

**Observing the paradox: interrogative-negative questions as cues for a  
monophonic promotion of polyphony in educational practices**

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**1. A new representation of education**

The uncertainty associated with the outcomes of education has never ceased to be a concern for education scientists and practitioners since James' conceptualization of education as an intersubjective relation where children, rather than being an empty box to be filled with knowledge, play an active role in influencing the outcomes of education (James 1983). Although pedagogy has devoted many efforts to the design of curricular and behavioural rules as well as structures incorporating the cultural presuppositions of standardised role performances and cognitive expectations, the concept of education as a development of personality controlled by educators by means of educational techniques appears more and more controversial. Against this backdrop, unsatisfactory reforms took place one after another, until a picture of the failure of education became

fashionable among education scientists, sociologists and politics (Luhmann and Schorr 1979).

Arendt (1993) understands crisis as a permanent condition of education, whose appearance in the public debate derives from the transfer to the political agenda of a structural limit of education, that is, its incapacity to control the development of children's personality. Arendt highlights a twofold paradox that is inherent to the idea of education as a developmental process controlled by educators: (1) the development of personality brings about the problem of trying to know a mind that resists being known, (2) teachers have to take responsibility for children, while children are inescapably free in their construction of meanings of education.

Since the 1980s, following a generalized lack of trust in education, the culture of childhood has placed particular emphasis on children's self-realization and agency (Vanderbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie 2006), and has looked at the inevitable autonomy of children as social agents as a resource for education. This representation leads to the promotion of children's sense of responsibility and skills in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts, thus showing an "understanding of their own competencies" (Matthews 2003: 274).

The success of this new vision of children as social agents has promoted a new role for the educator as an "organiser of learning" (Holdsworth 2005: 149), who gives up pre-planned activities, and is inventive and able to understand that children can and must tackle important issues.

Today, many publications in the field of pedagogy offer prescriptive resources to empower children's voices in educational practices, for example through teachers' active listening and consideration for children's creativity (Gordon 1974; Rogers 1951). However, none of these publications discusses the results of the application of its theoretical prescriptions.

This article discusses naturally occurring interactions recorded in the context of an educational project aimed at promoting children's active participation in educational practices in the classroom and children's ability in dialogic conflict management (see section 2). I focus on the failures and crises of the promotional intentions of the project, in which educational practices suffocate the voice of children, thus creating a monophonic educational discourse.

In particular, I focus on the educators' use of questions having negative interrogative frames as their first component to induce children to align with their educational agendas. I will argue that the use of interrogative-negative questions is an educational practice which reflects a culturally specific professional practice of "being educators", whereby educators elicit children's standardized cognitive performance through monologues, rather than empowering their voices.

## **2. The relevance of intertextuality in educational discourse**

In any social encounter, participants rely on repertoires of cultural presuppositions to foreground the expectations of others, therefore being able to choose how to act and react (re-act) to the actions of their co-participants.

Educational discourse, both the discourse *on* education (pedagogy) and discourses *in* education (educational interaction), is permeated by cultural presuppositions concerning role performances and the interrelation of educators' actions and children's actions in educational interaction.

While cultural presuppositions provide resources to select meanings and support interaction, the linguistic structures of interaction provide resources for understanding and accepting these presupposed meanings, thus enhancing understanding and generalized participation. The cultural presuppositions of interaction may be empirically observed by looking at *contextualization cues*, which highlight, foreground or make them salient in the interaction. According to Gumperz, contextualization cues are verbal and non-verbal signs used by interlocutors "to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended" (Gumperz 1992: 230-231).

Contextualization cues work at various levels of discourse: prosody (intonation, pitch shift, etc.), paralinguistic signs (tempo, pausing and

hesitation, latching or overlapping of speaking turns), code choice (style, language, etc.), and choice of lexical forms or formulaic expressions.

This paper focuses on paralinguistic signs, code choice and choice of lexical expressions. Moreover, contextualization cues which are not included in Gumperz' repertoire are analyzed. These pertain to the discourse level of *intertextuality*.

