

Argumentative strategies for conflict management and resolution in Italian and Swiss families

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how family members engage themselves in resolving differences of opinion during everyday interactions. In particular, we focus on the argumentative strategies used by parents during dinner conversations at home with their children. Within a data corpus based on video-recordings of family dinnertime interactions, two different excerpts of argumentative discussions among parents and children are presented and qualitatively analyzed. Our analytical approach includes the model of Critical Discussion as the general framework to investigate the family's strategies for conflict management and resolution in different cultures. The results show two specific argumentative strategies adopted by parents with their children: the use of ironic comments, and the admonition of the parent's authority. Besides, differences in the argumentative style between Italian and Swiss families are highlighted.

Keywords: Family; argumentation; discursive interaction; critical discussion; parent-child conversation; case studies

1. Introduction

This study aims to analyze how family members engage themselves in resolving differences of opinion during everyday interactions. More specifically, it is centered on the argumentative strategies used by parents during conflicts management at dinnertime with their children. The data consist of video-recorded dinner conversations at home of Italian and Swiss families. The study intends to show how argumentation may foster a critical attitude in the process of decision-making and of building of the consent during natural everyday interactions. As a result, we intend to open a large area of investigation concerning conflict management and resolution in the family context in different cultures.

In its first part, the paper shall present a concise description of the contemporary landscape of studies on family argumentation. Afterwards, the fundamental properties of the model of Critical Discussion will be considered, as well as the conceptual and methodological frame within which two excerpts of argumentative discussions among parents and children will be analyzed.

2. Some recent studies on family and argumentation

In recent years, alongside a number of studies which stress the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009), the relevance of the study of argumentative discussions is gradually emerging in family studies as a specific topic of interest. Indeed, despite the focus on narratives as the first genre to appear in communication with young 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 (Pontecorvo, & Fasulo,

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1997). Furthermore, recent studies revealed the presence of certain reoccurring argumentative features in family conversations as well as the association between some argumentative structures and children's ages (Brumark, 2007, 2008). Specific intercultural works have shown how families of different cultures can be characterized by different argumentative styles (Arcidiacono & Bova, in press), how it is relevant to accurately know the properties of the context in order to analyze and evaluate the argumentative dynamics occurring during family conversations (Arcidiacono et al., 2009), and how specific linguistic indicators can trigger the beginning of argumentative debates among family members (Bova, 2011).

In this study we intend to focus on the argumentative strategies used by parents with their children, as a possibility to observe the management of argumentative practices within the everyday conflictual interactions at dinnertime.

3. Methodology

The present study is part of a larger project¹ devoted to the study of argumentation within 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 research project is based on a corpus of video-recorded dinner conversations (constituting twenty hours of video data) of Italian and Swiss families. All participants are Italian-speaking.

In order to minimize researcher interference, the recordings were performed by families on their own when all family members were present at dinnertime. Each family videotaped their dinners four times, over a four-week period. All dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed² using the CHILDES system (MacWhinney, 1989), and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (80%) was reached.

3.1 Analytical Approach: The Model of Critical Discussion

In order to properly analyze the argumentative sequences we used the model of Critical Discussion (hereafter CD) developed by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004). This model provides a description of what argumentative discourse would be if it were optimally and solely aimed at resolving a difference of opinion about the soundness of a standpoint. The term "standpoint" is used to indicate, during the analysis, the position taken by a party in a discussion on an issue. According to Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2009), "*a standpoint is a statement (simple or complex) for whose acceptance by the addressee the arguer intends to argue*" (p. 44).

The model of CD consists of four stages that discussants should go through, albeit not necessarily explicitly, in the attempt to solve a disagreement. In the initial *confrontation* stage, the protagonist advances his standpoint and meets with the antagonist's doubts, sometimes implicitly assumed. Before the *argumentation* stage, in which arguments are put forth for supporting or destroying the standpoint, parties have to agree on some starting point. This phase (the *opening* stage) is essential to the development of the discussion because only if a certain common ground exists, it is possible for parties to reasonably resolve – in the *concluding* stage – the differences of opinions.

In the present study, CD is assumed as a general framework and a grid for the investigation of argumentative strategies in family conversations. In particular, we will focus on the argumentation stage to analyze the argumentative strategies used by parents during dinner conversations at home with their children.

4. Qualitative analysis

¹ We are referring to the project "Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in family context" funded by Swiss National Science Foundation (grant n. PDFMPP1-123093/1).

² For the transcription symbols, see the Appendix.

In this section, two excerpts as representative sequences of argumentation among parents and children will be presented. The first example concerns an Italian family, whereas the second concerns a Swiss family. Video recordings have been made according to the principles sketched above in order to document naturally occurring meals. Recordings have been made with the informed consent of the participants. In order to ensure anonymity, fictitious names replace real names in the excerpts.

The first excerpt concerns a dinner conversation of an Italian family including the parents and two children (Marco, 9 years old and Francesco, 6 years old). The “protagonists” of the selected sequence are Francesco and his mother that are debating about the child’s (im)possibility to talk.

