The taming of foes: The avoidance of asymmetry in informal discussions

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Although the data of the following investigation stem from what may be called ‘argumentation’ in everyday family dinner talk, the problem of dialogical asymmetry does not arise in the way one would usually expect, and it is rather this lack of conspicuous asymmetry that is in question here. True, local asymmetries, as described by Linell and Luckmann (this volume, Chapter 1), are a ubiquitous phenomenon in verbal exchanges. But if one expected everyday argument in family talk to be a field of speakers’ attempts to exert dominance, as in, say, institutional dialogue (Linell and Jönsson, this volume, Chapter 4; Drew, Chapter 2), one would be disappointed. Dominance, as we found in our investigation, seems, rather, to be the very feature speakers in dialogues try to evade. And oddly enough, they seem to circumnavigate this by using a format which is traditionally taken to be the very basis for the exertion of dominance: disagreement.

The use of disagreement, of course, is not a tool for the ultimate establishment of an ‘ideal speech situation’, which may be characterized by communicational equality. The ‘irreparable rhetorical character of everyday talk’, frankly admitted by Habermas (1981; 1984, p. 179), allows at best for what Rommetveit (1974) calls complementarity. Complementarity designates forms of verbal exchange which are based on reciprocity, more exactly – on reciprocity of motives (of, to use Schutzian terms, in-order-to and because), e.g. in buying and selling, asking and answering and so on. One aim of this paper, therefore, is to give evidence for the fact that speakers produce disagreement collaboratively in a way which evades dominance, especially by avoiding both the abyss of conflict talk and the byway of instruction. Disagreement may thus be regarded as complementary verbal interaction which establishes a dialectical relation between utterances and speakers.

The complementarity of this dialectical relation between utterances and speakers does not, however, pertain to all contexts of conversation. I assert neither that it is a feature of all categories of argumentation nor that it is typical of discussions in general nor of all those family discussions in our investigations which have been subjected to detailed scrutiny. On the contrary, this complementary relation in argumentation only comes up in certain kinds of conversation, in what Goffman (1981) has called a form of talk. Thus the second goal of this paper is to outline the elements of this form of talk which I would like to call informal discussion. Even if informal discussions can be said to form long sequences of conversation, i.e. what Bergmann (1987) has called a communicative aggregate, one salient feature of this kind of discourse is the frequent use of disagreement.

Although I shall present only a few examples of such informal discussions, there are two reasons for assuming that these cases exhibit patterns of a more common form of talk. One reason is intuitively found in our common everyday experience; the second reason can be seen in what appears to me to be shortcomings of previous research on argumentation.

First, we are all acquainted with those heated debates in pubs, those often sophisticated discussions on such important questions as the form of the latest sporting idol, or whether the newest film isn’t just too boring. From our own experience we may remember two things. On the one hand we usually debate, that is, we disagree about something unproblematic; on the other hand we never arrive at answers to those very important questions with which we started our debate. The very opposite is the case. Our discussions ramble from one subject to the other, we talk on and on; we order a beer while thinking about an argument, and having been served we realize that we are too late, the discussion has arrived at a different topic, the point cannot be made any more because, for example, X suddenly tells one of his most amusing jokes. There is no doubt that in this way informal discussions account for a certain degree of sociability; they provide us with topics and, moreover, with the tension and the thrill of pursuing these topics; and they make us continually change the topic. As we usually do not know how this happens, as conversation may go on against our will, one of the interesting questions of this chapter is – aside from demonstrating the
complementarity of disagreement — to hint at how (and why) we do this.

Even though argumentation has long been a topic of academic interest, I felt at a loss when trying to use concepts of argumentation theory to analyse these informal discussions. No doubt, one can find something in them which takes on the status of an argument (by means which are described later). And, no doubt, persuasive techniques, as have been described thoroughly by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1970), are employed continuously. But in informal discussion, logical truth seems only of minor importance. Instead of using the formal structure of an argument — be it a ‘tree of arguments’ or the so-called T-scheme as proposed by Toulmin (1983) — the speakers seem to be driven by the dynamics of dialogue, by the stepwise transition of verbal action in performance (Linell, 1990). That previous analyses of argumentation do not provide us with sufficient instruments to investigate such informal discussions is easily seen. First, few investigations are concerned with naturally occurring argumentational data. And even where this is the case they mostly rely on argumentations which are produced in institutional contexts, which exercise heavy restrictions on the performance of arguments.

Argumentation has been investigated in multiple ways. Nevertheless most of the data analysed stem from argumentation in institutional settings (which are more readily accessible). Parliamentary debates, public discussions on the radio, on television or in public places, therapeutic conversation and court trials are but a few examples of such settings. If, however, one were to accept the scientific commonplace that informal discussions form the somehow ‘original’, non-contaminated paradigm for discussion, or if one just wished to study naturally occurring informal argumentation, it is obvious that these settings differ in significant ways from anything one may conceive of as informal discussion: speech and individual contributions are often planned and projected in advance; the rules of talk, the distribution of proponents’ and opponents’ roles are fixed and organized beforehand, and often even the formal role of a chairman is pre-established. It is hardly necessary to stress that these precautions do not hold for informal argumentation (which can take the form of informal discussions). But it does seem necessary to draw attention to the fact that systematic contortions can arise if features of institutional argumentation are simply transferred to informal settings.

Take, for example, the lore that argumentation starts usually with a ‘problem’, the ‘quaestio’ or ‘validity claim’. In this version argumentation can then be defined as the process of solving the problem posed in the ‘quaestio’. Given the quaestio, this process is conceived of as a kind of logical calculus. Even if some unspecific interactional concepts (as, e.g. some notion of ‘challenge’) are included, argumentation is seen to be amenable to analysis in terms of, e.g. a ‘deep structure of a tree of arguments’ which are organized along a problem with which the speakers are preoccupied the entire time (Miller, 1984, pp. 222 ff.). If one, however, takes a close look at these investigations, one finds that it is exactly the quaestio which is pre-given by scientific investigators themselves who impute a ‘problem’ to be argued about by their subjects, and then find (surprisingly enough) that their subjects’ argumentation resolves around this ‘problem’ (Miller, 1984).