I will use the term *intertextuality*, originally developed by Kristeva (1980) in the field of semiotics, to refer to interactions which are constructed as a mosaic of references to preceding talk, common knowledge and shared expectations. Intertextual references are used to perform specific social activities. In our data, intertextual references convey expected answers after interrogative-negative questions, making it possible for educators to steer children's actions within monophonic educational discourses.

I argue (see section 4) that since interrogative-negative questions use intertextual references, they may be intended as contextualization cues for education as monophonic discourse, which, paraphrasing Bakhtin's criticism toward nineteenth-century realism in literature (1984), simulates a dialogue between educators and children but in fact simply provides a medium for the educator's own discourse to be more prominent.

### **3. Method and data**

Before moving to the analysis of data, the following section will provide the reader with a description of the dataset and some background information regarding methodological issues.

The educational project under investigation here involved 250 children (aged 10-12) in eleven primary schools in Northern Italy (April-May 2005). The study was financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. The project consisted of a number of interventions in schools, whereby the classes involved were divided into groups of five children, and each group was asked to create a fantasy story; to accomplish their task, children had to face decision-making processes which could engender conflicts. When conflicts arose in one group, educators with experience in the promotion of children's active participation would go to the group to promote children's reflection on conflict and conflict management. All educators were previously trained to support children's self-expression and self-reflexivity, rather than playing the role of experts transmitting knowledge to a passive audience about the correct ways to manage conflicts.

The methodology of the interventions took into account the most recent cultural presuppositions of children's empowerment, observing children's participation as a form of involvement in decision-making, which make them feel influential (Lawy and Biesta 2006). Empowerment means acknowledging that when children are able to determine the issues that they consider important the results cannot be known in advance (Britzman 2007).

Thus, empowering children's voices entails certain risks; first, the emergence of contradictions and refusals among children is more likely within a form of educational communication where educators give up the role of children controller. This risk is related to a form of communication where educators become facilitators rather than technicians, and both adults and children are considered as co-constructors of knowledge and expertise (Murray and Hallett 2000). With regard to the connection between children's active participation and conflict management, previous research indicates that the promotion of positive conflict management should be seen as a complement to the empowerment of children's voice (Holdsworth 2004; Baraldi 2009).

As the project provided for three two-hour interventions in each of the eleven primary-school classes involved, we had the opportunity to work on 66 hours of videotaped interactions. The cases shown here are representative of the cases in our collection, and were selected to best illustrate the range of operations performed by interrogative-negative questions as clear examples of the phenomenon. Our purpose is to highlight a range of possible meaningful communicative situations and problems related to the use of interrogative-negative questions. Data were transcribed using Jefferson's transcription system (see Annex 1). All personal details in the talk were altered in the transcription to protect participants' anonymity. Italian originals of the Examples are provided as an Annex (Annex 2).

We use conversation analysis as a method for the study of talk-in-interaction. The objective of conversation analysis is to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus on how sequences of actions are generated. The issue for conversation analysis is how participants understand, and make use of, any given utterance (ten Have 2007; Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008).

People's understanding of each other's action actually unfolds as sequences themselves unfold, and can be analysed using the *next turn proof procedure*: any next turn in a sequence displays its producer's understanding of the prior turn, and if that understanding happens to be incorrect, that in itself can be displayed in the following turn in the sequence (Clift, Drew and Hutchby 2006; Schegloff 2006). The second turn in the sequence makes the interlocutors' understanding evident (Heritage 2006; Mazeland 2006).

This article discusses a specific sequence of actions-in-interaction, namely educators' interrogative-negative questions followed by children's answers. I argue that this sequence represents a contextualization cue for a specific culture of education. We aim to demonstrate that interrogative-negative questions foreground a culture-specific concept of education, whereby educators must guide children's socialization by: shaping their choices and actions according to shared criteria and values; and also by selecting correct meanings and binding children to them (Baraldi 2008).

