

Pre-print version of the paper:

10. Bova, A. (2019). Parental strategies in argumentative dialogues with their children at mealtimes. *Language and Dialogue*, 9(3), 379-401. doi: 10.1075/ld.00048.bov

Parental strategies in argumentative dialogues with their children at mealtimes

Abstract

This study focuses on parent-child argumentation to single out the argumentative strategies most frequently used by parents to resolve in their favor the process of negotiation occurring during the argumentative dialogues with their children at mealtime. Findings of the analysis of 132 argumentative dialogues between parents and children indicate that parents mostly use arguments based on the notions of quality and quantity in food-related discussions. The parents use other types of arguments such as the appeal to consistency, the arguments from authority, and the arguments from analogy, in discussions related to the teaching of the correct behavior in social situations within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. The results of this study bring to light how parents and children contribute to co-constructing the dialogic process of negotiating their divergent opinions.

Keywords

Argumentative strategies, family, mealtime, negotiation, parent-child interaction

1. Introduction

Family mealtime¹ 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 (Goodwin, 2007; Mondada, 2009; Ochs, 2006). At mealtimes parents and children can talk about several issues, from daily events to school and extra-curricular activities of the children and possible plans of future activities involving one or more family members (Aukrust, 2002). The degrees of dialogical freedom at mealtimes can vary from family to family and depend on various contextual and social factors (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). However, not all topics are open for discussion at mealtimes. For instance, money, politics, and sex are usually viewed as less suitable themes for mealtime discussions, above all in the presence of young children (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Tulviste et al., 2002).

Among the everyday activities bringing together family members, mealtime represents an excellent opportunity to investigate how parents and children can interact and engage in argumentative dialogues spontaneously (Bova, 2019). Generally, during mealtime, argumentation plays an incidental - not a structural part, because family members do not sit exclusively at the meal table to convince the other family members about the validity of their own opinions. However, during mealtime, what happens frequently is that, on the one hand, the parents try to convince their children to accept their rules and prescriptions, while, on the other hand, the children cast doubt on the parents' standpoint² and ask their parents to make the reasons on which their standpoint is based more explicit. In consequence, spontaneous argumentation between parents and children during mealtime does not start from a positive reply but the total or partial rejection of an asserted standpoint or, at least, from doubts about it.

¹ 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 dinnertime, as it is the case in the present work.

² Standpoint is the analytical term used to indicate the position taken by a party in a discussion on an issue. As Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2009, p. 44) put it: "a standpoint is a statement (simple or complex) for whose acceptance by the addressee the arguer intends to argue."

Within the framework of family argumentation research (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015, 2017; Bova, 2015a, 2015b, 2019; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2015; Brumark, 2008; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2016; Pontecorvo & Pirchio, 2000), the present study aims to single out the argumentative strategies most often adopted by parents with their children during their argumentative dialogues at mealtime. In agreement with other scholars (Kuhn, 1991; Voss & Van Dyke, 2001; Weigand, 2006), I refer to a single argument as a product and the dialogic argumentation as a process, the latter being implicit in the former. An argument, therefore, is always included within a “dialogic structure of negotiation which results on the basis of diverging views” (Weigand, 2006, p. 71), and it can be understood fully only if the entire argumentative dialogue is considered. In all argumentative dialogues, including the ones between parents and children during mealtime, the interlocutors choose the types of argument that are useful either to support their standpoint or to weaken the interlocutor’s standpoint. In this study, by "argumentative strategies," I will refer to the arguments that are advanced by parents and children with the scope to support, explain, justify, and defend their standpoint.

To present this study, the paper is organized as follows: in its first part, a concise review of the most relevant literature on family argumentation is presented; afterward, the methodology on which the present study is based and the results of the analyses are described; finally, the results obtained from the analyses and the conclusions drawn from this study are discussed.

2. Studies on argumentation in the family context

The interest in studying the argumentative interactions during mealtime is because during this activity it is frequently possible to observe how behaviors and points of view of family members are put into doubt (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009; Bova, 2019). Consequently, family members often need to support their statements through argumentative reasoning. A series of studies have brought to light the most recurrent dynamics characterizing the initial phase of the argumentative dialogues between parents and children. For instance, these

dialogues exhibit some unique ways of advancing doubts. One such way is the Why-question, frequently – but not exclusively – asked by children to their parents. According to Bova and Arcidiacono (2013b), this type of question challenges parents to justify their rules and prescriptions, which frequently remain implicit or based on rules not initially known by or previously made explicit to children. Recently, Bova, Arcidiacono, and Clement (2017) have shown how commenting ironically on the attitudes or behavior of children appears to be an argumentative strategy adopted by parents to persuade the children to withdraw their standpoint. In a similar vein, Laforest (2002) noted that using humor when responding, creating an ironic distance that takes away the severity of the blame, is a typical strategy adopted by parents to avoid the beginning of an argumentative dialogue with their children.

