

Functions of “Why” Questions Asked by Children in Family Conversations

Antonio Bova*

**Institute of Linguistics and Semiotics, University of Lugano, Via G. Buffi 13, 6900 Lugano (Switzerland)*

This study focuses on children’s speech and, more particularly, analyzes the functions of children’s “why” questions asked during family conversations at home. Within a data corpus composed of video recordings of family dinnertime interactions, sequences in which children ask “why” questions during family conversations are presented and qualitatively analyzed. The results show the presence of two fundamental functions of children’s “why” questions: argumentative and explanatory. In addition, the cases observed highlight the specific use of children’s “why” questions as a way to request the burden of proof by assuming a waiting position before accepting or putting in doubt the parental prescriptions.

Keywords: Family; why questions; argumentation; children’s speech; parent-child conversation; case studies

1. Introduction

Very often the situation of interaction at the dinner table, where all family members are present and interact with each other, represents a context in which differences of opinion may emerge. In particular, family discussions are often triggered by the requests of children to elicit the reasons behind the parental prescriptions.

This paper aims to analyze the children’s speech during everyday interactions at home. More specifically, it is centered on the “why” questions asked by children during family conversations. On the basis of data consisting of video-recorded dinner conversations of Italian and Swiss families, this paper offers a systematic analysis of the functions of these specific questions frequently asked by children in conversations with adults.

In its first part, the paper will review the most relevant studies on family dinner conversations. Afterwards, the more recent works on children’s questioning will be taken into account, thus providing the conceptual and methodological frame in which three case studies will be analyzed.

2. Studying family trough dinner conversations

Dinnertime is a relevant subject of analysis for the study of family interactions. Its importance is not surprising since dinner is one of the activities that brings all family members together daily, and is characterized by a large prevalence of interpersonal relationships and by a relative freedom concerning issues that can be tackled.

Surprisingly, despite the remarkable relevance of family studies, those focused on family dinner conversations, or with family dinners as corpus data, are fairly recent in the scientific field. Indeed, these have only been included in language corpora since the projects by Hall and colleagues (e.g., Hall, Nagy, & Linn, 1984), and by Berko Gleason and her colleagues (Berko Gleason, 1975; Berko Gleason et al., 1984), which both began in the mid-1970s. Hall’s analysis focused primarily on the frequency of the vocabulary used by children and adults at home; meanwhile, Berko Gleason focused on the differences between mothers and fathers regarding their interaction style with their children. Subsequently, the most relevant studies on

family dinner conversations have addressed the issues of language socialization (Ochs, et al., 1996; Pontecorvo, et al., 2001), literacy development (Beals & Snow, 1994; Snow & Beals, 2006), and cultural differences among families of different nationalities (Blum-Kulka, 1994, 1997). In particular, in a well-known study on American and Jewish families, Blum-Kulka identified three contextual frames based on clusters of themes in family dinner conversations: an instrumental dinner-as-business frame that deals with the preparation and service of food; a family-focused news-telling frame in which the family listens to the most recent news of its members; and a world-focused frame of non-immediate concerns, which includes topics related to the recent and non-recent past and future, such as conversations about travel and complaints about working conditions. In addition, she identified three primary functions of talk at dinnertime: instrumental talk dealing with the business of having dinner, sociable chat consisting of talking as an end in itself, and socializing chat consisting of injunctions to behave and speak in appropriate ways. All those aspects constitute a relevant concern to focus on dinnertime conversations in order to rediscover the crucial argumentative activity that is continuously developed within this context.

In the last decade, thanks to a number of studies that stress the cognitive and educational advantages of reshaping teaching and learning activities in terms of argumentative interactions (Schwarz & Linchevski, 2007; Schwarz et al., 2008; Muller Mirza & Perret-Clermont, 2009), the relevance of the study of argumentative discussions has gradually emerged in family studies. Indeed, despite the focus on narratives as the first genre to appear in communication with young children, caregiver experiences as well as observations of conversations between parents and children suggest that family dinner conversations can be a significant context for emerging argumentative strategies (Arcidiacono & Bova, 2011).

