

Investigating children's Why-questions: A study comparing argumentative and explanatory function

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Abstract

Questions represent a crucial tool of interaction between parents and children from a very early age. This study aims to investigate which function – argumentative or explanatory – most characterizes Why-questions asked by children to their parents in a natural setting such as mealtimes at home. Why-questions asked by 13 children – eight girls and five boys aged between three and seven years – coming from 10 middle- to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families with a high socio-cultural level were analyzed. In the corpus, the explanatory function largely characterizes children's Why-questions. Questions we observed play fundamentally an educational role, since they favor the acquisition of new information and the transmission from parents to children of parental behavioral models (social behavior). The argumentative Why-questions, less frequently asked by children in our sample, are also important from an educational point of view. By these questions children challenge their parents to make clear the reasons behind their opinions, suggestions, rules and prescriptions, which are often largely implicit. Altogether, the results of this study indicate that both the explanatory and argumentative types of children's Why-questions have a knowledge-seeking function, that is, children asking such questions are seeking knowledge of something.

Keywords

Argumentation, conversation, explanation, family, parent–child interaction, Why-question

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Introduction

Research on language socialization provides evidence about the ways in which family interactions are valid sociocultural spaces of learning at different levels. In particular, children acquire language and culture through their participation and active engagement in meaningful everyday activities with parents and siblings. For this reason (among others), family discourses as events bounded in time and space, culturally shaped and regulated by adults and children, have been and are still the objects of interest for numerous researchers.

In the last few decades, a series of studies have shown that participation in multiparty conversations during mealtimes with parents and siblings is an important opportunity for children to develop their linguistic, cognitive, and social competences. Family interactions are indicators of the ways in which children enhance their chances to achieve membership in the community at a linguistic, social, and cultural level. A relevant contribution to this field of study has been offered by the work of American and European researchers (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1997, 2008; Ochs and Sholet, 2006; Ochs et al., 1989, 1996) interested in studying family socialization through language at dinnertime. This line of research particularly grew out of the work set up by Catherine E. Snow, Jean Berko Gleason, and Diane E. Beals (e.g. Beals, 1993; Beals and Snow, 1994; Gleason et al., 1984; Snow, 1983), afterwards extended by many other scholars in different countries (e.g. Aukrust, 2002; Davidson and Snow, 1996; Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). For example, Beals (1991, 1993) and Aukrust and Snow (1998) brought to light that family mealtimes can offer a great opportunity for extended discourse involving both explanatory¹ and narrative talk. In these studies, authors have shown that through explanatory talk children can gather information previously unknown to them, whereas the narrative talk can be an opportunity for starting to reason on hypothetical or conditional events as well as learning complex language forms. Similar results were also found by Blum-Kulka and Snow (1992), Beals and Snow (1994), and Aukrust (2002). In addition, Aukrust and Snow (1998) stressed that narrative events during mealtime conversations enhance rights and responsibilities of children as storytellers, the creation of alliances, and the reinforcement of family roles. As a matter of fact, from a communicative point of view, the conversations between parents and children during mealtimes are characterized by the presence of a wide variety of genres including explanatory and argumentative talk. Children are continuously exposed and socialized to different types of interaction schemes such as questions/answers, confrontations, explanations, argumentations, mediations, negotiations, etc. Questions in particular represent a crucial tool of interaction between parents and children from a very early age. In this regard, many scholars have emphasized that the development of children's ability to ask questions is an important indicator of children's linguistic, cognitive, and social development (e.g. Chouinard et al., 2007; Garvey, 1975; Sinclair and van Gessel, 1990). More specifically, the study of the explanatory talk at dinnertime family interactions reveals how children are exposed to rational ways of thinking in informal contexts, and how they orient themselves and practice different juggling perspectives and contributions (Blum-Kulka, 2002). For example, verbal conflicts in family conversations can be considered a genre culturally marked that presumes different skills and modes. In a study of American families,

Vuchinich (1990) highlighted specific formats used by adults and children as strategies to avoid conflicts and argumentation, while in the Italian context children are socialized to engage themselves in such activities (Arcidiacono, 2007; Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo, 2009).

Within a similar framework, other studies (Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono, 2010; Pontecorvo et al., 2001; Sterponi, 2003) have highlighted the social construction of knowledge that is based on a bidirectional process of language socialization and mutual apprenticeship, in which parents affect their children and, at the same time, are affected by children. Through the participation in dinner talk, children (and adults) learn cultural modes of argumentation and, more generally, they realize a co-construction of narratives in various genres (Rogoff, 2003).

This study aims to investigate a specific type of question frequently asked by children to their parents: the Why-question. In particular, we intend to single out the functions characterizing the Why-questions asked by children aged three to seven years old to their parents, and their properties in a natural setting such as mealtimes at home. To attain this purpose, the present study is organized as follows: in the first part, the article will review the most relevant studies focusing on children's Why-questions. Afterwards, we will present the methodology on which the study is based and the results of the analyses. In the last part of the article, we will discuss the results obtained from a qualitative analysis and the conclusions drawn from this study.

