

# Iperstoria

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## ‘Breast is Best’ or ‘Fed is Best’?

### A Study of Concessive Relations in the Debate on Methods of Infant Feeding

#### Abstract

*The ongoing ‘Breast is best’ vs. ‘Fed is best’ dispute represents an interesting object of study: it lies at the crossroads of multiple topical discourses and provides the opportunity to explore the ways in which contrasting constructions of reality interact and compete. Against this backdrop, this paper sets out to identify and investigate central markers of dialogism in the press coverage of the discussion around breastfeeding and bottle feeding. More specifically, the research focuses on concessive relations, a phenomenon typical of “interlocutive dialogism” (“dialogisme interlocutif”) which, while allowing the speaker to offer a multi-voiced perspective, also provides her/him with the possibility to artfully reduce the impact of opposing viewpoints and foreground her/his own.*

*A corpus composed of news stories, editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor appearing in newspapers within the last thirty years was built specifically for this chapter. More precisely, a dataset consisting of approximately 450 texts published in the last thirty-five years was gathered and examined through the use of automated interrogation routines (Sketch Engine). The approach adopted in the research is therefore corpus-based and enables the identification of recurrent patterns indicative of concessive relations. The quantitative information obtained from the software is interpreted in a discourse-analytical perspective; this last step is instrumental in uncovering tacit beliefs about motherhood and breastfeeding characterizing the ‘Breast is best’ and ‘Fed is best’ approach.*

**Keywords:** *concessive relations, discourse analysis, dialogism, parenthood discourse, newspaper discourse*

This study looks at the role of concessive relations in the debate about infant feeding methods. The use of concession is thus here explored as an inherently dialogic phenomenon which can be found in the discourse about feeding modes (section 3).

The research is based on the analysis of newspaper articles (news stories, editorials, op-eds and letters to the editors) published in English-speaking countries in approximately the last thirty-five years. Its methodological framework is set in the tradition of research on dialogism

(especially research carried out from a praxemics perspective) with special regard for studies on concession and its pragmatic properties. It also relies on corpus automated interrogation routines (Sketch Engine).

This paper is organized as follows: after a brief introduction about the press coverage of the debate about infant feeding methods and the description of the data set (section 1), I will provide an illustration of the main concepts related to dialogism and concession (sections 2 and 3) to then introduce the results obtained solely by automatic interrogation of the corpus (section 4). The following sections of the study examine how concessive constructs are strategically utilized in newspapers to persuade readers that breastfeeding is either an unrenounceable practice (section 5) or an option that may not prove optimal in all situations and contexts (section 6). The ideological implications of the findings are presented in the final part of the article. (section 7).

## **1. Infant nutrition in the press**

Debates about infant feeding methods have a long history. Since the introduction of baby formula (1867), the controversy about the practices of breastfeeding and wet nursing has been replaced by the discussion about the potential benefits of breastfeeding and bottle-feeding. Throughout the 20th century, people alternatively witnessed the portrayal of breastfeeding as the optimal solution and the spread of recommendations to bottle-feed as the safer and more convenient choice (Wolf, J.H. 2001). Discussions about baby feeding modes are affected by many topical discourses (parenthood discourse, public policy discourse, medical-scientific discourse, marketing discourse to name just a few) and may evolve in accordance with the developments occurring in them. Representations of maternal milk as the best option became dominant in Western countries during the 70s (Wright and Schanler 2001). Since then, the hegemonic view is that breastfeeding is linked with health benefits for mother and baby as well as a privileged way in which the two can form a physical and psychological bond. According to this perspective, breastfed children are said to be more resilient to sickness, less prone to obesity and to have higher IQs, while mothers who breastfeed for a significant amount of time run fewer risks to develop breast cancer (e.g. Moss-Racusin et al. 2020). In 1978 the motto 'Breast is best' became popular, following the publication of the homonymous book by Doctors Penny and Andrew Stanway. In 1981 the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) officially endorsed breastfeeding. In the early 90s, the WHO recommended exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months and launched the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative to encourage breastfeeding practices (WHO 1991). Since then, the WHO has regularly updated its breastfeeding guidelines/recommendations. At the time of

writing, breast milk is still generally regarded as the 'right choice' and campaigns encouraging breastfeeding are carried out throughout the world.

Whereas public policies are aligned with the 'Breast is best' approach, the scientific community is more divided on the topic. While acknowledging that maternal milk is species-specific and therefore good and safe for babies, research on the possible health advantages associated with it has (yet?) to produce conclusive scientific evidence: a significant number of studies which claim that breastfeeding confers remarkable benefits has been criticized for inferring causal relationships from correlational data (e.g. Moss-Racusin et al. 2020; Wolf J.B. 2011).<sup>1</sup> Due to various factors including ethical concerns,<sup>2</sup> many scholarly inquiries are non-experimental and "cannot determine whether any differences in outcomes between breast- and formula-fed infants result from the breast milk or formula they ingested or from the myriad other factors that lead their caregivers to offer them breast milk or formula" (Moss-Racusin et al. 2020, 2). However, these findings (or lack thereof) arguably occupy a marginal role in the public discussion on infant nutrition, which, as previously noted, is mainly dominated by campaigns promoting the idea that 'Breast is best.'