Furthermore, recent studies revealed the presence of certain reoccurring argumentative features in family conversations as well as the association between some argumentative structures and children's ages (Brumark, 2007, 2008). Other works have shown how families of different cultures can be characterized by different argumentative styles (Arcidiacono & Bova, in press), the relevance of an accurate knowledge of the context in order to evaluate the argumentative dynamics of family conversations at dinnertime (Arcidiacono, et al., 2009), and how specific linguistic indicators can trigger the beginning of argumentative debates among family members (Bova, 2011).

3. The Children's "Why" Questions

The children's questions have considerably caught the attention of many scholars in different research fields, above all in educational and cognitive psychology, and in linguistics.

According to Piaget (1929) children ask questions, and in particular, "why" questions, to obtain more information to fill in gaps in their knowledge. Meanwhile, Isaacs (1930) came to very different conclusions from that of Piaget. Indeed, the need to ask "why" questions, he believed, arises when the child has to deal with anomalies, deviations, contrasts, or differences that have stimulated a sense of unease or unsettlement. Brown (1968), looking at the development of "why" questions in child speech, highlighted the presence of some recurrent discourse patterns, involving sentence and constituent exchanges, which may constitute the basis of a learning process. Meanwhile, Tyack and Ingram (1977) examined children's production and comprehension of questions with the aim of discovering possible patterns in question acquisition. They show how children learn first the use of "what" and "where," as early as at the age of 2, and then in chronological order the uses of "why," "how," and "when".

More recent works (Chouinard et al., 2007; Loukusa et al., 2008) have shown how children's abilities to answer questions and to explain their answers are developed between the ages of 3 and 9. Besides this study, Frazier and colleagues (2009) examined children's questions and their reactions to the answers they received in conversations with adults. They observed that children more often agree and ask follow-up questions following adult explanations and, conversely, more often ask their original question again and provide their own explanation following nonexplanations.

The present study is focused on "why" questions asked by children during family dinner conversations at home. More specifically, through the analysis of case studies, the functions of these specific questions are brought to light.

4. Data corpus and analytical procedures

The present study is part of a larger project¹ devoted to the study of argumentation within the family context. The general aim of the research is to verify the impact of argumentative strategies for conflict prevention and resolution within the dynamics of family educational interactions. The research project is based on a corpus of video-recorded dinner conversations (constituting twenty hours of video data) of Italian and Swiss families. All participants are Italian-speaking.

In order to minimize researcher interference, the recordings were performed by the families on their own². This means that dinner conversations are documented as they naturally happen, without the researchers imposing tasks or topics, orchestrating the spatial positioning of participants, or modifying the context. The researchers met the families during a preliminary phase to inform the participants about the general goals and the procedures of the research, and to obtain informed consent. During the first visit, a researcher was in charge of placing the camera and instructing the parents on the use of the technology (such as the position and direction of the camera, and other technical aspects). The families were asked to record their interactions when all family members were present. Each family videotaped their dinners four times over a four-week period. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 minutes. In order to allow the participants to acquaint themselves with the camera, the first recording was not used for the purposes of the research. In the first phase, all dinnertime conversations were fully transcribed³ using the CHILDES system (MacWhinney, 1989) and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (80%) was reached. After this phase, the researchers jointly reviewed with the family members all the transcriptions at their home. This procedure made it possible to ask the family members to clarify some unclear passages (in the eyes of the researchers), e.g., allusions to events known to family members but unknown to others, implicit language, low level of recordings, and vague words and claims.

5. Qualitative analysis

For the aim of this study, three excerpts in which children ask “why” questions during dinner conversations at home have been selected as representative sequences because of space limitations. The first two examples concern Swiss families (cases 1 and 2), and the third is related to an Italian family (case 3). Video recordings have been made according to the principles sketched above in order to document naturally occurring meals. Furthermore, the recordings have all been made with the informed consent of the participants, and in order to ensure anonymity, fictitious names replace the real names in the excerpts.

The qualitative analysis developed here aims at describing the different functions solicited by children’s “why” questions during family dinner conversations. The first aspect revealed from the analysis concerns the fact that, under certain conditions, “why” questions may trigger the beginning of argumentative discussions among parents and children. The second aspect concerns the fact that, under certain other conditions, children’s “why” questions may solicit an explanation. And thirdly, children seem to ask “why” questions in order to request the burden of proof before accepting or putting into doubt the newly obtained information.

