Chapter 2

"But who said that you eat when you want and what you want?" Verbal Conflicts at Dinnertime and Strategic Moves among Family Members

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to analyze verbal conflicts between parents and children through the analysis of family dinnertime conversations. Previous studies on disputes have indicated that verbal conflicts could be educational instruments of interaction and tools of socialization in the family context. During the everyday interactions at home, family members engage themselves in several activities of disputing, debate, conflicting, with different objectives and results. The aim of this chapter is to capture parents and children during their interaction at dinnertime, and to observe ethnographically the verbal conflicts around different topics of discussion. Adopting a conversational and discursive approach as a guiding analytical concept, we propose different levels of analysis of the strategic moves of family members.

This chapter draws from videotaped recordings of Italian middle class family dinners selected as being dual career ones with two children. The data have been fully transcribed and codified following the approach of Conversation Analysis. The data have been analyzed both at a quantitative
and qualitative level. The results show the central place of verbal conflicts in the family context as particular cultural strategies of relationships between parents and children. The study underlines the relations between different aspects of conflicts and the pragmatic implications as strategic moves for all family members at dinnertime conversations.

**INTRODUCTION**

The study of verbal conflicts focuses mainly on disagreement concerning opinions and social roles. Within a sociolinguistic tradition, the structure of verbal conflicts (Grimshaw, 1990) and the sequential organization of conversations have been considered in relation to the linguistic choices and moves that participants made during an interaction. All these aspects contribute to define the context of the situation and the social roles that people assume during a conflict. However, a main role in developing conflicts is played by language, because it expresses referential contents, attitudes, and emotions. Language reveals the various elements of conflicts in the organization of the communicative exchanges at a prosodic, lexical and syntactic level. Conflict situations entail also the turn-taking competition during the conversation underlining differences in participants' point of view.

Conversations and verbal conflicts are connected by the fact they occur during everyday interactions and they cannot be considered separately. Usually a conflict appears during a conversation in which somebody (the protagonist) verbally engages with somebody else (the antagonist). But at the same time it can be the verbal interaction that allows an occasion to find elements of contrast and the possibility to conflict. This is particularly true within the everyday family interactions. In fact, family members engage themselves in several activities of disputing, debate, conflicting, with different goals and results.

The aim of this chapter is to focus on parents-children verbal conflicts, through the analysis of family conversations at dinner table. We intend to observe the conflict developed around different topics of discussion and the strategic communicative moves of the participants. For this purpose, we will adopt argumentative and discursive approaches as guiding analytical concepts.

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**WHAT IS A VERBAL CONFLICT?**

The word "conflict" refers to different terms, often used as synonymous, such as dispute, disagreement, and questioning (Vuchinich, 1984; Coombs, 1987; Shantz, Hobart, 1989). However, the characteristics of a verbal conflict have been well described by Eisenberg and Garvey (1981). They proposed the notion of "adversative episode" to designate a discursive sequence characterized by an initial event, an initial opposition (rejection, disagreement), and a reaction to the opposition. In particular, the initial opposition is a necessary but not sufficient condition within the adversative episode, because it may be complied with, ignored, or responded to in a playful way. A specific interactional move is necessary to transform an initial, potential opposition into an adversative episode. In fact, as suggested by Maynard (1985), only if a conflicting response to an initial oppositional move occurs, the first oppositional move retrospectively marks the beginning of a conflict.

The adversative episode implies at least a three-step sequence within a conversation between at least two participants. When the first speaker requests something, makes an assertion or action, this move can be considered an antecedent event or arguable action if the second speaker, in his/her turn, shows an initial opposition to the move of the interlocutor (for example by a negative response, a refusal, a denial, an objection). Then, the first speaker can disagree with the second speaker, acting a counter-opposition (for example rejecting the point of view or the argument of the other person, or insisting and supporting his own first claim).

Verbal conflicts can be characterized by three main dimensions. The first is the "orientation", defined as serious and non-serious. 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. The second dimension is the "modality", distinguished in mitigated and aggravated (Garvey, Shantz, 1992). The modality can be modulated by the fact that speakers can either mitigate speech actions to avoid creating offence or use more aggravated forms of speech actions. Opposition can thus vary in its intensity: speakers can disagree with one another in mitigated or modulated ways or in a more aggravated or unmodulated fashion (Labov, Fanshel, 1977). Another dimension concerns the conflict's termination that is collaboratively and sequentially achieved by participants. Vuchinich (1990) has defined different possibilities of "closing". In a stand-off, participants continue to keep opposing positions, without submitting: disputants drop the conflict without any kind of resolution. By submission, a mutual establishment of dominant and compliant
parties is possible when a person tacitly accepts the position taken by the other party. A compromise implies a concession in which "a participant offers a position that is between the opposing positions that define the dispute" (Vuchinich, 1990, p. 127). Another type of closing concerns the possibility that one participant withdraws conflict may also be closed by a combination of different terminations.