4.1. Excerpt 1. Participants: mother (MOM), Francesco (FRA)

1 *FRA: mom. [=! a low tone of voice]
2 *MOM: eh
3 *FRA: I want to talk:: [=! a low tone of voice]
→ *FRA: but I can't [=! a low tone of voice]
→ *FRA: because my voice is bad [=! a low tone of voice]
4 *MOM: absolutely not
→ *MOM: no::
5 *FRA: please:: mom::
6 *MOM: why?
7 *FRA: [=! nods]
8 *MOM: I don't think so
→ *MOM: it's a beautiful voice, like a man
→ *MOM: big, beautiful::
9 *FRA: no
%pau: common 2.5
10 *MOM: tonight:: if we hear the sound of crisp bread ((the noise when crisp bread is being
chewed)) [=! smiling]
11 *FRA: well bu: but not::: to this point
%pau: common 4.0

In the framework of the CD, we can define the sequence from turn 5 to turn 10 as an argumentation stage. Indeed, in this phase of the discussion the mother tries to convince Francesco to accept her standpoint (*The Francesco's voice is beautiful*). Within the selected sequence we intend to focus on the turn 10, when the mother makes use of an ironic expression with a high degree of implicitness (“*tonight if we hear the sound of crisp bread*”). It is interesting to notice how Francesco maintains his standpoint, though, decreasing its strength (turn 11, “*well bu but not to this point*”). Indeed, we might paraphrase Francesco’s answer as follows: “Yes, I have a bad voice, but not it’s not that bad. Not to that point, not as strange as the noise of crisp bread being chewed”. Accordingly, commenting ironically on Francesco’s behavior may represent an argumentative strategy adopted by the mother in order to withdraw or to decrease the strength of the child’s standpoint.

The second excerpt concerns a discussion at dinnertime of a Swiss family, composed by the mother, the father, and three children (Giovanni, 10 years old, Leonardo, 8 years old and Valentina, 5 years old). During dinner a difference of opinion emerges between Leonardo and his mother. In fact, the child wants to have the lemons that are placed on the table to play with. As the mother disagrees, a discussion takes place.

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4.2. Excerpt 2. Participants: mother (MOM), Leonardo (Leo)

1 *LEO: mom:: look!
→ *LEO: look what I'm doing with the lemon
→ *LEO: I'm rubbing it
→ *LEO: I'm rubbing out the colour
%sit: MOM takes some lemons and stoops down in front of LEO so that
her face is level with his
%sit: MOM places some lemons on the table
2 *LEO: give them to me
3 *MOM: eh?
4 *LEO: can I have this lemon?
5 *MOM: no:: no:: no:: no::
6 *LEO: why not?
7 *MOM: why not? because, Leonardo, mom needs the lemons
8 *LEO: why mom?
9 *MOM: because Leonardo your dad wants to eat a good salad today
10 *LEO: ah:: ok mom

In pragma-dialectical terms, from turn 6 to turn 9, the mother and the child go through an argumentation stage. In particular, we focus on the turn 9 when the mother explicitly stresses the father's authority ("*because Leonardo, your dad wants to eat a good salad today*"). It is a case in which the parent's authority is the argumentative strategy adopted in order to convince the child. Indeed, by anticipating the possible consequences of his behavior, the mother is telling to Leonardo that his father may be displeased by the person who was the cause of him not having a good salad. The father's authority seems to persuade Leonardo to accept the mother's prohibition ("*ah ok mom*"). Evidently, not to displease his father is, in Leonardo's eyes, more valuable than playing with the lemons. Moreover, we could also hypothesize that this point was well known by the mother, who consequently decided to stress the father's authority in order to convince Leonardo to accept her standpoint. Accordingly, the mother's behavior could be interpreted as the specific form of *strategic maneuvering* (van Eemeren, 2010) adopted with Leonardo in order to achieve her goal. In fact, the notion of strategic maneuvering takes into account the arguers' personal motivations for engaging in a CD: participants do not just aim at performing speech acts that will be considered reasonable by their fellow discussants (in terms of dialectical aim), but they also direct their contributions towards gaining success, achieving the perlocutionary effect of acceptance (as a rhetorical aim). As suggested by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002), the parties in an argumentative discussion attempt to be persuasive (in order have their standpoint accepted) while observing the critical standards for argumentative discourse.

Besides, unlike the previous example, the mother seems more aimed at giving the reasons on which her opinion is based, rather than to convince the child. Indeed, if in the Italian family (excerpt 1) the mother makes use of an ironic comment in order to persuade her child to withdraw his standpoint, in the Swiss family (excerpt 2) the mother justifies her refusal to give the lemons to the child by setting out her reasons ("*because, Leonardo, mom needs the lemons*"; "*because Leonardo your dad wants to eat a good salad*").

5. Conclusion

In this study we looked at how argumentation shapes the communicative practices of Italian and Swiss families, and more particularly how family members engage themselves in resolving differences of opinion during everyday interactions. The qualitative analysis of the two excerpts has brought to light two kinds of argumentative strategies

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adopted by parents with their children. First, commenting ironically on the attitudes or behavior of children appears to be an argumentative strategy adopted by parents to persuade the children to withdraw or decrease the strength of their standpoint. Second, the admonition to parent's authority (the father's authority, in our case) is the argumentative strategy adopted by parents in order to convince the child to accept rules and prohibitions. Furthermore, differences in the argumentative styles adopted by Italian and Swiss families were observed. Indeed, the argumentative strategy of the Italian mother seems more aimed at rapidly convincing rather than engaging in a discussion with her child. On the other hand, in the Swiss family, the mother seems to adopt a style more based on giving the reasons on which her opinion is based rather than to convince.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

*	indicate the speaker's turn
→	maintaining the turn of talk by the speaker
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
!	exclaiming intonation
.	falling intonation
:	prolonging of sounds
%pau	pause
%sit	description of the situation/setting
(())	segments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of the situation
[=]	segments added by the transcriber to indicate some paralinguistic features