Against this backdrop, an advocacy campaign called 'Fed is best' was launched in 2016 by emergency room physician Christie del Castillo-Hegy and lactation consultant Jody Segrave-Daly. This campaign challenges the prevailing assumptions on infant nourishing methods and aims at informing parents and health professionals about the potential dangers of exclusive breastfeeding in specific contexts: for example avoiding supplementing with formula at all costs may mean not providing sick or premature babies with enough nutrients in the first days after birth, thus putting their health at risk. 'Fed is best' also intends to contribute to the removal of stigma surrounding mothers who formula feed out of necessity or choice (Jacobson 2019). Much dissent against dominant views on baby feeding modes has therefore coagulated around this campaign; by and large, in recent years an increasing number of criticisms has been voiced against the promotion of breastfeeding as a sort of dogmatic imperative. In particular, the association between bottle feeding and reprehensible maternal behavior has been heavily contested, while prominence has been given to the need to support mothers no matter how they

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that even WHO recommendations have been criticized for relying on a small number of observational studies which could not prove causation for the outcomes examined (Fewtrell et al. 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Infant feeding research should be conducted to the highest ethical standards, which often proves rather challenging (Binns et al. 2017); for example, although inducing certain behavior might prove strategic to obtain reliable experimental data scientists avoid interfering with the relationship between mothers and their children.

feed their babies (Fallon et al. 2016). Detractors of the 'Fed is best' approach claim that companies producing formula are behind it; while this may seem a realistic possibility, (currently) no evidence can be found to back it up. In any case, it is important to stress that monetary interests play a crucial role in the debate on infant feeding methods, as different actors can economically profit from it: if the 'Fed is best' campaign favors formula milk and related manufacturers, the 'Breast is best' approach benefits professional figures such as lactation consultants and breastfeeding counselors as well as businesses specialized in breastfeeding gear, supplies, publications etc.

The dispute on infant feeding methods takes place in the context of the public sphere and its main communicative channels. The press is one of those means through which different opinions on the matter can find representation and circulation. Newspaper items on breast- and bottle-feeding span different genres: the news story (which may be a report on a specific event or scientific discovery), the editorial, the op-ed and the letter to the editor. News stories are mainly informative while the other three genres are argumentative. However, the selection of what events or scientific discoveries to turn into an item of news is not an ideologically free practice: it guarantees more coverage to facts which may end up corroborating one perspective or the other. Newspapers thus represent a battlefield where hegemonic and counter discourses collide and intermesh. Their analysis may therefore provide interesting insights into the rhetorical and discursive strategies adopted by advocates of the 'Breast is best' approach and by those employed by the 'Fed is best' proponents.

This study takes into account newspaper articles appearing in the English-speaking press between 1988 and 2021.<sup>3</sup> The data set created for the research consists of approximately 450 texts (380,000 tokens) belonging to the above-mentioned genres of the news story, the editorial, the op-ed, and the letter to the editor. Rather expectedly, close reading of the texts has revealed that 69% of them encourage the 'Breast is best' viewpoint ('BREAST' subcorpus) while 31% promote the 'Fed is best' position ('FED' subcorpus). The corpus was examined through the use

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<sup>3</sup> Corpus construction relied on a news database and was conducted by adopting topic, language, and time criteria. As regards the latter, the research investigates the period where the 'Breast is best' approach is dominant. Since this paradigm became increasingly widespread at the end of the 70s (the homonymous slogan was introduced 1978), it is expected that by 1988 (initial date of the text selection) pro-breastfeeding discourse largely prevailed over pro-bottle discourse.

Geographical and political/ideological criteria were not included in the process of corpus building, therefore this paper does not provide any findings on how national and cultural factors and/or the political leaning of the newspapers may affect discourse on methods of infant feeding. However, the impact of cultural background and political alignment represents an interesting object of study which may be explored in future research.

of automated interrogation routines (Sketch Engine) in order to identify recurrent patterns indicative of concessive relations and then investigated in a discourse-analytical perspective to uncover beliefs about infant feeding methods and motherhood tacitly conveyed by newspapers. Before moving on to the analysis, I shall now present the main theoretical concepts this study rests upon.

## 2. Interlocutive dialogism

Drawing on the Bakhtinian assumption that that any utterance is a “*maillon dans la chaîne de l'échange verbale*”<sup>4</sup> (1984, 302-303), this paper examines the newspaper coverage of the discussion about infant feeding methods with regard to its dialogic quality. Discourse is never absolutely monologic and its multi-voicedness is arguably even more remarkable in texts—such as those considered in this study—that are produced and circulated within discourses fighting for hegemony. Dialogism manifests itself as “*dialogisation intérieure*” (internal dialogue) “*trouv(ant) son expression dans une suite de particularités de la sémantique, de la syntaxe et de la composition*”<sup>5</sup> (Bakhtin 1978, 102). The dialogic dimension therefore affects the macro-level of speech turn, or text as well as the inferior levels of phrase and even word (Brès and Nowakowska 2005). As regards the macro- and middle-level, this ‘virtual’ dialogue “does not take the form of subsequent turns, but rather of an inherent enunciative duality within the same syntactic unit” (Garzone 2016, 4; see also Brès and Nowakowska 2005, 140). Brès distinguishes between *dialogisme interdiscursif* and *dialogisme interlocutif* to respectively indicate the relations between an utterance and those that precede (interdiscursive dialogism) or follow it (interlocutive dialogism, 2001, 84). In the latter case, the locutor (i.e. the subject responsible for the utterance) anticipates the response addressees may have towards the utterance (Brès and Nowakowska 2005, 139). In a lively debate such as that surrounding the ‘Breast is best’ and ‘Fed is best’ discourses, recourse to interlocutive dialogic devices represents a significant linguistic-rhetorical phenomenon, as it can be turned into an instrument aimed to pre-empt possible future criticism.

