kuda sadza* (Mum my stomach is painful, i do not want to eat sadza)

Mother: *If you eat your sadza mudumbu mako munopora. Tarisa uone Sarah atopedza sadza rake. Haudi kukura here mwanagu kuti uite musikana mukuru?* (If you eat your sadza your stomach will be fine. Look at Sarah; she has finished her sadza. Don't you want to grow up into a big girl?)

Child: [She looks at her sister who is eating her sadza

and she puts the sadza into her mouth but does not swallow it]

Mother: *Good Girl, swallow you food. Hona ini ndiri kudya rangu* (Look i am eating mine). *Ende riri kunaka* (It's delicious). *Ngatidyei mwanangu tigonogara mudining tione T. V* (Let us eat so that we can all go and watch television)

Child: *Ehe ndakudya ndigokura sa Sarah* (I am eating so that i can grow up like Sarah) [Emily starts eating but after a short while suddenly stops]

Mother: *Mwana akanaka anopedza sadza rake. Pandakakura ndapedza sadza rangu, haudi kuita sa mhamha vako here ?* (A good child finishes her sadza. When i was your age i used to finish my sadza, don't you want to be like your mother?)

Child: [She looks captivated] *Ehe ndakupedza .Kana ndapedza mozondipa drink nemaswets.* (I am now eating. If i finish my sadza will you give me a drink and sweets?)

Mother: *Yes my daughter, I will give you dessert and some sweets if you eat all your sadza.* (Good girl, finish all your, he will take you to the Lunar Park tomorrow.) [Emily starts eating]

Child: [She eats the sadza and the meat and leaves out the vegetables] *Mhamha handisi kuda mavegetables* (Mum i do not want the vegetables)

Mother: *Mavegetables anoita kuti ukure. Handiti unoda kuti mazino ako akure, anoita kuti ugone kuchikoro* (Vegetables are healthy . You want to your teeth to grow isn't ?, they will make you do well in school) *Unoda kurwara here, chidya mwanagu* (Do you want to get sick?, eat your food)

Child: [She finishes her food and is given some juice] *Mhamha ndapedza* (Mum i have finished my food)

Mother: *Waiita mwana akanaka, oh drink unwe, chienda unopedzisa kuona macartoon.* (You have done well my child, here is your juice, and you can go and watch cartoons.

Conversation 1 is an example of a successful persuasive interaction .The Mother through the use of rewarding language, tag questions, hedges, valence, intensives and narratives was able to persuade the child to eat. The Mother pointed out that before she cooked the meal she had also asked her child what she wanted to eat that day. The Child had also taken part in the preparation of the meal as she had assisted in cleaning the vegetables and peeling the tomatoes. The Mother ate her food together with the child and they ate in the kitchen away from the television.

4.2. Conversation 2

Mother: *Here is your food Anne.* [The mother takes the plate of sadza into the dining room where Anne is watching television]

Child: *Mum i am full i don't want any sadza.* [Anne is glued to the television]

Mother: *Anne, i said eat your sadza*

Child: *Handisi kuda sadza mhamha* (Mum i dot want to eat sadza)

Mother: *Please my Daughter eat your sadza, you have to eat.* [The mother has already finished eating her sadza and

she is watching television]

Child: *Ndati handisi kuda sadza* (Mum i said i do want sadza)

Mother: *Chidya sadza rako mwanagu, ndozvandisingadi unozviziva* (Eat your sadza my daughter so that, you know i do not like that)

Child: [She takes two mouthfuls and stops eating] *Mhamha ndaguta* (Mum i am full)

Mother: *Hona princess ari mu TV hona ari kudya ende vhudzi rake rakakura* (Look at the Princess in the movie, she is eating her food and her hair is long) *If you do not eat your food, you will not go and play an Uncle Sam's place.* [The mother gets very annoyed]

Ndakuzokurova manje (I will beat you up if you do not eat)

Child: *Ndaguta* (i am full) [She starts crying and the mother tries to force her to eat but she keeps her mouth closed. The mother gives up .Anne had only taken two mouth full's of her sadza]

Conversation 2 is an example of an unsuccessful persuasive interaction in which the Mother failed to persuade the child to eat. The Mother pointed out that she had not consulted the child on what she wanted to eat nor had the child assisted in preparing the meal. The Mother had finished eating her food first before persuading her child to eat her food .The Mother and daughter were seating in front of the television in the dining room.