Studies on children's Why-questions

Children's Why-questions have long held the attention of many scholars in diverse research fields, but above all in developmental and cognitive psychology and in linguistics. The first studies date back to the early 20th century. Stern (1924), who was interested in investigating the most essential sides of children's minds as they develop as far as their sixth year, in his seminal work *Psychology of Early Childhood*, divided the development stages in which questions usually emerge into two periods. The first, labeled the *naming period*, concerns the names of objects and occurs at the end of children's second year. During this period, the questions that children produce refer to objects that are present or to actions related to an ongoing activity. The second, named the *when and why period*, typically occurs between three and four years old. In this period, children begin to form questions about absent objects or people, or events with no immediate connection with the present. According to Piaget (1929), however, children begin to ask Why-questions because of a specific developmental need. He observed that children ask questions – in particular, Why-questions – to obtain more information in order to fill gaps in their knowledge. In accordance with Piaget, Isaacs (1930) argued that the need to ask Why-questions arises when the child has to deal with anomalies, deviations, contrasts, or differences which stimulate a sense of unease or unsettledness.

A series of later studies emphasized the fact that children begin to ask different types of questions in different phases of development. Ervin-Tripp (1970) found that children most often begin asking Who-questions first, and later they begin to ask questions pertaining to conceptual time periods, thoughts, and ideas by means of Why-, How-, and When-questions. Tyack and Ingram (1977), and in more recent years Rowland and her

colleagues (2003), also support the idea of the subsequentity of children's questions. Tyack and Ingram (1977) examined children's production and comprehension of questions with the aim of discerning typical patterns in question acquisition. They observed that children first, as early as age two, learn to ask What- and Where-questions, followed by Why-, How-, and When-questions. These last require a great capacity for abstract thinking, and for this reason they appear later in the development. Similar to what was found by Tyack and Ingram (1977), Rowland and her colleagues (2003) also found that children first learn to ask Where- and What-questions, and only after Why-, How- and When-questions.

More recent studies have shown that the ability of children to answer as well as ask Why-questions, and to clarify the reasons on which their answers are based, increase rapidly between the ages of two and five years (Loukusa et al., 2008; Valian and Casey, 2003). This aspect plays an important role in the development of children's verbal skills and therefore in their capacity to interact with adults and peers. According to Chouinard et al. (2007: vii), 'asking questions allows children to gain information they need to move their knowledge structures closer to an adult-like state'. By focusing on pre-school-aged children (aged two to five years), the authors observed that when parents do not, or cannot, provide satisfactory answers to a child's question, the child perseveres in asking his/her question to gain the requested information. Chouinard and her colleagues also observed that during development children learn to formulate Why-questions more efficiently in order to gather the information they want. In the authors' view, the ability of asking this type of questions constitutes an efficient cognitive development mechanism. In a recent work focused on preschool children aged two to four years, Frazier and her colleagues (2009) examined children's Why-questions and their reactions to the answers they received in conversations with adults. Similar to what was found by Chouinard et al. (2007), they observed that children agree and ask further questions following adult explanations. Conversely, children keep asking Why-questions and provide their own explanation following unsatisfactory or non-existent explanations by parents.

Altogether, this concise review of the most relevant literature on children's Why-questions indicates that what drives children to ask Why-questions to their parents is essentially the need to acquire new information. In most cases, the studies so far realized bring attention to the *causal-explanatory function* (henceforth, referred to as explanatory function) of children's Why-questions, that is, how this type of question allows children to ask for knowledge of the reasons that have caused an event. According to Blum-Kulka et al. (2010: 441), explanatory discourse can be viewed as 'some stretch of talk that can be interpreted as a response to a problematic state of affairs' and invites researchers to consider the sequential emergence of this type of talk in different situations and its function in communication. Studies conducted within a discourse-oriented pragmatic perspective (Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2002; Weizman and Blum-Kulka, 1992) have shown that children's explanations are signs of a remarkable pragmatic competence for a wide range of conversational functions. More specifically, available research in peer talk (Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2004; Ervin-Tripp and Gordon, 1986) suggests the relevance of children's verbal exchanges for the mutual learning of pragmatic as well as linguistic skills. In fact, peer talk implies context-specific gains, as multi-party setting of gender identity construction and social relationships. Forms and functions of explanation in

young children's peer talk reveal a rich array of pragmatic and social functions, as well as the potential to develop learning and acquisition of skills of decontextualized discourse (Blum-Kulka et al., 2010).

Hitherto, less attention has been paid to the *argumentative function* of children's questions, that is, the action of putting into doubt the standpoint advanced by another person. Zadunaisky Ehrlich and Blum-Kulka (2010) have studied how argumentative events display affordances on the plane of social order children are able to establish and on the developmental level and grown-up discourse capacities. In peer talk, children display well-formed arguments in rational ways and acquire competence to be equipped within their milieu.

Concerning the specific role of Why-questions, Walton (2004: 72) explains well the difference between the argumentative and explanatory functions:

The difference between the explanatory and argumentative functions of Why-questions concerns the starting point of explanation and argumentation: The purpose of an argument is to get the listener to come to accept something that is doubtful or unsettled. The purpose of an explanation is to get him to understand something that he already accepts as a fact.

