

# Cultural practices in Italian family conversations: Verbal conflict between parents and preadolescents

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*This work studies verbal conflict between parents and preadolescents through analysis of family dinnertime conversations. We move from the assumption that verbal conflict is an educational instrument of interaction and a tool of socialization. The aim of the research is to analyze the participants' strategies in situations of conflict and to highlight the relations between parents and preadolescents in these specific situations. The data collection methodology is mainly ethnographical: videotape recordings of Italian middle class family dinners (the families were selected as being dual career ones with two children) were fully transcribed and codified following the approach of Conversation Analysis. The results of the quantitative (by the use of the log-linear models) and qualitative analyses confirm the importance of verbal conflict in family context as a particular cultural strategy of relationships between parents and preadolescents. The analytical data underline the relations between different aspects of conflict and the pragmatic implications for all family members at dinnertime conversations.*

## **Interaction and verbal conflict: An integrated approach**

In recent years, the importance of the study of conflicts in the context of family relations, where conflict dynamics find expression and/or resolution, has emerged. The ecological validity of studying parent-children verbal conflict in family everyday conversation is offered by the presence of a natural context in which direct observation of social practices is implemented. We move from a notion of *conversation*, as an exchange between at least two speakers and as a common discursive practice in everyday interactions; language negotiation is also involved in the notion of conversation as interpersonal and social interaction. Both Vygotskij (1934) and Billig (1996) have shown that all languages are social in their genesis as well as functions, and imply various socio-normative schema (De Grada & Bonaiuto, 2002): so that, both language and common knowledge model the individual experience.

The study of verbal conflicts usually focuses on disagreement concerning opinions and social roles. The social idea of conflict as a contribution to the construction of family borders is therefore highly relevant from a psychological, sociological, and sociolinguistic point of view: it is interesting to study the expressions of conflict during conversation and the linguistic and interactive choices of family members in everyday life.

We know that sociolinguistics focuses on the structure of verbal conflict (Grimshaw, 1990) as well as on the notion of the sequential organization of conversation; moreover, as the context is continuously modelled and constructed during conversation, the linguistic choices (and various alliances among participants) during a conflict can contribute to re-defining the context of interaction and the social roles.

Verbal conflict is generally based on contrasting points of view regarding specific aspects of life; in other words, when there is a different degree of emotional investment in the situation, a need to re-determine the social microcosm also occurs. Language is fundamental for developing conflicts, because it expresses referential contents, attitudes, and emotions: language can reveal different elements of conflict in the organization of the communicative exchange on the level of various linguistic choices (prosodic, lexical and syntactic).

Conflict situations sometimes entail turn-taking competition during the interaction, as well opposition in the description of people, objects and situations. Different points of view concerning real life come to surface, and in some instances they also play other functions<sup>1</sup>. Whereas in ordinary conversation participants work at keeping social solidarity, conflict works on the opposite side. We may indeed observe different attempts at underlining differences (in participants' point of view) greater in the course of conflict: there is a connection between the conversation and the conflict elements during an interaction, especially in the specific situations of family everyday life. Therefore, this study specifically focuses on parent-children conflicts, by analyzing verbal interactions at dinner table.

### **Conflicts between parents and preadolescents in everyday interaction: Some theoretical references**

Psychological studies, underlining the usual presence of personal conflicts in adolescence<sup>2</sup>, regard conflict as a positive, normal and constructive dimension of adolescence (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1998). Previous studies acknowledge that conflict between parents and adolescents is frequent (Verhofstadt-Denève, Kienhorst, & Braet, 1996; Zani, & Cicognani, 1999) and has a constructive developmental function (Cigoli, Marta, & Regalia, 1998; Honess, Charman, Zani, Cicognani, Xerri, Jackson, & Bosma, 1997) because in a family context there is an ongoing tension between children's aspiration to autonomy and parental control. Moreover, in reviewing the literature we found that different terms are used: conflict, disagreement, and questioning<sup>3</sup>. As the changes during adolescence affect all family members (Carrà & Marta, 1995), the positive function of conflict can solicit developmental changes; Emery (1988) underlines the possibility of recognizing the same model of conflict in both family and other social settings. In particular, as conflicts are more frequent in a family's everyday life, they can present a dynamic character and influence the development of family members, and the social, emotional and practical functions of the community. In order to analyze the characteristics of conflict, we assume the notion of "*adversative episode*" from Eisenberg and Garvey (1981), who define it as a discursive sequence characterized by an initial event, an initial opposition (rejection, disagreement), and a reaction to the opposition (cf. Figure 1). Initial opposition is a necessary but not sufficient condition for argument because it can be responded to in various ways: for example, opposition may be complied with, ignored, or responded to playfully. That is, particular interactional work is necessary to transform opposition into a verbal conflict episode, and only if a conflicting response to an initial oppositional move occurs, the first oppositional move retrospectively marks the beginning of the conflict episode (Maynard, 1985).

Step	Speaker	Move	Example
1	A	antecedent event/arguable action	request for action; assertion, action
2	B	initial opposition	disagreement with 1: negative response refusal; denial; objection
3	A	counter-opposition	disagreement with 2 and/or supporting or insisting on 1

Figure 1. Three-step adversative episode

Different authors recognize other relevant dimensions of conflict: the “orientation”, defined as serious and non-serious, and the “modality”, mitigated and aggravated (Garvey & Shantz, 1992). Concerning the orientation, actions are framed as either serious or playful by the meta-messages accompanying them: these framings are just as important as the messages themselves in determining how an interaction will unfold. Labov and Fanshel (1977) have shown that the modality is modulated by the fact that speakers can either mitigate speech actions to avoid creating offence or use more aggravated forms of speech actions. By the same token, opposition can vary in its intensity: speakers can disagree with one another in mitigated or modulated ways or in a more aggravated or unmodulated fashion.

Another relevant aspect concerns the conflict’s termination that is collaboratively and sequentially achieved by participants. Figure 2 shows the different possibilities of “closing”, defined in the literature as stand-off, submission, compromise, third person’s intervention, and withdrawal (Vuchinich, 1990).

Speaker	Stand-off	Submission	Compromise	Withdrawal
A	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition
B	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition	Opposition
A	Topic shift	Assent	Concession offering	Withdrawal
B			Concession acceptance	

Figure 2. Basic conflict-termination formats<sup>4</sup> (adapted from Vuchinich 1990, p. 135)

Verbal conflict can end in a stand-off, when participants continue to keep opposing positions, without submitting. In a stand-off, disputants drop the conflict without any kind of resolution; any attempt to induce the opponent into submission or to work out a compromise fails. Concerning the submission, we know that the mutual establishment of dominant and compliant parties is one possibility of terminating verbal conflicts. By submitting, a person tacitly accepts the position taken by the other party. In the submission format, the termination of a conflict episode is achieved through dominance. Another mechanism for accomplishing conflict termination is the negotiation of a compromise. The crucial move in this kind of negotiation is concession. As Vuchinich (1990) notes, “in a concession a participant offers a position that is between the opposing positions that define the dispute” (p. 127). Thus, a concession does not mean to give up fully one’s position in favour of the other, but rather, it establishes a middle ground. A concession proposes a compromise solution between the two opposing positions. If the concession offered is accepted by the opponent the conflict episode can terminate. The basic compromise terminal exchange has two slots: concession offering and acceptance of the offering. Conflict may also be terminated with one participant withdrawing entirely from the interaction. As in the stand-off situation, the conflict is left in a stalemate with no terminal exchange. Withdrawal may occur when an opponent becomes too upset to continue the argument. Verbal conflicts may also be closed by a combination of the different termination formats.

