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# Parent–Child Mealtime Conversations Stimulated with Decorated Tableware

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## Abstract

This explorative qualitative study investigated how families engage in mealtime conversations supported with decorated plates that were specially designed to promote family conversations. Our aim was to examine the main thematic and discursive patterns that naturally occurred in these conversations. Six Norwegian families of pre-school children aged 3–6 years were provided with five decorated plates and asked to audio-record their conversations during a meal. Transcripts of the audio-recordings were analysed with manifest content-related analysis, followed by an abductive analysis and a mapping of the main discourse types and interactional patterns. We demonstrate that the conversations displayed great thematic heterogeneity and represented a continuum of extended and non-extended talk, ranging from basic labelling and vocabulary recall to narration, explanation and argumentation. Variable engagement levels among the participants were also noted. We argue that decorated tableware can serve as a valuable tool for studying linguistic input and the nature of adult–child conversations during mealtimes at home and beyond.

**Keywords** Mealtime conversations · Adult–child interaction · Early language · Thematic analysis · Discourse types

## Introduction

Since the early 1970s, mealtime conversations have emerged as an important research paradigm within family studies. Studies on family dynamics have highlighted the importance of positive communication among family members during mealtimes but the specific conditions for stimulating mealtime conversations and their variation across families are little known. Our study is the first study to explore the role

of the objects that most mealtimes contain—plates—in parent–child conversations around meals at home.

Such mealtime conversations can happen during breakfast, lunch or dinner and can be part of routine care activities not only at home but also in preschools and schools (Ødegaard, 2007). Mealtime conversations in families are associated with language growth, socialisation and culturally specific ways of talking and are, as such, of strong developmental value (Aukrust, 2002; Aukrust & Snow, 1998; Hu et al., 2021; Snow & Beals, 2006). The exact mechanisms through which mealtime talk supports literacy development are unknown, but it has been shown that mealtime conversations are a typical context where adults are sources of expert opinion (Bova, 2015a) and where children can practice their language skills, which are later associated with their literacy skills (Snow & Beals, 2006). Involvement in discussions during meals not only provides children with opportunities to develop their vocabulary, enhance their ability to create and comprehend different discourse types such as stories, explanations, or arguments, but it also provides an arena for families to bond together.

In our study, we were specifically interested in the role of decorated tableware in mealtime conversations. Various artists have used tableware to prompt conversations between

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meal companions, young and old. For example, designer Bilge Nur Saltik's Share Food dining collection consists of plates that are designed to be tipped toward a dining companion, thus serving as an invitation for conversation (<https://www.bilgenursaltik.com/share-food>). Children's tableware is a growing industry, estimated to reach USD 19.6 billion by 2030 (DataIntel, 2022), with an increased interest in plastic-free tableware because of environmental and safety concerns, such as leaching of chemicals from plastic into food. Children's story plates, made of paper or plastic and used for picnics or parties, often include popular fairy-tales themes, which could be considered prompts for conversations. Children's story plates made of porcelain exist too, although they are most typically part of vintage collections and based on classic fairy tales (e.g. Magic Roundabout Cup and Plate, 1960's).

In Scandinavia, which is the geographical context for our study, children's story plates have been popular in the 1970s, for example the plates decorated with Elsa Beskow's illustrations. In 2022, the Norwegian ceramics manufacturing company Figgjo AS released a collection of 17 plates that have been designed by professional illustrators with the purpose of stimulating children's language (<https://prateom.no>). It was Figgjo's collection of plates that we selected to focus on in this study.

The study was conceptualised as an exploratory study examining children's and parents' conversation patterns with a type of tableware that has not been studied before. We did not aim to evaluate the collection in terms of its learning potential or any other impact but rather to use the collection as a way to explore the main thematic and discursive patterns that naturally occur when mothers and children use decorated tableware during meals. Our main research question was: What are the key thematic and conversational patterns during family mealtime conversations that include discussions mediated by plates designed to stimulate conversations?

## Theoretical Grounding

At a broad level, our study builds on research on child language socialization and development. This line of research highlights how rich parental input is crucial for children's language growth. While socio-economic status (SES) is traditionally considered a key factor in language development (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2006), research shows significant variation in family linguistic input, regardless of SES (Weizman & Snow, 2001). This variation also extends to different interactional settings and activity types, such as play, sharing of personal narratives, shared book reading or mealtimes (Cristofaro & Tamis-LeMonda, 2012; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2012; Weizman & Snow, 2001).