**CONFLICTS WITHIN EVERYDAY FAMILY INTERACTIONS**

In the family context, conflicts can contribute to improve conversational, social and cognitive skills of adults and children (Pontecorvo, 1987). In fact, within a multiparty setting, family members can show not only negative attitudes during adversative episodes, but also cooperative moves and positive emotions. Conflicts are tools that aim at acquiring a social knowledge of rules (Hartup, Laursen, 1993) and 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).

Verbal conflicts within the family context are elements that people can use to construct the family borders from a psychological, sociological and linguistic point of view. The strategic moves of family members during verbal conflicts determine the possibility to model and to re-define the context of interaction (Gumperz, 1982). Using language to conflict, parents and children express referential contents, attitudes, and emotions, revealing different elements in the organization of the communicative exchanges. Due to the specific character of the family context, it is relevant to consider the conditions in which the building of a conflict is possible in the argumentative activities carried out by family members. Family conversation is a setting to investigate the interpersonal and social practices of interaction, following the idea that the context is not a container but a constituent of the communicative process (Rigotti, Rocci, 2006). For this reason, we intend to focus on the argumentative moves of family members during verbal conflicts that occur within the frame of their everyday interactions. To assume the notion of framing implies that during verbal conflicts participants recognize continuously what they are doing and what they have to do with the interlocutors. This capacity for family members because they can deal with disagreements by means of reasonable argumentative exchanges. The specificity of the family conversation represents, in relation to other more institutionalized contexts, a setting largely characterized by interpersonal relationships and a relatively freedom concerning issues that can be tackled (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, Greco Morasso, 2009).

**STRATEGIC MOVES DURING VERBAL CONFLICTS: TWO APPROACHES**

In this chapter, we refer to two possible ways to study the verbal conflict between parents and children at dinner time conversations. We intend to integrate the approaches of Conversation and Discourse Analysis and the model of the critical argumentative discussion, in order to reach a comprehensive account of the strategic moves occurring during verbal conflicts in the context of family interactions.

The first approach, including the Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974) and the Discourse Analysis (McKinlay, Potter, Wetherell, 1993), studies social phenomena in the actual context of life as they occur spontaneously during interactions. As conversation is the common discursive practice in everyday interactions (Ochs, 1988), its study represents "a general approach to the analysis of the social action" (Heritage, 1984, p. 299). Conversation and Discourse Analyses are based on the observation, description and examination of natural data, collected by ethnographical methods that replace other research methodologies in psychology and social sciences. In order to identify and to describe the sequential patterns of discourse produced by people, it is necessary to assume the participants' own perspective (Edwards, Stokoe, 2004). Researchers have to identify relevant phenomena observed during conversations and to organize a collection of excerpts of similar instances (Pontecorvo, Fasulo, Sterponi, 2001) in order to show what participants are doing during their spontaneous interactions. Within the discursive approach, participants' accounts are always occasioned in the context of discourse's production and address the concerns of people engaged in the interaction. In other words, accounts are considered as alternative versions of people's experiences, and not as definite facts about their lives. The detailed study of the discursive practices provides thus insights on how participants structure the ordinary talk, how define themselves and others within everyday interactions, and how people socially function.

The second approach, namely the model of the critical discussion (van Eemeren, Gortendorst, 1984; 2004), elicits the essential components of an argumentative discussion. As the verbal conflict is a situation that calls people to strategically argue and defend their own positions, we assume that this approach
can work as a guideline to identify participants' moves from an argumentative point of view. The core of the model is to permit the interpretation of real-life interactions in terms of their correspondence to an ideal model of the critical discussion. Four sequential stages are foreseen. At the beginning, there is a "confrontation stage" in which the difference of opinions is made explicit. Then, in the "opening stage" the common ground shared by the participants emerges and people can engage in providing arguments in support of their own point of view (this is the real "argumentative stage"). The final step is the "concluding stage": it concerns the phase through which participants conclude their critical discussion.