Conflict is not only characterized by negative attitude, it includes, also, positive emotions and cooperative goals: this is evident in early adolescence. In this sense, verbal conflict during

adolescence is an important aspect of personal and social development: “*the central contention is that conflicts are microcosms of the linkages between adolescents’ social relationships and their development as individuals*” (Shantz & Hartup, 1992, p. 217). Conflicts are not only related to social interaction, but they can also contribute to the acquisition of conversational practices and improve different cognitive and social skills (Pontecorvo, 1987). In the family context, the *adversative episode* also involves social skills, because it occurs within a multiparty arena, as the family is, and all members can be engaged.

Another relevant point concerns the fact that the quality of family relations is fundamental during early adolescence: parents are the children’s most important models, and the family as a system is an important cultural context of interaction between generations where social, cognitive and linguistic competences are acquired (Scabini, 1995). In this sense, family conversations are related to both cognitive and social aspects (Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Stamp, 1991).

## Methodology and data

### *Participant families*

The Conversation Analysis approach (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) has been developed as an alternative to the traditional methods of study in social sciences. Conversation Analysis studies social phenomena in the actual context of everyday life as they occur spontaneously during interaction. This approach is based on the collection, description and analysis of natural data, collected by ethnographical methods that replace other research methodologies in psychology (such as interviews, questionnaires, and experimental procedures involving manipulation of behavior). The aim of this approach is to identify and to describe the sequential patterns of discourse produced by the participants. At the core of Conversation Analysis there is the need to record, transcribe and analyze data by assuming the participants’ own perspective: the procedure is based on the identification of some relevant phenomena in the corpus of data, by building a *collection* of similar instances (Pontecorvo, Fasulo, & Sterponi, 2001).

The present study is part of a larger research project on family dinner conversations that started in Italy in 1991<sup>5</sup>. The general aim of the project has been the observation and the analysis of the socialization processes that occur at dinnertime conversations: the idea is to observe family members when they are engaged in spontaneous and prolonged interaction at home.

The general data corpus is constituted by the recordings of 76 dinners, held by 23 Italian middle class families from Rome, Naples, Florence and Reggio Calabria; the families were selected on the grounds of similar criteria (presence of both parents; presence of a child aged from 3 to 6; presence of at least one preadolescent child). For the present study, we have selected 12 families characterized by the presence of an adolescent child aged 10 to 11, differentiated with regards to gender and school level (i.e., males/females attending primary/middle school). A total number of 36 dinners was analyzed. Researchers met all families in a preliminary phase, to inform them about the general lines of the research and the procedures. The collection of the data is based on video-recordings of family dinners: during the first visit, a researcher was present in order to place the camera and to instruct the participants on how to use the technology. The video-recordings following the first one were done by the family autonomously, when the researchers were not present. Each family videotaped their dinnertime 3 times, over a 20-day period; the first videotaped dinner was not used for the aims of the research, in order to familiarize the participants with the camera and it was left to the family. All dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed, according to CA conventions (Jefferson, 1985)<sup>6</sup>. All transcriptions were revised by two researchers (reaching a high level of consent) and then coded. The unit of analysis has been the *topic* of discourse: we consider the topic as the subject of a sequence of no less than three consecutive turns of at least two different speakers.

*Verbal conflict in family life: Aims and criteria of analysis*

In the present study, we move from the assumption that verbal conflict between parents and preadolescents' is an educational tool of interaction and a mean of cultural socialization in everyday family life. The goal of this work is to study the verbal conflict as it emerges within the interactions occurring in family dinnertime conversations: the specific aim of the research is to analyze the participants' conversational strategies in these specific situations, in order to reveal the relationships between parents and preadolescents. In particular, we found situations of verbal conflict which fall into the categories recognized by previous studies in terms of modality and dimension (i.e., of the strategies of the participants' actions, as described above); for each situation, we specify the participants, their roles, and the linguistic structures of interactions. In the family context, there is a relevant presence of problematization's processes between parents and children, as already shown in a previous study (Menghini, Gnisci, & Pontecorvo, 2000): problematization is a critical process that poses others' knowledge as a problem, allowing new viewpoints, reflection, and consciousness. In this sense, participants could problematize an action or an assertion of any other member of the family.

On the basis of the results from previous studies, we have considered the following hypotheses:

- there are several conflicting sequences between parents and preadolescents during family interaction at home;
- parents (mothers, particularly) are more problematizing (in the sense that they produce more topics of problematization) than children;
- we expect preadolescents to get more easily involved in verbal conflict events when they answer to parents' "statements" as opposed to parents' "requests" (as already shown, for younger children, by Pirchio & Pontecorvo, 1997).

In order to analyze the conflict data, we have selected the conversational *sequences* occurring in family interactions, because we consider it is only possible to understand each turn with respect to the previous and following turn: "*sequence [...] (is) another candidate type of unit, the practices of which can underline the production of clumps of talk. The organization of sequences is an organization of actions, actions accomplished through talk-in-interaction, which can provide to a spate of conduct coherence and order which is analytically distinct from the notion of topic*" (Schegloff, 1990, p. 53).

Finally, to illustrate a range of interaction modalities developed by parents and preadolescents during dinnertime conversations, we refer to the concept of "participants' categories" (Garfinkel, 1967; Sacks, 1992). Conversation Analysis avoids making predictive assumptions regarding interactants' motivational, psychological, and sociological characteristics. These factors can only be invoked if the participants themselves are "*noticing, attending to, or orienting to*" them in the course of their interaction (Heritage, 1995, p. 396).

*Different levels of analysis: A quantitative presentation*

Conflicts are tools that aim at acquiring a social knowledge of rules (Hartup & Laursen, 1993); different studies on the structure of conflict reveal the social and cultural values of socialization implied by discursive processes in the conflict events (Farris, 2000; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001).

