Children's responses in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions

Antonio Bova*

Department of Psychology, Utrecht University, Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- To investigate parent-child argumentative interactions.
- The data corpus is composed of 132 argumentative discussions.
- In their argumentative choices, parents and children affect one another.
- The children's arguments mirror the same types of arguments previously used by parents.
- When parents advance complex arguments, children do not advance arguments.

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ABSTRACT

This study sets out to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions. The data corpus is composed of 132 argumentative discussions selected from 30 video-recorded meals of 10 middle to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families. Data are presented through discursive excerpts of argumentative discussions and analysed by the pragma-dialectical ideal model of critical discussion. The findings show that when parents advance context-bound arguments such as the arguments of quality (e.g., very good, salty, or not good) and quantity (e.g., too little, quite enough, or too much) of food, the arguments advanced by children mirror the same types of arguments previously used by parents. On the other hand, when parents advance more complex, elaborated, and context-unbound arguments such as the appeal to consistency's argument, the argument from authority and the argument from analogy, the children typically did not advance any argument, but their response is an expression of further doubt or a mere opposition without providing any argument. Overall, the results of this study indicate that the types of children's responses are strictly connected to the type of argument previously advanced by their parents. This aspect is particularly relevant in terms of children's capacities to engage in argumentative exchanges and to react in rational ways during the confrontation with the parents. Further research in this direction is needed in order to better understand specific potentialities of language in the everyday process of socialization within the family context.

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1. Introduction

Mealtime represents a crucial activity to investigate how parents and children interact and argue since it is one of the few occasions during the day that brings all family members together (Bova and Arcidiacono, 2015; Fiese et al., 2006; Ochs et al., 1996).

Within the framework of family argumentation research (Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo, 2009; Bova and Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Brumark, 2008; Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1997; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002), this study sets out to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in discussions at mealtimes relating to parental rules and prescriptions. It is not a goal of the present study to make an assessment of the arguments advanced by parents and children, i.e. deciding whether or not a certain argument is fallacious. Rather, my goal is to investigate the children's capacities to...
engage in argumentative exchanges and to react in rational ways during the confrontation with their parents. In particular, the following two research questions will guide this study: (1) In discussions of parental rules/prescriptions, when do children advance arguments to refute their parents’ arguments? (2) When children try to refute their parents’ arguments, what types of arguments do they advance? These research questions will be answered by means of a qualitative analysis of a corpus constituted of 132 argumentative discussions between parents and children.

The analytical approach for the analysis of the argumentative discussions between parents and children is based on the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). This model proposes an ideal definition of argumentation developed according to the standard of reasonableness: an argumentative discussion starts when the speaker advances his/her standpoint, and the listener casts doubts upon it, or directly attacks the standpoint. Accordingly, confrontation, in which disagreement regarding a certain standpoint is externalized in a discursive exchange or anticipated by the speaker, is a necessary condition for an argumentative discussion to occur. This model particularly fits this study, and more generally, the study of argumentative interactions occurring in ordinary contexts such as family mealtime conversations, because it provides specific criteria in order to select and identify the argumentative discussions as well as the arguments advanced by participants.

The present paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, a concise review of the most relevant literature on argumentative interactions between parents and children at mealtimes will be presented. In Section 3, the methodology on which the present study is based will be described. The results of the analysis are discussed in Section 4, followed by the Section 5, which summarizes the main findings and comments on their limitations and strengths.

2. Argumentative interactions during family mealtimes

Alongside a number of studies that have highlighted the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (see e.g., Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2008; Muller Mirza and Perret-Clermont, 2009), the relevance of argumentation in the family context is rapidly emerging in argumentation studies. In particular, the structure as well as the linguistic elements characterizing the argumentative interactions between parents and young children have been investigated by several scholars. Bova and Arcidiacono (2013a) have examined a specific type of invocation of authority - that they defined as “the authority of feelings” - used by parents in argumentative discussions relating to a wide range of topics such as the activity of mealtimes and children’s behaviour both outside and within the family context. The same authors have also shown that during food-related argumentative discussions, parents in most cases put forward arguments based on the quality and quantity of food to convince their children to eat (or not to eat more) (Bova and Arcidiacono, 2014a). Similar results can be found in studies on eating practices within family mealtimes by Paugh and Izquierdo (2009) and by Wiggins and her colleagues (Laurier and Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins, 2013).

The interplay between arguments and counter-arguments is evidenced in the frame of antagonistic situations between parents and children. Goodwin (2005), analysing a dispute between a father and his son, has shown how utterances opposing another position in an argument are constructed with a simultaneous orientation to (a) the detailed structure of the prior utterance being opposed and (b) the future trajectories of action projected by that utterance, which the current utterance attempts to counter and intercept. Examining the sequential analysis of directive use in conversations between parents and young children during mealtimes, M.H. Goodwin (2006) has shown how forms of arguments built of recycled positions differ in important ways from arguments where children are involved in accounting for their own behaviour with their parents. Situations where children shirk their responsibilities can lead to escalations of assertions of authority through threats or a parent’s giving up in defeat. By way of contrast, where parents are persistent in pursuing their directives, often facilitated by situations where children and parents join in sustaining face-to-face access to one another, children learn to be accountable for their actions. In a recent study by Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2009), an analysis of verbal conflicts in a family context has shown the role of the turn-by-turn details of conflict talk as situated interaction, the main aspects of the linguistic choices speakers make in designing and delivering their utterances, and the role of the contextual aspects such as the participants’ social relationship, and age for the production and interpretation of talk.