5. Discussion

The data from the observations and interviews indicated that Mothers are concerned about their children eating habits and they use a variety of verbal and non-verbal persuasive strategies to persuade their children to eat. However their efforts are met with mixed results as some children are persuaded into eating while others refuse to eat.

5.1. Rewarding Eating

The observed interactions between Mothers and children and the interviews confirmed that rewarding for eating or offering an incentive for eating is widely used as a persuasive strategy. Nine of the ten mothers observed used rewards in the form of 'goodies' for their children to eat. In Conversation 1, Mother A promises her daughter dessert and sweets for finishing her food. Examples of incentive oriented statements included,

Mother B: *Ukapedza rice rako ndinokupa masweets* (If you finish eating your rice, i will give you some sweets),

Mother D: *Idya ndigokutengera matoyi.* (If you eat your food i will buy you some toys.)

Mother G: *If you do not finish your food, i will not give you any ice cream for dessert.*

Offering rewards for eating was a very effective persuasive strategy as the children would immediately start or continue eating when offered something by the Mother. In Conversation 2, Mother C does not offer her child an incentive for eating and this could be a reason why she was

unsuccessful in persuading her child to eat.

The Mothers also used dessert as a control or stick to get children to eat the main portion of the meal and in such instances meat and vegetables were framed as food the children should eat while dessert is cast as food the children want to eat. Parents expected children to eat everything on their plates and this seemed to show that parents assume children unlike adults do not have developed tastes and preferences for certain foods as part of their personalities as they sought to ignore these preferences.

Tapper, Horne and Lowe (2003) suggests that it is unwise to use food as a reward or for any other behavior; as such a reward would undermine the value and enjoyment of the food as the child may view the food as a sign that it must taste bad. It is possible that using food to change behavior detaches food further from its role in satiating hunger and promotes a more problematic relationship with eating such as, undesirable or unhealthy food preferences. However despite the effects of rewarding eating the Mothers agreed that it was a very effective persuasive strategy.

5.2. Use of Tag Questions

Seven of the mothers used tag questions to persuade children to eat the main part of the meal. Tag questions which are similar to rhetorical questions in both style and content are questions added to a declarative statement usually at the end of a sentence. The researcher observed five of the Mothers using tag questions, for example,

Mother K: *Idya ukure handiti?* (Eat your food and you will grow up, isn't?)

Mother F: You have to eat your food, isn't it?

Mother F: You want to grow up, isn't?

Use of tag questions seemed to put children into a position of saying 'yes' verbally or in their minds and they were used by Mothers as a form of agreement catchers. Mothers also added words such as, 'hanti' (Yes) 'right', 'isn't,' and 'ndizvo' (is that it?) to obtain agreement more easily. Tag questions were also used to achieve interaction and since they are not independent clauses they do require a response and this response came in the form of the child eating the meal.

5.3. Hedges

A hedge is a way of qualifying or lessening the impact of a speech act and Holmes (1995) argues that women's use of hedges expresses their interpersonal warmth and linguistic tentativeness. The researcher noted the use of hedges such as, *can, will, may, you know*. For example, Mother B said to her child, '*I can promise you that if you eat, i will buy you the toys you want*'. The use of hedges in interactions observed made the children to eat because the children understood them in the context of a reward or incentive that would come after eating the meal. Mother C in Conversation 2 failed to persuade her child to eat most probably because she had not promised her child something.

The observed interactions contradict earlier findings that a message containing hedges may decrease the clarity of messages arguments by implying a more neutral possible than non-hedged speech thereby decreasing the messages persuasiveness (Kchevar: 1967).

5.4. Hypnotic Language

Hypnotic language is the use of presuppositions in a sentence. The researcher noted a high prevalence of the use of the word, *if*, for example in the utterances,

Mother E: *Ukasadya sadza rako hauone TV*. (If you do not eat your sadza, you will not watch TV)

Mother D: *Ukapedza sadza rako unonogara nevamwe*. (If you finish your sadza, you will sit with the others)

Mother J: *Ukasadya haukure*. (If you do not eat you will not grow).

Hypnotic language is presented in an '*if*' manner suggesting that if the child eats the food, then something good will happen thereby expressing a causal relationship between the child eating or not eating. In such cases the children seemed to accept the cause and effect constructs without interrogating the why implied in the relationship.