These two approaches can offer a complete view on how argumentation shapes the communicative practices occurring in families and, more specifically, how it fosters a critical attitude in the process of verbal conflicts carried out in this context.

**METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

**Research Study and Participant Families**

In this section, we present the study of parents-children verbal conflicts as part of a larger research project on family interactions (Pontecorvo, 1996; Pontecorvo, Arcidiacono, 2007).

The general aim of the project has been the observation and the analysis of the socialization processes that occur at dinnertime conversations. Participant families were selected on the grounds of the following criteria: the presence of both parents; the presence of a child aged from 3 to 6; and the presence of an elder sibling. In total, 23 Italian middle class families participated to the project. 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 was 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 has 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. Actually, the general data corpus is constituted by the recordings of 76 dinners. All dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed, according to the conventions suggested by Jefferson (1985). Specifically, the list of symbols used in the excerpts of this chapter is presented in the appendix. 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 have considered the topic as the subject of a sequence of no less than three consecutive turns of at least two different speakers.

**Aims and Criteria of Analysis**

We assume that parents-children conflicts are possible educational tools of interaction and means of cultural socialization during the everyday family exchanges at home (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, 2009). Our aim is to observe the verbal conflict as it emerges within the interactions occurring in family spontaneous conversations. In particular, we intend to analyze the participants' conversational moves in these specific situations, in order to reveal the relationships (at a quantitative and qualitative level) between parents and children.

The hypotheses we take into consideration concern: a) the consistent presence of conflict sequences between parents and children during family conversations at home; b) the higher frequency of conflicts solicited by parents versus children; c) the higher involvement of children in conflict situations in response to parents' "statements" than in response to adults "requests".

As criteria of analysis, we have selected all the turns of talk involved in the conversational sequences of conflicts occurring in family interactions. We have considered that it was only possible to understand each turn with respect to the previous and following turn. In fact, as suggested by Schegloff (1990) "sequence [...] is another candidate type of unit, the practices of which can underlie 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" (p. 53).

**DATA ANALYSIS**

We have selected situations of verbal conflicts which fall into the dimensions elicited in literature (as described above) in terms of orientation, modality and closing. In order to understand each situation, we have tried to specify the participants, their roles, and the linguistic structures of the argumentative interactions. We also have distinguished two possible directions of the conflict exchange: the first one concerns the process of problematization solicited by
parents with respect to children; the second one considers the possibility that children activate the conflict, through a problematization of the parents' statements or actions. As 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 engage in conflict through a problematization of an action or an assertion of any other member of the family.

In the next part of the chapter, we will consider two levels of analysis: a general overview of a quantitative study based on the use of log-linear models; and a qualitative analysis more devoted to a specific interpretation of family conversational sequences. The intention is to combine both levels, assuming a continuum between quantitative and qualitative methods (Denzin, 1978).

Models of Adversative Episodes: A Log-Linear Analysis

The first level of analysis will tend to explain the large structure of verbal conflicts in terms of adversative episodes. The implied dimensions are firstly the orientation (serious or non-serious), the modality (mitigated or aggravated), and the closing of a conflict (stand-off and withdrawal, submission, compromise and a third person's intervention). Then, we will consider the nature of the verbal conflict as an answer referred to turns of requests, directives or evaluative statements during conversation. As pointed out by Edwards (1997), 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 him/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 distinguish the argumentative strategies 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.

In the corpus of data, we have identified a total of 109 episodes of conflict: it emerges that in a large part (75.3% of episodes) parents problematize children, without relevant differences between mothers and fathers (respectively 38.6% and 36.7% of cases). Children activate conflicts preferably addressing to the father than to the mother (13.7% versus 11%). This tendency shows a preference to problematize the member of the other generation who is not the actor that addresses the problem (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Direction of problematization among participants.](image)

