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The dialogic construction of justifications and arguments of a seven-year-old child within a ‘democratic’ family

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The paper focuses on arguing and reasoning processes occurring at dinnertime family conversations. Our goal is to highlight the interplay between two sides of argumentative practices: the justification as social need to provide evidences for an assertion; the dialogic function of argumentation that refers to the goals arguers want to achieve during discussions. Through the analysis of a case study we discuss a sequence in which a child resists his father’s directive by an elaborated argumentative strategy in order to achieve his goal. Results show how participants engage in opposing the other’s standpoint and are socialized to argumentative dialogues.

Keywords: argumentation, reasoning, socialization, family, dinnertime conversations

1. Introduction

In recent years, argumentation in the context of everyday lives has become a relevant research topic in the domain of learning and development. This is evident within family studies in which dialogue and in particular argumentation have been treated as forms of interactions within a context characterized by a larger prevalence of intimacy (Blum-Kulka 1997, Pontecorvo and Fasulo 1999) and by a relative freedom concerning issues that can be tackled (Ochs and Shohet 2006, Bova and Arcidiacono 2015). Within family interactions, parents and children play dynamic roles that provide opportunities to organize and structure multi-party interactions (Snow and Beals 2006) and to enhance socio-cognitive competences. Among abilities and skills that family members can develop, argumentation is a central learning practice over the course of different everyday activities.

As suggested by different authors, rather than being disorderly, arguing provides children with the opportunity for the development of proficiency in language and social organization (Maynard 1985, Goodwin and Goodwin 1987, Goodwin 1990).

In order to study how parents and children argue when engaged in intensive verbal interactions, we have chosen to focus on dinnertime as a privileged moment to capture family members during their dialogic exchanges (Ochs 2006, Brumark 2008, Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo 2009, Aronsson and Gottzén 2011, Busch 2012, Bova and Arcidiacono 2013, Wiggins 2013, Arcidiacono and Bova 2015). Family dinnertimes are then considered as cultural sites for the socialization of children into competent and appropriate members of a society, as temporal and spatial situated arenas, which are laden with symbolic meanings and mediated by material artifacts (Ochs and Shohet 2006).

In this paper, we will pay specific attention to a case study of arguing and reasoning socialization processes that occur within a family during dinnertime interactions. As family members are continuously involved in activities that knit an array of heterogeneous phenomena into a coherent course of action (Goodwin 1996), we intend to pay attention to the specific activity of argumentation that takes place during dinnertime as a way to display and create knowledge. In particular, our goal is to highlight the interplay between two elements of argumentative practices: the justification as social need to provide evidence for a particular assertion and the pragmatic function of argumentation that refers to the goals arguers want to achieve during the discussion. In viewing talk and activities (Bazerman 1997) as the relevant units for the analysis of family dinnertime interactions, we intend to shed light on situated frameworks that adults and children co-construct through their dialogue and their strategic maneuvering during everyday exchanges.

2. Argumentation as a practice of socialization in the family context

According to Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2009), argumentation is considered, in this paper, as a mode of dialogue in which the interlocutors commit themselves to reasonableness: they accept the challenge of reciprocally founding their positions on the basis of reasons. In the case of family interactions, parents and children engage in argumentative discussions by putting 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 (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo and Greco Morasso 2009, Bova and Arcidiacono 2014, Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono 2014), and in contributing to building or reinforcing the argumentative capacities of

family members. As suggested by Schiffrin (1994, 376), “activities serve to publicly display an emergent sense of order: activities provide a practical basis, and a sense of intersubjectivity, through which other activities (and the situation that they help to create) can be sustained”. Dialogic activities and argumentative practices are processes throughout which people construct and evaluate arguments in consideration of their interaction with other arguments (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), and of the socio-cultural practices that can take place in conversation, through conceptual and pragmatic resources. In this framework, the relevance of argumentation is evident in terms of the language socialization process (Ochs and Schieffelin 1986, Ochs 1988), including both socialization through language and socialization in the use of language. In this sense, social reasoning is a particular type of language game, and language socialization can be viewed as 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, 408).