Interlocutive dialogism (just like interdiscursive dialogism) features lexicogrammatical clues signposting the presence of two (or multiple) enunciative entities (Garzone 2016, 5). Concessive constructions rank among the most typical and frequently used of these clues; as a consequence, their analysis may provide a useful insight into the ways in which different voices and views are incorporated in the discussion of infant feeding modes.

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<sup>4</sup> “A link in the chain of the verbal exchange.”

<sup>5</sup> “Finding its expression in a series of particularities of semantics, syntax and composition.”



### 3. Concessive relations

From the semantic standpoint, concessive relations involve the postulation of two facts or situations which are perceived as somewhat conflicting or incompatible (Rudolph 1996; König 1988; 1986; 1985). The postulation is thus an exception: it defies assumptions about what normally goes together and presents states of affairs that are prototypically in contrast (Vergaro 2008, 99). The two text units making up a concessive construction are conventionally indicated with P and Q. P stands for protasis, or concession, and refers to the proposition whose content the speaker admits to be valid as if she/he were accepting a possible objection from her/his addressee; Q stands for apodosis, or consequence, and designates the proposition which is portrayed as 'more valid' and which carries more weight, thus coinciding with the speaker's view (Thomson and Zhou 2000, 126). Concessive relations are syntactically encoded in either hypotactic or paratactic constructions. In hypotactic constructions the conceded proposition is realized as a subordinating adverbial clause introduced by a concessive connective such as *although, though, even if, even though, while*. Paratactic constructions correspond to sentence complexes featuring conjunctive adverbs such as *however, nevertheless, all the same, still yet*. In this case, the order concession-consequence is fixed, as the protasis is contained in a sentence followed by a second sentence (the apodosis) containing a conjunctive adverb (Quirk et al. 1985). Concessive relations can also be expressed by prepositional phrases (e.g. including the headword *despite*) incorporating a nominal form, a non-finite verb form or a nominal phrase (Garzone 2005, 132).<sup>6</sup> Recourse to prepositional phrases, hypotactic or paratactic constructions provides the states of affairs described in the concessive construct with different statuses; in all cases the content conveyed in the consequence carries more weight, but hypotaxis "attributes a lower grammatical rank to the conceded position assigning it an informationally subordinate role" (Garzone 2005, 132; Thompson and Zhou 2000, 126). The order in which subordinate and main clause occur in the sentence also affords the possibility of manipulating the relative weight of each proposition; as noted by Thomson and Zhou, "in argumentation [...] in cases of incompatibility, the second of two propositions will normally be the one which expresses the writer's own view" (2000, 126). Grammatical and informational disparity is even more evident when the concessive relation is nominalized (Garzone 2005, 132).

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<sup>6</sup> Concessive and adversative relations are encoded in similar constructions (e.g. *but, while, yet* etc.) and their meanings are often simultaneously expressed in the same sentence, with the result that setting them apart is problematic (Garzone 2005, 140). In this chapter only examples which are exclusively adversative will be left out, while no clear distinction between the two types of relation will be made in ambiguous cases.

Moving on to the semantic-pragmatic level, it is important to remark that “encoding meaning into a concessive construction does not add anything to the propositional content of the two clauses that compose the utterance” (Garzone 2005, 133) because concessives are non-truth evaluable. Their effect is that of giving prominence to the relation of contrast between the two utterances by depicting one of them as divergent from prototypical states of affairs. The juxtaposition between protasis and apodosis is not explicitly mentioned in their propositional content, but it relies on the shared belief (between speaker and addressee) that—due to either convention or logical argumentation—the circumstances described in the conceded proposition are incompatible with those represented in the consequence (Degano 2008, 70). This additional meaning is illustrated in logical terms as “*Normally if P then not Q*” (Iten 1998, 4) or “*P & [contrary to expectations] Q*” (Garzone 2005, 133) and it is worked out by the text recipient on the basis of her/his previous knowledge of the world and generates a “conventional implicature” (Grice 1989), i.e. “a non—logical inference, which—without being part of what is said in that utterance—is conveyed due to the presence of a certain term and its falsity is compatible with the truth of the utterance” (Garzone 2005, 134). As a consequence, it may be claimed that, when used surreptitiously, the real function carried out by a concession could be to establish the implicature rather than to assert the propositional content (Santulli and Degano *forth.*). In this case, the meaning expressed by the implicature is strategically constructed by the speaker to orient the audience to her/his position. The assumptions and expectations shared by both text producer and text recipient are characterized by a high degree of discretionality: it is the former who establishes the concessive relation as “it takes a human mind to judge that it is remarkable that two states of affair hold at the same time when the existence of one would normally prevent the other from coming about” (Iten 1998, 4). In this way, by means of concessive constructions, the speaker has the possibility to project her/his attitude on the text, to express evaluations (Thomson and Zhou 2000, 139-141) and even to transmit ideological beliefs (Garzone 2005, 139-140). This means that, although concession allows the presentation of different points of view and opens a dialogic perspective, it simultaneously provides the chance to close it or at least reduce the impact of what is temporarily conceded, by foregrounding the arguer’s perspective. Due to these pragmatic properties, concessive constructions are investigated in the following sections with the aim of identifying the strategies utilized in the newspapers to present opposing viewpoints while giving prominence to the preferred perspective on methods of infant feeding. The decoding of conventional implicatures may also contribute to shed light on the possible tacit beliefs about motherhood and breastfeeding which underlie the recourse to these strategies.

