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The methodical organization of talking and eating: Assessments in dinner conversations

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes food talk and more particularly food assessments produced during dinner conversations videorecorded in naturalistic settings. This focus reveals how expressions of food preferences, taste, and other evaluations are deeply embedded within collective activities, related both to the ongoing conversation and to the management of the meal as a social event. The paper reviews existing interactional studies of dinner conversations, and provides a detailed analysis of the interactional, linguistic and multimodal patterns which characterize the sequential environment in which assessments are produced. It identifies three recurrent contexts: at the beginning of meals, at closings of sequences and topical developments, and at 'delicate' moments characterized by emerging disagreements and conflicts. This sequential analysis reveals how taste and food preferences are highly sensitive both to the social occasions and to the organization of turns at talk; analysis shows that not only are assessments systematically positioned within specific sequences in dinner conversations, but also that they can be mobilized in service of other social practices, such as fueling topical talk, reorienting participants' focus of attention or stopping emerging sequential trajectories.

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1. Introduction

This paper offers a qualitative and systematic analysis of assessments of food proffered by participants during mealtime conversations videorecorded in naturalistic settings. Much existing work on attitudes, representations, feelings related to food is based on elicited accounts obtained through interviews, questionnaires, and rating scales. By contrast, this paper deals with naturally occurring assessments of food produced by family members or friends during actual dinner conversations. Adopting an interactional perspective, the paper is inspired by a long tradition within conversation analysis of detailed studies of dinner conversations, by studies of mealtime activities within the framework of language socialization and by analyses of food talk proposed within discourse psychology. On the basis of a data consisting of videorecorded dinner conversations among families and friends in France, which have been carefully transcribed, this paper offers a systematic analysis of the organization of food talk within social interaction. This analysis reveals that food assessments are very precisely positioned within mealtime activities, occasioned by the details of talk in interaction as well as other collective practices that characterize meals as social events. In this way, the paper contributes to the study of taste and food preferences as they are occasioned, expressed and elaborated upon in social practices.

2. A review of the interactional literature on dinner conversations

Food attitudes, representations, evaluations have been studied within a rich interdisciplinary body of literature, exploring eating behaviours and taste from various perspectives and methodological frameworks. Within this field, a large majority of studies are based either on experimental data or on constrained and elicited responses to questionnaires or interviews, which permit statistical studies of ratings, accounts, and self reported conducts. Such studies are based neither on direct observation nor upon video documentation of eating practices and food talk as they naturally occur in the everyday life of families and friends, without being orchestrated by any researcher. From an interactionist perspective eating practices are considered as situated within social collective events, and as indissociable from other social activities such as dining and talking together. A valuable interactionist literature exists which is based on detailed studies of naturally occurring dinner conversations, and which is able to contribute in a central way to the study of eating practices and food talk.

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Three research trends can be distinguished within this literature. Firstly, a rich tradition within ethnomethodologically inspired conversation analysis, since the 1960s focussing on audio and video recordings of dinner conversations. Secondly, a series of studies emanating from an interactionist perspective on socialization, and lastly a more recent group of studies coming from discourse psychology. I shall briefly review these three areas of research before presenting an analysis of naturally occurring food talk and food assessments in dinner conversations.

A first line of research developed from the 1960s onwards: ethnomethodologically inspired conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) established a tradition that has been influential through its reliance on ‘naturally occurring data’, i.e. data collected *in situ*, documenting conduct that is neither orchestrated nor provoked by the researcher but which occurs ordinarily and routinely in that setting (Mondada, 2006). Its analytical foundation is based upon the fact that talk and other social practices are organized in a locally situated way, orienting and adjusting to the peculiarities of the context in which they unfold. Thus, conversation analysis aims at describing organizational patterns of behaviour which exploit in an indexical and systematic way diverse complex multimodal resources: grammatical, prosodic, gestural, and visual resources are all mobilized, arranged and possibly reconfigured by participants in the local organization of their action, sensitive to the contingencies of context and to their sequential unfolding, moment by moment. This approach seeks to reconstruct an *emic* account – i.e. an account that takes into consideration the perspective of the participants – of the ordered character of these situated practices and of their meaning.

Dinner conversations have provided conversation analysts with a rich source of data for the study of the procedures which participants locally organize their social practices and their conversation. As long ago as 1970, in Philadelphia, Chuck and Candy Goodwin were carrying out pioneering work filming and recordings everyday dinner conversations and other social encounters. In 1977, Charles Goodwin presented his dissertation, which was based on about 50 h of filmed conversations in various settings (Goodwin, 1981, 33sv). Much of the data was focused on mealtimes during backyard picnics, family lunches and friend dinners. On the basis of such data, dinner conversations have been dealt with as a central event in everyday social life: a prototypical context for use of language, a practice in which sociability is maintained, and in which socialization into a culture and into family norms, as well as acquisition of language are achieved (Schegloff, 1996).

Dinner conversations have provided data for the systematic study of the interactional order, producing fundamental work on the management of turns at talk and on the organization of sequence. More particularly, the dynamic organization of talk among co-participants, and the distribution of turn at talk in multi-party conversations have been specifically explored on these data, revealing that participants normatively orient to the principle of ‘one speaker at a time’ (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) – although managing overlaps, turn-sharings and choral productions (Lerner, 1996, 2002, 2003). Moreover, dinner conversations have provided a fruitful locus for the observation of the relationship between speakers and their recipients within participation frameworks (Goodwin, 1981; Goodwin, 1984; Goodwin, 1986). The organization of participation frameworks (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004) manifests phenomena such as alliances, collaboration, co-authorship between speakers – for example engaging collectively in story-telling (Goodwin, 1987) – but also phenomena of coalition and ‘by-play’ (Goodwin, 1996), or of schisms, which transform one conversation into various parallel interactions (Egbert, 1997).

