



## Research report

# “You must eat the salad because it is nutritious”. Argumentative strategies adopted by parents and children in food-related discussions at mealtimes <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

At mealtimes, the evaluation of the appropriate (or not appropriate) behavior concerning the food is often assumed as a topic of discourse. The aim of this study is to single out the argumentative strategies used by parents with their children and by children with their parents in order to convince the other party to eat or not to eat a certain food. Within a data corpus constituted by 30 video-recorded meals of 10 middle to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families, we selected a corpus of 77 argumentative discussions between parents and children arisen around a food-related issue. Data are presented through discursive excerpts of argumentative discussions that were found within the data corpus and analyzed through the pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion. The results of this study show that the feeding practices in families with young children during mealtimes are argumentatively co-constructed by participants. In most cases parents put forward arguments based on the 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. Similarly, children put forward arguments based on the quality and quantity of food to convince their parents to change their standpoint, although their view on the issue is the opposite of that of their parents.

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## Introduction

Mealtime represents a privileged moment to investigate how parents and children interact and argue when family members are together (Beals, 1993; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Ochs & Sholet, 2006; Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001). At mealtimes, the discussions between parents and children revolve often around food (Capaldi & Powley, 1990; Delamont, 1995). As suggested by Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono (2007), as there is a strong link between verbal communication and the eating activity at mealtimes, the action of evaluating the appropriate (or not appropriate) behavior concerning the food is often assumed as a topic of discourse. For example, 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 a certain food, and other discussions in which the children want to eat a different food (see also Fasulo & Antonelli, 1996; Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Sterponi, 2003). In a recent work, Arcidiacono (2011)

observed cases in which parents and children at mealtimes express accusation focussing on violations of norms that the opponent (another family member) has committed during the on-going interaction and which the speaker addresses immediately or after a short while. For example, during a family dinner, a child (Luisa, 3 years old), drinking the coke instead of eating, is immediately invited to take some food by the father:

DAD: it's enough Luisa! now I'll give you some rice.  
wait!

LUI: no I'm full. daddy, I'm full.

DAD: well then if you really are full give me the coke ((stretching out his arm to take the glass from Luisa's hand)) as if it wasn't enough.

As consequence of the child's refusal to eat, the parent threatens Luisa to take the coke (and finally does it) as sign that the behavior at stake (to drink instead of to eat) is not appropriate. A discussion about the right to drink and/or to eat will follow during the same dinner between Luisa and the parents. In this and other cases, accusations and related actions assume both a retroactive value because they concern violations (actions on the part of the

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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.

In a recent article [Laurier and Wiggins \(2011, p. 63\)](#) indicate with the following question one research direction on family meal which must be developed 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 the present study we want to indicate one of the possible paths to go towards the research direction suggested by these authors. In particular, our study aims to identify the argumentative strategies most often adopted by parents and children during food-related argumentative discussions at mealtimes. Our purpose is to answer the following question: “What are the argumentative strategies through which parents and children negotiate the quality and quantity of food that has to be eaten (or not eaten) during the meal?” In this endeavor, we opted for a methodology based on the contemporary argumentation theory. The analytical approach for the analysis of the argumentative discussions between parents and children is, in fact, the pragma-dialectical model of a critical discussion ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004](#)).

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 discourse and on parental feeding practices at mealtimes is presented, in order to justify the place of our approach within the large range of studies on family interactions. Afterwards, the methodology on which the present study is based and the results of the analyses are described. In the last part of the article, the results obtained from the analyses and the conclusions drawn from this study are discussed.

#### *Studies on family discourse at mealtimes*

The analysis of the literature shows that the studies so far realized cover a wide spectrum of issues regarding family discourse at mealtimes. In this rich tradition of studies, four main research trends can be identified. The first consists of an extended body of studies developed within conversation analysis ([Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974](#)) and theoretically inspired by ethnomethodology ([Garfinkel, 1967](#)). Within this research trend, 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](#); [Erickson, 1988](#); [Lerner, 2002](#)). These analyses have shown interesting phenomena of alliance, collaboration, and co-authorship between speakers ([Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004](#); [Maroni & Arcidiacono, 2010](#)), phenomena of coalition and ‘by-play’ ([Goodwin, 1996](#)), or schisms, which transform one conversation into various parallel interactions ([Egbert, 1997](#)).

The second research trend consists of a series of studies based on anthropological, educational, and developmental perspectives. In particular, some scholars describe the family mealtime as a privileged moment for observing literacy development in young children as it offers a great opportunity for extended discourse, involving both explanatory and narrative talk ([Aukrust, 2002](#); [Beals, 1991](#); [Beals & Snow, 1994](#); [Blum-Kulka & Snow, 1992](#)). 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, 1997](#); [Beals & Tabors, 1995](#)), thus favoring greater language acquisition. Other studies have shown that the activity of family mealtime can stimulate the language socialization of young children. These studies focused in particular on what children learn through their engagement in mealtime interactions, showing that the process of child socialization within the family is thoroughly related to social positioning and cultural differences (e.g., [Aronsson, 1998](#); [Blum-Kulka, 1997](#); [Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999](#)).

The third research trend consists of a group of studies developed within the discursive social psychology approach devoted to investigating the interactional dynamics among family members as manifested in situations in which they all express their feelings, attitudes, and evaluations during their everyday conversations. Wiggins and her colleagues carry out thorough and sustained analyses of family mealtime conversations from a discursive social psychology perspective. In a recent work, [Wiggins \(2013\)](#) shows that disgust markers orient others in their choices about food and attend to family members’ entitlements to know disgust. [Wiggins \(2004a\)](#) earlier work shows the way in which a discussion on healthy eating was carried out and reconstructed during interactions as part of eating events. Wiggins study reveals that discussions about healthy eating are “localized and contextualized within a particular interaction” ([Wiggins, 2004a, p. 545](#)). In other works, Wiggins and her colleagues analyze the way in which food appreciation and pleasure are constructed ([Wiggins, 2002](#)), how assessments of food are produced ([Wiggins & Potter, 2003](#)) and challenged ([Wiggins, 2004b](#)) in family mealtimes, and how the processes through which having “enough” food are negotiated ([Hepburn & Wiggins, 2007](#)).