On the other hand, the very definition of informal discussions entails the fact that ‘problems’ are not given in advance. Precisely the opposite: informal discussions are the processes by which ‘problems’ are constructed. That is, the ‘problem’ is not to be seen as a singular utterance (as seems to be taken for granted in speech-act theoretical approaches) but is constructed interactively by the use of disagreement. Faced with such apparently ‘non-logical’ procedures, some analysts have misconceived this form of talk as unregulated, the usual rules of turn-taking and of speech etiquette being continuously broken (Schank, 1987, p. 34).

In this perspective dialogical argumentation turns out to be a kind of continuous reparation procedure. What I want to show is that the apparent violation of rules, the seemingly redundant constructions of disagreement and the incessant interruptions, are instead vital constituents of argumentation in informal discussions. They provide argumentation in a dialogical, dialectical way which does not in any way lack rationality — only the rationality differs from that of more institutionalized forms of argumentation. In order to describe the form of conversational argument involved, I will draw on Coulter’s notion of argumentative sequences (Coulter, 1979), to designate series of disagreements.

Thus the ‘validity claim’ made in argumentation does not pertain to singular utterances. It is rather a collaborative accomplishment of the speakers brought about by means of disagreement. What is at issue in an argument is not ‘self-evident’, seen by just looking at the words. Nor is it something one speaker alone can intentionally bring about. Rather it seems as if it were the machinery of argumentative conversations, the
form of talk, which produces and transforms the claims and counter-claims of the individual actors, almost unwillingly on their part. The issue is constructed by all the participating speakers, and their ways of producing it, the manner of their disagreement, become part of the issue itself. Thus an argument only becomes a conversational ‘problem’ if it is established interactively, that is if the speakers produce a disagreement which is perceivable to both parties. This social reality of argument depends, as I will try to show, on the interactive construction of its observability which thus renders it effective as disagreement.

Although I do not agree with Habermas’s notion of ‘validity claim’, he was the one to stress the necessity of argumentation in modern society, argumentation being the way in which the differences of knowledge, values and identities, based on the plurality of life worlds, become an enduring problem for social action. Opposing the harmonistic view held by Pomerantz (1984; see also Jacobs and Jackson, 1982), which states that disagreement is a ‘dispreferred activity’, informal discussions provide one example of the frequent and even cherished use of disagreement. The machinery of argumentation works on the ground of continuous disagreement, both with respect to the organization of turns, and to the thematic organization. Instead of being dispreferred, disagreement is – under certain conditions – a mechanism to produce topical relevance, to provide for thematic progression, for entertainment and thrill.

Moreover, the situation in our family dinner talk structurally very much resembles the ‘ideal speech situation’. The family members are all adults, leading (on the whole) economically and socially autonomous lives; no blatant asymmetry in the distribution of power is discernible, there is no pressure of time, and there is no need for immediate action, no urgent decisions have to be made. The family members have, so to say, all the time in the world to present their attitudes, to argue and to catch on.

Nevertheless, these informal discussions are not guided by the unauthoritative ‘power of the better argument’, as Habermas lets us so convincingly hope. (It is the speakers’ attempt to avoid asymmetry of knowledge which prevents this power exerting its influence.) Two reasons for this are suggested. First, the asymmetries underlying all social action especially endanger the fragile complementarity of disagreement. By hinting at two possible dangers, I will show how speakers accomplish argumentation in pursuing what metaphorically may be called well-tempered disagreement. Second, all communication takes place in specific social situations, characterized by setting, timing and types of actors. A form of talk as vulnerable as argumentation relies heavily on communicative routines which safeguard it from the explosiveness implied in disagreement. Argumentation, or informal discussion at least, seems a more routinized endeavour than the self-reflection of social consciousness.

Informal discussion can also be found in family dinner talk, which has been recorded ‘naturally’ for the Constance research project on ‘communicative genres’. Having finished dinner, the members of the family are sitting together, drinking some domestic red wine, talking about the soup and the grandmother who is absent – and suddenly they are involved in a heated debate. This happens on several occasions even at consecutive dinners, and in all subsequent years of recording. And these discussions are mostly very lengthy. The family may be debating for hours and hours on their different religious attitudes, on sports, on Marx and the Pope, on the German New Rightists and on the new occultism. Family members’ folk category for this is ‘argumentation’ or ‘discussion’, and their utterances are ‘arguments’, ‘points’ or ‘assertions’.

It was a debate on Boris Becker which first turned my attention to these conversations. After an opulent meal the family talked about some athletes, above all Boris Becker, who then, in 1984, was the focus of public interest in Germany. This topic turned into a busy quarrel of a kind which I found in later years when we recorded the family’s conversations on tape.

The building blocks of disagreement

Some of the most pervasive elements of argumentative sequences in informal discussions may be detected from a small excerpt, the Gienger argument which comes from what I call the Boris Becker discussion. This excerpt takes a prominent position as it was here that the conversation turned into an informal discussion.

The family members had been talking for quite a while, mostly about gymnastics, a sport into which several members are or have been involved. It is this topic which triggers off an argumentative sequence. Christian has stated that one cannot earn a lot of money by doing gymnastics; then he continues:
Extract 8.1 Boris Becker [For transcription convention key see Appendix, p. 272–3.]
1 C: (Ye and this guy Gienger, what does- what money does he have now?)
2 C: (He- he's a referee now)
3 M: 'Uh,'
4 (____
5 U: Look how (simple minded this Gienger is)
6 M: (At the cost of his health)
7 F: O'h well be
8 F: has- he's saved enough [hat seine Schaeffle scho im Trockene]
9 C: No; but not like some others.
10 F: =Listen, these advertisement contracts; and so on;
11 if his name is printed on a product
12 somewhere; (hh)
13 M: That's right; but not to the extent as say for example
14 F: but sure
15 M: in tennis with this guy:: Boris
16 F:

Christian asks a rhetorical question in line 1, and answers it immediately in line 2. Referring to Gienger, a former world champion in gymnastics, who now is (only) a referee, he supports the view that gymnastics is an unprofitable sport. I will try to account for this rare formulation of a 'quae esto' later. Let us first turn to what follows. After the comments of Ursula (line 5) and mother (line 6), it is father (line 7) who, overlapping with Ursula's turn, makes a consequential utterance. It is this utterance which meets with Christian's explicit contradiction (line 9). And now father goes on, providing something which can be understood as an argument — even an elliptical one (lines 10 ff.). Mother first sounds as if agreeing with father (line 13); then, however, she goes on to say something which rather backs Christian's assertion. Father tries to interrupt her (line 14), but she persists and goes on with the comparison to Boris Becker.