The acquisition of argumentative strategies is a crucial element in the development of reasoning skills in children (Mercier, 2011; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997; Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002) because it is through the daily exchanges with their parents that children begin to learn to produce and sustain their standpoints in verbal interactions with others. For example, Bova (2015a) observed that children always refer to an adult as a source of expert and not another child. According to this author, the actual effectiveness of this argument – that he has called ‘argument from adult-expert opinion’ – depends on how strongly parents and children share the premise on which the argument is based. Focusing on food-related argumentative dialogues, a series of studies (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999) show that children’s argumentative strategies mirror the argumentative strategies adopted by their parents, although their view on the issue is the opposite of that of their parents. Analyzing an argumentative dialogue between a brother and a sister during a family meal, Hester and Hester (2010, p. 44) show that the children’s arguments are organized both sequentially and categorically: “The brother could be heard to degrade his sister via his conversational actions – directives, accusations, enacted descriptions, mimicry, and mockery – whilst she, in turn, resists them through her rebuttals, accounts, counter-enacted descriptions, and other oppositionals.”

The study of argumentation in the family has also attracted the attention of developmental psychologists. For example, Dunn and Munn (1987) focused their attention

on the topics' family members cover when engaging in argumentative dialogues. In this study, the authors observed that children engage in argumentative dialogues with mothers on various topics, whereas with their siblings they primarily concern issues of rights, possession, and property. Slomkowski and Dunn (1992) have shown that children most often use self-oriented arguments, namely, talking about themselves. On the contrary, parents above all use arguments that refer to children and not to themselves, i.e., other-oriented arguments. Taken together, the results of these studies indicate that the argumentative dialogues in the family are oriented mainly towards the youngest child, and less towards the parents or the older siblings.

In this paper, I intend to go a step further within this research direction, thus providing a relevant contribution to the research strand on family argumentation. We have seen that in most cases the studies aimed at investigating the argumentative dialogues between parents and children have been focused on the specific argumentative contribution provided by children. Moreover, most studies have considered the number of arguments advanced by participants as the sole indicator to examine their argumentative interactions. Hitherto, less attention has been paid to investigate the types of argumentative strategies³ used by parents. To start filling this gap in the literature on parent-child argumentation, in the present study my focus is on the parents' generation of arguments during spontaneous argumentative dialogues with their children during mealtime with the aim to answer the following research questions: "What are the argumentative strategies most often used by parents to resolve in their own favor the dialogical process of negotiation occurring during the argumentative dialogues with their children at mealtime?"

3. Methodology

3.1. Data corpus

³ As already clarified in the Introduction section of this article, by "argumentative strategies" I refer to the arguments that are advanced by participants with the scope to support, explain, justify and defend their standpoint.

The present investigation is part of a larger project⁴ devoted to the study of argumentative practices in the family context. The research design implies a corpus of thirty video-recorded separate family meals (constituting about twenty hours of video data), constructed from two different sets of data, named *sub-corpus 1* and *sub-corpus 2*. All participants are Italian-speaking⁵. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 min. Sub-corpus 1 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five Italian families living in Rome. The criteria adopted in the selection of the Italian families were the following: the presence of both parents and at least two children, of whom the younger is of preschool age (3- to 6-year old). All families in sub-corpus 1 had two children. Sub-corpus 2 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five Swiss families⁶, all residents in the Lugano area. The criteria adopted in the selection of the Swiss families mirror the criteria adopted in the creation of sub-corpus 1. Families had two or three children.

3.2. Transcription procedures

All family meals were fully transcribed adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system CHAT⁷ (MacWhinney, 2000), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability (see the Appendix) and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (agreement rate = 80%) has been reached. Information on the physical setting of the mealtimes, i.e., a description of the kitchen and the dining table, was also made for each

⁴ I am referring to the Research Module “Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in the family context” (project n. PDFMP1-123093/1) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

⁵ Participant Swiss families live in the southernmost canton of Switzerland, the canton of Ticino. Switzerland has four national languages: French, German, Italian, and Romansh. The canton of Ticino is the only canton in Switzerland where the sole official language is Italian.

⁶ Although the data corpus on which the present study is based is constituted of families of two different nationalities, a cultural comparison aimed at singling out argumentative differences and commonalities between the two sub-corpora is not a goal of this study.

⁷ The acronym “CHAT” stands for Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcripts.

family meal. Italian data are presented in the original, using *Courier New* font, whereas the English translation is added below using *Courier New Italic* font.

3.3. Definition of argumentative situation and selection of the arguments

The approach adopted for the analysis is the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). This model is assumed as a grid for the analysis since it provides the criteria for the reconstruction of argumentative dialogues between parents and children and for the identification of the arguments put forth by parents. In the present study, this model does not set up norms of ‘good’ or ‘reasonable’ argumentative dialogues. Rather, the ideal model of a critical discussion becomes guidelines of behavior that must be included in the reconstruction of argumentation by describing them, i.e., not by claiming them to be fulfilled. According to this model, if there is not a difference of opinion between two, or more, interlocutors, we cannot talk of an argumentative discussion between them. Accordingly, in the present study, the dialogues between parents and children were considered as argumentative whether the following criteria were satisfied:

- (i) during a dialogue between parents and children, a difference of opinion between them arises around a certain issue;
- (ii) one child questions the one standpoint advanced by the parent;
- (iii) the parent puts forward at least one argument either in favor of or against the standpoint being questioned.