The studies on argumentation represent the fourth research strand on family discourse at mealtimes. Despite the focus on narratives being the first genre to appear in communication with children ([Aukrust & Snow, 1998](#); [Georgakopoulou, 2002](#)), the observations of conversations between parents and children during mealtimes prove to be an activity which is essential in teaching children the argumentative strategies that they can use for a variety of goals in many different contexts ([Bova, 2011](#); [Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2013b](#); [Dunn, 1988](#); [Hester & Hester, 2010](#); [Arcidiacono & Bova, 2011a](#)), sometimes even by avoiding an argumentative discussion ([Laforest, 2002](#)). [Bova \(2013\)](#) shows that parents, more often than children, put forward arguments in support of their standpoint, while children often avoid putting forward arguments, as they are not always expected to provide reasons to support their standpoints. In his work, Bova also shows that children assume a role of active antagonist, because they often challenge their parents to justify the reasons on which their rules and prescriptions are based. Similar results were also found by [Pontecorvo and Fasulo \(1997\)](#). Analyzing a corpus of mealtime conversations in Swedish families, [Brumark \(2006, 2008\)](#) observed the presence of certain recurring argumentative features in parent–child conversations as well as the association between some argumentation structures and child age. Some other studies have also shown that different cultures and nationalities can be characterized by different argumentative styles in families ([Arcidiacono & Bova, 2011b, 2013](#)). They have also shown how relevant it is to know the properties of the family context accurately in order to analyze and evaluate the argumentative dynamics of mealtime conversations ([Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, & Greco Morasso, 2009](#)). The present work, which aims to identify the argumentative strategies most often adopted by parents and children during food-related argumentative discussions at mealtimes, is mainly a further contribution to this research strand, although there are strong connections also with the other trends presented before.

*Research on parental feeding practices at mealtimes*

Feeding a child is a crucial parenting behavior and a central nurturing role of parents. The parental feeding practices and the way children respond to these practices are an important and complex part of the interactions within the family context (Satter, 1999; Wilson, 2011). Laurier and Wiggins (2011) underline that the majority of research on parenting feeding style relies on self-reporting questionnaires. For example, the study of Ainuki and Akamatsu (2005) is an attempt to assess the strategies used by mothers in response to picky eating by their children at meals. Through the development of questionnaires, the authors offer a view on how mothers motivate their children to eat. There is limited research in the domain that analyses family mealtimes *in situ*. A range of positive and negative interactions have been coded using different tools, such as the mealtime observation schedule (Sanders & LeGrice, 1989). For example, a recent study conducted by Hughes et al. (2011) was devoted to the observation of differences in the emotional climate created by parents and behavioral feeding practices. The results of the investigation made by Hughes and colleagues suggest that parents' feeding styles may be a proxy for the emotional climate at the dinner meal, which may in turn influence the children's eating behaviors.

In general, research on parental feeding practices at mealtimes highlight that parents try to teach their child adequate eating behaviors by using different strategies and these influence children's eating behavior in different ways: from one side, authoritarian patterns are considered as attempts to control children's eating with little regard for the children's individual preferences and choices. This parenting style is correlated to the provision of a greater number of prompts or cues from the mother for their child to eat (Drucker, Hammer, Agras, & Bryson, 1999); on the other side, a permissive feeding style can refer to allowing a child to make his/her own decisions regarding what, where and how much to eat (Scaglioni, Salvioni, & Galimberti, 2008).

The research on the topic relates general parenting styles to parental feeding practices almost exclusively among American families (e.g., Hubbs-Tait, Kennedy, Page, Topham, & Harest, 2008). However, studies exploring the relationships between parental beliefs and behaviors related to child feeding have also focused on European-American populations (Birch & Davison, 2001). The findings of these studies show that parental control refers to direct strategies that parents may use in order to improve the health of their child, e.g., pressuring the child to eat healthy foods and restricting intake of unhealthy foods (Patrick, Nicklas, Hughes, & Morales, 2005). Another aspect concerns the pressure to eat: it can vary from a strong verbal control, such as providing direct commands or corrections to a child, to a gentle verbal control such as suggestions or prompts to eat. Therefore, pressure to eat was found to be ineffective at promoting food intake. In fact, studies underline that some of the strategies that parents adopt with the intention of positively influencing food preference and consumption in their children may have the opposite effect (Morton, Campbell, Santich, & Worsley, 1999).

Considering the above mentioned studies and referring in particular to the recent work of Laurier and Wiggins (2011) as we stated in the introduction, in the present paper we intend to answer the following research question: "What are the argumentative strategies through which parents and children negotiate the quality and quantity of food that has to be eaten (or not eaten) during the meal?"

In the next sections of the paper we will present our research design (conceived to observe family discussions at home during mealtimes), as well as the main results of our study.

**Methodology***Data corpus*

The present investigation 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 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 group<sup>2</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 a high socio-demographic group, 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 (see Table 1).

*Recruitment of the families*

The creation of sub-corpus 1 (Italian families) took place from January to June 2004. At the beginning of research sub-corpus 1 was already at researchers' disposal, including its complete transcriptions.<sup>3</sup> The creation of sub-corpus 2 (Swiss families) took place from December 2008 to November 2009. The recruitment process of the families has been identical for sub-corpus 1 and sub-corpus 2.

The families were selected through the *snowball technique*, also known as chain referral sampling (Goodman, 1961; Heckathorn, 1997, 2002), by which the candidate families contacted helped the researchers to find others. After an initial contact by phone, the researchers visited the families in their own homes and they described to parents the research plan. The families were informed that this study aimed to investigate the style of their mealtime conversations, but nothing was said about the specific interest in argumentative discussions about food. Participating families did not receive any financial reimbursement for their participation in the study. At the end of the transcription phase, the families were

<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 (SNSF).

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

<sup>3</sup> A corpus of video-recordings of family mealtime conversations held by a large number of Italian families has been gathered by Clotilde Pontecorvo and her colleagues at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" (for more information, see Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007, pp. XIII–XVI) from the late '90 to early 2000. Thanks to Clotilde Pontecorvo, the most recent part of this broad corpus of video-recordings of family mealtime conversations – 15 meals in five Italian families videorecorded from January to June 2004 – has been used as part of the data corpus of the present research.

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

Family group	Italian	Swiss
Length of recordings in minutes	20–37	19–42
Mean length of recordings in minutes	32.41	35.12
<i>Participants</i>		
Mothers	5	5
Fathers	5	5
Adults, total	10	10
Son	6	6
Daughter	4	7
Children, total	10	13
Total participants	20	23
<i>Average age of participants</i>		
Mother	36.40 (SD 2.881)	34.80 (SD 1.643)
Father	38.40 (SD 3.209)	37.00 (SD 1.581)
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)

given a copy of the video as a token of gratitude for their participation.