5.1 Case 1

The first excerpt concerns a discussion at the dinner table of a Swiss family composed of the mother, the father, and two children, Luca (9 years old) and Bernardo (4 years old). The “protagonists” of the following sequence are Bernardo and his mother, who are debating because of Bernardo’s request to take a pill from the medicine container:

¹ I am referring to the Research Module “Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in family context” (project no. PDFMP1-123093/1) founded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It is part of the ProDoc project “Argupolis: Argumentation Practices in Context,” jointly designed and developed by scholars of the Universities of Lugano, Neuchâtel, Lausanne (Switzerland) and Amsterdam (The Netherlands).

² From a deontological point of view, recordings made without the speakers’ consent are unacceptable. It is hard to assess to what extent informants are inhibited by the presence of the camera. However, I tried to use a data gathering procedure that minimizes this factor as much as possible.

³ For the transcription symbols, see the Appendix.

%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

The sequence starts when Bernardo tells his mother that he is going to take a pill from the medicine container. The mother, in turns 2 and 4, does not agree with the child's behavior: Bernardo cannot take the pills. At this point, the child asks his mother the reason why he cannot take the medicines: "Why not?" The mother does not avoid justifying her prohibition, and in turn 6, she says: "Because children have to take special medicines." In turn 7, the child makes a request for clarification. The mother's answer is made clear and explicit in turn 8: "No, because I'm an adult." Then, in turn 9, the child makes a further request for clarification in order to understand what his status is (adult or child?). The mother's answer is again clear and explicit: "You are still a child." Finally, a nonverbal act (Bernardo bangs the medicine container on the table) concludes the sequence, showing how Bernardo accepts the mother's standpoint and does not take the medicines.

In this sequence we notice a difference of opinion between the mother and her child. Indeed, on the issue: "Can Bernardo take the pills from the medicine container or not?" Bernardo and his mother have two opposite opinions. Bernardo wants to take the pills; on the other hand, the mother tells Bernardo that he cannot take the pills. Accordingly, by asking for the reasons why he cannot take the pills from the medicine container ("Why not?"), Bernardo is seeking out the basis of the mother's prohibition. In other words, Bernardo is asking his mother to argue her case⁴.

5.2 Case 2

The following excerpt is also taken from a discussion at the dinner table of a Swiss family composed of both parents and three children: Marco (8 years old), Francesco (5 years old), and Maria (3 years old).

To sum up, during dinner the mother is clearly irritated by the child's behavior and for this reason begins to discuss:

1 *MOM: I'm too tired to even eat
%act: Begins eating again

⁴ According to Rigotti and Greco Morasso (2009): "Argumentation is a mode of discourse in which the involved interlocutors are committed to reasonableness; i.e., they accept the challenge of reciprocally founding their positions on the basis of reasons".

- 2 *FRA: 0 [= Laughs loudly from outside of the camera view]
- 3 *MOM: Francesco, your laughter is getting on my nerves
 %pau: (common 1.5)
- 4 *FRA: Why mummy? [= off-screen]
- 5 *MOM: I find it so stupid

In turn 1, the mother says she does not feel good, and in turn 2, we see that the reaction of the child is not a typical example of empathic behavior: indeed, he starts to laugh loudly. The mother is clearly disturbed by Francesco's behavior and plainly communicates her thoughts to Francesco. At this point Francesco asks his mother the reason why she is disturbed. The mother, still visibly disturbed by Francesco's behavior, concludes the sequence with a fairly brusque answer ("*I find it so stupid*").

As in the previous example, the brief sequence taken from a longer family dinner conversation has a mother and her child as protagonists. Unlike the previous excerpt, however, there is no difference of opinion between mother and child. Indeed, even though Francesco wants to know why his behavior bothers the mother (likely, according to Francesco, the mother does not need to be bothered), he is not putting into doubt that the mother is bothered because of his behavior. Indeed, in turn 4 ("*Why mummy?*"), Francesco asks his mother for an explanation concerning an event already shared and acknowledged by both (the fact that the mother is bothered by Francesco's behavior). Accordingly, Francesco's "why" question has the function of soliciting the mother's explanation.