Anderson et al.'s (2021) meta-analysis further supports the link between parental input quality and preschool children's language development, particularly vocabulary diversity and syntactic complexity. However, the associations vary across developmental stages and settings.

## Preschool-Aged Children and Mealtime Conversations

Often involving preschool-aged children, family mealtimes have long been considered a key platform for language socialisation (see e.g., Beals, 1991). Although studies reveal that family conversations during meals can vary based on external factors such as socio-economic and cultural background (Aukrust & Snow, 1998), interactional similarities across cultural contexts have also been identified (Bohn et al., 2024). Recent scholarship also underscores the importance of the child's active participation in mealtime interactions for language growth (Yang et al., 2024). Traditionally, much of the research in this area has focused on narratives and explanations (Aukrust, 2002, 2004; Beals, 1991; Snow & Beals, 2006). However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in argumentative discourse during family mealtimes, particularly its socialization and epistemic functions (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013b, 2015). Adults play a significant role in initiating and sustaining mealtime arguments, but children's input, especially through their requests and adult-directed why-questions, is also crucial (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013b, 2015). Further, this line of research has brought to the fore the kinds of argumentative topics that families may discuss during mealtimes and the types of argument schemes they may typically employ (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2018), identifying the adult rather than peers as the typical source of expert opinion in arguments from authority (Bova, 2015a, 2015b). Investigating the relationship between different discourse types during family mealtimes rather than argumentation only, Stein and colleagues (2020) revealed differences in the types of interactional prompts that lead to argumentation, narration and explanation. They also show variations in the respective length and frequency of use of the different discourse types as well as differences in the embeddedness of one discourse type in another.

## Gender Dynamics in Family Conversations

Another key theme in studies on child language socialization is the gendered nature of family conversations in various interactional contexts, including during reminiscing (Fivush, 2014) or emotion talk (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015) with preschool children as well as when discussing school-related topics with older children such as courses (Tenenbaum, 2009), science (Tenenbaum et al., 2003) or at mealtimes (Merrill et al., 2015). Fivush et al.'s (2000) seminal study

involving preschoolers found that mothers tended to engage in the conversations more than fathers, and girls were more likely to discuss emotional aspects of their experiences than boys. Studies have also shown that mothers, even when not explicitly endorsing stereotypes, may convey gender concepts to their preschool children implicitly through language (Gelman et al., 2004).

### Connecting Mealtime Conversations with Early Literacy Practices

Literacy scholars have noted a conceptual link between mealtime conversations and shared picture book reading. For instance, Alaca (2022) discusses the "blurring line" between stories presented in books and in edible materials, highlighting the educational value of such engagements in early childhood. Similarly, Kucirkova (2023) emphasizes the connection between food-themed story interactions and the affective nature of parent–child interaction. These connections were important to our inquiry as we seek to contribute to a new research area.

### New Research Area: Tableware and Mealtime Conversations

While food is naturally central to mealtime conversations, the tableware on which it is served also plays a role. To our knowledge, no studies have yet explored how different types of tableware may influence these conversations. Our study opens this new research area with an exploratory inquiry, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of family mealtime interactions, involving preschool-aged children.

## Method

### Study Procedure

The study was set up as a qualitative case study (DeFauw, 2021) with a small purposeful sample. A purposeful sample in this case meant that we followed snowball sampling by drawing on our own network of possible participants. At the onset of the study, the researcher met with the parent of each family and explained the purpose of the study and the ethical conditions for participation. Each family was provided with an audio-recorder and a set of batteries. The researcher showed the families how to operate the audio-recorder and where to place it on the table to capture high-quality sound.

In the course of the project, the families were provided with two sets of the Figgjo plates. Each set contained five plates, each portraying one of the following themes: (1) people, (2) animals, (3) edible things, (4) objects and (5) spaceship. Set 1 and Set 2 represented two variations of the

same five themes. Initially, families 1–3 received set 1 and families 4–6 set 2. Each family was asked to use the provided set for two weeks. In a crossover design, they then changed the sets in a fixed order. This ensured that each family received the plates with the same sequence of topics portrayed on the plates. The mealtimes could take place on several days or on the same day and could have gaps of days between them. The families were asked to audio-record their conversations only while using the plates. After two weeks, the researcher visited each family to swap the sets, check the audio-recordings and address potential questions. Two weeks later, the researcher picked up the audio-recordings or requested for these to be delivered to the university. Each family who participated in the study received one plate to keep as a thank you for their participation.

