

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Argumentation At The Swedish Family Dinner Table



## *1. Introduction*

Argumentative competence is a basic communicative skill generally supposed to be acquired through formal training in school. Accordingly, most studies of argumentation among children have been based on discourse samples elicited in semi-formal or experimental pedagogic or clinical settings (see Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997).

However, in a paper on argumentative discourse in informal discussions between peers in a school situation, Maynard claims that children between five and seven years of age use argumentative techniques in an already quite sophisticated way. Furthermore, language acquisition research gives evidence for considerable argumentative knowledge even before school (Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997; Viksten Folkeryd 1998). Despite the focus on narratives as the first genre to appear in communication with small children (Snow 1978; Snow & Goldfield 1983; c. f. Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997) caregiver experience as well as observations of conversations between parents and children suggest that family discourse may be an important context for emerging argumentative strategies (Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997; Wiksten Folkeryd 1998, Wallgren Hemlin 2001). Focusing on family disputes, Wiksten Folkeryd shows for example rudimentary skills in children from one year and six months, in expressing both points of view and opinions. However, except for those mentioned above (i. e. Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997; Viksten Folkeryd 1998), there still seems to be surprisingly few studies of family discourse as a context for argumentative development. The fact is that studying argumentation in family discourse may be of interest not only for revealing the ontogenesis of argumentation but also for theoretical considerations: the irregular, illogical and often incoherent structures emerging in these natural discourse situations indeed put a challenge to current argumentative theories and models of analysis.

The study to be presented here is focused on argumentative exchanges during dinner conversations in twenty families with school children in the age range 6-17

years. By using a model of analysis adapted to argumentation occurring in informal conversation, I wanted to 1) describe certain recurrent argumentative features in the context of family discourse and 2) find out whether and how argumentative structures differ with the ages of the participating children. The study thus takes a developmental, non-evaluative (c. f. Vuchinich 1990) perspective and is primarily descriptive (c. f. Felton & Kuhn 2001), though governed by a model, basing model construction and analyses on a corpus of video recordings (c. f. Viksten Folkeryd 1998).

## *Methods*

### *1. Data generation*

Twenty Swedish families with one to four children of school age (7 - 17 years) were divided into two groups, depending on the children's age spans. In both groups, at least one child was aged 10-12 years (mean age 10;8 and 10;9 respectively), referred to as the target child, but the families of group A included siblings who were younger (6-9, mean age 7;3) than the target child, while the families of group B included siblings who were older (13-17, mean age 13;9).

In each family, one dinner table conversation was entirely recorded (average duration: seventeen minutes; see further Brumark 2003). Verbal utterances and non-verbal expressions of all participants, having a clear communicative function relevant to the conversation as judged by two researchers, were identified and transcribed. Selected parts of the transcriptions were checked against the video recording by two researchers familiar with the actual transcription methods. The reliability of this check amounted to 85% of the compared transcripts.

For the segmentation of the recorded conversations, the basic unit of turn was preferred to that of move (c.f. Maynard 1985) or speech act (Grice 1975), the former allowing for a thorough analysis of the interactive as well as the argumentative structure without regarding it as a logically constructed game.

Exchange refers to two or three part discourse, comprising at least two turns but generally three or four (i. e. two adjacent pairs of four turns) held together and delimited by a main topic (macro-theme) or referential focus and a main function or communicative aim (c. f. game in Linell & Gustavsson 1987, Linell 1998). An argumentative exchange according to the model presented in section 2.2 should entail a disagreement between at least two parties and a follow-up consequence of this disagreement consisting of at least one turn.

Sequence refers to two or more exchanges, held together and delimited by a main topic (macro-theme) or referential focus, a main function or aim (c. f. local

sequence in Linell 1998). An argumentative sequence contains at least one argumentative exchange but may comprise an indefinite number of exchanges, of which not more than one has to be argumentative. In table 2, an overall picture shows the extent to which argumentations appeared in the two family groups.

