



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).

seemingly contradictory. In this endeavor, we have opted for a methodology based on the contemporary argumentation theory. The approach used to analyze the argumentative sequences and to identify the children's arguments is, in fact, the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 2004). The presentation of this model and the use we made in our study will follow in the *Methodology* section (§4.) of the paper.

3.1. *Studies on the argumentative skills of children*

The ability of children to argue and negotiate improves over time, with the full development of linguistic, cognitive, and social skills (Benoit, 1993; Benoit & O'Keefe, 1982). Most scholars agree with the claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development (e.g. Anderson, Chinn, Chang, Waggoner, & Yi, 1997; Mercier, 2011; Orsolini, 1993; Pontecorvo & Pirchio, 2000). For instance, a series of studies have shown that during argumentative discussions children aged 4 years are able to convince their parents and their older siblings of the validity of their own opinion (Arcidiacono, 2007; Eisenberg, 1992; Perlmann & Ross, 1997). Marjorie Harness Goodwin and Charles Goodwin, in their numerous studies devoted to the analysis of children's argumentation examining "naturally occurring data", have shown that rather than being disorderly, arguing provides children with a rich arena for the development of proficiency in language, syntax, and social organization (Goodwin, 1983, 1990; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; in this regard, see also Maynard, 1985a,b). In the same vein, Corsaro (1983, 2005), studying children in preschools, has found that they are adept at forming arguments and engaging in argumentation.

As far as the age when children show to have the capacity to understand and produce arguments is concerned, Dunn and her colleagues (Dunn, 1988; Dunn & Munn, 1987; Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Slomkowski & Dunn, 1992; Tesla & Dunn, 1992) have shown that in mother-child exchanges on differences of opinion over the "right" to perform certain actions, by age 4 children justify their own position by arguing about the consequences of their actions. By age 5, children learn how to engage in opposition with their parents and become active participants in family conflicts. Other studies have shown that the age at which children acquire argumentative skills comes even earlier: e.g., by age 2 children are already familiar with conflict interactions over the possession of objects (Hay & Ross, 1982; Stein, Bernas, Calicchia, & Wright, 1995); by age 4, children become able to understand family disagreements and to participate in them; and by age 5, they are able to construct complex moral justifications when the issue is well-known and appealing to them (Stein & Trabasso, 1982). Considering children aged 3–4 years, similar results also were found by Eisenberg and Garvey (1981), Howe and McWilliam (2001), Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2009), and Arcidiacono and Bova (2011). Altogether, the results of these studies indicate that children have a complex knowledge of arguments in social situations that are to them personally significant.

The claim that the capacity to understand and produce arguments emerges early in development seems to be contradicted by the work done by Kuhn and her colleagues, who documented the poor performance of children aged 3–6 years – and also older – in argumentative tasks (Felton & Kuhn, 2001; Kuhn, 1992; Kuhn, Shaw, & Felton, 1997; Kuhn & Udell, 2003). According to these studies, epistemological understanding underlies and shapes argumentation. In particular, to properly comprehend argumentative processes, it is necessary to examine children's understanding of their own knowledge. Despite the fact that epistemological understanding progresses developmentally, Kuhn and her colleagues have observed that in providing justifications for a claim, young children have difficulties in differentiating explanation and evidence in an argument. These findings lead the authors to affirm that young children do not have sufficient skills to engage in argumentative discussions with their parents.

3.2. *Children's development of argumentation and performance in arguing*

The differences between the results of the above-mentioned studies, documenting how the capacities to understand and to produce arguments emerge early in development, and the studies that document the poor performance of children in argumentative tasks, which appear to be mutually contradictory, can be explained for if we look at the different methodological tools applied in these studies. The reason of these differences is well-formulated by Schwarz and Asterhan (2010, pp. 150–151):

In the two kinds of studies, the methodological tools were of a very different nature. For Kuhn, these were structured interviews or questionnaires, administered at different ages [...] In contrast, Stein and her colleagues directly observed children in natural settings while settling disputes or negotiating a decision. The ability to challenge or to counterchallenge was observed in situ [...] It is then clear from a theoretical point of view that the development of argumentation skills and their manifestation in a given situation is highly sensitive to context.

The authors put emphasis on the importance of evaluating the argumentative skills of young children in the real contexts in which they engage in argumentative discussions. Despite differences in methodology and interpretation, the studies on the argumentative skills of young children have the merit to show that preschool children are able to understand and generate arguments, and to construct justifications in defense of an opinion. Moreover, these studies bring to light the social and developmental function played by family discussions, which are privileged moments during which children can learn and improve how to interact properly during argumentative interactions with other people, listening the reasons at the basis of the other's position and answering on the merits.

We agree with the considerations made by the authors and several other argumentative scholars (e.g., Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, & Greco Morasso, 2009; Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009; van Eemeren, 2011) regarding the necessity of studying argumentation in the real contexts in which it takes place. For this reason, we have chosen to analyze the argumentative discussions between parents and children during a typical, ordinary activity such as family mealtimes. By adopting a qualitative methodology including video-recordings and transcriptions of family mealtime conversations and an inductive analysis of argumentative discursive sequences between parents and children, the present study intends therefore to provide a contribution to this so far less investigated research direction in the recent literature on children's argumentation.