4. Results

All the argumentative dialogues within the corpus of 30 video recorded meals (N = 107) have been selected. Out of the 107 argumentative dialogues analyzed, parents put forward at least one argument in support of their standpoint in 93 instances, for a total number of

128 arguments. The findings of this study indicate that parents used four different types of arguments during the argumentative dialogues with their children during mealtime: *quality* and *quantity*, *appeal to consistency*, *authority*, and *analogy*. The argument of quality can be referred to a property – positive or negative – of something or specific behavior of someone, while the argument of quantity can be referred to the amount or the size of something or specific behavior of someone (see Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014). The appeal to consistency's argument can be described through the following question: "If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed something in the past, then why aren't you maintaining it now?". The argument from authority used by parents with their children can be described through the following statement: "Person X said/did Y. Therefore, Y must be right/accepted"⁸. As for the argument from analogy, the reasoning behind this argument is the following: "Major Premise: Generally, Case C1 is similar to case C2 (e.g., the weather in January is similar to the weather in December). Minor Premise: Proposition A is true in Case C1 (e.g., in December it rained every day). Conclusion: Proposition A is true in case C2. (e.g., In January, it will rain every day)" (cf. Walton, Reed & Macagno, 2008, p. 58).

Excerpts of qualitative analysis of the argumentative strategies used by parents will be presented for each type of argument in the next sections of the paper (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4). The excerpts presented in the following sections are representative of the results obtained from the broader set of analyses conducted on the whole corpus of arguments put forward by parents during argumentative dialogues with their children.

4.1. Quality and quantity

⁸ In this study, the argument from authority recalls clearly the notion of deontic authority elaborated by Walton (1997, p. 78): "The deontic type of authority is a right to exercise command or to influence, especially concerning rulings on what should be done in certain types of situations, based on an invested office, or an official or recognized position of power." The issue of authority has also been addressed widely within ethnomethodological and conversation analytic work. In this regard, see the special issue of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 45(1), 1-109, and the two seminal articles by Heritage and Raymond (Heritage, & Raymond, 2005; Raymond, & Heritage, 2006). For a detailed study of this type of argument as used by children, see also Bova, 2015b and Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a.

A great many of the arguments used by parents in argumentative discussions with their children refer to the concepts of quality (N = 44) and quantity (N = 32). These arguments were frequently used by parents when the discussion they engaged in with their children was related to food. The argument of quality was often – but not exclusively – used by parents to convince their children that the food was good and, therefore, deserved to be eaten. Parents used the argument of quantity with the same scope of when they used arguments of quality. Typically – but not exclusively – the parents used arguments of quantity to convince their children to eat “at least a little more” food. It is noteworthy to observe that when parents used arguments of quality and arguments of quantity, they often adapted their language to the child’s level of understanding. For example, if the parents’ purpose was to feed their child, the food was described as “very good” or “nutritious,” and its quantity is “too little.” On the contrary, if the parents’ purpose was not to feed the child further, in terms of quality the food was described as “salty” or “not good,” and in quantitative terms as “it is quite enough” or “it is too much.” In the following dialogue between a mother and her 7-year-old son, Fabio, we can see how the mother used an argument of quality to convince her daughter to eat the potatoes:

Excerpt 1.

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 35 years), mother (MOM, 33 years), Fabio (FAB, 7 years and 3 months), Michele (MIC, 4 years and 8 months), Caterina (CAT, 3 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 MIC sit on the left-hand side of DAD, while FAB and CAT sit on their opposite side.

- 1 *MOM: tutto buono ((il cibo)) stasera, no? [parlando con DAD]
everything ((the food)) good tonight, isn't it? [talking to DAD]
- 2 *DAD: veramente eccellente!
excellent!
- %act: MOM guarda verso FAB
MOM looks towards FAB
- 3 *MOM: mamma mia, Fabio stasera non ha mangiato niente [parlando con DAD]
good grief, Fabio has hardly eaten anything tonight [talking to DAD]

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- %act: schiocca leggermente la lingua e scuote la testa in segno di disappunto.
lightly clucking her tongue and shaking her head in disapproval.
4. *MOM: Fabio, devi mangiare le patate.
Fabio, you must eat the potatoes.
5. *FAB: no:: non le voglio ((le patate))
no:: I do not want them ((the potatoes))
6. *MOM: guarda come sono croccanti! ((le patate al forno))
look how crisp they are! ((baked potatoes))
7. *FAB: davvero?::
really?::
- %act: FAB inizia a mangiare le patate
FAB starts eating the potatoes
8. *MOM: bravo Fabio!
bravo Fabio!
- %act: FAB sorride guardando MOM
FAB smiles looking at MOM