### Participants

The study participants were identified through snowball sampling whereby the university research team asked for participation through talking with colleagues with children in the target age (3–6 years) and these recommended their friends or colleagues. Such a convenience sample is typical of pilot studies but carries its limitations in terms of data objectivity and authenticity. To increase data authenticity and reduce socially desirable answers provided by the participants, the participants were asked to act as data co-collectors.

Six mothers of five girls and one boy took part in the study (see Table 1 for details on the children's gender and age). All children were typically developing, native Norwegian speakers and were part of middle- to high-income families. Given the ethical requirements set by the Norwegian Body on Research Ethics (Sikt), we did not ask for any further personal information of the participating families.

### Ethical Considerations

The Norwegian Body on Research Ethics (Sikt) granted the ethical permission for this study. As such, the researchers

**Table 1** Participating children's gender and age

Participant number	Child's gender	Child's age (years)
1.	Female	3
2.	Female	4
3.	Female	5
4.	Female	6
5.	Male	5
6.	Female	5

committed to following the Body's ethical guidelines. This included the possibility for parents and children to withdraw from the research at any time and for their data to be deleted and fully anonymized. The parents were invited to participate only if they wished to be audio-recorded and they were free to use the audio-recording as it suited them, as long as the recording was during mealtimes and with the plates. By empowering the participants with the data collection, the researchers experienced that there was greater buy-in from them and also higher likelihood for the data to reflect naturally occurring conversations at their homes.

To make the study procedure and ethical protocol easier, we kept the recordings and analysed the transcripts only of the mothers who provided consent and their one-to-one conversations with the target child. For mealtimes that involved several family members, we asked the families to stop the audio-recorder or delete the data before handing it back to us.

## Data Analysis

The data were transcribed following a simplified version of conversation-analytical transcription conventions (see "Appendix"). In the first analytical step, we coded the data by hand for broad thematic patterns. Only those data segments that were specifically prompted by the pictorial content of the tableware were included. Segments that concerned food management and general food-related issues were excluded. More specifically, we pursued manifest content-related analysis, with attention to the overt and literally present themes (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). Such a basic content analysis is focused on interpretative coding and basic analytic processes and used to document the views of small or large groups of diverse individuals. Within manifest content analysis, we followed the approach of an interpretive or inferential content analysis, which intends to objectively and systematically establish and interpret key characteristics of content (Osgood, 1959, referenced in Drisko & Maschi, 2016). This step offered an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the data and discuss emerging patterns at a more generic level.

The second step entailed an abductive analysis (Mason, 2018) during which we alternated between a detailed data-driven analysis and an analysis aided by theoretical insights on mealtime child–adult conversations, as presented in the theoretical section. To enhance analytical transparency and rigour, we recorded all emerging themes and sub-themes in a shared file and noted those instances during which the themes manifested in interactions of each participating family. While not aiming at statistical comparison, we opted for this procedure as it facilitated a visual emergence of patterns across the entire dataset.

In the third step, we explored each theme in terms of its main discursive and interactional patterns. At a broad discursive level, we were interested in mapping the main discourse types (such as labelling, narratives, explanations, argumentation) through which the identified themes were enacted. At a close interactional level, we focused on who in the dyad initiated each thematic interaction (mother or child) and how it developed in terms of the participants' interactional roles (such as questioning, responding, evaluating, extending) and contributions (one active lead, joint lead).

## Findings

Our analysis revealed that the six participating families engaged in thematically rich talk during which they drew on diverse discourse types with different references to the plates. At the thematic level, the plates were discussed as either (1) objects that may have specific functions or serve specific purposes, (2) as prompts that evoked certain attitudes on the children's part, (3) as prompts for language and concept explorations and (4) as prompts for discussions about various social issues. At the discursive level, the conversations represented a continuum with non-extended talk, such as labelling, basic vocabulary recall and brief clarifications of the pictorial content of the plates, at one end, and variably extended talk in the form of narratives, explanations or argumentation, at the other. The discursive and thematic continuum is captured in Fig. 1.

Below we present the main analytical patterns and illustrate these with representative excerpts from the dataset.