#### 4. Concession in newspaper infant feeding discourse: a quantitative perspective

The first step in the analysis is the automatic interrogation of the corpus, which allows for some preliminary numerical considerations to be made. The quantitative investigation of the data set has made it possible to identify the frequencies of a variety of concessive items (isolated on the basis of the taxonomy provided in Quirk et al. 1985) and to subsequently focus on the context of those with the highest occurrence, i.e. the adverbs *however*, *nevertheless*, *(and) yet* and the connectives *although*, *(even) though*, and *even if*. Table 1 displays the percentage frequencies of these lemmas.<sup>7</sup>

Lemma	General Corpus	BREAST subcorpus	FED subcorpus
<i>However</i>	0.045%	0.047%	0.041%
<i>Nevertheless</i>	0.0013%	0.0012%	0.0015%
<i>And yet</i>	0.0029%	0.0016%	0.0057%
<i>Although</i>	0.024%	0.025%	0.021%
<i>(Even) though</i>	0.034%	0.031%	0.04%
<i>Even if</i>	0.0079%	0.0057%	0.012%
<i>Despite</i>	0.026%	0.024%	0.028%
<i>In spite of</i>	0.00053%	0.00082%	/

**Tab. 1:** Percentage frequencies of the main adverbs, connectives and prepositions

These percentage frequencies provide some insights into the use of concessive constructions in newspaper infant nutrition discourse: by and large, no lemma has a remarkable occurrence in the text selection, but if the sum and not the individual percentages is considered, then it may be claimed that concession plays a meaningful role in the press coverage of the question. As a matter of fact, if considered jointly, these lemmas would amount to a percentage frequency of approximately 0.14% and thus would rank within the first 100 items of the frequency wordlist. Additionally, the presence of such a wide selection of concession markers confirms the significance of this phenomenon of interlocutive dialogism within the debate on infant nutrition.

<sup>7</sup> Prepositional phrases are not very numerous in the data set and have been excluded from this section's analysis. However, those introduced by *in spite of* or *despite* (i.e. the most frequently occurring in the corpora) have been included in Table 1 for representational purposes.

A second consideration that can be made on the basis of these numbers is that, contrary to expectations, there does not appear to be a strongly marked preference for hypotaxis in the newspapers.<sup>8</sup> As already noted, “[s]ubordination immediately signals that the arguer is exposing her own viewpoint, which she firmly controls and adapts into a cohesive syntactic structure,” while in coordination “[t]he conceded viewpoint can be presented as part of common experience and beliefs, and is temporarily accepted by both arguer and audience” (Santulli and Degano, *forth.*). In spite of arguably promoting their stance on baby feeding methods, journalists do not seem to invariably resort to subordinate clauses which would allow them to significantly reduce the possible impact of the opposite viewpoint on the readership. Their choice of largely availing themselves of coordination, too, may be interpreted as an indication of their attempt to foreground the multivoicedness and the dialogic element of their articles. In this way they indirectly represent themselves as able to read reality in its many-sidedness and complexity, and look more reliable (and thus more persuasive) in the eyes of their audience.

The analysis of the contexts of these lemmas starts from the hypothesis that there may be regular patterns in the distribution of information between concession and consequence in the texts collected, depending on whether they promote the ‘Breast is best’ or ‘Fed is best’ approach. For example, it may be expected that the former category of texts will contain implicatures that maintain the equal status of infant feeding modes but are contradicted by the apodoses. Conversely, it is possible to presume that news items in favor of the ‘Fed is best’ will embed implicatures which acknowledge the primacy of breastfeeding but are subsequently refuted in the consequence part of the statement.

As the following sections show, the investigation of the contexts of occurrences of the adverbs and connectives used in concessive constructions only partially confirms this hypothesis. Results are presented and organized based on the subcorpus they belong to.

## **5. Expectations vs. reality: the use of concessive constructions in the BREAST subcorpus**

The retrieval and exploration of the concordances of the lemmas mentioned in the previous section represents the starting point for the isolation of patterns in the use of concessive constructions in the two subcorpora.

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<sup>8</sup> In the general corpus, concessive adverbs such as *however*, *nevertheless*, and *and yet* jointly amount to a percentage frequency of 0.050 whereas *although*, *(even) though* and *even if* account for 0.066% of occurrences.

As initially hypothesized, the analysis has revealed that such patterns do exist, but they do not generate opposite implicatures despite supporting contrasting opinions. The topics contained in the concessive statements of the two sections of the data set revolve around different ideas: whereas the FED subcorpus focuses on the discussion of whether breast is 'really best,' and the use of concession is mainly aimed at debunking this belief, the BREAST subcorpus starts from this theory and never problematizes it. This lack of correspondence between subcorpora probably has to do with the fact that the 'Breast is best' approach is hegemonic in the time period considered in the research. As happens with any kind of dominant discourse, language portrays this viewpoint as a natural and indisputable reality. The 'Fed is best' position is instead an instance of counter-discourse, not because it promotes formula over maternal milk, but because it frames infant feeding as an open question and raises the possibility that breastfeeding may not necessarily be the optimal solution for everyone.

### 5.1 *Expected numbers and statistics*

The automatic interrogation of the texts supporting the 'Breast is best' approach reveals a widespread concern with the number of women who do not breastfeed, quit breastfeeding altogether or stop breastfeeding exclusively before their babies are six months; figures and percentages are often included in the concordance lines whose node words are the concessive connectives listed in Table 1 (example 1):

- (1) A recent survey by the Toronto public health department found that *although 83 per cent* of mothers begin by breast-feeding, within four months *only 35 per cent* were still breast-feeding exclusively. (*The Globe and Mail*, 29 September 1998, emphasis added)

The implicature underlying this construction works in the following way:

P: 83 percent of mothers begin by breast-feeding

Q: within four months only 35 percent were still breast-feeding exclusively

Implicature: Normally, if P then not Q

Normally if a large percentage of women starts breastfeeding, it is to be supposed that a good percentage (i.e. more than 35) of mothers will breast-feed exclusively within four months.