Dinner is almost over. The parents are talking with each other, while their children are finishing eating. In line 1, the mother asks the father if he also thinks that the food served during the meal was good. The father agrees with the mother, saying that it was excellent (line 2). Immediately after, the mother expresses her concern because, she says, her 7-year-old son, Fabio, has eaten anything during the meal (line 3). This behavior is in contrast with the excellent quality of the food recognized by both parents at the beginning of the sequence. Within the excerpt, I shall specifically focus on the dialogue between the mother and his son between line 4 and line 7 because, within this phase of their dialogue, they engage in an argumentative dialogue to resolve a difference of opinion between them. The mother, in line 4, makes a claim: she tells her child, Fabio, that he must eat the potatoes. The child reaction, in line 5, fulfills this very claim in a negative sense because he disagrees with his mother (“no:: I do not want them”). The initiative and reactive moves, in lines 4-5, represent the beginning of the argumentative dialogue (cf. Weigand, 1999), since the mother and Fabio have two diverging standpoints: on the one hand, the mother wants Fabio to eat the potatoes, while Fabio does not want to eat them. At this point, the mother reaction is an argument advanced to convince her child to change his opinion and eat the potatoes. One could say that the mother is not trying to convince her child to eat the

potatoes, but, instead, she is ordering his child to do so. In my opinion, this is not the case. As observed in previous studies devoted to argumentative interactions in families with young children, parental directives are often mitigated by persuasion (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2018). The mother's argument, in line 6, refers to the quality of the potatoes and, in particular, it aims at emphasizing the good taste of the food, coherently to what has been previously attested by both parents (lines 1 and 2). The child's reaction, in line 7, fulfills his mother's argument in a positive sense, since the child appears to be persuaded by the argument of quality put forward by the mother and starts eating the potatoes. In this case, mother and child are successful in the process of negotiation between their diverging views (eating vs. not eating the potatoes). The non-verbal act by the child represents the conclusion of the argumentative dialogue and shows the efficacy of the mother's argumentation to convince the child to eat.

In some cases, the argument of quality and the argument of quantity were used together within the same argumentative dialogue by parents, as we can see in the following dialogue between a 7-year-old child, Giuseppe, and his mother:

Excerpt 2.

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 41 years), mother (MOM, 38 years), Giuseppe (GIU, 7 years and 9 months), Donatella (DON, 3 years and 10 months). All family members are eating, seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM sits on the right-hand side of DAD, while GIU and DON sit on her opposite side.

1. ***DAD:** quasi bollente ((il minestrone)) [parlando con MOM]
it is almost boiling ((the soup)) [talking to MOM]
2. ***MOM:** troppo?
too much?
3. ***DAD:** no:: no::
no:: no::
4. ***MOM:** Donatella, ti piace il minestrone?
Donatella, do you like the soup?
%act: DON annuisce come per dire di si

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DON nods as to say yes

%sit: GIU sta mangiando il minestrone
GIU is eating the soup

5. ***GIU:** basta, non ne voglio più ((minestrone)) [parlando con MOM]
that is enough, I do not want more ((soup)) [talking to MOM]

%act: GIU smette di mangiare il minestrone
GIU stops eating the soup

6. ***MOM:** dai, solo un poco in più
come on, just a little bit more

7. ***GIU:** no, non voglio altro:
no, I don't want anything else:

8. ***MOM:** ci sono tutte le verdure!
there are all the vegetables!

%pau: 1.0. sec

9. ***GIU:** no:: no::
no:: no::

%sit: GIU si alza da tavola e corre in un'altra stanza
GIU gets up and runs into another room

Dinner is just started, and the mother has finished serving the main course, i.e., a vegetable soup. All family members are eating it. The father, in line 1, says to the mother that the soup is almost boiling. We can assume that in this case, the mother interprets the father's claim as if he is telling her that the soup is not served at the right temperature but, instead, it is "too much" boiling (line 2). Although the father reassures, the mother needs a further reassurance, and she asks her 3-year-old daughter, Donatella, whether she likes the soup (line 4). Like the father, also the child, Donatella, confirms to the mother that the soup is not too much boiling. As observed in previous studies (Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Bova, 2015c), parents typically consider children's preferences and suggestions about food at mealtimes. Such scaffolding rests on the assumption that even the youngest children are ratified, dialogical partners. However, even if the soup is not too much boiling, i.e., it was served at the right temperature to be eaten, the 7-year-old son, Giuseppe, stops eating and tells that he does not want more soup. At this point, a difference of opinion between Giuseppe and his mother arises, since they have diverging views on the right amount of soup that has to be eaten.

