

Issues leading to argumentative discussions during family mealtime conversations.

ANTONIO BOVA

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

antonio.bova@unicatt.it

This paper sets out to investigate the issues leading parents and children aged 3-7 years to argumentative discussions during mealtimes. The research design implies a corpus of 30 video-recorded separate meals of 10 middle to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families. The findings of this study indicate that the argumentative discussions between parents and children unfold around issues that are generated both by parental directives and children's requests. The results of this study suggest that argumentative discussions during family mealtime are not mere conflictual episodes that must be avoided, but they have a crucial educational function.

KEYWORDS: Family; Argumentation, Parent-child interaction, Issues, Pragma-dialectical approach, Argumentum Model of Topics

1. INTRODUCTION

During family mealtime it is possible to observe how behaviors and opinions of family members are frequently put into doubt and negotiated (Bova, 2019; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2018; Bova et al., 2017; Fiese et al., 2006). The parents could easily avoid engaging in a discussion by advancing arguments in support of their standpoint, and yet resolve the difference of opinion in their favor, forcing children to accept, perhaps unwillingly, their standpoint (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2014, 2015). The difference in age, role, and skills with their children would allow them to do so (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2015; Blum-Kulka, 1997). Now it is evident that this happens frequently. However, equally frequently during mealtime, we can observe argumentative discussions, in which parents and children put forward arguments to convince the other party that their standpoint is more valid, and therefore deserves to be accepted (Bova, 2015; Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2013b). In this

study, we shall try to understand when this happens. In particular, the present paper sets out to investigate the issues that lead parents to start an argumentative discussion with their children aged 3-7 years during mealtimes. The research question that I aim to answer is the following: “Which types of issues lead parents to start an argumentative discussion with their children during mealtimes?” This research question will be answered through a qualitative analysis of argumentative discussions between parents and children. The analytical approach is based on the pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004) that proposes a definition of argumentation according to the standard of reasonableness: an argumentative discussion starts when the speaker advances his/her standpoint, and the listener casts doubts upon it or directly attacks the standpoint. Accordingly, confrontation, in which disagreement regarding a standpoint is externalized in a discursive exchange or anticipated by the speaker, is a necessary condition for an argumentative discussion to occur. This model particularly fits this study, and, more generally, the study of argumentative interactions occurring in ordinary, not institutionalized, contexts such as family mealtime conversations, because it describes how argumentative discourse would be structured when aimed at resolving differences of opinion.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part, a concise review of the most relevant literature on family argumentative discussions is presented and critically discussed. Afterward, I will describe the methodology that our study is based on. In the last part of the paper, I will present and discuss the results obtained from the analysis.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Data corpus

The data corpus is composed of 30 video-recorded separate family meals (constituting about 20 hours of video data), constructed from two different sets of data, named sub-corpus 1 and sub-corpus 2. All participants are Italian-speaking and did not receive any financial support to take part in the study. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 min. Sub-corpus 1 consists of 15 video-recordings of mealtime conversations of five Italian families living in Rome. For the selection of the Italian families, we recruited families including both parents and at least two children, with the younger of preschool age (three to six years old) and the other of primary school age. Based on the parental answers to questionnaires about socio-economic status (SES) and personal details that family members filled before the video-

recordings, it was established that participants were middle to upper-middle-class families. Most parents at the time of data collection were in their late 30s ($M = 37.40$; $SD = 3.06$). All families in sub-corpus 1 had two children. Sub-corpus 2 consists of 15 video-recorded meals in 5 middle to upper-middle-class Swiss families with high socioeconomic status, all residents in the Lugano area. The criteria adopted in the selection of the Swiss families mirror those adopted in the creation of sub-corpus 1. At the time of data collection, most parents were in their mid-30s ($M = 35.90$; $SD = 1.91$). Sub-corpus 2 families had two or three children.

3. ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion is used, in the present study, as a grid for the analysis, since it provides the criteria for the selection of the argumentative discussions as well as for the identification of the types of issues, which lead parents and children to engage in them. The pragma-dialectical ideal model of a critical discussion spells out four stages that are necessary for a dialectical resolution of differences of opinion between a protagonist that advances and sustains a standpoint, and an antagonist that assesses it critically: at the confrontation stage is established that there is a dispute. A standpoint is advanced and questioned; at the opening stage, the decision is made to attempt to resolve the dispute through a regulated argumentative discussion. One party takes the role of protagonist, and the other party takes the role of antagonist; at the argumentation stage, the protagonist defends his/her standpoint, and the antagonist elicits further argumentation from him/her if he/she has further doubts; at the concluding stage, it is established whether the dispute has been resolved on account of the standpoint or the doubt concerning the standpoint having been retracted. For the present study, the analysis will be focused on the first stage of the model of critical discussion, i.e., the confrontation stage, to identify the issues leading parents to start an argumentative discussion with their children. In this stage, the interlocutors establish that they hold different opinions about a certain issue: "the dialectical objective of the parties is to achieve clarity concerning the specific issues that are at stake in the difference of opinion" (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p.138). The discussions between parents and children will be considered as argumentative if the following criteria are satisfied: a) a difference of opinion between parents and children arises around a certain issue; b) at least one standpoint advanced by one of the two parents is questioned by one or more children or vice versa; c) at least one family member (parent or

child) puts forward at least one argument either in favor of or against the standpoint being questioned.

4. RESULTS

Within the 30 video-recorded meals constituting the general corpus of this research, I selected 127 argumentative discussions among family members. The argumentative discussions between parents and children represent a large part of the corpus of argumentative discussions (N=107; 84%). In particular, what emerges from the analysis of the 107 selected sequences is that the argumentative discussions unfold around two different types of issues that can be described through one of the following two questions: “Should child X do Y?” “May child X do Y?” The first question allows consideration of all issues generated by an initial request by one of the children with which (at least) one of the two parents showed to disagree. The second question, instead, allows one to consider all issues generated by an initial directive by one of the two parents with which (at least) one of the children showed to disagree. In most cases, the issues leading parents and children to start an argumentative discussion were generated by parental directives (N=76; 71%) and were related to the following categories (cf. Figure 1): feeding practices, the teaching of correct table manners, and social behavior of children outside the family context.

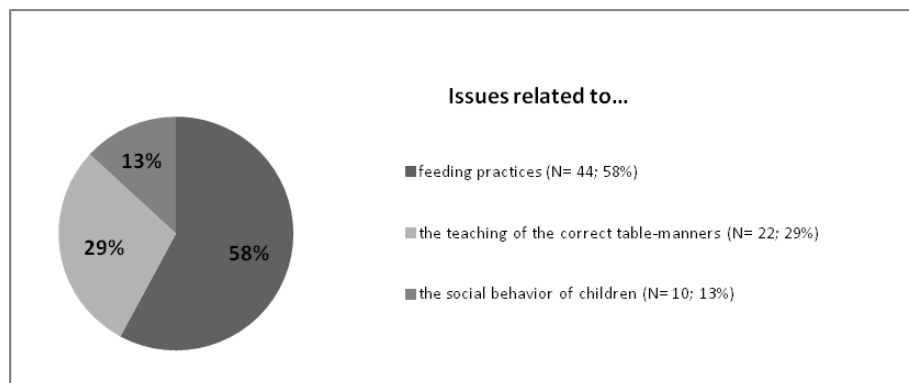


Figure 1: Types of issues generated by parental directives

Children's requests generated almost one-third (N=31; 29%) of the issues leading parents and children to start an argumentative discussion during mealtimes. I observed that these issues related to the following categories (cf. Figure 2): eating behaviors, the teaching of correct table manners, and behavior of children and parents both outside and within the family context. The categories are somewhat like the issues used by parents in their directives to children.