#### *Ethical issues*

All participants were approached by means of an information sheet outlining in clear language the general purpose of the study and providing information about how the video data would be used. Consent letters were written in accordance with Swiss Psychological Society (SPS) and American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, specifically the format outlined in the sixth edition of the Publication Manual of the APA (2009). As specified in a release letter signed by the researchers and the parents, all family members (both parents and children) gave us permission to video-record the mealtimes, provided the data would be used only for scientific purposes and privacy would be guarded. The families were assured that their anonymity would be maintained at all stages of the study, through the use of a single master sheet that contained the name of each participant and their participant number. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Transcriptions, video-recorded material, and information on the families were treated in the strictest confidence and seen only by researchers. Segments of video-recorded data were used for research purposes only. The package also made clear to participants that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time and that any concerns they had about the ethics of the study could be referred to the researchers for clarification at any time.

#### *Practical problems in collecting family mealtime conversations*

Collecting mealtime conversations poses several challenges. Some are technical ones associated with recording quality and difficulties in transcribing. Multiparty interactions are more difficult to transcribe than monologues and/or dyadic interactions. Problems facing transcribers include discriminating among family members, especially if there is more than one child; the frequent impossibility of determining who the addressees are; and situations in which children move from the meal-table or do not participate in the conversation (Pan, Perlmann, & Snow, 2000).

Other challenges have to do with ecological validity, i.e., ensuring that the taped mealtime is as natural as possible, and with the research design adopted for the study. Because of their desire to give a good impression of themselves in front of the camera (social

desirability), family members during the video-recording of their meals might not be inclined to behave as they normally do. This is indeed unavoidable and the researcher has no control over it. Such a bias is present in all types of research that deal with people and respect the basic ethical principle of informed consent of participants. The only thing the researcher can do in these cases is to be aware of the problem and to consider it in the analysis and the discussion of the results. However, there are studies including direct observations of family functioning at mealtimes that are considered less susceptible to bias because they rate ongoing moment-to-moment behavior, with an increased validity of findings (Patterson & Forgatch, 1995).

#### *Transcription procedures*

In a first phase, all family meals were fully transcribed adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system CHAT (MacWhinney, 2000), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability, and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (agreement rate = 80%) has been reached. The CHAT system provides a standardized format for producing computerized transcripts of face-to-face conversational interactions for the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES). The system provides options for basic discourse transcription as well as detailed phonological and morphological analysis. The acronym “CHAT” stands for Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcripts. In our research, verbal utterances and nonverbal expressions with a clear communicative function relevant to the meal activity were identified and clearly described 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 are introduced. First, punctuation symbols, as employed by [Schiffrin \(1994\)](#) and [Blum-Kulka \(1997\)](#), are used to indicate intonation contours:

,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
:	prolonging of sounds
?	rising intonation
!	exclamatory intonation

Second, additional symbols are added:

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

Afterwards, we reviewed together with the family members all the transcriptions at their home. This procedure allows to ask the family members to clarify passages that were unclear to researchers on account of low level of recording sound and vague words and constructions. Information on the physical setting of the mealtimes, i.e., a description of the kitchen and of the dining table, was also made for each family meal. In the transcription of the conversations, this practice has proved very useful for understanding some passages that, at first sight, appeared unclear.

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 in this article are pseudonyms.

### Analytical approach

The theoretical tool adopted for the analysis is the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004](#)). The pragmatic conception of the argumentative moves as speech acts in discursive exchanges is connected to other approaches to study verbal communication, such as discursive social psychology tradition. In fact, this approach considers that argumentative speech acts are not performed in a social vacuum, but between two or more parties who are having a disagreement and interact with each other in an attempt to resolve this disagreement. As suggested by [van Eemeren and Houtlosser \(2003\)](#), to transcend a merely descriptive stance in studying argumentation, the focus is on the explication of the critical standards to which arguers appeal when engaging in a regulated process of resolving a difference of opinions. The pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation proposes the model of a critical discussion as an ideal definition of argumentation, because it does not aim to describe how argumentative discourse occur in reality but how it would be structured were such discourse to be solely aimed at resolving differences of opinion: “To some degree, real-life argumentative discourse will always deviate from the ideal model” ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 35](#)).

The model of a critical discussion spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992: 35](#); see also [van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, pp. 60–61](#)):

- *Confrontation stage*. At the confrontation stage, it is established that there is a dispute. A standpoint<sup>4</sup> is advanced and questioned.
- *Opening stage*. At the opening stage, the decision is made to attempt to resolve the dispute by means of a regulated argumentative discussion. One party takes the role of protagonist, which means that he is prepared to defend his standpoint by means of argumentation; the other party takes the role of antagonist, which means that he is prepared to challenge the protagonist systematically to defend his standpoint.
- *Argumentation stage*. At the argumentation stage, the protagonist defends his standpoint and the antagonist elicits further argumentation from him if he has further doubts.
- *Concluding stage*. At the concluding stage, it is established whether the dispute has been resolved on account of the standpoint or the doubt concerning the standpoint having been retracted.

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

### Definition of argumentative situation and identification of the arguments

The analysis we present in this article is limited to and focused on the study of *analytically relevant argumentative moves*, i.e., “those speech acts that (at least potentially) play a role in the process of resolving a difference of opinion” ([van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 73](#)). In particular, the discussion is considered as argumentative if the following criteria are satisfied:

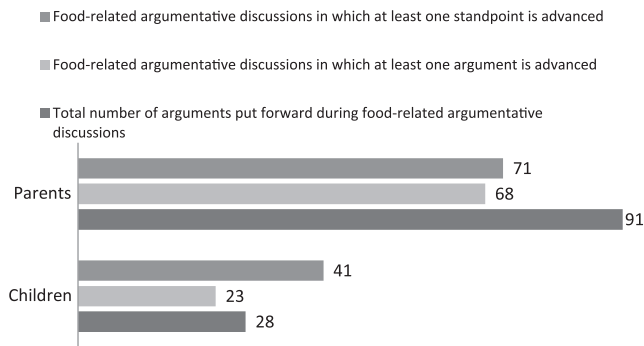
- (i) a difference of opinion among parents and children arises around a certain issue;
- (ii) at least one standpoint advanced by one of the two parents is questioned by one or more children, or vice versa;
- (iii) at least one family member puts forward at least one argument either in favor of or against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

In a first phase, we selected all the argumentative discussions that occurred in the corpus of thirty mealtime conversations ( $N = 120$ ). Later, for the scope of the present study, we referred to the argumentative discussions arisen around a food-related issue ( $N = 77$ ). In order to identify the arguments put forth by parents and children, the analysis has been focused on the third stage of the model of critical discussion, namely, the argumentation stage.

