

Family conversations : the relevance of context in evaluating argumentation

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FAMILY CONVERSATIONS: THE RELEVANCE OF CONTEXT IN EVALUATING ARGUMENTATION

This paper investigates how to reconstruct and evaluate argumentation in the context of Italian family conversations. By means of a case study, we show how understanding *context* is essential for the analytical reconstruction of argumentation. Within conversations at dinnertime, we rely on insights from Conversation and Discourse Analysis in order to interpret context-bound communicative and argumentative moves among family members. The analysis of the family exchange offers to us a view of how argumentation shapes the communicative practices occurring at dinnertime and how it can foster a critical attitude in the process of decision-making carried out in this context.

Keywords: argumentation, analytical reconstruction, family conversations, context, evaluation, socialization.

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This paper aims at underlying the relevance of the context in communicative practices occurring within family conversations. As argumentation is rooted in the context in which it takes place and is significantly determined by it, we are interested in looking at what conditions the building of consent is possible in the argumentative activity carried out by family members. Our data were collected within natural dinner conversations, with the main aim to document the discursive interactions and the socialization strategies that are practiced in Italian families (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono 2007).

1. Analytical Reconstruction of Argumentation in Context

Argumentation is a mode of discourse in which the involved 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). Political and media discourse, public controversy, juridical justification, and other forms of institutionalised interactions have been traditionally recognized as contexts in which argumentation plays an essential role.

In this paper, we focus on the less investigated context of family conversations. Even if the notion of context has received many definitions following different positions of scholars, according to Rigotti & Rocci (2006) we consider the context not as a container but as a *constituent* of the communication process. Family conversation is a setting to investigate the interpersonal and social practices of interaction, following the idea of framing: this notion refers to the context that permits the participants to recognize at every time what they are doing and what they have to do with their interlocutors. At the same time, context is co-constructed by means of their communicative moves. Indeed, the family context shows to have 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 discursive interactions, can be considered the matrix of all other forms of argumentation (Muller-Mirza et al. 2009). In relation to other more institutionalised argumentative contexts, moreover, family conversations, characterized by a large prevalence of interpersonal relationships and by a relative freedom concerning issues

that can be tackled, represent a challenge for the analytical reconstruction and for the evaluation of argumentation (compare Brumark 2008).

In this paper, we refer to the model of a *critical discussion* (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, 2004). This model is assumed for its *normative* function, insofar as it elicits the essential constituents of an argumentative discussion, namely those constituents that are necessary for a communicative interaction to be argumentative. In our analysis, the model has both an *heuristic* and a *critical* function: it works as a guideline to identify relevant moves from the argumentative point of view (*analytical reconstruction*), and it allows interpreting real-life interactions in terms of their correspondence to an ideal model of how a reasonable resolution of a difference of opinion should be.

The model of a critical discussion foresees four ideal stages, which do not mirror the actual temporal proceeding of the argumentative discussion, but the essential constituents of the reasonable – i.e. *critical* – discussion. In the *confrontation stage* of a critical discussion, the difference of opinion emerges: “it becomes clear that there is a standpoint that is not accepted because it runs up against doubt or contradiction.” In other words, the protagonist puts forward a standpoint, and the antagonist reacts to it either by casting doubt on it (giving rise, thus, to a *non-mixed* dispute), or by presenting an alternative standpoint (which originates a *mixed* dispute). In the *opening stage*, the protagonist and the antagonist “try to find out how much relevant common ground they share.” In the *argumentation stage*, arguments in support to the standpoint(s) are advanced and critically tested. Finally, in the *concluding stage*, the critical discussion is concluded, “in agreement when the protagonist’s standpoint is acceptable for both and the antagonist’s doubt must be retracted or that the not only standpoint of the protagonist must be retracted” (ibid: 60–61).

We also integrate the approach of Conversation and Discourse Analysis in the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, in order to arrive at a more comprehensive account of the interaction dynamics in the context of family conversation.

Our task here is to verify the extent to which knowledge of the context (conversation at dinnertime) is relevant to analytically reconstruct and evaluate the argumentative dynamics of this interaction.

2. Conversational Approach and Discursive Analysis within the Family Context

Over past decades, the importance of the study of family conversations has emerged as a productive field of research in the social sciences. The notion of conversation as the common discursive practice in everyday interaction and the idea of language socialization, as Ochs (1988) taught us in a very convincing way, involved in the notion of conversation as interpersonal and social interaction, have been the topics of various studies in psychology, anthropology and sociology. As all languages are social in their genesis as well as functions, and imply various socio-normative representations (Billig 1996; De Grada & Bonaiuto 2002), both language and common knowledge model the individual experience. The study of conversation “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: 299).

