

## **Types of arguments in parents-children discussions: An argumentative analysis**

### **Abstract**

This study aims to single out the argumentative strategies most frequently used by parents to convince their children to accept their rules and prescriptions at mealtimes. The results of the study show that parents mostly put forward arguments based on the quality and quantity of food to persuade their children to eat. Less frequently, the parents put forward other types of arguments such as the appeal to consistency, the arguments from expert opinion, and argument from analogy. While the former can be defined as “food-bound”, because through these arguments parents and children highlight a specific propriety (positive/negative) of food, the latter are mostly used in discussions related to teaching correct table-manners and how to behave with strangers and peers outside the family context.

### **Keywords**

Argumentative strategies, types of argument, mealtime, family conversations

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## Introduction

Among the everyday activities bringing together family members, mealtime represents a good opportunity to investigate the way in which parents and children can interact and argue spontaneously (Beals, 1993; Ochs, Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1996; Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001). It is more than a particular time of day at which to eat. Rather, it is a social activity type that is organized and produced by family members in “a locally situated way” using the resources of talk and interaction (Mondada, 2009, p. 559). Because the activity of family mealtime is characterized by a low level of institutionalization (Irvine, 1979), conversations among family members develop freely and do not follow strictly the rules of engagement involving the turn-taking of talk or the other former mechanisms of conversation typical of institutional settings. At mealtimes parents and children can talk about several issues, from daily events to school and extra-curricular activities of the children and possible plans of future activities involving one or more family members (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Fiese, Foley & Spagnola, 2006; Ochs & Sholet, 2006). The degrees of conversational freedom at mealtimes can vary from family to family and depend on various contextual and social factors (Beals, 1997).

Generally, during mealtime conversations, argumentation plays an incidental - not a structural part, because family members do not sit exclusively at the table with the aim of convincing the other family members about the validity of their own opinions. At least, this is not their initial goal in most of the cases. Unlike more institutionalized activity types, there is not a specific moment during the meal when an argumentative discussion has to take place. Family members can engage in an argumentative discussion at any moment during the meal, from its beginning until just a moment before its end. Moreover, the activity of family mealtimes does not precondition what kind of contributions are allowed in the argumentative practice of family members. Mealtimes are open activities in which exchanges of arguments and critical reactions can be developed freely without a fixed format. This is in sharp contrast to other more institutionalized activity types. For instance, analyzing the activity of Prime Minister’s Question Time in the British House of Commons, Mohammed (2008, p. 380) shows that it has clear procedural rules and assignment of roles: “The Prime Minister is the main protagonist of the positive standpoint. [...] The Members of Parliament from the Opposition and the leader of the Opposition in particular are conventionally the protagonists of the negative standpoint”. Another example concerns the work of Ilie (2000) about the role of argumentative orientation of political clichés as orientation to ideological commitments within British Parliament debates. Instead, in argumentative discussions among family members during mealtimes, parents and children are not obliged to act as politicians and journalists do in a political interview. However, what happens in practice during mealtimes is that parents, quite often, need to act as good politicians because their children are often very good journalists. In fact, the argumentative discussions between parents and children during mealtimes are characterized by sophisticated typical dynamics: on the one hand, the parents can try to convince their children to accept their rules and prescriptions, on the other, the children cast doubt on the parents’ standpoint and can ask their parents to make the reasons on which their standpoint is based more explicit.

Within the framework of family argumentation research, the present study aims to identify the argumentative strategies most often adopted by parents with their children. In order to present our research, the paper is organized as follows: in its first part, a concise review of the most relevant literature on family argumentation is presented; afterwards, the methodology on which the present study is based and the results of the analyses are described; finally, the results obtained from the analyses and the conclusions drawn from this study are discussed.

## **Studies on argumentation in the family context**

Alongside a number of studies that mark the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (see e.g., Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2008; Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009), the relevance of argumentation in the family context is rapidly emerging in argumentation studies. A significant contribution is represented by the work carried out in the last twenty years by Pontecorvo and her colleagues (Pontecorvo, 1993a; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997; Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2010; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2010, in press), who centred their research on the everyday interactions of Italian families in order to investigate the practices of socialization of children aged between 3 and 9 years interacting with their parents. The focus of the work of Pontecorvo was primarily educational in nature, because the family context has been considered to be the primary learning setting for the socialization of young children to the practices, values, and rules typical of their culture (Pontecorvo, 1993b). The development of language proficiency was therefore fundamental for the socialization of young children, since it allows them to become competent members of their community.

The interest in studying the argumentative interactions during mealtime is due to the fact that during this activity it is frequently possible to observe how behaviors and points of view of family members are put into doubt. As a consequence, the family members often need to support their statements through argumentative reasoning. For example, Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1997) observed that in story-telling with their parents, children make use of sophisticated argumentative skills by calling into question the rules imposed by their parents. According to Pontecorvo (1993a), the acquisition of argumentative strategies is a key element in the language socialization of children, because it is through the daily exchanges with their parents that children begin to learn to produce and sustain their standpoints in verbal interactions with others. Furthermore, other studies also stress that in the study of argumentation in the family, the role of language cannot be separated from general socio-cultural knowledge (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007; Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009). Argumentative discussions, in fact, can favor not only the language socialization, but also the cultural socialization of children, as they are not intended to be mere conflictual episodes that must be avoided, but opportunities for children to learn the reasons on which the practices, values, and rules typical of their culture are based.