## 2.2. Descriptive model of argumentation

Applied to informal conversations characterised by “interaction in which opinions give rise to spontaneous, dialogic and developed disagreements in the form of direct responses” (Wirdenäs 2002, p. 70), traditional argumentative theories and models reveal a number of shortcomings (c. f. Felton & Kuhn 2001, Wirdenäs 2002). First, the rather weak arguments of everyday discussions would be regarded as failures or fallacies according to the normative view inherent in these logical approaches. Second, the argumentative structure is conceived as context-free and general (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992). Third, the perspective is largely speaker-based, considering listeners foremost as guarantors for the relevance and validity of the arguments used.

Thus, the kind of interactive argumentative structures occurring in family discourse at the dinner table required tools of analysis modified and adjusted to the material. The structural model to be presented here is partly anchored in earlier theoretical and empirical research (for instance the pragma-dialectical approach of van Eemeren et al 1986, van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992; Weger 2002) but has been elaborated to account for such aspects of everyday argumentation as *simplicity* with regard to structure, *complexity* of multiparty interaction and conversation, *dependence* on the context of situation and activity and *diversity and mixture of subgenres* occurring in informal discourse. This elaboration is based on earlier study of childrens’ arguments (e. g. Maynard 1985) and on more recent research within the field of discourse analysis on argumentation in family and school context (e. g. Pontecorvo & Fasolo 1997; Viksten Folkeryd 1998, Wirdenäs 2002).

### 2.2.1. Structural simplicity and interactional complexity

First, the model had to suit the *structure* of informal multi party discourse. Accordingly, minimally *three* but generally *four turns* (c. f. the four stages in van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992) constitute a basic *argumentative exchange* between at least two parties. However, an infinite number of exchanges may build up sequences held together by one topic or different aspects of a main topic. The first step, the *first standpoint*, initiates the argumentation - on the condition

that it triggers an opposition from another party. The second step, the opposition or the *second standpoint*, establishes the *disagreement* between parties or against a third party within or outside the context (c. f. Wiksten Folkeryd 1998; Wirdenäs 2002). The standpoints on both sides may be rephrased and iterated (Wiksten Folkeryd 1998).

In order to count as an argumentative exchange, the disagreement, whether rephrased or not, should however be followed by a *developing expansion* through backing arguments (c. f. Wiksten Folkeryd 1998; Wirdenäs 2002).

The *conclusion* generally finishes the argumentative exchange but may be absent in those cases where the disagreement continues but argumentation is dissolved for example by one party yielding (c. f. Maynard 1985, Wiksten Folkeryd 1998). The following example illustrates a rudimentary form of an argumentation, where the indirect opposition is triggered by a non-verbal action (see further 2.2.2.) and the expansion consists of one argument, which is put into doubt in an ironic conclusion:

(1)

The child puts bacon on her mother's plate - *initiation (standpoint 1)*

Mother: Oh, why don't you want it? - *opposition (standpoint 2)*

Child: I don't know. I just don't feel like it. - *expansion (argument 1)*

Mother: That's why you took so much is it? - *conclusion*

Well, have one of these instead.

(Points at a pancake)

As mentioned above, the standpoints may be iterated, as in example (2) below:

(2)

The father wants his son to eat what is served for dinner

Father: You have to eat the hamburger as well. - *initiation (standpoint 1)*

Child: No. *opposition - (standpoint 2)*

Father: Yes. *iterations - (standpoint 1)*

Child: I don't want to. - *(standpoint 2)*

Father: You have to. *(standpoint 1)*

Child: No, I don't like hamburgers. *Expansion (standpoint 1)*

I only like real meat. *(argument 1 + backing)*

However, if the opposition and the standpoints are not followed by an expansion

through one or more arguments, as in example (2) above, the exchange does not meet the traditional criteria for an argumentation. This is the case in example (3), where father and son repeat their standpoints without backing them by (relevant) arguments (c. f. Viksten Folkeryd 1998: “argumentation without support”):

3)

The child is supposed to wake early for an important hockey match.