Turning to children’s oral argumentation, most scholars agree with the claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development (e.g. Anderson et al., 1997; Mercier, 2011; Orsolini, 1993; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Stein and Albro, 2001; Dunn and colleagues (Dunn, 1988; Dunn and Munn, 1987; Herrera and Dunn, 1997; Tesla and Dunn, 1992) showed that by age 4 children, in discussions with their mother, are able to justify their own 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 verbal participants in family conflicts. Moreover, Slomkowski and Dunn (1992) also show that children most often use self-oriented arguments, i.e. talking about themselves, whilst parents generally use other-oriented arguments, i.e. arguments that refer to children and not to themselves. Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1997) and Bova and Arcidiacono (2013b) observed that during mealtime conversations with their parents, children make use of sophisticated argumentative skills by calling into question the rules imposed by their parents. Brumark (2008) showed that adolescents aged 12–14 years use arguments that last longer and require more exchanges to be resolved, whilst children aged 7–10 years use shorter arguments that are about the immediate context. In particular, the author observed that the arguments of older children are quite elaborate, while the argumentative structure of younger children tends to be simple, and only rarely involves elaboration beyond one or two arguments. Hester and Hester (2010, p. 44) showed that children are able to use both context-bound and cultural resources to produce their arguments.

This concise review of the available literature shows that studies on argumentative interactions among family members during mealtimes have devoted considerable attention to investigating the argumentative strategies adopted by parents and the argumentative skills of young children. This study aims to provide a further contribution to the research strand on family argumentation. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the types of responses by children aged between 3 and 7 years in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data corpus

The data corpus is composed 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-speaking. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 min.

Sub-corpus 1 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five middle to upper-middle-class Italian families with a high socio-economic status 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 (3–6 years). Most parents at the time of data collection were in their mid-30s (M = 37.40; SD = 3.06). All families in sub-corpus 1 had two children.

Sub-corpus 2 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five middle to upper-middle-class Swiss families with a high socio-economic status, 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. At the time of data collection, most parents were in their mid-30s (M = 35.90; SD = 1.91). Families had two or three children. Detailed information on family constellations in sub-corpus 1 and sub-corpus 2 are presented in Table 1:

### Table 1: Length of recordings, participants, average age of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-corpus</th>
<th>Italian</th>
<th>Swiss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of recordings in minutes</td>
<td>20—37</td>
<td>19—42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean length of recordings in minutes</td>
<td>32.41</td>
<td>35.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults, total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total participants</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age of participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>36.40 (SD 2881)</td>
<td>34.80 (SD 1.643)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>38.40 (SD 3209)</td>
<td>37.00 (SD 1.581)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son</td>
<td>7.50 (SD 3619)</td>
<td>5.83 (SD 1.835)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>4.00 (SD 1414)</td>
<td>4.86 (SD 2.268)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-born</td>
<td>9.00 (SD 2.00)</td>
<td>7.60 (SD 2.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 sons; 1 daughter)</td>
<td>(3 sons; 2 daughters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-born</td>
<td>3.20 (SD .447)</td>
<td>4.40 (SD .548)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 sons; 3 daughters)</td>
<td>(2 sons; 3 daughters)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-born</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 (SD .000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 son; 2 daughters)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As specified in a consent letter signed by the researchers and the parents, the parents agreed to participate and that their children would also participate, provided the data would be used only for scientific purposes and privacy would be guarded. The information packet also made clear to participants that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time and that any concerns they had about the ethics of the study could be referred to the researchers for clarification at any time.

In a first phase, all family meals were fully transcribed by two researchers adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system CHAT (MacWhinney, 2000), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability (see the Appendix 1 for the conventions. The level of agreement between the two researchers, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, was very high (.82). Afterwards, the researchers reviewed together with the family members all the transcriptions at their home. This procedure allows asking the family members to clarify passages that were unclear to researchers on account of low level of recording sound and vague words and constructions. Information on the physical setting of the mealtimes, i.e., a description of the kitchen and of the dining table, was also made for each family meal. In the transcription of the conversations, this practice has proved very useful for understanding some passages that were unclear to researchers.

In this article, data are presented in the original Italian language, using bold font, whereas the English translation is added below using italic font. In all examples, discursive turns are numbered progressively within the sequence, and family members are identified by role (for adults) and by name (for children). In order to ensure the anonymity of children, their names in the paper are pseudonyms.