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

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

A number of recent studies have investigated the structure and the linguistic elements characterizing the argumentative discussions among family members. For instance, these conversations exhibit some special ways of starting argumentative confrontation, notably of advancing doubts. One such way is the Why-question, frequently – but not exclusively – asked by children to their parents. According to Bova and Arcidiacono (2013a), this type of question challenges parents to justify their rules and prescriptions, which remain frequently implicit or based on rules not initially known by or previously made explicit to children. Arcidiacono and Bova (2011a) have shown that commenting ironically on the attitudes or behavior of children appears to be an argumentative strategy adopted by parents to persuade the children to withdraw or decrease the strength of their standpoint. In a recent work, Bova and Arcidiacono (2013b) have brought out a specific type of invocation of authority that they have defined as ‘the authority of feelings’. In particular, the authors have shown that the parents’ authority can be an effective argumentative strategy only if the following two conditions are met: 1) the nature of the relationship between the authoritative figure and the person to whom the argument is addressed is based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than fear of punishment, and 2) the reasons behind a prescription are not to be hidden from the child’s eyes, but are to be known and shared by parents and children. In a previous work, Laforest (2002), focusing on the act of complaining typically occurring during family mealtime conversations, noted that family members use numerous strategies to avoid an argumentative discussion and, more often than not, they succeed. Examples of avoiding practices illustrated by the author are, among others, mitigating the issues on which the difference of opinion has been raised, creating an ironic distance that takes away the severity of the blame, using humor when responding in addition to applying the strategy of ignoring the complaints felt to be most explosive.

The observations of conversations between parents and children during mealtime prove to be an activity which is also essential for investigating the argumentative strategies used by children. For example, Bova (in press) observed that children always refer to an adult as a source of expert, and not another child. According to this author, the actual effectiveness of this argument – that he has called ‘argument from adult-expert opinion’ – depends on how strongly the premises, i.e. endoxa<sup>1</sup>, the argument is based on are shared by parents and children. Focusing on food related argumentative discussions, Bova and Arcidiacono (2014) show that children’s argumentative strategies mirror the argumentative strategies adopted by their parents, although their view on the issue is the opposite of that of their parents. Analyzing an argumentative discussion between a brother and a sister during a family meal, Hester and Hester (2010, p. 44) show that the children use both

sequential and categorical cultural resources to produce their arguments. In particular, in this study they show that the children's arguments are organized both sequentially and categorically: "The brother could be heard to degrade his sister via his conversational actions – directives, accusations, enacted descriptions, mimicry and mockery – whilst she in turn resists them through her rebuttals, accounts, counter-enacted descriptions and other oppositionals."

Some other studies have also shown that different cultures and nationalities can be characterized by different argumentative styles in families. In this regard, Arcidiacono and Bova (2011b, 2013) have observed some differences in the argumentative style adopted by Italian and Swiss families. These authors show that in Italian families the use of implicit expressions appears to be a typical argumentative strategy adopted by parents with their children. For example, Italian parents use implicit expressions in order to persuade their child to retract or reduce the intensity of their standpoint and also to persuade the child to accept a standpoint. Instead, in Swiss families, the findings obtained so far show that parents adopt a more dialectical style as they try to be more explicit in their argumentation, showing to be more concerned with giving reasons and resolving conflicts on merit rather than settling the dispute by only trying to orient the child.

## Methodology

### Data corpus

The present study is part of a larger project<sup>2</sup> devoted to the study of argumentation in the family context. The research design implies a corpus of thirty video-recorded separate family meals (constituting about twenty hours of video data), constructed from two different sets of data, named *sub-corpus 1* and *sub-corpus 2*. All participants are Italian-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 high socio-demographic level<sup>3</sup> 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 (three to six years). Most parents at the time of data collection were in their late 30s ( $M = 37.40$ ;  $SD = 3.06$ ). Fathers were slightly older than mothers (Fathers  $M = 38.40$ ;  $SD = 3.20$  vs. Mothers  $M = 36.40$ ;  $SD = 2.88$ ). 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 high socio-demographic level, 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 ( $M = 35.90$ ;  $SD = 1.91$ ). Fathers were slightly older than mothers (Fathers  $M = 37.00$ ;  $SD = 1.58$  vs. Mothers  $M = 34.80$ ;  $SD = 1.64$ ). Families had two or three children.

Detailed information on family constellations in sub-corpus 1 and sub-corpus 2 are presented below, in Table 1:

| 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>                  |                       |                       |
| Mothers                              | 5                     | 5                     |
| Fathers                              | 5                     | 5                     |
| Adults, total                        | 10                    | 10                    |
| Son                                  | 6                     | 6                     |
| Daughter                             | 4                     | 7                     |
| Children, total                      | 10                    | 13                    |
| Total participants                   | 20                    | 23                    |
| <b>Average age of participants</b>   |                       |                       |
| Mother                               | 36,40 (SD 2,881)      | 34,80 (SD 1.643)      |
| Father                               | 38,40 (SD 3,209)      | 37,00 (SD 1.581)      |
| Parents, total                       | 37,40 (SD 3,062)      | 35,90 (SD 1.912)      |
| 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)        | 7.60 (SD .894)        |
|                                      | (4 sons; 1 daughter)  | (3 sons; 2 daughters) |
| Second-born                          | 3,20 (SD .447)        | 4.40 (SD .548)        |
|                                      | (2 sons; 3 daughters) | (2 sons; 3 daughters) |
| Third-born                           | 0                     | 3 (SD .000)           |
|                                      |                       | (1 son; 2 daughters)  |