Instead of well organized and clear statements, we encounter a confusing succession of statements of different speakers. The rhythm changes from slow (1–3) to fast (10 ff.), and there are obtrusive overlaps and interruptions (5–7). Instead of one argument there is a succession of disagreements, instead of clear pros and cons different speakers express their positions, the meaning of which is hardly understandable (10 ff.) at first glance. We are dealing here with an argumentative sequence. None of the speakers is able to obtain a privileged right to speak, each has to risk losing his or her turn. One of the essential motors of this argumentative sequence is to be seen in the contradiction which develops between Christian and father (and then mother).

Contradictions

When Christian poses his rhetorical question, his mother agrees, and Ursula squeezes in an assertion. Just like her mother, she also seems to go along with Christian. Their father then interrupts the two of them quite rudely (something which he is not in the habit of doing). It is here that disagreement's shadow looms. But it is only the subsequent utterance by Christian which recognizably takes on the features of what may be called contradiction. The same holds for father's next utterance, something like an insisting backing, and also for mother, who seems to be contradicting her husband. This is quite a lively conversational phase, no pause is left open, the utterances follow each other in a hurry. The issue itself seems to change, starting with Gienger's earnings and ending with Boris Becker's. But before we can go into this, we must clarify what is meant by contradiction.

It is not Christian's 'contradiction' which starts the argument. Already the father's first statement (lines 7–8) is a clear reference to Christian's initial question (1). This reference to Christian's answer is not at all a mere semantic accomplishment. In fact, there is a very open anaphorical relation:

Extract 8.1b
1 C: He- he's a referee now
7f: F: Oh well he has- he's saved enough [Schaeffle scho im Trockene]

The anaphorical reference is not only a guess. Note that it is Christian who immediately responds to his father's utterance (line 9). It seems as if there were a disagreement before Christian himself states the blatant 'No'. Following Spranz-Fogasy's definition (1986, p. 28), I shall use the term 'contradict' when speakers reject the other's assertion, opposing it with an alternative assertion, or reasserting their own point of view. Within the organization of verbal exchange, contradiction is, according to Spranz-Fogasy, the second part of an adjacency pair. It thus establishes a conditional relevance for a more extensive treatment of what is contradicted in the two turns. The term 'contradiction', however, does not seem to cover all forms which function as 'disagreement tokens' (Coulter,
to the 'Yes-but' (Koerfer, 1979). The structure implicit in the 'yes-but' can be produced in such a way that it also holds for longer statements:

Extract 8.3 Christianity
1 C: It's all right to think that way
2 but look, (-) ehm it is not my own decision ... 

Christian first shows agreement with Ursula's preceding utterance (1); then, however, he adds a 'but' which establishes a contradiction. The 'yes-but', of course, entails a double structure, allowing for agreement and at the same time for continuing disagreement. In these exchanges, this well-known double structure forms the starting point for a whole range of argumentative techniques, like comparisons, contrasts, distinctions and dissociations, as have been described for monological arguments by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1970).

There is another, very frequent, type of contradictory 'technique'. Alluding to a well-known rhetorical pattern, one could call it negated parallelism.

Extract 8.4 Christianity
1 C: That's a reproach
2 U: No; that's no reproach ... 

The negated parallelism entails simple negation but also repeats the contradicted utterance almost word by word. This repetition is striking. Why should a speaker produce such a redundant reproduction if the first simple 'no' has already done the work of disagreement? First, there is, of course, the possibility of different placements for the negation. 'That is not a reproach' would do a very different job from what Ursula really says. That is, the repetition enables us to point out what it is in an utterance that is contradicted. I would like to call this the disagreed aspect. Second, this redundancy in disagreement is by no means rare. Speakers do not ashamedly or anxiously hide their contradictions away. They rather seem to stress them.

The rhetoric of disagreement

Disagreement can take on much more complex forms than those mentioned under the heading of 'contradictions'. These forms of disagreement are characterized by what appears to be redundancy. To get an idea of what I mean by this notion, take a look at a scene where a real conflict started.
The avoidance of asymmetry in informal discussions

This rough reconstruction shows that Christian is producing a chiastic structure which is built on the opposition between East (line 1f.) and West European athletes (2), exemplifying first the West (3f.), then the East Europeans (5f.). Even in this simplified transcript this may strike one as a very sophisticated construction. Let us turn to father's response:

**Extract 8.7b**

1 F: The Eastern block athletes are plain professionals.
2 They are hired by enterprises. But they do not work.
3 Whereas our athletes. They have to work for their
4 living on their own.

It is remarkable that father not only produces another chiasm, but carries out a genuine chiastic counter-movement to Christian's statement. Evidently, a simple 'no' is often not deemed sufficient to clear up a controversy. It would leave too vague what it is that is 'challenged' and, moreover, it would not accomplish what this redundancy does: make disagreement observable to the co-participants, even, as we have seen, in cases in which there is no discernible 'contradiction in terms' between utterances of the two opponents.

There are, of course, cases where speakers' first utterances can be understood as controversial assertions. Even if one would call them arguments, they nevertheless cannot produce argumentative sequences only by virtue of being stated controversially. Take the following excerpt. The family's discussion of Christianity has been interrupted by a joke. Then Christian takes the floor again:

**Extract 8.8 Christianity II**

1 C: Well, to my mind there are--are hm really two spheres here.
2 the' are two different spheres. (He explains the
3 Christian teaching of the two worlds:1) Ther' it's already
4 th' Good and the Bad. In every human being. That already
5 in every part.
6 U: no one says--no one is contradicting this.

Christian's voice already gives the cue that he is trying to take up the interrupted discussion again. Then he presents something which can be read as an argument (lines 1-5), presenting it as his view (1). But unexpectedly he does not meet with disagreement. Moreover, at the point where disagreement might be produced, Ursula states explicitly that she will not contradict.
So Christian continues presenting his idea of the two worlds in the sequence following this extract. The generation of argument through the spirit of disagreement

The assumption that argument starts off from an explicit ‘assertion’, therefore, does not hold for these informal discussions. On the contrary, disagreement may turn up at places which do not seem to be marked as claims or assertions:

*Extract 8.9 Spiesser*

(Willie reports that his Grandmother has asked him to stop the tape recorder in order not to waste energy.)