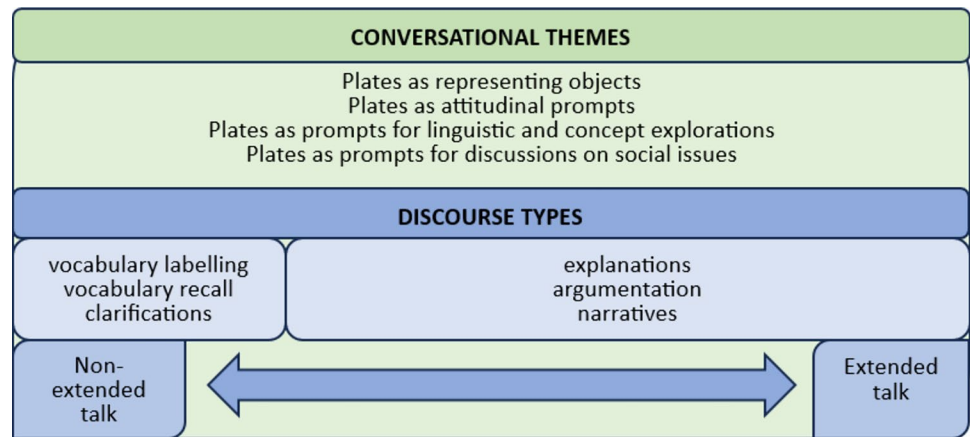
### Plates as Representing Objects

Zooming in on the first category, the participants discussed the plates as representing various objects, such as objects of scientific investigations, of specific production processes or as mercantile, artistic or utility objects, drawing mostly on explanatory discourse. The passage below is illustrative of the way in which this thematic category featured in our data:

Excerpt 1: Plates as mercantile objects.

1. Mother:	was it ( <i>the plate</i> ) nice?
2. Child:	yes! did you buy it?
3. Mother:	if I bought it?
4. Child:	yes
5. Mother:	no

**Fig. 1** Discursive and thematic continuum



6. Child: who bought it?  
 7. Mother: the university  
 8. Child: the university?  
 9. they they did, then?  
 10. Mother: yes. don't you remember that I said to you...  
 11. Child: ((unclear))  
 12. Mother: cheese?

As the excerpt shows, the mother–child dyad is here engaged in a brief exchange that centres on establishing who purchased the plate, thus presenting the plate as a mercantile object. It is the mother who initiates with a question on the child’s aesthetic judgement of the plate (line 1). While the child provides a brief answer, she does not elaborate and instead seizes the opportunity to inquire into the identity of the buyer of the plate (line 2). In the ensuing lines, the issue gets settled in a matter-of-fact manner and the dyad moves on to the next conversational topic (food—line 12). This interactional pattern is common for this thematic category.

**Plates as Attitudinal Prompts**

Our second thematic category comprises interactions that revealed certain attitudes on the children’s part, including reluctance to do something, such as talk about the plates with the mother or share experiences from the preschool. In some cases, the plates inspired the child to want to engage in a creative activity, either in parallel to the mealtime or when it ended, such as handicraft, drawing or book reading. However, the attitude that stood out in our data concerned the child’s evaluative expressions of preference for something, most often the plate itself, but also other things represented on the plate and extended to the child’s immediate world. These interactions were often enacted through argumentative discourse whereby the child was challenged by the mother to justify their

stance. This is illustrated in the next excerpt that revolves around the child’s dislike of the plate used that day:

Excerpt 2: Plates as attitudinal prompts—likes and dislikes

1. Mother: was it ((the plate)) nice?  
 2. Child: this one was a bit boring to look at  
 3. Mother: was it boring to look at? why was it boring to look at?  
 4. Child: because I did not like all the people and all the things  
 5. Mother: no?  
 6. Child: I am not the type who likes such things  
 7. Mother: ok but what is it that makes this one boring or why is it boring  
 8. Child: because ... they—I actually didn’t like—it’s just a little. I don’t  
 9. know why? actually I normally like things that are a bit: artsy but it—  
 10. Mother: a bit artsy? and this one was not?  
 11. Child: ehm  
 12. Mother: no  
 13. Child: I am not sure which type I like  
 14. Mother: no?  
 15. Child: I have never before seen a type that I would like  
 16. Mother: no but then we can look if there is a different plate you like? But  
 17. you have to eat a bit now.