From this perspective, dinner conversations have mainly been investigated in order to build a general model of social interaction, rather than having been considered within the study of mealtime talk in its peculiar features. Nevertheless, other attempts exist within the interactional literature, f.i. by Keppler (1994), Traverso (1996), and Blum-Kulka (1997), which aim at capturing the specificities of this activity type, and do so by focusing on specific rituals and actions performed during these events.

A second line of research deals with mealtime interactions as a key socialization moment for families. Eating is not only a social and cultural event, it is also an event which constitutes the family, turns participants into competent members of the group, the culture, and the community, by actively teaching and embodying norms, values, esthetics of food, as well as communicative norms and commensality values (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). Based on a variety of methodologies for gathering data (Ochs, Graesch, Mittmann, Bradbury, & Repetti, 2006), this line of research has produced studies of societal changes in mealtimes within American families, studying the extent to which families eat together, types and frequencies of family dinner arrangements as well as food preparation practices (Ochs, Shoet, Campos, & Beck, *in press*). This line of research also offered comparative studies of meal practices across cultures, showing for example that whereas in the United States children must eat what is on their plate and this is justified by parents invoking physiological and moral reasons, parents in Italy take into account what children want to eat as an expression of personal taste and identity (Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996).

A third research approach, discourse psychology, aims at reconstructing the perspective of the participants as it emerges and is manifested in contexts in which they speak about food and to express feelings, attitudes, and evaluations within the course of ongoing activities (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Drawing on a methodology which is closely inspired by conversation analysis, studies of actual mealtime interactions show how participants construct their own definitions of food, characterize the quality and quantity of the food served, elaborate upon their conceptions of the physiological state of hunger, ‘fullness’ or ‘restraint’, and formulate and treat their physiological sensations as acceptable or not (Wiggins, Potter, & Wildsmith, 2001). These definitions, conceptions, and formulations are constructed in a situated way; that is they are sensitive to the particular setting in which they emerge.

These various lines of research open up a field of inquiry which deals with dinner conversations as:

- social events that are interactionally organized in specific and systematic ways, sensitive to their local context,
- in which talk plays a significant role,
- through which ‘doing being a family’ and being together are achieved,
- in which norms, values, and evaluations, are acquired, negotiated, and discussed,
- in which relations to food are expressed through a variety of actions, both discursive (talking about food, requesting dishes, assessing them, etc.) and embodied (eating, tasting...),
- in which taste is constructed as a collective experience.

Thus, this perspective shows that food consumption, food preferences and taste are not reducible to physiological processes but rather are social practices within which food is treated not only for its intrinsic nutritional, sensory, biological, and even pleasurable properties, but also in a way that is deeply contingent upon social actions performed during meals and sensitive to the detailed organization of dinner talk.

3. Focusing the attention on the meal: food assessments in dinner conversation

In this paper, I deal with specific moments within dinner conversations, in which participants turn their attention to food and produce assessments of it. From a conversation analytic perspective, I focus on the way in which assessments are systematically placed within the temporal and sequential unfolding of dinner talk.

As shown by the literature on interactions during mealtimes, participants in dinner conversations are neither exclusively engaged in eating nor do they always define eating as the 'main' activity. Studies of storytelling at dinner, for example, show that the latter is often the main activity retaining the attention of the participants (Goodwin, 1984; Goodwin, 1986; 1996; Ochs, Smith, & Taylor, 1989). However, various actions can also refer to food: announcements, requests to pass a plate, offers, invitations to taste, compliments, assessments, stories about past and future meals, etc. In the following analysis, I focus on food *assessments*: this practice refocuses participants' focus of attention on the meal and brings food back to the foreground of the ongoing social activity. This practice is also often related to other actions and can be employed in service of achieving them (for example, a negative assessment can work as an account for the rejection of an offer, a positive assessment can work as a request for more food, etc.). Food assessments do not merely verbalize reference to pre-existing objective features and subjective feelings, such as preferences, taste, opinion about food quality. Over and above this they show that assessing food quality is deeply embedded within the course of social activities, that it emerges within them and is shaped by them. Thus, the analysis of assessments contributes to the empirical study of food preferences as they are situatedly displayed in the course of actions constituting the mealtime as a social event. It shows that taste, food appreciation and opinions about the quality of food are elements that are locally achieved in interaction – and which do not pre-exist as such in the 'minds' of individual subjects.

Assessments have been much studied using interactional approaches. Within conversation analysis, the literature has described the *sequential positions* where assessments are produced. Pomerantz (1984) shows three positions in which they occur: (a) when participants access to a particular referent or experience, (b) within reports of past events, and (c) in paired sequences where a first assessment is followed by a second. Her study focuses on the latter and she demonstrates a systematic organizational pattern. She shows that second assessments can either upgrade firsts – within a 'preferred' format (i.e. a format which is expected, is structurally simpler and delivered faster) – or can downgrade them – within a 'dispreferred' format (i.e. a format which is structurally more complex, expressed with some delays, hesitations and often with justifying accounts). Thus, assessing is a social practice in which participants mutually display their alignment or disalignment, as well as their access, knowledge, expertise, experience, and authority over the matter being assessed (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Goodwin and Goodwin (1987) show that performing an assessment is a structured interactive activity. Participants organize it by carefully arranging the grammatical and multimodal resources (i.e. resources such as language, gaze, gestures, bodily postures, and movements) of their turns at talk. For example, they can choose particular turn formats in order to favor co-participation in the production of collaborative (co-uttered) or concurrent assessments (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987). Thus, assessments are organized in a manner that allows participants to display to each other shared affect and coexperience in the matter being assessed.

Within discourse psychology, analyses have focused on the expression of food evaluations as being of two kinds. They may take an 'objective' form (related to features of the food, expressing compliments but also sometimes persuasive in tone) or a 'subjective' form (expressing peculiarities of the speaker), and their can refer either to food categories in general or to particular items (Wiggins & Potter, 2003). Assessments, especially if critical, can be challenged, displaying a 'rhetoric of taste' such as is frequently used for convincing children to try food and to challenge previous experiences with that food (Wiggins, 2004). Evaluations reveal not only the social elaboration of taste, but also moral aspects related to food (Sneijder, 2006).