For the present study, we began with a pilot study in order to identify different levels of analysis, and we defined two levels: the first one is "general" in that it explains the macro-structure of verbal conflict as an "*adversative episode*" (as presented above in Figure 1). This level, however, implies different dimensions of conflict: orientation (serious or non-serious), modality (mitigated or aggravated), closing (stand-off and withdrawal, submission, compromise and a third person's intervention). The second level is "conversational" and it is

aimed at understanding the discursive organization of interaction: in this sense, verbal conflicts are considered as answers referred to turns of requests or evaluative statements during conversation. Various researchers in Discourse and Conversation Analysis have pointed out the ways that directives are a potentially powerful interactive resource available to speakers (Edwards, 1997): by a directive, a speaker constrains the addressee to respond under certain conditions. Directives accomplish a range of functions, operating at various levels of interaction: the argumentative use of directives is an oppositional move by which a speaker attempts to get the addressee to do or prevents her from doing something. Directives have both a retrospective function (challenging the opponent's preceding activity) and a prospective function (determining the opponent's subsequent action). In this sense we have coded specifically the strategies of argumentation, in terms of justification (meant as an account, in which the defendant accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the negative quality associated with it by the accuser), negation, and insistence.

The aim of this section is to offer a general overview, in terms of quantitative analysis of data. In this sense, results may contribute to an understanding of the following qualitative analysis that tries to give an interpretation of sequences at a more specific level. We believe that it is possible to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, because we assume that there can be a continuum between these two methods (Denzin, 1978; Mazzara, 2002) for a possibility of a methodological pluralism, if they combine each other (Mannetti, 1998).

For what concerns the number of conflict topics identifiable in the data, the frequencies reveal a 10,2% presence of conflict topics out of the total number of general topics occurring during the observed interactions. Compared to another Italian study conducted with a similar methodology (Bastianoni & Briganti 2002), our results differ, in that the other study showed a frequency of conflict topics during family dinnertime conversations of 65% out of the total of topics. To understand this discrepancy, we have to consider that it is really difficult to have a precise correspondence between conflict topics (understood as sequences in which the subject of discourse is a conflict event) and a sequence of verbal conflict in terms of adversative episode (that becomes a conflictual sequence). Mainly on the grounds of this observation, we feel that it is more significant to consider the frequency of conflict turns with respect to the total number of turns, during dinnertime conversation; if we apply this parameter to the above quoted study, it emerges that the conflict turns are 13,6% of the total turns of conversations between parents and preadolescents. With this count the difference between the first set of data (10,2% *versus* 65%) is considerably reduced (10,2% *versus* 13,6%), and the two sets of data are more comparable.

In our corpus of data, we identified a total of 109 episodes of conflict: in 75,3% of episodes parents are problematizing children (while children to parents is equal to 24,7%). In particular, there are no relevant differences between the two parents, because mothers tend to problematize in the 38,6% of cases, while fathers problematize in the 36,7% of cases. Finally, adolescent children prefer to address their problematization slightly more to the father than the mother (13,7% *versus* 11%)<sup>7</sup>.

Referring to the three dimensions of verbal conflict, we can observe the following data: the orientation of adversative episode is serious (80% serious *versus* 20% non serious), the modality is aggravated (67% *versus* 33% mitigated), and the more frequent closing is the stand-off/withdrawal (46% *versus* 30,2% compromise/third person's intervention; and 23% submission).

The second point concerns a more "linguistic" level: the quantitative analysis reveals a presence of 60,6% reactions to statements *versus* 39,4% reactions to requests and, concerning the strategies of argumentation, there are only slightly more justifications (31,2%) than insistences (30,3%) or negations (28,5%).

In general, we can identify a kind of conflict episode, characterized by a serious orientation and an aggravated modality: it seems that participants engage in a conflict in order to answer to a statement sequence and they support it by the use of justification. Concerning the closing, we found that participants generally use the stand-off/withdrawal strategies.

We also considered another level of quantitative analysis in order to verify the inferential relation between variables. As the size of the sample allows for a log-linear analysis<sup>8</sup> (Multipath

Frequency Analysis), we used the statistical program BMDP Dynamic (version 7.0), by a construction of a design 2x2x3 in order to test the variables and to verify the association between factors and levels:

- Variable 1: Orientation of conflict (code: O)  
Levels (2): serious / non-serious (codes: S / N)
- Variable 2: Modality of conflict (code: M)  
Levels (2): mitigated / aggravated (codes: MI / A)
- Variable 3: Closing of conflict (code: C)  
Levels (3): stand-off + withdrawal / submission / compromise + third person's intervention (codes: W / SO / CO)

The analysis identified the log-linear models, in order to study the direction of the conflict in terms of problematization, and for this reason we constructed two different studies:

- Study 1:* parents are problematizing their children (preadolescents);
- Study 2:* preadolescents are problematizing their parents.

*Case of Study 1*

Table 1  
*Decisional table of models*

The results of fitting all K-factor marginals. Simultaneous test that all K+1 and higher factor interactions are zero

K-factor	D.F.	LR CHISQ	Prob.	Pearson CHISQ	Prob.	Iter
0-mean	11	92.15		0.00000	92.14	0.00000
1	7	43.33	0.00000	41.71	0.00000	2
2	2	0.43	0.80467	0.47	0.78877	11
3	0	0.00	1.00000	0.00	1.00000	1

Referring to the table above, we consider the “two factors association”, as shown in the table below.

Table 2  
*Association option for all terms of order less than or equal to 3*

Effect	Partial association				Marginal association			
	D.F.	CHISQ	Prob	Iter	D.F.	CHISQ	Prob	Iter
O.	1	32.83	0.0000					
M.	1	13.48	0.0002					
C.	2	2.51	0.2854					
OM.	1	12.69	0.0004	2	1	10.94	0.0009	2
OC.	2	12.54	0.0019	2	2	10.80	0.0045	2
MC.	2	21.16	0.0000	2	2	19.41	0.0001	2
OMC.	2	0.43	0.8047					

The Table 2 shows a significant relation concerning the main effects and the bi-dimensional effects of interaction. In particular, the estimate parameters considered case-by-case show that:

- the interaction Var. 1 x Var. 2 reveals an association between serious orientation and aggravated modality ( $z_{12(11)}=2.656, p<.05$ ), while the mitigated modality is associated to the non-serious orientation;
- the interaction between Var. 1 x Var. 3 confirms the association between the non-serious orientation and the stand-off/withdrawal in closing conflicts ( $z_{13(21)}=2.289, p<.05$ );

- the interaction Var. 2 x Var. 3 is significant for an association between compromise/ third person's intervention and the mitigated modality for the closing of conflict ( $z_{23(13)}=2.369, p<.05$ ).

Study 1 indicates that there is no significant tri-dimensional effect, but there is only a bi-dimensional association between the variables, as explained above.

### Case of Study 2

Table 3

#### Decisional table of models

The results of fitting all K-factor marginals. Simultaneous test that all K+1 and higher factor interactions are zero						
K-factor	D.F.	LR CHISQ	Prob.	Pearson CHISQ	Prob.	Iter
0-mean	11	28.39	0.00282	29.18	0.00213	
1	7	11.77	0.10827	10.32	0.17127	2
2	2	5.50	0.06398	6.51	0.03850	5
3	0	0.00	1.00000	0.00	1.00000	1

Referring to the table above, we consider the “two factors association”, as shown in the table below.