### 3.2. Data collection and transcription procedures

As specified in a consent letter signed by the researchers and the parents, the parents agreed to participate and that their children would also participate, provided the data would be used only for scientific purposes and privacy would be guarded. The information packet also made clear to participants that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time and that any concerns they had about the ethics of the study could be referred to the researchers for clarification at any time.

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1. Although the data corpus on which the present study is based is constituted of families of two different nationalities, Italian (sub-corpus 1) and Swiss (sub-corpus 2), a cultural comparison aimed at singling out differences and commonalities between the two sub-corpora from an argumentative point of view is not a goal of this study.

2. Based on the parental answers to questionnaires about socio-economic status (SES) and personal details of family members that participants filled before the video-recordings.

### 3.3. Analytical approach

The analytical approach adopted for the analysis is the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004). This approach considers that argumentative speech acts are not performed in a social vacuum, but between two or more parties who are having a disagreement and interact with each other in an attempt to resolve this disagreement. The model of a critical discussion spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion (see van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, pp. 60–61):

- **Opening stage.** At the opening stage, the decision is made to attempt to resolve the dispute by means of a regulated

  3. 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”.

- **Confrontation stage.** At the confrontation stage, it is established that there is a dispute. A standpoint is advanced and questioned.
argumentative discussion. One party takes the role of protagonist, which means that he is prepared to defend his standpoint by means of argumentation; the other party takes the role of antagonist, which means that he is prepared to challenge the protagonist systematically to defend his standpoint.

- **Argumentation stage.** At the argumentation stage, the protagonist defends his standpoint and the antagonist elicits further argumentation from him if he has further doubts.

- **Concluding stage.** At the concluding stage, it is established whether the dispute has been resolved on account of the standpoint or the doubt concerning the standpoint having been retracted.

In the present study, the ideal model of a critical discussion is assumed as a grid for the analysis, since it provides the criteria for the selection of the argumentative discussions and for the identification of the arguments put forth by parents and children.

3.4. Definition of argumentative situation and selection of the arguments

The analysis presented in this paper will be focused on the study of analytically relevant argumentative moves, i.e., “those speech acts that (at least potentially) play a role in the process of resolving a difference of opinion” (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, p. 73). In particular, for the present study, only the discussions that fulfill the following three criteria were selected for analysis:

(i) a difference of opinion between parents and children around an issue relating to parental rules and prescriptions becomes evident in the discourse, e.g. *Can the child use the rubber to erase the drawing?*

(ii) at least one standpoint advanced by one of the two parents is verbally questioned by one or more children, or vice versa, e.g. *(CHILD) Yes, I want to try – (PARENT) No, you can't*

(iii) at least one of the two parents put forward at least one argument either in favour of or against the standpoint being questioned, e.g. *(that rubber is for the drawing board and you cannot use it on other things)*

In order to identify the types of arguments put forth by parents and children, the analysis is focused on the third stage of the model of a critical discussion, namely, the argumentation stage. As stated by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, p. 138), in this stage the interlocutors exchange arguments and critical reactions to convince the other party to accept or to retract his/her own standpoint: “The dialectical objective of the parties is to test the acceptability of the standpoints that have shaped the difference of opinion”.

4. Analysis and results

The entire corpus was composed of N = 132 argumentative discussions between parents and children relating to parental rules and prescriptions. In the corpus, the parents advanced at least one argument (in several cases more than only one argument) in support of their rules and prescriptions in N = 125 instances (95%) for a total number of N = 186 arguments. Children advanced at least one argument (in few cases more than only one argument) to refute the parental rules and prescriptions in N = 48 instances (36%), for a total number of N = 58 arguments (Fig. 1).

A synoptic analysis of discussions relating to parental prescriptions’ issues revealed that the arguments addressed by parents to their children can be ascribed to five main argumentative categories: quality (N = 79; 42%), quantity (N = 52; 28%), authority (N = 31; 17%), appeal to consistency (N = 15; 8%), and analogy (N = 9; 5%). The categories of arguments identified in the present study are based on previous studies by argumentation scholars and have already been discussed in the relevant literature (e.g., van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992; Walton et al., 2008). Below, a brief definition of each type of argument identified in the corpus:

- **The argument of quality** can be referred to a property – positive or negative – of something, or to a certain behaviour of someone, whilst the **argument of quantity** can be referred to the amount and/or the size of something, or to a certain behaviour of someone (for example, see Bova and Arcidiacono, 2014a). In our corpus, the arguments of quality and quantity are typically used in discussions relating to the food served during the meal and to the behaviour of children. This is not at all surprising because conversations at mealtimes are often about feeding practices. The other types of arguments advanced by parents with their children, i.e. the arguments from authority, the appeal to consistency’s argument and the argument from analogy, are used in discussions relating to a wider range of topics such as the teaching of the correct behaviour in social situations within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers.

