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Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2013). Invoking the authority of feelings as a strategic maneuver in family mealtime conversations. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 23(3), 206-224. doi: 10.1002/casp.2113

## Invoking the Authority of Feelings as a Strategic Maneuver in Family Mealtime Conversations

**Keywords:** family, argumentation, mealtime conversations, authority of feelings, qualitative analysis

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### **Abstract**

This paper is centered on family conversations and focuses on the conditions that allow a specific strategic maneuver, the invocation of the authority, to be an effective argumentative strategy when used by parents to convince their children to accept rules and prescriptions. Within a corpus of argumentative sequences selected from 30 video-recordings of family mealtime conversations, an argumentative sequence between parents and children, which brings to light the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of a corpus of 60 argumentative sequences, is presented and discussed. The analysis relies on a communicative-argumentative methodology based on the extended pragma-dialectical theory and on the Argumentum Model of Topics to identify the participants' moves and to analyze the inferential configuration of arguments, respectively. The findings of the analysis show that the invocation of the authority by parents represents an argumentative strategy that is effective when two conditions are met: (i) the nature of the relationship between the person who represents the authority and the person to whom the argument is addressed is based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on the fear of punishment, and (ii) the reasons the prohibition is based on are not to be hidden from the child's eyes, but are to be shared by family members. The analysis has thus brought out a specific type of invocation of authority that we have defined as *the authority of feelings*. The results of this study contribute to research on family argumentation and on the interactional dynamics between parents and children.

## Introduction

The research activity of an increasing number of scholars has greatly enlarged our knowledge and understanding of family relations (Dubas, 2010). Indeed, the family has been studied in the social sciences under different perspectives and through different methods of analysis (see Greenstein, 2006), from its early institutional view as a primary social unit (Burgess, 1926) to the more recent vision as an intergenerational and socially constructed system of relationships (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006).

Over the last decades family studies have been mostly inspired by the paradigm of family communication (cf. Vangelisti, 2004), and a proper dialogue among family members has been considered as an indicator of positive family relations (cf. Beavers & Hampson, 2000; Olson, 2000). As for the method of analysis, in research on family discourse the case study has been, and certainly currently still is, widely used, as it has allowed researchers to thoroughly study numerous issues. For instance, family cultural patterns (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009; Aronsson, 1998; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs et al., 1996; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999), speech and language development in infants and young children (Aukrust, 1996; Beals, 2001; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001), conflict management and resolution strategies (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2011; Vuchinich, 1990), discourse organization and participation structures (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2010; Erikson, 1988; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997), family-based clinical treatments (cf. Dattilio, 1998).

This paper is centered on mealtime conversations among family members and focuses on the conditions that allow a specific strategic maneuver, that is, the invocation of the authority, to be an effective argumentative strategy when used by parents to convince their children to accept rules and prescriptions. Drawing on the model of Critical Discussion (CD) (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) and the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT) (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009, 2011) to analyze an argumentative sequence between parents and children, which highlights the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of a corpus of argumentative sequences selected from 30 video-recordings of family mealtime conversations, the paper sheds light on a specific type of invocation of authority used by parents with their children that we have defined as the *authority of feelings*. Furthermore, this study shows that the invocation by parents of their authority can be an effective argumentative strategy to encourage their children to accept rules and prohibitions when some conditions are met.

In its first part, the paper will review the most relevant family studies focusing on mealtime conversations and the more recent research strand devoted to the analysis of argumentative processes in the family context. Afterward, the CD model and the AMT will be taken into account, thus providing the conceptual and methodological frame by which a case study, in the last part of the paper, will be presented and analyzed.

## Studying family through mealtime conversations

Mealtime has indeed become a relevant subject of analysis for studying the family discourse. Its importance is not surprising, insofar as mealtime is one of the few moments that brings all family members daily together, and being characterized by a substantial freedom in relation to the issues that can be tackled favours the verbal interactions among family members (cf. Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002).

In the rich traditions of studies focusing on family conversations at home, in particular, three main research trends can be distinguished: 1) an extended body of studies, developed within Conversation Analysis approach and theoretically inspired by Ethnomethodology, primarily devoted to study the organization of family discourse, e.g. the management of turns at talking and

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the interactional order among participants to conversation; 2) a series of studies based on anthropological, educational and developmental perspectives, that look at the family mealtime as a breeding ground for language socialization and literacy development of young children; 3) a group of studies, developed within the discursive psychology approach, which aim at investigating the interactional dynamics among family members as manifested in situations in which they all discuss food, expressing their feelings, attitudes, and evaluations.

More recently a fourth line of research on family mealtime conversation is emerging: it is devoted to the study of argumentative discussions, and the scholars who are spearheading research on these themes come mostly from psychological and linguistic disciplines. These studies take into deep consideration the results obtained in the three main research strands and somehow they try to integrate them in order to have a wider perspective regarding the different aspects involved in the family conversations. The focus is here above all on the argumentative dynamics among parents and children.