Table 4

#### Association option for all terms of order less than or equal to 3

Effect	Partial association				Marginal association			
	D.F.	CHISQ	Prob	Iter	D.F.	CHISQ	Prob	Iter
O.	1	7.07	0.0078					
M.	1	0.27	0.6013					
C.	2	9.27	0.0097					
OM.	1	1.31	0.2515	2	1	1.61	0.2045	2
OC.	2	0.02	0.9921	2	2	0.31	0.8560	2
MC.	2	4.35	0.1134	2	2	4.65	0.0978	2
OMC.	2	5.50	0.0640					

The Table 4 shows a significant main effect of orientation and closing, as well as a bi-dimensional effect of interaction between *MC*, as well as a tri-dimensional effect of interaction.

In particular, the estimate parameters are considered case-by-case and show the following results:

- concerning the interaction Var. 2 x Var. 3, we can observe a presence of submissions in closing conflict in association with the mitigated modality ( $z_{23(13)}=1.442, p<.01$ ), even if the values are minimal;
- the interaction Var. 1 x Var. 2 x Var. 3 indicates a number of non-serious orientation in association to the mitigated modality and a final compromise in the conflict episodes ( $z_{123(213)}=1.960, p<.05$ ); there is also an association (with minimal value) between the serious orientation, the mitigated modality and the closing by stand-off/withdrawal ( $z_{123(121)}=1.282, p<.01$ );
- even if the values are minimal, there is an interaction Var. 2 x Var. 3 and an effect of tri-dimensional interaction, as it is explained below.

In sum, the results of the first study underline that when participants are engaged in serious conflicts, the modality of conducting their conversational practices is aggravated. This is interpretable as the fact that verbal conflicts are an opportunity by which family members could show their power and their role at dinnertime. On the other hand, when the orientation is non-serious, they act in a mitigated modality and they close by a stand-off or a compromise, probably because the non-seriousness of the conflict is an element that defines the situation as a not relevant one. In the second study this tri-dimensional association is confirmed (association between non-serious orientation, mitigated modality and compromise), even if there is also the possibility that parents are submitted to children. The fact to be submitted is a failure in terms of power management, but parents seem to accept it because they consider a non-serious conflict as an irrelevant opportunity of moral education, but as a kind of playful arena of children's socialization to arguing discourse.

Finally, even if the other tables are not shown (for spatial reasons), we have observed that preadolescents address conflicts towards their fathers, and that the orientation is always serious (100% of cases), with an aggravated modality (53,3% of cases). When conflicts are addressed to the mothers, the two types of orientation have equal occurrences (50% per type), and the distribution of modalities is 58,3% for the aggravated strategies *versus* 41,7% concerning mitigated cases. When parents are problematizing children, they prefer a serious orientation (81,7% of cases) and an aggravated modality (70,7% of cases). Concerning different types of closing, preadolescents generally use the compromise when addressing fathers; if the addressee is the mother, children don't use withdrawal in situation of verbal conflicts. On the other hand, the range of closing strategies (used by the parents that are problematizing their children) is more distributed: we observe a homogeneous distribution of all types of closing, even if the modality of withdrawal is dispreferred. Finally, mothers tend to close conflicts with preadolescents by the stand-off and the submission, and there are not significant differences concerning the gender and the school level of children.

### **Qualitative analysis of verbal conflicts in family life: Conversational sequences and interpretative categories**

In the last part of the paper, we will present some conversational sequences, as representative of the main areas of conflict events that we have identified above: we are interested in analyzing the discursive structures of family interaction, in order to identify the different "participants' categories", as presented above. By this procedure we have identified the following macro-categories as the main domains in which family members engage in conflict at dinnertime conversation: children's behavior; adult world; taste; practical, school and extra-familial knowledge. Here, we show some excerpts in order to underline specific aspects of conversational interactions occurring during verbal conflicts.

In order to examine the interactive sequential procedures by means of which participants jointly accomplish conflict and thereby construct and negotiate social relationships, we need an analytic framework that takes into account both local aspects of talk-in-interaction and global aspects of social structure. The present analysis will broadly refer to the analytical methods of Discourse and Conversation Analysis (see respectively, McKinlay, Potter, & Wetherell, 1993; Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Psathas, 1995). The excerpts presented below are representative of the main conflictual sequences' types, selected on the basis of the results obtained by the quantitative analysis.

#### *The personal behavior and the family rules: Discursive sequences*

The definition of rules is a fundamental element of social life in that rules contribute to socialization and values; family members show that norms are topic of discussion during dinner table interactions. In the relationships between preadolescents and parents, there is at

times some opposition as regards rules and “proper” behavior, and the discussion about some violation can represent an opportunity of asserting one’s position in the family hierarchy. This is illustrated by the following excerpt, in which dad formulates Serena’s current behavior as a violation of some standard of conduct.

*Excerpt 1: To refuse the pragmatic implications of a statement and the request of explanations*

Family DEL, dinner 3; participants: mom, dad, daughter 1 (target) Serena (age: 10,7), daughter 2 Daniela (age: 5,6)<sup>9</sup>

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. Pap: Se[rena].   | 1. Dad: Se[rena].   |
| 2. Serena: [poco: PO  | 2. Serena: [a little: BIT                                     |
| <b>3. Pap: Serena guarda come stai seduta: eh!</b>            | <b>3. Dad: Serena, how you are seated? eh!</b>                |
| 4. (1.0)  | 4. (1.0)  |
| <b>5. Serena: come sto seduta (.) scusa? come sto seduta?</b> | <b>5. Serena: how am I seated (.) sorry? how am I seated?</b> |
| 6. Mam: (ti serve la) (comodità)                              | 6. Mom: (you need a) (comfort)                                |
| [riferendosi a Serena]  | [referring to Serena]   |
| 7. (2.0)  | 7. (2.0)  |
| 8. Pap: (va bene).  | 8. Dad: (okay).   |
| 9. Daniela: ma (.) con i piedi per te:rra:!!!                 | 9. Daniela: but (.) with your feet on the flo:or:!!!          |
| [agitandosi e rimettendosi a sedere]                          | [shaking and seating]   |
| 10. Pap: ( )  | 10. Dad: ( )  |
| 11. Serena: papà: ma COME sono seduta?                        | 11. Serena: dad: but HOW am I seated?                         |
| [in tono lamentoso]   | [in complaining tone]   |
| <b>12. Pap: ora mangia. do:po.te lo dico dopo.</b>            | <b>12. Dad: eat now. later: I will tell you later.</b>        |