4. Methodology

4.1. Data corpus

The present investigation is part of a project³ devoted to the study of argumentative practices in the family context. The research design implies a corpus of thirty video-recorded separate family meals (constituting about 20 h of video data in total; the length of each recording varies from 20 to 42 min) of 10 middle to upper-middle-class nuclear Italian (*sub-corpus 1*) and Swiss (*sub-corpus 2*) families with a high socio-cultural level.⁴ As precised by Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2010b, pp. 454–455):

Middle class is an unmarked reference group that is tacitly used as a model for research and policy decisions about family [...]. Usually, middle class refers to the class or social stratum lying above the working class and below the upper class. Precisely because most families identify or hope to identify with the middle class, understanding tacit assumptions about middle class working families moved to the center of the research interest [...] the basis for the commonly expressed view to be middle class is therefore that many or most of families call ourselves middle class.

All participants are Italian-speaking.⁵ Sub-corpus 1 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five families 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 at least one is of preschool age (3 to 5 years) and at least one is aged between 6 and 9 years. All families in sub-corpus 1 had two children. Sub-corpus 2 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in five families residing 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. Families had two or three children.

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

4.2. Recruitment of the families and ethical issues

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 the researchers' disposal, including its complete transcriptions.⁶ 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 have been recruited through fliers in schools and personal acquaintances of the research team. After an initial contact by phone, the researchers have visited the families in their own homes and have described to parents the research plan. Families were informed that the study aimed to investigate the style of their mealtime conversations, but nothing was said about the specific interest in argumentative discussions. 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. 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 identification number. 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

³ We are referring to the Research Module "Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in the family context" (project n. PDFMP1-123093/1) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

⁴ 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.

⁵ Participant Swiss families live in the southernmost canton of Switzerland, the canton of Ticino. Switzerland has four national languages: French, German, Italian and Romansh. The canton of Ticino is the only canton in Switzerland where the sole official language is Italian.

⁶ 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. The data have been transcribed in Italian and then translated into English (for the purpose of presenting excerpts for data analyses). Translation of utterances has been conducted not word-by-word, but to represent what the respondents were saying in their mother language.

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	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)
Parents	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	8.00 (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)

clarification at any time. Participating families did not receive any financial reimbursement for their participation. At the end of the transcription phase, the families were given a copy of the video as a token of gratitude for their involvement.

4.3. Transcription procedures

In a first phase, all family meals were fully transcribed adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system CHAT⁷ (MacWhinney, 2000), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability,⁸ 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 analyses. 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. Afterwards, we reviewed together with the family members the transcriptions at their home. This procedure allows asking the family members to clarify passages that were unclear to researchers on account of low level of recording sound and vague words and constructions. Information on the physical setting of the mealtimes, i.e., a description of the kitchen and of the dining table, was also made for each family meal. In the transcription of the conversations, this practice has proved very useful for understanding some passages that, at first sight, appeared unclear.

In this article, data are presented in the original Italian language, using bold font, whereas the English translation is added below using italic font. In all examples, 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.

5. Analytical approach

The approach adopted for the analysis is the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, 2004) that proposes a definition of argumentation developed according to the standard of reasonableness: an argumentative discussion starts when the speaker advances his/her standpoint, and the listener casts doubts upon it, or directly attacks the standpoint. Accordingly, confrontation, in which disagreement regarding a certain standpoint is externalized in a discursive exchange or anticipated by the speaker, is a necessary condition for an argumentative discussion to occur.

⁷ The acronym "CHAT" stands for Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcripts.

⁸ Cf. the Appendix A for the symbols of transcription used in this paper.

The model of a critical discussion spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion between a protagonist that advances and sustains a standpoint and an antagonist that assesses it critically: i) at the confrontation stage, it is established that there is a dispute. A standpoint is advanced and questioned; ii) 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, and the other party takes the role of antagonist; iii) at the argumentation stage, the protagonist defends his/her standpoint and the antagonist elicits further argumentation from him/her if he/she has further doubts; and iv) 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 particularly fits our study, and more generally the study of argumentative interactions occurring in ordinary, not institutionalized, contexts such as family mealtime conversations, because it describes how argumentative discourse would be structured when aimed at resolving differences of opinion. For the present paper, it is assumed as a grid for the analysis, since it provides the criteria for the investigation of argumentative discussions between parents and children and for the identification of the arguments put forth by children. Within this model, the analytic determination of the discourse is achieved by interpreting each of its components from the perspective of the resolution of a difference of opinion. Discursive forms are considered as acts aimed at empowering one's own vision of the world in the dialectical space of a social exchange. Assuming this perspective, the argumentative interaction is more than a sign of people cognitive functions: it is a conversational and social practice that can take place in an ordinary framework. With respect to the examination of talk-in-interaction, using this model as a guide for the argumentative reconstruction aims to produce an analytic overview of all components of a discourse, which points are at issue, and which explicit and implicit arguments are advanced.

5.1. Definition of argumentative situations and identification of the arguments

The analysis we present in this paper will be limited to and focused on the study of what the pragma-dialectical of critical discussion defines as *analytically relevant argumentative moves*, namely, “those speech acts that (at least potentially) play a role in the process of resolving a difference of opinion” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, 73). If there is not a difference of opinion between parents and children, therefore, we cannot talk of an argumentative discussion between them. In particular, the argumentative discussion was selected for analysis if the following criteria were satisfied:

- (i) a difference of opinion between parents and children arises around a food-related issue. For example: *Does Gianluca have to eat the vegetable soup?*
- (ii) at least one standpoint advanced by one child is questioned by one or both parents, or vice versa. For example: *MOM: Gianluca has to eat the vegetable soup; GIANLUCA: No, I don't want to.*
- (iii) at least one child puts forward at least one argument either in favor of or against the standpoint being questioned. For example: *GIANLUCA: Because the vegetable soup smells bad.*

Only the discussions that fulfill the above-mentioned three criteria were selected for analysis, while all non-argumentative conversations were excluded. In a first phase, we selected all the argumentative sequences that had arisen around food-related issues among family members, i.e., between parents, between parents and children and among siblings, that occurred in the corpus of thirty separate meals ($N = 92$). Later, we only referred to the argumentative sequences between parents and children ($N = 84$; 91%). Finally, for the scope of the present study, we selected for the analysis only the argumentative sequences in which at least one child puts forward at least one argument either in favor of or against the standpoint being questioned ($N = 76$).

