



Activity-bound and activity-unbound arguments in response to parental eat-directives at mealtimes: Differences and similarities in children of 3–5 and 6–9 years old



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ABSTRACT

Previous works have investigated argumentative skills of young children referring to the number of arguments and counter-arguments advanced by children as the sole indicator to assess their capacities. Hitherto, less attention has been paid to analyze the strategies adopted by children of different ages in family interactions. This study investigates the argumentative types used by children aged 3–5 and 6–9 years to refute parental eat-directives during mealtime conversations, and whether participants refer to activity-bound/-unbound arguments within the two age groups. To analyze video-recorded meals of Swiss and Italian families, we employed the pragma-dialectical ideal model of critical discussion as tool to examine sequences in which children advance different types of arguments to support their refusal to parental eat-directives. Findings highlight differences and similarities in the two groups of children: mostly, both younger and older children use activity-bound arguments such as quantity and quality of food in response to parental directives; on the contrary, only children aged 6–9 years use activity-unbound arguments (adult-expert opinion and appeal to consistency) to refute the parental eat-directives. Results show how the construction of and engagement in argumentation are embedded in and shape social activities, and how argumentative skills are valued to participate in family interactions.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, the essential role of argumentation has been clearly recognized in contexts such as politics (Mohammed, 2008; Zarefsky, 2009), science education (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Duschl & Osborne, 2002; Erduran & Jiménez-Aleixandre, 2007; Kuhn, 2010), and law (Feteris, 1999; Stratman, 1994; Walton, 2002). In recent years, however, the study of the argumentative practices occurring during everyday activities in the family context has become a central research topic in learning and development. The reasons lie in the nature of family interactions, which are very different from those typically studied by argumentation theories. In fact, in relation to other more institutionalized contexts, the family context is characterized by a larger prevalence of intimacy (Blum-Kulka, 1997; Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999) and by a relative freedom concerning issues that can be tackled (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015; Ochs & Shohet, 2006). More specifically, the activity of mealtime¹ represents a privileged moment for studying how parents

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¹ Mealtime is the term used to describe all meals consumed during the day. In many cultures, meals include breakfast, lunch, and an evening meal referred to colloquially as dinner or tea. Research about mealtime practices, however, is usually concerned with lunchtime and dinnertime, as it is the case in the present work.

and children learn to argue with each other when engaged together in intensive verbal interactions (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2010a; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a; Ochs, 2006; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2010). Such dispositions can be considered as language socialization, a process in which “language socializes not only through its symbolic content but also through its use, i.e. through speaking as a socially and culturally situated activity” (Ochs, 2000, p. 408). As family mealtimes are co-located activities in which members may overhear the talk of other members, once the talk is initiated it may lapse and then be reinitiated, and so family members are in a “continuing state of incipient talk” (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, p. 325). For this reason, not only parents but also children play dynamic roles during mealtime conversations and these interactional moments can provide then opportunities for children to organize and structure dialogues within multiparty interactions (Davidson & Snow, 1996; Snow & Beals, 2006), and to enhance socio-cognitive competencies such as the development of food-acceptance patterns (Birch, Johnson, & Fisher, 1995), the ability to speak in a group conversation and to extend their vocabulary (Beals, 1997; Weizman & Snow, 2001), and to respect the others’ physical space (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006).

Laurier and Wiggins (2011, p. 63) have indicated in a recent article one of the research directions that scholars interested in family learning through interactions at mealtime should consider more in depth in the years to come: “How is the quantity and quality of food routinely negotiated, during the dinner itself, by and between parents and children?” We believe that the research direction indicated by Laurier and Wiggins is a good one, and through our study we want to show one of the possible paths to go towards the research direction suggested by these authors. In particular, in the present paper we adopt an idiographic perspective² in order to focus on the arguments adopted by children aged 3–5 years and 6–9 years to refute parental eat-directives during mealtime conversations. As our interest in family argumentative interactions is devoted to understand how parents’ and children’s practices are transformed through everyday learning at mealtime conversations, we are attentive to both sides of a typical argumentation: the justification as social need to provide some evidence for a particular assertion; and the pragmatic function of argumentation that refers to the goals arguers want to achieve during the discussion. In line with other scholars (Kuhn, 1991; Voss & Van Dyke, 2001), we refer to an individual argument as a product and to the dialogic argumentation as a process, the latter being implicit in the former. Our choice to observe children aged 3–5 years and 6–9 years is due to the criteria adopted in the composition of the data corpus on which the present study is based (see *Methodology* §4.): the presence, for each participant family, of at least two children, of whom at least one is of preschool age (3 to 5 years) and at least one is aged between 6 and 9 years.

We have seen that in most cases the studies aimed at investigating the argumentative skills of young children have considered the number of arguments (and counter-arguments) advanced by children as the sole indicator to assess their skills. Hitherto, less attention has been paid to investigate the types of argumentative strategies adopted by children. In particular, by “argumentative strategies” we refer to the arguments that are advanced by children with the scope to support, explain, justify and defend their resistance/refusing to adults’ directives. Our focus is on the children’s generation of arguments during everyday dialogues with their parents with the aim to answer the following research questions: What types of arguments are advanced by children in order to support their refusal/resistance to parental eat-directives during mealtime conversations? Are the sources from which children draw their arguments activity-bound, e.g., the objects in question, or activity-unbound, e.g., third-party actions?

2. The issue of eat-directives during everyday family conversations

At mealtimes, discussions between parents and children revolve often around food (Capaldi & Powley, 1990; Delamont, 1995). It is common to observe discussions in which the parents do not want their children to eat a certain food or more than a certain amount of food, or in which the children want to ask for a different food (Arcidiacono, 2011; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014a,b; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996). In these situations, as observed by Kent (2012), it is very difficult for children to resist parental directives without initiating a dispute. The why and the wherefore of this difficulty, in our view, can be traced looking at the definition of directives done by Craven and Potter (2010): according to these authors, directives embody no orientation to the recipient’s ability or desire to perform the relevant activity, and this lack of orientation to ability or desire is what makes them recognizable as directives. In these cases, accusations and related actions assume both a retroactive value because they concern violations (actions on the part of the defendant and oppositional moves) and a proactive one, when they are projected to initiate and maintain dispute sequences. The common aspect of these discussions is the fact that in each of them parents and children engage in argumentative discussions (around the topic of food) in which they put forward arguments to convince the other party that their own standpoint is more valid and therefore deserves to be accepted. Such situations are potentially relevant in providing occasions of learning within and through social interactions (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2014) and contribute to build or to reinforce the argumentative skills of family members.

3. Construction of and engagement in family argumentative discussions

A fundamental issue addressed by scholars interested in investigating the argumentative discussions between parents and young children is the actual capacity of children to construct arguments and to engage in argumentative discussions with their parents. In the next sections (§3.1 and 3.2), we will explain how and why, *prima facie*, the results obtained by the studies addressing this issue are

² According to Arcidiacono (2015), assuming idiography as a methodological approach entails different elements, such as: an ontological assumption concerning the object of knowledge as contingent upon the context; and an epistemological constraint consequent to the ontological statement (the object may not be assimilated to a general class according to its phenomenological similarities with the other exemplars of the class). In this paper, idiography is considered a way to pursue generalized knowledge and to give sense to intrinsically unique, singular, local, and embedded situations (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2009).

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