In our view, the connection between socialization processes and argumentation is relevant within the context of family interactions because children and adults can learn and practice, throughout argumentation, different forms of language socialization within everyday social activities. Although our main objective is not to describe in detail the process of socialization but essentially to consider argumentation as a way through which people can be socialized, we consider that the notion of socialization needs to be more precise.

For a long time, socialization has been conceived in a rather deterministic way (Gewirtz 1969) and as a unidirectional practice of internalization of values, beliefs, norms and role-expectations. According to this perspective, children appear mainly passive and have little impact on the processes in which they are engaged. By consequence, research within this approach has been firstly devoted to studying the parenting roles, conceived as the primary forces in determining socialization outcomes. Since the 1970s, a reorientation has been realized in order to consider the child’s active role in selecting and organizing socio-cultural information (Bower 1977). Thereafter, children were considered active subjects in their own right. Following this, the bi-directionality of the socialization process was recognized (Giddens 1979, Hewitt 1997), and the interplay between children’s and adults’ social worlds was taken into account. This perspective has devoted a lot of attention to the situated character of learning experiences of participants in such cultural practices. Consequently, mutual views of language socialization have been explored in the family context (Pontecorvo, Fasulo and Sterponi 2001), highlighting the ways in which children feel free to elicit adults’ instruction and guidance by unequivocally asking for information and explanation. These family relationships and the possibility of negotiating meanings within dialogical interactions are the

results of a jointly constructed achievement of the participants (Goodwin, 1994). For this reason, argumentative dialogues can be considered, in the family context, as settings for the analytical reconstruction of interactive models of socialization. Our position is inspired by the original contribution of Elinor Ochs (Ochs and Taylor 1992), who coordinated a relevant research project in which middle-class American families were observed during dinnertime in order to study different types of family socialization. In agreement with the work of Elinor Ochs, a research group coordinated by Clotilde Pontecorvo (Fasulo and Antonelli 1996, Sterponi and Pontecorvo 1996, Fatigante, Fasulo and Pontecorvo 1998, Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono 2007) carried out a more limited study concerning a sample of Italian families. A pivotal comparative paper around the differences between American and Italian parents interacting with their children around food taste appeared 20 years ago (Ochs, Pontecorvo and Fasulo 1996), highlighting to what extent family dinnertimes provide specific cultural differences about food preferences, moral norms connected to mealtime activities, and values of socialization through intensive dialogues and verbal exchanges.

Taking into account this tradition of studies devoted to the observation of dinnertime interactions, the present paper intends to analyze dialogic and argumentative practices in order to detect how family members show their capacities to *democratically*¹ negotiate meanings and co-construct intersubjective positions (Linell 2014) during verbal interactions. More particularly, we are interested in highlighting how social dimensions, rather than individual factors, play a pervasive role in justification (Rorty 1979). In this sense, justification is intended as “*a fundamentally social affair*” (Goldman 1997, 155) during argumentative dialogues, where people engage in presenting arguments that would persuade² the interlocutors of a specific proposition. Accordingly, these arguments play as justifications that the person needs to advance in order to achieve his/her goal.

1. In the Italian educational lexicon, the expression “democratic parents” refers to a national association founded after a law (established in 1974), which gave official access to the parents into the management of schools attended by their children through an elective method, in competition with other groups of parents having different orientations. In the present paper, the use of the term “democratic” will refer to a family situation in which the parents never impose to their child to do things without verbal objections. Rather, the child is allowed to dispute the standpoint of the parents (the adults’ directive) during the course of the family dinnertime.

2. In this paper, the term “persuasion” is used in a broad sense, which includes “conviction”. In fact, according to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), both require that the other’s opinion be changed (for further detail, see also Antaki, 1994). Thus, we prefer to speak about *persuasion* (from Latin *suasio*, in English *suasion*) because it is linked to the Latin term *soave* that is reached by good arguments, then by dialogue. Instead, the term *conviction* comes from the Latin expression *in vinculis* that means that the opponent is constrained by force to accept a social norm or a directive.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we will introduce the methodology we have employed for the study. Afterwards, we will present a situation in which a family dinnertime discussion offers the possibility of argumentation among participants through interplay between justifications, arguments and efforts of persuasion both from the parents and the child. The analysis and a discussion will follow. A final section to conclude the paper will present elements of reflection about the issues emerged in the study.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research and data corpus

The present investigation is part of a project³ devoted to the study of socialization processes of family members engaged in spontaneous interactions at home during dinnertime. The research design implies a corpus of 76 video-recorded separate family meals of 23 middle class nuclear Italian families with a high socio-cultural level.⁴ By using “middle class” we refer to “an unmarked reference group [...] 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 themselves middle class.” (Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo 2010, 454–455)

Families video-recorded their dinners at home (at least four times over a 20-day period) without the presence of researchers. All participants are Italian-speaking, living in different cities in Italy.⁵ The criteria adopted in the selection of the families were the following: the presence of both parents, of at least one child aged three to six years, and of at least one older sibling.