1 W: and that tape recorder that takes 3.2 watts

2 M: ( )

2 W: therefore you’d need to, you would need to-

4 H: 1 NO:nononono::: - that’s not true.

This short fragment shows how an utterance becomes an assertion only by virtue of a second turn of disagreement. It shows also that disagreement may crop up at any possible place in a conversation. Disagreement comes about in a second turn. There, contradiction is pointed up in a way which brings out the reference to the corresponding utterance. The fact that disagreement can happen at any possible place (not only, as we see from the examples, in slots) accounts for the seemingly rule-breaking character of these conversations. Instead of disorder, however, a new structure becomes established: disagreement establishes a conditional relevance for the next turns.

Disagreement thus has a topical potential for rendering certain utterances problematic. The topical focus (‘aspect’) established in the tension of the two utterances is not restricted to them but makes necessary what Jacobs and Jackson (1981) call an ‘expansion’. By means of the second turn, the previous utterance or a part of it (the ‘aspect’) becomes the topic of the third turn. So, for example, Herbert stresses that a tape-recorder does not consume 3.2 watts, then he claims that it must be more than this, and so on. Expansions may be ‘arguments’, ‘backings’, ‘warrants’ - utterances which seem to be defined rather by their relation to the interactive production of disagreement than by their logical relation to the contracted ‘validity claim’. Therefore I will not dwell on the logical structure. Instead I would like to hint at two other possibilities derived from this conditionally relevant ‘expansion’.

Conflict and the ping-pong rule of evidence

If an utterance is contradicted, there is, of course, a simple possibility: continue with the contradiction!

*Extract 8.10 Breesler*

1 W: When we went in the blue- the blue suits

2 M: both of us; didn’t we?

3 M: =Blue suits? You never had any.

4 W: =Sailors suits.

5 M: You NEVER had any.

6 W =Sure,.

7 H: I didn’t.

8 W: =You too

9 M: ' No you only had beige waistband trousers . . .

Willie’s reminiscence of the ‘blue suits’ (1f.) is interrupted by mother who denies it resolutely (3). Although Willie restates his assertion (5), mother repeats her disagreement emphatically (5). Again Willie insists on his view (6) when suddenly Herbert contradicts him; overlapping with Willie’s second attempt to insist (8), mother finally produces a correction which ends the disagreement on the ‘blue suits’.

As this example shows clearly, one possible way to ‘expand’ does consist in the repetition or continuation of disagreement, that is by denying, insisting and so on. This can result in a series of virtual ‘couplets’ of ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘sure’, etc.

*Extract 8.10b*

Nammen : I refer here to ((name))

Maier : No, I am sorry, that is not true. No.

Nammen : Sure, you have to deny this.

Maier : No, we do not have to, but, no.

Loewenthal: No, no, no

This fragment, which stems from an analysis of conflict talk (Apeltau, 1977), illustrates the dynamics of disagreement. There is no simple ‘monological’ rule like, e.g. the ‘general rule of evidence’: that the one contradicted should give evidence. What we find is a little like passing over the obligation or right to give evidence, and continuing with the disagreement instead. This right or obligation goes back and forth like a ping-pong between the opponents. This ping-pong strategy reflects simply the conversational turn-taking basis of these discussions. The game may continue for a while, and in fact we find this structure in conflict talk among children who playfully produce long series of disagreement, raising their voices step by step until a ‘winner’
takes the highest or loudest step (Boggs, 1978; Lein and Brenneis, 1978).

As in children’s conflict talk, adults may take an ironical stance and imitate this playful character. If, however, irony is not marked phonetically and if the discussion tackles ‘serious’ topics, there is a critical limit built into the ping-pong rule. The charge to provide evidence may be passed over several times, so that speakers can check the other’s ‘in-order-to’ and ‘because’ motives. The disagreement-expansion format restricts the ping-pong rule in such a way that repeated disagreement can be seen as refusal to expand. The ping-pong enables the speakers to check their motives, that is who it is who has to provide an argument. It is obvious that by pure continuation of disagreement, speakers would enter a dead end. The communicative problem of solving disagreement by expansions would turn into a serious interactional problem of reciprocity, given that no party could assume more than the other was willing to cooperate with, that is, produce something like an expansion (which could be challenged again). It is not surprising that this critical limit can be regarded as one reason which gives rise to conflict talk. The refusal to cooperate may be accompanied by rising voices or threatening gestures. In addition, conflict talk involves a shift to the personal level (which is implied in the demonstrated unwillingness to cooperate). Thus informal discussions always face the danger of conflict talk. How do speakers avoid this danger?

One possibility is already mentioned: stick to the critical limit of the ping-pong rule. To cite an example:

*Excerpt 8.11 Christianity*

1 U: A truly believing Christian must object to military service.  
3 U: Sure  
4 C: No! [a believing Christian, must, must go into the army (Sure)]  
5 U:  

Both parties have refused to offer an argument although both disagree. Having produced disagreement tokens twice, the situation seems hopeless. Obviously both speakers are aware of this unpromising situation, so Christian immediately adds an expansion to his disagreement token (4). As Ursula overlaps exactly at this point (5), she seems to recognize the problem too (and to withhold, realizing that Christian’s second disagreement token is but an introduction to his expansion). If Christian were bluntly to say ‘no’ again, he would not be accepting that Ursula is asking for a reason, which is rendered possible only by her insisting after his disagreement token. (It is hardly necessary to add that these series can apply to other forms of disagreement, e.g. parallelisms, too.)

Avoidance of conflict thus works out by means of the limitation of the ping-pong rule giving way to complementarity. This rule, however, holds only if disagreement is bluntly continued. As already mentioned, speakers may also produce an expansion. But the expansion itself gives way to another form which leads out of argumentation.

**On the fringes of instruction**

The expansion itself may become the subject of a disagreement.

*Excerpt 8.12 Christianity*

1 M: First we have to be desperate; so that we... 
2 U: Yes. 
3 C: because desperate people are more easily man- manipulated. Tha- that’s how I understand the matter.  
5 U: HOW THAT? No:  

Christian’s utterance (3) is just an expansion of a preceding disagreement. He simply takes up the formulation of his mother – his opponent – and gives her something like a reason for his position (3f.). He has hardly finished his sentence when Uschi disagrees again expressively (5).