- **The argument from authority** was another type of argument used in some cases by parents in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions with their children. Here, I refer to the definition of argument from authority as 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.” In particular, the criteria in order to select the arguments 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” (for a detailed study of this type of argument as used by children, see also Bova forthcoming).

- **The appeal to consistency’s argument** can be described through the following question: “If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed it in the past, why are you not maintaining it now?” (for example, see Bova and Arcidiacono, 2014b, p. 55).

- **As for the argument from analogy**, in the present study I refer to the definition given by Walton et al. (2008, p. 58). 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 everyday).

In the corpus, I did not observe significant differences in the types of arguments used by mothers and fathers, with the exception of the arguments from authority that were used more frequently by fathers than by mothers. The arguments put forth by children in reaction to their parents’ arguments are, almost exclusively, arguments of quality (N = 25; about 43%) and quantity (N = 30; 52%). Only in three instances a different type of argument was put forth by children, i.e. the argument from authority in two instances and the appeal to consistency’s argument in one instance.

A synthetic view of the arguments advanced by parents and of the types of children’s responses and arguments is presented below (Table 2). Excerpts concerning the argumentative strategies used by parents and the related arguments used by children will follow in the next sections.
4.1. Arguments of quality and quantity

Mostly, in argumentative discussions relating to parental rules and prescriptions the parents used arguments of quality (e.g., nutritious, tasty, beautiful, too salty, hard, polite) (N = 79; 42%) and quantity (e.g., too much, too little) (N = 52; 28%). In the 79 instances in which the parents advanced an argument of quality, the children’s types of responses were the following: immediate acceptance of parent’s argumentation in 6 instances (8%), expression of further doubt in 17 instances (22%), opposition without providing arguments in 24 instances (30%), and in 32 instances they advanced an argument (40%). The children’s arguments were in large part arguments of quality (28 instances) and in few cases arguments of quantity (4 instances). In the 52 instances in which the parents advanced an argument of quantity, the children’s types of responses were the following: immediate acceptance of parent’s argumentation in 6 instances (12%), expression of further doubt in 11 instances (21%), opposition without providing arguments in 11 instances (21%), and in 24 instances they advanced an argument (46%). The children’s arguments were in large part arguments of quantity (21 instances), in 2 instances arguments of quality, and in 1 instance an appeal to consistency’s argument.

The following examples are illustrations of how these two types of arguments are used by parents and how children react through (appropriate) arguments. In the examples one and two, mothers put forward an argument of quality and quantity, respectively, to convince the children to eat. Children, in turn, put forward arguments of quality and quantity to refute the mother’s standpoints.

Excerpt 1. Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 35 years), mother (MOM, 33 years), Giovanni (GIO, 7 years 3 months), Carlo (CAR, 4 years 8 months), Alessia (ALE, 3 years 4 months). All family members are seated at the table. DAD sits at the head of the table, MOM and CAR sit on the left hand side of DAD, whilst GIO and ALE sit on the opposite side.

In example one, the dinner is almost over. The parents are...
talking to each other about food, whilst 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 (line 2: “really good!”). Immediately after, the mother expresses her concern because, she says, her 7-year-old son, Giovanni, has not eaten anything during the meal (line 3). This behaviour is in contrast with the excellent quality of the food recognized by both parents at the beginning of the sequence.

Within this excerpt, I shall focus on the difference of opinion between the mother and her son in lines 4–7. In fact, the mother, in line 4, tells Giovanni that he must eat the meatballs, but the child immediately disagrees with his mother (line 5: “no: I don’t want them”). In argumentative terms, this exchange represents a confrontation stage, since the mother and Giovanni show two opposite standpoints: on the one hand, the mother wants Giovanni to eat the meatballs, while, on the contrary, Giovanni does not want to eat them. At this point, she puts forward an argument in support of her standpoint. The mother’s argument in line 6 is based on the quality of the meatballs and, in particular, it aims at emphasizing the good taste of the food. Giovanni replies that the meatballs are not crisp but, rather, they are hard (line 7).

The arguments advanced by the mother and her son are both aimed to show a specific property of the food served during the meal. What distinguishes mother’s and child’s argumentation is an opposite judgment regarding the quality of food. While the mother’s argument aims to underline a positive property of the meatballs, the use of the adjective “hard” by Giovanni indicates to the mother a negative property of the meatballs. In this case, the argument of quality put forth by the child is effective in convincing his mother to taste the meatballs she has prepared herself. After having tasted the meatball herself, in fact, she agrees with her son that the meatballs are not good (line 8).

**Excerpt 2.** Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 41 years), mother (MOM, 38 years), Luca (LUC, 7 years 2 months), Luisa (LUI, 3 years 10 months). All family members are seated at the table. DAD sits at the head of the table, MOM sits on the right hand side of DAD, whilst LUC and LUI sit on the opposite side.

In example two, the dinner began fifteen minutes ago. All family members are eating the main course, i.e., risotto. The excerpt starts when Luca tells his mother that he does not want to eat more risotto (line 1: “that’s enough, I don’t want more”).