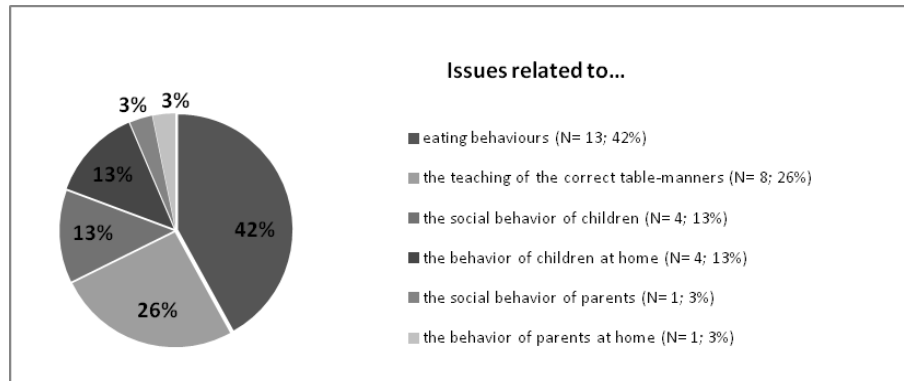


Figure 2: Types of issues generated by children's requests

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the argumentative discussions unfold around issues that are generated most frequently by parental directives and less frequently by children's requests. These findings are like the results of other studies on family mealtime conversations. For example, Kendall (2008) has shown that the discursive positions fathers and mothers take up are oriented to negotiating authority and favoring connection with children. When mothers perform more meal-related and sociable functions, fathers support them discursively. Further evidence of these aspects is offered by Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2010) on parents' discursive positions and by Aronsson and Gottzén (2011) concerning how people shift between distinct intergenerational positions during family interactions at dinnertime.

In discussing the results, I will present a selection of some excerpts representative (regarding modality and frequency) of the results obtained from the entire corpus of data to offer a view of the types of issues leading parents and children to start an argumentative discussion during mealtimes.

4.1. Issues Generated by Parental Directives

Even though the issues generated by parental directives also include the social behavior of children outside the family context, the argumentative discussions related to issues generated by parental directives are in large part strictly bound to the specific situational activity children are involved in, i.e., the activity of mealtimes. These issues frequently concern feeding practices. The following discussion between a father and his 7-year-old son, Samuele, offers an illustration of how a parental directive related to feeding practices can trigger the beginning of an argumentative discussion.

Excerpt 1

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Samuele (SAM, 7 years and 2 months), Daniele (DAN, 5 years and 4 months).

- %sit: SAM is drinking a soft drink
1. *DAD: stop drinking XXX ((name of the brand of the soft drink))
Samuele!
- *DAD: now I'll give you some rice.
2. *SAM: no, I don't want anything else: ((sitting on the chair))
- *SAM: please, no more. [! shaking his head in refusal]
3. *DAD: no:: you haven't eaten enough.
4. *SAM: no:::
- *SAM: no:: I'm full:
- %act: SAM looks towards DAD and starts drinking the soft drink again
5. *DAD: I told you:: Samuele stop drinking this stuff ((the soft drink))
- %act: DAD takes SAM's glass and takes it to the kitchen

The excerpt is opened by a father's directive (line 1) that can be interpreted as implicitly condensing a standpoint and a justification: in the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, the father's claim concerns an invitation to the child ("you should eat some food"), followed by a justification ("because you are drinking too much"). It is in line 2 when a difference of opinion between Samuele and his father arises. The child's intervention constitutes the beginning of the argumentative discussion, as the child replies to the father that he does not want to eat anything else. What is interesting in argumentative terms is the fact that Samuele does not consider that he must stop drinking, but immediately focuses on the central claim of the parent, namely to convince the child to eat the rice. Samuele's choice, i.e., a refusal to the father's proposal through a counter-position on his argument, determines the orientation of the discussion exclusively around the food. The father ratifies this specific direction of the argumentative discussion in line 3, as he puts forward an argument based on the quantity of food. However, as we can observe from Samuele's answer in line 4, this argument is not effective enough to convince the child to accept the father's standpoint. The opposition of Samuele ("no::: no:: I'm full") determines a change of strategy in the father's position. The adult turns back to the first directive (to stop drinking) to make explicit the fact that Samuele cannot discuss the parental issue anymore. The father's directive is advanced again using

the expression “I told you:: Samuele” (line 5) and through the action of taking the soft drink away from Samuele. From the father’s perspective, this last intervention is a way to re-conduct the discussion to the first level, giving as an argument the inappropriate conduct of Samuele who is drinking instead of eating. Gaining further insights into the context of family conversations can provide a richer perspective on the goals dominating the participants’ argumentation: what could be interpreted as an imposition of the order could turn out to be a constructive move aiming at teaching the value of argumentation as a rational way to solve differences of opinion.