5.2 Case 3

The third and last example concerns a discussion at the dinner table of an Italian family composed of both parents and two children: Luca (7 years old) and Alessandro (5 years old). The protagonists of this sequence are the two little brothers, Alessandro and Luca, who are debating about Alessandro's proposal for a challenge:

- 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 the gesture of 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)

The sequence starts with a request by Alessandro to his elder brother Luca ("*Are you up for a challenge?*"). The issue is that Alessandro wants to challenge his elder brother to a contest as to who can finish the meal faster, and he makes clear his goal by means of a nonverbal act: he keeps the fork close to his mouth. Luca does not agree to Alessandro's challenge ("*No, thanks.*"). At this point Alessandro asks Luca the reasons why he disagrees and concludes the sentence with a nonverbal act: he makes the gesture of taking an enormous mouthful. In turn 4, Luca answers his brother by telling him to eat properly and pointing out the eventual consequence of his wrong behavior ("*Eat slowly... Otherwise, it'll go down the wrong way.*").

As in the first example, there are two opposite opinions: Alessandro, the younger brother, wants to challenge his elder brother Luca as to who can finish the meal faster, but Luca disagrees because he does not want to eat hastily, as we can infer by his sentence in turn 4: "Eat slowly." Meanwhile, Alessandro, by means of the "why" question in turn 3 ("*Why not?*"), is making clear his request to know the reasons why his elder brother does not want to accept the challenge. As a result, in this case the "why" question triggers the beginning of an argumentative exchange between the two children. Indeed, Alessandro is asking his brother to argue in

order to justify his position. In addition, it is interesting to note a more general function of “why” questions. In the first excerpt being analyzed, the child seems to ask a “why” question in order to request the burden of proof, as the mother has to justify her prohibition on the basis of reason. Only later on does the child accept the parental prescription. Let us see a brief sequence from this excerpt:

	%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

Basically, Bernardo wants to know the reason why he cannot take the medicines. Moreover, after the “why” question in turn 4, it seems that he is implicitly saying to his mother: I am waiting for your reasons. Later on, I will be able to decide if your prohibition is proper or not. It does not mean, though, that later on Bernardo will decide whether or not to obey the mother's prescription. Instead, it means that Bernardo is in a waiting position before deciding if the mother's prescription is acceptable to him or not.

The expression "waiting position" is frequently used in military slang to refer to a particular strategy used in war by naval units. A waiting position, in fact, is any suitable position in which naval units can be kept ready for operations at immediate notice. It goes without saying that the family context is not a battlefield, but by analogy, it seems that children ask “why” questions in order to get into a waiting position, ready to accept or put into doubt the newly obtained information. Pragmatically speaking, it may be defined as a specific form of strategic maneuvering (van Eemeren, 2010) adopted by children in order to ask the other to justify their opinion.

In conclusion, as suggested by Ervin-Tripp and Strage (1985), parental prescriptions are frequently implicit or based on rules not (initially) known by children, and their strength and effectiveness depend mainly on the parents' authority. Through the “why” question, however, the child manifests his or her desire to know the reasons behind the parental prescription. Indeed, in Bernardo's case the “why” question produces the effect of eliciting the explicitness of the rule on which the mother's prescription is based (“*Children have to take special medicines. They can't take the same medicines as adults. Otherwise, they will get ill.*”).

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown some functions of “why” questions asked by children during family dinner conversations. To summarize, the qualitative analysis of three excerpts of family dinner conversations has brought to light two different functions of children's “why” questions: argumentative and explanatory. The results show that, when there is a difference of opinion between the child and his/her interlocutor (parent or sibling), the children's “why” question triggers the beginning of an argumentative discussion. On the other hand, when the discussion refers to an event acknowledged and shared by both parties, the function of children's “why” questions is to request an explanation. Furthermore, through “why” questions, children seem make clear their desire to find out the (often implicit) reasons behind parental prescriptions from a waiting position, ready to accept or put into doubt the newly obtained information.

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