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

## Transcription procedures

All family meals' video-recordings were fully transcribed adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system CHAT (MacWhinney, 1989), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability. The transcriptions were revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (agreement rate = 80%) was reached. Then, verbal utterances and nonverbal expressions with a clear communicative function relevant to the meal activity were identified in the transcription. This methodology allows a detailed analysis of verbal interactions among family members during the recording sessions. The transcript adopts CHAT in using the following 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
- xxx inaudible utterance(s)
- %act: description of speaker's actions
- %sit: description of the situation/setting

Several deviations from CHAT were introduced. First, punctuation symbols, as employed by Schifffrin (1994) and Blum-Kulka (1997), were used to indicate intonation contours:

- , continuing intonation
- . falling intonation

- : prolonging of sounds
- ? rising intonation
- ! exclamatory intonation

Second, additional symbols were added:

- maintaining the turn of talking by the speaker
- %pau: 2.5 sec
- @End end of the family meal

Afterwards, we reviewed all the transcriptions together with the family members at their home. This procedure allows to ask the family members to clarify passages that were unclear in the eyes of the researchers on account of low levels of recording sound and vague words and constructions. Information on the physical setting of the mealtime, 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, at first sight, appeared unclear.

The direct experience of the entire corpus construction process, including the recordings of the interaction (construction of primary data) and the transcriptions (construction of secondary data), has allowed both the application of the availability principle, that is, “the analytical task of recording (and, in the same way, of digitising, anonymizing, transcribing, annotating, etc.) to enhance the availability of relevant details - which indeed makes the analysis possible” (Mondada, 2006, p. 55) and a fuller experiential understanding of the specific situations.

In this article, data are presented in the original Italian language, using Courier New bold font, whereas the English translation is added below using Times New Roman italic font. In all examples, all turns are numbered progressively within the discussion 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 are pseudonyms.

## Definition of argumentative situation and selection of the arguments

The analysis we present in this work focuses 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 & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 73). In particular, a discussion is considered as argumentative whether the following criteria are satisfied:

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

We have selected all the argumentative discussions within the corpus of 30 mealtime conversations (N = 107). Out of 107 argumentative discussions we have analyzed, parents advance at least one standpoint in 98 instances (91.6%), putting forward at least one argument in support of their standpoint in 93 instances (94.9%), for a total number of 128 arguments. Moreover, in the corpus we observed that mothers advance more arguments than fathers (82 vs. 46). The detail of the parents' argumentative contribution is presented below, in Fig. 1.

| Parents' argumentative...   |   | Parents' argumentative contribution |    |    |    |     |    |    |     |     |     |    |  |
|---|---|-------------------------------------|----|----|----|-----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|--|
| ■ Argumentative discussions in which at least one standpoint is advanced by parents                     | 0 | 13                                  | 26 | 39 | 52 | 65  | 78 | 91 | 104 | 117 | 130 | 98 |  |
| ■ Argumentative discussions in which at least one argument is advanced by parents                       |   |                                     |    |    |    | 93  |    |    |     |     |     |    |  |
| ■ Total number of arguments put forward by parents during argumentative discussions with their children |   |                                     |    |    |    | 128 |    |    |     |     |     |    |  |
| ■ Total number of arguments put forward by mothers  |   |                                     |    |    |    | 82  |    |    |     |     |     |    |  |
| ■ Total number of arguments put forward by fathers  |   |                                     |    |    |    | 46  |    |    |     |     |     |    |  |

**Figure 1: Contributions of parents in argumentative discussions with their children.**

In order to present and discuss the results of our analysis, we selected some excerpts. These are representative of the more frequent results obtained from the larger set of analyses conducted on the whole corpus of arguments put forward by parents during argumentative discussions with their children.

## Results: Parents' prevailing arguments

In this section, we consider the prevailing arguments used by parents within the 93 argumentative discussions where they put forward at least one argument to support their own standpoint. Within this corpus of data, we observed a total of 128 arguments (N = 82 by mothers and N = 46 by fathers). Findings about the arguments used by parents with their



children can be ascribed to four main categories: *quality* and *quantity*, *appeal to consistency*, *expert opinion*, and *analogy* (Fig. 2). We did not observe significant differences in the types of arguments used by mothers and fathers, with the exception of the arguments from expert opinion that were used more frequently by fathers than by mothers (Fig. 3). Excerpts of qualitative analysis of the argumentative strategies used by parents are presented for each category in the next sections of the paper.