Parental directives did not pertain exclusively to feeding practices, but also the teaching of correct table manners. The following example shows how other types of parental directives can generate issues that lead parents to start an argumentative discussion with their children.

Excerpt 2

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Gabriele (GAB, 7 years and 5 months), Adriana (ADR, 4 years and 4 months).

- %act: GAB gets down from the table, and he is about to go and sit on the couch
1. *MOM: Gabriele, you can’t go to watch TV on the couch
 - %act: GAB comes back to sit at the table
 2. *GAB: but I want to watch TV on the couch!
 3. *MOM: Gabriele, during mealtimes you cannot get down from the table
 4. *GAB: why not?
 5. *MOM: because it is ill-mannered to do it
 6. *GAB: mmm
 - %act: GAB remains seated at the table and continues to eat.

In this sequence, the difference of opinion is between the mother and her 7-year-old son, Gabriele. The child leaves the table and is about to go and sit on the couch to watch TV. The mother disagrees with her son’s behavior and makes her standpoint explicit in line 1. However, the adult’s directive, in its actual form, does not provide any reasons. Gabriele interprets the fact that he is not allowed to watch TV as a directive against his wish. In fact, in line 2 the child, who came back to sit at the meal-table, disagrees with his mother and advances his standpoint using the adversative conjunction “but” to mark the different position concerning the adult statement. In this phase of the discussion,

the issue leading the mother to start an argumentative discussion with her son is related to the teaching of correct table manners.

To understand the issue discussed in the presented sequence, the circumstances in which the argumentation takes place must be considered. In the present case, the possibility of watching TV is not a topic of discussion per se, but it is the fact that family rules, at least for this family, imply finishing dinner before going engaging in other activities (including watching TV on the couch). Accordingly, in this case, the mother-child argumentative discussion is evidence for semiotic regulation of new behavior acquisition because it has not only the purpose of teaching a new, good behavior, but also regulating their action (or, in this case, not acting). The discursive interventions of Gabriele have played a crucial role since his mother has been challenged to defend her standpoint. Based on this issue, the mother has been forced to specify the reasons for her directive, and to justify why he was not allowed to leave the table at that point. The implicit accusation made by Gabriele (the impossibility of going to watch TV despite his wish, "I want...") requires the parent to give a justification. The question is whether and how the participants use the potential of dissent to handle the critical question argumentatively. Finally, after the unilateral directive, the mother offers a strong disagreement preventing the possibility of continuing the debate.

4.2. Issues Generated by Children's Requests

Mostly, the issues generated by children's requests concern activities strictly related to mealtimes, such as eating behavior and teaching of correct social norms and behavior by parents. These findings are in line with the frequencies we found in the analysis of parental directives. The following dialogue between a father and his 7-year-old daughter, Manuela, is an example of how a child's request to the adult-related to having to eat a particular food can trigger the beginning of an argumentative discussion.

Excerpt 3

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 39 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Manuela (MAN, 7 years and 4 months), Filippo (FIL, 5 years and 1 month), Carlo (CAR, 3 years and 1 month).

1. MAN: can I leave this little bit of pasta? ((slightly raising the plate to show the contents to her father))
2. DAD: no, you can't
3. MAN: why, dad?
4. DAD: you haven't eaten anything, Manuela

In this exchange, the difference of opinion between the child, Manuela, and her father concerns the amount of pasta to be eaten: Manuela wants to leave a little bit of pasta that is still on her plate, but the father disagrees with her (line 2, “no, you can’t”). While the child’s expression, “this little bit,” aims to obtain a concession, the father, on the contrary, replies with a prohibition. The adult’s contribution opens the ground for an argumentative discussion because the participants express two opposite standpoints. By asking a why-question (line 3), Manuela is challenging the parental prohibition and shows her willingness to know the reasons on which the father’s prohibition is based. This position is argumentatively strategic because it obliges the father to put forward an argument in support of his standpoint (line 4, “you haven’t eaten anything, Manuela”), refuting the daughter’s argument based on this little bit. However, the argument related to the presumed quantity of food that must be eaten closes the child’s possibility to extend the argumentative exchange. The reason for the directive is connected to the non-consistent behavior of Manuela during the dinner and, for this reason, there is no further space for debating about the reasons why the child cannot leave some food.