In order to identify the types of arguments put forth by children with their parents, the analysis is focused on the third stage of the model of a critical discussion, i.e., the *argumentation stage*. In this stage the interlocutors exchange arguments and critical reactions to convince the other party to accept or to retract his/her own standpoint (see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 138). Accordingly, in line with the pragma-dialectical approach, we considered as children's arguments only the argumentative moves that aim to support, explain, justify and defend their own position in resistance to adults' directives. The analyses of these arguments, advanced by 23 participants – 13 children aged 3–5 years (7 boys and 6 girls) and 10 children aged 6–9 years (5 boys and 5 girls) – are proposed in the following section.

Table 2

Contributions of children in argumentative discussions with their parents.

	N = 13 children 3–5 years old	N = 10 children 6–9 years old
Argumentative discussions engaged in with the mother	23 out of 76	32 out of 76
Argumentative discussions engaged in with the father	11 out of 76	13 out of 76
Argumentative discussions engaged in with the parents	34 out of 76	45 out of 76
Argumentative discussions in which at least one argument is advanced by a girl	20 out of 34	28 out of 45
Total number of arguments put forward by girls during argumentative discussions with their parents	22	40
Argumentative discussions in which at least one argument is advanced by a boy	14 out of 34	17 out of 45
Total number of arguments put forward by boys during argumentative discussions with their parents	14	28
Total number of arguments put forward by children during argumentative discussions with their parents	36	68

6. Results

What emerges by a preliminary synoptic analysis of the 76 selected sequences is that the argumentative discussions unfold around two different types of issues that can be described through one of the following two questions:

- 1) “*Should child X do Y?*” This question allows one to consider all issues generated by an initial prescription by one of the parents to which (at least) one of the children showed to be in disagreement;
- 2) “*Can child X do Y?*” This question allows consideration of all issues generated by an initial request by one of the children to which (at least) one of the parents showed to be in disagreement.

In most cases, the issues leading parents and children to engage in argumentative discussions were generated by parental prescriptions (N = 52; 68%). Almost one-third (N = 24; 32%) of the issues leading parents and children to engage in argumentative discussions were instead generated by children's requests.

Within the total of 76 argumentative discussions that had arisen around a food-related issue that we have analyzed, the parents engage in argumentative discussions with their older children (6–9 years) in 45 instances, while with the younger ones (3–5 years) in 34 instances. Both older and younger children engage more often in argumentative discussions with the mother than with the father. Interestingly, we observed four cases in which both older and younger children were involved in argumentative discussions with their parents.

Overall, children put forward 104 arguments (in some cases more than only one argument) in support of their standpoint. In particular, we have observed that the 10 children aged 6–9 years advanced 68 arguments in support of their standpoint, while the 13 children aged 3–5 years advanced 36 arguments in support of their standpoint (Table 2).

In discussing the results, we present a selection of excerpts of talk-in-interaction representative of the argument types observed in the whole corpus of arguments put forward by children to refute parental eat-directives during argumentative discussions with their parents.

6.1. Argument types adopted by children aged 3–5 years

The analysis of the prevailing arguments used by the 13 children aged 3–5 years involved 34 argumentative discussions in which they put forward at least one argument to support their refusal to a parental eat-directive, for a total number of 36 arguments. The findings show that the arguments used by children aged 3–5 years with their parents can be ascribed to two main categories: *quality* and *quantity* of food. Although similar findings are reported in previous studies (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014a,b; Wiggins & Potter, 2003), the new aspect concerns how children belonging to different age groups use different kinds of argument types to refuse their parents' eat-directives. Excerpts of qualitative analysis of the children's arguments are presented for each category in the following two sections of the paper.

6.1.1. Arguments of quantity

Mostly, the arguments used by children aged 3–5 years to refute parental eat-directives at mealtimes refer to the notion of quantity (too much or too little) of food (N = 19; about 56%). In the following dialogue between a mother and her son, Marco, aged 5 years and 6 months, the child puts forward an argument of quantity in order to convince her mother to let him not to finish eating the soup.

Excerpt 1. Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 42 years), mother (MOM, 40 years), Leonardo (LEO, 7 years 9 months), Marco (MAR, 5 years 6 months)

1. *MOM: **dai, finisci di mangiarlo ((il minestrone))**
come on, finish eating it ((the soup))
2. *MAR: **no:: no::**
no:: no::
3. *MOM: **dai: mangialo**
come on: eat it
4. *MAR: **era troppo**
it was too much
5. *MOM: **no::**
no::
6. *MAR: **si, era troppo!**
yes, it was too much!
7. *MOM: **la prossima volta dobbiamo cucinare molto meno ((di minestrone)) [: rivolgendosi a DAD]**
next time we have to cook much less ((of soup)) [: talking to DAD]
%act: MOM prende il piatto con il minestrone e lo porta in cucina
MOM takes the plate with the soup and brings it in the kitchen