The explanatory Why-questions aim therefore to gain an understanding of the causes of an event already ascertained and acknowledged by discussants. The explanation, in fact, moves from an ascertained fact, and aims not to justify – as facts require no justification – but to identify the reasons why the fact is true or the event occurred. In contrast, the argumentative Why-questions presuppose a difference of opinion between two or more parties, as argumentation starts from a questionable thesis and ideally ends with conclusive proof (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004: 1; for a detailed study on the differences between argumentation and explanation, see also Rigotti and Greco Morasso, 2009; Snoeck-Henkemans, 1999, 2001).

This study intends to investigate which function – argumentative or explanatory – characterizes Why-questions asked by children aged three to seven years to their parents during mealtime conversations at home. We shall also analyze and discuss when this happens, that is, the type of issues that lead children to ask argumentative or explanatory Why-questions.

Methods

Population

Why-questions asked by 13 children – eight girls and five boys between three and seven years old – were analyzed. They came from 10 middle- to upper-middle-class Swiss and Italian families with a high socio-cultural level. All participants are Italian-speaking.

Data corpus

The present research takes as its empirical base a quasi-homogeneous corpus of video-recorded family mealtime conversations, constructed from two different sets of data labeled *sub-corpus 1* and *sub-corpus 2*. In order to minimize researcher interferences, the recordings

were performed by the families on their own. Each family videotaped their dinners four times over a four-week period. The length of the recordings varies from 20 to 40 minutes.

Sub-corpus 1 consists of 15 video-recordings of mealtime conversations in five Italian families living in Rome. The criteria adopted in the selection of the Italian families were the following: the presence of both parents and at least two children, of whom the younger is of preschool age (three to seven years) and the second is older.² Most parents at the time of data collection were in their late 30s ($M = 37.40$; $SD = 3.06$). Fathers were slightly older than mothers (Fathers $M = 38.40$; $SD = 3.20$ vs Mothers $M = 36.40$; $SD = 2.88$). All families in sub-corpus 1 had two children.

Sub-corpus 2 consists of 15 video-recordings of mealtime conversations in five Swiss families, all residents in the Lugano area. The criteria adopted in the selection of the Swiss families mirror the criteria adopted in the creation of sub-corpus 1. At the time of data collection, most parents were in their mid-30s ($M = 35.90$; $SD = 1.91$). Fathers were slightly older than mothers (Fathers $M = 37.00$; $SD = 1.58$ vs Mothers $M = 34.80$; $SD = 1.64$). Families had two or three children.

Detailed information on family constellations in sub-corpus 1 and sub-corpus 2 are presented in Table 1.

Transcription procedures

All family meals were fully transcribed adopting the Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES) standard transcription system (CHAT) (MacWhinney, 1989), with some modifications introduced to ease readability (see Appendix), and revised by two researchers until a high level of consent (agreement rate = 80%) had been reached. Italian data are presented in the original, using Times New Roman regular font, whereas the English translation is added below using Times New Roman bold font. In all examples, all turns are numbered progressively within the discussion sequence, and family members are identified by role (for adults) and by name (for children). In order to ensure the anonymity of children, their names in this article are pseudonyms.

Selection criteria of children's Why-questions

The questions analyzed form part of a wider study devoted to the investigation of argumentative dynamics between parents and young children during mealtime conversations³ (Arcidiacono and Bova, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Bova, 2011). In Italian, the word '*perché*' is used both to ask 'why' and as a response, similar to the English word 'because'. As a consequence, in attempting to identify all Why-questions asked by children aged three to seven years included in the data, we do not consider each instance of '*perché*' used by children when speaking with their parents, but we selected only those with an interrogative function.

Distinguishing argumentative and explanatory function

The criterion to distinguish the explanatory and the argumentative types of Why-questions in family conversations concerns the presence/absence of a difference of opinion between parents and children. When there is no difference of opinion between parents

Table 1. Length of recordings, participants, average age of participants.

Family group	Italian	Swiss
Length of recordings in minutes	20–37	19–42
Mean length of recordings in minutes	32.41	35.12
Participants		
Mothers	5	5
Fathers	5	5
Adults, total	10	10
Son	6	6
Daughter	4	7
Children, age 3–6	5	8
Children, total	10	13
Younger and older siblings	5	5
Total participants	20	23
Average age of participants		
Mother	36.40 (SD 2.881)	34.80 (SD 1.643)
Father	38.40 (SD 3.209)	37.00 (SD 1.581)
Parents	37.40 (SD 3.062)	35.90 (SD 1.912)
Son	7.50 (SD 3.619)	5.83 (SD 1.835)
Daughter	4.00 (SD 1.414)	4.86 (SD 2.268)
Children, age 3–6	3.20 (SD .447)	4.40 (SD .548)
First-born	9.00 (SD 2.00) (4 sons; 1 daughter)	7.60 (SD .894) (3 sons; 2 daughters)
Second-born	3.20 (SD .447) (2 sons; 3 daughters)	4.40 (SD .548) (2 sons; 3 daughters)
Third-born	0	3 (SD .000) (1 son; 2 daughters)

and children, the Why-question has an explanatory function. When there is a difference of opinion between parents and children, the Why-question has an argumentative function.