In this paper, we will focus on food assessments and explore both general features they share with assessments produced within other settings and also specific situated patterns they display in dinner conversations.

4. Methodology

As long ago as the seventies, studies within conversation analysis were emphasizing the importance of basing descriptions of the organization of talk and gestures on naturally occurring social interactions. Conversation is the prototypical context for use of language: it is where children are first socialized, where non-natives learn to speak, where social relationships are constructed and maintained, and where organization of grammar emerges, changes and is sedimented through time. Because of this conversation analysis has fostered audio, and then video recording of conversational practices in everyday life. Because conversation is organized in a locally situated way, i.e. in a way that is sensitive to the specific details of context as they are created by the participants themselves, video recordings have been shot in order to preserve the contextual features of the social interactions being recorded (Sacks, 1984, Mondada, 2006). This means that social practices are documented as they ordinarily happen, without being orchestrated by researchers imposing tasks, topics, spatial positioning of participants, or modifications of the context but rather who adjust their recording techniques to the setting as it is ordinarily arranged.

Applied to dinner conversations, this approach requires that meals are not arranged for the sake of the recording but recorded as they happen, that the distribution of participants around the table is not arranged for the camera but is kept as it is ordinarily, that researchers do not ask people to speak about particular topics (for example about the food being served) but record talk as it emerges and is occasioned in that particular setting. Moreover, the video recording device tries to capture the entire participation framework, integrating all participants and as much as possible of their talk, gestures and mutual gaze, and to cover the entire space of the activity, which sometimes calls for more than one camera. This is easier with few participants than with larger groups. In the case of fewer participants, conversation analysis has favored interactions between more than two persons, because turn-taking and participation are sensitive to the number of participants (Schegloff, 1995). However in the case of larger groups, schisms are very frequent and segment one unique conversations in various parallel interactions (Egbert, 1997), which often makes sound recordings (and their transcription) difficult. The event is recorded in a continuous shot, without pauses, from the very opening (if possible when guests ring the doorbell, or family members organize a joint converging move to the dinner table), to the closing of the conversation. Often the recording devices include one or more static cameras, on tripods, able to record the event in the absence of the researcher (who can also participate in the dinner; alternatively one of the participants can be in charge of the recording).

The study of assessments reported in this paper is based on a growing corpus of video recorded dinner conversations (constituting about thirty hours of video data to date) collected in France. For the qualitative analysis developed here, one particular meal has been selected,

because of space limitations. Video recordings have been made according to the principles sketched above in order to document naturally occurring meals. Prior to the data collection and to cameras installation contacts were made and fieldwork was carried out. The recordings have been all made with the informed consent of the participants, who also participated in the installation of the video devices and who were allowed to erase the tapes at the end of the meals if they wanted. This ethical procedure is deeply embedded into an ethnographic approach to participants, in a way that guarantees their full knowledge of the field of enquiry but which also preserves the naturality of the setting.

Once recorded, interactions have been transcribed in a careful way (see Jefferson, 2004 for standards used within conversation analysis; see the excerpts below for written and visual representations of the data. Transcript conventions are explained at the end of the paper). The transcriptions are achieved in this way in order to capture not only the details of talk-in-interaction in their particular temporality and sequential order, but also the multimodal details of embodied conducts in interaction (gestures, glances, facial expressions, body postures, movements, manipulations of objects, etc.). In order to enhance further the precision of the transcripts, alignment software such as Praat, CLAN, or ELAN have been used which allow the transcribed text to be aligned with the original audio and video signal (see Mondada, 2007).

Data analysis has been carried out by identifying assessment practices and their sequential positioning within unfolding talk and activities. Within conversation analysis, two ways of analyzing data have been equally practiced. On the one hand, *single case analysis* aims at analyzing single episodes of talk which are fully described by exploiting the current findings of the relevant literature in order to understand their organization as they unfold in time, step by step. On the other hand, *analysis of collections* aims at focusing on single phenomena investigated through various recordings and at systematically describing the specific linguistic resources each phenomenon mobilizes, the particular sequential environments where it is observable and the particular actions it accomplishes (Schegloff, 1988). The present study is an analysis of collections, focusing as it does on a single phenomenon, assessments produced about food, in three different sequential environments.

5. Analysis: assessments in three sequential positions

Previous studies on food assessments within dinner talk have focused on forms and formats of assessments, as well as on actions they were performing (Wiggins, 2001; Wiggins & Potter, 2003), but have not examined the way in which they were placed within the unfolding sequences of talk and action. My focus here is on the sequential positioning of assessments: this permits one to account for the way in which assessments are inserted within current activities, (re)organize participation to the ongoing interaction and (re)orient participants' attention. This analysis is carried out paying attention not only to talk but also to the embodied conducts of the participants, i.e. their gesture, gaze, bodily movements – still a neglected dimension in the literature (but see Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987).

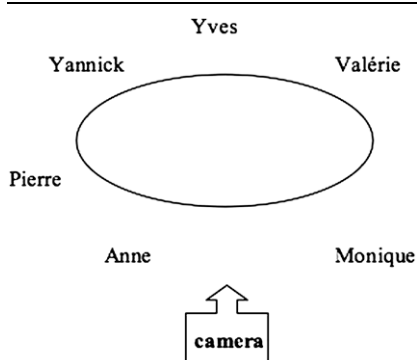
Analysis of the corpus has revealed that assessments do not occur randomly but are produced mainly in three sequential positions: assessments can be found when food is first presented and served to the participants, when a sequence of talk or a topic has come to an end and when participants are engaged in 'delicate' topics or conflicting interactions. In all the cases assessments do a two-fold interactional job: they refocus the attention of participants on food and they reorient the ongoing course of talk. The first sequential occasion at which assessments are produced is directly related to the presentation and 'discovery' of the food and corresponds to the first environment described by Pomerantz (1984), which is characterized by the collective experience of an event or an object. The second and third kinds of assessment are sensitive to sequential environments that are less related to food practices than to the social organization of the meal, and show that food assessments can be a resource mobilized for the management of particular episodes of talk.