The approaches of *Conversation Analysis* (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) and *Discourse Analysis* (Antaki 1994; Edwards, Potter & Middleton 1992) are two main alternatives to the traditional methods of study in social sciences. These approaches analyze the conversation in the actual context of the everyday life, as it occurs spontaneously, in order to identify the sequential patterns of discourse produced by the participants. The main idea is to study “social life in situ, in the most ordinary of settings, examining the most routine, everyday, naturally occurring activities in their concrete details” (Psathas 1995: 1–2). As social actors construct a mutual understanding in their verbal interactions, the organization of daily life is supported by a series of assumptions shared and continuously confirmed through social exchanges. At the core of these approaches, there is also the need to assume the participants’ own perspective, in order to explore the structures of expression used in conversation (such as words, sounds, movements), as well as the structures of meaning (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 paradigms of symbolic interaction (Kaye 1989; Schaffer 1984) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), the analysis of talk-in-interac-

tion 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). In our analytical reconstruction of argumentation, we are interested in better understanding how argumentation among family members occur and develop following certain kinds of implicit rules and roles, motives and finalities. As previous studies (Stein & Albro 2001) have pointed out the relevance of the personal and social aims of the interlocutors and the capacity for perspective taking, static models of argumentative analysis are not sufficient to capture the complexity of the interactional dynamics and the personal and interpersonal goals that are at stake in ordinary life situations in which participants are not explicitly focusing on the validity of the arguments.

3. The Case Study: Methodological Aspects

3.1. Research Project and Participant Families

The present study is part of a larger project on Italian family conversations (Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono 2007). The general aim of the research has been the observation and the analysis of the socialization processes that occur at dinnertime, when family members are engaged in spontaneous and prolonged interactions at home. The general data corpus is constituted by the recordings of 76 dinners, held by 23 Italian middle class families from different cities; the families were selected on the grounds of similar criteria (presence of both parents; of a child aged from 3 to 6; and of at least one preadolescent sibling). Researchers met families in a preliminary phase, to inform them about the general lines of the research and the procedures, and to get the informed consent. During the first visit, a researcher was in charge of placing the camera and instructing the participants on how to use the technology. Families did the video-recordings by themselves, when the researcher was not present. Each family videotaped their dinnertime four 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. The other three dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed following

the jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson 1985)¹, revised by two other researchers (until a high level of consent was reached) and then coded.

3.2. Aims and Criteria of Analysis

The goal of this study is to analyze the role of the context within family conversations at dinnertime, in order to be able to evaluate the argumentative processes co-constructed by parents and children. Concerning the specific and situated setting of our observations (family conversations at dinnertime), we advance the hypothesis that a careful analytical reconstruction of the critical discussion and the consequent evaluation of the quality of argumentation² also requires a detailed conversational and discursive analysis of the sequence in which the argumentative moves are constructed by the participants.

Following Schegloff (1990), we have selected conversational sequences occurring in family interactions, in order to analyze the type of backings (Toulmin 1969; Pontecorvo 1987) produced by participants. In order to consider these sequences as relevant for our study, we are referring to the concept of “participants’ categories” (Sacks 1992), as we avoid making predictive assumptions regarding interactants’ motivational, psychological, and sociological characteristics. As suggested by Heritage (1995: 396) these factors can only be invoked if the participants themselves are “noticing, attending to, or orienting to” them in the course of their interaction.

4. The Evaluation of Argumentation in Context

In order to analyze the interactive processes by which family members jointly construct and negotiate social relationships and meanings, we consider the analytic framework that takes into account both local aspects of talk-in-interaction and global aspects of social structure. We present below an excerpt as a representative sequence of argumentation among parents and children, with the goal to underline the relevance of the context in

¹ For the symbols of transcription, see the Appendix.

² The term evaluation refers to the interpretation of communicative moves in terms of their relevance to the critical (reasonable) resolution of a difference of opinions.

evaluating the quality of the verbal interaction. In our qualitative analysis we will show how the model of the critical discussion in evaluating the argumentative moves of the participants requires a detailed examination of the contextual elements of the discursive sequence constructed by family members.

Excerpt 1: Family DEL, dinner 3; participants: mom, dad, daughter 1 Serena (age: 10,7), daughter 2 Daniela (age: 5,6). In the excerpt, fictitious names replace real names in order to ensure anonymity.