Analysis and results

Within the framework of family conversations and inspired by the theoretical paradigms of interactionism (Ochs and Taylor, 1992; Psathas, 1995), our analysis of talk-in-interaction involves a focus mainly on structures and function of questions. However, we intend to highlight also processes that activate knowledge and different opinions among family members as they occur in the natural setting we observed (Arcidiacono et al., 2011; Pontecorvo, 1996).

In the 30 mealtime conversations constituting the general corpus of the research, we found 51 instances in which children aged three to seven years asked Why-questions to their parents. In most cases, children asked Why-questions with an explanatory function ($N = 40$; 78%). In particular, they frequently asked Why-questions to their parents to

acquire an explanation of an event with an immediate connection to the present. This function is seen, for example, in an exchange between a father and his six-year-old son, Francesco.

Excerpt 1

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Francesco (FRA, 6 years 3 months), Michele (MIC, 4 years 2 months)

1. *FRA: papà, perché non piove oggi?
dad, why isn't it raining today?
2. *DAD: perché oggi, le nuvole sono piene d'acqua
because today, the clouds are full of water
- *DAD: ma la vogliono tenere tutta per loro, ancora un po'!
but they want to keep it just for themselves, a little longer!

Looking out the window, Francesco notes that, unlike previous days, it is not raining. He then asks his father why it is not raining. Through his straightforward explanatory question, the child seeks to know the cause of a non-event (line 1). In responding to his child's Why-question, the father provides an explanation, adapting the content and language of his answer to the child's level of understanding (line 2). It is important to observe that there is not a difference of opinion between father and child, as they both agree that the event, namely that today it is not raining, is true.

Another example that allows us to further clarify the explanatory function of children's Why-questions is the following dialogue between a mother and her six-year-old daughter, Giorgia.

Excerpt 2

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 34 years), mother (MOM, 33 years), Giorgia (GIO, 6 years 6 months), Clara (CLA, 3 years 1 month)

- %act: GIO gioca con MOM seduta sulle gambe di MOM
GIO plays with MOM seated on MOM's legs
- 1 *MOM: Clara è coccolata da tutti a scuola ((scuola materna))
Alessia is coddled by everyone at school ((kindergarten))
 - 2 *GIO: perché è coccolata da tutti?
why is she coddled by everyone?
 - 3 *MOM: perché è piccola [: ridendo]
because she is a baby [: laughing]
 - 4 *MOM: è proprio piccola [: ridendo]
she is really a baby [: laughing]
 - %act: MOM e GIO ridono
MOM and GIO laugh
 - 5 *MOM: non è vero?
isn't she?
 - 6 *GIO: sì certo [= sorridendo].
yes sure [: smiling]

This sequence starts with the mother saying to her older daughter Giorgia that her young sister Clara is coddled by everyone at kindergarten. Clara is playing seated on her mother's legs. The mother's expression appears to be a way to keep playing with her young daughter. Giorgia replies to her mother by advancing a request of explanation: Why is Clara coddled by everyone at kindergarten? In this case, there is no difference of opinion between the mother and her older daughter Giorgia. In fact, by asking a Why-question, Giorgia is not casting doubt on the fact that her younger sister is coddled by everyone at kindergarten, but she clearly manifests her interest to know why. As in the previous example (excerpt 1), the parent's standpoint is not put into doubt.

The children we observed ask explanatory Why-questions also to figure out the reasons on which the parents' reactions to their behaviors were based. This aspect is illustrated in the following discussion between a mother and her six-year-old son, Stefano.

Excerpt 3

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 36 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Alessandro (ALE, 8 years 6 months), Stefano (STE, 6 years 5 months)

- %act: MOM da un'occhiata rapida a DAD
MOM gives a quick glance towards DAD
1. *MOM: sono talmente stanca che non riesco neanche a mangiare [!: riprendendo a mangiare]
I'm too tired to even eat [!: begins eating again]
2. *STE: 0 [!: ride sguaiatamente da fuori campo]
0 [!: laughs loudly from off camera]
3. *MOM: Stefano, questa risata mi sta facendo davvero arrabbiare.
Stefano, your laughter is getting on my nerves.
- %pau: 1.0. sec
4. *STE: perché mamma? ((da fuori campo))
why mom? ((off screen))
5. *MOM: la trovo stupida.
I find it stupid.
- %pau: 1.5. sec
- %act: MOM and DAD iniziano una nuova discussione su un tema diverso
MOM and DAD start a new discussion on a different subject

In line 1, the mother says that in that moment she is not feeling good. The reaction by Stefano to his mother's statement is not a typical example of emphatic behavior: he starts laughing loudly (line 2). The mother is clearly disturbed by her son's behavior and plainly communicates her thoughts to him (line 3). At this point, the child asks his mother the reason why she is upset (line 4). The mother, still visibly disturbed by his behavior, concludes the sequence with a fairly brusque reply: *I find it stupid* (line 5). As in the previous example, in this dialogue there is no difference of opinion between the mother and the child, because they do not have two opposite standpoints. Even though the child's Why-question represents a challenging move because it questions the mother's reasons for being nervous, in this case the child is not casting doubt on the fact that his mother is actually upset because of his behavior. The child in fact clearly acknowledges that the mother is visibly disturbed by his behavior. As a consequence, the child's Why-question

serves to solicit an explanation from his mother of the reasons on which her reaction to his behavior is based.