We can already guess from this example how this argumentative sequence will progress: one party puts forward an expansion which can be regarded as an argument – and which meets again with disagreement. Progress by means of an expansion, however, is not always open to further disagreement. There is another possibility, which is evident in the next example:

*Excerpt 8.13 Boris Becker*  
(M talks about her gymnastics training group)  
1 U: Perhaps they don’t know it any more.  
2 M: Sure, they know (It).  
3 U: ‘Hmhm.’

Ursula suggests that the girls in her mother’s sports group do not know ‘it’ any more (1). The disagreement is formulated
The avoidance of asymmetry in informal discussions

sequences, a speaker, however, tries to avoid establishing the implied asymmetries of knowledge. If one speaker assumes the role of a teacher too often, the right to disagree is endangered and the other speakers are likely to be degraded to recipients of the teacher's knowledge. The establishment of topics in argumentative sequences helps to prevent this. Sometimes the avoidance of instruction becomes quite obvious:

**Extract 8.4 Boris Becker**

1: C: ... a kid like this Boris Becker (hh) makes such a lot of money without—any taxation like that
2: U: not no: taxation
3: U: (0.5)
4: U: Twenty four percent he has to pay.
5: C: I don't know how
6: C: In any case
7: C: They should impose much higher tax rates.

Having disagreed with Christian on the tax rates Boris Becker has to pay, Ursula presents her better knowledge about the exact figure (5). But before she has even made her most important contribution Christian interrupts her (6), going on with his argument. The asymmetry of knowledge is evident. Christian wants the tax rates to be raised, but he does not even know, as Ursula shows, the existing tax rates. But as is usual in these arguments, no one bothers about better knowledge. Surely, the 'ways' of argumentative sequences and of teaching are not too different; each expansion includes an element of knowledge. But in argumentative sequences speakers hesitate to install this asymmetrical form:

**Extract 8.9b Broesler following the 'NO:nononono::: that's not true' in 8.9a**

1: W: (1.0)
2: W: this small tape recorder,
3: H: No tape recorder works on 3.2 watts.
4: W: = So it uses 7.

Being contradicted, Willie apparently waits for teaching — but there is a long pause (1). As we now see, Willie himself does not know much better, so he just repeats his assertion with marks of uncertainty (2). But Herbert, too, only reformulates his disagreement. At this point it is clear for both that they will not engage in any teaching: Willie 'offers' a first alternative (4); in a few turns they 'raise the ante': Herbert proposes 20, and finally they agree on 20 watts. Only now Willie can go on with his criticism as 20 watts is so little as to demonstrate the ignorance of both of them with respect to energy consumption.

This example demonstrates how near teaching can be to

anaphorically by mother (2). Here, however, Ursula replies by only murmuring an accepting 'Hm'. There is no further disagreement and no further expansion, as the topic over which there was disagreement has come to an end. The reason for this argumentative 'shortcoming' is easily understood. Mother is talking about 'her girls'. Even if Ursula suggests something, she does not know the girls (as is clear from the preceding talk). Mother has privileged access to the knowledge on this subject matter — and no disagreement series is produced. Although this example is but a short disagreement episode, we could now assume that asymmetries of knowledge may obstruct the development of such argumentations. Analysing similar texts, Keppler and Luckmann (this volume, Chapter 7) found that in everyday conversations teaching is introduced by a phase in which asymmetries of knowledge are established interactively between the speakers. Teaching may be initiated by the speaker; it may also be initiated by the recipient of the expected teaching. And one of the ways for the 'teacher' to initiate the instruction is — disagreement. This 'rectification' (Richtgestellung) takes the following form:

**Speaker 1:** Utterance
**Speaker 2:** Contradiction
**Speaker 2:** Teaching

If asymmetries of knowledge are once established, the teachers-to-be get the floor. They have the 'ticket' for a unit of talk which they understand as being lack of knowledge of the other interlocutor. 'The right to teach' is thus acquired by the 'teacher-to-be's disagreement with someone who does not yet know that he is a 'pupil'-candidate but who contributes to the opening of the teaching sequence in consequence of the fact that he 'must' be granted the right to be given an explanation of the disagreement (Keppler and Luckmann, this volume, Chapter 7, p. 150). Instruction is segregated from the main flow of talk, and the 'teacher' becomes the principal speaker for the duration of the teaching sequence.

According to the classical Contra factum non valet argumentum, we thus find teaching also starting off from disagreement, somehow neutralizing the ping-pong rule: the teacher gets the floor upon contradicting and holds it until having 'unloaded' the better knowledge announced in disagreeing (Keppler, 1989). With respect to the continuous flow of disagreement this functions like an interruption or at least like a 'side-sequence'. Being involved in a series of argumentative...
argumentation. But in this case, too, both speakers try to avoid the asymmetry of knowledge. Both speakers are right in a certain way. Willie was not too wrong and Herbert’s contradiction turned out reasonably. Argumentative sequences thus not only face the problem of conflict; they also flee the byway of teaching which would leave the floor to one speaker only, leaving the path of precipitated, hurly-burly disagreement.

So far I have tried to show how speakers get around possible asymmetries hidden in the structure of disagreement. This mainstay of my argument, however, relies on the affirmation that there is a specific form of talk in which such disagreement occurs. Therefore I would like to sketch some other features of this form of talk.

Informal discussion as a communicative aggregate

The informal discussions analysed in this chapter are mostly multi-party conversations. Four, five, up to fifteen people are sitting around a table while three, four or five are continuously talking. This poses the problem of the organization of talk: who disagrees with whom and what is the position of the third, fourth, etc., speaker? This problem has a surprising solution. The artful construction of disagreement not only signifies what it is that is not agreed to; it also shows whom the speaker is opposing and, if several speakers are talking, it also indicates who is opposed to whom and who agrees with whom.

