



# A cross-cultural perspective in studying argumentation: dinnertime interactions among adults and children in Italian and Swiss families

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## Main goal of this study

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- To analyze to what extent family members engage in resolving *differences of opinions* during everyday interactions at home
- Role of the *context* in the analytical reconstruction of argumentation



# Approaches

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- *Critical discussion*

Ideal argumentative discussion to analytically reconstruct and evaluate real-life interactions

- *Conversation and Discourse Analysis*

to identify sequential patterns of discourse produced by participants



# Critical discussion (I)

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*Pragma-dialectical perspective*

(van Eemeren, Grootendorst, 2004)

- Identification of the basic elements that constitute an argumentative discussion: *issue, standpoint, arguments*

*Doing an argumentative analysis of a text means reconstructing those aspects of it which are relevant to the argumentative purpose of resolving a difference of opinion, and neglecting other aspects (Rigotti, Greco Morasso, 2009)*



# Critical discussion (II)

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- *Normative* function: essential constituents of an argumentative discussion (necessary for a communicative interaction to be argumentative)
  
- 4 phases:
  - *confrontation stage* (the difference of opinion emerges)
  - *opening stage* (to find out shared common ground)
  - *argumentation stage* (arguments in support to the standpoints)
  - *concluding stage* (the critical discussion is concluded)



# CA and DA

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- To analyze the conversation in the actual *context of the everyday life*, as it occurs spontaneously  
*“social life in situ, in the most ordinary of settings, examining the most routine, everyday, naturally occurring activities in their concrete details”* (Psathas 1995, pp. 1-2)
- Need to assume the *participants’ own perspective*

Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974); Antaki 1994; Edwards, Potter & Middleton 1992



# The relevance of the context

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- Not as a container but as a *constituent* of the communication process
- *Framing*: context that permits the participants to recognize at every time what they are doing and what they have to do with their interlocutors
- Context is *co-constructed* by means of their communicative moves



# The research study

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- Family interactions (Pontecorvo, Arcidiacono, 2007)
- Videorecordings of dinner conversations
- Families: both parents; a child aged from 3 to 6; at least one preadolescent sibling
- Transcription (Jefferson, 1985) and qualitative analysis





# Excerpt 1: Italian family

**@Participants: MOM, DAD, LEO Leonardo, LUC Luca.**

**@Age of LEO: 4,2 (years, months)**

**@Age of LUC: 10,1**

**@Location: Rome (Italy)**

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1 \*LUC: Mom [=! a tone of voice low]  
2 \*MOM: eh  
3 \*LUC: I want to talk [=! a tone of voice low].  
4 \*LUC: but it is not possible [=! a tone of voice low]  
5 \*LUC: why <my voice is bad>? [=! with a very low tone of voice]  
6 \*MOM: why?  
7 \*MOM: no::  
8 \*LUC: please mom: [=! with the tone of someone who says something obvious]  
9 \*MOM: no absolutely

10 \*LUC: 0 [=! nods as to say he knows what he says]  
11 \*MOM: I do not think so  
12 \*LUC: I think so [=! with his mouth full] to me it is  
13 %act: taking the bruschetta (bread with chopped tomato) out of his mouth  
14 \*MOM: a beautiful voice like a man  
15 \*MOM: big, beautiful  
16 \*LUC: no  
21 \*LEO: an idiot [voice =]  
22 \*MOM: you feel like an idiot?  
23 \*LUC: the voice.  
25 \*MOM: tonight t [:] if we hear the sound of "bread schioccarello" (the strange noise when wheat bread is chewed) [=! smiling]. [=! ironically]  
29 \*LUC: well bu [:] but not to this point.  
31) \*pau: common 4.0



# Elements of analysis

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- **Issue:** “*My voice is bad*”
- **Standpoint:** “*No absolutely*”
- **Argument:** “*you have a beautiful voice* (principal argument), *big, beautiful, like a man* (coordinative argument).
- It is the mother who assumes ***the burden of proof***  
Mom: *you have a beautiful voice like a man.*



## Excerpt 2: Swiss family

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**@Participants: MOM, DAD, BER Bernardo, LUC Luca.**

**@Age of BER: 4,10 (years, months)**

**@Age of LUC: 9,2**

**@Location: Lugano (Switzerland)**

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%sit: BER touches and looks at the  
container with the pills.

[...]

1 \*BER: I'm going to take one of these

2 \*BER: yes.

3 \*MOM: you can't Leonardo.

4 \*BER: eh?

5 \*MOM: you can't.

%act: shakes his head.

6 \*BER: why not?

7 \*MOM: because children have to take special  
medicines

8 \*MOM: they can't take the same medicines as  
adults

9 \*MOM: otherwise they will make themselves  
ill.

10 \*BER: and before you XXX also felt ill?

11 \*MOM: no because I'm an adult

%sit: BER gets close to MAM

12 \*BER: and me?

13 \*MOM: you are still little bit a child

%pau: common 1.0.

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



# Elements of analysis

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- **Issue:** “*I want to take one of the medicines*”
- **Standpoint:** “*You can’t Bernardo*”
- **Argument:** “*because children have to take special medicines (principal argument), they can’t take the same medicines as adults, otherwise they will make themselves ill (subordinative argument).*”
- The argumentative function of the “why” used by children: →

Mom: *you can’t Bernardo.* Ber: *why not?*



# Discussion

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- *How does argumentation shape the communicative practices of family members?*
- *Can we talk of a different "argumentative style" between Italian and Swiss families?*
- *The crucial role of the "why" used by children as "trigger element" of argumentation in family context*
- *(Often) adults are in charged at assuming the burden of proof*



# Conclusions and implications

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- The general context of family interactions is given by the overarching goal of *socialization*
- Argumentation fosters a *critical attitude* in the process of decision-making and of the building of consent in the everyday interactions carried out in this context (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, Greco Morasso, 2009)
- Different contexts (Italian & Swiss) may be characterized for different *styles* in argumentative discussions



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