As is typical for this category, the mother initiates the interaction by requesting the child’s aesthetic evaluation of the plate (line 1). Once offered (line 2), the dyad engages in unpacking the reasons for the stance in a succession of turns, with the mother acting as the reasoning facilitator and the child as the stance defender. Faced with a string of questions (lines 3, 7, 10) as well as one-word responses that function interactionally as invitations to extend her reasoning (lines 5, 12, 14), the child in this example mitigates her initial, categorical justification (line 4) to a position of uncertainty round her own aesthetic preferences. However, rather than pursuing the child’s reasoning



further, the mother turns attention to another plate and the issue of food management.

### Plates as Prompts for Language and Concept Exploration

This thematic category included numerous instances of both extended and non-extended talk. The non-extended talk revolved mainly round vocabulary issues, including, first and foremost, labelling of the pictorial content of the plates or, alternatively, vocabulary recall. This talk contained few interactional turns and was often initially prompted by the adult. The next excerpt illustrates how these conversations typically proceeded:

Excerpt 3: Plates as prompts for labelling.

1. Mother:	so this is the fourth plate. what do you see on it?
2. Child:	it is a rocking horse
3. Mother:	ehm
4. Child:	a beach ball
5. Mother:	a ball yes

In this example, the mother opens the conversation with a prompt for labelling the pictorial content of the plate (line 1), and, in her uptake, the child answers shortly (line 2) before the next item is labelled (line 4). Here it is unprompted by the mother, although we also evidenced passages where the mother may have assumed her questioning role explicitly. While in some cases the mother also provided a short evaluation, such as “well done” or “yes”, in others, no further elaborations were invited or offered. As such, these conversations conformed, with small variations, to an initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) pattern that stretched across several consecutive turns.

Beyond such basic labelling and recall, we identified interactions that evolved into variably elaborated discussions, serving first and foremost language learning purposes. This included numerous instances of vocabulary extensions, but also joint explorations of language sounds or pragmatic aspects of language (e.g. jokes). In addition, the dyads engaged in various concept explorations. The following excerpt shows an interaction where vocabulary extension is in focus:

Excerpt 4: Plates as prompts for vocabulary extensions—adult-driven

1. Mother:	what's underneath this one then?
2. Child:	with this one we do like wrooo::
3. Mother:	who has one like that?
4. Child:	daddy

5. Mother:	daddy. do you remember what it's called then? daddy has one like
6	that. when he presses it it lights up. we bought it for him as a birthday
7	gift
8. Child:	nails
9. Mother:	yes, that's what we can put on it or use when we have a hammer,
10.	but the thing that lights up and makes noise is called a drill. It turns
11.	around and then it screws it (( <i>the nail</i> )) on

Here, the mother initiates with a prompt for labelling an item on the plate (line 1). Since the child chooses to describe its sound qualities rather than offer an exact label (line 2), indicating that the label may not be available to her, the mother follows up with prompts and cues that extend into the child's world, here their family life (lines 3 and 5–7), to help the child on the way. Since her attempts are unsuccessful, she finally offers a more elaborated answer where she explains the conceptual difference between the child's guess (nails) and the correct answer (drill). The conversation is adult-driven throughout.

We also identified conversations where the child and the mother drive the interaction forward in a sustained joint effort, such as in the next example. It is preceded by an exchange about a sheep depicted on one of the plates:

Excerpt 5: Plates as prompts for vocabulary extensions—joint interactional effort

1. Mother:	do you think it is? what do you think it is? do you think it is mummy
2.	lamb? mummy sheep?
3. Child:	mummy sheep and baby sheep
4. Mother:	but what are baby sheep called?
5. Child:	lamb
6. Mother:	emm
7. Child:	baby dogs are called puppies
8. Mother:	correct yes
9. Child:	and baby cats are called kittens
10. Mother:	and what do we call baby people?
11. Child:	baby
12. Mother:	@ that was a trick question ((...)) do you think baby dinosaurs have
13.	their own name? no?
14. Child:	yes, dino
15. Mother:	dino.. perhaps?
16. Child:	mummy?
17. Mother:	mm? ...

Although it is once again the mother who initiates with a bid for a precise labelling of the animal depicted on the plate

(sheep) and with a cue that draws on a distinction between the animal and its offspring (line 1–2), the child offers a correct answer and follows it up with a short series of conceptual analogies (lines 7, 9, 11), supported by the mother and sprinkled with elements of humour and linguistic exploration (lines 10–17).