5.1. Assessments produced when food is offered

One expected slot in which assessments are produced is when food is brought to the table and offered to the participants. This moment corresponds generally to a general focus of attention towards the meal and a 'discovery' of the dishes. This is the case at the very beginning of the meal, as well as when the host brings new food from the kitchen. Both actions can be done discreetly or be loudly announced. In the latter case, the arrival of new dishes can focus the attention of the participants, projecting the relevance for comments, compliments, and assessments.

The following excerpts are taken from a videotaped dinner conversation, recorded during a Sunday meal in a French family. Sunday meals are often an occasion to reassemble the dispersed family. In this case father Yannick, mother Valérie, younger brother Pierre and sister Monique live together and have invited older brother Yves, who does not live at home any more, and who has come to visit with his girlfriend, Anne. The meal is a cheese raclette, which implies a particular organization and circulation of food; each participant prepares his own cheese by heating it on a special electric machine, like a mini-broiler or a toaster oven, with separate small trays for each individual diner. Along with the cheese, boiled potatoes, *cornichons*, and/or small pickled cocktail onions, small sausages and *charcuterie* are also

Table 1
Arrangement of the participants around the table.



served. These various ingredients occasion intense circulation of a multitude of dishes, which are served, passed and offered by the participants (see Table 1).

In the following excerpt when we join the scene the raclette has already begun. The mother, Valérie, brings a new dish, a “boudin blanc”, in from the kitchen, announcing it (transcript conventions are explained at the end of the paper):

- (1) (mi2_27)
(2.5)
- 1 VAL °p'tit° boudin BLAN:c,
°little° WHI:te sausage,
- 2 (1.0)
- 3 YAN et euh::,
and ehm::,
- 4 (0.4)
- 5 YAN [°alors°. y a le foie gras,] pour euh:
noël hein.
[°so°. there is goose liver,] for ehm:
Christmas isn't it.
- 6 VAL [°°qu'est-ce qui veut goûter?°°]
[°°who wants to try?°°]
- 7 (0.8)

Valérie's announcement is formatted as a syntactical construction comprising a first adjective (“°p'tit°”), the name of the sausage (“boudin”) and the specification of its type (‘white’ as opposed to ‘black’). The use of diminutives for speaking about food is common in French as well as in Italian (Ochs et al., 1996). They convey positive affect towards the food. Prosodically, the announcement begins with a lower voice, then rises and becomes louder on the last word. In this way, the announcement is formatted not just as informing about the food, but as the expression of a positive stance, dealing with the food as a delicacy and its imminent consumption as pleasurable. These features constitute the announcement as a *first* action projecting other relevant *next* actions – such as assessments, evaluations, and comments.

But what comes next is *not* the projected action: there is a pause (2), then a turn by Yannick which does not constitute a response to Valérie but introduces a new topic, the “foie gras” (5), referring to culinary preparations to be made for Christmas. Yannick's turn, just after Valérie's one, is not just launching a new topic of discussion; it initiates a new sequence while an ongoing sequence, initiated by her, is not yet completed. In this sense, it appears as not responding to Valérie and even as competing with her. Valérie seems to withdraw from this competition, in her overlapped continuation of what becomes an offer in the form of a search for candidates interested in what she just brought (“°°who wants to try?°°” 6), almost whispered.

Although these actions are distinct, they are topically related: both refer to things to eat, both are Christmas specialities (“boudin blanc” used to be mostly made for Christmas, although nowadays it is sold and cooked all year round). In this sense, Yannick's turn seems to be motivated by a thematic association with Valérie's one, in the form of a stepwise transition from one topic to another (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). This is typical of discussions around and about food (Erickson, 1981; Mondada, 2003, p. 209). In this sense, Yannick displays a certain responsivity towards Valérie, although not aligning with her action.

Reception of Valérie's announcement is not only displayed through verbal (non) responses, but also manifested in embodied behaviours: the video recording shows that

- Valérie makes her announcement as she is still on her way from the kitchen to the table. When she speaks, she not yet in the visual field of the family members,
- when Valérie starts to speak no topical talk is going on; all participants are busy with their food, concentrated on their own plates (see Fig. 1),
- the only one who pays attention to her is her son Yves, who turns his head and glances at her as she is producing her announcement (Fig. 2):

- (2) (mi2_27) (multimodal details of excerpt 1, lines 1-2)
(2.5)
- 1 VAL #°p*’tit° boudin BL*AN:c,#
yve *.....*looks at VAL-->>
fig #fig 1 #fig 2
- 2 (1.0)



Yves's glance to Valérie does constitute the very first response to her announcement. His multimodal conduct (gestures, glances, facial expressions, bodily postures) open up the possibility of participating in the line of action initiated by Valérie, although another action has meanwhile been launched by Yannick.

At this point, two sequences have been initiated, one proposing a topical discussion about “foie gras”, the other offering “boudin blanc”. Both project more to come, although in different ways.