Reverting to the three dimensions of verbal conflicts, the orientation of adversative episodes is largely serious (80% of cases), the modality is aggravated (67% of cases), and the more frequent closing is the stand-off/withdrawal (46% versus 30.2% of compromise/third person's intervention; and 23% of submission). Concerning the nature of the conversational interventions during conflicts, in the 60.6% of cases there are reactions to statements versus 39.4% of cases in which people react to requests. The observed strategies of argumentation show only slightly more justifications (31.2%) than insinuations (30.3%) or negations (28.5%). For what concerns the number of conflict topics identifiable in the data, the frequencies reveal a less presence of conflict topics (10.2% of the total number of general topics) occurring during the observed interactions. To understand this result, we have to consider that it is really difficult to have a precise correspondence between a conflict topic (understood as a sequence in which the subject of discourse is a conflict event) and a sequence of verbal conflict in terms of adversative episode (that becomes a conflict sequence). Mainly on the grounds of this observation, it is more significant to consider the frequency of conflict turns with respect to the total number of turns during a dinnertime conversation. Looking at this parameter, it emerges again a less frequency of conflict turns (13.6% of the total turns of conversations) between parents and children. In general, we have identified 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, participants generally use the stand-off/withdrawal strategies.

A more detailed level of quantitative analysis has been applied in order to verify the inferential relation between variables. We have used a log-linear analysis (Multipath Frequency Analysis) to test the main effects and the effects of
the interaction between the variables (Rojewski, Bakeman, 1997). As highlighted by Bakeman and Gottman (1986), in applying the sequential log-linear analysis "the investigators define a set of hierarchical models [...] the simplest model – the null or equiprobable model – contains no terms at all and generates the same expected value for each cell in the contingency table. The most complex model – the saturated model – contains sufficient terms to generate expected values for each cell that are identical to the values actually observed. The idea is to find the least complex model that nonetheless generates expected values not too discrepant from the observed ones, as determined by a goodness-of-fit-test" (pp. 194-195). Through the use of the statistical program BMDP Dynamic version 7.0 (Brown, 1983), a design 2×2×3 has been constructed in order to test the variables and to verify the association between factors and levels. We have used G^2 as the associated statistical test. The following conditions have been established: variable 1 is the orientation (O) of the conflict, with 2 levels (serious / non-serious); variable 2 is the modality (M) of the conflict, with 2 levels (mitigated / aggravated); variable 3 is the closing (C) of the conflict, with 3 levels (stand-off + withdrawal / submission / compromise + third person's intervention). Two possible cases (Arcidiacono, 2009; in press) have been considered: a) when parents problematize their children; b) when children problematize their parents.

In the first case, the data analysis (see Table 1) shows that the model offering the best adaptation is the bi-dimensional model [OM][OC][MC].

Table 1. Association option for all terms of order less than or equal to 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>D.F.</th>
<th>CHISQ</th>
<th>Prob</th>
<th>Iter</th>
<th>D.F.</th>
<th>CHISQ</th>
<th>Prob</th>
<th>Iter</th>
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<td>M.</td>
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<td>C.</td>
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<td>0.2854</td>
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<td>10.94</td>
<td>0.0009</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.0019</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>0.0045</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>19.41</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
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The observation of standard residuals and estimate parameters reveals an association between serious orientation and aggravated modality (z_{2(11)}=2.656, p<.05), while the mitigated modality is associated to the non-serious orientation; the association between the non-serious orientation and the stand-off/withdrawal in closing conflicts (z_{2(11)}=2.289, p<.05); and the association between compromise/third person's intervention and the mitigated modality for the closing of conflict (z_{2(11)}=2.369, p<.05).

In the second case (see Table 2) the model that offers the best adaptation is the bi-dimensional model [OM][OC][MC].

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>D.F.</th>
<th>CHISQ</th>
<th>Prob</th>
<th>Iter</th>
<th>D.F.</th>
<th>CHISQ</th>
<th>Prob</th>
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The observation of standard residuals and estimate parameters reveals a presence of submissions in closing conflict in association with the mitigated modality (z_{2(11)}=1.442, p<.01), even if the values are minimal; a number of non-serious orientation in association to the mitigated modality and a final compromise in the conflict episodes (z_{2(11)}=1.960, p<.05); and an association (with minimal values) between the serious orientation, the mitigated modality and the closing by stand-off/withdrawal (z_{2(11)}=1.282, p<.01).