Families were recruited through personal acquaintances of the research team, following the snowball technique, also known as chain referral sampling

3. The research project started in 1991 and was supported by a grant from “Sapienza” University of Rome (Italy). We are grateful to the participant families for opening their homes to us, as well as our colleagues for discussing data and the methodological approach with us in scientific encounters.

4. Based on the parental socio-economic status (SES).

5. The origin of the participant families has not been taken into account as a variable in this study. These families (cf. below for the technique of recruitment) were living in four cities located in the North (Florence), Center (Rome) and South of Italy (Naples and Reggio Calabria).

(Goodman 1961, Heckathorn 1997, 2002), by which the candidate families helped the researchers to find others. After an initial contact by phone, the researchers visited the families in their own homes and described the research plan to the parents. Families were informed that the study aims to investigate interactions during mealtime, but nothing was said about the specific interest in argumentative dialogues. All participants were approached by means of an information sheet outlining the general purpose of the study and providing information about requirements. 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. 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 clarification at any time. Participating families did not receive any financial reimbursement for their participation. The first videotaped dinner of each family was not used for the analyses, as it was considered the participants' first experience familiarizing themselves with the camera and the research setting. The families were given a copy of the video as a token of gratitude for their involvement.

3.2 Transcription procedures

All family meals were transcribed adopting the CHILDES standard transcription system, CHAT⁶ (MacWhinney 2000), with some modifications introduced to enhance readability (cf. Table 1 for the transcription symbols), and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (agreement rate = 80%) had 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. Information on the physical setting of the mealtimes, e.g., a description of the kitchen and of the dining table, was also made for each family meal.

In this article, data are presented in the original Italian language, whereas the English translation has been added below using bold font. Translation of utterances has been conducted not word-by-word, but to represent what the respondents

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

were saying in their mother language. In all examples, 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 participants in this article, their names are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Transcription symbols (source: Jefferson 1985)

| | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|---------|--|
| . | falling intonation | () | non-transcribing segment of talk |
| ? | rising intonation | ((abc)) | comments added by the transcriber |
| ! | exclaiming intonation | > < | quick utterance |
| , | continuing intonation | ° ° | quieter talk than the surrounding talk |
| – | abrupt cut-off | = | contiguous utterances |
| : | prolonging of sounds | (1.5) | pause (in seconds) |
| ABC | high tone (capital letters) | (.) | micro-pause (less than 0.2 seconds) |
| [| simultaneous or overlapping speech | — | emphasis |

3.3 Approach and criteria for the analysis

We have employed ethnographical and conversational instruments to analyze video-recorded family interactions and to interpret their dialogues through the use of participants' categories (Edwards and Potter 1992, Edwards 1997). This approach implies that categories are not attributed beforehand with a presupposed scheme; they are invoked as participants' evidence offered to the other participants in order to make meaning of their conduct. The theoretical assumptions we have sketched imply that both development and education have to be approached "as social practices, in which becoming competent, achieving understanding, being educated and so [...] are matters of how people get counted as that" (Edwards 1991, 63). Such a methodological approach can help to understand how development and education, in their social and dialogical features, take place within an interaction.

We have found in conversational and discursive analyses (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, Atkinson and Heritage 1984, Button and Lee 1987) a powerful tool to account for the explanation of social and cognitive interactions (Rogoff and Lave 1984, Valsiner 1995). Our choice to study family interactions is not random; rather, it is driven by the fact that this is one of the major settings in which language socialization occurs (Fasulo and Pontecorvo 1997, Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono 2010). We intend to pay attention to how the organization of actions and the production of their accountability are treated in an endogenous way by the participants, giving order, intelligibility, and coherence to their social actions and resources (Suchman 1987, Brassac et al. 2008, Aronsson and Cekaite 2011).