Dinner is almost over. The mother wants Marco to finish eating the soup (line 1, *come on, finish eating it*), but the child does not want to keep eating it (line 2, *no:: no::*). In reconstructing the argumentative discussion, according to ideal model of a critical discussion, this phase represents the confrontation stage. In fact, the mother's standpoint (*Marco must finish eating the soup*) has been met by the child's

refusal. As typically happens in discussions between parents and young children, the opening stage, in which the parties decide to try and solve the difference of opinion, and explore whether there are premises to start a discussion, is largely implicit.⁹ After a further invitation to finish eating the soup by the mother (line 3, *come on::*), Marco justifies his stance by putting forward an argument which aims to highlight that the amount of soup on his plate was too much (line 4). The insistence of the mother has the effect of establishing an obligation to provide reasons. The child fulfills this obligation (line 6, *it was too much!*), providing a further confirm of his position. In the present case, Marco delineates an alternative to the *status quo*: in fact, he is modifying the unilateral position (to do not eat more soup) into a reciprocal one (because the mother has cooked too much soup). In argumentative terms, what clearly distinguishes mother's and child's point of view in this case is an opposite opinion regarding the quantity of soup. This phase of the discussion represents the argumentation stage. The child's argument in this case can be defined as effective. In fact, in line with our dialectical perspective of argumentation, we believe that one argument, or a series of arguments, put forth by A is considered as 'effective' when B accepts A's standpoint and retracts its own standpoint. In line 7, the mother appears to be convinced that the amount of food was actually too much and she takes the plate with soup and brings it to the kitchen. This action represents the concluding stage of the sequence and shows that, in the present interaction, mother and child engage in the process of jointly explicating reasons for not eating more soup. This enlarges Marco's and mom's response duties as well as their options: they are in fact expected to argue on an equal footing. Finally, the strategy adopted by the child is to provide a justification for his stance (by using the argument type of quantity) and then to repeat his stance.

The analytical overview of the discussion between Marco and his mother is summarized below:

Issue: Should Marco finish eating the soup? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, he must; MAR: No, I don't want to. Child's argument of quantity: "*It (the soup) was too much*"

6.1.2. Arguments of quality

Within the corpus of argumentative discussions considered for the present study, another type of argument frequently used by children aged 3–5 years to refute parental eat-directives refers to the notion of quality (positive or negative) of food (N = 15; 44%). The next example illustrates the use of this type of argument: protagonists of the dialogue are a mother and her daughter, Elena, aged 5 years and 7 months.

Excerpt 2. Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 36 years), mother (MOM, 32 years), Antonio (ANT, 7 years 4 months), Elena (ELE, 5 years 7 months)

1. ***MOM: Elena, devi mangiare un po' di pane**
Elena, you have to eat a little of bread
2. ***ELE: no:: no::**
no:: no::
3. ***MOM: ma è buono!**
but it's good though!
4. ***ELE: no:: è duro**
no:: it's hard
5. ***MOM: ma Elena, è davvero buono::**
but Elena, it's really good::
6. ***ELE: no, è duro non mi piace**
no, it's hard I don't like it
7. ***MOM: no::**
no::
8. ***ELE: sì, è duro**
yes, it's hard
9. ***MOM: perché fai così a mamma tua?**
why are you doing that to mummy?
10. ***ELE: no:: no::**
no:: no::
11. ***MOM: va bene, niente pane questa sera**
well, no bread for this evening

⁹ In types of activities that can be defined "institutionalized" such as a political interview, the argumentative roles of protagonist and antagonist are clear, fixed, and maintained by the participants throughout the argumentative discussion. Accordingly, "discussion rules and other starting points are often taken for granted and do not require explicit mentioning" (van Eemeren et al., 2002, p. 26). For instance, in a political interview the politician has to put forward a standpoint and the interviewer is expected to cast doubt on it (Andone, 2012). Even though during the discussions between family members the roles of protagonist and antagonist are neither predetermined nor fixed – since the parents are not obliged to assume the role of protagonist, nor are the children of the antagonist, or vice versa – similar considerations can be done for the activity of family mealtime. In a previous study adopting the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013b) it has been found that it is pretty common that parents assume the role of protagonist, advancing a standpoint, e.g., rules and prescriptions, while children assume the role of antagonist, opposing the parent's standpoint, especially during food-related discussions.

A few minutes after the dinner has started the mother is serving the main course to all family members. In line 1, the mother tells Elena that she must eat a little of bread, but the child immediately disagrees with her mother (line 2, *no:: no::*). In this confrontation stage, the mother puts forward an argument (in support of her standpoint) based on the quality of the bread, aiming at emphasizing the good taste of the food (line 3, *but Elena, it's really good::*). It seems that the mother puts up an argument for renegotiation (marked by the adversative connective “but”). In fact, the counter-argument used by Elena in reaction to her mother's argument also refers to a quality of the food: in line 4, Elena replies to his mother that the bread is not good but, rather, it is hard. While the mother in her argument had put to the fore a positive property of the bread, trying to support the conversational flow by securing the interaction's continuation, the use of the adjective “hard” by Elena indicates to the mother a negative property of the bread. In the excerpt, there are two different arguments both used to highlight a specific property of the food (good vs. hard) served during the meal with the aim to convince the other party that their view is wrong: what distinguishes mother's and child's argumentation is therefore an opposite judgment regarding the quality of food. This phase of the discussion represents the argumentation stage. When the mother (line 9) tries to imagine why Elena might have refused, her attempt is ignored even though she possibly could have produced a space for accounting the reasons of the child's refusal. In this case, the counter-argument of quality put forth by Elena is effective in convincing her mother to let her not to eat the bread. In fact, in line 11, the mother closes the sequence with the discourse marker “well”: she does not put her position up for negotiation, making her statement beyond dispute. This is the concluding stage of the argumentative discussion in which the child has provided a counter-argument about the quality of food by repeating her stance.