The construction of what we may call oppositions, that is of speakers’ local relations to one another in disagreement, is complemented by the use of ‘agreement markers’. They can be very explicit, saying ‘this time you are right’ or ‘that is true’; they may be more restricted like ‘yay yah’, ‘hmm’, or they may be constructed like parallelisms or anaphors, repeating the preceding utterance of another person. Agreement markers not only indicate what and whom the speaker agrees with, thus establishing coalitions (speakers’ momentary positions of consent); they also provide for the positioning of speakers’ utterances. If W and Z are disagreeing, X, agreeing explicitly with W, might well meet with disagreement from Z. Thus, the series of disagreements establishes a dialectical relation of speakers in terms of proponents and opponents. By means of this dialectical relation (the social correlate of complementarity) the utterances of each speaker are located on one side or the other. Only by virtue of this dialectical relation is it possible for speaker X to contradict Y during Y’s turn even if X does not yet know what Y will say; for X it may suffice that Y has uttered a token of agreement to Z—the one X had contradicted before.

The local character of disagreement also accounts for the dialectical positions. Situational there is a pro and a con—here there is hardly a third position in arguing (that is unless speakers do interrupt, head for some byway like teaching or change the form) as will become clear below. Suppose someone tried to mediate. In this case the mediators would have to agree with one and then with the other of the preceding speakers. He or she would already run the risk of being disagreed with in between—i.e. at a point where he or she had just agreed with one speaker. And even if he or she succeeded in referring to both positions—the next speaker could (and really would) contradict the attempt of conciliation, thus involving the mediator him- or herself in the dialectical stream of disagreement, opposition and coalition.

This dialectical structure has an impact even on the logistics of conversational argumentation. Of course we could try to reconstruct the deep structure of, for example, the Gieger argument, and arrive at something similar, such as Toulmin’s scheme. This, however, could only be brought about if we included elements which are not spoken explicitly. Apparently, the logic is rather dialectical, and it follows a dialogical rather than a monological pattern.

This has two consequences. On the one hand the speakers add to their disagreement tokens, which themselves already require some art: argumentative means, such as, e.g. logical particles (because, so, thus). In the Gieger argument Christian alludes to an ‘argument of distinction’ which becomes fully realized by mother, introducing an example which, (along with his distinctive ‘not as much as’, then becomes the topic). Similar techniques to those found in these disagreements have been described by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1970) as comparisons, dissociations and so on. Given the continual disagreement, these techniques lead to ongoing change of the ‘questio’. What is disagreed with at one moment may be expanded by an example, and the example again may meet with a disagreement. It is in this way that the question of Gieger’s income turns into the question of Boris Becker’s income taxes.

Informal discussions, however, do not consist exclusively of series of disagreements. On the contrary, disagreement may come to a sudden end. There are several typical ways of ending a
series of disagreements or argumentative sequences. Although the features of such sequences do not have the rigidity of communicative genres, they form an ‘event’ (Gumperz and Berenz, forthcoming) within a social encounter; they show visible boundaries and a specific sequential organization. The social encounter itself, family discussion, can be described by a loose but recognizable concatenation of different communicative forms, that is, an aggregate.

If argumentative sequences in informal discussions come to an end, they may be followed by very different communicative forms. Some of them seem to be spontaneously produced ‘flying stretches’ of hectic conversational activity; others bestow the impression of resting places, e.g., when speakers are given the floor. In any case, informal discussions do not at all consist exclusively of argumentative sequences. Even if they return to argumentation once in a while, on the whole they appear as something of a communicative pie. Speakers may tell jokes and funny stories, paranormal stories, memories and so on. Some of the intermingled forms have already been analysed in some detail, so it may suffice just to mention them: situative resources may interfere, like pets or the practical requirements of dinner table sociability (wine, food, etc.); argumentative sequences may turn into the reconstruction of medial experiences, or they may be interrupted for the telling of wisdom (Bergmann, 1968; Kepl er and Luckmann forthcoming; Ulmer, 1968). The attempt to look for some systematical concatenations between typical forms, however, seems a vain enterprise. It may be that the very informality of an event is made up by the broad variety of communicative forms. Mixed as the communicative pie of informal discussions may be, it always tastes like argument. To state it less metaphorically: it is always dominated by argumentation. This implies that even if other forms are hooked in, speakers frequently return to argumentative sequences.

Whereas continuous disagreement accounts for the intrinsically motivated shift of topics, the informal character enforces this in allowing for departures from argumentation to other communicative forms. This is one explanation of the trait we all know so well: its never-ending character. As opposed to formally institutionalized discussions (Berthold, 1982), informal discussions are communicative aggregates which derive the very essence of their informality from this freedom to select forms and to argue, too. Instead of pursuing a topic straight ahead, speakers may talk about contraception, go on to celibacy and finally turn to religious cults. And they may finally come to an end when the participants get tired, when it is time to sleep—and when no speaker disagrees any more.

‘Don’t shout!’: conflict and argumentation

Facing the problems of conflict, of asymmetries of knowledge, of shifting topics and their never-ending character, why do speakers indulge in informal discussions at all? The reason for this seems quite obvious if we look at the—admittedly fragmentary—excerpts. Argumentation turns out to be a machinery to produce topics which, on the one hand, provide for a thrill by means of disagreement and, on the other hand, maintain a high degree of sociability exactly in getting around asymmetries and in allowing for other communicative forms, bestowing a non-binding, almost playful character on them. The sociability of well-tempered argumentation confers some kind of equality on the participants. Participants may feel free to disagree at any point, they feel free to introduce some other form of discussion at any time, they may even abstain from discussing if they are not in the mood to do so. In the manner pointed out above they may just obstruct any attempt to bring forward better knowledge (or ‘better argument’). Thus they cherish discussion almost for its own sake—and for the sake of maintaining the conversation. Despite the equality of sociable argumentation, informal discussions are subject to strong restrictions. Apart from speakers’ unwillingness to pinpoint notions and utterances to a degree which would allow for the notion of validity claim (which would in any case be counteracted by the ongoing disagreements), the thrill of the dialectical complementarity of disagreement always faces dangerously in two directions: disagreement may lead to the establishment of asymmetries of knowledge (thus depriving ‘ignorants’ of the right to disagree and thereby ruling out the equality of the ping-pong); and disagreement may lead into the troubled waters of conflict talk, ending up with the opposite of sociability: shouting, crying and quarrelling.

