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Argumentation among family members in Italy and Switzerland: A cross-cultural perspective

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Abstract

The main goal of this study is to analyze to what extent family members engage to resolve differences of opinion during everyday interactions at home. Our aim is to point out the importance of the context in the analytical reconstruction of argumentation carried out by parents and children at dinnertime. Through the examination of everyday interactions, we analyze qualitatively how argumentation shapes the communicative practices of Italian and Swiss family members and how it can foster a critical attitude in their processes of decision-making. We integrate two theoretical and methodological approaches: the first one is the model of the critical discussion, derived from the pragma-dialectical perspective. It represents an ideal argumentative discussion against which real-life interaction can be analytically reconstructed and evaluated. The second one is the conversational and discursive approach that aims at identifying the sequential patterns of discourse produced by participants. The present study shows that within the setting of dinnertime conversations pragma-dialectical and conversational analyses are powerful tools to understand how argumentation fosters a critical attitude in the process of decision-making and of the building of consent. The results open a space of investigation about the management of family debates in different contexts, taking into account a double perspective on argumentation.

Introduction

Argumentation is a mode of discourse in which interlocutors are committed to reasonableness, i.e. they accept the challenge of reciprocally founding their positions on the basis of reasons (Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2009). Traditionally, some forms of institutionalized interactions have been clearly recognized as contexts in which argumentation plays an essential role: political and media discourse, public controversy and juridical justification, conflict resolution practice of mediation and financial proposal.

In this paper, we will focus on the less investigated context of family conversations. In particular, our goal is to analyze to what extent family members engage in resolving differences of opinion during everyday interactions at home. By the presentation of case studies, we will analyze qualitatively how argumentation shapes the communicative practices of Italian and Swiss family members and how it can foster a critical attitude in their processes of decision-making.

Family argumentation

Family encounters including children should deserve more attention as an important context of argumentative development in empirical as well as theoretical investigation. Research on children's argumentation seems to have been focused primarily on peer interactions and based on conversation samples elicited either in experimental clinical settings or in semi formal pedagogic contexts (Maynard, 1985; Benoit, 1992; Felton & Kuhn, 2001). However, in recent years, besides a growth in the number of studies which highlight the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (Pontecorvo, 1993; Grossen & Perret-Clermont, 1994; Mercer, 2000; Schwarz et al., 2008), the importance of the study of argumentative dynamics which are involved in the family context is gradually emerging as a relevant field of research in social sciences. Indeed, the family context has a particular significance for the study of argumentation, as the argumentative attitude learnt in the family, in particular the capacity to deal with disagreement by means of reasonable verbal interactions, can be considered the matrix of all other forms of argumentation (Muller-Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009). Furthermore, despite the focus on narratives as the first genre to appear in communication with small children, caregiver experiences as well as observations of conversations between parents and children suggest that family conversations can be a significant context for emerging argumentative strategies.

In conversation with children, parents use language in order to convey norms and rules governing linguistic, social and cultural behavior. By focusing on Swedish family dinner table conversations, Brumark (2006a) revealed the presence of certain recurrent argumentative features in family conversations, also showing how some argumentative structures may differ depending on the ages of children. Other recent works have shed light on the relevance of an accurate knowledge of the context in order to evaluate the argumentative dynamics of family conversations at dinnertime (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo & Greco Morasso, 2009; Bova, forthcoming). Indeed, argumentation constitutes an intrinsically context-dependent activity which does not exist unless it is embedded in specific domains of human social life. Argumentation cannot be reduced to a system of formal procedures as it takes place only embodied in actual communicative and non-communicative practices and spheres of interaction (Rigotti et al., 2009). Thus, when we have to work with family conversations, the knowledge of the context has to be integrated as part of the argumentative structure itself in order to properly understand the argumentative moves adopted by family members. Accordingly, the apparently irregular, illogical and incoherent structures emerging in these natural discourse situations (Brumark, 2006b) require a "normative" model of analysis as well as specific "empathy" towards the object of research, in order to properly analyze the argumentative moves which occur in the family context.