In the corpus, we observed that children asked Why-questions not only to know the reasons of events already ascertained and the reasons on which no difference of opinion between children and parents are based, but also to put into doubt the validity of the reasons on which the parents' opinions are based, and to know the purpose of accomplishing the action queried. The Why-questions with an argumentative function, however, were less frequent than those with an explanatory function. In fact, in the corpus we found children had asked Why-questions with an argumentative function 11 times (22%).

For example, the argumentative Why-question was used by children to ask for the reasons on which the rules and prohibitions were based, as in the following dialogue between a mother and her five-year-old son, Gabriele.

Excerpt 4

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 38 years), mother (MOM, 34 years), Gabriele (GAB, 5 years 4 months), Silverio (SIL, 8 years)

- 1 *GAB: mamma:: guarda!
mom:: look!
- *GAB: guarda cosa sto facendo con il limone
look what I'm doing with the lemon
- *GAB: sto cancellando!
I'm rubbing it out!
- *GAB: sto cancellando questo colore!
I'm rubbing out this color!
- %sit: MAM prende il limone e si china di fronte a GAB di modo che il suo viso risulti all'altezza di quello di GAB
MOM takes the lemon and bends down in front of GAB so that her face is at the same level as GAB's face
- %sit: MAM posa il limone sul tavolo
MOM places the lemon on the table
- 2 *GAB: dammelo
give it to me
- 3 *MOM: eh?
eh?
- 4 *GAB: posso avere questo limone?
can I have this lemon?
- 5 *MOM: no:: no:: no:: no::
no:: no:: no:: no::
- 6 *GAB: perché no?
why not?
- 7 *MOM: perché no? perché Gabriele, mamma ha bisogno dei limoni.
why not? because Gabriele, mom needs lemons.
- 8 *GAB: perché mamma?
why mom?
- 9 *MOM: perché, Gabriele, tuo papà vuole mangiare una buona insalata oggi [!: con un tono di voce basso e dolce]

because, Gabriele, your dad wants to eat a good salad today [! with a low and sweet tone of voice]

- 10 *GAB: ah:: va bene mamma
ah:: ok mom

The sequence starts when Gabriele tells his mother that he is erasing the color from a drawing by using a lemon. The mother clearly disagrees with this kind of use of the lemon by Gabriele, and decides to take it and put it on the table (line 1). At this point, a difference of opinion arises between Gabriele and his mother, because he wants to have one of the lemons that are on the table to play with (line 2), while the mother states that he cannot play with it (line 5). Gabriele asks his mother her reason for forbidding it (line 6). The mother answers that she needs the lemons, without providing any justification for her need (line 7). As we can observe from Gabriele's answer (line 8), the mother's need is not sufficient to convince the child to accept her refusal and change his opinion. In fact, he keeps asking his mother the reason why he cannot have the lemon:

- 6 *GAB: perché no?
why not?
- 7 *MOM: perché no? perché Gabriele, mamma ha bisogno dei limoni.
why not? because Gabriele, mom needs lemons.
- 8 *GAB: perché mamma?
why mom?

In her second argument, the mother says to the child, in a low and sweet tone of voice, that she needs the lemons because dad wants to eat a good salad (line 9). Now, Gabriele accepts the argument put forward by his mother (line 10). In this dialogue, we observe a difference of opinion between the child and his mother, since they have two opposite standpoints. Therefore, the child's Why-questions (lines 6 and 8) both have an argumentative function because the child, by asking this type of question, is opposing his mother's prescription.

In our corpus, the parents adapted the content and language of their answers to the child's level of understanding not only when they provided an explanation, as seen previously (excerpt 2), but also when they put forward arguments in support of their standpoint. The next example is a good illustration of this dynamic.

Excerpt 5

Italian family. Participants: father (DAD, 37 years), mother (MOM, 37 years), Samuele (SAM, 9 years 11 months), Adriana (ADR, 5 years 2 months)

- 1 *ADR: ci possiamo alzare da tavola?
can we leave the table?
- 2 *DAD: no
no
- 3 *ADR: perché?
why?
- 4 *DAD: perché lui [: l'orsacchiotto di ADR messo sul tavolo] sta dormendo
because he [: the teddy bear of ADR that is on the table] is sleeping

- %act: indicando l'orsacchiotto
pointing to the teddy bear
- *DAD: sta dormendo [: l'orsacchiotto] e non ha ancora finito di mangiare
he is sleeping [: the teddy bear] and did not finish eating yet
- 5 *ADR: no:: lui [: l'orsacchiotto] non sta: dormendo
no:: he [: the teddy bear] is not sleeping
- 6 *DAD: mhm ((guardando ADR con un'espressione perplessa))
mhm ((looking at ADR with a puzzled expression))
- 7 *ADR: ma lui [= l'orsacchiotto] non sta:: è:: solo malato
but him [: the teddy bear] is not:: is:: just sick
- 10 *DAD: 0 ((annuisce))
0 ((DAD nods))
- %pau: 1.0.