In fact, speakers not only pay attention to the overt communicative etiquette of well-tempered disagreement. Formulations of manners of speaking like, e.g., ‘now let him finish’ or ‘don’t shout’ may be indicators of this. There are even more enduring ‘shelters’ built in these discussions which not only prevent them from driving into these byways; they also have results which are not intended. Namely, these discussions often start off from
topics which are of personal interest, be this just the personal reproach of one child against another which prompts the discussion, the moral personal attitudes of family members, like Christian's Catholicism, the interruption of the sons' gymnastic careers, or Ursula's atheism. The family members seem quite likely to discuss these personal questions but, paradoxically, they do not succeed in accomplishing this in a direct way. In fact, as soon as these topics get into the machinery of disagreement, they become immediately transformed into topics of much less personal concern and of much broader interest. Actually, the Gienger argument is exactly one point where such a transformation occurs. The family had been talking about gymnastics, and at several points serious attacks against the two sons who had interrupted their careers had been brought forward. The conversation then even included some moral sentences, slowly turning away from the sons and introducing other examples (two elite gymnasts in the village, a successful gymnast from the neighbourhood). It was only when the Gienger argument started that the conversation turned into a discussion and lingered on with the next, the well-known example of Boris Becker.

This turn is significant also for other discussions. They start off with topics of personal concern, but immediately these topics become transformed into topics of more general interest. There are good reasons for this, which are already built into disagreement. As the avoidance of conflict talk may be one reason for this turn to impersonal topics, the topics are at the same time of such generality as to allow anyone to make contributions. The differences of knowledge - be this mother's knowledge of the local gymnasts or Ursula's knowledge on literature - are overcome in choosing topics of general interest.

All of the family's informal discussions thus tackle problems of general interest in order to keep the harmonious balance of well-tempered disagreement. This conflict prophylaxis leads to an interesting paradox. Apparently the family members liked to talk about personal problems - at least most of their informal discussions started with such topics. In order to avoid conflict and avoid asymmetries of knowledge they turned to commonplace topics, and thus they had to get clear about personal problems (religious, political, moral, attitudes in some cases) arising from the most trivial and popular topics around.

Even if one of the families analysed in this chapter seems to have cherished this kind of talk, one cannot assume that all families engaged in informal discussion. On the contrary. As already mentioned, a second family rarely engages in informal discussions, and if they did, they were seriously in danger of conflict (which in fact did happen). The family in question, on the other hand, not only had this notion of argumentation, but interviews with family members showed that they knew about the peculiarity of this kind of argumentation. Ursula, for example, recalled that these discussions were common among her parent's generation when she was a child, 'that the old sat together, they sent us children to the play room and discussed - something we children found most boring'. Discussion - 'that was a notion among us children. What are the old people doing? They are discussing again. We found that deadly boring'. 'Discussion', however, could mean two things. 'Father's relatives often met too. And they were always shouting. Obviously they called it discussing too, but they only shouted that is what my father's relatives were like.' Compared to her family, father's relatives were extremely 'vindictive', they quarrelled all the time. One could argue that her family is an exception, but other research hints at the possibility that there might be something like a certain communicative culture which allows for informal discussion.

Thus, informal discussion seems to depend on what Gumperz (1982, pp. 43 ff.) calls 'conventions' which develop on the basis of social networks. Families cherishing such discussions are certainly an example of such networks. But this communicative form necessitates a kind of network of social relationships which is not found only in families. Certainly, more investigations of different settings, contexts and aggregations would be required. But it is safe to assume that informal discussions can be characterized by what Simmel (1970) has called sociability, that is, they are social encounters in which certain elements of the outer social structure are disregarded (power, status). The sociability of non-dominating argumentation is, however, not devoid of all inequalities. Communicative cultures that cherish informal discussions have to handle the explosiveness of disagreement in such a way as to allow for complementarity, both by instruction and by the avoidance of conflict. Still, members do not form a circle of naive philosophers, unknowingly guided by the 'power of the better argument'. In fact, they just like to have arguments without getting into conflict, and in the end they talk as usual. And I hope at least to have hinted at one of these 'habits of the heart' which, if I am not mistaken, most of us pursue once in a while.
I am indebted to Allison Wetterlin who helped me to anglicize the text and to avoid referring to male speakers. I would also like to thank Cathryn Houghton for her help and Ivana Markova for many comments and corrections.

2. Cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1970). I will hark back to the rhetorical techniques described there.

3. Quasthoff (1978, p. 27) has already shown that ‘natural argumentation’ is much more complex than Toulmin’s scheme projects.'(1983, p. 10)." There must be an initial stage at which the charge or claim is testimony given in support of the charge or claim, leading to the final stage'. Maas (1976) and Klein (1985) also take the ‘challenged’ (das Streitige) to be presupposed in argumentation.

5. Harvey Sacks (1987, p. 66) has used this metaphor of the machinery leading from disagreement to consent.

6. For structurally accidental reasons the father is less important than the children, and the only daughter contributes more to the conversation than three of the four sons taken together.

7. The material stems mainly from dinner-table talk of one family in several subsequent years which is part of the data of the Constance research project. Material from other families and other setting are also included. At the risk of some distortions I have translated the excerpts, which were originally in Swabian, a south-west German dialect, and Standard German.

8. It is only after about half a minute that he triggers a disagreement which takes up one of his examples. And, as we may gather from what has already been said, the example becomes the topic of the argument rather than Christian’s thesis on the two worlds.

9. Willie and Herbert had for some time been maligning the technical ignorance of their fellowmen when Willie introduced his grandmother as another example. Here he meets with Herbert’s contradiction, surprisingly because what later turns out to be at issue (the number of watts consumed is but a subordinate point which was formulated in passing and in a rather casual way.

10. For the Beweislastregel and the allgemeine Begrundungsregel cf. Kopperschmidt 1980, pp. 64 ff

11. If a second speaker questions an utterance by disagreeing, the first speakers may continue disagreement because they either do not know what they disagree about or what reasons the second speakers have in mind. Thus they require the second speakers to give a reason. If they again continue disagreeing in their subsequent turn, second speakers may show that they do not want to put forward evidence (if they did, the ping-pong would come to an end) but want disagreed on something.

12. In fact, the above cited example of continued disagreement (Extract 8.10b is one prominent example of conflict talk.) One of the families (three of four) was engaged in conflict talk after the discussion had turned to the very personal level of the parents reproaching each other. In any case it can be said that disagreement is a structural prerequisite for conflict.