In the following part of the paper, we present and discuss a case of a family conversation in which a seven-year-old child resists his father's invitation to go to sleep by an elaborated argumentative strategy. The situation has been selected because it represents a dialogical interaction in which family members negotiate their positions during an argumentative game over the course of the dinner. In particular, the sequence is presented through four excerpts in which participants show how their different standpoints are negotiated during the argumentative dialogue: the mother and the father appear as "democratic" parents in facing the arguments proposed by the child, and our focus is on the father-child exchange in which the adult avoids employing directives to make the child go to sleep and never closes the discussion with the son until is persuaded. On the contrary, he engages in discussing with the child, asking for justifications and arguments, and considering the consequences of the propositions that are at stake. The interaction is taken as an example of how family members negotiate meanings during argumentative exchanges at dinnertime,⁷ in which cultural knowledge and associated practices are then recreated through social and experiential relationships among family members.

4. Qualitative case analysis and results

The context of the scene in which the sequence has been recorded concerns the weekday dinner of the Sol family. The participants (mother, father and three children) are near the end of the meal, all seated at the table. At a certain point, Stefano (the elder child, aged seven) starts to walk around the table (see Figure 1). The father (at minute 24:15) invites him and Gianluca (the other son, aged four) to leave the room and go to sleep: "*It's almost half past eight, it's time to go to sleep, come on!*" The children do not reply. In particular, Stefano goes toward the door of the room and then remains behind the camera that is recording the dinner. The mother and the father start to talk between them for 90 seconds. In the meantime, Stefano is not visible while he is in the background, standing behind the camera; Gianluca continues to eat; the father is seated holding the baby (Marina, aged three months) and chatting with the mother, who is seated next to him. Sometimes the baby is vocalizing, and at a particular moment Stefano (the seven-year-old) says to the baby, "*Be quiet!*", still standing behind the camera. Immediately after (at

7. A first analysis of the sequence was presented during a conference held at the University of São Paulo (Brazil) in November 2009. The authors are grateful to Dr. Camilla Monaco for her work on the analysis of data and discussion. A special thanks is also addressed to various colleagues and students that have examined the data with us.

minute 25:45), the father recounts that Stefano is still behind the camera and says to the child, “*Stefano, are you still there?*” (see Figure 2). This intervention is the beginning of the argumentative sequence (dominated by the persuasive parental strategy) we have selected for the analysis that follows.

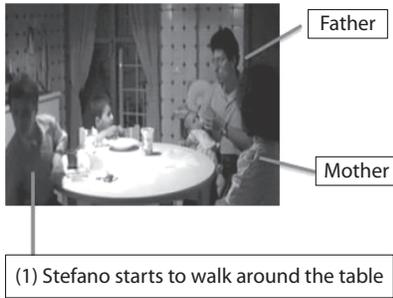


Figure 1



Figure 2

4.1 The dispute trigger

The sequence we present and discuss here begins when the father again invites Stefano to leave the room and go to sleep (at minute 25:45). The child rejects the father’s invitation in order to stay longer with the other family members and to get extra time before going upstairs. This constitutes the trigger of the argumentative exchange based on a dispute between the father and Stefano. The following excerpt focuses on this moment.

((Stefano is standing behind the camera, close to dinner table))

1. Dad: Stefano ancora lì stai?
Stefano, are you still there?
2. Stefano: >°voglio stare, quando vai te°<
>°I want to stay, until you will go°<
3. Dad: vuoi sta:re?
do you want to sta:y?
4. Stefano: voglio andare quando vai te.
I want to go when you’ll be going.
5. Mom: no, comincia ad andare su [e comincia a fare le cose
**no, begin to go upstairs [and start to prepare you
going to bed**
6. Dad: [no Stefano, vai su:
[no, Stefano, go upstairs:
7. Stefano: ho paura dei fantasmi
I am frightened by the ghosts