In line 1, Adriana asks her father permission to leave the table, but he doesn't allow her (line 2). At this point, Adriana asks her father the reason why she can't leave the table and he replies, putting forward an argument to convince his daughter not to leave the table (line 4). The argument used by the father appears to be clearly adapted to the daughter's level of understanding, both in the choice of content and the language used.

Typically, Why-questions with an argumentative function found in the corpus are followed by arguments advanced by parents that justify their opposite standpoint. An example that illustrates this aspect is the following dialogue between Manuela and her father.

Excerpt 6

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 39 years), mother (MOM, 36 years), Manuela (MAN, 6 years 4 months), Filippo (FIL, 5 years 1 month), Carlo (CAR, 3 years 1 month)

1. *MAN: questo poco di pasta lo posso lasciare? ((sollevando leggermente il suo piatto per mostrarne il contenuto al papà))
can I leave this little bit of pasta? ((slightly raising the plate to show the contents to the father))
 Here the expression *this little bit* aims to obtain a concession. The father, on the contrary, replies with a prohibition:
2. *DAD: no, non puoi
no, you can't
 At this point, Manuela, interested in challenging the parental prohibition, asks:
3. *MAN: perché papà?
why dad?
 In his answer, the father clearly rebuts the daughter's argument based on *this little bit*:
4. *DAD: non ne hai mangiato per niente, Manuela
you have eaten nothing, Manuela

In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between the child and her father. The child wants to leave a little bit of pasta that is still on her plate, while the father disagrees with his daughter (line 2: *no, you can't*). By asking a Why-question (line 3), the child

challenges her father to justify the reasons on which his prohibition is based. At this point, the father puts forward an argument in support of his standpoint (line 4: *you have eaten nothing, Manuela*).

The following dialogue between four-year-old Alessandro and his mother is an illustration of an additional feature of children's Why-questions with an argumentative function.

Excerpt 7

Swiss family. Participants: father (DAD, 36 years), mother (MOM, 34 years); Alessandro (ALE, 4 years 6 months), Stefano (STE, 8 years 5 months)

- %sit: ALE tocca e guarda il contenitore delle medicine
ALE touches and looks at the container with the drugs
1. *ALE: io: me la prendo una di queste qui.
I'm: going to take one of these.
- *ALE: si!
yes!
2. *MAM: non puoi, Alessandro!
you can't, Alessandro!
3. *ALE: che?
what?
4. *MOM: non puoi. [!: scuote la testa]
you can't. [!: shakes her head]
5. *ALE: perché no?
why not?
6. *MOM: perché i bambini, devono prendere delle medicine speciali
because children have to take special drugs
- *MOM: non possono prendere le medicine degli adulti
they can't take drugs for adults
- *MOM: altrimenti, si sentono male.
otherwise, they will get sick.

The sequence begins when the child tells his mother of his intention to take a drug from the container. Alessandro announces his action with a pre-sequence – *'I'm going to . . .'* – and reinforces his position by concluding his remark with 'yes' (line 1). His mother disagrees with his behavior, twice repeating '*you can't*' (lines 2 and 4), after which he asks her why he cannot take the drug (line 5). In doing so, the child makes no effort to defend his position by putting forward arguments on his own behalf; instead, he challenges his mother to explain why he cannot take the drugs and, accordingly, to assume the burden of proof. The mother does not avoid justifying her prohibition, putting forward her argument, saying '*because children have to take special drugs*' (line 6). The subject of the mother's claim is no longer her son, but the wider category of children (*they can't take . . . they will get sick*). This intervention thus evokes a general rule – *children have to . . .* – to which Alessandro is also subject.

In this dialogue, there is a difference of opinion between Alessandro and his mother, since they have two opposing standpoints. Through his Why-question, Alessandro makes clear that he wants to know the reason why he cannot take the drug, that is, the reason for the prohibition imposed by his mother. Argumentatively speaking, the child asks a

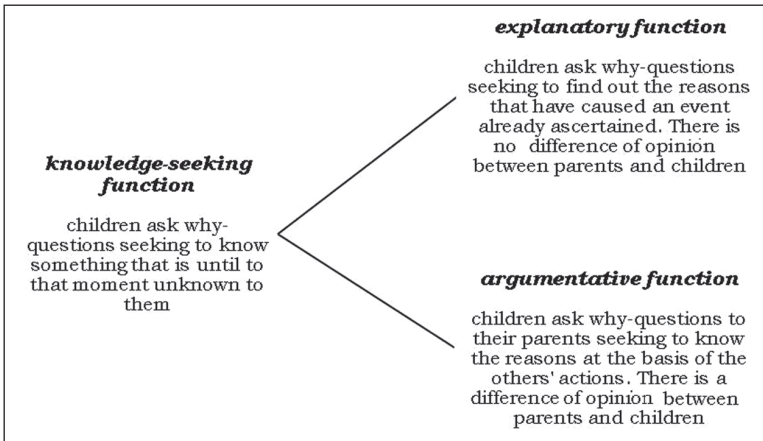


Figure 1. Functions of children's Why-questions.