### *Ethnomethodology and the analysis of 'naturally occurring data'*

The first line of research has been developed from the 1960s onwards within conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). It was inspired by ethnomethodological studies (Garfinkel, 1967), which immediately attracted much attention thanks to a research method based on 'naturally occurring data', i.e. data collected in situ, documenting conduct that is neither orchestrated nor provoked by the researcher as it occurs ordinarily and routinely in that setting. The ethnomethodological approach seeks to reconstruct an *emic* account, i.e. an account that takes into consideration the participants' own perspective, the ordered character of these situated practices, and their meaning (cf. Harris, 1976). The analytical foundation is based upon the fact that talk and other social practices are organized in a locally situated way (cf. Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007), orienting and adjusting to the peculiarities of the context in which they unfold. Within this research field, the dinner conversation has been a privileged subject of study to build a general model of family interaction dynamics.

Mealtime conversations have thus provided naturally occurring data for the systematic study of the interactional order, the management of turns at talking, and the organization of family discourse. In particular, the dynamic organization of talking among family members (in terms of co-participants) and the distribution of turns have been systematically explored, revealing how people are normatively oriented to the principle of 'one speaker at a time', although they manage overlaps, turn-sharing, and choral productions (Butler & Fitzgerald, 2010; Lerner, 2002).

Furthermore, these studies have also focused on investigating the social construction of discourse coherence and the participation structure of family members as well as the types of relationship within the participation frameworks (Erickson, 1988). These analyses have shown interesting phenomena of alliances, collaboration, and co-authorship between speakers, such as engaging collectively in story-telling (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004), phenomena of coalition and 'by-play' (Goodwin, 1996), or schisms, which transform one conversation into various parallel interactions (Egbert, 1997).

### *Mealtime as a privileged moment to promote child development*

A second line of research examines family's mealtime conversations from an educational and developmental perspective. The focus is on the conditions that promote and improve child growth. Some scholars, in particular, describe the family mealtime as a privileged moment for observing literacy development in young children as it offers a great opportunity for extended discourse,

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involving both explanatory and narrative talk (Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Beals, 1993). During mealtime conversations children are frequently encouraged to experiment with their language skills (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001) and are exposed to a more sophisticated vocabulary (Beals & Tabor, 1995), thus favoring greater language acquisition. Furthermore, mealtime provides opportunities to reconnect, organize, and structure dialogue, which becomes richer and more complex than it does in dyadic situations (Snow & Beals, 2006).

Within this research tradition, a key concept is undoubtedly the “language socialization”. The basic tenet of the language socialization process is that children learn language and culture through their active engagement in meaningful social interactions with adults and peers. Specific interest in family mealtime conversations as privileged moments to promote and expedite the language socialization of young children began mostly due to the work of Ochs and her colleagues on American families (cf. Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), later on extended to cross-cultural comparisons of American versus Italian families (Ochs, Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1996). According to Ochs and colleagues, the process of acquiring language is embedded in and constitutive of the process of becoming socialized, namely to be a competent member of a social group.

A milestone of language socialization studies is represented by *Dinner Talk* (Blum-Kulka, 1997). In this study on dinner conversations of American and Jewish families, Blum-Kulka centers her comprehensive and detailed investigation on cultural patterns for parent-child relationships and the dynamics of pragmatic socialization of young children, i.e. the ways in which children are socialized to use language in context in socially and culturally appropriate ways. In particular, she contends that the tension between sociability and socialization provides the key to understanding the shared features of the speech event.

However, while mealtime conversations provide children ample opportunities to gain practice in the full diversity of roles available, scholars underline how it can bring to light power asymmetries among family members as well (Fatigante, Fasulo & Pontecorvo, 1998; Georgakoupoulou, 2002). During mealtime conversations, in fact, children receive information about the rules governing the use of polite forms in their culture: metapragmatic comments (Arcidiacono, 2011; De Geer, 2004), behavioral routines (Gleason, Perlmann & Greif, 1984), identity in interaction, social distance, power, and degree of impositions (Aronsson, 1998; Snow et al., 1990).

One facet to enhance and promote language socialization in family context is also represented by “problem-solving” activities in which parents and children are both involved, both when they concern a future activity, like planning a family trip, and when they are devoted to the interpretation of a past event (Ochs, Smith & Taylor, 1989). In this relation, Pontecorvo et al. (2001) contend that socialization at dinner should be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship in which parents affect and are simultaneously affected by children. Hence, while children are engaged in the process of becoming competent members of a social group as children, parents are engaged in the process of becoming competent members of a social group as parents.

### *Studies in discursive psychology*

A third line of research, developed within discursive psychology approach (Potter & Edwards, 2001), aims at investigating the interactional dynamics among family members as they emerge and are manifested at home when they speak about food and express feelings, attitudes, and evaluations. Discursive psychology builds on three core observations about the nature of discourse. Firstly, discourse is *situated*, i.e. it is embedded in some kind of sequence of interaction and in some kind of context. Secondly, it is *action oriented*, i.e. discourse is the primary medium for social action. Thirdly, discourse is both *constructed* and *constructive*. In other words, it is constructed since it is made up of linguistic building blocks: words, categories, idioms, repertoires, and so on, which are

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used in a wide range of ways to present particular versions of the world. Moreover, discourse is also constructive because these versions of the world are a product of the talk itself, not something that may putatively exist prior to the talk (Wiggins & Potter, 2008).