Within this excerpt, I shall specifically focus on the dialogue between the mother and Giuseppe between line 5 and line 9. The reason of this choice is because within this phase of their dialogue the process of argumentation emerges as a process of negotiation between their diverging views on the proper amount of soup that has to be eaten by Giuseppe. The child, Giuseppe, in line 5, makes a claim: he tells his mother that he does not want to eat more soup because he has already eaten enough amount. The mother's reaction, in line 6, fulfills this very claim in a negative sense because she disagrees with her son. The mother advances an argument that refers to the quantity of food ("come on, just a little bit more") to convince her son to keep eating it. The mother is saying that eating just a little bit of soup would allow the child to reach the proper amount of soup that must be eaten. By doing so, the mother is also mitigating (cf. Caffi, 1999) the force of her standpoint, i.e., Giuseppe has to keep eating the soup, because she is telling her son that, till that point, he almost ate the right amount of soup, so now he has to make just a little effort to reach the right amount. The initiative and reactive moves, in lines 5-6, represent the beginning of the argumentative dialogue since the child, Giuseppe, and his mother explicit their diverging views on the right amount of soup that has to be eaten during that meal. In this case, the mother's argument of quantity is not effective to convince the child to change his opinion and, accordingly, to decide to keep eating the soup. The child reaction, in line 7, is a further confirmation of his initial standpoint ("no, I do not want anything else:"), indicating that he is not willing to change his opinion. Like her son, also the mother is not willing to withdraw her initial standpoint. To convince Giuseppe to keep eating the soup, in line 8, she decides to put forward a further argument. The second argument advanced by the mother does not refer to the quantity of soup but to its quality: the child must eat a little more soup because it is made with all the vegetables. We can, therefore, assume that, according to the mother, the vegetables represent a positive quality of the soup. However, despite the mother's argumentative effort, Giuseppe is not willing to change his opinion and, to avoid going on the process of negotiation through an argumentative dialogue with his mother, he decides to leave the table (line 9). The argumentative dialogue between the mother and her son does not find a conclusion nor a compromise between the two participants. Why did the initial positions remain the same? The withdrawal as the closing

possibility of the verbal exchange around the soup can be considered, in this case, the sign that participants do not intend to continue the discussion (Vuchinich, 1990). According to Weigand (2001), there are in principle three reasons for rejecting a standpoint: practicability, the usefulness of the action, and the interlocutor's motivation. In this case, I would exclude the first two reasons, and I would consider the child's lack of motivation to change his initial standpoint as the reason why he decided to run away from the table and, accordingly, from the argumentative dialogue with his mother as well.

4.2. Appeal to consistency

The second type of argument used by parents with their children refers to the consistency with past behaviors (N = 20). The next dialogue between a 7-year-old child, Antonio, and his mother is a clear illustration of the use of this type of argument:

Excerpt 3.

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Antonio (ANT, 7 years), Maria (MAR, 4 years and 5 months), Ilaria (ILA, 3 years and 2 months). All family members are seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the table; MOM and ANT sit on the left-hand side of DAD. MAR sits on their opposite side, while ILA is seated on the DAD's knees.

1. *MOM: Antonio, ieri sei stato bravissimo
Antonio, you had been very good yesterday
2. *ANT: perché?
why?
3. *MOM: perché?
why?
4. *MOM: zia Daniela mi ha detto che ieri sei stato bravissimo
aunt Daniela told me that you were very good yesterday
5. *MOM: hai fatto tutti i compiti ((di scuola))
you did all the ((school)) homework

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6. *MOM: quindi domani torni da zia Daniela a fare i compiti, va bene?
so tomorrow you're going back to aunt Daniela's to do your homework, ok?
7. *ANT: no:: non voglio
no:: I do not want to
8. *MOM: andiamo, Antonio
come on, Antonio
9. *MOM: ma ieri sei stato lì tutto il pomeriggio
but yesterday you were there all afternoon
10. *MOM: e oggi hai detto che ti sei divertito tanto!
and today you said that you had so much fun!
11. *ANT: mhm:: ((ANT ha un'espressione perplessa))
mhm :: ((ANT has a puzzled expression))
- %act: ANT annuisce mostrando così di essere d'accordo con MOM
ANT nods to say that he agrees with MOM
12. *MOM: ok, allora domani ti accompagno da zia Daniela
ok, so tomorrow I will take you to aunt Daniela

The dinner is started by 15 minutes, and all family members are eating the main course. The excerpt starts when the mother, in line 1, sends a compliment to her 7-year-old son, Antonio: “Antonio, you had been very good yesterday.” By these words, the mother shows her intention to start a dialogue with her son. However, Antonio does not know the reason why, according to her mother, yesterday, he was very good (line 2). In line 3, the mother unveils the reason on which her compliment to his son was based: she says that aunt Daniela told her that yesterday he was very good because he did all the school homework. Within this excerpt, I shall specifically focus on the dialogue between the mother and Giuseppe between line 6 and line 12 because, within this phase of their dialogue, they engage in an argumentative dialogue to resolve a difference of opinion between them.

In line 6, the mother makes a claim that reveals the logical consequence of the child’s behavior: she wants Antonio to go again at aunt Daniela’s home to do his school homework. The reasoning used by the mother to support her standpoint that Antonio must go again to aunt Daniela’s house to do his school homework is based on the logical form “as X, so Y” (given the consistency of the first element, the second element is then justified). The child reaction, in line 7, fulfills this very claim in a negative sense because he disagrees with his mother (“no:: I do not want to”). The initiative and reactive moves, in