((family members are seated at the table waiting for dinner. Serena is seated on the edge of her chair. Her feet are rest on tips of her toes))

1. DAD: Se[rena.
2. Serena: [a little: BIT
3. DAD: Serena, how you are sea:ted? eh!
4. (1.0)
5. Serena: how am I seated (.) sorry? how am I seated?
6. MOM: (you need a) (comfort) *((referring to Serena))*
7. (2.0)
8. DAD: (okay).
9. Daniela: but (.) with your feet on the flo:or:::!! *((shaking and seating))*
10. DAD: ()
11. Serena: dad: but HOW am I seated? *((in complaining tone))*
12. DAD: eat now. late:r. I will tell you later.

4.1. Conversational Analysis

In the excerpt, dad is questioning Serena's behavior: in turn 3 he is using a directive statement that is formed as an implicit criticism of how the child is seated. The turn of the father is an indirect speech act whose force differs from what is taken to be the literal meaning of the sentence uttered. The implicit father's request is to be seated properly. Concentrating on request, Brown (1980) has highlighted the relevance of different conditions to account for the different ways that a request can be framed. For example, to make a request a speaker must want the action done, believe that the interlocutor can do the action, believe that he/she wants to do

the action, and believe that he/she would not do the action unless asked to. The conditions associated with request are also completed, within specific settings, by different obligation relationships, such as role, authority and cooperative obligation. In the excerpt, the father's indirect speech act opens up a sequence in which Serena uses the same words of dad in order to defend herself, without providing a justification for her behavior but asking for a clarification (turn 5 "how am I seated sorry? how am I seated?"), while implicitly asking her father to back his indirect criticism. In turn 6, mom aligns with dad by implicitly questioning the attitude of Serena ("you need a comfort"), and in turn 11 the child repeats another time her previous question in order to mitigate the situation, even if her tone is complaining. During the sequence, the mother is not only supporting the father's perspective, but she plays a role of moderator between the logic of the rule and the logic of the family harmony. Even the other child (Daniela) offers her position about the attitude of Serena (turn 9 "but with your feet on the floor!"). The linguistic act she is doing is an invitation to her sister to be with the feet on the floor, as a sign of a proper behavior within the contingent situation. In this sense, this is an example of a distributed (multi-party) argumentation among participants. The sequence is closed by the father with a refusal to continue the conversation on the topic (turn 12 "eat now"), thus renouncing to a possible immediate compromise with her daughter ("later. I will tell you later").

In addition, the presented exchange plays other important roles in terms of identity processes and self elaboration, particularly in the relationships between parents and children (Hofer et al. 1994; Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo 2009; see also the "Discussion and Conclusion" section in this paper).

4.2. Argumentative Analysis

This passage is particularly interesting from the argumentative point of view because it seems to represent a case of failure of a proposal of initiating a critical discussion. The frame of the sequence, in which there is a situational accusation (Gruber 2001) focusing on violations of a norm during the ongoing interaction, permits the participants to postpone their argumentative moves, without an engagement in discussing and arguing

their positions. In the excerpt, the father's accusation is employed by family members as an interactional resource to exert a degree of discursive power, by placing constraints on discursive options available to the recipient. In this sense, the context is very important to understand how relations of power can be negotiated at a micro-level of interaction, by looking at the interplay of control manoeuvres and opposition strategies in the ongoing talk. In addition, as the power management is not a fixed social entity but it is dynamically negotiated in and through the conversation, verbal interactions at dinnertime can constitute a valuable site for the analysis of the way in which participants jointly produce and transform the social order and how they can position themselves through the sequence in which they are involved.

As for the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, at turn 3, the father's directive can be interpreted as implicitly condensing a standpoint and a justification, the standpoint being "you should be seated differently" and the justification "(because) it is evident that you are inadequately seated." The father, then, assumes the role of the protagonist of the critical discussion. Serena's answer at 5 (polemically restated at 11) is not configured as a counter-position on the father's argument. Rather, Serena challenges the validity of the father's statement: apparently, she is asking for precisising his standpoint (*how* am I seated?), thereby requesting a usage declarative (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984) to ensure mutual comprehension. However, Serena's intervention is actually more than a simple request for clarification. Her polemical tone and the repetition of her utterance suggest that she is indeed implying that her father's statement is insufficient, insofar as it rests on premises that are not an accepted starting point in the opening stage. This would require the father to assume as a standpoint the same proposition he used as an argument ("it is evident that you are inadequately seated"), and provide further backing; Serena, in fact, is implying that the fact that she is seated incorrectly is not self-evident. In this sub-discussion, clearly connected with the overarching one, the father is called upon to be the protagonist; the argument for supporting his standpoint should be in this case retrieved from a shared definition of what "being seated correctly" implies and, more in general, from the family's norms and customs about the acceptable behaviors at the dinner table; ultimately, this brings to consider the meaning that eating