Drawing on a methodology that is largely based on conversation analysis, these studies describe how family members construct their own definitions of food, characterize the quality and quantity of the food served, elaborate upon their conceptions of the physiological state of hunger, 'fullness', or 'restraint', and formulate and treat their physiological sensations as acceptable or not (Wiggins, 2002; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). These definitions, conceptions, and formulations are constructed in a situated way, i.e. they are sensitive to the particular setting in which they emerge.

Even though these scholars cannot be labeled as discursive social psychologists, some studies of Pomerantz and Mondada might be full-fledged considered as discursive social psychology studies. In two studies that nowadays are considered as classics of the conversation analysis, Pomerantz (1978, 1984) shows that the assessments of events are structured so as to minimize stated disagreement and maximize stated agreement between speakers. As noted by Potter and Edwards (2001) and others, these studies have profoundly affected the birth and the development of discursive psychology approach. In a recent work, Mondada (2009) deeply details how conversation analysis can be used to examine the organization of food assessments in family meals. Through a fine-grained conversation analysis, Mondada highlights how taste and food preferences are highly sensitive both to the social occasions and to the organization of turns at talk.

More recently, a new strand in the research on family mealtime conversations is emerging: it is devoted to the study of argumentative discussions, and the scholars who are spearheading research on these themes come mostly from psychological and linguistic disciplines.

### **Family and argumentation: Some recent studies**

In the last years, alongside a number of studies that mark the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (Mercer, 2000; Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009; Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2008), the relevance of the study of argumentative discussions is gradually emerging in family studies.

According to Muller Mirza et al. (2009), the argumentative attitude learned in the family, in particular the capacity to deal with disagreement by means of reasonable verbal interactions, can be considered "the matrix of all other forms of argumentation" (p. 76). Furthermore, despite the focus on narratives as the first genre to appear in communication with young children, caregiver experiences as well as observations of conversations between parents and children suggest that family conversations can be a significant context for emerging argumentative strategies (Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997), and that children learn and use argumentation for a variety of goals (Hester & Hester, 2010; Stein & Miller, 1993). These studies underscore how children's use of arguments is specific to each relationship and is consistent with research documenting how children's argument with their mothers is not related to that used when in dispute with their siblings (Slomkowski & Dunn, 1992) and friends (Herrera & Dunn, 1997), and how children argue differently with friends and with non-friends (Hartup et al., 1988). Taken together, these studies suggest that mother-child and sibling-child relationships represent different and independent contexts of children's argumentation, and, more in general, that the family discussion provides an important laboratory for children to learn how to argue effectively and that the experiences in this context may translate into skills that are transferred to other significant interpersonal domains.

Most of the studies so far devoted to argumentation in the family context have been mainly focused on the structure and on the linguistic moves characterizing the argumentative discussions among family members. For instance, focusing on Swedish families, Brumark (2006, 2008) has shown the presence of certain reoccurring argumentative features in family conversations as well as the

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association between some argumentation structures and children's age. Besides, some intercultural studies have also shown that families of different cultures can be characterized by different argumentative styles (Bova, 2011a, 2011b; Arcidiacono & Bova, in press), and how relevant it is to accurately know the properties of the context, i.e. dinnertime, in order to analyze and evaluate the argumentative dynamics occurring during family conversations (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo & Greco Morasso, 2009).

According to Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono (2010), in the study of argumentation in family, the role of language cannot be separated from general socio-cultural knowledge. These authors highlight that children learn progressively a complex set of relations between contexts of use and linguistic features, and that every interaction represents a potentially socializing experience and an opportunity for the literacy development of young children. In conversation with children, in fact, parents use language in order to convey norms and rules governing social, cultural, and linguistic behavior.

Less attention has so far been devoted to those relationship dynamics that may affect the argumentative moves of family members. In an ambitious attempt to start to fill this void, this study addresses the issue of the connection between the kind of relationship among discussants (i.e., family members) and their mode of strategic maneuvering. More specifically, it focuses on the conditions that allow a particular strategic maneuver used by parents, i.e., the invocation to the authority, to be argumentatively effective.

## Methodology

### *Data corpus*

The present study is part of a larger project<sup>1</sup> devoted to the study of argumentation in the family context. The research design implies a corpus of video-recorded mealtime conversations (constituting about twenty hours of video data) of Italian and Swiss families (see Table 1). All participants are Italian-speaking.

In order to minimize researcher interferences, the recordings were performed by the families on their own. This means that in the mealtime conversations the researchers did not impose any tasks or topics, and they did not orchestrate the spatial positioning of participants so as to affect the setting of the interaction. Each family videotaped their dinners four times over a four-week period. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 minutes. All dinnertime conversations have been fully transcribed using the CHILDES system (MacWhinney, 1989) and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (80%) has been reached. This methodology allowed a detailed analysis of verbal interactions among family members during the recording sessions. After this phase, we jointly reviewed with the family members all the transcriptions at their home. This procedure made it possible to ask the family members to clarify some unclear passages (in the eyes of the researchers), like low level of recordings and vague words and constructions.