5.5. Positivity and Negativity

In persuading children to eat, an important persuasive strategy used by the Mothers was valence (positivity and negativity) which is the extremity of the language used. In Language Expectancy Theory, language is seen as rule-governed system and people develop expectations concerning the language or message strategies employed by others in persuasive attempts (Burgoon: 1995). The use of words with positive connotations provoke positive associations while the use of words with negative associations can be used to create an unfavorable impression and can sway the children towards the mother's view. Mother A in Conversation 1 asks her child, '*Haudi kukura here mwanagu uite musikana mukuru?*' (Don't you want to grow up into a big girl?)

Words with positive connotations such as, '*Ukadya unokura*' (If you eat your food you will grow), '*Mwana akanaka anodya*' (A good child eats her food) provoked positive associations with eating which are brought out by growing up healthy and being a good child. Words with negative connotations such as, '*Ukasadya mazino ako haameri*' (If you do not eat your food, your teeth will not grow) and '*If you do not eat you will not be able to play soccer*' seemed to create an unfavorable impression of the child if the child did not eat as it was associated with not growing any teeth and not being able to play soccer. The study confirms Gleason's (1987) findings that mothers use more indirect speech acts and that women's speech is more supportive (Christie: 2000, Fishman: 1980).

Closely linked to the use of words with positive and negative associations was the use of positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness according to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) is defined as redressive action

directed to the addressee's positive face (the desire that wants should be thought as desirable) and it satisfies that desire by communicating that one's own wants are in some respects similar to the addressee's wants. This was mainly brought out through the use of inclusive language, for example, in the utterance, '*Ngatidyei, hona Anna anodya ndosaka akakura*' (Let's eat, look at Anna, she eats her food that is why she is healthy). Inclusive language creates feeling of 'us' (The mother and child) against 'them' (Those who do not want to eat) creating a sense of common purpose between the Mother and the child. Negative politeness is defined as redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face (the want to have freedom of action unhindered and attention unhindered). This redress partially satisfies need for positive action by weakening a challenge by making it negative, for example, in the statement, '*Ungade kusadya kuti urware?*' (Would you like to get sick because of not eating?). Mother C in Conversation 2 was probably unsuccessful in persuading her child to eat because she had not used inclusive language.

Closely associated with valence was the use of modeling as a persuasive strategy. The Mothers pointed out that children are great hypocrisy detectors and they soon detect parents who tell them to eat but rarely do themselves and if parents do not eat then children will be unlikely to do so. The researcher observed that Mother A, Mother D and Mother K told their children to eat their food because they had finished theirs. For example, Mother H said to her child, '*Hona ini ndapedza, iwe chipedzawo uite mwana akanaka*' (Look, I have finished eating my food, finish your food so that you can become a good child) which was a very effective persuasive strategy as it sent a message that the food was safe. Mother C and Mother G ate their food before the children started eating theirs and the children did not see them finishing their food which could have been a reason why they failed to persuade their children to eat.

The interviews revealed that Mothers use reinforcement to 'shape' or 'encourage' children to act in certain ways and not others in a process known as, 'socialization'. When eating, Mothers pointed out that they can reinforce by a smile, a nod, a hug or some other sign of approval. Three of the mothers pointed out that they would talk to the child on the importance of eating while four participants indicated that they persuaded their children to eat by getting them to be involved in cooking and by designing their own food with pasting or cheese cut into funny shapes or just using the sauce to make funny faces. Mother A, Mother F and Mother J pointed out that one of the most effective persuasive strategies was to get personalized cutlery and plates. For example a child might like a certain color, pattern or something that shows their hero such as, Ben Ten or Spider Man.

The observations and interviews revealed that Mothers also use body language to persuade their children to eat. A gentle touch on the arm and a reassuring pat on the back were cited as important strategies which made the children to feel safe and assured. The mothers also pointed out that

eating at the same table and sitting at the same level and not standing over the child was also an effective strategy as it made the child to feel like an equal and in control. Of note was the effect of distractions on persuasive attempts such as the television noted in Conversation 2 where the child seemed not to want to eat because the child and Mother were both watching television.

The researcher also observed that six of the Mothers followed their child's slow pace and also took their time to decipher and respond to the child's non-verbal cues which to the researcher appeared to communicate an 'I am in no hurry, I am having fun just hanging out with you' attitude. Of note were Mothers C and G who used a regular adult pace as they hurried their children to eat because they wanted to watch their favorite soap on television which caused the children to stop eating their meal.