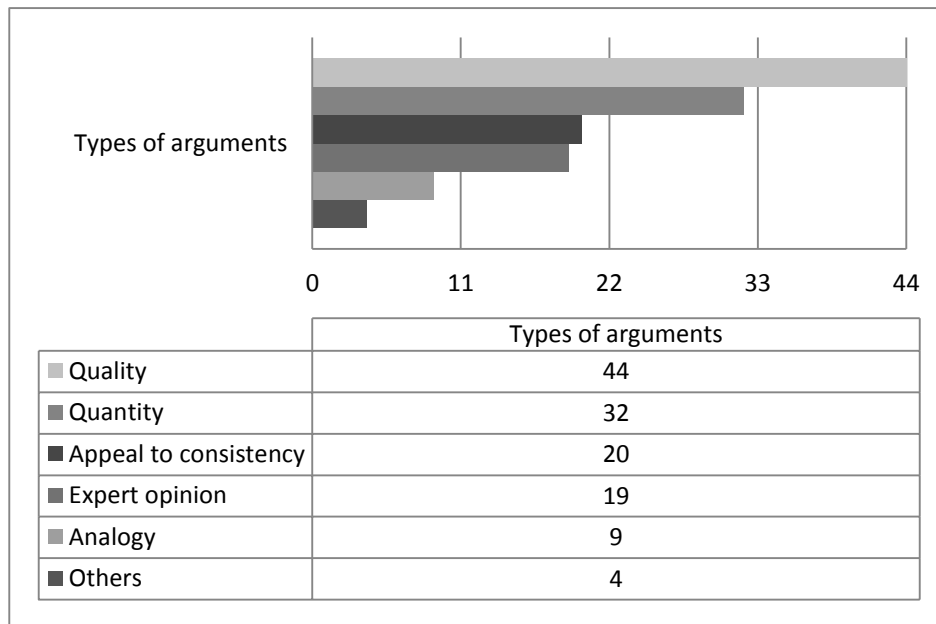
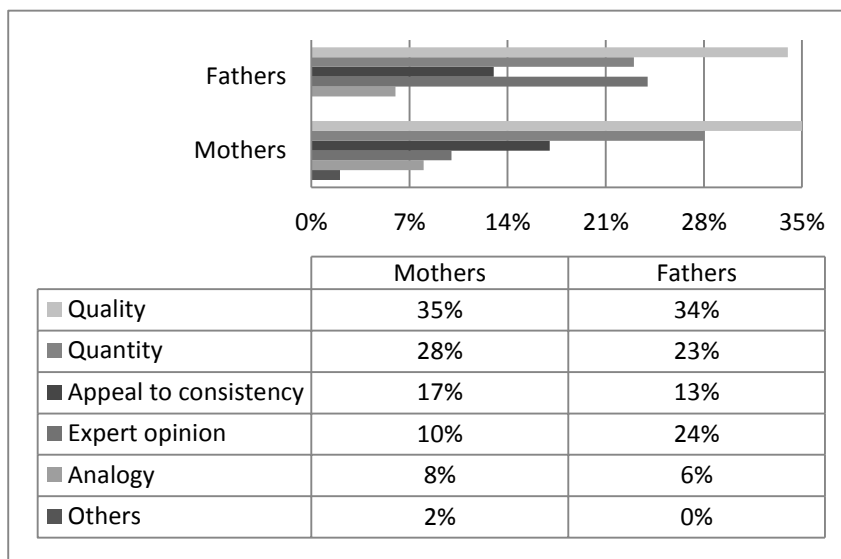


Figure 2: Types of arguments put forward by parents with their children in argumentative discussions.



**Figure 3: Types of arguments put forward by mothers and fathers with their children in argumentative discussions.**

### *Arguments of quality and quantity*

The first category of arguments used by parents in argumentative discussions with their children refers to the quality (positive or negative) (N = 44; about 34%) and the quantity (too much or too little) of food (N = 32; 25%). This is not at all surprising because conversations at mealtimes are often about feeding practices.

The first example of how a mother puts forward an *argument of quality* to convince her 7-year-old son, Giovanni, to eat the potatoes is presented below.

#### **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.

- 1        **\*MOM:**        **tutto buono ((il cibo)) stasera, no? [parlando con DAD]**  
                         *everything ((the food)) good tonight, isn't it? [talking to DAD]*
- 2        **\*DAD:**        **veramente eccellente!**  
                         *really excellent!*
- %act:**        **MOM guarda verso GIO**  
                         *MOM looks towards GIO*
- 3        **\*MOM:**        **mamma mia, Giovanni stasera non ha mangiato niente [parlando con DAD]**  
                         *good grief, Giovanni has hardly eaten anything tonight [talking to DAD]*
- %act:**        **schiocca leggermente la lingua e scuote la testa in segno di disappunto.**  
                         *lightly clucking her tongue and shaking her head in disapproval.*
- 4        **\*MOM:**        **Giovanni, devi mangiare le patate.**  
                         *Giovanni, you must eat the potatoes.*
5.        **\*GIO:**        **no:: non le voglio ((le patate))**  
                         *no:: I don't want them ((the potatoes))*
6.        **\*MOM:**        **guarda come sono croccanti! ((le patate al forno))**  
                         *look how crisp they are! ((baked potatoes))*
7.        **\*GIO:**        **davvero?::**  
                         *really?::*
- %act:**        **GIO inizia a mangiare le patate**  
                         *GIO starts eating the potatoes*
8.        **\*MOM:**        **bravo Giovanni!**  
                         *bravo Giovanni!*

%act: GIO sorride guardando MOM  
GIO smiles looking at MOM

Dinner is almost over. The parents are talking between 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, saying that it was *really excellent* (line 2). Immediately after, the mother expresses her concern because, she says, her 7-year-old son, Giovanni, has 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 the excerpt, we shall focus on the difference of opinion between the mother and his son in lines 4-7. In fact, the mother, in line 4, tells Giovanni that he must eat the potatoes, 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<sup>4</sup>, since the mother and Giovanni show two opposite standpoints<sup>5</sup>: on the one hand, the mother wants Giovanni to eat the potatoes, while, on the contrary, Giovanni does not want to eat them. At this point, she puts forward an argument in support of her standpoint, namely, she accepts to assume the burden of proof<sup>6</sup>. The mother’s argument in line 6 is based on the quality of the potatoes and, in particular, it aims at emphasizing the good taste of the food, coherently to what has been previously attested by both parents (lines 1 and 2). This phase of the discussion is considered an argumentation stage. In line 7, Giovanni appears to be persuaded by the argument of quality put forward by the mother and he starts eating the potatoes. The non-verbal act by Giovanni represents the concluding stage of the argumentative discussion and shows the efficacy of the argument of quality used by the mother in order to convince the child to eat.