- (2) Although *breast-feeding rates continue to climb* across racial groups, a recent National Immunization Survey found *just 66.4 percent* of black women initiated breast-feeding in 2012 and only 35.3 percent were still breast-feeding at six months. (*The New York Times*, 17 August 2017, emphasis added)

- (3) The most recent national nutrition survey showed that, on discharge from hospital, more than 80 per cent of newborn infants were exclusively breast-fed; *however*, by three months of age *fewer than 60 per cent* of infants remained fully breast-fed. (*Herbert River Express*, 19 August 2003, emphasis added)

Examples 2 and 3 are comparable to example 1 in that they generate similar implicatures, although 2 only refers to the community of black women and 3 contains an instance of parataxis. *However* is contained in the consequence, the text unit with more informational weight and which occurs last. It is due to the presence of this adverb that the reader can infer that the preceding sentence has to be intended as a concession, which would otherwise be processed as a 'neutral' statement.

### ***5.2 Possible explanations for the gap between expected and actual numbers***

The mismatch between expected and actual numbers of exclusively breastfed infants is one of the main topics of the BREAST corpus; many articles deal with possible explanations for this situation. Some depict hospital policies as responsible for the decline in breastfeeding rates, in spite of the fact that most new mothers initiate breastfeeding after the birth of their babies and seem to abandon it later on:

- (4) Although *more than 58 per cent* of the respondents reported that their hospital had a written policy on breastfeeding, *less than five per cent* reported having one that complied with all of the World Health Organization steps. (*Hamilton Spectator*, Canada, 24 August 1996, emphasis added)
- (5) Although *most* hospitals that deliver babies employ a lactation specialist, new mothers generally leave the hospital within two days of childbirth, before most problems with nursing are likely to surface. (*The New York Times*, 30 March 1999, emphasis added)

These concessive constructs (4 and 5) illustrate data assessed negatively (in the apodosis) because they do not meet expectations generated on the basis of data evaluated positively (in the protasis).

The same juxtaposition can be found in examples where responsibility for unsatisfactory breastfeeding statistics is attached to widespread disrespect of the law:

- (6) Free samples [of formula milk] are widely available in maternity wards *despite laws prohibiting the practice*. (*The Vancouver Sun*, 10 August 2013, emphasis added)

- (7) *Although the Ontario Human Rights Code makes it clear mothers have the right to nurse in public, we've all heard the horror stories about nursing mothers being told to take their babies to germ filled bathrooms to feed or who've endured snarky comments for feeding their babies [in] public. (The Toronto Star, 4 April 2005, emphasis added)*

In example 7 the difference in weight between the two text units is particularly apparent; whereas P is a subordinate clause placed in a sentence-initial slot, Q is the main clause which occurs in the last position—a characteristic that contributes to making it more memorable. In addition, the apodosis contains heavily connoted language ('horror stories,' 'germ filled') which can be impressive and persuasive. All in all, these combined strategies place emphasis on what is deemed unacceptable. Disregard for the rights of breastfeeding mothers (example 8) and lack of assistance (example 9) are often portrayed as connected to stigma, which, rather interestingly, is also one of the main ideas debated in the FED subcorpus (section 6):

- (8) *Women who breast-feed in public still face discrimination and harassment, even though the practice is legal. (The Star Tribune, 27 February 2011, emphasis added)*
- (9) *Swansea University professor Amy Brown said: "Breastfeeding should be normal behavior. However, in this country it sparks high levels of debate in the press and online—much of which can be highly critical of breastfeeding or examples of when a mother has experienced a problem when feeding her child this way. Despite the promotion that 'breast is best,' we do not follow it up with actions to support new mothers." (The Mirror, 8 September 2016, emphasis added)<sup>9</sup>*

The stark contrast between the binomial "discrimination and harassment" contained in the main clause and the term "legal practice" featured in the concessive subordinate of example 8 represent a further instance of the concern with the gap between reality and expectation. The order of clauses is also interesting: the subordinate—very short and direct—comes second, which confers it more weight. The discrepancy between the way things should be and how they actually are also emerges in the quoted words of Dr. Brown (example 9) as revealed by her use of two concessive constructions in three consecutive sentences. Moreover, the idea that 'Breast is best' approach is endorsed in the UK appears in a nominalized form, whereas the emphasis on the unmet necessity to support new mothers is encoded in the main clause: as a result, the former, which is attributed a lower grammatical ranking, carries less weight.

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<sup>9</sup> The concessive constructions featured in this example are included in reported speech. In general, it may be claimed that journalists tend to report other people's words when the latter support the position (either pro-breastfeeding or pro-feeding) promoted in the article, therefore when the speaker's point of view coincides with that of the writer.