Why-question to request the *burden of proof*⁴ by assuming a waiting position before accepting or putting into doubt the parental prescription. As a matter of fact, by asking a Why-question the child challenges his mother to justify her standpoint.

Discussion

Both the explanatory and the argumentative type of children's Why-questions have a *knowledge-seeking function*, that is, children asking such questions are seeking knowledge of something. In particular, the children we observed ask Why-questions with an explanatory function seeking to find out the reasons that caused an event already ascertained, while they ask Why-questions with an argumentative function seeking to know the reasons on which the parents' actions are based (Figure 1).

In this study, the explanatory function largely – but not exclusively – characterizes the Why-questions asked by children to their parents. These results are similar to what was found in previous studies (e.g. Chouinard et al., 2007; Frazier et al., 2009). In fact, in most cases, children ask Why-questions to their parents to know the reasons of an event already ascertained.

In our corpus, most frequently the aim of the Why-questions with an explanatory function is to acquire an explanation of an event with an immediate connection with the present. For example, this aspect has been illustrated in excerpt 3, where the father and the child were in agreement on the fact that it was not raining. This finding is not in line with what was found by some previous studies on children's talk in the family and with peers (Blum-Kulka, 2002; Blum-Kulka and Snow, 2004; Blum-Kulka et al., 2010; Tyack and Ingram, 1977), which stressed that frequently children ask questions about distant matters (*abstract thinking*). In this sense, explanatory discourse is intended as a reciprocal co-construction of knowledge: in family, the social distribution of knowledge for explanations can allow children to be experts on child-specific topics. The plausible explanation of our finding can be due to the types of issues typically discussed by parents

and children during mealtimes. In the general corpus of the research, family members often discuss events closely related to mealtimes, such as having to eat a certain food or adopting proper table manners. Further investigation in this direction is certainly necessary.

Furthermore, children frequently asked Why-questions with an explanatory function to learn how to interact with others properly (social behavior). Our participants, in fact, asked Why-questions to find out the reasons on which the parents' reactions to their behaviors are based. The reasoning underlying this behavior by children can be formulated as follows: 'I want to know why I have done something right/wrong so that I will/won't act like that again.' The children's Why-questions with an explanatory function therefore have an educational function, since they favor the transmission of the parental behavioral models to children. These dynamics are illustrated in excerpt 2, where we have seen that the child wanted to know why his behavior had upset his mother:

3. *MOM: Stefano, questa risata mi sta facendo davvero arrabbiare.
Stefano, your laughter is getting on my nerves.
 %pau: 1.0. sec
 4. *STE: perché mamma? ((da fuori campo))
why mom? ((off screen))

In our corpus, children's Why-questions with an argumentative function are less frequent than those with an explanatory function. About one-fifth of the analyzed children's Why-questions were characterized by an argumentative function. In a series of recent studies, Rocci (2008, 2009) has shown that the presence of significant linguistic indicators such as '*Why not?*' and '*Because*' suggests that an argumentative discussion is taking place, that is, an attempt to solve a disagreement between a party who defends a certain standpoint and a party who challenges this standpoint. Similarly, in this study children's Why-questions there appears to be in a number of cases a linguistic indicator⁵ of beginning an argumentative discussion between parents and children during mealtime conversations. In most cases, we observed that the aim of children's Why-questions with an argumentative function was to know the purpose of accomplishing the action queried by parents. We observed that children, asking this type of question, challenged their parents to justify their rules and prescriptions, which were frequently implicit or based on rules not initially known by, or previously made explicit to, the child.⁶ Through the Why-questions, children manifested their desire to know the reason behind the parents' prescriptions, and by means of argumentative discussion they tried to achieve their own purpose. For example, in excerpt 7, the Why-question asked by the child produces the effect to elicit the explanation of the rule on which the parental prescription is based:

4. *MOM: non puoi. [!: scuotendo la testa]
you can't. [!: shakes her head]
 5. *ALE: perché no?
why not?
 6. *MOM: perché i bambini, devono prendere delle medicine speciali
because children have to take special drugs

- *MOM: non possono prendere le medicine degli adulti
they can't take drugs for adults
- *MOM: altrimenti, si sentono male.
otherwise, they will get sick.

Furthermore, by asking Why-questions, children place the burden of proof on parents. In doing so, they assume a waiting position before accepting or casting doubt on the parental prescription.⁷ In excerpt 7 we have seen that Alessandro wants to know the reason why he cannot take a pill from the container; by asking a Why-question, Alessandro is implicitly saying to his mother: 'I am waiting to hear your reasons. Only after that will I be able to evaluate if your prohibition is proper or not.' This does not actually mean that Alessandro will then decide whether or not to obey the mother's prescription, but that Alessandro puts himself in a waiting position before deciding whether the mother's prescription is acceptable to him or not. From an argumentative point of view, this behavior can be seen as a specific form of *strategic maneuvering*⁸ adopted by Alessandro to make his mother justify her ban.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to investigate which function – argumentative or explanatory – characterizes the Why-questions asked by children aged three to seven years to their parents in a natural setting such as mealtimes at home.

