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Introduction

Why do parent–child argumentative interactions matter? What is the reason for such an interest? This chapter provides the reasons that motivated the study of parent–child argumentation with the aim to understand the function of this type of interactions. Focusing on the activity of family mealtime, in the first part, the chapter draws attention to the distinctive features of parent–child conversations. A second section of the chapter is devoted to discussing whether and, eventually, when children have the competence to construct arguments and engage in argumentative discussions with the aim to convince their parents to change opinion. In the last part of the chapter, research questions and structure of the volume are presented.

1.1 Introduction

Ten years ago, in a volume concerning the role of argumentative practices in the educational sphere, Muller Mirza, Perret-Clermont, Tartas and Iannaccone (2009, p. 76) stressed that the argumentative attitudes learned in the family are to be considered “the matrix of all other
forms of argumentation.” The thesis sustained by these authors has not remained isolated, because, since then, parent–child interactions have been considered by many scholars coming from different disciplines as an important object of investigation for the study of argumentative practices. What is the reason for such an interest? Why do parent–child argumentative interactions matter? Is it because the family environment, like the school environment, is for children one of the first spaces for learning argumentative skills, or, instead, there is, also, a different reason? To answer this question, in this volume, we will try to understand the function of these types of interactions. Understanding the function of parent–child argumentation will help to clarify the reasons why it matters.

An important decision at the base of this volume is what kind of interactions between parents and children to analyze. The choice to consider as the object of research of the present study the conversations between parents and children during mealtime is indeed not casual. This choice is based on the fact that the activity of mealtime represents a privileged moment for studying the argumentative interactions between parents and children because it is one of the few moments during the day in which all family members come together and engage in verbal interactions. Mealtime is a “densely packed event” in which much has to happen in approximately twenty minutes (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006, p. 77). At mealtime, parents and children talk about several issues, from daily events to the school and extracurricular activities of children, and possible plans for future activities involving one or more family members. During these discussions, differences of opinion among family members can quickly emerge (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015). The correct management of the differences of opinions is of fundamental importance, since, at times, they can even degenerate into a full-blown interpersonal conflict (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009). The parents could easily avoid engaging in a discussion by advancing arguments in support of their standpoint, and yet resolve the difference of opinion in their favor, forcing children to accept, perhaps unwillingly, their standpoint. The difference in age, role, and skills with their children would allow them to do so. Now, it is evident that this happens frequently. However, equally frequently
during mealtime, we can observe argumentative discussions, in which parents and children put forward arguments to convince the other party that their standpoint is more valid, and, accordingly, deserves to be accepted. By reading this volume, the readers will find out why this happens.

1.2 Distinctive Features of Parent–Child Mealtime Conversations

Mealtime is the term used to describe all meals consumed during the day. In many cultures, meals include breakfast, lunch, and an evening meal referred to colloquially as dinner or tea. Research about mealtime practices, however, is usually concerned with lunchtime and dinner-time. Family mealtime represents more than a particular time of day at which to eat. Rather, it is a social activity type that is organized and produced by the family members in a locally situated way using the resources of talk and interaction (Mondada, 2009). Mealtime in families with young children is no less embedded in sociocultural routines and norms than other social events, yet it also has its distinctive features. As shown by Irvine (1979), on a continuum of formality, it occupies an interim position between mundane, day-to-day informal encounters and formal public events, and it has certain organizational principles that are accepted and shared in many different cultures.

A shared convention is that family mealtime is a colocated activity, i.e., family members may overhear the talk of other family members (Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989). Colocation also means that once a discussion is initiated, it may lapse and then be reinitiated, and so family members are in a continuing state of incipient talk (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 325). However, simultaneous speech in family mealtime conversations is not considered, in most cases, as a turn-taking problem or as a violation in need of repair. For example, it is possible to observe conversations between two family members, between all family members, or even two conversations occurring at the same time. Therefore, not all mealtime conversations are necessarily multiparty,
but the potential for multiparty talk is always a possibility at mealtime.
The following dialogue is a good illustration of how two different con-
versations, the first, from line 1 to line 7, between the father and her
7-year-old son, Samuele, and the second, from line 3 to line 6, between
the mother and his 5-year-old daughter, Adriana, can both occur at the
same time:

Excerpt 1.1
Italian family III. Dinner 1. Family members: father (DAD, 37 years),
mother (MOM, 37 years), Samuele (SAM, 7 years and 11 months), and
Adriana (ADR, 5 years and 4 months). All family members are eating,
seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table, MOM
and SAM sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while ADR sits on their
opposite side.