For each family dinner, we initially selected five argumentative sequences (N = 150). The sequence was considered as argumentative if all the following three criteria were satisfied: (i) both discussant must explicitly acknowledge that a difference of opinion among two (or more) family members takes place around on a certain issue; (ii) at least one standpoint related to the issue is put forth by one (or more) family members is questioned by one (or more) family members; (iii) at least one of

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<sup>1</sup>We are referring to the Research Module "Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in the family context" (project no. PDFMP1-123093/1) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It is part of the ProDoc project "Argupolis: Argumentation Practices in Context," jointly designed and developed by scholars of the Universities of Lugano, Neuchâtel, Lausanne (Switzerland) and Amsterdam (The Netherlands).

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the family members puts forward (at least) one argument in favor or against the standpoint being questioned.

Later, we have reduced the number of argumentative sequences to be analyzed to 40% of the total argumentative sequences that had been initially selected (N= 150 → N= 60), relying on the fact that a randomized cut ensures the application of an unbiased treatment in the selection of the argumentative sequences. The argumentative sequence analyzed in the present study has been selected as it brings to light the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of the whole corpus of argumentative sequences.

Family group	Italian	Swiss
Length of recordings in minutes	20–37	19–42
Mean length of recordings in minutes	32.41	35.12
<b>Participants</b>		
Adults	10	10
Mothers	5	5
Fathers	5	5
Children, total	10	13
Son	6	6
Daughter	4	7
Children, age 3-6	5	8
Younger and older siblings	5	5
Total participants	20	23
<b>Average age of participants</b>		
Parents	37,40 (SD 3,062)	35,90 (SD 1.912)
Mother	36,40 (SD 2,881)	34,80 (SD 1.643)
Father	38,40 (SD 3,209)	37,00 (SD 1.581)
Children, age 3-6	3,20 (SD .447)	4.40 (SD .548)
Son	7,50 (SD 3,619)	5.83 (SD 1.835)
Daughter	4,00 (SD 1,414)	4.86 (SD 2.268)
first-born	9,00 (SD 2,00) (4 sons; 1 daughter)	7.60 (SD .894) (3 sons; 2 daughters)
second-born	3,20 (SD .447) (2 sons; 3 daughters)	4.40 (SD .548) (2 sons; 3 daughters)
third-born	0	3 (SD .000) (1 son; 2 daughters)

**Table 1. Length of recordings, participants, average age of participants**

## Analytical approaches

The model of Critical Discussion (hereafter CD) and the Argumentum Model of Topics (hereafter AMT) represent the analytical approaches in order to identify and analyze the argumentatively relevant moves and to systematically reconstruct the inferential configuration of arguments, respectively.

### *a) The Model of Critical Discussion*

The pragma-dialectical approach proposes the model of CD as an ideal definition of an argumentative discussion developing according to the standard of reasonableness (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004). This model is assumed, in the present study, as a general framework for the analysis of argumentative discussions in the family context. More specifically, the model is intended as a grid for the analysis, since it helps to identify argumentative moves (heuristic

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function), to evaluate their contribution to the resolution of the difference of opinion (critical function), and to reconstruct the analytical overview in terms of a critical discussion (analytic function).

The pragma-dialectical approach identifies four ideal stages, which do not mirror the actual temporal phases of the argumentative discussion, but are the essential constituents of a reasonable – i.e. critical – discussion. In the initial confrontation stage, the protagonist advances his standpoint and meets with the antagonist's doubts, sometimes implicitly assumed. Before the argumentation stage, in which arguments are put forth for supporting or destroying the standpoint, parties have to agree on some starting point. This phase (the opening stage) is essential to the development of the discussion because only if a certain common ground exists, it is possible for parties to reasonably resolve – in the concluding stage – the differences of opinions.

In the argumentative reality, the model of CD can be implemented according to different discussion types. The nature of the difference of opinion actually arising determines different types of confrontation between the parties. In argumentative terms, in a *single* dispute only one proposition is at issue, whereas in a *multiple* dispute two or more propositions are questioned; in a *non-mixed* dispute only one standpoint with respect to a proposition is questioned, whereas in a *mixed* dispute two opposite standpoints regarding the same proposition are questioned (van Eemeren, Houtlosser & Snoeck Henkemans, 2007: 21-23).

Other studies (van Eemeren & Houtlosser, 1999; van Eemeren, 2010) have introduced the notion of strategic maneuvering in an extended version of pragma-dialectical theory. The extended model, which attributes high relevance to the notion of context, allows to account for the arguers' personal desire to win the cause (rhetorical aim) and for its dialectical counterpart (dialectical aim), which is identified with the interlocutors' commitment to maintain a standard of reasonableness.

#### *b) The Argumentum Model of Topics*

Elaborating on the pragma-dialectical analytical overview, which elicits the argumentatively relevant constituents of discourse, the AMT aims at systematically reconstructing the inferential configuration of arguments, namely the deep structure of reasoning underlying the connection between a standpoint and the argument(s) in its support (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009, 2011).