8. Dad: ecco vabbè. hai paura dei fantasmi
 well. you are frightened by the ghosts
9. Gianluca: ANCORA ((*riferendosi al cibo. Gianluca e La madre
 iniziano una discussione tra di loro*))
 **AGAIN ((referred to the food. Gianluca and the mother
 start a discussion between them))⁸**
10. Dad: e vabbè hai paura dei fantasmi. va-
 so you are frightened by the ghosts. go-

The trigger of the sequence concerns the parental invitation to Stefano to go to sleep and the immediate reply of the child (“*I want to stay, until you will go*”). The first reaction offered by the father (turn 3) is to stress the incongruence in Stefano’s use of language. The child’s answer (turn 4, “*I want to go when you’ll be going*”) is a repair and an effort at manipulation, because he is trying to link his chance at achieving his goal by appealing to a common rule: all family members have to leave the room at the same time. This intervention produces an immediate reaction in both parents: turns 5 and 6 are two turns of talk that are connected and partially overlapping, both starting with the negative “no” and aimed at delegitimizing Stefano’s intervention and his possibility of freely choosing what he wants to do. The parents are avoiding the argument proposed by the child. This can be mainly intended as a sign of authority (they say “go” to Stefano, without asking why the child refuses to leave the room). At his turn, Stefano provides a justification supporting his request, that is, the presumed presence of ghosts in his bedroom (turn 7). The father’s reaction toward the argument provided by Stefano seems sarcastic and compels the child to appeal to other arguments (as will be presented in the following excerpt) to justify his standpoint, namely the impossibility of going alone to the bedroom because of the presence of ghosts.

In the first part of the exchange, Stefano has managed to get the parents’ attention and to provide arguments connected to his feelings. However, the course of the interaction obliges the child to modify his argumentative choice and appeal to his feelings, referring to another element that can support his goal to get extra time.

4.2 The first argument connected to an external source

The first argument produced by Stefano to prove the plausibility of the presence of ghosts is the fact that his friend Giampiero told him that ghosts exist. More

8. The turns related to the discussion between the mother and Gianluca have been omitted for practical reasons (lack of space and readability of the transcription). In the observed case there was a conversational “chiasma” (Goodwin 1981), a split in parallel independent discourses. Our focus is on the exchange involving Stefano and the father.

specifically, this is written in a handbook illustrating that Rome (the city in which the participant family is living) is populated by a lot of ghosts. This argument, connected to an external source (the affirmation made by Giampiero and the support of the handbook), becomes the new topic of discussion among participants.

11. Stefano: Giampiero dice che ((*i fantasmi*)) esistono- prima in Italia, e a Roma.
Giampiero says that ((*the ghosts*)) exist- firstly in Italy, and in Rome.
12. Dad: chi è che lo dice questo?
who is saying that?
13. Stefano: é sul manuale dei fantasmi. Giampiero.
it is on the handbook about ghosts. Giampiero.
14. Dad: eh?
eh?
15. Stefano: Giampiero ha un manuale dei fantasmi dove c'è scritto che la città >più popola:ta< è Roma.
Giampiero has a handbook about ghosts where it is written that >the most popula:ted< city is Rome.
16. Dad: la città più popolata di fantasmi è Roma? (.) e com'è che io abito a Roma dal 1968 e non ne ho mai visto manco uno?
is Rome the ghosts' most populated city? (.) and how it comes that I have been living in Rome since 1968 and I had never even seen one ghost?
17. Stefano: non si vedono.
they cannot be seen.

The appeal to external sources in order to affirm that ghosts exist in Italy (and in Rome) is immediately questioned by the father (turn 12, “*who is saying that?*”). He is asking the child to provide more details about the source of the new argument and about its authoritativeness. The doubt expressed by the father about *who* is saying that ghosts exist is intended by Stefano as a potential attack to his first argument, namely that the source is Giampiero. Consequently, the child introduces another source (the handbook about ghosts) in order to sustain his standpoint. This change is a sign of how Stefano is appealing to different arguments that are invoked, in the course of the exchange, as contingent elements related to the father’s counter-arguments, doubts or requests for clarification. The book that is used as a reference by the child constitutes an artifact (Wartofsky 1979), in terms of objectification of the need and the intention already invested with cognitive content by Stefano.