1. *MOM: buono ((il cibo)) stasera, no? [parlando con DAD] good ((the food)) tonight, isn’t it? [talking to DAD]
2. *DAD: veramente buono! really good!
3. *MOM: mamma mia, Giovanni stasera non ha mangiato niente [parlando con DAD]
good grief, Giovanni has hardly eaten anything tonight [talking to DAD]
4. *MOM: Giovanni, devi mangiare le polpette.
   Giovanni, you must eat the meatballs.
5. *GIO: no:: non le voglio ((le polpette))
   no:: I don’t want them ((the meatballs))
6. *MOM: guarda come sono croccanti! ((le polpette))
   look how crisp they are! ((the meatballs))
7. *GIO: no:: sono dure! ((le polpette))
   no:: they are hard! ((the meatballs))
8. *MOM: si, effettivamente non sono tanto buone
   yes, actually they are not very good
9. *MOM: vuoi una piccola cotoletta?
   do you want a little chicken cutlet?
10. *GIO: si::! ((sorridente))
    yes::! ((smiling))
In this example, the mother explicitly disagrees with his son statement (line 1: “that’s enough, I don’t want more risotto”), and immediately puts forward an argument of quantity to convince Giovanni to eat just a little bit more. In line 3 Luca says to his mother that he has already eaten one kilo of risotto. In this case, I can reasonably suppose that according to the child one kilo of risotto represents a big amount. Accordingly, he is saying to his mother that the quantity of rice he has eaten until that moment is more than the right amount. However, unlike the previous example where the argument of quality was effective in convincing the mother to change her opinion, the argument put forth by the child here does not bring about a similar outcome. The mother, in fact, still wants Luca to finish eating the risotto (line 4: “come on: you have not finished yet”). However, despite the mother’s argumentative effort, Luca still disagrees with her and leaves the table (line 5: “no: no:”). The argumentative sequence does not find a conclusion or a compromise between the two participants. The withdrawal as closing possibility of the verbal exchange around the risotto can be considered, in this case, the sign that one of the participants, i.e. the child, became too upset to continue the discussion.

In conclusion, in this section we have seen that the arguments of quality and quantity are the most frequent types of arguments advanced by parents and children during their argumentative discussions at mealtimes. In particular, these two types of arguments are in most cases used by parents and children in order to highlight a specific feature (positive or negative) of food. Moreover, we have seen that the arguments of quality and quantity were mostly advanced by children in reaction to the same types of arguments previously advanced by their parents. In fact, in the corpus when the parent put forth an argument of quality or an argument of quantity, the argument by the child typically mirrored the same type of argument previously advanced by their parents.

4.2. Argument from authority

The data set in the present study is composed of $N = 31$ (17%) arguments from authority which meet the criteria outlined above. In the 31 instances in which the parents advanced an argument from authority, the children’s types of responses were the following: immediate acceptance of parent’s argumentation in 3 instances (10%), expression of further doubt in 11 instances (36%), opposition without providing arguments in 15 instances (48%), and only in 2 instances they advanced an argument (6%). In both cases the arguments advanced by children were arguments from authority. Moreover, compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, which were in most cases advanced during food-related discussions, in the corpus this type of argument was in most cases used by parents in discussions where their purpose was teaching the correct behaviour in social situations within and outside the family context to their children.

The following dialogue between a mother and her 4-year-old son, Alessandro, offers an example of this type of argument.

Excerpt 3. Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 36 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Stefano (STE, 8 years 5 months), Alessandro (ALE, 4 years 6 months). Except for DAD, who is in the kitchen, all family members are seated at the table in the dinner room. MOM and STE sit on the left hand side of the table, whilst ALE sits on the opposite side.

In example 3, the dinner is almost finished. The mother asks the children if they still want to eat a little more food (line 1), but
children are already focused on other activities such as playing with toys and other objects. In this phase of the meal, it has been frequent to observe, in the corpus, discussions in which parents and children negotiate the after dinner activities, e.g., how long watching TV, whether playing with this or that object, or at what time going to sleep. In fact, mealtimes are therefore not only oriented to food, but they represent moments in which all the daily activities involving the family members, especially children, can be taken into account and discussed.

In the excerpt, the focus is on the discussion between the mother and Alessandro (line 2, and from line 8 to line 16). The sequence starts when Alessandro tells his mother that he wants to take a rubber to erase a drawing on the blackboard. The mother disagrees with Alessandro and, in line 3, she reveals to her son what her opinion is based on (“that rubber is for the drawing board and you cannot use it on other things”). Alessandro is not convinced by his mother’s argument (line 8: “but:”) and, in line 10, he replies that he wants to try to use the eraser (“but I want to try it”). In line 13, the mother uses an argument that is no longer related to the properties of the eraser, but states a general rule that the child needs to follow in similar situations. In this case, the mother’s argument is effective in convincing the child not to use the rubber for the drawing board. In fact, Alessandro accepts to use the “right rubber” that will be given to him by his mother (line 16). The mitigation used by the mother in line 13 (“sometimes, you can try”) and the concession in line 15 (“wait until I give you …”) can be considered as ways to align her position to the son due to the argument offered by the child in line 14 (“but I want to erase it”); in this sense, the mother’s effort of re-contextualization of the claim can be viewed as a good compromise between the appeal to the authority and expert opinion and the reasonableness of the child’s desire and intention.