One of the speech actions, which the disputants frequently use to oppose another, is commonly referred to as accusing, blaming, complaining, criticising, reprimanding, rebuking. With an accusation, complaint, reproach or a related action, a speaker expresses dissatisfaction with or criticism of a preceding or current action, an attitude or characteristic on the part of the defendant, which he/she construes as inadequate in that it violates some underlying social rule or norm, or fails to meet his/her expectations and/or preferences, and for which he/she holds the defendant responsible of. In the excerpt 1, dad is questioning Serena’s way of being seated: we can observe his imperative *statement* in turn 3. Apparently, we can take it as implicit criticism (*consider how you are seated... and what you have to do about it*), but Serena defends herself by the use of the same words used by dad (turn 5). In this way, the two opponents (target *versus* dad + mom, who aligns with dad in turn 6) maintain their own positions (by a linguistic *insistence*), although Serena answers in an adequate pragmatic way in order to mitigate the conflict [e.g., by the use of a complaining tone (turn 11)]. In the episode’s closing there is a *submission* of Serena, because the father refuses to continue the conversation on this topic and he promises to give a later explanation (turn 12) so that he does not even offer a compromise. What presents evidence of Serena’s failure in justifying herself? This situation shows what Gruber (2001) expresses as “situational” accusation; Gruber, in fact, distinguishes between “situational” and “extra situational” accusations: situational accusations focus on violations of a norm that the opponent has committed during the ongoing interaction and which the speaker addresses immediately or after a short while. By contrast, extra situational accusations refer to breaches that were committed outside the current interaction.

*The area of taste: Discursive sequences*

The problematization between parents and children is not only referred to the quality of the food and different tastes, but it can also spread over more general characteristics. Furthermore, accusations may not only express a discrepancy between an expected and/or desired and a factual action (Laforest, 2002), but they may also turn on the defendant’s character traits and/or attitudes, as illustrated by the following excerpt.

*Excerpt 2: On personal tastes (when somebody refuses novelty)*

Family QUI, dinner 1; participants: dad, mom, son 1 (target) Samuele (age: 11,11), daughter 2 Adriana (age: 4,4)

[Mam parla dei gusti alimentari di TARGET]	[Mom speaks about TARGET's tastes]
1. Mam: ha scoperto il prosciutto adesso a dodici anni (.). beh.	1. Mom: he's discovered the ham now, and he's twelve (.). mhm.
2. Samuele: [io mangio ( )]	2. Samuele: [I eat ( )]
3. Pap: [adesso ( ) prima solo pasta (.) con burro e parmigiano	3. Dad: [now ( ), before only pasta (.) with butter and parmesan cheese
4. (2.0)	4. (2.0)
<b>5. Samuele: io se voglio, mangio tutto. se io non voglio. posso mangiare se voglio. quando voglio.</b>	<b>5. Samuele: if I want, I eat up everything. if I don't want. I can eat if I want. when I want.</b>
6. Mam: ma chi l'ha detto [in tono risentito] che mangi quando vuoi e quanto vuoi? tu mangi se lo diciamo <u>noi!</u>	6. Mom: but who said [in angry tone] that you eat when you want and what you want? you eat if <u>we</u> say so!
7. Samuele: no io dico	7. Samuele: no. I say so
8. Pap: sennò, non mangi	8. Dad: otherwise, you don't eat
9. Samuele: e se- se-. metti, che a me non mi piaceva fino a sessant'anni il prosciutto [( )]	9. Samuele: <u>and</u> if- if-. suppose, that I don't like the ham until I'm sixty [( )] [reproaching tone]
10. Pap: [↑ non eri normale. capito, Samuele? non eri normale.	10. Dad: [↑ you are not normal. you understand, Samuele? you are not normal.
11. Mam: perché non è normale?	11. Mom: why is he not normal?
12. Samuele: se a uno non piace una cosa., non gli piace.	12. Samuele: if somebody doesn't like something., he doesn't like it.
13. (1.5)	13. (1.5)
14. Pap: ma un conto è che non gli piace. e non gli piace. ma tu ( ) non li vuoi assaggiare. questa è la differenza.	14. Dad: but if somebody doesn't like something. he doesn't like it. but you ( ) don't want to try. that's the difference.
15. (5.0)	15. (5.0)
16. Pap: tu ti metti in testa le: tue idee, (.) bacate (3.0) e le porti fino all'ossessione.	16. Dad: you have your ideas, (.) bad- ideas (3.0) and you would defend them obsessively.

There is a possibility that criticism could be directly addressed to the person identified as the cause of the problem, as in the case that the individual held responsible for the behavior or attitude that is deemed inadequate. In excerpt 2, the mother is talking about Samuele's tastes, because the child complains about the fact that there is no ham to eat; the mother defends herself by referring to the child's tastes (turn 1), she uses to know, to justify her position. She invokes a personal characteristic from Samuele's past (e.g., food preferences); in this sense it can mean, for the pre-adolescent, a re-attribution of infant qualities not justified now. In particular, the preadolescents could not tolerate a hetero-attribution of personal characteristics, if referred back to the time of infancy, because he/she is engaged in a changing process: in fact there is the use of *negation* in Samuele's turn 7. Therefore, the hetero-definition can represent a possibility of affirming an independent choice: in the excerpt, Samuele answers by an *assertive reaction* (turn 5), through the use of the verb *to want*. The parental alliance moves from a *statement* about the food tastes of Samuele, and it develops through a strategic use of the third personal pronoun (turn 1), in order to annihilate the child's voice. The development of the sequence shows an escalation to the high tones, in particular concerning the father's intervention (turn 8: use of critical tone). In turn 6, mom aligns with dad (she uses the pronoun "we"), but in turn 11 she argues with dad, in an ambiguous situation of implicit aligning with Samuele. The sequence is closed by dad's open criticism (turn 16) with the use of the word "*obsessively*" given as a bad qualification concerning the child.

*The area of the adult world: Discursive sequences*

The conversational roles can regulate relationships among family members during interaction: as preadolescents represent a border position between the parental subsystem and infant subsystem, the orientation towards an adult role is a frequent cause of conflict in conversation between parents and preadolescents. When adolescents make reference to the adult world, there is an attempt to refer to personal identities and a demand for autonomy and decisional power in the relationships.

*Excerpt 3: The defence of autonomy and decisional ability*

Family SEL, dinner 2; participants: dad, mom, aunt, daughter 1 (target) Manuela (age: 10,7), daughter 2 Federica (age: 7,0), daughter 3 Francesca (age: 4,0), infant Alessio (age: 1,5)

1. Manuela: quando sarò grande, sarò zitella [non sposata]	1. Manuela: when I'll be an adult, I would like to remain alone [not married]
2. Zia: zitella? non lo vuoi un marito?	2. Aunt: not married? you don't want a husband?
3. Manuela: no:	3. Manuela: no:
4. (2.0)	4. (2.0)
5. Zia: perché?	5. Aunt: why?
<b>6. Manuela: perché, non mi va.</b>	<b>6. Manuela: because, I don't want one.</b>
7. Pap: perché, gli uomini non vanno bene, no? no, eh?	7. Dad: because, the men are no good, right? right, eh?
8. (4.0)	8. (4.0)
9. Pap: perché, gli uomini sono bestie secondo te? [Manuela muove la testa orizzontalmente]	9. Dad: because, the men are beasts, do you think? [Manuela shakes her head horizontally]
10. Pap: eh, lo vedi. alto concetto questo, eh.	10. Dad: eh, you know. it is a high concept, eh.
11. (5.0)	11. (5.0)
12. Pap: voi donne siete il sesso debole, vero?	12. Dad: you women, you are the weak sex, right?
13. Manuela: come ti permetti!	13. Manuela: how dare you!