The analytical overview of the discussion between Elena and her mother is summarized below:

Issue: Should Elena eat a little of bread? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, she must; ELE: No, I don't want to. Child's argument of quality: “*It (the bread) is hard*”

Looking at the short discussion between the mother and Elena, we can observe that the counter-argument used by the child in reaction to the argument of quality used by her mother was also an argument of quality. Interestingly, in our corpus we observed quite frequently that the type of argument advanced by children mirrored the same type of argument previously advanced by their parents. Other examples of arguments of quality put forth by children aged 3–5 years to refute parental eat-directives at mealtimes are the following:

Issue: Should Michele eat the meatballs? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, he must; MIC: No, I don't want to. Child's argument of quality: “*I don't want them ((the meatball)), they are hard!*”

Issue: Should Anna eat the stew? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, she must; ANN: No, I don't want it. Child's argument of quality: “*I don't like the stew, it's spicy!*”

6.2. Argument types adopted by children aged 6–9 years

The analysis of the prevailing arguments used by the 13 children aged 6–9 years involved 45 argumentative discussions in which they put forward at least one argument to support their refusal to parental eat-directives, for a total number of 68 arguments. Similarly to what has been observed regarding the younger children, the children aged 6–9 years mostly put forth arguments that refer to the quantity ($N = 25$; 37%) and quality ($N = 22$; 32%) of food. However, we have observed that the older children also put forth other types of arguments such as the *argument from adult-expert opinion* and the *appeal to consistency*.

In the previous section we have shown two cases in which the children aged 3–5 years have advanced the arguments of quality and quality of food in discussions with their parents. In what follows, for reason of space we will present only two cases of use of the argument from adult-expert opinion and the appeal to consistency made by children aged 6–9 years, avoiding to present further examples of the arguments of quality and quality.

6.2.1. Argument from adult-expert opinion

In the corpus, the *argument from adult-expert opinion*¹⁰ ($N = 12$; 18%) can be described through the following statement: “The adult X told me Y, therefore Y is true”. We have observed that when the 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 grandparent or a friend of the father, and not another child. The following

¹⁰ In this study, the definition of argument from expert opinion coincides exactly with the Walton's notion of epistemic authority (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 issue of epistemic authority has been also addressed widely within ethnomethodological and conversation analytic work. In this regard, see the special issue of *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 45(1), 1–109, and the two seminal articles by Heritage and Raymond (Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Raymond & Heritage, 2006).

dialogue between a mother and her 7-year-old daughter, Michela, shows the child's uses of this type of argument in order to convince the mother of the validity of her standpoint.

Excerpt 3. Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 35 years), Michela (MIC, 7 years 8 months), Antonio (ANT, 5 years 1 months)

1. ***MOM: Michela, devi mangiare la carne**
Michela, you must eat the meat
 2. ***MIC: no.**
no.
 3. ***MOM: sì, è bella tenera**
yes, it's pretty tender
 4. ***MIC: la nonna mi ha detto di non mangiare carne tutti i giorni perché fa male**
the grandma told me not to eat meat every day because it is unhealthy
 5. ***MOM: davvero? ((sorridente))**
really? ((smiling))
 6. ***MIC: sì!**
yes!
- %act: MOM e MIC si guardano a vicenda sorridendo entrambe**
MOM and MIC look at each other both smiling

During the dinner, family members are eating the meat with the only exception of the 7-year-old daughter, Michela. In line 1, the mother tells her daughter that she needs to eat the meat but the child disagrees (line 2). This phase of the discussion represents the confrontation stage, because the mother's standpoint (Michela must eat the meat) has been met by the child's refusal (Michela doesn't want to eat). The opening stage, in which the parties decide to try to solve the difference of opinion and explore whether there are premises to start a discussion, is also in this case largely implicit. In line 3, the mother puts forward an argument based on the quality of food (*it's pretty tender*) to support her standpoint (Michela must eat). The child, called to account for their refusal and being confronted to the argument advanced by the mother, replies in line 4, by putting forward an argument from adult-expert opinion to support her refusal to not eat the meat: "*The grandma told me not to eat meat every day because it is unhealthy*". In line 5, the mother asks Michela if the grandmother really said not to eat meat every day, and the child confirms the truthfulness of her previous statement (line 6, *yes!*). The sequence that goes from line 3 to line 6 represents the argumentation stage, because the mother and the child advance arguments in support of their own standpoint. The argument put forward by the child appears to be effective in convincing her mother to retract her standpoint. The mother, in fact, does not continue to ask her daughter to eat the meat and they conclude the discussion both smiling.