lines 6-7, represent the beginning of the argumentative dialogue, since the mother and the child, Antonio, have two diverging standpoints. At this point, the mother reaction is an argument advanced to convince her child to change his opinion and go again to aunt Daniela's house to do his school homework. It is particularly interesting the strategy used by the mother, as she puts forward, in lines 9-10, an argument referring to the consistency with past behaviors: "but yesterday you were there the entire afternoon, and today you said that you had so much fun!". By referring to an action Antonio did in the past ("yesterday you were there the entire afternoon") and emphasizing how good that event was for him ("today you said that you had so much fun!"), the mother tries to show to Antonio that his present behavior should be consistent with the behavior he had in the past. In sustaining her argumentative strategy, in line 9, the mother used the marker "but." Even if we can never be sure about what goes on in another person's mind, we can assume that this choice is because she wants to underline the contradiction between the previous behavior of his son, i.e., the time spent at the aunt Daniela's home, and his non-consistent reaction, i.e., he does not want to go there again. The effect of the marker "but" is also reinforced through the conjunction "and" that introduces the fact that the child, Antonio, said that he had fun with aunt Daniela. In this case, we can observe how mother and child are successful in the process of negotiation between their diverging views (going vs. not going again at aunt Daniela's home to do his school homework). The child's reaction, a non-verbal act, i.e., he nods to say that he agrees with his mother fulfills his mother's argument in a positive sense, since he accepts to go the day after at aunt Daniela's home to do his school homework.

4.3. Authority

The third type of argument most often used by parents in argumentative dialogues with their children is the argument from authority (N = 19). Interestingly, in the corpus, when parents put forth arguments from authority with their children, the authority always proves to be an adult. In particular, in most cases, the parents referred to themselves as a source of authority. Less frequently, the parents refer to a third party such as a family friend, the

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grandfather, or a teacher as a source of authority. The following dialogue between a mother and her 5-year-old son, Filippo, offers a clear illustration of the use of this type of argument:

Excerpt 4.

Swiss family. Participants: 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.

1. ***MOM:** Filippo, devi mangiare un poco di questo formaggio
Filippo, you must eat a little of this cheese
2. ***FIL:** no.
no.
3. ***MOM:** si: perché solo il pane non è abbastanza
yes: because bread alone is not enough
4. ***FIL:** no, non voglio il formaggio
no, I do not want cheese
5. ***MOM:** questo è quello che ha comprato il Nonno però::
this is the one Grandpa bought, though::
6. ***MOM:** è delizioso!
it is delicious!
7. ***FIL:** davvero?
really?
8. ***MOM:** si, l'ha comprato il Nonno!
yes, Grandpa bought it!
%act: FIL sorride mostrando così di essere d'accordo con MOM
FIL smile to say that he agrees with MOM
9. ***MOM:** è delizioso!
it is delicious!
%act: MOM mette un pezzo di formaggio nel piatto di FIL
MOM puts a piece of cheese on FIL's plate

The dinner has been in progress for about 15 minutes. This sequence starts with the mother, in line 1, making a claim: she tells her son, Filippo, that he must eat a little cheese

along with his bread. The child reaction, in line 2, fulfills this very claim in a negative sense because he does not want to eat the cheese (“no”). The initiative and reactive moves, in lines 1-2, represent therefore the beginning of their argumentative dialogue, since the mother and the child, Filippo, have divergent views on a food-related issue. In argumentative terms, the mother’s standpoint, i.e., Filippo must eat a little cheese, has been met by the child’s refusal. In line 3, the mother reacts to her son opposition by advancing an argument of quantity to convince Filippo to withdraw his opposite standpoint: “Because bread alone is not enough.” However, the child, in line 4, reacts to his mother’s argument reasserting his original position: “No, I do not want cheese.” At this point, the mother puts forward two further arguments to convince the child to change his opinion. The first argument, i.e., “This is the one Grandpa bought,” in line 5, is an argument from authority, while the second argument, i.e., “it is delicious,” in line 6, is an argument of quality. These two arguments, more than the first one, succeed in catching the child’s attention (“really?”, line 7). In the attempt to convince her child to change his opinion, the mother repeats once again the same two arguments, in line 8 and line 9. A non-verbal act – the mother puts a piece of cheese on the child’s plate – represents the end of this argumentative dialogue. The child goes on to eat the cheese willingly, showing that he accepted his mother’s standpoint.

In this example, I want to stress the attention on the argument from authority advanced by the mother in line 5 and line 8 (“This is the one Grandpa bought”). The mother refers to her son’s grandfather as a source of authority to convince the child to accept her standpoint and eat a little cheese along with his bread. In this case, the child accepts the mother’s argumentation and withdraw his opposite standpoint. We cannot know if the Grandfather is indeed an authority figure, but what matters here is that in the child’s eyes, his grandfather is an outstanding authority. The mother bases her argumentation on the nature of the grandfather-grandson relationship and on the feelings that are at the ground of this specific relationship, i.e., the Grandfather loves his Grandson, and vice versa. Therefore, it is an argument from authority based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on the fear of punishment. Another aspect highlighted from this study concerns the level of knowledge that the child has of the adult who represents the source of authority. When parents refer to another adult as a source of authority, I observed that the parents

always refer to an adult who is well-known by and has positive feelings towards the child such as a grandparent or a teacher. This is in line with what has been observed by Sarangapani (2003), who highlighted sources that according to children possess epistemic authority, including teachers, grandparents, and older peers. According to this author, any knowledge presented by these sources is considered believable by children and rarely, if ever, questioned. Further investigation in this direction is undoubtedly necessary.