### Results

In the corpus of 77 argumentative discussions analyzed, parents advanced at least one standpoint in 71 instances, while children did so in 41 instances. In the 71 instances in which parents advanced at least one standpoint, they put forward at least one argument (in several cases more than only one argument) in support of their standpoint in 68 instances (95%) for a total number of 91 arguments. In the 41 instances in which children advanced at least one standpoint, they put forward at least one argument (in few cases more than only one argument) in support of their standpoint in 23 instances (56%), for a total number of 28 arguments ([Fig. 1](#)).

<sup>4</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”.



**Fig. 1.** Comparing the contributions of parents and children in food-related argumentative discussions.

In discussing the results, we present a selection of the analyses of talk-in-interaction representative of the results obtained from the larger set of analyses conducted on the whole corpus of arguments put forward by parents and children during food-related argumentative discussions.

### Parents' prevailing arguments

The analysis of the prevailing arguments used by parents involved the 68 argumentative discussions arisen around a food-related issue in which they put forward at least one argument to support their own standpoint, for a total number of 91 arguments. The findings show that the arguments used by parents with their children can be ascribed to three main categories: *quality and quantity*, *appeal to consistency*, and *expert opinion*. Excerpts of qualitative analysis of the argumentative strategies of the participants are presented for each category.

### Arguments of quality and quantity

Mostly, the arguments used by parents with their children in food-related argumentative discussions refer to the quality (positive, e.g., nutritious, tasty; or negative, e.g., too salty, hot) ( $N = 39$ ; about 43%) and quantity (too much or too little) of food ( $N = 32$ ; about 35%). In the following dialogue between a mother and her daughter, Adriana, aged 5 years and 4 months, we can

1. \*MOM: **Adriana, devi mangiare l'insalata.**  
*Adriana, you must eat the salad.*
  2. \*ADR: **no:: non mi piace ((l'insalata))**  
*no:: I don't like ((the salad))*
  3. \*MOM: **Adriana, devi mangiare l'insalata perché è nutriente.**  
*Adriana, you must eat the salad because it is nutritious.*
  4. \*ADR: **mhm::**  
*mhm::*
- %act: **ADR inizia a mangiare l'insalata ma sembra controvolgia**  
*ADR starts eating the salad, but seems unwilling*

**Excerpt 1.** Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Samuele (SAM, 9 years 11 months), Adriana (ADR, 5 years 4 months).

- %sit: **GAB sta bevendo una bibita gassata**  
*GAB is drinking a carbonate soft drink*
1. \*DAD: **basta, Gabriele!**  
*that's enough, Gabriele!*
- %act: **GAB smette di bere**  
*GAB stops drinking*
- \*DAD: **adesso ti do il riso.**  
*now I'll give you some rice.*
2. \*GAB: **no, non voglio altro: ((sedendosi sulla sedia))**  
*no, I don't want anything else: ((sitting on the chair))*
  3. \*DAD: **il riso col sugo di pomodoro**  
*the rice with tomato sauce*
- %pau: **1.0. sec**
4. \*GAB: **per favore, niente. [!:facendo cenni di negazione col capo]**  
*please, no more. [!: shaking his head in refusal]*
  5. \*DAD: **no:: non hai mangiato abbastanza.**  
*no:: you haven't eaten enough.*
  6. \*GAB: **no:::**  
*no:::*
- %act: **GAB si alza e corre in un'altra stanza**  
*GAB gets up and runs into another room*

**Excerpt 2.** Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Gabriele (GAB, 5 years 4 months), Silverio (SIL, 8 years).

1. \*DAD: **basta mangiare fagiolini, Giovanni**  
*stop eating the French beans, Giovanni*
2. \*GIO: **no:: voglio ancora!**  
*no:: I want more!*
3. \*DAD: **no! ne hai mangiato già abbastanza ((fagiolini))**  
*no! you have already eaten enough ((French beans))*
4. \*GIO: **ok:: ok:: [: sorridendo]**  
*ok:: ok:: [: smiling]*

**Excerpt 3.** Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Giovanni (GIO, 6 years 3 months), Michele (MIC, 4 years 2 months).

observe how the mother puts forward an *argument of quality* to convince her daughter to eat the salad (see [Excerpt 1](#)).

In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between the mother and her daughter, Adriana. The sequence starts when the mother tells Adriana that she must eat the salad (line 1). Adriana clearly disagrees with her mother: *no:: I don't like* (line 2). In argumentative terms, this phase of the discussion represents the confrontation stage, since that the mother and Adriana have two opposite standpoints: on the one hand, the mother wants Adriana to eat the salad, while, on the contrary, Adriana does not want to eat it. At this point, the mother accepts to assume the burden of proof,<sup>5</sup> namely, to defend her standpoint by putting forward (at least) one argument in its support. The argument put forward by the mother (line 3) is based on the quality of salad and, in particular, it aims at emphasizing the (positive) health properties of this food. In argumentative terms, this phase of the discussion represents the argumentation stage. Although Adriana appears to be far from being enthusiastic to eat the nutritious salad, the argument of quality put forward by the mother succeeds in convincing Adriana to eat it. Adriana clearly does not like the salad, in fact she starts eating it unwillingly. However, the salad she has a very positive quality, i.e., it is nutritious, and therefore must be eaten. In argumentative terms, the non-verbal act by Adriana represents the concluding stage of the argumentative discussion.

The argument of quality and the argument of quantity can be also used together within the same discussion, as in the following dialogue between a father and his son, Gabriele (see [Excerpt 2](#)).

This sequence starts when the father tells his son, Gabriele, that he must stop drinking a carbonate soft drink and that he has to start eating some rice (line 1). In line 2, a difference of opinion between Gabriele and his father arises, because Gabriele replies to his father that he does not want to eat anything else. This phase of the discussion represents the confrontation stage, since Gabriele and his father have two opposite standpoints. In line 3, the father puts forward an argument based on the quality of food: *(it is) the rice with tomato sauce*. In this case, we can suppose that, according to the father, the fact that the tomato sauce is an appetizing ingredient, and it is therefore a positive quality of this dish, is an *endoxon*,<sup>6</sup> namely, a premise shared by him and his son. However, as we can observe from Gabriele's answer (line 4), the argument of quality put forward by the father is not effective to convince him to accept the father's standpoint and change his opinion. In line 5, the father puts forward a further argument to

convince Gabriele to eat the rice. The second argument put forward by the father does not refer to the quality of the food but, instead, to its quantity. The father tells his child that he has to eat a little more rice because, until that moment, he hasn't eaten enough. In argumentative terms, this phase of the discussion represents the argumentation stage. Despite his father's argumentative effort, Gabriele still clearly disagrees with his father and does not accept to eat the rice (line 6). The concluding stage of this argumentative discussion involves the non-verbal act of the child getting up from the table and running into another room.