13. This holds even for semi-formalized legal mediation where the establishment of a third party remains fragile: cf. Notthdurft (1989).

14. When I first formulated this idea I did not anticipate that it would be accepted. It is also one of the cases where there is no hierarchy and so the organization of the turns. But it took only five minutes for him to become involved again in the discussion as a member who immediately was disagreed with by Adi - and who contradicted again.

15. Thus different aspects of utterances rely on the correspondent opposing part, which should be connected crosswise:

   Challenge: Gymnastics is a non-profitable art
   C: Gienger earns little money
   F: G. has enough savings
   C: Not like others
   F: The advertisement contracts
   M: Not like Boris Becker
   F: But sure
   C: Becker earns millions

16. One is to drown out the speaker. Several times two, three or even four speakers just consented, very obviously, e.g. in saying ‘certainly’ (doch) at the same time or just by repeating the utterance of the preceding speaker. Opponents would appear very offensive if they continued the argument. A second way of ending an argument is consent. Consent rarely needs ratification of the thesis but just implies an (at least partial) acceptance of the last argument (‘exactly, but…’, ‘ja, aber…’). In several cases one can hardly tell consent from a pure stop, the third form. The opponent or proponent simply stops disagreeing. The fourth form, interruption, is the most frequent. While arguing, suddenly the girlfriend of one son leaves, prompting a series of good-byes, comments, etc. Or one speaker takes his glass of wine and shouts, loudly, ‘Cheers’ while another is about to develop a thesis about the conflict between Marxism and Catholicism. Interruptions, stops, consent and drowning out do not necessarily mean that the argumentation has come to an ultimate end. Often they are a kind of thematic association, they pick up the thread of the argumentative topic in order to tell a funny joke.

17. I found several typical ways of returning to argumentation. First, a speaker may explicitly reformulate the problem after the argument has been interrupted. Interestingly enough these reformulations rarely reproduce exactly what has been said; they say it in a few words, thus posing a new problem. A special kind of reformulation is the invitation. Once Ursula, having seen that her opponent, Christian, had been interrupted by a bad joke from Detlef, asked the other participants to listen to Christian. Another
way is to formulate what may be called a real assertion. Christian, e.g., announces that he will now state his opinion on contraception, and so he goes on: 'I would like to make an important comment on ...' As we have seen, this must not lead to an argumentative sequence. In order for it to become an assertion a speaker depends on the fourth form which may be produced at any time: disagree-
ment as a second turn.

18. The notion of argumentative Dialogueor's asserts exactly the oppo-
site, that is: that there is an argumentative character throughout arguments: cf. Jaeger (1976).

19. After Detlef has explained why he could not continue gymnastics, Uschi accuses him of never finishing anything he has begun. Now it is the family's second former gymnast, Christian, who is defendinging. But he is interrupted by the attacked, Detlef, who justifies himself: he did not have the same chances as others. Then we hear father's sceptical 'Hmm', followed by a long pause. Father seems then to expand his sceptical remark, but lets it go. The next pause is followed by a long turn by mother who tells of two 'elite children' gymnasts of the village, a story which is linked by a comparison ('they too'). Neither Detlef nor Christian become topics again; but there is constant allusion to their broken careers.

20. 'You are always starting something and then leaving it'/'99 per cent is hard work - the rest is talent'/'Either you decide to do it or you leave it altogether'. The sentences which follow in quick succession all consist of two parts, and the two parts are contrasting (start-stop; work-talent; decide-leave it). The third sentence is followed by what has come to be known as the Gienger (and later the Boris Becker) argument. Christian's affirmation 'gymnastics is a lost art' then, cannot be looked at in isolation. It appears to be motivated by a topic of some relevance to the past family history, and it is also motivated by the reproach in the preceding talk.

21. The long discussion on Christianity, e.g. sets in with a personal reproach:

Christianity
1 M: Didn't you talk about the article.
2 U: =Christian didn't understand, that's all.
3 C: I understand it quite well, (0.5)
4 C: It was mostly almost plain blasphemy.
5 U: What; not at all.

Directly the theme has been initiated by mother (1). Uschi starts with the reproach that Christian did not understand (with the connotation: has been too stupid) the afore-mentioned article. Christian, of course, immediately disagrees. There is a short gap - does not insist and leaves space for Christian's next move. But he does not enlarge on his ability to understand but turns to the article itself, and Uschi hurriedly disagrees with his assertion, so that both can now engage in a discussion of the article and not of Christian's ability to understand it. For reproaches in families, see Frankenberg (1976).

22. Most family members live most of the time on their own in other cities. Thus the family shares few of the experiences which are commonplace for normal members of society.

23. It is no novelty to argue that there are certain milieus which are more prone to argument than others. Schiffrin (1984) also points at the 'argumentative' culture (of Jews in Philadelphia).

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9 Dominance and asymmetries in A Doll’s House

Ragnar Rommetveit

Aim and scope: from conversation analysis to interpretation of a polyphonic literary text

The purpose of this study is to explore in a stepwise fashion and, it is hoped, in increasing depth and scope, patterns of dominance and asymmetry in conversation between the two main characters in Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. The text that I shall examine in some detail is a sequence of 62 turns from the very first conversation between Nora and Helmer in the first act. This sequence will be analysed with respect to gross (and in part quantifiable) interactional dynamics and compared with a smaller fragment of conversation between them toward the end of the play.

The two excerpts will be dealt with as if they were transcripts of real-life face to face communication, both in the initial assessment of interactional dominance and coherence and whenever, after a micro-analysis of interactional moves, I proceed to enquire into patterns of semantic and strategic dominance (Linell, 1990). Asymmetry between the two partners in the conversation will then be further explored in terms of control of intersubjectively endorsed perspectives on things and states of affairs they talk about, i.e. in terms of distribution of epistemic responsibility (Rommetveit, 1990; forthcoming). Dialogically displayed dominance will consequently be examined as potential manifestations of asymmetric interpersonal relations such as those dealt with by Martin Buber in his explication of Ich-Es (I-it) – as opposed to Ich-Du (I-you) variants of human self-other relationships (Buber, 1958).

However, A Doll’s House is a modern work of fiction, a
Asymmetries in Dialogue

Edited by
Ivana Marková and Klaus Foppa

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