The model of "critical discussion"

This model is a theoretical device developed in pragma-dialectics to define a procedure for testing standpoints critically in the light of commitments assumed in the empirical reality of argumentative discourses (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984). The model of critical discussion provides a description of what argumentative discourse would be like if it were optimally and solely aimed at methodically resolving a difference of opinion about the soundness of a standpoint. In this study, the model is taken as a basis for the analysis of argumentative strategies in the family context. The notion of critical discussion does not refer to any empirical phenomena and the pragma-dialectical procedure to conduct a critical discussion constitutes a theoretically based model to solve differences of opinion. As suggested by van Eemeren (2010), in argumentative reality no "tokens" of a critical discussion can be found.

The model of critical discussion foresees four ideal stages, which do not mirror the actual temporal proceedings of the argumentative discussion, but the essential constituents of the reasonable, i.e. critical discussion. The first step is the confrontation stage in which a difference of opinion emerges: “it becomes clear that there is a standpoint that is not accepted because it runs up against doubt or contradiction” (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004, p. 60). In the opening stage, the protagonist and the antagonist try to find out how much relevant common ground they share (as to the discussion format, background knowledge, values, and so on) in order to be able to determine whether their procedural and substantive zone of agreement is sufficiently broad to conduct a fruitful discussion. In the proper argumentation stage of critical discussion, arguments in support of the standpoint(s) are advanced and critically tested. Finally, in the concluding stage, the critical discussion is concluded, “in agreement that the protagonist’s standpoint is acceptable and the antagonist’s doubt must be retracted, or that the standpoint of the protagonist must be retracted” (ibid., pp. 60-61).

In the last decade, van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2003) have developed the notion of strategic maneuvering. They have observed that in empirical reality discussants do not just aim at performing speech acts that will be considered reasonable by their fellow discussants (dialectical aim), but they also direct their contributions towards gaining success, that is, to achieving the perlocutionary effect of acceptance (rhetorical aim). This notion allows reconciling a longstanding gap between the dialectical and the rhetorical approach to argumentation, and takes into account the arguers’ personal motivations that move them to engage in a critical discussion.

Conversational and discursive approach

The notion of conversation as the common discursive practice in everyday interactions and as a process of language socialization (Ochs, 1988), have been the topic of various studies in psychology, anthropology and sociology. The study of conversations “represents a general approach to the analysis of the social action which can be applied to an extremely varied array of topics and problems” (Heritage, 1984, p. 291).

The approaches of Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) and Discourse Analysis (Antaki, 1994; Edwards, Potter & Middleton, 1992) aim at analyzing conversations in their actual contexts, in order to identify the sequential patterns of discourse produced by participants. The main idea is to study social life in situ, in the most ordinary settings, examining routines and everyday activities in their concrete details (Psathas, 1995). These approaches try to assume the participants’ own perspective, in order to explore the structures of expressions used in conversation (such as words, sounds, movements), as well as the structures of meanings (overall topic, their organization in talk, local patterns of coherence in the sequence, implication, assumptions).

Within the framework of family conversations and inspired by the theoretical paradigm of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), the analysis of talk-in-interaction involves a focus not only on structures and strategies, but also on processes that activate knowledge and different opinions among family members (Ochs & Taylor, 1992; Pontecorvo, 1996; Pontecorvo, Fasulo & Sterponi, 2001; Sterponi, 2003).

Method

Data

The present study is part of a large project¹ devoted to the study of argumentation in the family context. The general aim of the research is to verify the impact of argumentative strategies for conflict prevention and resolution within the dynamics of family educational interactions. The data corpus is constituted by the video-recordings of thirty dinnertime interactions held by five Italian middle class families from different cities and five Swiss families living in Lugano. All participant families are Italian-speaking.