The issues leading parents to start an argumentative discussion with their children were also generated by children’s requests about the possibility of teaching the children how to behave correctly, both in social interactions within and outside the family context, especially at school. For instance, the following example illustrates how a request by the 5-year-old son, Alessandro, who wants to take a pill from the medicine container, can lead to an argumentative discussion with his mother.

Excerpt 4

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 36 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Stefano (STE, 8 years 5 and months), Alessandro (ALE, 5 years and 6 months).

- %sit: ALE touches and looks at the container with the pills
- 1. *ALE: I’m: going to take one of these.
- *ALE: yes!
- 2. *MOM: you can’t, Alessandro!
- 3. *ALE: what?
- 4. *MOM: you can’t. ((shakes her head))
- 5. *ALE: why not?
- 6. *MOM: because children, have to take special medicine
- *MOM: they can’t take medicine for adults
- *MOM: otherwise, they will get sick.

7. *ALE: and before did you also feel sick?
 8. *MOM: no, because I'm an adult
 9. *ALE: and me?
 10. *MOM: you are still: a child
%pau: 1.0 sec
- %sit: Alessandro bangs the medicine container on the table. MOM reaches toward him to try to make him eat a piece of fruit. ALE turns his head away quickly and slowly leaves the kitchen to go toward DAD and STE

In this exchange, the issue leading the mother to start an argumentative discussion with Alessandro is related to teaching the child proper behavior at home. The sequence begins when the child tells the mother of his intention to take a pill from the container. The argumentative discussion is opened by the mother, in lines 2 and 4, when she disagrees with the child's behavior, twice repeating, "You can't.". In this phase, we can observe that the child's standpoint (I want to take a pill from the container) meets with the mother's refusal (You can't, Alessandro). Interestingly, in the corpus, disagreements between parents and children are not only related to the generation of reasons regarding the truth-value of an assertion advanced by children, but also to the control of desired/undesired behavior by parents, e.g., on how to behave appropriately, both within and without the family context. As in previous cases, the argumentative strategy used by the child is the why-question to the adult to challenge the mother to defend her standpoint. In doing so, Alessandro makes no effort to defend his position by advancing arguments on his behalf; instead, he assumes a waiting position before accepting or putting into doubt the parental directive. The mother does not avoid justifying her prohibition, putting forward her argument and evoking a general rule – children have to – to which Alessandro is also subject.

Interestingly, in the corpus, I also observed one case where the issue leading to an argumentative discussion was related to the behavior of parents outside the family context, and one case to the parental conduct within the family context. These two issues, both generated by children's requests, can be described as follows: May Mom go to the sports hall to pick up Paolo? May Mom prepare breakfast for Dad every day?

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that argumentative discussions are not primarily aimed at resolving verbal conflicts among family members, but they mainly appear to be an instrument that enables parents to

transmit, and children to learn, values and models about how to behave in a culturally appropriate way. Mealtimes appear as activity settings and opportunity spaces where family members intentionally and unintentionally express their feelings and expectations. Of course, just because opportunities exist does not mean they are taken. In our case, we observed that the argumentative discussions unfold around issues that are generated both by parental directives and by children's requests. The parental directives mostly concern context-bound activities such as having to eat a particular food or teaching correct table manners. The issues triggered by children's requests refer to a wide range of activities, mainly context-bound, but also in some cases context-unbound, such as the children's behavior outside and within the family context.

The observed dynamics characterizing family discussions reveal that argumentation is a co-constructed activity in which children play a role that is equally fundamental to that of their parents. Using a qualitative approach of analysis, i.e., the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, we have observed that by engaging in argumentative discussions, parents accept (assume) the commitment to transmit rules, values, and correct behaviors to their children. By participating in argumentative discussions with their parents, children can become more aware of their active role within the family context. The analytical reconstruction of how family members dialectically solve differences of opinion is thus a useful way to highlight choices, forms, and dynamics adopted by adults and children at mealtimes.