Father: Are you tired, son? Will you be able to get up at six o'clock tomorrow - *initiation - (standpoint 1)*

Child: No.- opposition - *(standpoint 2)*

Father: Yes. - *(standpoint 1)*

Child: No. - *(standpoint 2)*

Father: Yes. No. Yes ... I'll see to it, even if I have to drag you out of bed! - *(standpoint 1+argument?)*

A opposition has been established, the expansion may consist of just one supportive argument, followed or not by backing support. But the expansion may be developed in infinity by iterations (Wiksten Folkeryd 1998) of standpoints and support for standpoints, or extensions through digressions toward new aspects or arguments related to the main topic.

Occasionally, oppositions or standpoints and backing arguments may be integrated in one and the same turn, as in the following example, where the mother's opposition and backing of her standpoint is expressed in two utterances (marked by italics) within the same turn:

(4)

The ice cream van can be heard from outside elicitation

Child: Can I have an ice cream from the ice cream van ? - *initiation (standpoint 1)*

Mother: *Not today, love. - opposition (standpoint 2)*

*We bought one last time and it's enough with one a month.- (argument 2)*

Child: (Whines)

On the other hand, one structural element may emerge through interaction between two or more parties. In the example (11) in Results, the opposition is for example produced in *collaboration* between the two older siblings in this family.

### 2.2.2. *Dependence on situational context*

Second, compared to most previous theoretical and empirical studies of argumentation (for instance van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992) this model implies an explicit reliance on the impact of *context*. Thus, the situational context of family dinner frames (c. f. Goffman 1974; Linell 1998) and determines what kind of communication is accepted at the dinner table. Generally speaking, the implicit rules governing the western middle class dinner allow two main kinds of communication at the table: *instrumental talk*, monitoring or regulating the main activity and *non-instrumental conversation* for more social purposes (Blum-Kulka 1997). These two types of dinner talk form the *conversational contexts* of argumentative exchanges and sequences.

As pointed out in the outline of the structure (2.2.1.), the context may however as well be integrated as part of the *argumentative structure* itself. In his by now classical study, Maynard (1985) also argues for the importance of consideration of contextual aspects and non-verbal behaviours when studying the elicitation of a dispute (c. f. Eisenberg & Garvey 1981).

This means that the initiation or initial standpoint may be *elicited* by anything in the conversational or situational context (c. f. Wiksten Folkeryd 1998).

The elicitation, as well as the initiation, may be *non-verbal* or presupposed by circumstances in the context (c. f. Maynard 1985), as in the example (4), where an incident outside the window elicits the first standpoint, and in the example (1), where the first standpoint is made non-verbally. The difference between elicitation and initiation is the degree of communicative intentionality (c. f. example (4) and (1), where there seems to be no communicative intention behind the action).

The initial step may thus consist of non-verbal expressions or triggering aspects in the context but they become a triggering initiation only through a following reaction or opposition, as a result of an antagonist regarding it as inviting opposite standpoints (see Wirdenäs 2002). Like the initiation, however, the opposition may be present or represented by a third party in or outside the context.

### 2.2.3. *Diversity and mixture of sub-genres*

Third, contrary to for example Wiksten Folkeryd (1998), who following the distinction made by Schiffrin (1985), talks about argumentation as a non-narrative discourse genre (Wiksten Folkeryd 1998, p.89), this study regards argumentation as delimited conversational sequences of varying length, integrated within a

number of different genres and sub-genres (c. f. Wirdenäs 2002).