Researchers met families in a preliminary phase, to inform the participants about the general lines of the research and the procedures, and to get informed consent. Further, families were informed that we were interested in “ordinary family interactions” and they were asked to try to behave “as usual” at dinnertime. During the first visit, a researcher was in charge of placing the camera and instructing the parents on the use of technology (such as the position and direction of the camera, and other technical aspects). In order to minimize the researchers’ interferences, the recordings were performed by the families on their own while the researchers were not present². Families have been asked to record their interactions at the dinner table when all members were present. Each family videotaped their dinners four times, over a four-week period. Lengths of recording vary between approximately 20 and 40 minutes. The first videotaped dinner was not used for the aims of the research, in order to allow the participants to familiarize themselves with the camera. The other three dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed³ using the CHILDES system (MacWhinney, 1989), and revised by two other researchers until a high level of consent was reached (80%).

Criteria of analysis

In order to analyze the argumentative exchanges, we have selected the conversational sequences occurring in family interactions. As suggested by Schegloff (1990) “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). Moreover, to consider these sequences as relevant for our study, we refer to the concept of “participants’ categories” (Sacks, 1992), in order to avoid 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).

We present below two excerpts as representative sequences of argumentation among parents and children, with the aim to show to what extent family members engage in resolving differences of opinion during everyday interactions at home. The first example concerns an Italian family (case 1) and the second is related to a Swiss family (case 2). In the excerpts, fictitious names replace real names in order to ensure anonymity.

Analysis

¹ The ProDoc project “Argumentative Practices in Context (Argupolis)” is a doctoral program, jointly designed and developed by scholars of the Universities of Lugano, Neuchâtel, Lausanne (Switzerland) and Amsterdam (The Netherlands) that is specifically devoted to study argumentation practices in context. The Research Module “Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in family context” is the specific field in which this study takes place, thanks to the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation (project n. PDFMP1-123093/1).

² From a deontological viewpoint, recordings made without the speakers’ consent are unacceptable. It is hard to assess to what extent informants are inhibited by the presence of a tape recorder. However, we tried to use a data gathering procedure that would minimize this factor as much as possible. For a more detailed discussion, cf. Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo (2004), and Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono (2007).

³ For the transcription symbols, see the Appendix.

Case 1: Italian family

Excerpt1: Family TAN, dinner 2; participants: MOM (mother, age: 35); DAD (father, age: 37); FR1 (child 1, Marco, age: 9); FR2 (child 2, Francesco, age: 6).

All family members are seated at the table waiting for dinner.

- 1 *FR2: mom. [=! a low tone of voice]
2 *MOM: eh.
3 *FR2: I want to talk:: [=! a low tone of voice]
→ *FR2: but it is not possible [=! a low tone of voice]
→ *FR2: because <my voice is bad> [=! with a very low tone of voice]
4 *MOM: why?
→ *MOM: no::.
5 *FR2: please:: mom: [=! with the tone of someone who is saying something obvious]
6 *MOM: no absolutely.
7 *FR2: [=! nods as to say he knows what he is saying]
8 *MOM: I do not think so.
→ *MOM: a beautiful voice like a man.
→ *MOM: big, beautiful::.
9 *FR2: no.
*pau: common 2.5
→ *FR2: an idiot ((voice))
10 *MOM: you feel like an idiot?
11 *FR2: the voice.
*pau: 6.0
12 *MOM: tonight: if we hear the sound of "bread schioccarello" ((the noise when hard bread being chewed)) [=! smiling] [=! ironically]
13 *FR2: well bu: but not:: to this point.
%pau: common 4.0

The relevant part of the sequence starts in turn 3 when the child tells his mother that he cannot speak because his voice is bad. The mother does not agree and in turn 4 she asks the child for the reasons of such an idea. In turn 5 Francesco makes an attempt to escape the burden of proof, since his assumption needs no defense: *Please mom*. The mother does not accept the child's assumption (turn 6: *No absolutely*) and in so doing she assumes the burden of proof. In other words, she starts to provide arguments in order to defend her standpoint (*The voice is not bad*), telling her child that his voice is beautiful, as that of a grown-up man. Finally, the sequence is closed by a long common pause (4 seconds).