4.3. Appeal to consistency’s argument

The data set in the present study is composed of N = 15 (8%) appeal to consistency’s arguments. In the 15 instances in which the parents advanced an appeal to consistency’s argument, the children’s types of responses were the following: no immediate acceptance of parent’s argumentation, expression of further doubt in 6 instances (40%), opposition without providing arguments in 9 instances (60%). The appeal to consistency’s argument in most cases used by parents to teach the correct behaviour in social situations within and outside the family context to their children, appears therefore to be a quite complex argument, maybe too complex, for the children, since in no case they have advanced an argument in response to their parent’s arguments. The next example is an illustration of this type of argument.

Excerpt 4. Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Paolo (PAO, 7 years), Laura (LAU, 4 years 5 months), Elisa (3 years 2 months). All family members are seated at the table. DAD sits at the head of the table, MOM and PAO sit on the left hand side of DAD. LAU sits on the opposite side, whilst ELI is seated on the DAD’s knees.

In example 4, the protagonists of the dialogue are a mother and her son, Paolo, aged 7 years. All family members are eating the main course. In this moment of the conversation, the parents’ focus is not on food: they are talking about the school behaviour of one of their children. In line 1, the mother sends a compliment to her 7-year-old son, Paolo: “Paolo, you’ve been very good yesterday”. With these words, she shows her intention to start a conversation with her son: however, Paolo appears puzzled, because he does not know the reason why, according to his mother, yesterday he was very good (line 2: “why?”). In line 3, the mother unveils the reason on which her compliment to her son is based: she says that Aunt Daniela told her that yesterday he was very good because he did all the school homework. At this point of the sequence, the mother introduces a sentence that reveals the logical consequence of the child’s behaviour: she wants Paolo to go again to Daniela’s home because the day before he was very good.

The reasoning used by the mother to justify the fact that Paolo has to go again to aunt Daniela’s house is based on the logic form “as X, so Y” (given the consistency of the first element, the second element is then justified). As first reaction, Paolo disagrees with the mother’s proposal (line 4: “no: I don’t want to”), disapproving the mother’s logics and expressing his personal feeling. Here, an interesting strategy is followed by the mother, as she puts forward two coordinative arguments in line 5: “but yesterday you were there the entire afternoon and today you said that you had so much fun!” By referring to an action Paolo did in the past (“yesterday you were there the entire afternoon”) and emphasizing how good that event (doing the homework to Aunt Daniela’s house) was for him (“today you said that you had so much fun!”), the mother tries to show to Paolo that his present behaviour should be consistent with that of the past. In this case, the coordinative arguments put forward by the mother appear to be effective in convincing her son to change his opinion (“PAO nods to his mother so to say that he agrees with her”), or, at least, to accept the mother’s proposal.

In this example, we can observe that in sustaining her argumentative reasoning, the mother used “but” in line 5. This choice is probably due to the fact that she wants to underline the contradiction between the previous son’s behaviour (the time spent at the aunt’s home) and his non-consistent reaction (he does not want to go again) to the mother’s proposal. As already stated by Schiffrin (1987), the effect of the marker “but” can be further reinforced through the conjunction “and”. This is exactly what happens in this discussion, where the mother after using the marker “but” (“but yesterday you were there the entire afternoon”) reinforces her argument by adding the conjunction “and” (“and today you said that you had so much fun”). Finally, in the concluding stage of the sequence, the mother makes explicit the logic of her reasoning process, by saying “so tomorrow I’ll take you to aunt Daniela” (line 7), as consequence of the argument used since the beginning in line 3.

4.4. Arguments from analogy

The data set in the present study is composed of N = 9 (5%) arguments from analogy which meet the criteria outlined above. In the 9 instances in which the parents advanced an argument from analogy, the children’s types of responses were the following: no immediate acceptance of parent’s argumentation, expression of further doubt in 3 instances (33%), opposition without providing arguments in 6 instances (67%). Similarly to what we have observed for the argument from authority and the appeal to consistency’s argument, this type of argument was almost exclusively used by parents in discussions relating to the teaching of the correct behaviour in social situations within and outside the family context to their children. Moreover, as we have seen with the appeal to consistency’s argument, in any case children have advanced one argument to refute the argument advanced earlier by their parents. The following dialogue between a mother and her 7-year-old son, Marco, offers an example of this type of argument.