4.4. Analogy

The fourth type of argument put forward by parents in argumentative dialogues with their children is the argument from analogy (N = 9). The following example offers a clear illustration of the use of this type of argument by a mother during a dialogue with her 9-year-old son, Gerardo:

Excerpt 5.

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 42 years), mother (MOM, 40 years), Gerardo (GER, 9 years and 6 months), Leonardo (LEO, 3 years and 9 months). GER and LEO are seated at the meal table. MOM is standing and is serving dinner. DAD is seated on the couch watching TV.

- %act:** la cena è appena iniziata. MOM serve da mangiare ai bambini, DAD invece è ancora seduto sul divano a guardare la TV
dinner is just started. MOM serves the food to children, DAD instead is still seated on the couch watching TV
- 1. *MOM:** dai vieni:: la cena è pronta [parlando a DAD]
come:: dinner is ready [talking to DAD]
 - 2. *DAD:** solo un attimo
just a moment
 - 3. *MOM:** vieni: altrimenti si raffredda
come: otherwise it gets cold
- %pau:** 2.5 sec
- 4. *GER:** Mamma

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Mom

5. *MOM: cosa Gerardo?
what Gerardo?
6. *GER: secondo me la maestra Annalisa ((la maestra di matematica)) ci dà tanti compiti da fare per le vacanze ((riferendosi alle vacanze di Natale))
I think that the teacher Annalisa ((the Math teacher)) will give us a lot of homework to do during the holidays ((referring to the Christmas holidays))
7. *MOM: no:: no:
no:: no:
8. *MOM: secondo me no
I do not think so
9. *GER: si invece!
I do though!
10. *MOM: no:: secondo me no.
no:: I do not think so.
11. *MOM: se la maestra Francesca ((la maestra di italiano)) non l'ha fatto, non lo farà neanche la maestra Annalisa
if teacher Francesca ((the Italian teacher)) did not do it, teacher Annalisa would not do it either
12. *GER: speriamo! ((sorridente))
let us hope so! ((smiling))
- %act: anche MOM sorride
MOM smiles too

Dinner is just starting. The mother is serving the food, while the father is still seated on the couch watching TV. The mother, in line 1, asks the father to sit at the meal table and enjoy the meal since the food is ready. This event, i.e., the mother announcing the beginning of the meal, represents a common starting point for the activity of mealtime. In the analysis of this excerpt, I shall specifically focus on the dialogue between the mother and his son, Gerardo, between line 4 and line 12 because, within this phase, they engage in an argumentative dialogue to resolve a difference of opinion on an issue related to the school context.

The child, Gerardo, in line 4, tries to call his mother's attention ("Mom"). The mother, in turn, asks Gerardo what he needs to say to her ("what Gerardo?"). By doing so, the mother expresses her willingness to start a dialogue with her son. At this point, the

child, in line 6, makes a claim: he tells his mother that he thinks that the Math teacher, i.e., the teacher Annalisa, will give them – this means not only to him but to all the students of his class – much homework to do during the Christmas holidays. The mother’s reaction, in lines 7-8, fulfills this very claim in a negative sense because she disagrees with her son (“no:: no: I do not think so”). The child’s initiative standpoint and the mother’s reactive answer, in lines 6-8, represent the beginning of the argumentative dialogue because the child and his mother have two diverging views on a possible future behavior by the Math teacher. The child reaction, in turn, in line 9, is a further confirmation of his initial standpoint (“I do though!”). However, he does not advance any argument in support of his position. The mother, instead, in line 11, advances an argument from analogy to convince her child to change his opinion. According to the mother, if the Italian teacher did not give them homework to do during the Christmas holidays, neither would the Math teacher. The reasoning behind the mother’s argument can be inferred as follows: because the two teachers share some similarities, i.e., they are both teachers of the same class, they will behave similarly. In this case, the mother’s argumentation appears to be effective in convincing her son to change his opinion. In line 12, the child does not continue to defend his initial standpoint (“let us hope so!”), and the dialogue ends with both of them smiling.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The parent-child argumentative dialogues during mealtime is an object of research which can provide us with much information on how parent-child manage their interactions during everyday activities. This study has shown how the dialogic process of argumentation between parents and children during mealtime emerges as a process of negotiation between diverging views on the subject matter. The focus on the argumentative dialogues, therefore, allows us to understand the way in which the differences of opinions are managed by family members. Argumentation between parents and children during mealtime does not start from an affirmative reply. Instead, parents advance arguments only in reaction to a rejection of their standpoint or at least from doubts about it by their children. By engaging

in argumentative discussions, parents accept the commitment to clarifying to their children the reasons on which rules and prescriptions are based, while children can become more aware of being full-fledged active participants of their family. Family argumentative interactions should, therefore, be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship in which parents affect children and are simultaneously affected by them (cf. Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001).