From an argumentative point of view, we could reconstruct the difference of opinion between the child and his mother in the following terms:

Issue:	<i>My voice is bad</i>
Protagonist:	mother
Antagonist:	child 2
Standpoint:	<i>No absolutely</i>
Argument:	<i>you have a beautiful voice</i> (principal argument) <i>Big, beautiful, like a man</i> (coordinative argument).

In the course of the sequence, Francesco does not accept the mother's argument, and in turns 9 and 11 he replies that he has the voice of an idiot. At this point, the mother uses an ironic expression, an argument with a high degree of implicitness. Indeed, she tells the child that if that evening she would hear strange noises, such as that of hard bread being chewed, it would be her child's voice. In turn 13 Francesco maintains his standpoint but he decreases its strength in a way. Indeed, we could paraphrase Francesco's answer as follows: *Yes, I have a bad voice, but not so much! Not to that point, not as strange as the noise of hard bread being chewed!* According to leading scholars, commenting ironically on the attitudes or habits of children appears to be a socializing function adopted by parents in the context of family conversation (Brumark 2006a). In this case we can note how when the implicit meaning is clear and shared by both arguers (i.e. the child understands the implicit meaning of the mother's utterance), commenting ironically on the child's behavior could also represent an argumentative strategy adopted by parents in order to withdraw or to decrease the strength of the child's standpoint.

We can conclude that, from an argumentative point of view, the sequence is characterized by two elements. Firstly, it is the mother who assumes the burden of proof. More precisely, she is called upon to be the protagonist of the discussion and she provides arguments in order to defend her standpoint. On the other hand, the child does not defend his initial assumption by providing arguments, but he denies to assume the burden of proof since, for him, his assumption needs no defense. Thus, it is clear that it is up to the mother to decide to start a (critical) discussion. Secondly, the important function of irony and implicitness in the argumentative exchange of this Italian family has to be noted. We have seen in the last part of the sequence (turn 12) how the mother makes clear use of an ironic expression with a high degree of implicitness, in order to withdraw or decrease the strength of the child's opinion. In cross-cultural terms, we could consider the use of irony as a peculiar feature of the Italian families' conversations.

Case 2: Swiss family

Excerpt2: Family GEV, dinner 3; participants: MOM (mother, age: 32); DAD (father, age: 34); FR1 (child 1, Luca, age: 9); FR2 (child 2, Bernardo, age: 4) All family members are eating, seated at the table.

	%sit:	FR2 touches and looks at the container with the pills
1	*FR2:	I'm going to take one of these
	→ *FR2:	yes.
2	*MOM:	you can't Bernardo.
3	*FR2:	eh?
4	*MOM:	you can't.
	%act:	shakes his head
5	*FR2:	why not?
6	*MOM:	because children have to take special drugs
	→ *MOM:	they can't take the same drugs as adults
	→ *MOM:	otherwise they will make themselves ill.
7	*FR2:	and before you < > also felt ill?
8	*MOM:	no because I'm an adult
	%sit:	FR2 gets close to MOM
9	*FR2:	and me?
10	*MOM:	you are still a child
	%pau:	common 1.0

%sit: FR2 bangs the drugs' container on the table. MOM extends her hand towards him to try and make him eat a piece of fruit. FR2 turns his head away quickly and slowly leaves the kitchen to go towards DAD and FR1

The sequence starts when Bernardo tells his mother that he is going to take one of the pills which are in the container of drugs. The mother in turns 2 and 4 does not agree with the child's behaviour: Bernardo cannot take the pills. At this point, the child asks his mother the reason why he cannot take the drugs (turn 5: *why not?*). From an argumentative point of view the exchange is particularly interesting, since the child is asking the reasons for the mother's opinion. We could say that in this case the "why" used by the child has an argumentative function. The mother does not avoid justifying her position. Indeed, in turn 6 she puts forward her argument (*because children have to take special drugs*). In other words, we could say that she accepts the role of protagonist in the discussion and, consequently, she assumes the burden of proof.