- (3) continuation of excerpt (1)
- 7 (0.8)
- 8 MON [pour Noël?]
[for Christmas?]
- 9 VAL [bE::n NO]:N
[we::ll NO]:
- 10 (0.5)
- 11 YAN <°quoi non?° ((faster))>
<°why not?° ((faster))>
- 12 (0.2)
- 13 MON pourquoi avant [noël?
why before [Christmas?
- 14 VAL [j'ai dit que je le faisais
dimanche.
[I said I would do it on
sunDAY.
- 15 (0.2)
- 16 YAN tu l'fais dimanche?=
are you going to do it on sunday?=
17 MON =ben oui:,
=well yes:,
18 YAN [((nods))
19 [(0.4)
20 VAL ouais.
yeah.
21 MON attends mamie elle
wait a second granny
22 aura [mis du foie gras pour Noël.]
will [have prepared goose liver for Christmas.]
23 VAL [mamie elle en a fait des foies gras.
[granny she has done lots of goose liver.
24 (0.4)
25 VAL c'est N[OUS qui l'faisons.]
it U[S who do it.]
26 MON [mais Laurence elle en a] du foie
[but Laurence has provided for goose
27 gras p[our Noël.
liver f[or Christmas.
28 YVE [HUMm, (.) [très bon
[HUMm, (.) [very good

Yannick's proposal is responded to, whereas Valérie's announcement and offer are ignored until line 28, where Yves expresses his pleasure with a “HUMm,” followed by an explicit assessment (“very good”, 28).

From line 8 to line 27, Yannick's action is responded to, although almost in a negative way. In line 8 Monique initiates the repair of the period mentioned by Yannick, and in overlap Valérie rebuts what she treats as a proposal (9). Yannick questions her answer (11) as Monique repeats her repair (13). Valérie expands her answer (14), and gets a repair from Yannick, as Monique joins her mother (17). Repairs and disagreements characterize this fragment of talk, in which contrasting views are expressed about whom in the family will prepare the “foie gras”. Valérie actively contributes to the discussion.

In this particular environment, Yves goes (28) with his 'gustatory mmm' (Wiggins, 2002), which is not an independent expression of individual pleasure, but rather a delayed response to what was projected by Valérie's announcement. The continuity between the latter and the former is visible in the embodied actions carried out by Valérie and Yves during this fragment:

(4) multimodal details of excerpt 3, lines 7-10

```

7      (0.2) | (0.8)
      val      /moves the bowl towards YVE--->
      yve      >>looks at the bowl brought by VAL--->>

8      MON     [po+ur noël?]
9      VAL     [bE+::n |NO]#:N|
           /looks at YAN/
      yan      +...looks at VAL-->>
      fig      #fig3

10     *(0.1) | (0.5)
      yve     *....grasps the bowl-->>
      val     -->|

```



3

The detailed production of this short moment makes observable the skilled way in which Valérie participates in two courses of action (Fig. 3):

- on the one hand, she answers Yannick about “foie gras”: as he glances at her, she looks at him saying “NO:N” (9);
- on the other hand, she gives Yves a plate with the sausages, and he grasps it: in this way, she actively organizes action related to “boudin blanc”.

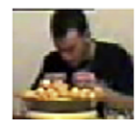
In this way, Valérie is engaged in a multi-activity, i.e. in two different streams of action, exploiting specific multimodal resources for each of them (Mondada, *in press*). She mobilizes her gaze and verbal resources with her husband, engaging in a conversational activity about absent, discursively constructed food; at the same time, she deals with gestural resources with her son, about a co-present, materially manipulated item of food. Valérie is the only member of the family involved in this multi-activity; Yves is the only one whose attention is continuously monitoring the circulation of the “boudin blanc”, while the “foie gras” discussion seems to dominate the episode:

(5) multimodal details of excerpt 3, lines 10-27, focused on Yves’ actions

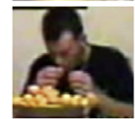
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10     *(0.6)
      yve     *....grasps the bowl-->
11     YAN     <°quoi no*n?° ((faster))>
      yve     -->*puts 1 sausage in his plate-->
12     (0.2)
13     MON     pourquoi avant [noël?
14     VAL     [j'ai dit que je le faisais diman*CHE.
      yve     ---->*
15     (0.2)
16     YAN     tu l'fais dimanche?
17     MON     =ben oui":,
      yve     *takes 1 sausagef w his fingers-->
      fig     #fig 4
18     YAN     [((nods))
19     [(0.4)
20     VAL     ouais.
21     MON     attends *mamie elle*
      yve     -->*smellsf it-*
      fig     #fig 5
22     aura [mis du foie gras pour Noël.]
23     VAL     [mamie elle en a fait* des fjoies gras.
      yve     *eats a bitf of a sausage->
      fig     #fig 6

```



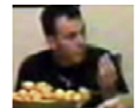
4



5



6



7

24 (0.4)
 25 VAL c'est* N[OUS qui l'faisons.]
 yve -->*looks at the remaining bit-->
 26 MON [mais laurence elle en a] du foie
 27 gr*as p[our Noël].
 yve ->*turns to VAL and shows her# the remaining bit->
 fig #fig 7
 28 YVE [HUMm, (.) [très bon

During the discussion about “foie gras”, Yves grasps the bowl offered by Valérie, picks up one sausage, puts it on his plate, then holds it again with his fingers (Fig. 4), smells it (Fig. 5), eats a bit (Fig. 6), then turns to Valérie and shows her the remaining bit (Fig. 7). At that precise moment, he produces a “HUMm” and an assessment (28). On the basis of this transcript, we can see that the assessment is carefully prepared by a succession of actions inspecting the food.

The assessment is formatted in two parts. The first takes the form of a sound, “HUMm”, a sort of ‘response cry’ (Goffman, 1978) which appears to be related to an individual sensation of pleasure, expressing it immediately as it is experienced. The second, “it’s good”, is not only an assessment expressed in a more conventional form; it is also bodily addressed to Valérie, to whom Yves turns, gazing at her and showing her the sausage. Thus, Yves’s action is not just the manifestation of an individual reaction, but it is formatted very early on as an intersubjective action, recipient-oriented towards his mother.

Yves’ assessment achieves an important change in the conversation, as the subsequent episodes shows:

(6) continuation of excerpt (5)

28 YVE [HUMm, (.) [très bon
 [HUMm, (.) [very good
 29 YAN [et ils vont l'amener [ou pas?]
 [and will they bring it [or not?]
 30 VAL [c'est BON?]
 [is that GOOD?]
 31 (.) [et j'avais envie] de prendre les NOirs,&
 (.) [I felt like] buying the BLacks,&
 32 PIE? [°ils () le foie gras.°]
 [°they () goose liver.°]
 33 VAL &et pis j'ai pas OSé, j'ai dit NOIr,
 &but I didn't DAre, I told BLAck,
 34 YVE HUM,
 35 VAL l'boudin noir [avec le fr]oma:ge
 black pudding [with ch]ee:se
 36 YVE [anne?]
 37 (1.0)
 38 VAL moi j'adore CA, le::,
 I love IT, the::,
 39 (0.2)
 40 MON [moi j'aime pas.]
 [I, I don't like]
 41 ANN [tiens pierre tu peux] m'passer[la:,
 [look pierre can you] pass me [the:,
 42 VAL [le boudin [blanc.]
 [the white sausage.]
 43 YVE [goûte,]
 [taste,]
 44 franchement, goûte.
 really, taste.

Even though Yannick and Pierre pursue the “foie gras” topic (29, 32), this dissolves as the “boudin blanc” topic is developed. Valérie responds to Yves’ assessment by recycling it and asking for its confirmation (30). This is followed by a short story (31–35) about the purchase of the food, in which she opposes two sorts of sausages (“boudin noir” and “boudin blanc”) and expresses concerns about choices and adequate combinations of food. This micro-story is closed by Yves reiterating his expression of pleasure (34), by Valérie stating her personal taste (38) and, in a similar although inverted way, by Monique affirming her distaste (40). Assessments are here positioned at the end of the story, therefore initiating its closing (cf. Goodwin & Goodwin, 1987, p. 21, 38) as opposed to after an announcement of food, where they can initiate a possible topical development. In this extract they are proffered in a more subjective way (“I love THAT”, “I don’t like”) and they construct, in an opportunistic way, the community of tastes and preferences of the family (cf. Wiggins & Potter, 2003).

Moreover, this collective dimension of taste is further enhanced by Yves, who turns to Anne (36), passing her the bowl, and then to Monique (43–44) insisting that she taste the food (Yves will eventually tend her a bit of sausage and, although she refuses, he will put it on her plate, and she will eventually pass it to Valérie). In this sense, food, food pleasure and tasting are actively shared and circulated within the family.

This analysis of thirty seconds of dinner talk has shown the methodical way in which an announcement projecting a positive stance towards newly arrived food on the table is dealt with by different family members, who initially compete with it and finally, in a co-ordinated manner, join in the collective, shared (although differentiated) expression of tastes and preferences. The competition between Yannick’s and Valérie’s actions shows the various ways in which food can be practically dealt with during the situated dinner practices: as a topic of conversation or as an object which is touched, tasted, appreciated, passed around, and circulated.

Assessments play an important role in this sequence, in two positions:

- (a) As projected and expected second action after the initial announcement,
- (b) As an action closing a sequence, a series of actions or an episode (the end of Yves’ inspection of food, as well as the end of Valérie’s story about her choices when buying food). Yves’ assessment (line 27) not only responds to Valérie’s initial announcement, but also initiates a radical change of the attention of the co-participants, from discursively evoked food to actual tasted food. In the position analyzed in this section, even if assessments are produced as a direct response to food discovery, their production nevertheless is shown to be finely tuned to the organization of the ongoing social actions and to be a key component of their negotiated emergent organization.

5.2. Assessments after the closing of a sequence/of a topic

Assessments about food are not inserted randomly into the course of dinner conversations, but adequately positioned within their sequential organization. The participants’ orientation is displayed in another position where food assessments are frequently proffered: during a pause, when a sequence has come to a close, or when a topic is exhausted.

(7) (mi 5.10 / 253)

- 1 VAL [on s’organisera: dimanche, on verra:
[we’ll organise everything: on sunday, we’ll see
- 2 MON oh demain, (0.3) °pas dimanche°
oh tomorrow, (0.3) °not on sunday°
- 3 YAN °ouais°
°yeah°
- 4 (3.#0)
fig #fig 8
- 5 VAL →i refroidit vite le: fromage,
it’s cooling down fast the: cheese,
- 6 (1.8)
- 7 VAL il est déjà tout, (.) tout dur, moi.
it is already quite, (.) quite hard, mine.
- 8 (2.7)
- 9 YVE j’te piqu’rai une bouteille d’eau,
I will take a bottle of water,
- 10 pour cette nuit. hein?
for this night. okay?



(8) mi 33.05 / 1806

- 1 **MON** euh mais quoi qu'on en dise mamy °ça restera toujours mamy°