Our dataset also contains conversations where the child assumed a more prominent and active part in the interaction. This is illustrated in the next excerpt where the dyad engages in a discussion about a plate depicting various animals. The child acts as both its initiator (line 1), questioner (3, 10, 14) and commentator (lines 5–6, 8, 12), also here with humorous elements (i.e. repetitions of the word “period”), while the mother supports the child’s efforts by extending the child’s vocabulary through precise labelling (line 2, 11), acknowledging, endorsing or extending the child’s linguistic exploration (lines 4, 7, 9, 13) as well as conceptual understanding (line 15–16):

Excerpt 6: Plates as prompts for language and concept learning—child-driven

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1. Child:	what do the small fish eat?
2. Mother:	plankton
3. Child:	pla?nkton?
4. Mother:	ehmm
5. Child:	period plankton.. actually? ((Ron)) said the one who wins puts on a
6.	dress. period
7. Mother:	period? @ perhaps small fish eat. period?
8. Child:	@ yes
9. Mother:	no
10. Child:	[or?] what was the other thing?
11. Mother:	plankton
12. Child:	plankton period
13. Mother:	ehmm:
14. Child:	are there many – can we have a hundred small per?iods?
15. Mother:	well: the plankton in the sea you know? It’s so small that you can have
16.	one billion millions m:

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### Plates as Prompts for Discussions on Social Issues

Our last thematic category includes instances where the plates served as catalysts for discussions on various social issues. The pictorial content of the plate, such as various animals, people, toys, tools or food, often provided a vantage point to exploring the same or related theme in more detail and beyond its immediate interactional context. The themes that featured most prominently were the child’s experiences of the outside world, such as in the preschool

or during family leisure and other activities, or the child’s fantasy world. Such conversations were evidenced across all six families. In some cases, these conversations also evolved into more philosophical discussions, such as on the potential crossroads of reality and fantasy and distinctions between the two. Discussions on other themes such as gender issues, the aesthetics of the human body, relationships, feelings or future career plans were also present and could take the form of variably elaborated argumentation, reasoning and narratives.

The excerpt below illustrates the process of a joint exploration of an issue that proceeds from a very concrete level to a more abstract level. It revolves round the issue of colours:

Excerpt 7: Plates as prompts for conversations on social issue—fantasy/reality

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1. Child:	look... the white ones must – they must be coloured
2. Mother:	yes but if the white spots were coloured then you would not see
3.	all the fruit and vegetables
4. Child:	yes—I know that but that’s what makes them nice for me
5. Mother:	what colour should the white spots have had then?
6. Child:	... could have been. green or could have had a fantasy colour
7. Mother:	a fantasy colour?
8. Child:	yes
9. Mother:	what does your favourite fantasy colour look like?
10. Child:	sometimes.. I colour cows pink or purple or other colours. so it’s
11.	not just the usual colours we can use
12. Mother:	no? And you know what ((Molly)) there are purple carrots!.

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As the excerpt shows, although the conversation opens with the child’s assertion about her colour preferences for objects on the plate, it evolves into an exploration of the theme of fantasy colours versus colours of objects in the real world. The interaction is accomplished jointly through snippets of argumentative and explanatory discourse (lines 1–4 and lines 5–12, respectively), where the mother briefly assumes the role of an antagonist that opposes the child’s assertion (lines 2, 3) but also as an interactional party that requests explanations (lines 5, 7 and 9) and offers factual information (line 12). The child’s uptake, on the other hand, takes the form of stance justifications (line 4) but also assertions that vary between brief (line 8) to more extended (lines 10–11).

The following excerpt illustrates a discussion on gender issues. It emerged in one of the conversations about a plate depicting various objects and was immediately preceded by a passage where the mother enquires into how the child likes the plate of the day and what objects she sees on it. Yet, the child does not offer specific descriptions of the objects



represented on the plate but rather introduces the abstract issue of the plate and the toys represented on it as gendered. The passage below illustrates this theme in a short argumentative exchange between the child and the mother:

Excerpt 8: Plates as prompts for conversations on social issue—gender issues

1. Child:	...but these plates are boys' things!
2. Mother:	is this plate a boys' thing?
3. Child:	yes!
4. Mother:	why is it a boys' thing?
5. Child:	because boys like to play with cars and scooters ... and ... just ...
6.	those and ((I)) do not like boys' things sometimes
7. Mother:	yes but these are toys—girls like to use scooters also
8. Child:	it isn't? what—what was it?
9. Mother:	I don't know. there are girls who like scooters and cars and things
10.	and balls and and you like climbing frames and swings
11. Child:	yes but I don't like so much ((unclear)) on these.
12–20.	((the conversation turns to going to the playground with swings))
21. Mother	...but since you said that this was a boys' plate, what would have
22.	been on a girls' plate then?
23. Child:	a rainbow, flowers, perhaps a dress and other things
24. Mother:	yes but but these are two different things that we can play with
25.	we can play with rainbows and dresses and things.
26. Child:	yes? but I like things and.. like animals and.. colours... mom
27.	I don't want them to hear my voice...

As the transcript shows, the interaction opens with the child's assertion about the gendered nature of the plates (line 1). The mother challenges the claim advanced by the child several times (lines 2, 4, 7), and although the child offers a brief justification based on her personal judgements and preferences at first (lines 5–6), she nonetheless seems to abandon the issue of gender already in line 8 and turns her attention instead to her real-world experiences with the toys, represented on the plate (lines 12–20). While the mother attempts to sustain the focus on the issue of gender (lines 9–10) and even re-establishes it following the interactional detour in lines 12–20, the child shows little interest in pursuing it and, since she expresses a wish for the recording to be stopped (line 27), the recording ends there.

## Discussion

This paper aimed to explore the use of conversation-stimulating plates during family mealtimes, representing the first study to address this topic. Employing a qualitative approach, the study sought to understand in detail how families engage in conversations enriched by plates specifically designed for this purpose. Through thematic and discursive analysis of parent–child transcripts, the study identified four main themes: the plates as functional objects, prompts for children's attitudes, tools for language and concept exploration, and catalysts for discussions on social issues. Conversations varied from basic vocabulary recall to narratives, explanations and argumentation, reflecting a continuum of engagement levels.

Overall, our findings demonstrate significant heterogeneity in both conversational themes and discourse types facilitated by the inclusion of the plates during family mealtimes. This contributes to the literature on language socialization and early childhood development, emphasizing the crucial influence of the home environment in these processes and the continued significance of family mealtimes as a key context for language exchange (Beals & Tabors, 1993; Hu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024). Given the exploratory design of our study and the descriptive nature of our data, we cannot know whether the plates enriched the family mealtime interactions compared to mealtimes without their use or whether the same thematic and discursive heterogeneity could be maintained through their regular inclusion in family mealtime routines. Nonetheless, our findings pave the way for future studies to explore the effects of using this specific mealtime resource for enhancing parent–child conversations aligned around specific conversational topics.

As we showed, decorated plates used during mealtimes can serve as an impetus for the enactment of a range of discourse types, stretching from non-extended discourse to variably elaborated discourse in the form of narratives, argumentation and explanations. Basic vocabulary labelling and recall often provided a vantage point to more elaborated exchanges on related issues but also to conversations where the dyads explored aspects of vocabulary, language sounds and concepts through extended stretches of talk. We further note that the dyads in our study did not display a strict adherence to particular discourse types but rather engaged in talk characteristic of gliding transitions between discourses or even mixing of discourses within a conversation on a particular topic of interest, often accomplished through a flexible use of linguistic resources. This corroborates earlier research on family mealtime conversations specifically and the organisation of discourse units in interactions more generally that underscores the complex interrelations between enacted discourse types in extended stretches of talk and

also the potential embeddedness of one discourse type in another (Quasthoff et al., 2017; Snow & Beals, 2006; Stein et al., 2020).

While the role of the adult and the quality of adult linguistic input for child language and cognitive growth has long been noted (Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe & Snow, 2020; Tamis-LeMonda, 2012; Weizman & Snow, 2001), the precise mechanisms through which mealtime conversations undergird literacy development, as identified by Snow and Beals (2006), remain unclear. Also, as underscored in Anderson et al.'s meta-study (2021), there are variations in parental input and child language across developmental stages and measurement conditions. In our study, we sought to explore the specific conversational dynamics focusing on the interactional and discursive nuances of parent–child discussions when using previously not investigated objects (decorated plates) during meals. Our findings point at the co-constructed, dialogic nature of these interactions. While the adult represented a typical initiator and the main driving force in the interactions (excerpts 1, 2, 3, 4), we also show that there is leeway for children's initiations and active contributions as well (excerpts 5, 6, 7, 8). As such, this study contributes to the as yet less explored but growing scholarship on how children may shape their own language learning trajectories and manifest their agency in family mealtime discourse through active questioning (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013b; Yang et al., 2024).