In the excerpt, the child supports the rejection made in the confrontation stage by highlighting another topic of relevance (and by using the argument type of the adult-expert opinion). The child repeats her stance without any support. The argument reported by the child is not limited to the adult's authority (in relation to the individual child) but it also refers to a general argument ("it's not good to eat a lot of meat"). The analytical overview of the discussion between Michela and her mother is summarized below:

Issue: Should Michela eat at least half of the meat? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, she must; MIC: No, I don't want to. Child's argument from adult-expert opinion: "*The grandma told me not to eat meat every day because it is unhealthy*"

The argument from adult-expert opinion advanced by Michela is particularly interesting for at least two reasons. Firstly, by saying to her mother that the grandmother told her that eating meat every day is not healthy, Michela is saying that the expert in this field is the grandmother rather than her mother. It is relevant to note that in this case we cannot know if the grandmother is indeed an expert regarding diet and in particular regarding the right amount of meat that a child should eat, but what matters here is that for the child the grandmother is certainly an outstanding expert, probably in many other fields as well. This is in line with what has been observed by Sarangapani (2003), who highlighted sources that according to children possess epistemic authority including teachers, grandparents and older peers. According to this author, any knowledge presented by these sources is considered believable by children and rarely, if ever, questioned. Children, in fact, use these sources as evidence for their claims, if called on to justify those claims. The second reason of interest in the argument type use is the fact that, by referring to an adult as a source of expert opinion, Michela adapts the argumentation to the interlocutor, that is, the parent, who is also an adult (Bova, 2015). However, the actual effectiveness of the argument from adult-expert opinion depends on the extent to which the premises the argument is based on are shared by parents and children. In other words, this argument proved to be effective only when the parent shows to believe that the adult to whom the child is referring is indeed an expert.

6.2.2. Appeal to consistency

Another type of argument used by children aged 6–9 years to refute parental eat-directives at mealtimes refers to the consistency with past behaviors (N = 9; 13%). This type of argument can be described through the following question: "If you have explicitly or implicitly affirmed it in the past, then why are not you maintaining it now?" The next example illustrates the use of this type of argument. Protagonists of the following dialogue are a mother and her son, Paolo, aged 7 years.

Excerpt 4. Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 39 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Paolo (PAO, 7 years 1 months), Daniela (DAN, 5 years 4 months)

1. ***MOM: adesso, mangia un po' di frutta ((rivolgendosi a PAO))**
now, eat a little of fruit ((talking to PAO))
2. ***PAO: no::**
no::
3. ***MOM: sì, Paolo**
yes, Paolo
→ ***MOM: prima di alzarti da tavola devi mangiare anche la frutta**
before leaving the table you have to eat also the fruit
4. ***PAO: no:: non voglio:**
no:: I don't want to:
5. ***MOM: ho detto di sì. Paolo**
I said yes. Paolo
6. ***PAO: ma se prima anche tu hai detto che non la vuoi la frutta!**
but if before you also said that you don't want the fruit!
7. ***MOM: sì, ma solo questa sera!**
yes, but only this evening!
8. ***PAO: anche io solo questa sera**
only this evening also for me
9. ***MOM: eh: fai come vuoi.**
eh:: do what you want.

In this sequence, the mother and her son, Paolo, have two opposite standpoints. The dinner is going to its conclusion, and the mother wants to give Paolo some fruit (lines 1, *now, eat a little of fruit* and line 3, *yes, Paolo*), but the child disagrees with his mother and does not want to eat it (lines 2, *no::* and line 4, *no:: I don't want to:*). In line 5, the mother does not advance any argument in support of her standpoint, but she only reaffirms, one more time, her initial standpoint. According to the ideal model of a critical discussion, this phase represents the confrontation stage. As already observed in previous studies (Busch, 2012; Hepburn & Potter, 2011), when the adults try to settle or end a dispute with their young children quickly, their attempt may resolve only in a temporary settlement or even it may contribute to the continuation of dispute rather than to its cessation. This is what happens following the mother's intervention, because the child reacts by advancing an argument in support of his refusal to accept his mother's directive. In the sequence, we specifically focus on the argument advanced by Paolo in line 6: *but if before you also said that you don't want the fruit!* It results that family members are in the argumentation stage. By referring to an action that his mother did in the past, the child asks the mother to behave in a rationale way, i.e., to be consistent with the same behavior she had in the past now in the present. The reasoning used by the child to justify his refusal to eat the fruit is based on the logic form "as X, so Y", i.e., given the consistency of the first element, the second element is then justified. Moreover, it is noteworthy to observe that by sustaining his argumentative reasoning, the child uses the adversative connective "but" in line 6. This choice is probably due to the fact that he wants to underline the contradiction between the previous mother's behavior (previously during the meal, she said that she does not want to eat the fruit that evening) and her non-consistent reaction (she wants that her son eats the fruit) to the son's refusal. In this case, the child's argument shows to be effective in convincing the mother to change her standpoint. In the concluding stage, in fact, she authorizes Paolo to do what he wants. Finally, in the exchange the child repeats his rejection and justifies his stance by referring to his own will. He supports his claim to the right to take his own will into account by using the argument type of appeal to consistency.

The analytical overview of the discussion between Paolo and his mother is summarized below:

Issue: Should Paolo eat a little of fruit? Standpoint: MOM: Yes, he must; PAO: No, I don't want to. Child's appeal to consistency: "But if before you also said that you don't want the fruit!"