eh but no matter what we think granny °will always remain granny°
- 2 **VAL** °ah oui, mais bien sûr.°
°oh yes, of course.°
- 3 **PIE** bon,
so,
- 4 **YVE** → c'est vachement bon tu vois
this is terribly tasty you see
- 5 **MON** mamy euh je suis partie au vélodrome elle me fait tiens je te
granny ehm I went to the stadium she said look I
- 6 **donne dix euros parce que tu va à marseille.**
give you ten euros because you travel to Marseille.

In excerpt 7, the family is discussing arrangements for the next week-end. Valérie closes the topic with a conclusion delaying the final decisions, which is contested by Monique and mildly agreed upon by father (3). The following pause (4) is quite long; everyone is concentrated on their food and nobody uses it to extend the previous topic. In that position, Valérie inserts a comment and then an assessment about the cheese. After a lapse, Yves initiates a new topic, about the arrangements for the night.

In excerpt 8, the family is speaking about granny and complaining about her getting older. The topic is closed by a general tautological comment (cf. Drew & Holt, 1988). This closing is oriented to as such by younger brother Pierre, who is trying to leave the table and initiates a more general closing (3). Older brother Yves at this point uses this spot to insert an assessment about the dessert (4). Yves is the only person still eating at that moment, and nobody joins him for the production of a second assessment. Monique picks up the granny topic again and initiates a new story.

Thus, participants do orient not just to silences and pauses as opening up a slot for assessments about food, but also and more fundamentally to the ongoing sequential structure. This way of inserting assessments, as well as other actions related to food, such as requests to pass dishes, shows both participants' exploitation of slots for turning the attention back to food, and participants' use of food as a local resource for producing topicality at moments in which older topics are exhausted and conversation is suffering from lack of new ones (Bergmann, 1990). Talking about food can turn out to be a powerful resource for relaunching conversation.

5.3. Assessments in 'delicate' environments

Another sequential environment where assessments – as well as requests for food and other food activities – do frequently occur in dinner conversation is within sequences of talk characterized by disagreements, tensions and trouble between the participants. In these environments, food assessments can produce alternative trajectories of talk and provide for a closing of 'delicate' moments.

(9) (mi6.0 / mi310)

- 1 **YVE** QUAND anne aura son salaire on fera plus d'économies.
WHEN Anne will earn a salary we'll not save up anymore.
- 2 **ça c'est sûr. hein,**
that's sure. isn't that?
- 3 (0.5)
- 4 **YVE** m'fin du moins [moi.
well at least [as far as I am concerned.
- 5 **ANN** → [j'ai pas le fromage, c'est toi qui
[I don't have the cheese, it's you who
- 6 **l'as der[rière.]**
have it [behind you.]
- 7 **VAL** → [il]a PAS beaucoup d'goût le fromage je trouve
[it]does NOT taste much these cheese I feel'
- 8 (0.6)
- 9 **YVE** ouais, il est un peu:: ouais,
yeah, it's a little bit:: yeah,
- 10 **VAL** il est un peu fadasse [hein m c- j'l'ai eu en promotion,
it's a little tasteless [isn't it m c- I got it as a special offer,
- 11 **YAN** [y faudra te mefier dans la baignoire car
[you have to be careful in the bathroom since
- 12 **l'eau est chaude en ce moment, très chaude même**
the water is hot in this period, it's even very hot

In this excerpt, the family has been complaining about Yves' stinginess. Yves argues (1–4) that his pennywise management of his money is only contingent on the fact that his girlfriend Anne does not yet have a job. His comment (1–2) is not responded to (3) and he offers an expansion (4), renewing the opportunity for another speaker to select (Ford, Fox, & Thompson, 2002). At this point, instead of alighting the topic, Anne inserts a request for the cheese (5–6). This occasions Valérie's comment about it: she produces a first negative assessment (7), followed by a second (uncompleted) assessment by Yves aligning with her (9) and in this way he abandons his previous topic. Valérie continues, with a third downgrading negative assessment and an account for the bad quality of the cheese (10). At that point, Yannick initiates another topic, warning his son about how to use the bathroom (11–12) and the topic of Yves' stinginess is definitively abandoned.

Similarly, in the next excerpt, water has been spilled all over the table and Valérie is cleaning it, blaming Monique for the mess:

(10) (mi 26.37 / mi 1469)

- 1 VAL [t'es pas douée, hein ma
[you're really not gifted,
>>cleaning the table--->
- 2 puce, [hein
my friend, are you
- 3 MON [ben excuse moi, s'était sous l-
[well sorry, it was under t-
- 4 (0.#6)
fig #fig 9
- 5 YVE → c'est +bon ça,+
it's good this,
val +smiles+turns and looks at YVE-->
- 6 PIE [<c'est *pa#lpa+ [qui est *pas doué ((from kitchen))>
[<it's dad [who is not gifted ((from the kitchen))>
val --->+
yve *shows his yogurth to ANN*
fig #fig 10
- 7 YAN [°oui:,°] [c'est des: des
[°yes:,°] [it's some: some
- 8 YVE ouais c'est (l'délire)+ () (acheter)
yeah it's (fantastic) () (buy)
val >>finishes to clean+
- 9 ANN oh tu pourrais en acheter, personne t'oblige à
oh you could buy some of them, nobody forces you
- 10 n'pas en acheter,
not to buy them
- 11 YVE oui c'est vrai
yes that's right
- 12 ANN ben oui=
oh yes=
- 13 YVE =mais je suis un grippe-sous [tu sais bien.
=but I am money-grubbing [you know that very well.
- 14 VAL [tu en as acheté plusieurs?
[have you bought various?
- 15 (0.9)
- 16 YAN c'est une boîte.
it comes in a tin.



As Valérie is looking at the water spilled on the table (Fig. 9) and is blaming Monique, who gives an apology and a tentative account for what happened, a pause follows (4) and Yves produces a positive assessment (5). This is immediately responded to by Valérie with a smile and a glance: in a form of 'body-torque' (Schegloff, 1998), Valérie continues to clean the table and at the same time orients to Yves who shows her the assessed food (Fig. 10) (cf. supra, excerpt 4). Although Pierre, from the kitchen, repairs Valérie's blaming of Monique, denouncing the father (6), nobody continues to discuss the attribution of responsibility for the accident. Valérie finishes cleaning but does not

add any more comments on that topic. She maintains her orientation toward the topic brought in by Yves, contributing to its development (14) and at the same time ignoring the ongoing argument between Yves and Ann about his stinginess. Here, the assessment has a double sequential implication: it is positioned in a slot which stops the development of the previous activity and inserts a new topic into the conversation, one which will be pursued by the participants.

This orientation towards assessments as a possible resource in ‘delicate’ environments is even more visible when trouble persists, as in the following excerpt:

- (11) (mi 6.38 / mi 356)
- 1 YVE **ben non mais j’t’ai ja[mais.] (.) j’t’ai jamais d’mandé d’t^e priver,**
well no but I have ne[ver.] (.) I never asked you to deprive yourself,
- 2 VAL **[qui c’est qu’a l’eau]**
[who has the water]