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Footnote:

1 Two or more arguments, that directly support a standpoint, are defined as ‘coordinative’ whey they are interdependent between each other. For a comprehensive discussion on this topic and, more in general, on the structure of argumentation, see Snoeck Henkemans (2000).
1. **MOM:** Stefano e Alessandro, volete mangiare ancora qualcosina?  
   *Stefano and Alessandro, do you still want to eat a little something?*

2. **ALE:** posso prendere la gomma per cancellare il disegno?  
   *can I take the rubber to erase the drawing?*

   %act: MOM fa cenno di no agitando l’indice della mano  
   *MOM says no by shaking her finger*

3. **MOM:** no Alessandro  
   *no Alessandro*

→ **MOM:** no!  
   *no!*

→ **MOM:** quella gomma è per la lavagnetta,  
   *that rubber is for the drawing board,*

→ **MOM:** e non si usa su altre cose  
   *and you cannot use it on other things*

[...]

8. **ALE:** però::  
   *but::*

9. **MOM:** cosa c’è?  
   *what?*

10. **ALE:** però io voglio provare  
    *but I want to try it*

11. **MOM:** no tesoro  
    *no sweetheart*

12. **ALE:** no::  
    *no::*

13. **MOM:** no tesoro, fidati che so quello che ti dico  
    *no sweetheart, trust me because I know what I am talking about*

→ **MOM:** qualche volta, puoi provare  
    *sometimes, you can try*

→ **MOM:** altre volte non si prova, ci si fida di quello che dicono i genitori  
    *other times you can’t try, you must trust what your parents tell*

14. **ALE:** ma io voglio cancellare ((il disegno))  
    *but I want to erase it ((the drawing))*

15. **MOM:** allora aspetta che ti prendo la gomma giusta  
    *wait that I give you the right rubber then*

16. **ALE:** va bene  
    *ok*
Excerpt 5. Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 42 years),
mother (MOM, 40 years), Marco (MAR, 7 years 2 months), Leonardo 
(LEO, 3 years 9 month). All the children are seated at the table. 
MOM is standing and is serving dinner. DAD is seated on the couch watching TV.

At the beginning of this excerpt the mother is serving the food, 
whilst the father is still seated on the couch watching TV. She asks 
the father to sit at the table and enjoy the meal, since the food is ready (line 1: “come: dinner is ready”). This event, namely, the 
mother announcing the beginning of the meal, represents a typical 
starting-point for this activity type. In the excerpt, I shall focus the 
analysis on the difference of opinion between the mother and her 
son, Marco, on an issue related to the school context (from line 3 to 
line 7).

Marco in line 3 advances a standpoint: he says to his mother that 
he thinks that the math teacher, i.e. the teacher Marta, will give 
them a lot of homework to do over the Christmas holidays. The 
mother disagrees with her son (line 4: “no:: I don’t want to”). Marco, in turn, chooses to disagree with his mother (line 5: “Id o 
though”), but he does not provide any argument in support of his 
standpoint. To counter this, the mother advances an argument from 
analogy to convince Marco to change his opinion. In line 6, in fact, 
she says to her son that if the Italian teacher did not give them 
homework to do over the Christmas holidays, neither will the math 
teacher. The reasoning behind the mother’s argument can be 
inferred as follows: because the two teachers share some similar-
ities, namely, they are both teachers of the same class, they will 
behave in a similar way. In this case, the argument put forward by 
the mother appears to be effective in convincing her son to change 
his opinion. He does not continue to defend his initial standpoint 
(line 7: “let’s hope so!”), and they conclude the discussion both 
smiling.

5. Discussion

This study has intended to provide a contribution to the study of 
argumentative discussion in families with young children. I have 
focused particularly on the types of responses by children aged 
between 3 and 7 years in argumentative discussions relating to 
parental rules and prescriptions. As already observed by Blum-
Kulka (1997) in her cross-cultural study on family dinner conver-
sations, argumentative discussions are not primarily aimed at
resolving verbal conflicts among family members, but they essentially appear to be an instrument that enables parents to transmit, and children to learn, values and models about how to behave in a culturally appropriate way. Mealtimes appear as activity settings and opportunity spaces where family members intentionally and unintentionally express their feelings and expectations. The purposes for which parents may engage in an argumentative discussion with their children may be various. Sometimes, they need to advance arguments in order to justify their view about a certain behaviour or a certain thought that is not accepted by their children. Other times, parents advance arguments in order to teach their children a certain “correct” behaviour, e.g., the correct tablemanners, whilst in other occasions parents advance arguments with the aim to involve their children in a new discussion, so starting a common reasoning along with them. Although there are many different purposes for which parents can engage in an argumentative discussion with their children, there is a common element to all the argumentative discussions they engage in: there is no argumentation without arguments in support of a certain standpoint.