In our corpus of data, we often observed that the argument of quality and the argument of quantity can be also combined within the same discussion, as in the following example involving a mother and his 7-year-old son, Luca.

## Excerpt 2.

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 41 years), mother (MOM, 38 years), Luca (LUC, 7 years 9 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.

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

- %sit:**            **LUC sta mangiando il minestrone**  
*LUC is eating the soup*
5.            **\*LUC:**        **basta, non ne voglio più ((minestrone)) [parlando con MOM]**  
*that's enough, I don't want more ((soup)) [talking to MOM]*
- %act:**            **LUC smette di mangiare il minestrone**  
*LUC stops eating the soup*
6.            **\*MOM:**        **dai, solo un poco in più**  
*come on, just a little bit more*
7.            **\*LUC:**        **no, non voglio altro:**  
*no, I don't want anything else:*
8.            **\*MOM:**        **ci sono tutte le verdure!**  
*there are all the vegetables!*
- %pau:**            **1.0. sec**
9.            **\*LUC:**        **no:: no::**  
*no:: no::*
- %sit:**            **LUC si alza da tavola e corre in un'altra stanza**  
*LUC gets up and runs into another room*

The dinner is started from a few minutes. The mother has already served the main course, i.e., a vegetable soup, and all family members are eating it. We decided to select for the analysis the point in which the father says to the mother that the soup is almost boiling (line 1). In this case, the father is referring to a possible negative quality of the soup. The mother asks again the father whether the soup is too much boiling (line 2). Although the father reassures the mother, saying that the soup is not too much boiling (“no:: no::”, line 3) the mother appears to be not convinced yet by the father’s answer. In fact, the soup can be not too much boiling for the father, but it can be unlike for the children, especially for the youngest child. As Ochs and Taylor (1992) and Goodwin (2007) have shown, children’s wishes and preferences are typically taken into account by parents at mealtimes. Such scaffolding rests on the assumption that even the youngest children are ratified conversational partners. We observe, in fact, that the mother asks her 3-year-old daughter, Luisa, whether she likes the soup (line 4). At this point, the other child, Luca stops eating and tells that he does not want more soup. As consequence, a difference of opinion between the child and his mother arises, and the mother starts to invite Luca to eat more soup using an argument of quantity (“just a little bit more”, line 6). However (as we can observe from Luca’s answer in line 7), this argument is not effective enough to convince the child to accept the mother’s standpoint. As consequence, in order to convince Luca to eat the soup, the mother puts forward a further argument that refers to the quality of the food: the child has to eat a little more soup because it is made with all the vegetables (line 8). According to the mother, the vegetables in the soup represent a positive quality of the soup and an argument in sustaining the reason to eat it. However, despite the mother’s argumentative effort, Luca still disagrees with her and leaves the table (line 9). The argumentative sequence does not find a conclusion nor a compromise between the two participants. The

withdrawal as closing possibility of the verbal exchange around the soup can be considered, in this case, the sign that participants became too upset to continue the discussion (Vuchinich, 1990).

## Appeal to consistency

Another type of argument used by parents with their children refers to the consistency with past behaviors (N = 20; about 15%). This type of argument is described as follows: “If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed something in the past, then why aren’t you maintaining it now?” The next excerpt is an illustration of this type of argument. The protagonists are a mother and her son, Paolo, aged 7 years.

### Excerpt 3.

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Paolo (PAO, 7 years), Laura (LAU, 4 years 5 month), Elisa (ELI, 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.

- %sit:           **MOM, PAO e LAU stanno mangiando, seduti a tavola. ELI sta giocando con un giocattolo seduta sulle ginocchia di DAD**  
*MOM, PAO and LAU are eating, seated at the table. ELI is playing with a toy seated on DAD's knees*
1.           **\*MOM:       Paolo, ieri sei stato bravissimo**  
*Paolo, you've been very good yesterday*
2.           **\*PAO:       perché?**  
*why?*
3.           **\*MOM:       perché?**  
*why?*
- **\*MOM:       zia Daniela mi ha detto che ieri sei stato bravissimo**  
*aunt Daniela told me that you were very good yesterday*
- **\*MOM:       hai fatto tutti i compiti ((di scuola))**  
*you did all the ((school)) homework*
- **\*MOM:       quindi domani torni da zia Daniela a fare i compiti, va bene?**  
*so tomorrow you're going back to aunt Daniela's to do your homework, ok?*
4.           **\*PAO:       no:: non voglio**  
*no:: I don't want to*
5.           **\*MOM:       andiamo, Paolo**  
*come on, Paolo*
- **\*MOM:       ma ieri sei stato lì tutto il pomeriggio**  
*but yesterday you were there the all afternoon*
- **\*MOM:       e oggi hai detto che ti sei divertito tanto!**  
*and today you said that you had so much fun!*