- 3 MON **non mais [(bon)**
no but [well]
- 4 VAL **[tu fais passer l’eau monique s’t^e plaît?**
[can you pass the water Monique please?
- 5 (2.3)
- 6 YVE **est-ce que j’t’ai dit d’t^e priver**
did I ask you to deprive yourself
- 7 (0.3)
- 8 MON **non mais:: (.) style**
no but:: (.) kind
- 9 (0.8)
- 10 VAL→ **elles sont pas trop mauvaises ces p’tites pommes de ter[re]**
they are not too bad these little pota[toes]
- 11 YVE **[style quoi?**
[kind what?
- 12 (0.8)
- 13 MON **style euh: profites-en machin et**
kind ehm: take advantage sort of and
- 14 **tout [euh**
everything [ehm]
- 15 PIE → **[regardes c’est [beau non?**
[look its [beautiful isn’t it?
- 16 YVE **[ben oui profites-en, (.) ben oui c’est clair**
[duh take advantage, (.) duh that’s obvious]
- 17 VAL → **qui c’est qui veut de l’eau pendant qu’j’ai**
who wants some water while I have
- 18 **la bout[eille**
the bot[tle]
- 19 YAN **[du fromage je veux moi=**
[cheese I want as far I am concerned=
- 20 ANN **=ben moi j’veux bien**
=well I’m happy to take some
- 21 (0.7)
- 22 PIE **yves,**
- 23 YVE **oui?**
yes?
- 24 PIE **c’est beau ça, hein?**
it’s beautiful this, isn’t it?
- 25 YVE **ah oui c’est très beau**
oh yes it’s very beautiful
- 26 (0.7)

Yves is having an argument with his sister Monique, accusing her of taking advantage of the fact that she still lives at home with the parents. While Yves is going on (1, 6, 11, 16) and Monique is replying (3, 8, 13–14), the other members of the family insert various actions related to the management of food: Valérie asks Monique for the water (4), then produces an assessment about the potatoes (10), using a

positive formulation and a diminutive. Pierre asks for Yve's attention at various points, showing him the artistic composition of his plate (15, 22, 24). Requests and assessments about food are multiplied as the fight is going on, until Yves aligns with these activities and participates in them, providing a second assessment to Pierre's first (25).

Assessments offer a very powerful resource for initiating a new trajectory of talk; their structural features – the projection of a second assessment by the production of a first one – make them an efficient means of initiating new lines of talk, and for generating new topical talk out of assessed objects in the environment. The production of assessments in 'delicate' moments shows how their sequential positioning is crucially sensitive to their context: far from being physiologically motivated by individual sensations of pleasure, assessments are highly socialized practices, using the immediate environment for the management of social relations and social interaction. In turn, food assessments achieve a shift of attention, focusing participants back on their eating practices and topicalizing them for further talk, contributing to the socialization of sensations, pleasures and taste within conversation.

6. Discussion

In this paper, I have described three sequential positions in which food assessments are produced within dinner conversations. After the announcement and discovery of a new dish brought to the table, within the closing of a sequence or a topic and in 'delicate' interactional environments where a fight or some conflict is going on. In these three environments participants display their orientation to the ongoing sequential organization, and adjust their contributions to its temporal and interactional features. They tend to insert food assessments when other actions are being or have been completed. In this sense, assessments contribute to highlighting or to achieving the closing of ongoing sequences and also contribute to the intelligibility of the organization of the activity. In this position, they initiate new actions concerned with food, re-focusing co-participants' attention on the meal which can be either aligned to or 'resisted' with competitive topics by some of them. Participants' orientation to sequence organization is also displayed by assessments placed in the middle of disagreements or conflicting sequences. Thus placed, they propose alternative sequential developments, eventually bringing the disagreement to a close.

This careful sequential positioning of assessments demonstrates their situated, occasioned nature within social interaction. In contrast to declared food preferences and quality food evaluations in interviews, food assessments in dinner conversations are sensitive to the ongoing conversation and orient as much towards food quality as towards organization of talk. The very fact that food assessments are systematically found in specific positions within dinner conversations demonstrates the mutuality in the organization of food practices and of social practices, of eating and talking. On the one hand, food is appreciated, tasted, complimented, and assessed in sequential positions and in actions that are socially organized. References to food as well as expressions of feelings, sensations and evaluations of food are shaped in a way that fits into the specific organizational features of the ongoing activity. On the other hand, social activities can be organized by using reference to food and food assessments as a resource for shaping and reshaping ongoing talk trajectories. Thus, food assessments observed in naturalist settings show that food preferences, taste and evaluations of the quality of the meal are not merely produced within an objective or subjective relation between the eater and the food; they are much more deeply embedded within collective practices of having a meal together, of managing social relationships and of organizing episodes of talk.

7. Transcript conventions

Data were transcribed according to conventions developed by Gail Jefferson and commonly used in conversation analysis.

[overlapping talk
=	latching
(.)	micro pause
(0.6)	timed pause
:	extension of the sound or the syllable it follows
.	stopping fall in tone
,	continuing intonation
?	rising inflection
mine	emphasis
°uh°	quieter fragment than its surrounding talk
.h	aspiration
h	out breath
((sniff))	described phenomena
< >	delimitation of described phenomena
()	string of talk for which no audio could be achieved

An indicative translation is provided line per line, in order to help reading the original.

Multimodal details have been transcribed according to the following conventions (Mondada, 2007): *actions are described in the following line, in italics, and are synchronized with talk thanks to a series of landmarks:*

**	delimitate one participant's actions descriptions.
++	delimitate other participant's actions descriptions.
	delimitate other participant's actions descriptions
* -->	gesture or action described continues across subsequent lines.
* -->>	gesture or action described continues until and after excerpt's end.
-->*	gesture or action described continues until the same symbol is reached.
>>--	gesture or action described begins before the excerpt's beginning.
....	gesture's preparation.
---	gesture's apex is reached and maintained.
,,,,	gesture's retraction.

val participant doing gesture is identified when (s)he is not the current speaker.
 fig indicates the exact point where screen shot (figure) has been taken,
 # with a specific sign showing its position within turn at talk.

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