Exchanges and sequences of exchanges may thus appear as incoherent by including other types of conversational exchanges into the argumentation (c. f. Sacks et al 1974; Schegloff 1990; Linell 1998). Exchanges disrupting the coherence of an argumentative sequence may be of any kind. Adjacency pairs (Garvey 1979), clarifying or clearing up misunderstandings regarding the argumentation, are however accounted for as part of the argumentative exchange. On the other hand, a coherent argumentative exchange may be integrated in other kinds of conversation, as in example (5) below (argumentation represented by italics):

(5)

The mother wants her son to eat some vegetables

Mother: What are you going to do now? *Have some cabbage?*

*Child: No.*

*Mother: Yes, you need it. It's good for you.*

*Child: You're wrong.*

Mother: So?

Child: So what?

Mother: What are you going to do now?

Child: Play on the computer.

Mother: That makes a change!

(Ironically)

Furthermore, depending on function, structure and the presumed goal of a given sequence, different sub-categories of argumentative exchanges may be distinguished. In this study, I will focus on three *sub-genres*, here termed *disputation*, *deliberation* and *negotiation* (c. f. Brumark 2003).

*Disputation*, corresponding to the rhetorical notion *epistemic* (scientific knowledge), typically deals with general phenomena, about which we may have different opinions. The implicit purpose of a *disputation* is primarily to contrast different theoretical standpoints and to try to convince the other party by using relevant arguments, without any intention to reach a consensus. Moreover, the standpoints may be hypothetical and need not arise from true involvement. *Disputation* typically concerns more theoretical or hypothetical questions about which the participants may have different opinions (see example (8) in Results).

*Deliberation* (Englund 2000), corresponding to the rhetorical notion *phronesis* (practical judgement), appears as a kind of exploring discussion, characterized by the presentation of different standpoints, met by tolerance and respect (Englund 2000). A deliberation is often related to practical problems in the immediate context and has the attainment of consensus as its collective ambition or goal. Deliberation is thus generally concerned with practical problem-solving and is thus oriented towards the future.

*Negotiation*, corresponding to the rhetorical notion *techné* (instrumental skills), resembles interaction within commercial contexts. According to Wagner (1995), negotiating activity “is a conversational activity in which speakers may engage when proposals are not accepted.” (Wagner 1995, cited in Öberg 1995, p.17). Wagner furthermore points to the differences between negotiation in ordinary conversation and business negotiation, where participants have to reach an agreement. But even in ordinary conversation, negotiation often has the goal of reaching agreement and making one of the parties submit to a mutual decision and then conform to the practical consequences of that decision.

Table 1. Length of recordings, Number, mean number and percentage of turns, utterances and argumentative turns

Family group	A	B
Length of recordings	9-25	9-20
Mean length of recordings	17	17.77
Number of turns	2354	2751
Mean number of turns	261.6	250
Number of utterances	2743	3502
Mean number of utterances	304.8	318.4
Number of utterances/participant	85.6	83.2

Table 1

## Results

### 3.1. Basic quantitative data

As a preliminary measure, turns and utterances made by all family members in the groups were identified and calculated (*table 1*). Non-linguistic as well as linguistic contributions were analysed in relation to the previous and subsequent conversational context.

As might be expected, the number of argumentative sequences, exchanges and turns differed considerably between the family groups (*table 2*). The total frequency of argumentative sequences amounted to 40, of which 24 appeared in the families with older children compared to 16 sequences in those of younger



children.

Further, the sequences seem to be longer in the family group of older children if the number of argumentative exchanges/sequence were included. This family group also produced considerably more turns per argumentative sequence (*table 2*).

### 3.2. Descriptive analysis

#### 3.2.1. Dependence on situational context

**Table 2.** Number of argumentative sequences (AS), exchanges (AE) and turns

Family group	A	B
Number of AS	16	24
%	40	60
Mean number of AE/AS	4.1	5.8
Mean number of turns in AS	9.9	17.5
Number of turns/groups		
Mothers	68	147
%	31.6	68.4
Fathers	13	22
%	37.1	62.9
Children	78	250
%	23.8	76.2

Table 2

As already suggested by the examples in the outline of the model of analysis, the situational context or frame (Goffman 1974) is of crucial importance when analysing informal discourse. In the twenty table conversations studied, the impact of the situational context on argumentative exchanges was most obvious in instrumental talk where the focus was on the dinner activity.