### 5.3 Breastfeeding as a difficult but always viable and worthy infant feeding method

The need to provide breastfeeding women with encouragement and aid is intrinsically connected to the acknowledgement that this feeding method can be very challenging and painful. When journalists bring up the difficulties linked with breastfeeding, however, they strategically describe them by recurring to concessive constructions in such a way as to show their readers that they have a realistic view of the practice while simultaneously declaring that mothers' struggles are offset by the advantages breastfeeding offers them and their babies:

- (10) Observed up close, breast-feeding is demystified and becomes the most natural thing in the world, *though not without its difficulties for both mother and baby in the first few weeks.* (*The Gazette, Montreal*, 27 July 1993, emphasis added)
- (11) New mothers might have to contend with painful, cracked nipples, clogged milk ducts and infections. Babies, too, sometimes have difficulty latching on and nursing. And women who return to work sometimes find that continuing to breast-feed requires a major commitment. *It appears to be worth the effort, though, given the benefits for mother and child.* (*The New York Times*, 22 June 2003, emphasis added)

Example 11 contains an instance of *though* as an adverb; when performing this function, this word is indicative of a paratactic structure and may occur in a sentence-final position or in the middle of the sentence as in the example (Quirk et al. 1985). The interpretation of the sentence including 'though' requires an implicit repetition of the text unit (Degano 2008, 83). In the case of example 11, the underlying construction would be the following:

'And women who return to work sometimes find that continuing to breast-feed requires a major commitment. It appears to be worth the effort, *though continuing to breast-feed requires a major commitment*, given the benefits for mother and child.'

In concessive constructions where *though* acts as a conjunction, the subordinate clause is the text unit which carries less weight. Conversely, when utilized as an adverb, *though* occurs in the clause with more epistemic force (similarly to *however*; Degano 2008, 83). In the latter case, this concessive marker operates retrospectively, signaling that the previous sentence has to be intended as a protasis (Degano 2008, 84). As regards example 11, the choice of this particular structure allows the newspaper writer to give prominence to the idea that dedicating oneself to breastfeeding might be problematic but is certainly worth the struggle, thus re-affirming that 'Breast is best.'



Rather expectedly, the description of the difficulties experienced during breastfeeding is one of the main topics of the FED subcorpus, whose analysis and results are presented in the next section.

## 6. The Juxtaposition between ideology and practice in the FED subcorpus

### 6.1 *The debunking of the 'Breast is Best' myth*

If the dichotomy between expectations and reality is the principal concept of the BREAST subcorpus whose main discussion revolves around the inadequate numbers of (exclusively) breastfed babies, the predominant topic of the FED subcorpus is the debunking of the theory that breast is always best. The analysis of the texts revealed no attempt to encourage bottle-feeding over breastfeeding, unlike what used to happen in pro-bottle-feeding topics in the historical periods prior to that considered in the study. Very few concessive constructs were found that highlight the possible disadvantages of breastfeeding in very specific contexts and situations (examples 12 and 13):

- (12) Although there may be a small increase in infections in developed countries, there is also evidence that purely breastfed babies can become low on iron by six months. (*The Herald Express*, 29 January 2011)
- (13) Some experts, like Timmermann, said that women might consider limiting breastfeeding if their levels are high and that, at the very least, they should be given the information that these chemicals are harmful and pass into breastmilk. Most women, however, are unable to make an informed decision, and are left struggling to make impossible choices. (*The Guardian*, 15 February 2021)

The majority of concessive relations in the FED subcorpus is instead aimed at confuting the notion that breastfeeding guarantees significantly more benefits than other infant feeding methods. Numerous instances of concession appear in news stories featuring recent studies that confute the results of previous research according to which breastfeeding confers significant health advantages to mother and child:

- (14) *Although there is some evidence supporting such claims*, no randomized, controlled trials—the gold standard of scientific research—have proved that breast-fed babies fare better, at least in industrialized countries. (*The New York Times*, 24 July 2012, emphasis added)

- (15) This survey has made headlines, *even though further analysis* of it shows it only makes a tiny difference to your bond with your child, given the variables of childhood. (*The Sun*, 19 November 2017, emphasis added)
- (16) Research published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* concluded breastfeeding can indeed result in outcomes such as a healthier BMI and better maths skills. *However, when* the study was “restricted to siblings who were differently fed within the same families,” it found the distinction between bottle and breastfed-children were “not statistically significant.” (*The Hobart Mercury*, Australia, 28 March 2014, emphasis added)

Examples 14, 15, and 16 are a small representative set of the occurrences of *although*, *even though* and *however* in concessive constructs juxtaposing old and new discoveries. The most recent findings are normally reported in the apodosis and appear as more valid and reliable than the old ones (examples 14 and 16). Example 15 works differently, but the position of the subordinate clause provides it with more weight than if it came before the main clause, at the beginning of the sentence.

Although most concessive relations in the FED subcorpus confute the notion that breast is always best, there are a few instances that instead start from this assumption but reduce its absolute validity by either encoding it in a subordinate clause (example 17) or in a sentence followed by an adverb such as *however* (example 18):

- (17) *Although breastfeeding still offers babies the best start in life*, enthusiasm for its benefits among doctors and medical researchers has led to its benefits being overestimated. (*The Independent*, 22 November 2003, emphasis added)
- (18) Mary Herrick wrote: “Almost, if not all, women know that breast is best. *However, many can't produce enough or keep up with breastfeeding.*” (*The Sun*, 27 February 2018, emphasis added)<sup>10</sup>

Examples 17 and 18 are interesting because they are perfect representatives of interlocutive dialogism in the debate on infant feeding methods, although some degree of interlocutive dialogism is to be found in all the examples reported in this study. As a matter of fact, they incorporate the exact main standpoint of the opposing view, the quasi-dogmatic statement ‘Breast is best,’ in the concession, only to maintain that its truthfulness is limited.

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<sup>10</sup> See footnote 9.

## 6.2 Breastfeeding discourse as 'doublethink'

Moving on to the other main ideas expressed in the concessive constructs of the subcorpus, it is possible to find other topics that are almost completely symmetrical to those of the BREAST subcorpus. For example, whereas the illustration of the problems experienced by breastfeeding mothers is typically encapsulated in the concessive part of the utterance in the BREAST subcorpus, in the FED subcorpus journalists may attach more importance to the issue by describing it in the consequence as in example 18.