The situation is now a real challenge for the child: his attempt to remain in the room instead of going to sleep depends on his capacity to argue and to make meaningful the arguments and the justifications provided to the father. Stefano is trying to negotiate in the here-and-now of the interaction the possibility of postponing the enactment of the parental invitation (to go to sleep), which is still pending as a directive. The child's argument is not to disobey the father, but to invoke reasonable elements that sustain his standpoint. This conversational strategy allows a co-construction of the dialogue, according to the frame of the situation, that is the space that parents (and, specifically, the father) are offering to argue about whether it is the case to go to sleep or not. This sensitivity and capacity to negotiate turn by turn the argumentation are played during the exchange, in terms of choice of arguments and types of reasoning that can be useful to achieving one's own goals.

In the invocation of external sources as reasonable justifications, Stefano adds another element in turn 15, sustaining his position about ghosts: the handbook specifies that Rome is a city populated by many ghosts. In turn 16, the father replies through other evidence that could be classified as a veridical challenge, in which "the explanation is challenged because it does not match what at least one person considers to be the true state of the world" (Ochs and Taylor 1992, 36). In fact, the father says that, although he is a Roman citizen, he had never even seen one ghost in Rome. Stefano replies that it is because ghosts "*cannot be seen*" (turn 17). Based on this argument, the exchange continues through the invocation of deductive logic, as presented in the following excerpt.

4.3 The second argument: Reasoning on the consequences of an argument

As Rome is populated by ghosts (according to the handbook), the fact that the father has never seen them is evidence to be used in proving false the child's argument, evidence that is based on the authoritativeness of the external source (the handbook). The mother uses this argument to test the consistency of Stefano's position, adding elements from her own experience as a long-time citizen of Rome. Then, the sequence continues around the new argument produced by the mother and the reactions of the other participants.

18. Mom: pensa che io c'abito dal cinquantotto:
 figure out that I have been living here since fifty-eight:
19. Dad: ALLORA SE NON SI VEDONO vai su=che t'importa. vai su
 tanto non li vedi:. vai.
 THEN IF YOU CANNOT SEEN THEM, go upstairs=what does annoy you. go upstairs since you cannot see them:. go.



Turn 19: the father invites Stefano to go upstairs, showing to the child the direction of the door

Figure 3.

20. Stefano: io c'ho paura.
I'm frightened.
21. Dad: dei fantasmi? (1.5) ma- io non so neanche cosa siano i fantasmi ma [se ci fossero,
by the ghosts? (1.5) but- I have not even know what the ghosts are but [if they existed,
22. Stefano: [come no?
[how not?
23. Dad: non farebbero nie:nte.=t'hanno mai fatto niente?
they would not do any:thing wrong.=have they ever done anything wrong to you?
24. Stefano: si
yes
25. Dad: scusa, Roma è tanto popolata dai fantasmi vero?
quindi, chissà quante volte li hai incontrati=senza saperlo. (.) t'hanno mai fatto male?
excuse me, Rome is so populated by ghosts, isn't it? thus, how can you say how many times you met them=without knowing it. (.) did they ever hurt you?
(0.5) ((Stefano is out of frame, but it seems that he is nodding))
26. Dad: a te hanno fatto male i fantasmi?
did the ghosts hurt you?
((the mother turns her head towards Stefano))
27. Stefano: una volta sono inciampato nel niente.
once I stumbled in the non-entity.
28. Dad: e quello è stato il niente. mica il fantasma [cammina dai
that was the non-entity. it was not the ghost.[go then

29. Mom: [dai
Stefano vai su
[then
Stefano go upstairs

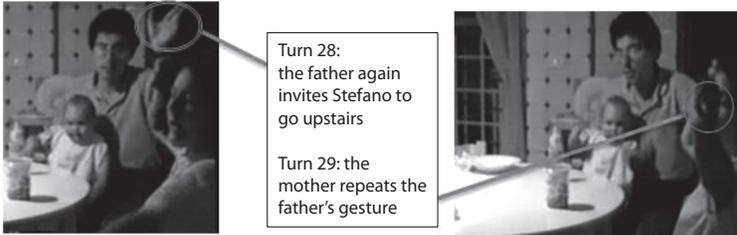


Figure 4.