The general principle underlying the reconstruction of the inferential configuration of an argumentative move is that of finding those implicit premises that are necessary in order for the argumentative move to be valid. In the AMT, two fundamental components should be distinguished when bringing to light the inferential relation binding the premises to the conclusion of an argumentation. First, an argument envisages a *topical* component, which focuses on the inferential connection activated by the argument, corresponding to the abstract reasoning that justifies the passage from the premises (arguments) to the conclusion (standpoint). The inferential connection underlying the argument is named with the traditional term *maxim*. Maxims are inferential connections generated by a certain semantic ontological domain named *locus*. Second, an *endoxical* component, which consists of the implicit or explicit material premises shared by the discussants that, combined with the topical component, ground the standpoint. These premises include *endoxa*, i.e. general principles, values, and assumptions that typically belong to the specific context, and *data*, basically coinciding with punctual information and facts regarding the specific situation at hand and usually representing the part of the argument that is made explicit in the text (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2011).

Despite its particular concern for the inferential aspects of argumentation, the AMT, de facto, accounts not only for the logical aspects of the argumentative exchange, but also for its embeddedness in the parties' relationship, and thus proves to be particularly suited for the argumentative analysis of ordinary conversations.

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### *Criteria of analysis*

Considering that the pragma-dialectical approach aiming at the reconstruction of an analytical overview of arguments and the Argumentum Model of Topics focusing on the inferential structure of arguments are complementary as they cover two relevant and different levels of the organization of the argumentative strategy, this study has integrated these approaches as two steps of the same process of analysis.

In the first phase of the inquiry, guided by the pragma-dialectical model of CD to conduct the analytic overview, the following components must be identified:

- the difference of opinion at issue in the confrontation stage; once the main difference of opinion is identified, the type of difference of opinion is also categorized: single/non-mixed (elementary form), single/mixed, multiple/non-mixed, multiple/mixed;
- the premises agreed upon in the opening stage that serves as the point of departure of the discussion;
- the arguments and criticisms that are – explicitly or implicitly – advanced in the argumentation stage, and the outcome of the discussion that is achieved in the concluding stage.

In the second phase of the analysis, we refer to the AMT in order to reconstruct the inferential structure of the arguments used by participants, i.e. the type of reasoning underneath the argument. According to the AMT, the following components must be identified:

- the *maxim* on which the argumentation is based and the relative *locus* at work;
- the *endoxon*, i.e. the premises shared by the discussants;
- the *datum*, i.e. the punctual information and facts regarding the specific situation at hand (usually representing the part of the argument that is made explicit in the text) to which the argument is linked.

The Y structure (so-called because its form looks like the letter Y) in Figure 2, will be the graphical tool adopted for representing the AMT's reconstruction. Examples of AMT's reconstructions by using the Y structure can be found in different works devoted to argumentation in various contexts (cf. Filimon, 2009; Greco Morasso, 2011; Rigotti & Palmieri, 2010; Zlatkova, 2011).

### **Analysis of a case**

The example presented and discussed here concerns a Swiss family. Fictitious names replace real names of participants, to ensure anonymity.



**Figure 1. The family**

Excerpt 1: Family LUG, dinner 3; participants: MOM (mother, age: 32); DAD (father, age: 34); MAT (child 1, Matteo, age: 9); LEO (child 2, Leonardo, age: 5) All family members are eating, seated at the table. Protagonists of the discussion are Leonardo and his mother.

- 1 \*LEO:           mamma:: guarda!  
\*LEO:           mom:: look!
- \*LEO:           guarda cosa sto facendo con il limone  
\*LEO:           look what I'm doing with the lemon
- \*LEO:           sto cancellando  
\*LEO:           I'm rubbing it
- \*LEO:           sto cancellando questo colore  
\*LEO:           I'm rubbing out the colour
- %sit:           MAM prende dei limoni e si china di fronte a LEO di modo  
che il suo viso risulti all'altezza di quello di LEO  
*MOM takes the lemon and stoops down in front of LEO so  
that her face is level with his*
- %sit:           MAM posa alcuni limoni sul tavolo  
*MOM places the lemon on the table*
- 2 \*LEO:           dai dammelo  
\*LEO:           give it to me
- 3 \*MOM:           eh?  
\*MOM:           eh?
- 4 \*LEO:           posso avere questo limone?  
\*LEO:           can I have this lemon?
- 5 \*MOM:           no:: no:: no:: no::  
\*MOM:           no:: no:: no:: no::



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Type of difference of opinion:	Single Mixed
Mother's Standpoint: (a.)	You can't have the lemons
Child's Standpoint: (b.)	I want the lemons
Mother's Argument: (a.1)	Mom needs the lemons
Mother's Argument (a.2)	Dad wants to eat a good salad today

### *Reconstructing the inferential structure of mother's arguments*

We now turn to the analysis of the inferential structure of both arguments used by the mother. The first one is as follows: *Mom needs the lemons*. Figure 2 shows the representation based on the AMT.

On the right hand of the diagram, the inferential principle, that is, the maxim, on which the argumentation is based is specified: "If a means admits alternative uses, it is reasonable to reserve it for the use bringing to the most important purpose." This is one of the maxims of the *locus from means to goals* (cf. Rigotti, 2006). The reasoning follows with a syllogistic, i.e., inferential, structure: "The mother intends to use the lemons for a purpose that is more important than the purpose of her child"; therefore, "The lemons are to be reserved for the mother's need (the child cannot have the lemons to play with)".

However, this is only one part of the argumentation. The fact that "The mother intends to use the lemons for a purpose that is more important than the purpose of her child" needs further justifications; unlike the maxim, this is not an inferential rule but a factual statement that must be backed by contextual knowledge.