A comparison between family groups, furthermore, revealed considerable differences between the age groups (*table 3*). In the family group with younger children, most of the argumentation occurred within instrumental conversation, i. e. concerning the activity of eating, including comments on food and table manners (in 13 out of 16 sequences). Examples (1) to (5) show typical argumentative sequences within instrumental conversation in the families with younger children.

The family group of older children showed the reverse pattern, where 5 sequences out of 19 appeared in instrumental talk. Example (6) shows how joint planning within the family may be argumentative:

(6)

Family group B

Mother: Now I'm going to pack your things. Dad will be here to collect us at quarter-past seven.

Child 1: Half-past six.

Child 2: What?

Child 1: Half- past six.

Child 2: Half-past six?

Child 1: He's collecting us at half-past six. He told me.

Mother: No.

Child 1: Yes. He was going to take S home and then collect us.

Child 2: Tonight?

Mother: He said quarter-past nine.

Child 2: Tonight?

Mother: Mmm ...

Table 3. Conversational context

Family group	A	B
<i>Conversational context</i>		
Instrumental	13	5
%	72.2	27.8
Non-instrumental	3	19
%	13.6	86.4

Table 3

### 3.2.2. Diversity and mixture of genres and sub-genres

The incoherence resulting from disrupting and disrupted exchanges and the diversity of argumentative sub-genres in the twenty dinner conversations questions the concept of argumentation as a clearly defined and coherent genre in informal discourse (Bahktin 1986; Wiksten Folkeryd 1998). The results of my study show for instance how narratives may include argumentative parts, as illustrated in example (7) below.

(7)

A mother is telling a story, but her son comes with objections

Child: You'd forgotten I had to go to school.

Mother: I hadn't.

Child: You hadn't set the alarm.

Mother: You know what happened.

Child: You hadn't set it 'cos you thought it was weekend.

Mother: What time did the alarm clock say when you woke up?

Child: My watch said umm..

Mother: Half past ten (speaks very quietly).

Child: Your watch said half past ten, mine said quarter to seven (smiles significantly)

and when I woke you up you said: "But it's weekend."

Mother: Did I?

Child: Yes. (Mother and child laugh)

This example represents a very common type of family narrative found in my material: a dispute arises about a narrated incident. This argumentation is framed by a non-instrumental conversational context, the purpose of which seems primarily to establish a common understanding of a joint experience. On the other hand, there were also narratives illustrating standpoints or claims, integrated into other genres.

As for the three sub-genres considered, some specific observations can be made. *Deliberation*, generally concerned with how to handle a problem practically in the future, occurred mostly among older children and could be quite lengthy.

*Disputation*, typically concerning more theoretical or hypothetical questions, seemed relatively rare in the twenty families studied, at least in families with younger children (table 4). The argumentative exchanges in example (8) below might, however, count as a disputation, though within an instrumental context on a fairly concrete and trivial topic.

(8)

Family group A

Mother: Was that a fart?

Child 2: No (laughing).

Mother: That was a fart. I heard a noise.

Child 2: No (laughs).

Mother: Yeah, yeah (laughs).

Child 2: No it was a burp but I made it sound like a fart.

Mother: OK, so it sounded like a fart.

Child 2: But it was a burp.

*Negotiation* appeared frequently in the immediate instrumental conversational context regarding the mealtime activity in the family group of younger children, more seldom in the group of older children (table 4). Negotiation seemed to arise when the adult wanted the child to behave properly at the dinner table, eat what was served and not leave until everybody was finished (as in the example (13) below).