In line with previous studies (Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1997; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002), the results of this study indicate that the parents put forth a higher number of arguments (N = 186 vs. N = 58) and used more different types of arguments compared to their children. However, from an argumentative point of view, the results of this study bring to light another interesting aspect: in their argumentative choices, parents and children affect one another. Family argumentative interactions should be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship in which parents affect children and are simultaneously affected by them (Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1999; Pontecorvo et al., 2001). In fact, by engaging in argumentative discussions, parents accept (and assume) the commitment to clarify to their children the reasons on which their rules, values and prescriptions are based, whilst children can become more aware of being full-fledged active participants of their own family. Accordingly, for the reasons mentioned above, the parents play the role of “educators” during argumentative discussions and the children play the not less important role of “active learners”.

In both cases (parents and children), the prevalent use of arguments concerning the concepts of quantity and quality appears as the privileged way to convince the other party. When children advanced arguments to oppose their parents’ argumentation, they mostly used the same type of argument used previously by their parents. When parents used arguments of quality and quantity, they often adapt their argumentation in order to teach their children a certain “correct” behaviour, e.g., the correct tablemanners, whilst in other occasions parents advance arguments with the aim to involve their children in a new discussion, so starting a common reasoning along with them. Although there are many different purposes for which parents can engage in an argumentative discussion with their children, there is a common element to all the argumentative discussions they engage in: there is no argumentation without arguments in support of a certain standpoint.

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language to the child’s level of understanding. 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 mealtimes. For example, if the parents’ purpose is to feed their child, the food is described as “very good” or “nutritious”, and its quantity is “too little”. On the contrary, if the parents’ aim is not to feed the child further, in terms of quality the food is described as “salty” or “not good”, and in quantitative terms as “it’s quite enough” or “it’s too much”.

The other types of arguments put forward by parents, i.e. the arguments from authority, the appeal to consistency and the argument from analogy, appear less frequently in the corpus. Interestingly, when the parents advanced these types of arguments the children did not advance any argument. Only in two instances, in reaction to an argument from authority, they responded advancing an argument from authority too. Rather, their response was an expression of further doubt, e.g., why-question, or a mere opposition without providing any argument in support of their own position, e.g., no I don’t want to. Compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, the argument from authority, the appeal to consistency and the argument from analogy used by parents appear to be more complex and elaborated. 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 relating to the evaluation of the quality or quantity of food, but also touch on other important aspects that characterize family interactions. I refer in particular to the teaching of the correct behaviour in social situations within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. For this reason, I contend that within the activity of mealtimes these types of arguments can be defined as “context-unbound”, and in my view this can be one of the reasons why the children put forth hardly any argument in reaction to these types of arguments put forth by their parents. Moreover, within these kinds of discussion, there are not differences between the arguments used by mothers and fathers in our corpus, except for the argument from authority that is used by fathers in most of the cases. This finding shows that the parental role does not speak in favour of the use of specific types of arguments during mealtimes interactions with children.

In order to clarify how these results relate to actual world questions involving language socialization within family frameworks, I want to underline that the observed argumentative strategies imply not only discursive competencies, but also psychological elements, such as persuasion, capacity to convince the interlocutor about an argument, commitment to prescriptions and rules. By their reciprocal engagement in argumentative discussions, parents and children jointly produce and transform the social order and their positions within the family frameworks, through the formatting and sequencing of actions and their responses. These participants’ dynamics are evident in the manifest collision of power maneuvers (Tannen, 2007) and resistance in argumentative sequences. By engaging in argumentative discussions, parents accept (assume) the commitment to transmit rules, values, and correct behaviours to their children. By participating in argumentative discussions with their parents, children can become more aware of their active role within the family context. The argumentative reconstruction of how family members dialectically solve differences of opinion is thus a useful way to highlight choices, forms, and dynamics adopted by adults and children at mealtimes.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that the types of children’s responses are strictly connected to the type of argument previously advanced by their parents. This aspect is particularly relevant in terms of children’s capacities to engage in argumentative exchanges and to react in rational ways during the confrontation with the parents. During interactions at mealtimes, children can use discourse to acquire/show a complete recognition of their being members of the family. In addition, the argumentative skills are the foundation upon which children can develop their role of arguers also outside the family context. As already observed by Ochs and colleagues (Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik, 2013; Ochs et al., 1996; Ochs and Schieffelin, 2011) and by Pontecorvo and colleagues (Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono, 2010; Pontecorvo and Pirchio, 2000; Pontecorvo and Sterponi, 2002), the importance of these skills needs to be examined also considering different daily activities relevant for child’s development such as the school context during the interactions with other adults and peers in order to illuminate other relevant areas of adult-child argumentative dynamics. Focusing on interaction, argumentation can combine constructivist development with close discursive and psychological analyses: the method of analysis adopted in this work has allowed a detailed study of discursive sequences between parents and children in a multiparty setting interaction. Further research in this direction is needed in order to better understand specific potentialities of language in the everyday process of socialization within the family context.

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Appendix. Transcription conventions

* 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
%act: description of speaker’s actions
%sit: description of the situation/setting
. continuing intonation
: falling intonation
+ prolonging of sounds
? rising intonation
! exclamatory intonation
→ maintaining the turn of talking by the speaker
%pau: pause

References