In this sequence, the preadolescent presents a hypothetical future plan, opening a problematization during conversation (turn 1). The topic of marriage reveals a discrepancy between the adult (parental) expectations and the idea of Manuela (turns 2-6). In her turn 1, she displays a plan for the future, but she confirms her own actual position (she is not yet *adult*). When the discourse of Manuela is problematized by the aunt (turn 2), she simply confirms the aunt's interpretation, and the father can open a direct criticism of the girl's idea (turn 7). In legitimising his claim, he uses continuously the tag-question "right", a rhetorical device identified as "extreme case formulation", as suggested by Pomerantz (1986, p. 219) "*to defend against or to counter challenges to the legitimacy of complaints, accusations, justifications, and defences*". Speakers tend to use the extreme case formulations when they anticipate or expect the interlocutor to undermine their claims and when they are in adversative situations. Thus, the dad's statement produces a reference to the general male and female positions: Manuela replies by insistence and negation at the same time, and for this reason there are no possibilities for compromise between the participants on this topic (turns 12-13). This excerpt illustrates how participants can exploit accusations as a discursive resource to build opposition in conversational disputes. In addition, it shows that extreme case formulations are rhetorical devices that disputants can employ in defending against prospected challenges to the legitimacy of complaints.

*The area of practical, scholastic and extra-familial world: Discursive sequences*

Concerning the interactions, we know the importance of the dimension of social construction, because the knowledge is continuously produced during the practices (Wertsch, 1985), by the negotiation between participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In family dinner conversations, children are able to express a lot of competences referred to practical abilities and to the acquisition of a "young people" world; we can refer to the situations of roles' inversion in which parents are learners, and children are experts. We can also try to observe this kind of situation during dinner conversations. In the course of a dispute, participants show an orientation to the expectation of opposition. The fact that the disputants frequently accuse each other indicates their orientation towards finding fault with the opponent as an effective means of constructing oppositional moves. This corresponds with the findings of linguistic studies of naturally occurring conflict talk. For instance, Goodwin (1990) observes that a frequent argumentative action in preadolescents' disputes involves "*categorising what prior speaker has just said as a culturally defined offence*" (p. 154).

As Boxer (2002) points out, speech behavior such as direct complaining and disapproval exchanges occur most often "*where the relationship has already been established and where*

*the disapproval has less chance of hindering the relationship*" (p. 50). The following excerpt shows a situation in which these aspects of complaining and disapproval exchanges are present.

*Excerpt 4: Homework and conceptual abilities*

Family MIN, dinner 4; participants: mom, dad, son 1 (target) Luca (age: 10,9), daughter 2 Luisa (age: 3,10)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. Pap: cioè, non ti hanno interrogato oggi a scuola?<br>[Luca non risponde]                                      | 1. Dad: so, you were not tested at school today?<br>[Luca doesn't reply]   |
| 2. Pap: ti hanno interrogato?   | 2. Dad: were you tested?   |
| 3. Luca: no, aspetta (.) che ho fatto oggi a scuola? ( )  | 3. Luca: no, wait (.) what did I have at school today? ( )   |
| 4. Pap: oggi, hai fatto tecnica (.) no?   | 4. Dad: today, you studied technical design (.), right?  |
| 5. Luca: no.  | 5. Luca: no.   |
| 6. Pap: hai fatto (.), geografia.   | 6. Dad: you studied (.), geography.  |
| 7. Luca: non mi ha interrogato. educazione fisica, non l'ho fatta,  | 7. Luca: I wasn't tested. Athletics, I didn't participate,   |
| 8. Pap: religione?  | 8. Dad: religion?  |
| 9. Luca: non mi ha interrogato  | 9. Luca: I wasn't tested   |
| 10. (2.0)   | 10. (2.0)  |
| 11. Pap: e matematica?  | 11. Dad: and maths?  |
| 12. (1.0)   | 12. (1.0)  |
| 13. Luca: no, matematica non l'ho fatta.  | 13. Luca: no, I didn't study maths.  |
| 14. Pap: ( )  | 14. Dad: ( )   |
| 15. Luca: e non mi ha interrogato   | 15. Luca: and I wasn't tested  |
| 16. Pap: t'è andata bene!   | 16. Dad: you made it!  |
| 17. (2.0)   | 17. (2.0)  |
| <b>18. Luca: perché? anche: se mi interrogasse?</b>   | <b>18. Luca: why? even: if I was tested?</b>   |
| 19. Mam: non ho capito perché non sei riuscito a finire il compito. com'è 'sta storia?                            | 19. Mom: I don't understand why you didn't finish the exercise. tell me!   |
| 20. Pap: quale compito?   | 20. Dad: which exercise?   |
| 21. Luca: il tema.  | 21. Luca: the composition.   |
| <b>22. Pap: non sei riuscito a finire il tema? non l'ha finito, (.) perché non è abituato a concettualizzare.</b> | <b>22. Dad: you haven't finished the composition? he hasn't finished it, (.) because he's not able to conceptualize.</b> |
| 23. Luca: ma de che aho? [espressione dialettale per intendere: "ma che dici?"] l'ho fatto lungo tre pagine!      | 23. Luca: what are you saying? [in Roman dialect] it was rather complete! [referring to the composition]                 |
| 24. Pap: ah..   | 24. Dad: ah..  |

Since in close relationships, establishing and negotiating shared norms of behavior is a central issue, the people, who provide us with the most opportunities to evaluate their conduct, are the closest ones. Consequently, accusations, complaints, criticism, are common activities in conversations between people who are on intimate terms (Tannen, 2001). Accusations and corresponding activities entail a request to the defendant to remedy the perceived violation, for instance, by producing an account for their behavior or by offering an apology. Goffman (1971) views accusation sequences as "remedial interchanges": the interactor, who has violated a rule or norm, is expected to produce a remedial activity. The function of remedial work is to change the meaning that otherwise might be attributed to the relevant activity with the aim of changing what could be considered offensive into what can be considered acceptable. Hence, from a structural point of view, by issuing an accusation, the speaker forces the addressee to respond in a certain way. In the excerpt 4, dad (turn 1) asks Luca about the homework (and in particular the lacked interrogation and the non-conclusion of the task). Luca tries to justify his position (turn 5) when also the mother is problematizing him. He uses the strategy of negation, in some case by an iconic doubling of the voice (turns 5, 7, 9, 13, 15), but we know that a judgment assumes, in the family context, an evaluative educational connotation, because parents can express opinions about the children's behavior in order to activate a re-definition of their identity. In this sense it is useful to refer the discourse to the school, because it is a critical area of discussion. In this excerpt, father uses the pretext of homework in order to make irony (turn 16) and criticize Luca in a general way (e.g.: in turn 22 there is an

implicit criticism using the third person pronoun); we can observe that Luca does not reply to the evaluation on a cognitive level, but he is focused on the first problematization (turn 23), referred to the composition.