In both family groups, opposition to the child's proposals or requests sometimes gave rise to negotiations, as in the example (9) below, from family group B. In this sequence, the ten-year-old child wanted her mother to peel her potatoes. Her fourteen-year-old sister supports the mother in this negotiation by referring to the age of the younger child (c. f. Goodwin 1983).

#### (9) Family group B

Child 1: Can you peel my potato?

Mother: No I can't. You can peel it yourself.

Child 2: You're ten and can't peel a potato.

Mother: Look, you have to peel it yourself.

Child 1: No, you peel it.

Mother: Here's somebody who can peel her own potato.

Child 2: You have to peel your own potato in school, don't you?

Child 2: If you know how to do it, then show everybody.

Child 1: No, it's already peeled in school.

Child 2: What - your potatoes are peeled these days?

Child 1: Yes.

Mother: That can't be true can it?

Child 2: All the goodness disappears when you peel potatoes.

Mother: Maybe, but I don't think they can manage.

Child 1: Yes, we can.

Child 2: They do it for us sometimes as well but I don't know why 'cos the only thing that happens is that they cook them too long and they get all hard and thick, like an extra layer of peel. Disgusting!

This negotiation continues for another couple of turns and is reiterated two

sequences later. As in this example, negotiations in family group B arise exclusively between adults and younger siblings.

Table 4. Argumentative and structural types of AS

Family group	A	B
<i>Argumentative type</i>		
Disputation	2	7
%	12.5	29.2
Deliberation	2	10
%	12.5	41.6
Negotiation	12	7
%	75	29.2

Table 4

### 3.2.3. *Interactional complexity and structural simplicity*

A comparison between the groups revealed no obvious differences regarding the distribution of the steps of initiation, opposition and conclusion, which supports the claim of Maynard (1985) of structural skills being fairly developed at an early age. However, the argumentative exchanges and sequences in both groups provided interesting examples of interactional complexity on the one hand and structural simplicity on the other.

As mentioned in the outline of the model of analysis, initiation was sometimes produced through collaboration between adult and child, or between children, illustrated by the example below, where a discussion of a TV program gives rise to a new sequence of argumentative character. The mother begins by taking part in the initiation but proceeds by bringing about an opposition:

(10)

Family group B

Mother: Was it not x we saw? All the episodes put together as a film. A whole weekend.

**Table 5.** Distribution of child initiations, oppositions, expansions and conclusions <sup>1</sup>

Family group	A	B
<i>Initiations<sup>2</sup></i>		
Mother	6	9
Father	2	
Children	8	11
Collaboration		4
<i>Oppositions</i>		
Mother	5	6
Father	5	5
Children	6	11
Collaboration		2
<i>Conclusions</i>		
Mother		4
Father		2
Children		2
Collaboration		1

Table 5

Child 1: A very long film.

Mother: Yeah.

Child 1: A very, very long twelve hours.

Mother: Come on, the episodes weren't that long.

This argumentation goes on for two more exchanges.

The opposition, providing the second and opposite standpoint, was either (and quite often) expressed as a naked denial or as a more elaborated repudiation, sometimes by adding the first backing argument (as in example (9), if the second utterance in the second turn is analysed as an argument). The opposition could also be more indirect or produced in collaboration between two or more participants (like the initiation). In the following example, the mother (family group B) suggests a film to see together with her four children of different ages:

(11)

Family group B

Mother: Let's see if we can watch Tarzan.

Child 1: Tarzan!?

Child 3: (uttered with a sigh of disgust)

This argumentation continues and finishes five exchanges later by the youngest son coming to his mother's rescue and by the older siblings deciding to go to see another film.

Occasionally, initiation and opposition were elicited by a non-verbal action, obviously not intended to be an initiation (c. f. Maynard 1985), as in the following example (c. f. example (2) in the outline of the model):

(12)

Family group B

Child: (Takes garlic with her own fork)

Mother: You don't eat it like that.

Child: Well, I do.

Mother: That's not very nice. Now you are putting it down again.