Furthermore, the argumentative exchanges we have observed in our data appear as areas of socialization in which accusations are used as declarative statements where a family member explicitly mentions the activity or the attitude that constitutes a violation, attributing a negative quality to it. Argumentative discourse in the family context enables behavioral change and behavioral control. The argumentative interactions between parents and children generate not only a cognitive effect but, also, a behavioral one. For example, parents start an argumentative discussion with their children to teach them how to behave appropriately not only at the meal-table but also in all situations in which children can be in contact with other people outside the family context. The school context and the children's behavior with their peers, e.g., schoolmates, represent the issues parents are most concerned about. A possible implication of this aspect concerns how the children's capacity to start an argumentative discussion with their parents could influence their future ability to be actively involved in exchanges with other adults.

Within the family context, argumentation can contribute to improving the conversational, social, and cognitive skills of adults and

children. Argumentation is constitutive, not just disruptive, of social life, leading adults and children to continually renegotiate the norms of interaction and contributing to the construction of the family borders from a social and linguistic point of view. For this reason, a focus on the moves of people during daily argumentative discussions is, in our opinion, a way to understand how parents and children recognize continuously what they are doing and what they have to do with the interlocutors. As people can deal with disagreements through reasonable argumentative exchanges, this capacity is considered as a resource within the family context.

From an argumentative perspective, I believe that the role of children is not less important than the role of their parents. Through the analysis of argumentative sequences, we have seen that their presence and involvement in family conversations favor the beginning of argumentative discussions and represents a stimulus factor, inducing parents to reason with their children. Through their continuous questioning, children show their desire to find out the – often implicit – reasons on which their parents' standpoints are based. Children's questions reflect the children's desire to know and find out what is, until that point, unknown to them (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013b). The questions asked by children to their parents and caregivers, in general, represent a great educational opportunity; because of the children's questions, the parents need to advance arguments in support of their standpoint. It is a responsibility of parents and caregivers, in general, to take advantage of the opportunity offered by children's questions, providing the educational responses that children need. This feature is connected to the value of family conversations as spaces in which the dynamics of generational positions can be developed as part of language socialization and interactional events.

REFERENCES

- Arcidiacono, F., & Bova, A. (2015). Activity-bound and activity-unbound arguments in response to parental eat-directives at mealtimes: Differences and similarities in children of 3-5 and 6-9 years old. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 6, 40-55.
- Arcidiacono, F., & Pontecorvo, C. (2010). The discursive construction of the fathers' positioning within family participation frameworks. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 25(4), 449-472.
- Aronsson, K., & Gottzén, L. (2011). Generational Positions at a Family Dinner: Food Morality and Social Order. *Language in Society*, 40(4), 405-426.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1997). *Dinner talk: Cultural patterns of sociability and socialization in family discourse*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Bova, A. (2015). Adult as a source of expert opinion in child's argumentation during family mealtime conversations. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 4(1), 4-20.
- Bova, A. (2019). *The Functions of Parent-Child Argumentation*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2013a). Invoking the authority of feelings as a strategic maneuver in family mealtime conversations. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 23(3), 206-224.
- Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2013b). Investigating children's Why-questions. A study comparing argumentative and explanatory function. *Discourse Studies*, 15(6), 713-734.
- Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2014). "You must eat the salad because it is nutritious". Argumentative strategies adopted by parents and children in food-related discussions at mealtimes. *Appetite*, 73, 81-94.
- Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2015). Beyond conflicts. Origin and types of issues leading to argumentative discussions during family mealtimes. *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 3(2), 263-288.
- Bova, A., & Arcidiacono, F. (2018). Interplay between parental argumentative strategies, children's reactions, and topics of disagreement during mealtime conversations. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 19, 124-133.
- Bova, A., Arcidiacono, F., & Clément F. (2017). The transmission of what is taken for granted in children's socialization: The role of argumentation in family interactions. In C. Ilie & G. Garzone (Eds.), *Argumentation across communities of practice: Multi-disciplinary perspectives* (pp. 259-288). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- van Eemeren F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (1992). *Argumentation, communication, and fallacies. A pragma-dialectical perspective*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation: The pragma-dialectical approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kendall, S. (2008). The Balancing Act: Framing Gendered Parental Identities at Dinnertime. *Language in Society*, 37(4), 539-568.