In this regard, the AMT representation allows consideration of the contextual premises that are implicitly or explicitly used in argumentation. This may be found on the left hand of the diagram, where a second line of reasoning is developed in order to support the former one. This is why the first conclusion on the left side becomes the minor premise on the right side. In this way, the crossing of contextual and formal premises that is characteristic of argumentation is accounted for in the AMT (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2011).

In this argument the endoxon refers to common knowledge about the hierarchy of needs within the family: "The purpose of the mother is more important than the desire of her child". The datum ("The child wants the lemons to play with. The mother needs the lemons for her purpose."), combined with the endoxon, produces the conclusion that "The lemons are to be reserved for the mother's need (the child cannot have the lemons to play with)".

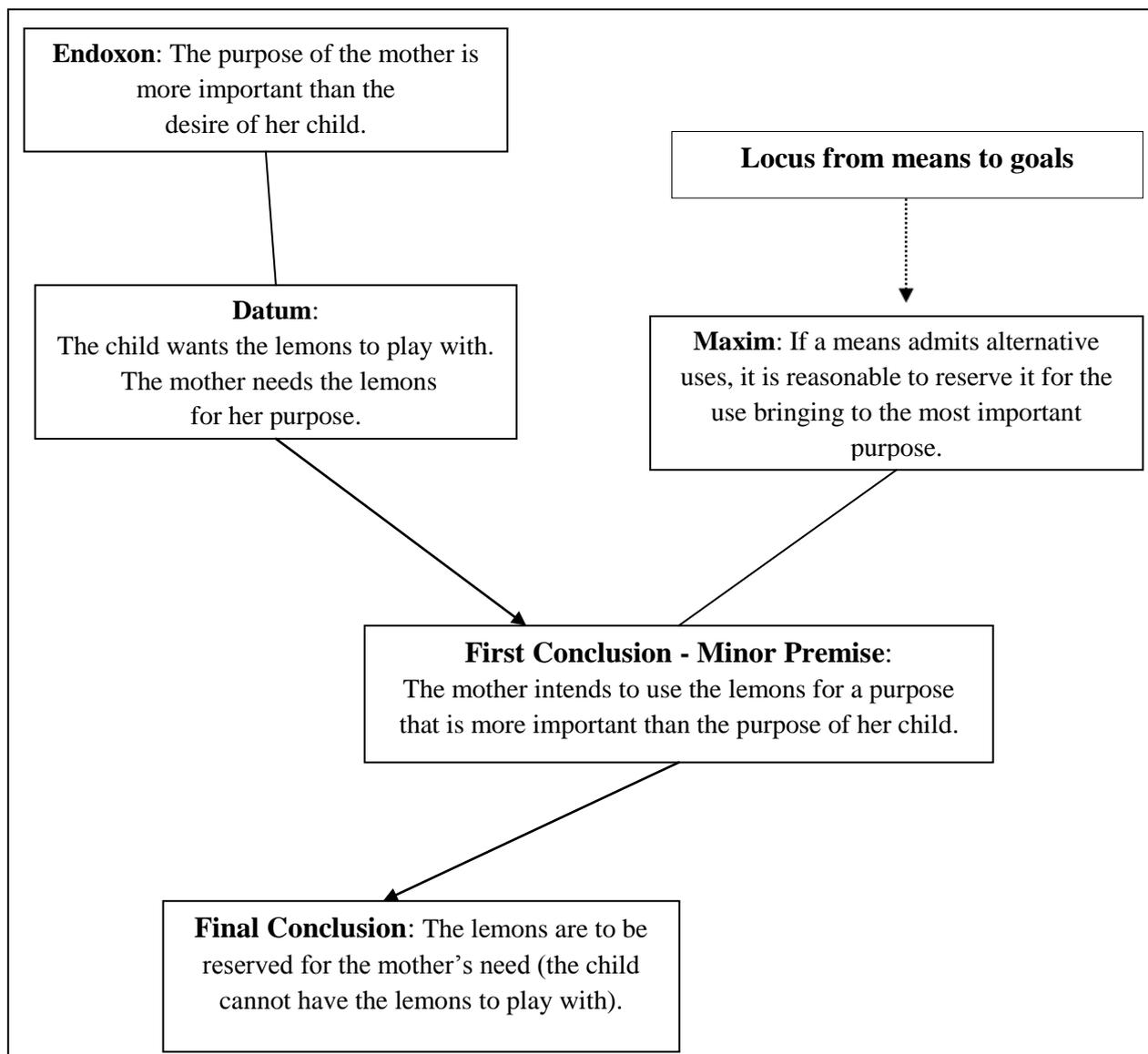


Figure 2. AMT-based reconstruction of the first argument put forward by the mother

However, as we can observe from the child's answer in turn 8 (*why mom?*), the argument "Mom needs the lemons" is not sufficient to convince Leonardo to accept the mother's prohibition and change his opinion. By asking "why" a second time Leonardo puts into doubt the endoxon. He wants to know why the purpose of his mother is more important than his desire to play with the lemons.