The results of the first case show that participants engage in serious conflicts, maintaining an aggravated modality during their conversational practices. A possible interpretation concerns the idea that verbal conflicts are opportunities by which family members could show their power and their role at dinnertime. The non-serious orientation is associated to a mitigated modality and to stand-off or compromise as closing strategies, probably because the non-seriousness of the conflict defines the situation as a not relevant one. When children problematize their parents, the association between non-serious orientation, mitigated modality and compromise is confirmed, even if there is also the possibility that parents are submitted to children, due the non-serious nature of the conflict, intended as a kind of playful arena of children's socialization to arguing discourse.
ARGUMENTATIVE AND DISCursive MOVES: THE ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONAL SEQUENCES

In this section we will present different excerpts of family conversations framed in their contexts of production. We will consider each part as a category that accounts for certain types of argumentative and discursive moves in verbal conflicts. This procedure permits to avoid the use of pre-established categories. We intend to remain sensitive to what participants do, as well as to what they refrain from doing to realize their activities (Schegloff, 1986; Maynard, Clayman, 2003). In our qualitative analysis, we highlight how family members reflexively produce, through their talking, the social setting they inhabit in terms of objective features of everyday life (Sacks, 1992). Thus, every effort is made to avoid general or ideal-typical characterizations of interactional procedures in favour of attending to specific instances as they unfold within, are shaped by, and in turn organize, concrete circumstances.

The excerpts presented below are representative of some 'conflict sequences types', selected also on the basis of the results obtained by the quantitative analysis. We will try to highlight the discursive value of participants' interventions and the argumentative moves displayed by family members at dinnertime discussions. We will present cases in which the definition of rules is a fundamental element of social life and contribute to the values' socialization. Family members often use norms as topic of discussion within dinner table interactions: during conversations there are at times oppositions as regards rules and proper behaviours of children. In particular, some violation of rules and norms can represent a good opportunity of discussion and of asserting one's position in the family hierarchy.

The first excerpt concerns the negotiation between parents and children about the amount (and the type) of food to eat during the dinner. Due the specific moment of the data collection, the food is often a relevant topic of discussion among participants.

Excerpt 1: MIN family, dinner 1. Participants: mother, father, Luisa (age: 3 years, 10 months)

((Luisa is drinking the coke instead of eating))

980. DAD: it's enough Luisa! Now I'll give you some rice. Wait!
981. Luisa: I don't want anything else
982. DAD: the rice with sauce

The sequence is opened by a father's directive that can be interpreted as implicitly condensing a standpoint and a justification. In the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, the standpoint concerns an invitation to the child ("you should eat some food") followed by a justification ("because you are drinking the coke"). Turns 980-984 are a sequence in which emerges a difference of opinions: the first intervention of Luisa is in fact a refusal of the father's proposal, a counter-position on his argument (turn 981 "I don't want anything else").

When the mother takes a role within the discussion, we can recognize a phase of opening stage (turns 985-1000), in which the topics are the fact that Luisa can become hungry and the opportunity to eat at least some vegetables. The establishment of a well-founded opening stage is a delicate and crucial part of this family interaction. From one side there is the need to find premises to win one's cause according to a competitive interpretation of strategic manoeuvring (van Eemeren, Houtloosser, 2002), and from the other side participants tend to redefine the family's shared identity, preserving the context itself. In fact, in turn 1001 the father immediately re-conduct (opening an argumentative stage) the discussion to the first level, giving as argument the inappropriate conduct of Luisa who is...
drinking the coke. His intervention, from the point of view of the analytical reconstruction of the argumentation, poses a dilemma about whether this invitation to eat instead of drink, imposed by the authority, is an indication of bad argumentative quality in the previous interventions of Luisa. If the child and the mother are referring to another topic (such as the fact to be hungry), this could violate the rule of reasonable conduct, because, in the eyes of the father, the admissible moves in this critical discussion are not related to his premises (the inopportune to drink the coke). However, the father’s position could also be interpreted as a specific form of strategic manoeuvring, motivated by the respect of certain family customs (such as “if you don’t eat, you don’t drink the coke”). During the argumentative sequence, the mother assumes a role of mediator, trying to find a compromise between Luisa’s desires and the directives of the father. This strategy produces in the concluding stage (turns 1009-1012) the possibility to solve the conflict through an explicit agreement between the participants.

Gaining further insights on the context of family conversations can provide a richer perspective on the goals dominating the participants’ strategic manoeuvring: what could be interpreted as an imposition of order could turn out to be a constructive move aiming not simply at conducting an argumentative discussion but also at teaching to the child the value of argumentation as a rational mean to solve differences of opinion.

In other cases the conflict 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. As suggested by Laforest (2002), accusations may not only express a discrepancy between an expected and a factual action, but they may also turn on the defendant’s character traits and attitudes. The following excerpts are two illustrations of this phenomenon during family conversations with youngest and elder children.