6.        **\*PAO:**        *mhm:: ((PAO ha un'espressione perplessa))*  
                         *mhm :: ((PAO has a puzzled expression))*
7.        **\*MOM:**        *ok, allora domani ti accompagno da zia Daniela*  
                         *ok, so tomorrow I'll take you to aunt Daniela*
- %act:**        *PAO annuisce mostrando così di essere d'accordo con MOM*  
                         *PAO nods to say that he agrees with MOM*

The dinner is started from about 15 minutes. 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 behaviour of one of their children. The excerpt starts when the mother sends a compliment to her 7-year-old son, Paolo: "Paolo, you've been very good yesterday" (line 1). By these words, the mother shows her intention to start a conversation with her son. However, Paolo appears puzzled, because he does not know the reason why, according to her mother, yesterday he was *very good* (line 2). In line 3, the mother unveils the reason on which her compliment to his son 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 logic consequence of the child's behaviour: she wants Paolo to go again at 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 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 ("no: I don't want to", line 4), 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<sup>6</sup> 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 was for him ("today you said that you had so much fun!"), the mother tries to show to Paolo that his present behavior 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. We would like to underline 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. The effect of the marker "but" is also reinforced through the conjunction "and" that introduces the fact that Paolo said that he had fun with aunt. 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.

## Argument from expert opinion

A third type of argument put forward by parents in food-related argumentative discussions with their children is the so-called *argument from expert opinion*. The argument from expert opinion appeared 19 times in our corpus (about 15%). It is noteworthy that this type of argument was used more frequently by the fathers (24% - 11 out of 46 arguments found in the corpus) than the mothers (10% - 8 out of 82 arguments found in the corpus). In our study, we refer to the definition of argument from expert opinion as the notion of epistemic authority elaborated by Walton (1997, pp. 77-78):

The epistemic authority is a relationship between two individuals where one is an expert in a field of knowledge in such a manner that his pronouncements in this field carry a special weight of presumption for the other individual that is greater than the say-so of a layperson in that field. The epistemic type of authority, when used or appealed to in argument, is essentially an appeal to expertise, or to expert opinion.

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

#### Excerpt 4.

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.

- %act:            ALE indica alla mamma di voler prendere una gomma per cancellare un disegno e MOM fa cenno di no agitando l'indice della mano  
ALE tells his MOM he wants to take a rubber to erase a drawing and MOM says no by shaking her finger
1.            \*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
- \*MOM:        non hai più fame, Stefano?  
                         aren't you hungry, Stefano?
2.            \*STE:        per favore:: niente. [!: facendo cenni di negazione col capo]  
                         please:: no more. [!: moving his head as if to say no]
3.            \*MOM:        non hai più fame?  
                         aren't you hungry?
4.            \*STE:        no:: sono sazio.

- no:: I'm full.*
5.       **\*MOM:**       **solo un poco di verdura?**  
                                   *only a few vegetables?*
6.       **\*STE:**       **no:: sono proprio sazio.**  
                                   *no:: I'm really full.*
7.       **\*ALE:**       **però::**  
                                   *but::*
8.       **\*MOM:**       **cosa c'è?**  
                                   *what?*
9.       **\*ALE:**       **però io voglio provare**  
                                   *but I want to try it*
10.       **\*MOM:**       **no tesoro**  
                                   *no sweetheart*
11.       **\*ALE:**       **no::**  
                                   *no::*
12.       **\*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*
13.       **\*ALE:**       **ma io voglio cancellare ((il disegno))**  
                                   *but I want to erase it ((the drawing))*
14.       **\*MOM:**       **allora aspetta che ti prendo la gomma giusta**  
                                   *wait that I give you the right rubber then*
15.       **\*ALE:**       **va bene**  
                                   *ok*

The dinner is going to its conclusion. The mother asks to the children if they still want to eat a little more food, but the children attention is already directed to other activities such as playing with toys and other objects. In this phase of the meal, it has been frequent to observe, in our corpus, discussions in which parents and children negotiate the activities allowed to children after dinner, 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, our focus is mostly on the discussion between the mother and Alessandro (line 1, and from line 7 to line 15) whilst another sequence between the mother and the other child, Stefano, is inserted within the larger discussion about the possibility to erase the drawing: the part concerning the exchange between Stefano and the mother is not specifically analysed here as it can be referred to the food-bound practices discussed above.



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 1, 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 (“but::”, line 7) and, in line 9, he replies that he wants to try to use the eraser (“but I want to try it”). In line 12, 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, which we can paraphrase as follows: Your parents have more experience than you. Therefore, you have to trust them and to accept what they say. 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 15). The mitigation used by the mother (“sometimes, you can try”, line 12) and the concession in line 14 (“wait that I give you...”) can be considered as ways to align her position to the son due the argument offered by the child in line 13 “but I want to erase it”: in this sense, the mother’s effort of re-contextualization (Ochs, 1990) 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.

## Arguments from analogy

A forth type of argument put forward by parents in argumentative discussions with their children is the so-called argument from analogy (N = 9; about 7%). As stated by Walton, Reed and Macagno (2008, p. 58), the reasoning behind this argument is the following:

*Major Premise:* Generally, Case C1 is similar to case C2.