1. *DAD: non più Coca-Cola, Samuele
   → *DAD: adesso: ti do un po’ di riso
2. *SAM: non voglio nient’altro!
3. *MOM: hai sonno Adriana?
5. *SAM: no:: sono pieno:
   %sit: Samuele sta bevendo la Coca-Cola
   Samuele is drinking Coca-Cola
   %act: DAD guarda verso SAM

Talking while eating between parents and children is not acceptable
everywhere. When it is, it is usually regulated by norms of what is appro-
appropriate to say, at which moment and to whom. In certain cultures, verbal
activities are reduced to a necessary minimum. However, in most urban
well-educated Western populations, mealtime talk between parents and
children is not only permitted but also called for and expected. For exam-
ple, the next extract shows how, in a Swiss family, a mother, in line 6, invites
her 5-year-old son, Filippo, who was talking with his 3-year-old brother,
Carlo, to share with the rest of the family his opinion on “doing sports”:

Excerpt 1.2
Swiss family III. Dinner 3. Family members: father (DAD, 39 years),
mother (MOM, 34 years), Manuela (MAN, 7 years and 4 months),
Filippo (FIL, 5 years and 1 month), and Carlo (CAR, 3 years and
1 month). All family members are eating, seated at the meal table. DAD
sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and MAN sit on the left-hand
side of DAD, while FIL sits on their opposite side.

%sit: FIL sta parlando con un tono di voce basso a CAR
FIL is talking in a low tone of voice to CAR
1. *FIL: è importante!
   it is important!
2. *CAR: cosa?
   what?
3. *FIL: fare attività sportiva
   doing sports
→ *FIL: ti fa diventare più forte!
   it makes you stronger!
%act: MOM e DAD si guardano e sorridono
MOM and DAD look at each other and smile
4. *MOM: cosa hai detto ((Filippo))?
   what did you say ((Filippo))?  
5. *FIL: cosa?
   what?
6. *MOM: perché è importante fare sport?
   why is it important to do sports?
→ *MOM: noi tutti vogliamo sentire perché
   we all want to hear why
7. *FIL: perché ti fa diventare più forte! [:! FIL fa il gesto di mostrare i
   muscoli del
   because it makes you stronger! [:! FIL makes a gesture to show
   his arm muscle]
   braccio
   everyone laughs

%act: tutti ridono
everyone laughs
Regarding the topics discussed during mealtime, the choice of the topics discussed by parents and children is strictly affected by the specific context of mealtime (Aukrust, 2002; Billig, 1997; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2018). For example, parents and children do not sit at the meal table to talk about the theory of the relativity; instead, they talk mostly about food and good table manners. In addition to teaching children how to eat together with others (Bova, Arcidiacono, & Clément, 2017; Wiggins, 2004, 2013), the family also transmits and transforms all kinds of other eating practices, such as how to comply, or not, with requests to finish (Laurier & Wiggins, 2011). However, during mealtime, parents and children not only talk about daily events and food-related topics. As observed by Blum-Kulka (1997, p. 9), the conversations between parents and children during mealtime are unpredictable as they are characterized by substantial, but not total, freedom about the issue that can be tackled. For example, children learn about their parents’ jobs and more in general about work, as they listen to and interact with their parents (Paugh, 2005).

During mealtime conversations, preferences for certain types of comments may be culture-specific. For example, Swedish parents are more concerned in providing behavioral rules for their children than Estonian and Finnish parents (De Geer, 2004; De Geer et al., 2002; Tulviste, Mizera, De Geer, & Tryggvason, 2002). Israelis parents are primarily concerned in providing rules for their children on correct language use, i.e., meta-linguistic comments, whereas Jewish Americans parents pay more attention to discourse management, i.e., turn-taking (Blum-Kulka, 1993). Not all topics, though, are open for discussion between parents and children at mealtime. For instance, money, politics, and sex are usually viewed as less suitable themes for mealtime conversations, above all in the presence of young children (Blum-Kulka, 1994; Ochs, 2006). These unmentionables comply with a covert formal rule for topic selection that is shared by all members within the family, although the interpretations attached to these avoidance practices may vary according to culture and families.