**Excerpt 2: TAN family, dinner 2. Participants: mother, Leonardo (age: 3 years, 9 months)**

((Leonardo makes a move to leave the table))

114. MOM: where are you going?
115. Leonardo: to use the computer
116. MOM: the compUter? ((taking Leonardo by the arm to stop him from getting down from the chair)) you haven’t finished yet. now listen here ALL OF YOU- this story about the computer has to stop
117. DAD: no, no is enough is enough! ((to Leonardo))

In this second excerpt, the action of Leonardo, moving to leave the table, is the starting point of a confrontation stage that implies also the intervention of the mother (turn 114 “where are you going?”). The justification of the child (turn 115 “to use the computer”) and the reaction of the mother (turn 116 “the computer?”) produce the opening of a sequence in which participants give their reasons to promote an argumentation stage. In particular, the mother clarifies that it is not possible to leave the table if there is still some food to eat. In her intervention in turn 116 (“listen here all of you”), she includes also the other child to the intention to express a general rule that family members have to comply with. The parental argument in turns 117-119 is clear: “at meal times we stay at the table and we eat no playing with the computer”. Even when Leonardo acts as he would like to leave the table again, the mother underlines that is not possible to switch on the computer if the child hasn’t finished yet. The explicit verbalization of the rule is then followed by a directive (turn 119 “you must eat your fruit”), underlying the authority and the role within the family participation framework. The sequence ends without a real concluding stage, because Leonardo leaves the room and the parents don’t pay more attention about him. In fact, the family is almost at the end of the dinner and after few time participants shift the focus of the discussion to another topic and, immediately after, they leave the table.

As previously underlined, the knowledge of the context is relevant in the reconstruction of argumentation. The circumstances in which the argumentation takes place must be taken into account when evaluating the correspondence of argumentative reality to the model of a critical discussion. In our case, the possibility to use the computer is not a topic of discussion per se, but it is the fact that family rules (at least for this family) imply to complete the dinner before going to do other activities (including playing computer games).

In other sequences of family conversation, participants are frequently accusing, blaming, complaining, criticizing, reprimanding, rebuking. In particular, through the speech acts of the accusation, the complaint, the reproach or a related action, the speaker expresses dissatisfaction with or criticism of a preceding or current activity, attitude or characteristic on the part of the defendant. When some
social rule or norm are violated, or fails to meet expectations and/or preferences, sequences of conflicts appear during family interactions. The following excerpt is an illustration of this case.

Excerpt 3: QUI family, dinner 1. Participants: mother, father, Samuele (age: 11 years, 11 months)

((mother is speaking about Samuele’s tastes))

296. MOM: he’s discovered the ham now, and he’s twelve (. mhm.
297. Samuele: [I eat ]
298. DAD: [now ( ), before only pasta ( ) with butter and parmesan cheese
299. (2.0)
300. Samuele: if I want, I eat up everything. I don’t want. I can eat if I want. when I want.
301. MOM: but who said that you eat when you want and what you want? you eat if we say so!
302. Samuele: no. I say so
303. DAD: otherwise, you don’t eat
304. Samuele: and if- if-, suppose that I don’t like the ham until I’m sixty ( )
305. DAD: [you are not normal. you understand, Samuele? you are not normal.
306. MOM: why is he not normal?
307. Samuele: if somebody doesn’t like something, he doesn’t like it.
308. (1.5)
309. DAD: but if somebody doesn’t like something, he doesn’t like it. but you ( ) don’t want to try. that’s the difference.
310. (5.0)
311. DAD: you have your ideas, ( ) bad- ideas (3.0) and you would defend them obsessively.