Given recent scholastic interest in aspects of argumentative discourse in family mealtime conversations (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Bova, 2015a, 2015b), we were also interested in the emergence of such discourse when using decorated tableware during family dinners. While corroborating Bova and Arcidiacono's (2013a, 2015) emphasis on the crucial role of adults in initiating such discourse during mealtimes, we show that not only did adult-initiated requests for an evaluation of the aesthetic content of the plates feature as a frequent conversation opener (excerpt 2), they also offered opportunities to dive deeper into children's reasoning and argue beyond aesthetic evaluations (excerpt 7 and 8). Often acting as argument protagonists, entrusted with providing the burden of proof in arguments, adults may often role-model how argumentative discourse functions and initiate children into its appropriate use (Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015). In our data, the parents also assumed the role of antagonists, challenging the children's claims and requesting their more detailed justifications. While these parental bids for extended reasoning were not necessarily met with an active uptake on the children's part (excerpt 8), the mealtime conversations, stimulated by decorated tableware, nonetheless seem to carry much potential for the development of argumentative discourse in preschool children.

Beyond this, our findings showed discussions that ranged from brief depictions of the plates as objects to discussions

of attitudes and language-related issues, to broader social concerns, some of which were complex and pertinent to contemporary issues in Global North families, some more abstract and philosophical, while others were purely reflective of the children's young age. For instance, we evidenced conversations where the dyads engaged in a joint exploration of the borderlines between fantasy and reality, drawing on both explanatory and argumentative discourses (excerpt 7), but also other topics of considerable conceptual and discursive complexity such as love and friendship. This suggests that, in line with the philosophy for children (P4C) research tradition (Lipman, 2003), the integration of decorated tableware in family mealtimes has the potential to facilitate dialogues that may not only serve as a platform for children's linguistic and conceptual growth but also hone their critical thinking through joint enquiry.

The conversations also delved into gender-related topics, reflecting children's perceptions of the gendered nature of various aspects in their environment, as is typical for this age group and as was illuminated in a seminal study by Fivush et al. (2000) and other scholarship conducted across a range of interactional settings (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Fivush, 2014; Tenenbaum, 2009; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). While our study did not focus on possible differences between boys and girls in the utterances (and all adult participants were female), we did find gender references in the recorded conversations and these were directly traceable to the content on the plates (excerpt 8). As Gelman et al. (2004) have shown, this type of "gender talk" is prevalent in families when using resources depicting various people or objects in stereotypical and non-stereotypical situations, with children offering more explicitly stereotypical references and mothers signaling gender implicitly through linguistic cues. It would be interesting to probe the gender patterns that we identified with a larger-scale study that includes tableware with various stereotypical and non-stereotypical depictions of gender.

## Concluding Remarks

Given that the families we engaged in the research were expected to use the plates for the purpose of the study, our data contain instances where the conversations were not entirely natural, for example when the children questioned the use of the plates (Excerpt 1). The study was not conceptualized as an intervention and we recommend that future studies consider creative possibilities to involve families in the use of specific plates for their everyday mealtimes and research methods for documenting the interactions. By focusing on the interactional dynamics within the family setting, our study provides a unique perspective on mealtime conversations as a language socialization arena. However,

given that the participating families were recruited among university staff only, they represent specific participant demographics with potentially similar language socialization and family interactional practices. This lack of socioeconomic variation of the sample as well as the absence of the entire family in the conversations pose potential limitations to the generalizability of the findings. We recommend further exploration into more diverse family compositions and settings to better understand the broader implications of using decorated tableware. In particular, using decorated plates in preschools could be a useful avenue to explore with attention to how these can enhance interactions between staff and children during important routine times. In conclusion, decorated plates can serve as a valuable tool for studying linguistic input and the nature of parent–child conversations during mealtimes at home and beyond.

## Appendix: Simplified Conversation-Analytical Transcription

.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
!	Animated tone of voice
@	Laughter
:	Prolonged letter
(.)	Micro-pause
( <i>italics</i> )	Transcriber comment/ description of non-verbal moves
	Self- or other-interruption

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no competing interests.

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