*Minor Premise:* Proposition A is true (false) in Case C1.

*Conclusion:* Proposition A is true (false) in case C2.

The following dialogue between a mother and her 9-year-old son, Marco, refers to this type of argument.

### Excerpt 5.

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 42 years), mother (MOM, 40 years), Marco (MAR, 9 years 6 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.

- %act:            la cena è appena iniziata. MOM serve da mangiare ai bambini,  
DAD invece è ancora seduto sul divano a guardare la TV  
MOM dinner is just started. Mom serves the food to children, DAD instead is still seated on  
the couch watching TV
1.            \*MOM:        dai vieni:: la cena è pronta [parlando a DAD]  
                 come:: dinner is ready [talking to DAD]
2.            \*DAD:        solo un attimo  
                 just a moment

3.       **\*MOM:**       **vieni: altrimenti si raffredda**  
                               *come: otherwise it gets cold*
- %pau:**       **2.5 sec**
4.       **\*MAR:**       **mamma**  
                               *mom*
5.       **\*MOM:**       **cosa Marco?**  
                               *what Marco?*
6.       **\*MAR:**       **secondo me la maestra Marta ((la maestra di matematica)) ci dà**  
                               **tanti compiti da fare per le vacanze ((riferendosi alle**  
                               **vacanze di Natale))**  
                               *I think that the teacher Marta ((the Math's teacher)) will give us a lot of homework to do*  
                               *during the holidays ((referring to the Christmas holidays))*
7.       **\*MOM:**       **no:: no:**  
                               *no:: no:*
- **\*MOM:**       **secondo me no**  
                               *I don't think so*
8.       **\*MAR:**       **si invece!**  
                               *I do though!*
9.       **\*MOM:**       **no:: secondo me no.**  
                               *no:: I don't think so.*
- **\*MOM:**       **se la maestra Chiara ((la maestra di italiano)) non l'ha**  
                               **fatto, non lo farà neanche la maestra Marta**  
                               *if teacher Chiara ((the Italian's teacher)) didn't do it, teacher Marta won't do it either*
10.       **\*MAR:**       **speriamo! ((sorridendo))**  
                               *let's hope so! ((smiling))*
- %act:**       **anche MOM sorride**  
                               *MOM smiles too*

Dinner is just starting. A shared convention is that mealtime is a *co-located activity*. Co-location means that members may overhear the talk of other members (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 325). This process is illustrated in 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. This event, namely, the mother announcing the beginning of the meal, represents a typical starting-point for this activity type. In the excerpt, we shall focus our analysis on the difference of opinion between the mother and her son, Marco, on an issue related to the school context. Marco in line 6 advances a standpoint: he says to his mother that he thinks that the math teacher, i.e. the teacher Marta, will give them – this means not only to him, but to all the students of his class – a lot of homework to do during the Christmas holidays. The mother disagrees with her son in line 7 (“no:: no: I don’t think so”). Marco, in turn, in line 8 shows to disagree with his mother (“I do though”), but he does not provide any argument in support of his standpoint, i.e. he does not assume the burden of proof. On the contrary, the mother accepts

to assume the burden of proof and advances an argument from an analogy to convince Marco to change his opinion. In line 9, in fact, she says to her son that if the Italian teacher did not give them homework to do during 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 similarities, 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, and they conclude the discussion both smiling.

## Discussion

This work has intended to provide a contribution to the study of argumentative practices within the family context. We have focused particularly on the argumentative strategies used by parents with their children during mealtime conversations. Despite differences in roles, age and competencies between parents and children, during mealtime conversations the former often need to develop an effective argumentation to convince their children to accept their rules and prescriptions. However, the purposes for which parents may engage in a argumentative discussion with their children may be various. Sometimes, they need to advance arguments in order to justify their view about a certain behavior 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" behavior, e.g., the correct table-manners. Other times, instead, parents advance arguments with the aim to involve their children in a new discussion, so starting a common reasoning along with them. Despite the different purposes for which parents can engage in an argumentative discussion with their children, the common element to all the argumentative discussions they engage in is the necessity to advance arguments in support of a certain standpoint. There is no argumentation without arguments in support of a certain standpoint.

Regarding the topics family members discuss, we have seen that the choices of mealtime conversations are *unpredictable events* as they are characterized by substantial but not total freedom in relation to the issue that can be tackled. A "multiple agenda" (Blum-Kulka, 1997, p. 9) is played out at mealtimes, and often totally unforeseen topics are addressed. However, not all topics are open for discussion at mealtimes. For instance, money, politics, and sex are usually viewed as less suitable themes for mealtime conversations, above all in the presence of young children. This is due to the fact that even when no guests are present, the presence of children affects the choice of what is acceptable and what can be mentioned at mealtimes (in this regard, see also Tulviste et al., 2002; Fiese et al., 2006; Ochs & Sholet, 2006).

In the present study, we have seen that the argumentative discussions between parents and children relate to various issues, some of them discussed more than others during mealtimes. For example, we found argumentative discussions related to the food preferences of family members, the teaching of the correct table-manners by parents, or the children's behavior within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. In our corpus, we observed in particular that the argumentative

discussions between parents and children were often around food, and the parents mostly put forward arguments based on quality (e.g., very good, nutritious, salty, or not good) and quantity (e.g., too little, quite enough, or too much) of food to convince their children to eat. The argument of quality was typically put forward by parents to convince their children that the food is good and therefore deserves to be eaten. Similarly, the argument of quantity was put forward by parents to convince their children to eat “just a little bit more” food. Moreover, as we have seen in the excerpt 2, the argument of quality and the argument of quantity can be also put forward together within an argumentative discussion. Because through the arguments of quality and quantity parents and children highlight a specific propriety (positive or negative) of food, these two arguments, we contend, can be defined as “food-bound”.

Compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, the other types of arguments put forward by parents, i.e. the appeal to consistency, the arguments from expert opinion, and the argument from analogy, appear less frequently in our corpus. These types of arguments were mostly used by parents in discussions related to teaching correct table-manners and how to behave with strangers and peers outside the family context. What is interesting about these types of arguments is the fact that they introduce new elements within parent-child mealtimes interactions, which are not only related to the evaluation of the quality or quantity of food, but also touch on other important aspects that characterize family interactions. We refer in particular to the teaching of the correct behavior in social situations within and outside the family context, e.g., in the school context with teachers and peers. 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 expert opinion that is used by fathers in most of the cases. This finding shows that the parental role does not speak in favor of the use of specific types of arguments during mealtime interactions with children.

It is noteworthy to observe that when parents put forward arguments to convince children to accept their standpoint, they often adapt their language to the child’s level of understanding. In the corpus, the parents’ choice of using a language level that can be easily understood by children is a typical trait of the argumentative interactions between parents and children during mealtime. 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”. Another possible way to understand the argumentative activity during family interactions at the table is the reference to the ideological discursive positions that adults can take during their exchange with the children: in particular, correct and/or proper behaviors, prescriptions and rules can vary along the time (in terms of ideology and social practices) and within cultures. For instance, talking while eating is not acceptable everywhere. When it is, it is usually regulated by norms of what is appropriate to say, at which moment, to whom, and so on. In certain cultures, verbal activities are reduced to a necessary minimum. For example, it is interesting to report the case of a rural French family depicted by Margaret Mead (Mead, 1959, cited in Blum-Kulka, 1997, p. 11) in her film *Four Families*, where the meal is completely task-oriented, generating only occasional remarks associated with the business of having dinner but containing no extended

conversation. However, in most urban well-educated Western populations, meal talk is not only permitted but also called for and expected. Furthermore, addressing topics related to children's personal lives, such as what they do during the day, what kind of activities they do at school, and who their friends are, is a typical parental behavior at mealtimes adopted by western families (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999; Ochs & Sholet, 2006; Snow & Beals, 2006). More precisely, this behavior has been typical of western families for twenty or thirty years now, but has not always been so (Fiese et al., 2006). For this reason, the analysis of verbal interactions between parents and children should take into account not only the type of relationships between the parties, but also the way in which what is typical or not within a certain community can affect the parties' behavior.

In this paper, no specific analyses of the children's strategies have been presented. However, we think that this aspect is very relevant and can contribute to better understand the complexity of family interactions at mealtimes. An example (among others) is the work of Brumark (2008) concerning the analysis of mealtime children's conversations in Swedish families. The author observed 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 appears to be simple and seldom elaborated by only one or two arguments. Further investigations in this direction are certainly needed and suitable within the research domain we are interested in.

In order to clarify how our results relate to actual world questions involving language socialization within family frameworks, we would like 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. As we have pointed out, the capacity to justify a standpoint and to argue with other family members (and particularly with the parents) is largely context-dependent and can allow to single out specific argumentative patterns among family members. During interactions at mealtime, adults and children can use discourse to acquire/show a complete recognition of their being members of the group. As suggested by Aronsson (1997), we think that in focusing on interaction, applied psycholinguistics can combine constructivist development with close discursive and argumentative analyses: the method of analysis we adopted in this work has allowed a detailed study of discursive sequences between parents and children in a multiparty setting interactions. 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.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In their model to reconstruct and analyze the inferential configuration of the arguments advanced by discussants in argumentative discussions, the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT), Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2010) propose to reconsider the Aristotelian notion of

endoxon. According to the authors, endoxon are context-bound principles, values, and assumptions that are typically “accepted by the relevant public or by the opinion leaders of the relevant public”, and which often represent shared premises by discussants in argumentative discussions (ibid., p. 501).

<sup>2</sup> We are referring to the Research Module “Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in the family context” (grant number PDFMP1-123093/1) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

<sup>3</sup> Based on the parental answers to questions about socio-economic status (SES) and personal details of family members that participants filled before the video-recordings.

<sup>4</sup> The pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) proposes the model of a critical discussion as an ideal definition of argumentation developing according to the standard of reasonableness. This model does not describe reality, but how argumentative discourse would be structured were such discourse to be solely aimed at resolving differences of opinion (ibid., p. 30). The model of a critical discussion spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion (ibid., pp. 60-61): in the initial confrontation stage, the protagonist advances his standpoint and meets with the antagonist’s doubts, sometimes implicitly assumed. Before the argumentation stage, when arguments are put forth for supporting or destroying the standpoint, parties have to agree on a starting point. This phase – the opening stage – is essential for 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 – their differences of opinions.

<sup>5</sup> 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”.

<sup>6</sup> Van Eemeren (2010, pp. 213-240) provides a comprehensive discussion on the notion of “burden of proof” and its relevance for argumentation. In this regard, see also van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002).

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