30. Stefano: no, c'ho paura. vieni con me?
no, I'm frightened. come with me?
31. Dad: eh Stefano:, su!
eh Stefano:, come on!
32. Stefano: tanto Gianluca ha finito ((*il suo cibo*)) deve venire con me.
Gianluca has finished ((his meal)) so he has to come with me.
33. Dad: ci pensi? stai con la telecamera accesa col microfono lì e qualcuno sentirà che un bambino di quasi otto anni (.) ridicolo che ha paura dei fantasmi [perché Giampiero gli ha det-
you see? there is a camera switched on with the microphone there and someone will hear that an almost eight year old child (.) ridiculous who is afraid by ghosts [since Giampiero said-
34. Mom: [e vuole aspettare Gianluca
[and he wants to wait for Gianluca
35. Dad: perché dà retta alle stupidaggini che gli racconta Giampiero che le ha viste in un libro di che- fatto per dire le cretinate ai bambini così se lo comprano e loro guadagnano un sacco di soldi.
because he pays attention to rubbish told by Giampiero that read them in a book of that- written to say stupid things to children so that they will buy it and the authors can get a lot of money.

The excerpt starts with the parents in agreement. The mother refers to her experience (turn 18, “*figure out that I have been living here since fifty-eight*”) and opens the possibility of shifting from the previous argument under discussion (the presence of the ghosts) to another one, which is the possibility of seeing the ghosts (cf. turn 19 by the father, also completed by the repeated directive addressed to Stefano to go to sleep). However, Stefano re-introduces a new element, saying that he is still frightened. The father replies that there are no reasons for it, inviting the child to provide further elements to sustain his position. In turns 21 and 23 the father invites Stefano to provide justifications as a need to make evident his assertions. The construction of turn 25 is thus emblematic. The pre-sequence “*excuse me*” introduces the deductive reasoning that the father will use in order to contrast the child’s intervention: as the ghosts populate Rome, it is plausible that Stefano has met them. If this is the case, have they hurt the child?

Stefano needs now to make a supplementary effort in terms of argumentative move in order to reply to the father’s question. However, the child’s answer (turn 27, “*once I stumbled in the non-entity*”) is not sufficient as a counter-argument, because there is no reference to the ghosts. This point could constitute the closing of the sequence, as the father again invites Stefano to go upstairs (by using gestures to indicate the direction of the door, an action repeated by the mother in order to align herself with the father’s directive). Here, the child re-uses the argument “*I’m frightened*”, but the father underlines that the audience of the videotaped situation will observe the ridiculous behavior of a seven-year-old child saying that he is frightened by ghosts and paying attention to rubbish written in a friend’s book (turn 35).

4.4 The third argument: There is a photo of the ghosts

Stefano’s reaction is the last attempt to defend his standpoint: he is now appealing to the existence of a photo of the ghosts (turn 36, “*there is also a photo*”).

36. Stefano: c’è- c’è pure una foto
there- there is also a photo
37. Dad: la foto di un fantasma? allora li puoi vedere. perché
 le foto fotografano solo le cose che si vedono ((*alza
 La mano come per fare il segno “stop” e per segnalare
 che non c’è piu’ ulteriore spazio per discutere*))

a photo of a ghost? then you can see them.
 Since you can photograph only those things
 that can be seen ((stand the hand as sign
 "to stop" and to indicate that there are no
 further floor to discuss))



Figure 5.

38. Stefano: beh, allora si vedono
ok, then you can see them
39. Mom: () ((addresses to the father))
 ((the father is whistling))

The father takes into account the new element (the existence of a photo of the ghosts) and continues his deductive reasoning by saying that if it is true that a photo exists, it means that ghosts are visible. The reasonableness of the father's deduction obliges Stefano to accept the parent's position and to close the argumentative exchange. The father starts whistling, and the child moves to his room.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Within an activity of persuasion characterized by different arguments, justifications and counter-arguments used by family members can be intended as strategic moves in order to provide evidence for a particular assertion. In fact, in their maneuvering, participants refer to dialogic functions of the argumentation to achieve their goals during the discussion. As highlighted by other works in different fields (e.g., Paglieri and Castelfranchi 2010), people argue for something, and the reference to the goals is crucial to explain not only why they argue but also how they do so. The specific case of the observed family is an example of how Stefano, a seven-year-old child, became aware of the "democratic" attitude of the parents (and particularly of the father), who want to convince him through reasoning and arguing, instead of imposing the adults' directives. In terms of personal goals and dialogical moves, during the exchange the child succeeded in wasting time to get the younger brother to accompany him upstairs. In this sense, Stefano was able to use justifications for his standpoint in order to prolong the discussion with the parents. The argumentative activity was dialogically used to achieve this goal by providing different elements as possible justifications for the arguments and counter-arguments proposed by other participants.