Here, take mine and put some on your plate will you.

Can you manage that?

This dispute continues for some more exchanges.

Expansion, constituting the argumentation proper, could be distinguished as just one argument but generally by more than one, backing different standpoints. The expansion may be prolonged, not only by the elaboration of arguments but also by iterations of standpoints (c. f. Viksten Folkeryd 1998). Thus, the expansion step of the argumentative sequences varied considerably in length, though tending to be most elaborated in the family group of older children. The size of the expansions depended, not only on the production of arguments and iterations of standpoints, but also on moving toward sub-aspects of the main topic or other kinds of digressions (for an extensive analysis of modified polarity, see Viksten Folkeryd 1998). In the example (13), the negotiating sequence begins by the child's request to leave the table, opposed by the mother's suggestion that she should stay for a dessert.

The digression arises from a successive shift of the focus from the child's preference for chocolate instead of grapes to the question of her actual liking for grapes (a negotiation of the pole to use the expression of Viksten Folkeryd 1998) and finally toward the need for other dishes for dessert (a distraction according to Viksten Folkeryd 1998):

(13)

Family group B

Mother: You can have some chocolate after. First you have to have some grapes.

Child: Oh, how many?

Mother: We have quite a lot so you can have as many as you want.

Child: Five at the most.

Mother: What?

Child: Five at the most and then I want some chocolate.

Mother: (Laughs) But I thought you liked grapes.

Child: Yes, but ...

Mother: Take a small one first.

Child: But ...

Mother: But first you need a clean plate.

Child: Can't I have the chocolate first and the grapes after?

Mother: No, first the grapes and then the chocolate.

Child: But ...

Mother: But I thought we could have a small dessert.

Child: But ...

Mother: Here ...

Child: Not so much.

Mother: No, no. But, I have to get some small plates.

Maybe we can use the ones we already have, even if they are a bit dirty.

The mother's purpose is obviously to coax the child to submit without raising her voice. It is worth noting that such strategies were quite frequently used by the adults in these dinner conversations.

Reaching a conclusion accepted by both parties was not necessary for the argumentation to finish (c. f. Viksten Folkeryd 1998) and actually seldom occurred (see table 6). Argumentative sequences typically finished by participants moving towards another topic or just dropping the topic due to lack of more arguments or out of a wish to withhold argumentation (thus defusing the argumentation to use the term of Maynard 1985). One way of defusing argumentation seemed to be distraction by suggesting new associations away from the main issue (c. f. Viksten Folkeryd 1998, c. f. mitigating in Eisenberg and Garvey, 1981). In example (14) the argumentation starts by a negative judgement made by an older sibling about her younger sister's bandy coach and finishes by a positive estimation of the players by the father, which turns the discussion toward another issue:

(14)



## Family group B

Child 3: Their coach seems completely mad.

Child 2: I don't want

Child 3: Their coach seems completely mad.

"Go for the ball, go for the ball, go for the ball." (He says)

Father: You can't say that, really.

Child 3: Oh yes I can, because he is.

Child 4: But it's the first time and they have to learn.

Father: They already have. At least I think so.

I think they can stay in position much better.

### *Discussion and conclusion*

#### *4.1. Discussion of methods*

As pointed out in the theoretical framework, the lack of usable tools for empirical observations of argumentation in naturally situated discourse between more than two participants of different ages necessitated the construction of a suitable model of analysis. This model, however, met with both practical and theoretical problems, despite being adapted to the empirical data of the present study.

