

Different Types of “Why” Questions Used by Children During Family Conversations

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Children's Why Questions

- Interactional moves used by children in family conversations
- Argumentative discussion in family is often triggered by children's requests to elicit the reasons behind parental prescriptions
- Might the children's why question trigger argumentative discussions in family?



The research project

- « Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in family context »
- Doctoral School Argumentation Practices in Context
Argupolis (www.argupolis.net)
- Financed by Swiss National Science Foundation
(project n. PDFMP1-123093/1).



Main goals of the project

- Establishing to what extent family members engage in resolving differences of opinions during everyday interactions at home
- What aspects trigger argumentative discussions in the family?
- What argumentative strategies are more often used by family members?
- What are the differences and the similarities between Italian and Swiss families?



Children's Questions / 1

The children's questions have been, and currently are, relevant subjects of analysis for many scholars in different research fields

- Isaacs (1930); Brown (1968); Garvey (1975)
- Tyack and Ingram (1977) show how children learn first the use of “what” and “where”, already at the age of 2.0, and then in chronological order of why, how and when
- Chouinard and colleagues (2007) show how the information, which children received as the result of questions, is significantly better remembered than information which is given to them unrequested



Children's Questions / 2

- Loukusa and colleagues (2008) show how children's ability to answer questions and explain their answers develops between the ages of 3 and 9 years, and in particular this ability increases rapidly between the ages of 3 and 5 years
- Frazier and colleagues (2009) examine children's questions and the reactions to the answers they received in conversations with adults. They show how children more often agreed and asked follow-up questions following adult explanations and, conversely, more often asked again their original question and provided their own explanation following non-explanations



Children's Why Questions in the Family

- When do children's why questions trigger an argumentative discussion in family conversations?
- In what conditions is this possible?
- Can we properly speak of different types of children's why questions in family conversations?



The research project

- Research project « *Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in family context* »
 - Italian and Swiss families
 - 30 video-recordings of dinnertime interactions at home
 - Language: Italian
 - Families: both parents; a child aged from 3 to 6; at least another child
 - Transcription (CHILDES: MacWhinney, 1989) and different qualitative analyses

cf. Arcidiacono & Bova (2010, forthcoming), Bova (forthcoming)



Excerpt 1: « *You can't Bernardo!* » - « *Why not?* »

@Participants: MOM, BER Bernardo.

@Age of BER: 4

@Location: Rome (Italy)

%sit: BER touches and looks at the
container with the pills.

[...]

1 *BER: I'm going to take one of these

→ *BER: yes.

2 *MOM: you can't Bernardo.

3 *BER: eh?

4 *MOM: you can't.

%act: shakes his head.

5 *BER: why not?

6 *MOM: because children have to take special
medicines

→ *MOM: they can't take the same medicines as
adults

→ *MOM: otherwise they will get ill.

7 *BER: and before you XXX also felt ill?

8 *MOM: no because I'm an adult

%sit: TAR gets close to MAM

9 *BER: and me?

10 *MOM: you are still a child

%pau: common 1.0.

%sit: BER bangs the medicine container on
the table. MOM reaches towards him to
try and make him eat a piece of
fruit. BER turns his head away
quickly and slowly leaves the kitchen
to go towards DAD and LUC



Elements of analysis

- **Issue:** “*Can Bernardo take the pills from the medicine container, or not?*”
- **Two opposite opinions:**
“*Yes, I want to!*” - “*You can’t Bernardo*”
- “**Why not?**”: Bernardo is asking his mother to justify her prohibition on the basis of reasons

Excerpt 2:

“Francesco your laughter is getting on my nerves”
“Why mummy?”

@Participants: MOM, FRA Francesco.

@Age of FRA: 5

@Location: Rome (Italy)

1 *MAM: I'm too tired to even eat

 %act: begins eating again

2 *FRA: 0 [= laughs loudly from outside of
 the camera view]

3 *MAM: Francesco your laughter is getting on my
 nerves

 %pau: common 1.5.

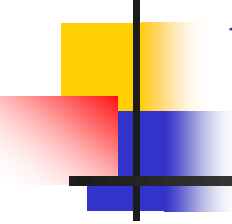
4 *FRA: why mummy? [= off screen)

5 *MAM: I find it so stupid



Elements of analysis

- There is **no difference of opinion** between the mother and Francesco
- Francesco is not putting into doubt that the mother is bothered by his behavior
- He wants to know why his behavior bothers the mother



Excerpt 3: *“Are you up for a challenge?”* *“No, thanks”*

@Participants: ALE Alessandro, LUC Luca.

@Age of ALE: 5 Age of LUC: 7

@Location: Lugano (Switzerland)

1 *ALE: hey! Are you up for a challenge?
 %act: keeping the fork close to his mouth

2 *LUC: no thanks
 %pau: common 2.0.

3 *ALE: why not?
 %act: making a gesture by taking an enormous
 mouthful

4 *LUC: eat slowly
 %pau: common 3.0.

→ *LUC: otherwise it'll go down the wrong way

→ *LUC: have you got that?

5 *ALE: 0 [= silence]
 %pau: common 2.5.



Elements of analysis

- As in the first example, there are two opposite opinions

- Alessandro wants to challenge his elder brother
- Luca clearly disagrees
- Alessandro asks Luca to justify why he does not want to make a challenge



Conclusions and implications / 1

Children's why questions have two different functions

- Either when there is a difference of opinion between the child and his interlocutor, or when the opinion of one of the two interlocutors is put into doubt, the why question triggers an argumentative discussions in the family (*argumentative why*)
- If the child does not put into doubt the opinion of his interlocutor because the comment made by one of the family members refers to an event considered already ascertained, the function of the why question is to elicit an explanation (*explanatory why*)



Conclusions and implications / 2

- This does not prevent that an unconvincing explanation could lead to the doubt in the child, and thus the possibility of a beginning of an argumentative discussion
- A **waiting position**, in military terms, is any suitable position in which naval units can be kept ready for operations at immediate notice. In the family context, children seem to make use of why questions in order to be in a waiting position, ready to accept or put into doubt the new obtained information



Further developments of this study...

- Might argumentative discussions in family correspond to a reasonable resolution of the difference of opinion? If no, why? Maybe because of differences of age, roles, status, competences, experiences... among family members?
- In order to analyze and evaluate argumentative discussions in the family, we need to define whether it is possible to consider young children as reasonable arguers, also considering their cognitive skills as a relevant topic in both psychological and linguistic studies



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