together can have for the family itself. These aspects cannot be simply imposed by the parents, given the age of their two daughters, but they should be, at least to a certain extent, negotiated by means of a dedicated discussion. Serena's request for a sub-discussion shows how much the establishment of a well-founded opening stage is delicate and crucial in the family context. In fact, the problem here is not only finding premises to win one's cause according to a competitive interpretation of *strategic manoeuvring* (van Eemeren & Houtlosser 2002), but also to redefine the family's shared identity. Strategic manoeuvring, in this case, involves an overarching, shared and affectively relevant goal (Rocci 2005; Muller-Mirza et al. 2009) bound to the preservation of the family context itself.

At a first glance, the father's reaction appears problematic, as he refuses to go into this discussion and declares he wants to postpone it (turn 12 "I will tell you later"). Certainly, from the point of view of the analytical reconstruction of argumentation, both critical discussions – the overarching one, launched by the father, and the sub-discussion provoked by Serena – are blocked or at least suspended by means of this last move. Now, a dilemma is posed about whether this decision, imposed by the father thanks to his parental authority, is a signal indicating bad argumentative quality. Certainly, this is a possible interpretation: Serena's request is polemic in tone but legitimate from the point of view of admissible moves in a critical discussion; in fact, if the father is really relying on a starting point that is not shared or made explicit, he is violating a rule of reasonable conduct. However, the father's reticence could also be interpreted as a specific form of legitimate strategic manoeuvring. In fact, the father's choice might be motivated by the respect of certain family rites and customs; in particular, the conversation at the dinner table can be considered as an instrument of socialization and exchange where polemical discourse and conflict are not welcome because they would hinder this shared familiar goal. A linguistic clue that brings us to consider this second interpretation as more adequate is that the father avoids reproaching her for the complaining tone and he even does not "uptake" Daniela's suggestion, which would be a possible argument in favour of his position; nor does he compel Serena to change her behavior.

As van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004) suggest, knowledge of the context is relevant in the reconstruction; and, more specifically, the so-

called “third-order” conditions (ibid: 36–37), referring to the “external” 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. This opens the way to consider how the consideration of context constitutes the possible way out of our dilemma. Gaining further insights on the context of family conversations can provide a richer perspective on the goals dominating the participants’ strategic manoeuvring.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The general context of family interactions is given by the overarching goal of socialization. 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 acting some forbidden behaviors. 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 and evaluating argumentation, in our case, the father’s strategic manoeuvring: the father’s avoidance to open a sub-discussion on the negotiation of the behavioral norms can be read not as a refusal to argue but as an acknowledgement of the importance that the opening stage has for the family shared identity. The father uses his power to close the conversation in that moment but he also commits himself to re-open a discussion later.

Therefore, what could be interpreted as a mere imposition of an order could turn out to be a constructive move aiming not simply at conducting a sound argumentative discussion but also at teaching to children the value of argumentation, not as aggressive but as rational means to solve real cases of differences of opinion. Indirectly, by staying silent, the father might indicate that he highly values the positive role of learning to argue, as we found in another family long dispute between a “democratic” father and his 8-year old child (Pontecorvo, Monaco & Arcidiacono 2009).

In the last six years we studied as a group, within a Sloan sponsored comparative research, the everyday domestic life of eight Italian middle

class families by observing, interviewing and video-recording almost a normal week of life, beginning early in the morning and ending after children's bedtime. This new research has permitted to study other aspects of family life, such as the quality of family time in Italy and US, the playtime, the computer use and the scholastic homework of children, the language use of parents toward their children, the school and educational representations of parents. All these aspects offer to us a more complete view of how argumentation shapes the communicative practices occurring in families and, more specifically, how it 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.

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Appendix: Transcription Symbols

- . falling intonation
- ? rising intonation
- ! exclaiming intonation
- , continuing intonation
- : prolonging of sounds
- [simultaneous or overlapping speech
- C high tone (capital letter)
- (.) pause (2/10 second or less)
- () non-transcribing segment of talk
- (()) segments added by the transcribers in order to clarify some elements of the discourse

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