We recognize that different forms of conversational moves operate as mediational means toward the achievement of the goal of the dialogue in progress. As

suggested by Wells (2007, 10), a goal “can only be achieved if the participants organize their contributions according to the rules of the genre that is most appropriate for their purpose in their shared situation”. In our case, at least three general features can summarize the trajectory of the argumentation involving Stefano and the parents: it was highly co-constructed; it unfolded throughout complex argumentative patterns; and it was rhetorically shaped. In fact, the child was supporting the discussion with the parents by appealing to different sources (the opinion of his friend Giampiero; the information contained in the handbook about ghosts; the quantitative information about ghosts’ presence in Rome; his personal experience of stumbling in a non-entity; the existence of a ghost picture), building during the exchange the interactional frame of the activity at stake. Parents and child were modelling different configurations during their interaction, giving meanings to each intervention, accounting for reasons and stimulating interlocutors to argue. All these elements have been designed within a complex argumentative setting as signs of language socialization that participants have realized through different interpersonal positions. Family members have shaped the rhetoric of the exchange during the interaction, as interplay of arguments, counter-arguments, justifications and reasoning processes.

It is interesting to note that the argumentative sequence we have analyzed was based on an inferential component, namely the fact that turns were grounded on the others’ interventions. The inference implied a connection among the values of the different interventions and underlined the critical aspect of each argumentative process implied during the dialogue. Being critical and able to discuss the others’ positions has involved, within the argumentative exchange, the need to find reasonable elements for his/her own actions, decisions and strategic maneuvers. All these factors have shown the capacity to negotiate, during the exchange, the possibility of making meaning of each other’s interventions and of developing effective argumentation within the family setting. The observed case provides evidence that a favourable discursive arena involving a young child can be established through intersubjective positions that are shaped within the contingent context of discussion. In particular, the participants have performed different actions (e.g., the appeal to an authoritative source, the book and the picture of the ghosts, the everyday experiences of parents in their native city), moving back and forth between them and embodying objects and gestures to pursue the discussion. In fact, substantial objects and personal experiences have reflected and materialized the final agreement among participants, being representative of the actors who contributed to invoke, interpret and use them. Although this does not always produce the expected consequences, objects and discourses shape the action and are shaped by it. Relational and cognitive elements are then intrinsically related (Cole 1990; Saxe 1994) in people’s daily activities, because in the social and historically

specific operations people not only transform and create their environment, but also change their lives and knowledge (Stetsenko 2005).

The sensitivity to different argumentative actions and operations and the capacity to manage them at his/her own advantage are very important competences that children can acquire within the family, as a relevant part of their socialization. As we wrote above, the analysis of a coherent sequence of arguments, both produced by the child and the father, shows the dialogic functions of argumentative activity in achieving specific goals. The analysis of the case we have presented here provides a window into the emergence of goals in practice, as parents and child were adjusting their goal-related activities according to the framework that they were building together. It is interesting to underline that our “democratic”⁹ father never repeated his initial directive and finally, in turn 37, “perhaps unconsciously” he even accepted a discussion of the argument about the photo of the ghost. The father’s capacity to offer a space of discussion and at the same time to frame it in order to convince his child to go to sleep constitutes a crucial element to build the arena within which the long dialogue about directives and reasonable arguments to defend standpoints has been possible. As suggested by Hedegaard (2012), to focus on children’s activities within a specific setting requires considering the children’s social situations of development, so as to discover the influence of both children’s orientations within the activity and demands from the setting and other people. In this sense, dialogues and cultural elements not only give conditions for defining development, but also frame the context in which the children’s development is supported (Rogoff 2003). Future research in this direction will provide further evidence about the relevance of co-constructed strategies among family members and the possibility of identifying its impact in other socialization contexts.

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9. A character often ironically represented in Italian newspaper strips.

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