The argument used by Paolo in the discussion with his mother is logical in its nature. The 7-year-old child, in fact, shows to be able to relate in a properly manner a past event (mom, you previously said that...) with a present event. Most importantly, he uses this relation in order to convince the mother of the validity of his opinion (in the specific case, of his refusal to eat a little of fruit). The construction of this type of argument requires a level of logical skills, we have observed, within the large corpus of data, in some cases in the older children, while we never did in the younger ones. The second reason to consider Paolo's argument is, instead, psychological in nature. Through his argument, the child shifts the focus of his argumentation from himself and his desire of not to eat the fruit, to his mother and her (incoherent) behavior of asking him to eat. Unlike from what has been observed in regard to the arguments of quantity and quality, these types of argument, i.e., appeal to consistency as well as the argument from adult-expert opinion, are not exclusively based on children themselves, but they are based on someone else. This aspect is relevant in terms of argumentative competences and conversational practices because it implies the capacity to decentrate from himself/herself in order to create new contexts above and beyond sentences (Quastoff & Krah, 2012). Interactive patterns, distribution of participant positions and ascription of competence are the building blocks of socialization and open a promising approach for the study of

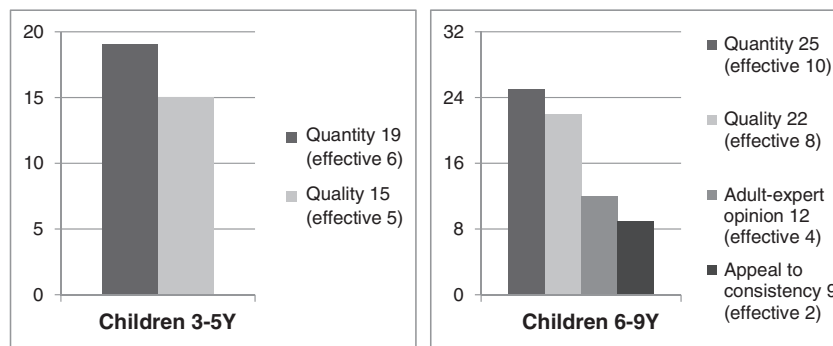


Fig. 1. Types of arguments put forward by children aged 3–5 years and 6–9 years and their effectiveness.

argumentative strategies in everyday family interactions. In addition, the examples show how the process (and not primarily the results) can orient aspects of development. Family interaction and the activity contracts (Aronsson & Cekaite, 2011) between parents and children can provide a discursive matrix for children learning the activity-unbound argumentative strategies. Such activity contracts, i.e., prior agreements that form a type of account work around target activities and emerge as parts of such account work, regulate mutual rights and obligations, invoking family rule statements and local moral order, drawing on an array of verbal resources and argumentative strategies.

In the concluding this section, we want to underline that the presentation of different excerpts¹¹ concerning the type of arguments put forward by participants shows an interesting element that can summarize the discursive choices (and strategies) used by children to refute parental eat-directives during mealtime conversations. In both children's age-groups, the use of arguments concerning the quantity and the quality of the food appears as the privileged way to convince their parents about the possibility/opportunity to eat or not to eat. Elder children also recur to the argument from adult-expert opinion and the appeal to consistency, although in a less frequent way. The Fig. 1 shows the general frequencies of the types of arguments put forward by the two groups of children.

7. Discussion

This study has intended to provide a contribution to the research strand on children's argumentation. We have focused particularly on the types of arguments used by children aged 3–5 years and 6–9 years to refute parental eat-directives during mealtime conversations. The analyses of conversational exchanges between parents and children have been proposed as examples of possible ways to recognize the socializing and educational value of argumentative interactions. In our view, argumentative strategies imply not only discursive competencies, but also psychological elements, such as persuasion, capacity to convince the interlocutor about an argument, adaptation to the language competences and mental capacities of the other. Family argumentative interactions should be viewed as a bidirectional process of mutual apprenticeship in which parents affect children and are simultaneously affected by them (Pontecorvo, 2004; Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001). In fact, by engaging in argumentative discussions, parents accept (and assume) the commitment to clarify to their children the reasons on which their rules, values and prescriptions are based. On the other side, the role of children is not less important than the role of their parents. Through their continuous questioning and contrasting adults' directives, children show their desire to find out the – often implicit – reasons on which their parents' standpoints are based. Moreover, by the exercise of their argumentative skills, children can become more aware of being full-fledged active participants of their own family. Accordingly, for the reasons mentioned above, we believe that while the parents play the role of “educators” during argumentative discussions, the children play the not less important role of “active learners”. These assumptions are connected to the perspective we have assumed in our work.

Through the pragma-dialectical model, we have tried to overcome both the limitations of exclusive logic normative approaches and of the exclusive linguistic descriptive models. We think that the study of argumentative discussion can neither be based unilaterally on experience nor on logic construction. These two ways must be interwoven in an integrative approach. Using the pragma-dialectical model we have aimed to reconstruct argumentative discourse in a way that all these aspects are highlighted in order to contribute to the resolution of a difference of opinion. In the context of family conversations, the analysis has been achieved by starting from what parents and children have expressed, instead of speculating about what they think or believe. In so doing, we were determining the points at issue for the participants, the positions they adopted, their arguments and the argumentative structures that sustained their discourses.