The sequence is opened by an implicit confrontation stage embodied within the opening stage (turns 296-300) between the mother and the child. The mother’s criticism about Samuele’s tastes is generated by the child’s complaint about the fact that there is no ham to eat. As the mother invokes personal characteristics (such as the food preferences) that are not tolerated by the child, the assertive reaction of Samuele in turn 300, through the use of the verb to want, is an explicit engagement to conflict. In fact, the argumentation stage (turns 301-309) is conducted by participants using elements related to personal characteristics of Samuele instead of defining the food preferences or the taste of specific kinds of food. The strategic moves within this frame determine a parental alliance, developed through the use of the third personal pronoun, in order to annihilate the child’s voice, and through the alignment (as in turn 301 using the pronoun “we”) between the mother and the father. In turns 304, Samuele tries to express a hypothetical reasoning about the topic of discussion (“suppose that I don’t like the ham until I’m sixty”), but immediately the father negatively qualifies the child (turn 305 “you are not normal”). This intervention seems to be ambiguous even for the mother (in turn 306 she asks to the father why the child would be not normal). In fact, it is not clear if the father is following the hypothetical reasoning of Samuele (like “if you don’t like the ham until you will be sixty, you will be not normal”) or if the father is negatively evaluating the argument given by the child and, consequently, he is defining Samuele as “not normal”. Even when the child uses some general reason (turn 307 “if somebody doesn’t like something, he doesn’t like it”), the father re-conducts it to a personal level (turn 308 “but you don’t want to try, that’s the difference”). This strategic move offers further possibility to the child to provide counter-arguments. Finally, the sequence ends by an explicit criticism (turn 311, “you have your ideas, bad ideas and you would defend them obsessively”) that gives a bad qualification concerning the child, without a real argumentative concluding stage.

The excerpts presented above allow us to a deeper comprehension of the ways by which family members can initiate and manage conflicts at dinertime. We observed cases in which participants express situational accusation (Gruber, 2001), focusing on violations of norms that the opponent has committed during the ongoing interaction and which the speaker addresses immediately or after a short while. By contrast, there are also breaches that were committed outside the current interaction, and that refer to the past or to personal characteristics of somebody involved in the situation. In both case, accusations and related actions assume a retroactive value because they concern violations (actions on the part of the defendant, that are somehow defective), and thus constitute oppositional moves. They are also proactive, when they are projected to initiate and maintain dispute sequences. Furthermore, accusations can be employed by speakers as interactional resources to exert a degree of discursive power by placing constraints on the discourse options available to the recipient. For this reason, it is important to examine how strategic moves are constructed and negotiated at a micro-level of interaction by looking at
the interplay of control manoeuvres and opposition strategies in conflict sequences.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this chapter has been the analysis of verbal conflicts between parents and children through the observation of spontaneous conversations during the everyday dinners of Italian families. Verbal conflicts have been considered educational instruments of interaction and tools of socialization in the family context, through which participants engage themselves in disputing, debating, and arguing with different objectives and results. The ethnographic observation of dinnertime conversations has been the way to capture parents and children during their interactions around different topics of discussion.

In this final section of the chapter, we intend to highlight some results and implications that derive from the different levels of analyses we employed. The conversational and discursive approaches have been the guiding analytical concepts in order to explore the different moves of family members and the argumentative strategies showed by participants during adversative episodes related to their conversations at home. The central place of verbal conflicts in the family context, the particular relation between different aspects of conflicts, and the pragmatic implications as strategic moves for the family members will be the main points of this concluding part of the chapter.

Firstly, this study has showed the association between different elements of an adversative episode: in particular, the orientation and the modality of a conflict result strongly connected, and this could explain the strong presence of adversative episodes characterized by seriousness and aggravated modalities. The possibility to investigate more carefully this relation has highlighted also a significant association between the orientation, the modality and the closing of a conflict. For this reason, it has been possible to take up different forms of orientations, modalities and closings that result from the quantitative level of analysis. Besides, the presence of patterns could allow us to examine the immediate relationships between topics of discourse and forms of argument, because these aspects may distract from the core argument that different linguistic resources afford diverse parent-child interactions.

Concerning the initial hypotheses, we do not found a higher number of conflict sequences between parents and children. However, within the observed episodes, we found a higher frequency of conflicts solicited by parents. The data confirm the fact that family debates are occasions of socialization and educational tools that parents try to use in different ways. We also observed that children show a general tendency to stand up against their parents' statements: we can hypothesize that if declarative statements are used by adults in order to evaluate children and their reactions, the systematic children's oppositions come across as a strategy for defending their own identity. In fact, according to another study (Sterponi, 2003), children can practice a kind of account in order to contrast the parents' statements. The strategy used in conversation is usually supported by explanations that aim at expressing or at keeping the interaction going, and answer to a need of accounting in a situation of verbal conflict.

From an educational point of view, it is important to underline that this study can suggest different pragmatic implications: results show that children are more oriented to affirm their identity or their need to obtain something in engaging with their parents within a verbal conflict. On the other side, parents tend to use the adversative episode as a way to socialize children to the family rules and to affirm the authoritarian roles of parents. In fact, norms are transmitted not only through directives, but also through an explicit interpretation and evaluation of the everyday behaviour. As suggested by Dunn and Munn (1987), children can learn early to justify their actions, but not necessarily to explain them during conflict events. Within family dinner conversations, the account can involve both strategies of explanation and justification, as shown also in the analysis of the reasoning of young children in school context (Orsolini, Pontecorvo, 1992).