An important aspect that must be considered in the study of parent–child conversations at mealtime is the asymmetrical distribution of rights between them. The parents, in fact, exhibit particular rights in
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this kind of interactions, which usually would not be accorded in adult–
adult interactions (Erickson, 1988; Hepburn & Potter, 2011). In other
words, parents typically ascribe more rights to themselves than their
children, who typically may have restricted conversational rights (Speier,
1976, p. 101). For instance, parents can enforce silence when children
play together, whereas such as intervention in adult activity by children
would be considered impolite. Or, if a child interrupts a discussion
between adults, the adult may invoke their right to demand politeness.
An example of this dynamics is illustrated in the following dialogue
between a father and her 8-year-old son, Marco:

Excerpt 1.3
Italian family V. Dinner 2. Family members: father (DAD, 42 years),
mother (MOM, 40 years), Marco (MAR, 8 years and 6 months), and
Leonardo (LEO, 5 years and 7 months). All family members are seated
at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table, MOM and
LEO sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while MAR is seated on their
opposite side.

1. *DAD: Marco, questa sera non hai proprio fame
   *DAD: non hai mangiato quasi niente!
   → *DAD: this evening you are not hungry at all, Marco
   you have hardly eaten anything!
2. *MAR: ma non dire sciocchezze, non è vero!
   but do not talk nonsense, it is not true!
3. *DAD: Marco, innanzitutto rispondi in modo educato, e adesso finisci
di mangiare!
   Marco, first of all, answer politely and now finish eating!

In this sequence, the father, in line 1, saying to his son, Marco,
that, according to him, that evening he was not hungry at all because,
until that moment, he had hardly eaten anything. The child, in line 2,
replies to his father accusing him of saying nonsense, since, for him,
it was not true that he had not eaten anything. In line 3, the father
says to his child that his reply was impolite (“Marco, first of all, answer
politely”), and orders to him to finish eating the food (“and now fin-
ish eating!”). Some scholars (e.g., Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Maccoby
& Martin, 1983; Pomerantz, Grofnick, & Price, 2005) pointed out that this type of parents’ behavior might be interpreted as serving the need of parents to present themselves as the source of authority and power in front of their children. However, during mealtime, parents frequently have a high level of conversational involvement in the many facets of children’s lives and, on most occasions, even the youngest children are granted participatory rights as ratified conversational partners. In particular, the use of a wide range of supportive strategies by parents encourages children to initiate topics of personal relevance to them (Beals, 1997; Snow & Beals, 2006; Weizman & Snow, 2001). For example, Nevat-Gal (2002) showed that the participation of young children to family discussions is favored by the use of humorous phrases by parents. Commenting ironically on the attitudes or habits of children is also a supportive strategy adopted by parents during mealtime conversations to encourage their children to initiate topics of personal relevance to them (Brumark, 2006; Rundquist, 1992). Moreover, a series of studies have shown that conversations with their parents during mealtime represent an opportunity for children to practice both explanatory and narrative talk (Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Beals, 1993; Beals & Snow, 1994; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013), to extend their vocabulary (Beals & Tabors, 1995; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005), and to gain practice in the full diversity of roles available (Georgakopoulou, 2002). In this regard, it is particularly illuminating to look at the following dialogue, where the mother, in line 7, asks her 5-year-old daughter, Adriana, to help her to finish the narration of a daily event:

**Excerpt 1.4**

Italian family III. Dinner 2. Family members: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Samuele (SAM, 7 years and 11 months), and Adriana (ADR, 5 years and 4 months). All family members are eating, seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table, MOM and SAM sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while ADR sits on their opposite side.
1. **MOM:** oggi io, la nonna e Adriana, abbiamo fatto una passeggiata in montagna!
   *today, Grandma, Adriana and I took a walk in the mountains!*
2. **ADR:** sì sì
   *yes*
3. **MOM:** era una bellissima giornata, c’era un bel sole
   *it was a beautiful day, and there was a nice sunshine*
4. **DAD:** quanto avete camminato?
   *how long did you walk?*
5. **MOM:** più di due ore!
   *more than two hours!*
→ **MOM:** a un certo punto: abbiamo perso la nonna
   *at some point we lost Grandma*
→ **MOM:** e ci siamo fermati ad aspettarla.
   *and we stopped waiting for her*
→ **MOM:** poi, è arrivata dopo dieci minuti
   *then, after ten minutes she came*
→ **MOM:** e indovina cosa ci ha detto? ((rivolgendosi a DAD))
   *and try to guess what she said? ((talking to DAD))*
6. **DAD:** cosa?
   *what?*
7. **MOM:** Adriana, cosa ha detto la nonna? continua tu!
   *Adriana, what did Grandma say? finish telling the story!*
8. **ADR:** ha detto:: che si era fermata a raccogliere dei fiori!
   *she said that she stopped to pick some flowers!*
9. **DAD:** ah ah [:! ridendo]
   *ah ah [:! laughing]*
%act: anche MOM e ADR ridono
   *MOM and ADR laugh too*

In this sequence, the mother, in line 1 and line 3, is sharing with the other family members what she, her daughter, Adriana, and the Grandmother did together that day: they took a nice walk in the mountains and that it was a beautiful day. The father, in line 4, asks a question to his wife concerning this daily event, and the mother answers to him. What is interesting is that the mother, in line 7, asks her daughter, Adriana, to help her to finish the narration of this daily event: “Adriana, what did Grandma say? finish telling the story!” In this case, the child accepts the mother’s request and, in line 8, she shares with the rest of the family the narration of the daily event: “she said that she stopped to pick some flowers!”
1.3 Can Children Engage in Argumentative Discussions with Their Parents?

Several studies have highlighted how children first learn to argue with others through interactions with their parents (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Hay & Ross, 1982; Stein & Albro, 2001) and other siblings (Ross, Ross, Stein, & Trabasso, 2006; Shantz, 1987; Slomkowski & Dunn, 1992). Later, when children enter school, they are offered many opportunities to engage in argumentative discussions and learn how to resolve disputes with their peers (Howe & McWilliam, 2001; Mercer & Sams, 2006; Orsolini, 1993). However, at what age children start to show signs of the ability to construct arguments and engage in argumentative discussions with the aim to convince their parents to change their opinion? Studies addressing this issue and the answers provided are seemingly contradictory.

Many scholars agree with the claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development. Dunn and her colleagues (Dunn & Munn, 1987; Tesla & Dunn, 1992) showed that in mother–child exchanges on differences of opinion over the “right” to perform specific actions, by age 4 children justify their position by arguing about the consequences of their actions. By age 5, children learn how to engage in opposition with their parents and become active participants in family conflicts. Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1997) observed that in story-telling with their parents, children aged between 4 and 5 years make use of sophisticated argumentative skills by calling into question the rules imposed by their parents. Hester and Hester (2010) showed that children aged 7 years could use both context-bound and cultural resources to produce their arguments. Brumark (2008) has observed that children aged 12–14 years use arguments that require more than one exchange to be resolved, whereas children aged 7–10 years use shorter arguments that are about the immediate context.

Compared with the studies mentioned above, according to Stein and her colleagues the age at which children acquire argumentative skills comes even earlier. In Stein’s view, children are already familiar with conflict interactions by age 2. They become able to understand family disagreements by age 4. In domains that are familiar to them, they...
demonstrate some of the argumentative competences of older children and even of adults by age 5. For example, Stein and Trabasso (1982) posited that children could construct elaborate moral justifications by age 5 when the issue is well-known and appealing to them. The purpose of Stein and colleagues’ work is to demonstrate that the development of argumentation skills has an interpersonal root and that children first learn to master their skills with their parents, siblings, and peers (Stein, Bernas, Calicchia, & Wright, 1995; Stein & Miller, 1990, 1993). Overall, the results of their studies suggest that children have a sophisticated knowledge of argument in social situations that are to them personally significant.

The claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development seems to be contradicted by the work by Kuhn and her colleagues, who documented the poor performance of children in argumentative tasks (Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Kuhn, 1991, 1992; Kuhn & Udell, 2003). According to Kuhn and her colleagues, epistemological understanding underlies and shapes argumentation. In other words, to properly comprehend argumentative processes, it is necessary to examine children’s understanding of their knowledge. Although epistemological understanding progresses developmentally, Kuhn and her colleagues observed that in justifying a claim, young children have difficulty in differentiating explanation and evidence in an argument. These findings lead Kuhn to affirm that young children do not have sufficient skills to engage in argumentative discussions with their parents.

The differences between the results of the studies of Stein and those of Kuhn, which appear to be mutually contradictory, can be explained for if we look at the different methodology applied in their studies. The reason for these differences is well-formulated by Schwarz and Asterhan (2010, pp. 150–151):

In the two kinds of studies, the methodological tools were of a very different nature. For Kuhn, these were structured interviews or questionnaires, administered at different ages […] In contrast, Stein and her colleagues directly observed children in natural settings while settling disputes or negotiating a decision. The ability to challenge or to counterchallenge was observed in situ […] It is then clear from a theoretical point of view that the development of argumentation skills and their manifestation in a given situation is highly sensitive to context.
Schwarz and Asterhan emphasize the importance of evaluating the argumentative skills of young children in the real contexts in which they engage in argumentative discussions. Despite some differences in methodology and interpretation, the studies on the argumentative skills of young children have the merit to show that preschool children can understand and generate an argument, and to construct justifications in defense of a standpoint. Moreover, these studies bring to light the important function represented by parent–child conversations, which are a sort of laboratory where children learn and improve the argumentative skills they can use in many different contexts.

1.4 Research Questions and Structure of the Volume

The main research question that will guide this volume can be formulated as follows: What is the function of parent–child argumentation? To answer this broad question, three research questions have been devised with the aim to examine in detail all the relevant features of the argumentative discussions between parents and children. In a first phase, the focus will be directed to investigate the initial phase of the argumentative discussions between parents and children during mealtime, with the aim to identify the types of issues that lead them to engage in an argumentative discussion: “On what types of issues do parents and children engage in argumentative discussions?” (Question 1). Subsequently, the focus will be directed to investigate how parents and children contribute to the development of their argumentative discussions. The purpose of this phase of the analysis is to identify the types of arguments adopted most often by parents and children to convince the other party to accept their opinions: “What are the types of arguments adopted most often by parents and children to convince the other party to accept their opinions?” (Question 2). Finally, in the last phase of analysis, the goal will be to single out the most frequent types of conclusions of the argumentative discussions between parents and children during mealtime: “How do parents and children conclude their argumentative
discussions during mealtime after they started and engaged in them?" (Question 3). The results of this investigation should provide us with a detailed reconstruction of the function played by argumentative interactions between parents and children during mealtimes.

To clarify how the research questions will be answered, the structure of this volume is as follows. Chapter 2 provides a detailed exposé of the research methodology on which the investigation of the argumentative discussions between parents and children during mealtime is based. In the first part of the chapter, the conceptual tools adopted for the analysis of parent–child argumentation, i.e., the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion and the Argumentum Model of Topics, are presented. Subsequently, the process of data gathering, the procedures for the transcription of oral data, and the main practical problems and ethical issues and practical problems in collecting parent–child mealtime conversations are discussed. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, ethical issues and practical problems in analyzing family mealtime conversations present throughout the study are considered. Chapter 3 is devoted to the investigation of the initial phase of parent–child argumentative discussions during mealtime (Question 1). In this chapter, the types of issues leading parents and children to engage in argumentative discussions during mealtimes as well as the specific contributions that parents and children provide to the inception of argumentation will be analyzed and discussed. To discuss the results, some exemplary argumentative discussions between parents and children will be presented and discussed. Chapter 4 is devoted to the investigation of the most frequent arguments used by parents and children as well as the different types of conclusions of their argumentative discussions (Questions 2 and 3). As for the previous chapter, to discuss the results, some exemplary argumentative discussions between parents and children will be presented and discussed. In Chapter 5, I will first provide an overview of the main findings of the analysis presented in the previous chapters. Subsequently, I will answer the research question which motivated this study: What is the function of parent–child argumentation? Finally, I will indicate new open questions that should guide future investigation on parent–child argumentation.
References


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