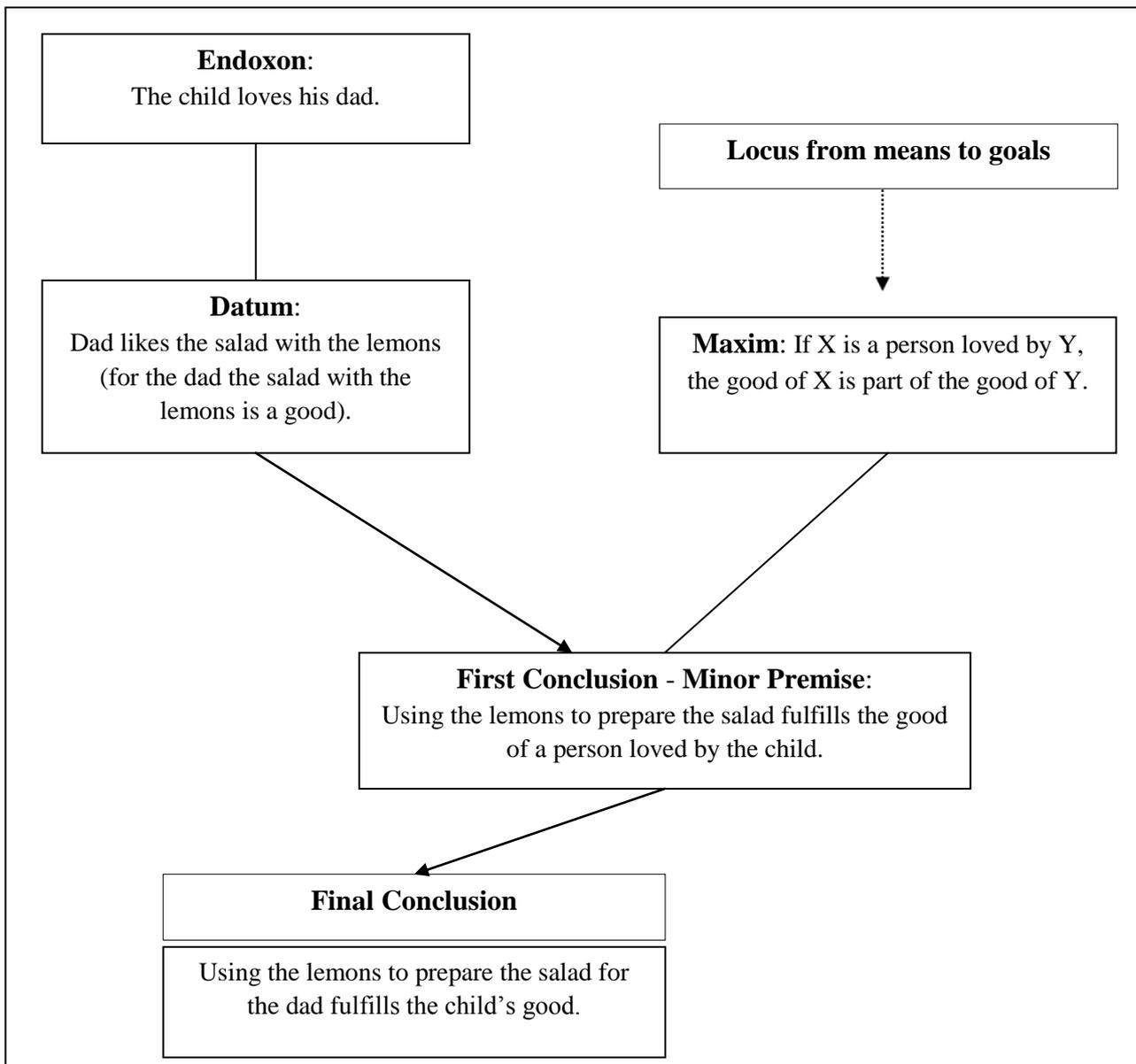
The first argument used by the mother appears to be incomplete, or at least open to different interpretations. She is saying that she needs the lemons, but the reasons are not stated. She bases the strength of her argument only on the authority she held as a mother, without providing any justification for her needs though. In this case, this is not enough to convince Leonardo to accept such a prohibition. Why? What is behind Leonardo's request?

Let us now consider the second argument: "Dad wants to eat a good salad today." Figure 3 shows the representation based on the AMT.

As with the previous scheme, an argument *from means to goals* ("If X is a person loved by Y, the good of X is part of the good of Y") is put forward to convince the child not to play with the lemons. The reasoning follows with a syllogistic structure: "Using the lemons to prepare the salad

fulfills the good of a person loved by the child”; therefore, “Using the lemons to prepare the salad for the dad fulfills the child’s good.”

However, in this case, the endoxon is different from the endoxon of the first argument. In the second argument the endoxon refers to common knowledge about the feeling that each child feels for his dad: “The child loves his dad.” The datum “Dad likes the salad with the lemons (for the dad, the salad with the lemons is good),” combined with this endoxon, thus produces the conclusion that “Using the lemons to prepare the salad for the dad fulfills the child’s good.”



**Figure 3. AMT-based reconstruction of the second argument put forward by the mother**

If in answering the first argument, the child had put into doubt the premise, that is, the endoxon (“The purpose of the mother is more important than the desire of her child”), in this second case, the premise is fully shared between mother and child (“The child loves his dad”).