As sociolinguistic research has shown (Orletti, 1983), accusations generally involve: a reference to the relevant activity, attitude, or characteristic; a negative evaluation of that action, attitude, or person's trait based on the perceived violation of some underlying norm or the speaker's preferences and/or expectations; the attribution of responsibility for the relevant action, attitude, or characteristic and its consequences to the accused; and a request to the defendant to remedy the perceived failure, for instance, by offering a remedy or an explanation of their behavior. In the context of the ongoing interaction, however, some of these aspects are often not made explicit. For instance, the attribution of responsibility is frequently implicit by way of direct address. Similarly, the negative evaluation of the activity in question may be unspoken as, for example, in accusations that are realised by statements that merely allude to the relevant behavior or attitude without explicitly mentioning it or the norm that it has been violated, and without explicitly calling into question the defendant.

The excerpts presented above allow us to a deeper comprehension of the ways by which family members can initiate and manage their conflicts at dinnertime. Conversation analysts have argued that after accusations, denials are the preferred second-pair part, because the absence or delay of a denial is experienced as a proper absence and is commonly interpreted as an admission of guilt (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). As a result, denials tend to be placed interruptively or immediately following the turn in which the accusation is produced, without delay, accounts, or other mitigating techniques. In addition to the high frequency of denials in response to accusations, the participants' orientation to this sequential peculiarity of accusations is also reflected by the fact that both the justifications and insistences in the data are designed to downplay their concessive aspect and highlight their defensive function. The data show that accusations and related actions have a special function in dispute sequences: they are retroactive because they assume a violation (an action on the part of the defendant, that is somehow defective), and thus constitute oppositional moves. They are also proactive, because they are projected to initiate and maintain dispute sequences. Furthermore, it is important to understand how accusations can be employed by speakers as an interactional resource to exert a degree of discursive power by placing constraints on the discourse options available to the recipient. Finally, since power has to do with controlling *versus* being controlled, it is important to examine how relations of power are negotiated at a micro-level of interaction by looking at the interplay of control manoeuvres and opposition strategies in conflict talk.

To summarize this section with reference to the quantitative analysis presented in the previous paragraph, we have examined the internal structure of the adversative episode, looking at various formats that are employed in the parent-child disputes in our corpus to package accusations and thereby oppose the other party. We have shown that these formulations display certain features that signal to participants as well as to analysts that the utterances are being used as accusations. Moreover, we have observed how disputants can employ accusations as a conversational resource both to express opposition and to control the opponent's actions, in order to understand how discursive power is negotiated in the local context of the ongoing disputes.

## Concluding discussion

In the study of conflict in family conversations, we have pursued various strands of analysis: the quantitative level, the turn-by-turn details of conflict talk as situated interaction, the main aspects of the linguistic choices speakers make in designing and delivering their utterances, and the role of the contextual aspects such as the participants' social relationship, and age for the production and interpretation of talk. For practical reasons, no specific attention has been devoted to the analysis of other aspects, such as genre's differences, school levels, threats, counter-accusations, and competence challenges<sup>10</sup>.

This concluding discussion largely refers to the qualitative analysis. Given that we have discussed the quantitative data in the previous section, we underline here a certain number of aspects: firstly, the relevance of the general tendencies observed (in terms of frequencies and relations between variables) in order to introduce the analysis of conversational sequences referred to the participants' categories. In order to justify the combination of methods, we can say that we combined quantitative and qualitative analyses as an attempt to justify the need for more specific research in this field. For this reason, in this section we try to discuss some general features concerning the range of data, without the idea of generalizing the results to other contexts. Firstly, we have to underline the relevance of the association between the orientation and the modality of conflict, in order to explain the result of a strong presence of adversative episodes characterized by seriousness, and aggravated modalities: all the excerpts presented in the study are referred to these aspects, and the qualitative analysis that has been conducted offers pertinent indications that complete this evidence.

We believe that the mapping of the associations between orientation, modality and closing is interesting in its own right. In any case we believe the relation between how seriously the participants argue, with consequent aggravation and stand-off conclusion to the episode should be studied more specifically, in that they can help to explain the role of arguing in children's socialization. This is a possible application of development of the research presented here. The possibility of integrating the quantitative and qualitative data also suggests that, through the conversational analysis of discursive sequences, we can take up different forms of orientations, modalities and closings that resulted from the previous section: a possible level of analysis could be studying why these patterns exist and examining the immediate relationships between topics and form of argument, because these aspects may distract from the core argument that different linguistic resources afford diverse parent-child interactions.

Thanks to the analysis of the excerpts, we can underline some indications in order to frame in a specific way the verbal conflict in Italian family conversations as a cultural practice. The qualitative analysis shows the sequences of turns and words in which conflict has a significant role in the interaction: our attention focused on the main aspects that characterize in a cultural way these specific kinds of interactions, because each family reveals a particular way "of doing conflict", continuously constructed by the participants through different strategies. In this sense, we underline that this concluding discussion aims not at generalizing results, but at showing possible reading of the different modalities of participation employed by family members in the specific context of dinnertime conversations. Generally, our data show that preadolescents have a general tendency to stand up against their parents' statements: declarative statements are often used by adults in order to evaluate children and their reactions, and the systematic opposition of preadolescents comes across as a strategy for defending their own identity and as for practicing a kind of "account" in order to contrast the parents' statements (Sterponi, 2001). We can note that these conversation strategies are usually supported by an explanation: the explanation, as an argumentation strategy, aims at expressing or at keeping the interaction going, answers to a need of accounting in a situation of verbal conflict.

We underline again the link between these evidences and the results obtained by the quantitative level of analysis: the serious orientation and the aggravated modality are in association with initial events characterized by declarative statements that develop adversative episode in which participants use negation and insistence as argumentative moves.

From a socio-educational point of view, norms and rules are acquired not only through simple routines and directives, but also through an explicit interpretation and evaluation of everyday behavior: the adolescents can offer, beyond the justification of actions, different elements of explanation to support their various actions ("to say" and/or "to do"). Even if it is true that children learn early to justify their actions (but not necessarily to explain them) during conflict events with peers and adults (Dunn & Munn, 1987), the semantic content of the justification is specifically related to the situation and to the topic of conflict. During family dinner conversations, the account involves strategies of explanation and justification<sup>11</sup>,

as shown by Orsolini (1993), in analyzing the reasoning of young school children. If we turn to the relationships between parents and adolescent children, it is possible to notice some children's modalities of interaction across different areas of discourse. A positive conclusion to the conflict is usually taken as a model for adopting the same strategy in future situations.