This distribution of information between protasis and apodasis is strategic to emphasizing that breastfeeding can be difficult and not always viable. However, when newspapers give prominence to the dichotomy between the postulation that 'Breast is best' and the challenges (often depicted as insurmountable) faced by women, an opposite organization of concession/consequence may occur.

- (19) *Nurses* at her local health clinic also gave her disapproving looks when she reached for his bottle. *Among friends, however*, Ms. Evans found she was not alone in having problems with breastfeeding. (*The Globe and Mail*, July 12, 2010, emphasis added)
- (20) Rebecca is still furious that she wasn't given more sympathetic advice to begin with. "It was like this *midwife* had a line she had to stick to, *even though she could see it just wasn't working for me or the baby*," she says. The lactivists say all women can breastfeed if they want to. They simply do not accept that it doesn't always work; *even though the most experienced mothers know differently*." (*The Daily Mail*, 7 May 2019, emphasis added)

Examples 19 and 20 establish a discursive juxtaposition between health professionals (namely 'nurses' and 'midwives'), who champion the notion that 'Breast is best' (and its corollary that breastfeeding is a matter of will and training) and mothers, who are asked to put this notion into practice. Although these examples contain a comparable position, the distribution of the propositional content encoded in P and Q is reversed: in 19 the writer underlines the fact that mothers' struggles are not uncommon and should be given more consideration by expressing this concept in Q, the sentence including the adverb *however*. In 20 breastfeeding difficulties are described in subordinating concessives, whereas the 'infuriating' behavior of the midwife and of 'lactivists' (a label attributed to strong advocates of breast-feeding, often used with a negative connotation in the FED subcorpus) is foregrounded in the main clause, with the aim of condemning it. Anyway, it may be additionally observed that the two sentences in 19 have uneven weight but identical grammatical status; in other words, the portrayal of the nurses'

conduct appears to be intended as a concession only in retrospect and therefore plays a rather prominent role in the construction.

- (21) I was lucky that a lot of things fell into place for me because *even though it's meant to be natural that doesn't mean that it's easy*. (*Sunday Business Post*, 10 August 2014, emphasis added)
- (22) There is a doublethink going on here, a *disconnection* between what people are *supposed* to say and what they're actually doing. *And yet* the message persists that breast is the only way forward. (*The Observer*, 10 February 2013, emphasis added)

Example 21 is very interesting since it features a distinction between the notion of naturality and that of effortlessness, which are often portrayed as overlapping in breastfeeding discourse. The idea that breastfeeding may be something that naturally comes to women is conceded in the subordinate (although the use of the expression 'is meant to be' somewhat reduces its impact), whereas the rejection of the equivalence between naturality and simplicity is introduced in the main clause and given more prominence.

Example 22 contains the Orwellian term 'doublethink' which evokes the idea of a totalitarian state where people pretend to espouse the values imposed by the dictatorship while privately behaving according to their own standards. This utterance contains the concessive expression *and yet* which is almost invariably used in the FED subcorpus in constructs representing the dichotomy between ideology and practice.<sup>11</sup> The author of example 22 maintains that there is a 'disconnection' surrounding breastfeeding discourse and that women say what they are 'supposed to say' in order to avoid criticism.

Taking on the stigma against mothers who bottle-feed or do not exclusively breastfeed plays a crucial part in the FED subcorpus (examples 19 and 20). However, as indicated by the following examples, newspapers disagreeing with the 'Breast is best' approach also underline the feelings of self-blame and failure often harbored by new mothers who have introjected the imperative that 'Breast is best' but are unable to breastfeed (examples 23 and 24):

- (23) I'm not advocating that women forgo breastfeeding for formula. I am advocating, however, that women stop beating themselves up *if they cannot breastfeed or if*

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<sup>11</sup> As stated in paragraph §4, the automatic interrogation of the data set has not revealed a close correspondence between the topics put forth to support the "Breast is best" or "Fed is best" approach and specific concessive adverbs or conjunctions, but *and yet* represents an exception. As a matter of fact, in 86% of its occurrences this expression is utilized to underscore the contrast between the way things seem to be and what they really are.

*breastfeeding is so difficult for them that it's making their life miserable. (The Edmonton Journal, 18 February 2017, emphasis added)*

- (24) But in 2016, *despite women being afforded more choice than their mothers*, it seems there is one decision a mother can no longer make without feeling guilt: the choice not to breastfeed. (*The Hobart Mercury*, Australia, 16 April 2016, emphasis added).

Whereas both example 23 and 24 stress that it is important for women not to reproach themselves and feel shame if they bottle feed, a significant difference emerges between them: example 24 raises the issue of choice, even though only to affirm that mothers' right to choose is not without guilt, while example 23 seems to solely take into account mums who cannot breastfeed or find it extremely problematic, thus excluding those who actively decide to give their babies formula milk and possibly indirectly accepting that stigma against the latter is justified. The hypothesis that traces of the hegemonic discourse can be found even in articles that promote the 'Fed is best' approach appears reasonable and represents the main object of study of the next pages.

## **7. Ideological implications about motherhood in the 'Breast is best' vs. 'Fed is best' dispute**

Sections 5 and 6 have detailed and presented the exploration of the concessive relations isolated in the newspapers keeping the main topics and constructs featured in the BREAST subcorpus and those appearing in the FED subcorpus separated. As regards the ideological implications resulting from their analysis, though, such a divided approach no longer seems helpful as the beliefs about infant feeding and parenthood emerging from the investigation of the articles are not so rigidly and neatly distinguishable.