Furthermore, in the corpus of food-related argumentative discussions we observed that arguments of quality and quantity are not only used by parents to convince their children to eat, but also to convince children *not* to eat, as in the following example (see [Excerpt 3](#)).

In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between the father and his son, Giovanni, since the father does not want that Giovanni eats more French beans (line 1), while Giovanni wants to continue to eat more (line 2). In line 3, the father assumes the burden of proof and puts forward an argument of quantity to convince his son to stop eating more French beans: *you have already eaten enough*. As we can observe from Giovanni answer in line 4, the argument put forward by his father is effective in convincing him to stop eating French beans.

In the corpus, other examples of arguments of quality and quantity put forward by parents include:

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**''no, non puoi mangiarlo questo ((formaggio)), è troppo salato''**  
*"no, you can't eat this ((cheese)), it's too salty"*

**''non sono così tanti, poi sono pure buoni ((ceci))''**  
*"they are not that many, and are also tasty ((chickpeas))"*

**''un pò di carne la devi mangiare, almeno poco poco''**  
*"you must eat a little of meat, at least a little bit"*

---

#### Appeal to consistency

In the corpus of food-related argumentative discussions, another type of argument used by parents with their children refers to the consistency with past behaviors ( $N = 9$ ; about 10%). This type of argument can be described through the following question: "If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed it in the past, why are not you maintaining it now?" The next example illustrates this type of argument: the protagonists of the dialogue are a mother and her daughter, Clara, aged 3 years and 10 months (see [Excerpt 4](#)).

In this dialogue, Clara and her mother have a clear difference of opinion: the mother wants to give Clara some risotto (line 1), but Clara disagrees with her mother and does not want to eat it (line 2). We can observe that the mother in lines 1 and 3 puts forward

<sup>5</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).

<sup>6</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 (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2010, p. 501).

1. \*MOM: bimbe, la cena è pronta  
*girls, dinner is ready*
- \*MOM: Clara, vuoi del riso?  
*Clara, do you want some rice?*
- \*MOM: risottino giallo con le polpettine?  
*yellow risottino with meatballs?*
2. \*CLA: no:: non lo voglio il risotto.  
*no:: I don't want the risotto.*
3. \*MOM: c'è lo zafferano!  
*it's made with saffron!*
4. \*CLA: e che cos'è?  
*and what is that?*
5. \*DAD: è una polvere gialla  
*it's a yellow powder*
6. \*MOM: quand'eri piccola ti piaceva  
*when you were a baby you used to like it*
- \*MOM: ti piaceva tantissimo!  
*you used to like it very much!*
- %act: DAD avvicina a CLA una forchettata di riso  
*DAD moves towards CLA with a fork full of rice*
7. \*DAD: assaggia  
*try it*
8. \*CLA: brucia!  
*it's hot!*
- \*CLA: ma è buono  
*but it is good*
- %pau: 2.0. sec
- %act: CLA continua a mangiare il risotto guardando la televisione  
*CLA continues eating the rice while watching television*

**Excerpt 4.** Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 34 years), mother (MOM, 33 years), Giorgia (GIO, 6 years 6 months), Clara (CLA, 3 years 10 month).

two arguments of quality to convince her daughter to eat the risotto: *yellow risottino with meatballs?* (line 1), and *it's made with saffron!* (line 3). In this sequence our focus is however on the argument put forward by the mother in line 6: *when you were a baby you used to like it*. This intervention permits the mother to make clear to her daughter that what she is going to eat is not something unknown, a dish to be wary of and to avoid, but rather a dish she has already eaten in the past and used to like very much. By referring to an action which Clara did in the past and emphasizing how good that event was for her (*you used to like it very much*), the mother asks her daughter to behave in a rationale way, i.e., to be consistent with the same behavior she had in the past now in the present.

In the corpus, other examples of arguments that refer to the consistency with past behaviors put forward by parents are the following:

``ne hai mangiati tanti funghi l'altra sera''  
"you ate a lot of mushrooms last night"

``ma come fai a dire che non ti piace ((limone)) se non lo hai mai provato?''  
"but how can you say that you don't like ((lemon)) if you've never tried it?"

``ne mangi tanti di solito di tortellini''  
"you usually eat a lot of tortellini"

#### 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*<sup>7</sup> (cf. *epistemic authority* in Walton, 1997) ( $N = 8$ ; about 9%). The following dialogue between a mother and her son, Filippo, offers a clear illustration of this type of argument (see Excerpt 5).

The sequence starts with the mother telling her son that he needs to eat a little cheese along with his bread (line 1). The child disagrees with his mother: he does not want to eat the cheese (line 2). In reconstructing this argumentative discussion, this phase of the discussion between the mother and her son represents the confrontation stage. In fact, in this phase of the discussion the mother's standpoint (*Filippo must eat a little cheese*) has been met by the child's refusal. In line 3, the mother puts forward an argument to

<sup>7</sup> Walton (1997, pp. 77–78) distinguishes two types of authority: *epistemic* and *deontic*. "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. By contrast, the *deontic* type of authority is a right to exercise command or to influence, especially concerning rulings on what should be done in certain types of situations, based on an invested office, or an official or recognized position of power". In this study, the definition of argument from expert opinion coincides exactly with the Walton notion of *epistemic* authority. We did not refer, instead, to the notion of *deontic* authority.