In argumentative terms, we could reconstruct the difference of opinion between the child and his mother as follows:

Issue:	<i>I want to take one of the drugs</i>
Protagonist:	mother
Antagonist:	child 2
Standpoint:	<i>You can't Bernardo</i>
Argument:	<i>because children have to take special drugs</i> (principal argument) <i>they can't take the same drugs as adults, otherwise they will make themselves ill</i> (subordinative argument).

In turn 7 the child makes a request for clarification. We could paraphrase the child's question as follows: *Has it happened before to you as well?* His mother's answer is clear and explicit in turn 8: *no because I'm an adult*. In turn 9 the child makes a further request for clarification in order to understand what is his status: adult or child? The mother's answer is still clear and explicit: Bernardo is still a child. At this point, a non verbal act (Bernardo bangs the drugs' container on the table) concludes the sequence, showing how Bernardo accepts the mother's standpoint and does not take the drugs. In pragma-dialectics terms, this is a concluding stage. As for the previous case, it is the mother who assumes the burden of proof. Indeed, she accepts the "challenge" to defend her opinion on the basis of reasons. However, regarding the argumentative style, this Swiss family, compared to the Italian one, seems to make less use of irony and implicitness, more aimed at giving the reasons rather than to convince. Certainly, this aspect requires further empirical evidence. Another important aspect that characterizes this sequence is the fundamental function of the "why" used by the child in turn 6. Indeed, by asking the reason why he cannot take the drugs, the child has favoured the beginning of an argumentative exchange with the mother, using a linguistic indicator to start a critical discussion.

Discussion and conclusions

The general context of family interactions is given by the overarching goal of socialization (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009). Thus the triggers of family debates are often given by the need to have children complying with some more or less explicit parental prescriptions, as well as to have them not enacting some forbidden behaviours. In both cases, children try in most cases to oppose parents by giving the verbal accounts they consider necessary or at least possible in the given setting (Sterponi, 2003). The common goals of

family conversations at the dinner table (concerning rules, tastes and language socialization) should be taken into account in reconstructing argumentation and evaluating the argumentative strategies adopted by family members.

In this study we qualitatively analyzed how argumentation shapes the communicative practices of Italian and Swiss family members and how it can foster a critical attitude in their processes of decision-making. At this point it seems appropriate to take stock of the acquisitions of the research presented here, listing also the approximately drawn solutions, which need to be specified.

Considering the two cases as part of a large research project, some questions about the argumentative moves of family members at dinnertime still remain unanswered. Firstly, we have seen in both Italian and Swiss families that it is the parent who often assumes the burden of proof, called upon to be the protagonist of the discussion, and provide arguments in order to convince the child to accept his/her opinion. Secondly, we have observed some differences in the argumentative styles adopted by Italian and Swiss families. Indeed, the Italian families seem to make more use of irony and implicitness, while the Swiss families seem to adopt a style more “rational” and explicit in their argumentation. Finally, it is very important to consider the fundamental function of specific linguistic features (such as the “why” used by a child in our excerpts) in order to initiate argumentative debates in the family context.

Our research suggests further lines of investigation. In particular, we need to understand to what extent family argumentation can correspond to a reasonable resolution of the difference of opinion; to highlight the specific nature of argumentative strategies used by family members; and to define whether it is possible to consider young children as reasonable arguers, also considering their cognitive skills as a relevant topic in both psychological and linguistic studies.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

- * indicate the speaker’s turn
- < > non-transcribing segment of talk
- (()) segments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of the situation
- [=!] segments added by the transcriber to indicate some paralinguistic features
- : prolonging of sounds
- , continuing intonation
- ? rising intonation
- . falling intonation
- maintaining the turn of talk by the speaker
- %pau: pause
- %act: description of speaker’s actions
- %sit: description of the situation/setting

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