All in all, albeit with differences, newspaper discourses about baby nutrition focus almost exclusively on mothers (fathers are very rarely mentioned) and assign them remarkably limited agency. Women are depicted as passive subjects that have to be either instructed or trained or both. The main concern of the BREAST subcorpus is that breastfeeding rates are not as they should be: however, the responsibility for not achieving higher numbers is mainly attached to insufficient hospital/governmental policies and support. In other words, new mothers are portrayed as not adequately educated or tutored on how to breastfeed; the implicit corollary to this is that, if provided with the right help, all mothers would automatically exclusively breastfeed until their babies are six months or older.

The necessity to lecture women on the health benefits (or lack thereof) of maternal and formula milk also emerges in the FED subcorpus. In the entire data set an eminently medical

perspective is adopted: parents' decisions to rely on one method or another are represented as mainly grounded in medical-scientific information (whereas other factors may contribute to it). However, the role played by stigma in both subcorpora indicates that the nature of the debate is not only medical, but also moralistic (especially as regards the pro-breastfeeding approach).<sup>12</sup> Hegemonic discourse establishes an association between methods of infant nutrition and virtuous (or reprehensible) maternal behavior; therefore, the experience of infant feeding comes to represent much more than just providing babies with nourishment and can be fraught with sense of guilt or shame if women feel they are not reaching the canons of good motherhood because they are not feeding their children in 'the right way.'

The combined presence of dissimilar discourses such as the medical and the moralistic one may be surprising, but the analysis suggests that they hybridize and activate a synergic coalescence. More specifically, they are both grounded in the ideology of intense mothering and "the need for mothers to manage risk by heeding expert warnings and advice" (Lee 2007, 476).<sup>13</sup> This relatively new parenting paradigm, which requires mothers' unconditional availability for their children, has been on the rise (Símonardóttir and Gíslason 2018; Wolf J.B. 2011) and is currently part of dominant motherhood discourse. As a result, at present intense mothering is considered and represented as the norm and the benchmark against which mothers can assess how valuable they are as such.

Another related assumption which is at the basis of both medical and moralistic discourse that can be found in the whole corpus and not just one of its sections is a deterministic approach to parenting and nutrition (Símonardóttir and Gíslason 2018, 2). Even though there is no guarantee that feeding modes will have but a moderate impact on babies' future life, no objection is ever raised in this regard. The issue of personal choice made on grounds that have neither to

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the findings of this study align with (among others) those of Murphy (1999), Knaak (2010; 2007), Lee (2007) Wolf J.B. (2011), Fallon et al. (2016), and Símonardóttir and Gíslason (2018).

<sup>13</sup> 'Intensive mothering' (also dubbed as 'total motherhood' or 'exclusive motherhood') is a "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 1996, 8) approach to mothering introduced in the late Forties. According to this paradigm, mothers should not only protect their children but also predict and prevent any event that may interfere with their development;

[i]ts practice is frequently cast as a trade-off between what mothers might like and what babies and children must have [...]. And when mothers have "wants"—such as a sense of bodily, emotional, and psychological autonomy—but children have "needs"—such as an environment in which anything less than optimal is framed as perilous—good mothering is defined as behavior that reduces even infinitesimal or poorly understood risks to offspring, *regardless of the potential cost to the mother.* (Wolf J.B. 2011, xv, emphasis added)

do with the medical-scientific domain nor with intensive parenting is largely absent from the discussion.

Against this background, feminist rhetoric would arguably represent an actual counter discourse against the dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood and infant feeding methods. Such a rhetoric would compete with “the highly gendered and oppressive elements of infant feeding and its link to idealized versions of motherhood” (Símonardóttir and Gíslason 2018, 13), introduce the notion of equality and shared parenthood into the debate, raise the question of women’s postpartum mental health and attribute new mothers more agency. However, both the root ‘feminis\*’ (which counts only 38 occurrences in the entire data set) and words related to the semantic fields of the above mentioned feminist instances occupy a very marginal role in the corpus and do not seem to affect the hegemonic discourse conveyed in newspapers and its imbedded ideological tenets.

## 8. Concluding remarks

In light of these considerations, it may be affirmed that the ‘Breast is best’ vs. ‘Fed is best’ dispute only partially represents a clash of beliefs. The analysis has showed that the ‘Fed is best’ stance on the issue of infant nourishing can be seen as counter hegemonic because it debunks the theory that breastfeeding invariably represents the optimal option and it lifts the widespread stigma attached to bottle feeding. However, there seems to be a remarkable degree of overlap between the two positions considered in the study as regards the tacit ideological beliefs that have to do with motherhood and (shared) parenthood.

In other words, the investigation of interlocutive dialogism and of concession (a phenomenon related to the multivoicedness of a text) carried out in this research suggests that pro-breastfeeding and pro-feeding discourses can be considered as opposing from the point of view of argumentation because they promote different opinions, but not from the point of view of the deeply ingrained conceptions that lie at the basis of the ideology of maternity. In the entire data set women are portrayed as passive subjects who are encouraged and expected to religiously follow medical guidelines and equally assertive standards of what is deemed to be ‘good motherhood.’

Whereas research is increasingly focusing on the issues connected to infant feeding methods and their ideological implications with the objective of supporting mothers, it is hoped that new, less prescriptive approaches are adopted in different domains such as, among others, public policies, healthcare services and hospitals, mainstream media etc. Rather than providing mothers and parental couples with instructions on how to feed their children, these new

approaches should start from the specific situation of the new parents and validate their feelings and wishes, thus empowering them and guaranteeing them and their babies high levels of wellbeing.

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