1. \*MOM: **Filippo, devi mangiare un poco di questo formaggio**  
*Filippo, you must eat a little of this cheese*
2. \*FIL: **no.**  
*no.*
3. \*MOM: **si, perché solo il pane non è abbastanza**  
*yes, because just bread is not enough*
4. \*FIL: **no, non voglio il formaggio**  
*no, I do not want cheese*
5. \*MOM: **questo è quello che ha comprato il nonno, però:: è delizioso!**  
*this is the one Grandpa bought, though:: it is delicious!*
6. \*FIL: **davvero?**  
*really?*
7. \*MOM: **si, l'ha comprato il nonno!**  
*yes, Grandpa bought it!*
8. \*FIL: **mhm:: ((sembra pensieroso))**  
*mhm:: ((he seems thoughtful))*
9. \*MOM: **è delizioso!**  
*it is delicious!*
- %act: **MOM mette un pezzo di formaggio nel piatto di FIL**  
*MOM puts a piece of cheese in FIL plate*

**Excerpt 5.** Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 39 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Manuela (MAN, 6 years 4 months), Filippo (FIL, 5 years 1 month), Carlo (CAR, 3 years 1 month).

support her standpoint; the child, in line 4, does not provide a counter argument to defend his position, replying instead by reasserting his original stance. In line 5, the mother puts forward two arguments to further her perspective: “*this is the one Grandpa bought*”, and “*it is delicious*”. These two last arguments, more than the first, succeed in catching the child’s attention. To resolve the child’s doubts, the mother repeats once again these two arguments in lines 7 and 9. The sequence that goes from line 3 through line 9 represents the argumentation stage. The final stage concerns a non-verbal act – the mother puts a piece of cheese on the child’s plate – which concludes the discussion. The child goes on to eat the cheese willingly, showing in this way to accept his mother’s standpoint. In this dialogue we can observe how the mother succeeds in convincing her son of the validity of her standpoint by saying to her son that an expert (the grandfather) bought the cheese that she wants to give to him. Of course, we cannot know if the grandfather is indeed an expert regarding cheese, but what matters here is that for the child his grandfather is certainly an outstanding expert, probably in many other fields as well.

In the corpus, other examples of arguments from expert opinion put forward by parents include:

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‘no tesoro, fidati che so quello che ti dico... qualche volta puoi provare, altre volte non si prova ci si fida di quello che dicono i genitori’  
“no sweetheart, trust me because I know what I am talking about... sometimes you can try, other times you can’t try and you must trust what parents tell you”

‘non puoi avere i limoni perché io ((mamma)) ho bisogno dei limoni’  
“you can’t have the lemons because I ((mom)) need the lemons”

---

#### Children’s prevailing arguments

The analysis of the prevailing arguments used by children involved the 23 argumentative discussions arisen around a food-

related issue in which they put forward at least one argument to support their own standpoint, for a total number of 28 arguments. The findings show that the arguments put forward by children with their parents in food-related argumentative discussions can be ascribed to two main categories: *quality and quantity*, and *expert opinion*.

#### Arguments of quality and quantity

Similarly to what has been observed in regard to parents, in order to defend their standpoints children in most cases put forward arguments that refer to the quality (positive or negative) ( $N = 12$ ; about 43%) and quantity (too much or too little) of food ( $N = 11$ ; about 39%). For example, in the following dialogue between a mother and her son, Filippo, aged 5 years and 1 month, the child puts forward an *argument of quality* to convince her mother to let him not to eat the risotto (see [Excerpt 6](#)).

In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between the mother and her son. The parent wants Filippo to eat the risotto (line 1), but the child does not want to eat it (line 2). After listening to the argument put forward by his mother (*it’s good though*, line 3), Filippo justifies his stance by putting forward an argument which aims to highlight the bad, for him, quality of the risotto: *it’s a little strange* (line 4). The mother, in line 5, puts forward another argument based on the quality of the risotto (*it’s really soft*) to convince Filippo to eat it, but he keeps saying that the risotto is strange (line 6). At this point, the mother is convinced that she should taste the “strange” risotto herself. After doing so, she agrees that the risotto is indeed a little strange (line 9). In this example, the argument put forward by the child (*the risotto is a little strange*) produces the effect of convincing the mother to taste the risotto she has prepared herself. The use of the adjective “strange” makes clear to the mother that the taste of the risotto is not good. After having tasted the risotto herself, she also agrees with her son that the risotto is not good.

In the following example, instead, a 6-year-old child, Paolo, advances an *argument of quantity* with his father (see [Excerpt 7](#)).

In this discussion, there is a difference of opinion between the father and his son. The father wants Paolo to eat the pasta, but

the child replies that the amount of pasta on his plate is too much. The father disagrees with Paolo, because, for him, that amount of pasta is not too much. In this dialogue, although parents and children have opposite goals, they adopt the same argumentative strategy. In fact, both the father and the child put forward arguments based on the quantity (too little according to the father, and too much according to the child) of food, trying to convince the other party that their view on the quantity of food is wrong. What distinguishes father's and child's argumentation is therefore an opposite opinion regarding the quantity of pasta.

In the corpus, other examples of arguments of quality and quantity put forward by children are:

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**''mamma, io non lo voglio il pane, è duro!''**  
 "Mom, I don't want the bread, it's hard!"

**''voglio più fagiolini, ne ho mangiati pochi''**  
 "I want more French beans, I have only eaten a few"

**''a me non piace lo spezzatino, brucia!''**  
 "I don't like the stew, it's spicy!"

---

#### Argument from adult-expert opinion

Another type of argument used by children with their parents in food-related argumentative discussions is the so-called *argument from adult-expert opinion* ( $N = 4$ ; about 14%) (Bova, in press). This type of argument can be described through the following statement: "The adult X told me Y, therefore Y is true". In the corpus, we observed that when children refer to a third person as a source of expert opinion, the expert always proves to be an adult such as a teacher, a grandfather, an uncle, or a friend of the father, and not another child. In the following dialogue between a mother and her 7-year-old son, Marco, we can observe how the child puts forward this type of argument to convince his mother of the validity of his standpoint (see Excerpt 8).

In this dialogue, taking place in the last phases of the meal, the mother says Marco to stop eating if he already feels full (line 1), but the child says to his mother that such a behavior is wrong (line 2). The mother does not assume the burden of proof, as she does not advance any argument to defend her standpoint and only repeats her stated standpoint (line 3). On the contrary, Marco, in line 4, puts forward an argument in support of his standpoint: "Grandpa told me that I have to finish what is in the plate". Interestingly, Marco succeeds in convincing his mother of the validity of his standpoint by saying to his mother that an expert told him when it is the right moment to stop eating. The expert in this field, Marco is saying, is the grandfather rather than his mother. Similarly to what we have seen in Excerpt 5, where the mother put forward an argument from expert opinion to convince her son to eat the cheese, also in this case we cannot know if the grandfather is actually an expert regarding food and proper diet to follow, but what matters here is that for the child his grandfather is certainly an outstanding expert.