The direct observation of family dinners and the attention to verbal conflict is an opportunity to illustrate specifically some linguistic aspects related to the participants' talk in conversation. Verbal conflict as an area of socialization is produced by various argumentative strategies: the syntactic construction that is most frequently used in our data to package accusations is a declarative statement, in which the speaker explicitly mentions the activity or the attitude that constitutes a violation and attributes a negative quality to it. Moreover, paralinguistic, prosodic, and nonverbal cues such as, for example, increased volume, contrastive stress and exaggerated intonation contours, and gestures, further emphasize the argumentative character of turns. Anyway, the modalities of interaction in family conversation we presented are specific to this particular cultural context, and they can activate a frame in which ethical principles and behavioral codes are shared: in this sense, the different characterizations of the verbal conflict can determine different pragmatic implications. In addition, the preceding analyses evidence that power management is not a fixed social entity but a dynamic relationships that is continuously negotiated in and through talk-in-interaction: this dynamics is most evident in the manifest collision of control manoeuvres and resistance in verbal conflict sequences. Hence, conflict talk constitutes a valuable site for the analysis of the ways in which participants jointly produce and transform social order and their position in it through the formatting and sequencing of actions and their responses. We may observe a kind of "continuum" between the different excerpts presented above: there are some situations related to the "here and now" (food taste, children's behavior) and other excerpts in which the focus is on the "future" (getting married, extra-familial world). The sequential placement of the utterances within an argumentative context, in which participants orient to the expectation of opposition, contributes to their contextualisation as accusations. These lexical and sequential features are meta-pragmatic signs that indicate to participants that the utterances are to be interpreted as accusations: in other words, they function as contextualisation cues, which frame the utterances as accusations and thus as oppositional moves. This is reflected by the addressees' responses, which reveal their understanding of the prior utterances as doing criticizing rather than some other activity. The contribution offered by all family members can contribute to a re-definition of the family identity during the time: conflict and power are closely related in that disputants can employ accusations as a conversational resource not only to oppose the other party's preceding activity, but also to exercise influence over the opponent's subsequent actions.

In conclusion, this study shows that conflict, opposition and involvement are emergent social phenomena within families, and they are mutually accomplished and displayed by participants through the ways in which they interact with each other. The co-construction of the adversative episode takes place on various communication levels: here we pointed our attention specifically on the sequential and argumentative levels.

Anyway, it is needed to further analyze more specific developmental event in order to fully understand the value of verbal conflict in family interactions: for example, it could be studied the relation between the closing of a conflict and the modality in which a successive conflict develops in the course of the same dinner. In this way, we will understand better which strategic options are available to the participants and also the importance of determining the relevance of the semantic content of verbal conflict. Another possible level of study implies the developmental and social dimensions related to the sequential structure of conflict: for example, by offering justifications, parents can play an instructive role, because they can activate expectations, discursive resources (from a lexical and syntactical point of view) and interpretative modalities referred to the interpersonal positioning in this specific context.

Finally, we signal the necessity of analyzing more conversational excerpts in working up a longitudinal story about the formation of adolescent/young adult identity through family argumentation, and the use of Conversation Analysis methods to identify how dispreferred

responses function in conflict. Another possible way of extending this study is related to a more specific comparison of the interaction between young children, pre-adolescents and adolescents with their parents; this would allow psychologists to properly re-address the “storm and stress” model of adolescence from a developmental perspective: there are, in fact, excellent insights into the relationships between justification and explanation in childhood, as well as the meaning of conflict as an arena to display both claims to independence and to family membership.

## Appendix

### *Transcription symbols*

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.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
-	abrupt cut-off
:	prolonging of sounds
ˉ	stressed syllable
◦◦	quiet speech
> <	quicker speech
hh.	aspiration
.hh	inhalation
[	simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	contiguous utterances
(.)	pause (2/10 second or less)
()	non-transcribing segment of talk
<b></b>	highlights segments of special analytical interest

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## Notes

- 1 We can refer to the function of contextualization as a behavior, which sets up the context in order to offer an interpretation of the situation (Gumperz, 1982).
- 2 See the psychodynamic concept of “*storm and stress*”, currently discussed by researchers (Ardone, 1999).
- 3 For reviews, cf.: Vuchinich (1984); Coombs (1987); Shantz and Hobart (1989).
- 4 The third person’s intervention is proper of a multiparty context and for this reason it is not included in the Figure 2.
- 5 The first suggestion came from a similar project started in 1989 in USA and directed by Elinor Ochs. For more details about the Italian research group, cf. Pontecorvo (1996).
- 6 Each excerpt of family conversation presented here has been converted into a simple form (see the Appendix). For all families, fictitious names replace real names in order to ensure anonymity.
- 7 In the study of Menghini, Gnisci, and Pontecorvo (2000), the authors observe that there is a tendency in Italian family conversations to problematize the member of the other generation who is not the actor that addresses the problem. We can also say that, given the relatively small corpus of data, the percentages are too similar to provide definitive evidence of difference; in this sense it would also be possible to apply some form of non-parametric statistic to lend weight to this claim.
- 8 The log-linear models have been constructed for categorical variables in order to test the main effects and the effects of the interaction between the concerned variables (Rojewski & Bakeman, 1997).
- 9 All the excerpts are literal verbatim translations of the utterances of each speaker, in which some of the sense of the original utterance is necessarily lost in translation. For this reason, this is not a translation of the sense of what has been said with some of the features of speech re-introduced afterwards, but there is an effort to stay close to the original Italian expressions.
- 10 “*Competence challenges are a class of oppositional moves that call into question not simply [...] the prior talk but the competence or status of the party who produced that talk. More precisely, the person presenting an argument is attacked instead of the argument itself*” (Spitz, 2005, p. 387).
- 11 Cf. Scott and Lyman (1968): they introduced the difference between “excuse” and “justification”.

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*Cette recherche vise à étudier le conflit verbal entre parents et enfants préadolescents dans les conversations en famille au cours du dîner. Le conflit verbal est considéré comme un outil éducatif au sein des interactions familiales et un moyen de socialisation pour tous les participants. Le but de la recherche est l'analyse des stratégies de participation aux interactions conflictuelles, pour mettre en évidence les relations discursives entre parents et enfants préadolescents. Dans le cadre d'une méthodologie ethnographique, on a enregistré plusieurs dîners de familles italiennes de classe sociale moyenne (les familles ont été sélectionnées sur la base de certains critères comme la présence des deux parents qui travaillent et de deux enfants); les données ont été transcrites intégralement, en accord avec le modèle d'Analyse de la Conversation. Les résultats des analyses quantitatives (par l'utilisation des modèles log-linéaires) et qualitatives confirment l'importance du conflit verbal dans le contexte familial comme stratégie culturelle spécifique à la relation entre parents et enfants préadolescents: l'analyse des données souligne la relation parmi différents aspects du conflit et les implications pragmatiques concernées pour les participants en situation de conversation à table.*

**Key words:** Cultural practices, Early adolescence, Family interaction, Socialization, Verbal conflicts.

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