Looking at argumentation from an interactionist perspective, discerning the argumentative structure can hardly be done with exact precision (as pointed out by Viksten Folkeryd 1998) since the different parts of the structure collapse, change places, and also are repeated and sometimes indirectly expressed. In addition, both elicitations and initiations often consist of non-verbal expressions or contextual features (Maynard 1985). Participants simultaneously assume the roles as both speaker and listener and may modify or even give up positions during the process of argumentation. These and other anomalies have to be considered and the question arises whether structural coherence even exists in natural discourse. Another problem indicated by for instance Maynard (1985) is the researcher's constant need for inference through semantic as well as pragmatic interpretation. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992) require the analysis to be based on externalization i. e. considerations restricted to the explicit commitments of the participants. However, this method seems difficult to apply in analysing the discourse exhibited in family dinner conversations where so much is conveyed implicitly, by subtle contextual clues. Furthermore, since this study had the aim of distinguishing developmental differences, a normative, though not idealizing, perspective was to some extent implied. The question to be

posed then is whether structural coherence is preferable and thereby unmarked, whereas incoherence would be the marked case. However, incoherence is common in more interactionally complex argumentation. On the other hand, other developmental aspects, such as length of sequences may be a consequence of mere iteration of standpoints and repetitions of arguments, thus not reflecting a more developed argumentation. Finally, certain aspects considered in this study are not exclusively argumentative but rather belong to the conversation as a social exchange and thus perhaps do not reflect the argumentative skills of the children. On the other hand, argumentation within conversation is naturally embedded in conversational structures and is thus difficult to separate from this structural framework.

As mentioned in methods, the study included twenty monolingual middle class Swedish families from one area south of Stockholm. The homogeneity of the families with regard to social backgrounds as well as attitudes regarding conversation at the table and family socialization was checked by questionnaires. However, in spite of this, the internal communication structures and relations proved to differ considerably. Further, the data was based on only one recording of approximately seventeen minutes in each family, and this might have affected the results.

#### *4.2. Discussion of results*

With the reservations mentioned, the quantitative findings nevertheless suggest clear differences between the family groups with regard to most of the variables studied. But, as pointed out in the results section, certain variables were not independent. More frequent and extensive argumentative sequences in family group B most likely were due to the frequency of turns and exchanges on the whole. And, even if comparing percentages, the larger amount of argumentative sequences would cause a greater variation of conversational contexts and types. Furthermore, the different argumentative types were related to the different contexts, though not to the extent expected (e. g. disputation).

The findings also showed a tendency toward coherence within argumentative sequences, except for intrusions of repair exchanges and short instrumental exchanges related to the dinner activity. This circumstance could speak in favour of treating argumentation as a genre. But, on the other hand, short argumentative exchanges were often intermixed within other types of conversational structures, such as co-narration.

Most of the results regarding the developmental differences were to be expected. The poverty of the arguments used by the children, as well as by the adults was, however, unexpected, given earlier findings (Viksten Folkeryd 1998). As mentioned above, there was seldom more than one argument, which was repeated though modified. Perhaps the lack of conscious argumentative purpose resulted in the low ambition to elaborate arguments.

The similarity between family groups with regard to argumentative structure (except for length) was also unexpected. In one respect group B differed, by producing conclusions in almost one third of the argumentative sequences. The argumentative sequences within family group A lacked conclusions, a finding that might reflect a formal training among the older children (although the parents were responsible for 75 % of the conclusions).

#### 4.3. Concluding remarks

Despite the methodological problems discussed above, this study might contribute by empirical validation of argumentative theory in some respects. First, the *dependence* on the context of situation and activity on the argumentative exchanges appears clearly, not only with regard to emerging sub-genres but also with regard to the structure. Second, the analyses of the argumentative sequences reveal a *diversity and mixture of argumentative subgenres*, though with a tendency toward coherence within the exchanges. Third, the *complexity* of multiparty interaction and conversation, as well as the participation of children of different ages appear to favour *simplicity* of argumentative structure and arguments. Finally, the model of analysis used proved to catch developmental aspects fairly well.

#### NOTES

[1] Due to the small number of items, the results are represented as factual frequencies

[2] Elicitations were not considered part of the argumentative structure

Expansions were not calculated but submitted to a qualitative analysis below

Conclusions appeared seldom

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