Argumentation in the family context, as in all the different types of interpersonal interactions (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2017), cannot but be dialogical. In this study, we have seen that both parents and children contribute to co-constructing the dialogic process of negotiating their divergent opinions. The structure of parent-child argumentative dialogues, in fact, is constituted by the interaction between initiative and reactive moves which are aimed at resolving their differences of opinion. The argumentative dialogues between parents and children relate to various issues, some of them discussed more than others during mealtimes. For example, we have seen, in most cases, argumentative dialogues related to the food preferences of family members, but also to the teaching of the correct table-manners by parents, or the children's behavior within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. What are the argumentative strategies most often used by parents to resolve in their own favor the dialogical process of negotiation occurring during the argumentative dialogues with their children at mealtime? During the argumentative dialogues with their children, parents choose arguments that are useful either to support their position or to weaken the position of their children.

The results of the analysis of the argumentative dialogues considered for this study indicate that parents mostly put forward arguments based on quality and quantity to convince their children to eat. The argument of quality is typically used by parents to convince their children that the food is good and, therefore, deserves to be eaten. Similarly, the argument of quantity is used by parents to convince their children to eat more food. As we have seen in excerpt 2, the argument of quality and the argument of quantity can also be used together by parents within an argumentative dialogue with their children. Moreover, the parents' choice of using a language level that can be easily understood by children is a

typical trait of the argumentative interactions between parents and children during mealtime.

Compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, the other types of arguments, i.e., the appeal to consistency, the arguments from authority and the argument from analogy, were less frequently used by parents. What is interesting about these types of arguments is the fact that they introduce new elements within parent-child mealtimes interactions, which are not only related to the evaluation of the quality or quantity of food, but also touch on other important aspects that characterize family interactions. I refer to the teaching of the correct behavior in social situations within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. Accordingly, argumentative dialogues during family mealtime are an essential activity to promote children's language socialization, i.e., the process of learning, by means of verbal interactions, through which children construct and transform their structure of knowledge and their competence (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2016). Parent-child argumentation, though, favors not only the language socialization but also the cultural socialization of children. In this study, we have seen that the argumentative discussions between parents and children, in fact, are not intended to be mere conflictual episodes that must be avoided, but opportunities for children to learn the reasons on which the behaviors, values, and rules typical of their culture are based. For example, the following dialogue between a mother and her 6-year-old son, Luca is a clear illustration of how the mother explains to her son the reason why his behavior, i.e., whispering things in his Dad's ears, is not correct:

Excerpt 6.

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 41 years), mother (MOM, 38 years), Luca (LUC, 6 years and 8 months), and Luisa (LUI, 3 years and 11 months). All family members are seated at the meal table. DAD sits at the head of the meal table. MOM and LUI sit on the right-hand side of DAD, while LUC sits on their opposite side.

%act: PAO si avvicina a DAD e gli dice qualcosa parlandogli nell'orecchio

PAO goes towards DAD and whispers something in his ear

1. ***MOM:** non si dicono le cose all'orecchio, Luca

Luca, you cannot whisper things in people's ears

2. *LUC: perché?

why?

3. *MOM: dobbiamo ascoltarla tutti

because everyone must hear it

[...]

In this dialogue, in line 1, the mother says to the child that he cannot whisper in his father's ear, and the child, in line 2, asks his mother to explain the reason why he cannot whisper in his Dad's ears. The argument used by the mother, in line 3, clarifies the reasons why the child's behavior is not appropriate and, accordingly, the child does not have to repeat that behavior: "because everyone must hear it." In this case, the difference of opinion with her son is an opportunity used by the mother to teach him a behavior that until that moment he did not know or, at least, he did not know very well: to not whisper in people's ears.

The consideration regarding the transmissions of behaviors, values, and rules typical of their culture are based by parents opens the way for new research paths, not addressed in this article. The analysis of parent-child argumentative dialogues should consider how what is typical or not within a specific community can affect the interlocutors' dialogical choices. Addressing topics related to children's personal lives, such as what they do during the day, what kind of activities they do at school, and who their friends are, is a typical parental behavior at mealtimes adopted by western families (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs & Shohet, 2006; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999). This behavior has been typical of western families for twenty or thirty years now but has not always been so. For example, it is interesting to report the case of a rural French family depicted by Margaret Mead (Mead, 1959, cited in Blum-Kulka, 1997, p. 11) in her film *Four Families*, where the meal is entirely task-oriented, generating only occasional remarks associated with the business of having dinner but containing no extended conversation. Further research in this direction is needed to understand better how features and constraints of the activity of family mealtime affect the way parents and children make strategic choices in argumentative dialogues.

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Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) [grant number PDFMP1-123093/1].

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Appendix: Symbols of transcription

*	indicates the speaker's turn
[...]	not-transcribed segment of talking
(())	segments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of the situation
[=!]	segments added by the transcriber to indicate some paralinguistic features
xxx	inaudible utterance(s)
%act:	description of speaker's actions
%sit:	description of the situation/setting
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
:	prolonging of sounds
?	rising intonation

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- ! exclamatory intonation
- maintaining the turn of talking by the speaker
- %pau:** pause of 2.5 sec
- @End** end of the family meal