In the corpus, other examples of arguments from adult-expert opinion put forward by children include:

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**''no:: me l'ha detto la maestra che devo mangiare lentamente''**  
 "no:: the teacher told me that I have to eat slowly"

**''si che posso! ((mangiare con le mani)) me l'ha detto il papà di Marco che posso''**  
 "yes I can! ((eating with hands)) Marco's dad told me that I can"

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1. \*MOM: vuoi un po' di risotto?  
do you want a little risotto?
2. \*FIL: no:: no::  
no:: no::
3. \*MOM: ma è buono!  
it's good though!
4. \*FIL: no:: è un po' strano  
no:: it's a little strange
5. \*MOM: ma Filippo, è davvero morbido:  
but Filippo, it's really soft::
6. \*FIL: no, è strano non mi piace  
no, it's strange I don't like it
7. \*MOM: no::  
no::
8. \*FIL: si, è strano  
yes, it's strange
- %act: MOM assaggia il risotto  
MOM tastes the risotto
9. \*MOM: si, effettivamente non è tanto buono  
yes, actually it's not very good
10. \*FIL: è strano!  
it's strange!
11. \*MOM: sarà il formaggio,  
maybe because of the cheese,
- \*MOM: si è un po' strano.  
yes it's a bit strange.

**Excerpt 6.** Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 39 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Manuela (MAN, 6 years 4 months), Filippo (FIL, 5 years 1 month), Carlo (CAR, 3 years 1 month).

The presentation of different excerpts concerning the types of arguments put forward by parents and children shows an interesting element that can summarize the discursive choices (and strategies) used by family members during food-related argumentative discussions. In fact, in both cases (parents and children), the prevalent use of arguments concerning the quantity and the quality of the food appears as the privileged way to convince the other about the possibility/opportunity to eat or not to eat. Similarly, both parents and children recur to the argument of expert opinion, although in a less frequent way. Figure 2 shows the general frequencies of types of arguments put forward by parents and children: the proportion between the two cases is the same (the argument of appeal to consistency cannot be compared because it has been used only by parents during the observed conversations).

#### Discussion

Despite the differences in age, roles and competencies between parents and children, feeding practices in families with young children appears to be argumentatively co-constructed. On the one hand, the parents try to convince their children to eat (or not to eat more) a certain food served during the meal; on the other hand, the children try to convince their parents that the quality of the food is not good or that the amount is too much (or not enough). By putting forward arguments in support of their own standpoint, parents and children try to convince the other party to change their

1. \*PAO: questo poco ((di pasta)) lo posso lasciare? [!: sollevando leggermente il suo piatto per mostrarne meglio il contenuto]  
*can I leave this little bit ((of pasta))? [!: slightly lifting his plate to show DAD exactly how much is left]*
2. \*DAD: no.  
*no.*
- %act: LUC si gira e prende sul ripiano la bottiglia dell'acqua  
*LUC turns and takes a bottle of water from the work top*
3. \*PAO: è troppo!  
*it's too much!*
4. \*DAD: non ne hai mangiato niente, Paolo  
*you've hardly eaten anything, Paolo*
- %pau: 2.0. sec

**Excerpt 7.** Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Paolo (PAO, 6 years 1 month), Laura (LAU, 4 years 5 month), Elisa (ELI, 3 years 2 month).

standpoint, according to the results founded by Pontecorvo and Fasulo (1997).

In our corpus, we observed that it is the parent that most of times accepts to assume the burden of proof, namely, to put forward (at least) one argument in support of his/her standpoint (68 out of 71; 95%). The children, instead, not always accept to assume the burden of proof (23 out of 41; 56%). Furthermore, when children put forward arguments in support of their standpoint, they often advanced the same type of argument used previously in the discussion by their parents. Similar results were also observed by Pontecorvo and her colleagues (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007, 2010; Pontecorvo & Pirchio, 2000; Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002). In this regard, we believe that the differences in age, roles and competencies between parents and children can certainly affect their argumentative interactions (see, e.g., Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Stein & Albro, 2001; Stein & Miller, 1993), and therefore they must be carefully considered in the discussion of the results.

Although challenging the parents' standpoint can be feasible for the child, we observed that it was not always possible in reality as it was the parent who decided if his/her standpoint was discussable or not. In our corpus, we found that the parent accepted the child's standpoint only when the issue in a debate between parents and children relates to food. We did not find, instead, any case where the children succeeded in convincing the parents to accept their standpoint in discussions related to teaching the correct table-manners. These findings indicate that the issues related to food can at times be discussable, whereas when the issues are related to teaching table manners and how to behave in social interactions

outside the family, e.g., in the school context, the parents are not amenable to changing their standpoint.

Moreover, in a number of cases we also observed that the choice of continuing to object to the parental rule or ban appeared to the child to be more demanding and therefore less convenient than accepting the parent's standpoint. This finding does not coincide with previous works on the same topic. For example, Vuchinich (1987, 1990) found that most of the conflicts during dinnertime conversations in American families ended with no resolution. This difference can be explained by the fact that Vuchinich does not focus his analysis on the argumentative discussions, but, instead, on verbal conflicts among family members. A verbal conflict takes place when there is a difference of opinion between two (or more) parties, while an argumentative discussion when there is a difference of opinion between two (or more) parties and at least one of the two parties puts forward an argument in support of his/her standpoint. Therefore, in the argumentative discussion at least one of the parties has shown the interest in resolving the difference of opinion in his/her own favor. In the verbal conflict, instead, not always at least one of the parties shows the willingness to resolve the difference of opinion. For this reason, it is more likely to observe the conclusion of a conversation with no resolution in a verbal conflict than in an argumentative discussion. It would be interesting to see whether in the corpus studied by Vuchinich there are also some argumentative discussions and, if this is the case, to compare the frequency of the conclusions with no resolution of the argumentative discussions with that of the verbal conflicts.

As far as the types of arguments most frequently used by parents and children are concerned, the findings of this study show

1. \*MOM: basta mangiare se sei pieno  
*stop eating more if you are full*
2. \*MAR: no è sbagliato.  
*no it's wrong.*
3. \*MOM: no! se sei pieno non devi continuare a mangiare  
*no! if you are full you do not have keep eating*
4. \*MAR: no:: me l'ha detto il nonno che devo finire ((di mangiare)) quello che c'è nel piatto  
*no:: Grandpa told me that I have to finish ((to eat)) what is in the plate*
5. \*MOM: ah:: il nonno:: il nonno:: [: sorridendo]  
*ah:: Grandpa:: Grandpa:: [: smiling]*
- %act: MAR continua a mangiare  
*MAR keeps eating*

**Excerpt 8.** Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 42 years), mother (MOM, 40 years), Marco (MAR, 7 years 6 months), Leonardo (LEO, 3 years 9 months).