It is interesting to notice that the mother does not base her argumentative strategy on the fear of the father’s power and authority. If that were the case, she would have said something like: “Watch out or I’ll tell Dad”. Furthermore, she uses with the child a low and sweet tone of voice to emphasize

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the fact that she is not mad with him. The mother bases her argumentation on the nature of the father-son relationship and on the feelings that are at the ground of their relationships (“The child loves his dad”). It is an invocation to the parents’ authority based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on the fear of punishment. The second argument is thus based on what we have defined as *the authority of feelings*.

It also is relevant to put to the fore that in the second argument, the mother spells out the reasons behind the ban addressed to her son. She tells the child that she needs to use the lemons to prepare a good salad for the dad, or, in other words, to fulfill a wish of his (beloved) dad (“Dad likes the salad with the lemons”). Argumentatively speaking, the mother’s behavior represents a specific form of *strategic maneuvering* (van Eemeren, 2010) grounded on the so-called authority of feelings to convince her child to accept the prohibition. At this point, Leonardo, also not too unwillingly, accepts the prohibition showing that not displeasing his father is, in his eyes, worthier than playing with the lemons. The invocation of authority by parents that we have define as the *authority of feelings* appears to be an effective argumentative strategy when the following two conditions are met: (i) the nature of the relationship between the person who represents the authority and the person to whom the argument is addressed is based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on the fear of punishment, and (ii) the argument provides the reason(s) grounding the parental prescription.

By using an expression that is much more poetic than scientific, we could describe the meeting of these two conditions as a perfect match of reason and emotion.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to investigate how parents manage differences of opinion with their children during mealtime conversations. More specifically, it focused on the conditions that allow a specific strategic maneuver, that is, the invocation of the authority, to be an effective argumentative strategy when used by parents to convince their children to accept rules and prescriptions, namely, to have them plainly accepted by the child and not seen, instead, as unjustified impositions.

The methods of analysis, that is, the model of Critical Discussion and the Argumentum Model of Topics, have allowed a detailed study of an argumentative sequence between a mother and her child that occurred during a family dinner. The argumentative sequence analyzed in this study was extracted from a corpus of 60 argumentative sequences selected from 30 video-recordings of dinnertime interactions of Italian and Swiss families as it highlighted the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of the whole corpus of argumentative sequences.

At this juncture, it seems appropriate to take stock of some findings of our study.

First, we observed that it is the parent who is called upon to begin an argumentative discussion in the family, especially to justify a position, to provide arguments, and to convince the child to accept an opinion.

Second, it is very important to consider the fundamental function of children’s requests, for example, the “Why-questions” used by the child in our case, to trigger the beginning of argumentative discussions in the family.

Third, the qualitative analysis of the argumentative sequence has put into light a specific type of invocation of authority used by parents with their children that we have defined as the *authority of feelings*. In particular, we have seen that the invocation of authority by parents with their children is an effective argumentative strategy when both of the following conditions are met:

- 1) the nature of the relationship between the person who represents the authority (in our case, the parents) and the person to whom the argument is addressed, that is, the child, is based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on the fear of punishment. In this regard, we are to

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consider the right emotion (admiration, fear, surprise, sorrow, and so on) that moves the behavior of the child toward a certain direction in that specific situation;

2) the reasons, which are at the base of a prohibition, are not to be hidden from the child's eyes, but are to be known and shared by both parents and children. For example, the argumentative sequence analyzed in this work shows how the child accepts the mother's ban only once he discovers the underlying reason. Previously, when the mother did not clarify the reasons for her ban, the child continued to demand to know why he could not play with the lemons.

As general finding, children seem to need complete recognition of their being an integral part in the construction of family discourse, in other words, of their being members of the group. Furthermore, another significant aspect is the particular nature of the authority that this study has put into light: the authority resides not *with* people but *between* people, the way they relate to each other.

We want to conclude by making some methodological remarks. Generally speaking, the results provided by the analysis of a number of case studies do not allow drawing conclusions of general order. We chose to use such kind of analysis insofar as our goal was to make an in-depth examination of a complex object of analysis, that is, the everyday verbal interactions among parents and children. The argumentative sequence analyzed in the present study has been selected insofar as it describes and highlights the results obtained through the qualitative analysis of a corpus of 60 argumentative sequences.

At this point, we believe that our decision has appeared to be the right one as the analysis of a representative case study has allowed (i) a comprehensive understanding of the specific event under investigation, that is, an argumentative discussion between a mother and her child, and (ii) an extensive description of the context, that is, the family mealtime conversation. In addition, it has provided (iii) relevant and insightful information to thoroughly study interaction dynamics among family members, and, more specifically, (iv) the way in which a difference of opinion is handled.

Accordingly, the results of case studies enable us to carry out more global analyses that can permit to single out typically argumentative patterns among family members.

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## Appendix: Transcription symbols

*	speaker's turn
?	rising intonation
!	exclaiming intonation
:	prolonging of sounds
,	continuing intonation
→	maintaining the turn of talk by the speaker
[ : ]	comments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of talk
%sit:	description of the situation/setting

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