The Emergence of Issues in Everyday Discussions Between Adults and Children

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ABSTRACT

This article studies how discussion issues emerge and argumentative discussions are initiated. Studying how discussions are initiated enables us to understand who is a legitimate instigator of a discussion issue and to what extent the freedom rule of argumentation is granted in a given context. This is of particular importance in asymmetrical contexts, such as discussions between adults and children. In this article, the authors consider the case of adult-child discussions taking place in an informal family setting and propose a typology of how issues emerge and discussions are initiated. This analysis shows that, in informal settings, children are able to introduce new issues for argumentation. It demonstrates that in collaborative argumentation, issues have precedence over standpoints. Finally, it indicates that the possibility of introducing new issues represents the ultimate application of the freedom rule of a critical discussion.

KEYWORDS

Argumentation Theory, Argumentative Discussion, Asymmetry, Collaborative Argumentation, Confrontation Stage, Critical Discussion, Dialogical Argumentation, Difference of Opinion, Family Discussion, Freedom Rule, Legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

In the study of argumentation, it is generally accepted that argumentative discussions originate from some form of disagreement or incompatibility. According to the pragma-dialectical approach, a discussion originates when there is a difference of opinion between a protagonist and an antagonist (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 60): a protagonist puts forward a standpoint and an antagonist raises a doubt or advances an opposing standpoint (ibid.). Barth & Krabbe (1982) speak of conflict of opinion and Plantin (2005) sees argumentation as arising from an incompatibility of discourses. The difference of opinion which forms the starting point of the argumentation is often referred to as a discussion issue.

This paper sets out to analyse how differences of opinion emerge in the course of dialogue, using the setting of interpersonal interactions between adults and children. Accepting the premise that a difference of opinion is the origin of an argumentative discussion, we examine the question of how differences of opinion emerge in dialogical contexts; what steps are taken to raise the issues around which argumentative discussions revolve and, finally, who makes these dialogical moves. Theories
of argumentation normally provide analyses of what happens once an argumentative discussion has started. Our intention is to rewind the process a step further and study how argumentation starts, i.e. how it emerges within naturally occurring conversations. Based on empirical data collected in family conversations, this paper proposes a typology of how issues emerge in adult-children discussions. We assume a discursive analytical standpoint, because we are interested in a phenomenological description of how discussions start. This standpoint fits well with a dialogical view of argumentation, in the sense of Plantin (2005) and Jacquin (2014), because we place emphasis on how argumentation emerges and develops in a process of interaction.

The question of how argumentative discussions emerge is not insignificant, for at least two reasons. Firstly, in general, the analysis of specific contextualized communicative interactions allows us to understand the specificities of real-life argumentation in context. In a family context, not all conversations are argumentative; so how is it that argumentation starts? Secondly, and more specifically, to frame it in Plantin’s (2005) terms, understanding who can raise issues for argumentative discussions sheds light on the question of legitimacy, i.e. considering how much space is given to children to raise issues to be debated.

This question is all the more important in contexts that are not too rigidly pre-structured from an institutional point of view, both in terms of their issue management and of who has the power and legitimacy to raise an issue for discussion. In some of these contexts, collaborative argumentation is expected, as different parties are required to contribute to a “reasoned collective handling of disagreement” (Schwarz & Baker, 2017, p. 134, footnote 1). Family conversation, which will be central to this paper, is one such context, because it is open to different goals (also depending on the specific family considered) and is often not an adversarial context.

Generally speaking, in family conversations there are likely to be no previously established constraints on who can raise an issue for discussion and what type of issue it should be. For this reason, it is particularly important to consider who is considered legitimate in introducing issues. In this kind of setting, we might say that the possibility of opening up a new discussion (i.e. of raising a new issue) is a manifestation of the application of the freedom rule of a critical discussion, which states that “Participants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question” (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004, p. 192). We interpret the possibility of raising discussion issues as the ultimate expression of the freedom rule. In fact, being able to put forward arguments (or even standpoints) concerning someone else’s issues would be an incomplete freedom, if it were not complemented by the possibility of raising one’s own issues, i.e. submitting open problems to other interlocutors. Notably, in order for an issue to emerge in adult-children discussions, the situation has to be perceived as a relatively free and safeguarded space by all the participants, in particular the children (Perret-Clermont & Iannaccone, 2005; Greco, Mehmeti & Perret-Clermont, 2017). This is not always given in adult-children discussions, because of the existing asymmetry of authority and knowledge that often gives the adult the freedom to decide whether something will be discussed at all.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we will describe the theoretical and methodological starting points of our work. After this, we will propose a typology of the emergence of issues and illustrate it by means of examples taken from an empirical corpus. Finally, we will discuss our findings and propose paths for future research.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL STARTING POINTS FOR THE ANALYSIS

The Notion of Issue

In his Topics, Aristotle introduces the term πρόβλημα, (Gr. πρόβλημα) as the “subject of reasonings” (Tredennick & Forster, 1960, p. 279), i.e. a question that can be answered by yes or no and that is
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