More generally, verbal conflicts observed in our data are areas of socialization produced by different argumentative strategies. For example, accusations are used as declarative statements in which a family member explicitly mentions the activity or the attitude that constitutes a violation, attributing a negative quality to it. Paralinguistic, prosodic, and nonverbal cues are also present during conversational sequence of conflict. For example, increased volume, contrastive stress and exaggerated intonation contours, gestures have the role to emphasize the argumentative character of turns' sequences. Looking at our data, it seems emblematic the verbal exchange in excerpt 3 in which parents shift from elements related to personal characteristics of the child (concerning the food tastes) to general rules linked to the authority within the family and to the role of decision makers. In fact, the claim of the mother "but who said that you eat when you want and what you want?" is a paradigmatic expression of how parents can verbally underline (and use in practice) their power. In the specific case, the mother strongly emphasizes this aspect of control, in particular in the last past of her turn: "you eat if we say so!". Also the father reinforces the frame of asymmetry in his turn addressing to the child: "otherwise, you don't eat".
this situation, the child is thus unable to cope with the parents’ statements, without any opportunity of gaining advantage in his argumentative strategy. This sequence is also an example of the “borders” that define the verbal conflicts between parents and children. In fact, the degree of freedom in crossing boundaries is related to the roles of participants, and to the norms of the family within a specific culture.

The analytical reconstruction of the argumentative structure of adversative episodes reveals that family members often engage in conflict on the basis of few elements of opening stage and, more often, do not finalize their argumentative activities through a real concluding stage. This conduct is related to the power management, that is not a fixed social entity but a dynamic relation continuously negotiated in and through the talk-in-interaction. In fact, verbal conflicts constitute valuable sites to analyze the ways in which participants jointly produce and transform the social order and their positions, through the formatting and sequencing of actions and their responses. The participants’ dynamics are evident in the manifest collision of control manoeuvres and resistances in verbal conflict sequences. For example, the sequential placement of utterances within an argumentative context in which participants are orientated to the expectation of opposition can contribute to their contextualization as accusations. Lexical and sequential features are thus meta-pragmatic signs that indicate to participants how to interpret the utterances. All the signs function as contextualization cues framing the utterances as, for example, accusations and thus as oppositional moves. This activity contributes to re-define the family identity and also to exercise influences over actions.

In conclusion, conflicts, oppositions and argumentative involvements are emergent social aspects of the verbal interaction among family members. Participants mutually accomplish and display them through different ways of interaction. The sequential and argumentative levels of these interactions are specific points to be considered to develop further lines of research: for example, it will be relevant to analyze the impact of genre’s differences, school levels, threats, counter-accusations, and competence challenges in families conflicts. In particular, as suggested by Spitz (2005) “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” (p. 387). In the case of the family, this point seems to be relevant from an educational point of view, because it can reveal not only how seriously the participants argue, but more specifically the role of arguing in children’s socialization.

Further possibilities of more specific analyses can contribute to fully understand the value of verbal conflicts in family interactions. Within a sequential perspective, it could be interesting to study the relation between the closing of a conflict and the modality in which a successive conflict develops in the course of the same interaction. In this way, it will be possible to understand better which strategic patterns participants use in different conflict sequences. Another possibility concerns the study of developmental and social dimensions that are related to the structure of a conflict. For example, it will be useful to analyze the instructive role played by parents in offering justifications, activating expectations, discursive resources and interpretative modalities referred to the interpersonal positioning within the specific context of the dinner. In fact, this option is related to a developmental perspective through which a more specific comparison of the interaction between young and elder children with their parents could allow psychologists and educationalists to properly understand the value of family conflicts.

**REFERENCES**


**APPENDIX 1: TRANSCRIPTION SYMBOLS**

- falling intonation
- rising intonation
- exclaiming intonation
- continuing intonation
- abrupt cut-off
- prolonging of sounds
- high tone (capital letter)
- stressed syllable

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<td>[]</td>
<td>simultaneous or overlapping speech</td>
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<td>non-transcribing segment of talk</td>
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<td>(2.0)</td>
<td>pause (2 seconds)</td>
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<td>pause (2/10 second or less)</td>
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