Findings show that both explanatory and argumentative types of children's Why-questions have a *knowledge-seeking function*, that is, children asking such questions are seeking knowledge of something. In the case of the explanatory Why-question, the child agrees with the parent's standpoint and wants to know the reasons on which that standpoint is based. In contrast, in the case of the argumentative Why-question, the child clearly disagrees or at least puts into doubt the parent's standpoint.

The explanatory function largely – but not exclusively – characterizes the Why-questions asked by the children we observed in this study. In the corpus, the children frequently asked Why-questions to acquire an explanation of an event with immediate connection with the present and to figure out the reasons on which the parents' reactions to their behavior are based. The explanatory Why-question seems to have fundamentally an educational function, since it favors the acquisition of new information and the transmission of behavioral models (social behavior) from parents to children.

Children asked Why-questions with an argumentative function less frequently than those with an explanatory function. Notwithstanding this, this type of question also appears to be important in parent–child interaction from an educational point of view. By asking argumentative Why-questions, children challenge their parents to justify the reasons behind their opinions, suggestions, rules, and prescriptions, which are often largely implicit. In doing so, children place the burden of proof on their parents, assuming a waiting position before accepting or casting doubt on the parent's standpoint. Interestingly, the decision to start an argumentative discussion appears to be 'co-constructed' by parents and children. This aspect is confirmed by previous studies in the same context (Arcidiacono, 2011; Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo, 2010; Arcidiacono et al., 2009; Maroni and Arcidiacono, 2010; Pontecorvo et al., 2001).

In conclusion, we want to stress that the Why-questions asked by children to their parents, and to caregivers in general, represents a great educational opportunity. We have seen that this type of question reflects the children's desire to know and find out what is until that point unknown to them. In other words, the children make explicit their desire to discover the secrets of the world in which they live, through the words of those who have much more experience than them, namely their parents. Moreover, by asking Why-questions to their parents the children show their willingness to be active participants in family life. It is the responsibility of parents and caregivers in general to take advantage of the opportunity offered by children's Why-questions, providing the educational responses that children need. Future investigations should therefore be centered on the responses provided by parents to children's Why-questions, and their functions and characterization from an educational point of view.

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Notes

1. The explanatory talk is here defined as that type of discourse which aims to make explicit the reasons that have caused an event already ascertained.
2. For more details, see Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono (2007).
3. We are referring to the Research Module 'Argumentation as a reasonable alternative to conflict in the family context' (project no. PDFMP1-123093/1) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). It is part of the ProDoc project 'Argopolis: Argumentation Practices in Context' jointly designed and developed by scholars of the Universities of Lugano, Neuchâtel, Lausanne (Switzerland) and Amsterdam (The Netherlands).
4. Van Eemeren (2010: 213–240) provides a comprehensive discussion on the notion of 'burden of proof' and its relevance for argumentation. In this regard, see also Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2002a).
5. For a comprehensive study on linguistic indicators of argumentative moves, see Van Eemeren et al. (2007).
6. As observed by Ervin-Tripp and Strage (1985), parental prescriptions which are implicit or based on rules not initially known by children base their strength and effectiveness mainly on parents' authority. In this regard, Bova and Arcidiacono (2013) have shown that the parents' authority can be an effective argumentative strategy adopted by parents with their children only if the following two conditions are met: 1) the nature of the relationship between the person who represents the authority (often, but not always, the parents) and the person to whom the argument is addressed (the child) is based on the certainty of positive feelings, rather than on fear of punishment, and 2) the reasons behind a prescription are not to be hidden from the child's eyes, but are to be known and shared by parents and children.
7. Generally speaking, the expression 'waiting position' is 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, children can ask Why-questions in order to get into a waiting position, ready to accept or put into doubt the newly obtained information.
8. Van Eemeren and colleagues (Van Eemeren, 2010; Van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999, 2002b) developed the notion of strategic maneuvering within the *extended version of*

pragma-dialectics. The notion of strategic maneuvering is a theoretical tool to show how the simultaneous pursuit of dialectical and rhetorical aim can be achieved. By maneuvering strategically, arguers pursue their desire to persuade their audience with a commitment to reason. Such delicate balancing of the dialectical and rhetorical goals of argumentation takes place by means of systematic, coordinated and simultaneous management of three inseparable aspects of strategic maneuvering: *topical potential*, that is, the selection of the most expedient moves to make one's own position stronger; *audience demand*, that is, the moves made in each stage of the discourse should comply with the addressee's preferences; and *presentational techniques*, that is, the selection of appropriate presentational devices at the communicative and stylistic level.

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Appendix

The transcription follows the CHAT system (MacWhinney, 1989), including the following conventions:

- * indicates the speaker's turn
 - (()) segments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of the situation
 - [=!] segments added by the transcriber to indicate some paralinguistic features
 - %act: description of speaker's actions
 - %sit: description of the situation/setting
- Several deviations from CHAT were introduced.
- First, punctuation symbols, as employed by Schiffrin (1994) and Blum-Kulka (1997), were used to indicate intonation contours:
- , continuing intonation
 - . falling intonation
 - : prolonging of sounds
 - ? rising intonation
 - ! exclamatory intonation
- Second, additional symbols were added:
- maintaining the turn of talking by the speaker
 - %pau: 2.5 sec