

# Becoming skilled at explaining and arguing

## The role of co-construction and multimodality

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## Explaining and arguing as discursive practices

This special issue explores how young members of a community of practice acquire resources to explain and argue in conversations. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge and linguistic anthropology, explaining and arguing can be considered sedimented discursive practices (Luckmann, 1986; Hanks, 1996), i.e. socioculturally evolved procedural solutions for

recurrent communicative problems. Whereas arguing serves to construct knowledge by exploring and negotiating divergent viewpoints, explaining is mainly designed to demonstrate and transmit knowledge. At the same time, these discursive practices enable participants to constitute social orders and negotiate identities (e.g. Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987; Danby & Theobald, 2014). Within the field of education, explaining and arguing are regarded as key competences for engaging in learning processes. In classroom talk, for example, pupils are regularly asked to explain a calculation method, define the meaning of a word, justify an interpretation of a text, or weigh up scientific hypotheses (e.g. Kääntä, Kasper & Pirainen-Marsh, 2016). Even outside school, explaining and arguing are part of the communicative household of many families (Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1997; Sterponi, 2009) and peer groups (Cekaite, Blum-Kulka, Grøver & Teubal, 2014). However, how and how often families and peer groups draw on these practices varies widely (Heller, 2014; Morek, 2015), and this may have consequences for how children become skilled at explaining and arguing.

*Co-construction* is characteristic of these discursive practices and their development in several ways. In a fundamental sense, explaining and arguing are interactional achievements (Schegloff, 1982), and thus co-constructed activities (Dausenschön-Gay, Gülich & Krafft, 2015). In a narrower sense, individual actions – for instance, single arguments or parts of an explanation – can be built collaboratively (Lerner, 2004), i.e. co-constructed by different actors (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995; Kyratzis, Ross & Koymen, 2010). From an ontogenetic perspective, the co-constructed nature of explanatory and argumentative activities is a particularly relevant resource in interactions between differently competent actors (Goodwin, 2013; Quasthoff, 2015), because the more competent partner can take a greater share of the responsibility for producing an explanation or argument. Young children’s participation in talk-in-interaction relies heavily upon their caretakers’ supportive practices, such as re-establishing and explicating conditional relevancies (Heller, 2014; Morek, 2015), expanding children’s explanations and arguments in multi-unit turns by asking for reasons or further details (Kidwell, 2011; for storytelling: e.g. Theobald, 2019). Peer interaction also provides an opportunity space for co-organizing longer and more complex sequences of talk (Arendt, 2019; Blum-Kulka, Huck-Taglicht & Avni, 2004; Kreuz, Mundwiler & Luginbühl, 2017) and establishing causal, conditional and other relations (Kyratzis, Ross & Koymen, 2010; Cekaite et al., 2014). The present collection of papers

contributes to our understanding of supportive practices and how they add to the process of becoming skilled at explaining and arguing.

*Multimodality* is relevant in this process in at least two ways. Using resources such as body posture, gesture, head movements, prosody and gaze together with verbal language requires skills: participants need to (re) arrange the interactional space (Mondada, 2016), establish visual attention as a relevant resource, and temporally coordinate diverse resources that mutually elaborate each other (Goodwin, 2013). At the same time, multimodality may serve as a resource in that it enables children to embody and sustain a visible ‘frame’ or ‘working consensus’ (Goffman, 1959) on the purpose and structure of the activity-in-progress, or to perform actions for which they still lack the verbal means. Caretakers may combine verbal with bodily-visual resources to clarify for the child what an action is doing.

Within the shared theoretical and thematic focus of this special issue, several thematic strands can be identified. One focus is on age-related differences in co-constructed argumentation (Arendt & Zadunaisky Ehrlich; Kreuz & Luginbühl) and differences within one age group (for explaining games: Kinalzik & Heller; for arguing: Morek). Another focus is on adults’ and peers’ interactional demands and support as resources for the acquisition of oral (Kern; Morek) and written argumentation (Morek). Through their fine-grained analysis, which focuses, among other things, on epistemic modalizations, repetitions and joint imaginations, these articles show how these resources promote a process of becoming skilled at explaining and arguing while at the same time revealing relevant, even literacy-related, competencies.

Another thematic strand emphasizes the various embodied ways in which practices and actions are constituted in interaction. Although all resources are considered, there is special focus on gaze and gesture (Kinalzik & Heller) and prosody (Bose & Hannken-Illjes; Kern). With an emphasis on deixis, coherence building and framing, these contributions show that multimodality is a resource, but also a complex skill that itself needs to be acquired.

The studies in this collection draw on both naturally occurring data (Arendt & Zadunaisky Ehrlich; Bose & Hannken-Illjes) and talk in semi-natural settings (Kern; Kinalzik & Heller; Kreuz & Luginbühl; Morek). Combining these kinds of data and multimodal conversation analysis might be somewhat unusual, since everyday practices are best examined in natural settings. Investigating aspects of development, however, makes

it necessary to conduct comparisons between participants and across time (Wagner, Doehler & González-Martínez, 2018). Using tasks that resemble tasks in natural settings (e.g. school) and that set the stage for a specific kind of discursive practice (like asking for a game explanation or for a decision within a group) without further restricting the interaction, but leaving the processing of the discursive practice in question untouched, might be a way to include larger groups of children into the analysis, document differences between children within one age group, and compare how children's participation and co-participants' interactional support change over time. Therefore, this collection of articles covers children across a wide range of ages – pre-school (Arendt & Zadunaisky Ehrlich; Bose & Hannken-Illjes; Kern), elementary school (Kinalzik & Heller; Kreuz & Luginbühl) and secondary school (Morek) – from Israel, Switzerland and Germany.

## About the guest editors

Vivien Heller is full professor in German linguistics and their didactics at Wuppertal University. She received her PhD in linguistics from Dortmund University on genre repertoires and argumentative discourse practices in families and classrooms. Based on ethnomethodology and multimodal analysis, her research focuses on interactional support and embodiment in language and discourse acquisition, both in family and classroom environments. Recent publications examined gaze and epistemic stance in children's collaborative reasoning, epistemic ecologies in the classroom and academic discourse practices.

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