5.6. Intensives

The observed Mothers also used linguistic extremity which is a set of stylistic markers that can increase the perceived extremity of a message position (Hamilton and Stewart: 1993). Extremity is a specific component of linguistic intensity which is characterized by language markers that influence the extent to which a message differs from a neutral position, for example Mother K said to her child, '*This is really bad*', when the child was initially refusing to eat and "*Waita zvakana wapedza chikafu chako*" (You have done well by finishing your food), when the child had finished her food.

Closely linked to extremity is the use of intensifiers which can be defined as language that indicates the degree to which the speaker's attitude towards a concept deviates from neutrality (Hamilton and Stewart: 1993). For example, Mother K remarked, "*Zvakaipisira, kusadya mwanangu*" (It is very bad for you not to eat my child). This emphasized that not eating was indeed a very bad habit which could not be tolerated.

The observations indicated that facial expressions seemed more to express the persuasive intents of the participants than verbal messages. Of importance was the general configuration of the eyebrows, eyes and mouth which showed concern. Intense eye contact, a strong gaze and the prolonged eye contact seemed to inculcate a sense of guilt in the children as they would shy away and avoid the Mothers gaze and start eating. The mothers observed also portrayed a calm and attentive facial expression and which seemed to assure the child. However Mother C and Mother G got angry and distressed and the children seemed to pick up these negative emotions and started crying.

5.7. Deictic Phrases

Deictic phrases are words specifying identity, spatial or temporal location from the perspective of a speaker in the context in which communication occurs. Such phrases according to Ward (2012) introduce particulars of the

speakers and hearers shared cognitive field into the message. In other words, deixis refers to the phenomena whereby the understanding and meaning of certain words and phrases in an utterance requires contextual information. Examples of deictic phrases in sentences noted by the researcher included, 'He has eaten her food' and 'He will not take you to the Lunar Park'.

The use of deictic phrases directly points the Mother's attention to a referent given in the situation in the utterance and the researcher noted that the deictic phrases were often used in combination with gestures. The Mothers mainly referred to the Children's fathers and older brothers who would have finished eating their food.

5.8. Directives and Requests

Goodwin (2006:57) defines directives as 'Utterances designed to get someone to do something'. However, such a description leaves out the boundaries of what should make up the content of a directive relatively open as it does not clearly distinguish between a directive from a request. According to Goodwin (2006) while requests are as contingent to varying degrees on the recipient's willingness or ability to comply, directives embody no orientation to the recipient's ability or desire to perform the relevant activity. The lack of orientation to ability or desire maybe what makes them recognized as directives.

All the participants confirmed to using directives which the researcher also regarded as requests as a last resort to make children eat their meals. Statements such as, 'Eat your food' and 'Pedza chikafu chako' (Finish your food) and 'Anne, i said eat your sadza' by Mother C led to children refusing to eat while some started crying.

5.9. Narratives

The researcher also observed that Mothers would also recount their own positive childhood memories of particular dishes at the dinner table to persuade children to eat. In this manner food items are not only imbued with positive sentiments but also served to link family members across generations and in some cases bring family members no longer alive into family members consciousness. For example, Mother A alluded to the fact that when she was young she used to eat all their food. Another important component of children meal time was engagement in mealtime prayers as shown in Conversation 1. Children were expected to lead, join in or say their own grace and to be silent during the meal. Praying seemed to place the children in a situation where not eating was against God and those who ate all their food were 'god's children'.

6. Conclusion

The findings and explanations presented in this study revealed the predominant use of verbal and non-verbal persuasive strategies by Mothers in persuading children to eat their dinner meal. The positive relationship between

persuasive strategies and positive eating habits indicate that Mothers need to device effective strategies to persuade children to eat since some of the persuasive strategies create tension between Mothers and children leading to poor eating habits.

The study also illustrated the difficulties Zimbabwean mothers face and the compromises they make as they negotiate eating practices during dinner time as family meal times are punctuated by battles over individual desires and parent's expectations for good eating habits. Meal times also become prime sets of debate over individual control, regulation of excesses and what constitutes moral behaviour slipping into judgements about a 'good or bad parent, a good or bad child'. The results also show that Mothers may need assistance from linguists and behavioral sciences scientists on how to persuade their children to eat their meals.

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