Looking at the findings of our data, both younger and older children seem to be able to put forth effective arguments in support of their own standpoints. In the four examples we have presented the argumentative exchanges have concerned situations in which,

¹¹ We are aware that the pragma dialectical model, as every model, plays a role in the identification of what communicative processes are of interest for the analysis. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, p. 7), we consider that whether a model is used “the argumentative discourse has it emerges has to undergo some analytic interpretation before insight provided in the theoretical model can be brought to bear in practical situations”.

following an argument advanced by the child, a parent retracted his/her initial standpoint. 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 a recent study done by [Zadunaisky-Erich and Blum-Kulka \(2010\)](#) on peer talk in preschoolers' genre of argumentation in natural interactions, the authors have observed how children's argumentative moves and discursive strategies incorporate innovative child-unique strategies, as well as strategies which echo discursive conventions from the adult culture. Our findings have to be considered of interest and potentially relevant for further investigations in the direction delineated by these authors who illustrated the integration of a cultural and a developmental approach within one model of peer talk discursive events. We are aware that the differences in age, roles and competencies between parents and children certainly affect their argumentative interactions (see e.g. [Tannen, 1990](#); [Lareau, 2003](#); [Heller, 2014](#)). For instance, it is not surprising that parents normally advance more arguments than their children, as found in other studies (cf. [Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999](#); [Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002](#)). However, the results of our study bring to light an interesting aspect: in their argumentative choices, parents and children affect one another. When children advanced counter-arguments to oppose their parents' argumentation, in fact, they mostly use the same type of argument previously advanced by their parents, e.g., the bread is good vs. the bread is hard. As discursive practices are socio-culturally situated, utterances of children and parents contribute to shape contexts and frames of interactions that are continuously re-defined by family members.

In our corpus of food-related argumentative discussions, both younger (3–5 years) and older (6–9 years) children mostly put forth arguments based on quantity (e.g., too little, quite enough, or too much) and quality (e.g., very good, nutritious, salty, or not good) of food. For this reason, they can be defined as *activity-bound* arguments. In line with previous studies ([Brumark, 2008](#); [Laurier & Wiggins, 2011](#); [Wiggins, 2002, 2013](#)), in our corpus the children's capacity to justify a standpoint and to advance a counter-argument with their parents appears to be largely context-dependent.

The arguments of quantity and quality were typically – but not exclusively – put forth by children to convince their parents to let them not to eat more food. Typically – but, also in this case, not exclusively – children use these arguments to refute eating the food prepared by their parents, by highlighting the bad quality of that food. Looking at the group of children aged 3–5 years, we have observed that the arguments of quantity and quality are virtually the only ones they use with their parents. We believe that this finding can be explained by the young age of the children and accordingly by their relatively poor argumentative skills.

Compared to the arguments of quality and quantity, the other types of arguments used by the children, i.e., argument from adult-expert opinion and appeal to consistency, are used less frequently during argumentative discussions with the parents. These arguments are used only by the children aged 6–9 years, while the children aged 3–5 years never use such types of arguments to refute parental eat-directives. Although there are similarities between the arguments of quality and quantity and the argument from adult-expert opinion and appeal to consistency, since the actions involved are around parental directives and resistance to these by the children, what is interesting of these latter two arguments is the fact that they clearly show how the older children, compared to their younger siblings, use arguments that do not refer only to the activity they are involved in (*activity-unbound*).

An aspect that clearly differentiates the arguments of quantity and quality from the argument from adult-expert opinion and the appeal to consistency is that the first arguments are oriented to the children themselves (“It is too much for me”, “It is too salty for me”), while the second arguments are oriented to someone else (you/she–he/they told me that... – you/she–he/they did that...). Moreover, in the case of the arguments of quantity and quality the issues to do with food are constructed as individual and inaccessible to others, whereas in the case of the argument from adult-expert opinion and the appeal to consistency the issues at stake are to do with rules and norms that do have an external basis. Therefore, the argument of quantity and quality can be defined as self-oriented, while the argument from adult-expert opinion and the appeal to consistency can be defined as other-oriented. In line with what has been found by [Slomkowski and Dunn \(1992\)](#), the children observed in the present study mostly use self-oriented arguments in discussions with their parents. Further investigation in this direction is certainly necessary.

8. Conclusions

We want to underline some methodological remarks and further directions on lessons learned from our research. The method of analysis we adopted in this study, i.e., the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion, has allowed a detailed study of argumentative sequences between parents and children in a multiparty setting interactions. We have seen that this model contributes to describe how argumentative discourse would be structured when aimed at resolving differences of opinion. What we have found particularly useful in this model is that it starts from a precise definition of argumentation: if there is not a difference of opinion between (at least) two parties, and at least one party advances an argument in support of his/her standpoint, we cannot say that an argumentative discussion is taking place. Starting from this definition, we have been able to define precise criteria that we have used to identify all the argumentative discussions between parents and children arisen around a food-related issue. Through this procedure all the arguments advanced by children in order to support, explain, justify and defend their own position in resistance to their parents' eat-directives have been detected.

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 present study had certainly limitations. First, because the investigation relies on participants' interventions within a specific family activity, the generalization of the results is tenuous. The possibility of exploring how different argumentative stages influence participants' discussions in other types of interaction will offer a way to test the effect of argumentative exchanges outside the family. Second, the limited number of recordings favors a more careful analysis but do not allow certain quantifications, such as the correlation between categories. A larger database would probably permit more quantitatively reliable data for certain statistical relationships ([Arcidiacono, 2013](#)). Moreover, more generally, the findings of this study can have relevant implications at different levels. As parents and children engage in argumentative exchanges during everyday conversations, specific

attention to precise linguistic elements as well as conversational and discursive patterns can be a way to further consider the issues we have highlighted by our argumentative perspective. A specific analysis of this (and other) linguistic aspect(s), through other approaches (such as Conversation and Discourse Analyses) will allow us to better understand the interplays of action, cognition, and effect within situated activities (Goodwin, 2007) as a joint arrangement that is crucial for apprenticeship in the family context.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Symbols of transcription

*	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
,	continuing intonation
.	falling intonation
:	prolonging of sounds
?	rising intonation
!	exclamatory intonation
→	maintaining the turn of talking by the speaker
%pau	pause of 2.5 s
@End	end of the family meal

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