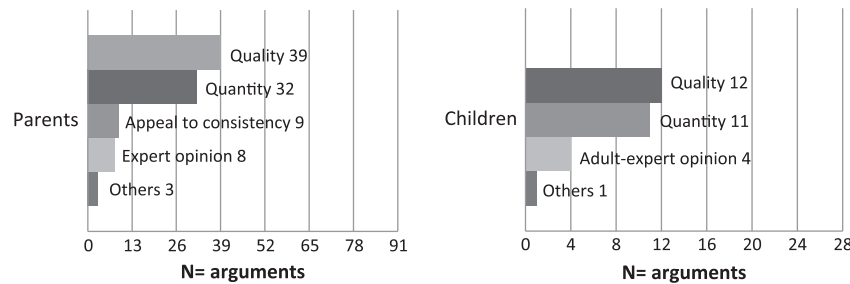


Fig. 2. Types of arguments put forward by parents and by children in food-related argumentative discussions.

that both parents and children during food-related argumentative discussions mostly put forward arguments that refer to the concepts of quality and quantity of food. Similar results can be found in studies on eating practices within family mealtimes by Wiggins and her colleagues (Laurier & Wiggins, 2011; Wiggins, 2002, 2013). Because through these arguments parents and children highlight a specific propriety (positive or negative) of food, they can be defined as “food-bound arguments”.

The argument of quality is typically – but not exclusively – put forward by parents to convince their children that the food is good and therefore deserves to be eaten. On the contrary, children typically – but, also in this case, not exclusively – put forward arguments of quality to refute eating the food prepared by their parents, by highlighting the bad quality of that food. The argument of quantity is put forward by parents and children with the same scope of when they put forward arguments of quality. Typically – but not exclusively, as shown in Excerpts 1 and 2 – the parents put forward arguments of quantity to convince their children to eat “at least a little more” food. In the observed discussions, the counter argument used by children with their parents was, in most cases, also an argument of quantity. These findings show another aspect that is worth to be underlines. The argumentative strategies adopted by children mirror, quite frequently, the argumentative strategies adopted previously by their parents.

It is also noteworthy to observe that when parents put forward arguments of quality and quantity, they often adapt their language to the child’s level of understanding. In our corpus, the parents’ choice of using a language that can be easily understood by children is a typical trait of the argumentative interactions between parents and children during mealtimes. For example, if the parents’ purpose is to feed their child, the food is described as “very good” or “nutritious”, and its quantity is “too little”. On the contrary, if the parents’ purpose 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”.

Compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, the other types of arguments put forward by parents and children observed in our corpus, i.e., appeal to consistency and argument from expert opinion by parents, and argument from adult-expert opinion by children, are used much less frequently during food-related argumentative discussions. By putting forward these types of arguments, parents and children do not aim at highlighting a specific propriety of food. For this reason, they can be defined as “food-unbound arguments”.

The arguments that make an appeal to consistency, e.g., *in the past you used to like it*, aim at showing children how our past actions are important to justify our present actions. These arguments seem motivated by a desire by parents to teach their children not only proper behaviors related to food or table-manners, but they also aim at teaching their children the importance to behave in a rationale way. The type of argument that we called appeal to consistency could therefore also be called “appeal to

rationality”. However, we opted for the first definition because it appears the most appropriate to describe all the examples we found in our corpus. By using the argument from expert opinion, e.g., *this is the one Grandpa bought, though*, instead, parents aim to teach their children the importance to follow the behaviors suggested by those people more expert than them. However, the children observed in our study seem to already know quite well this principle, since they also used this type of argument with their parents, e.g., *Grandpa told me I should finish eating*.

Similarly to what was observed in regard to parents, the children in defending their standpoints advance arguments from expert opinion. However, we observed that when children advanced arguments involving support of expert opinion to their parents, the expert, in the child’s eyes, always proved to be an adult, such as a teacher, a grandfather, an uncle, or a friend of the father. We decided to call this type of argument “argument from adult-expert opinion”. In regard, we also observed that children mostly used other-oriented arguments, namely, arguments in which they refer to someone else. The argument from adult-expert opinion is a clear example of these types of arguments. This finding does not coincide with the ones from Slomkowski and Dunn (1992), who argue that children mostly use self-oriented arguments in the discussions with their parents. Further investigation in this direction is certainly necessary.

## Conclusions

The feeding practices in families with young children during mealtimes represent a crucial educational activity in which parents and children have intensive and complex interactions. These practices should be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship in which parents affect children and are simultaneously affected by children. In particular, we contend that feeding practices in families with young children during mealtimes are argumentatively co-constructed by parents and children together. Despite differences in roles, age and competencies between parents and children, the parents need to develop an effective argumentation to convince their children to eat or, more rarely, not to eat. In our corpus, in fact, the children seem to be able to put forth effective arguments in support of their own standpoints. This aspect is particularly relevant in terms of children’s capacities to engage in argumentative exchanges and to act in rational way during the confrontation with the parents. In addition, these abilities are the ground through which children can develop their role of arguers also outside the family context. The topic of the food is in fact a matter of confrontation at different levels and in various contexts of the everyday lives of people: the discussion about quality and quantity of food, the related arguments about the health implications of a proper diet, the socialization to the rules to be respected at mealtimes are socially crucial for children. The results of the observations and the fine analyses of conversational exchanges among family members are examples of possible ways to recognize

the educational value of argumentative discussions. By the exercise of their argumentative skills, children can become more aware of the relevance of food and diet for their lives. This topic has to be assumed as a relevant one also by parents and other caretakers, in order to play a fundamental role in the social endeavor of feeding practices.

We want to conclude our work with some methodological remarks. We are conscious that many challenges derive from the advantages and disadvantages of the research design adopted for the present study of mealtime conversations. On the one hand, the limited number of recordings favored a more careful analysis but did not allow certain quantifications, such as the correlation between categories. A larger database would probably permit more quantitatively reliable data for certain statistical relationships. On the other hand, careful studies of a small number of conversations in a natural setting may give rise to a more penetrating and “data-close” analysis of the argumentative dynamics among family members. Using mealtime conversations does not automatically solve the problem of obtaining optimal family interaction data. No data are perfect. Nevertheless, we believe that mealtime conversations are a highly informative source for the study of eating practices within family context, and generally they are an invaluable source for studying the dynamics of family interactions within an emic perspective.

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