Finally, our analysis of the sequence [educators' interrogative-negative

question-children's answer] aims to bring the issue of the structural limits of educational communication to the fore, thus meeting James' claim for an evolution of educational practices toward polyphony.

#### **4. Observing the paradox: a monophonic approach to the promotion of polyphony**

The functioning of interrogative-negative questions relies on the sequential properties of questions as social actions (Heritage 2002). Asking a question establishes significant constraints on what the recipient does next, and therefore places the questioner in an interactionally powerful position (Heritage and Raymond 2003; Stivers and Makoto 2010). When a person asks a question to another, s/he establishes constraints not only in terms of the type of action the recipient should produce next, but also in terms of action design (Robinson and Heritage 2005). For instance, while a polar question restricts the answer to *yes* or *no*, an alternative question limits the possibilities of answering as expected to one of the alternatives provided (Raymond 2003)

Questions open a sequence whereby the following action is expected to be an answer. Questions-answer sequences are instances of *adjacency pairs* (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). In adjacency pairs, a given first pair part projects a range of seconds: given the initial condition of a first pair part

being uttered, the second part of that pair is then relevant; consequently, the absence of such a second is a noticeable absence, and the speaker of the first may infer a reason for that absence. Adjacency pairs are two-action sequences in which participants' mutual perception may be observed at its basic level. As interaction exists when communication takes participants' mutual perception into account, and adjacency pairs are the basic form of interaction.

The relation between first and second pair parts is not accidental: among alternative second parts, there are *preferred* second parts and *dispreferred* second parts (Pomerantz 1984). Preferred second parts are normal, seen but unnoticed: they are expected actions requiring no account. On the contrary, dispreferred second parts are noticeable and therefore have to be accounted for.

In line with Bolinger's idea (1957), later developed by Boyle (2000) and Koshik (2002), our data show that the preference for interrogative-negative questions may be conveyed by intertextual references. For instance, a question such as "Isn't it a beautiful sunny day?" in a setting where the questioner is out of doors in full sunlight conveys the questioner's stance on the weather and expresses a marked preference for the recipient's agreement.

The act of questioning implies claiming that the questioner lacks certain information, while at the same time there is an assumption that the addressee has such information. Thus, the addressee is projected in a

knowledgeable position. However, different question designs can adjust, or even reverse, the knowledge gap between questioner and respondent (Heritage and Raymond 2010). Interrogative-negative questions are instances of questions designed to claim a knowledgeable position for the questioner, and are used to seek confirmation for information that is already in play. If the object of an interrogative-negative question is a piece of shared knowledge, the question conveys the questioner's stance toward the matter under discussion, and expresses a marked preference for the recipient's agreement.

#### *4.1 Resisting the course of action: non conforming-answers*

In example 1 below, two groups are arguing after group 1 (G1) has asked a member of group 2 (G2) to perform in the roleplay of their fantasy story. Pia and Lucia are members of G1, Raggi is a member of G2.

(1) ((Castel S. Pietro, Bologna. Primary school. Children aged 10))

1. Edu: excuse me but: (.) let's avoid confusion (0.7) **wasn't the decision** that Raggi would perform for both teams made this morning in class?
2. Pia(G1): but we:
3. Edu: if you had something to say (0.3) you should have said

that this morning; hh **didn't you listen** to yourselves  
making the decision?

4. Lucia(G1): °no, it's tha:t°
5. Edu: this is your problem hh, **don't you think?**
6. Raggi(G2): yes, >but then we said [also-]<
7. Edu: [I'm not] interested in that, it is  
your problem, and that has wasted ten minutes (.) stop  
raising your hand 'cause in a quarter of an hour we  
haven't been able to find a solution to a banal proble:m

The interrogative-negative question in example 1, turn 1 is the first part of an adjacency pair and makes an answer relevant as the following action. Two features of this interrogative-negative question concur to establish the educator's evaluative position as pre-established and, as a corollary to that, to assert his primary rights to assess the children's action: (1) being a polar question, it calls for either *yes* or *no*, and thereby asserts command of the terms to be used by the recipient in the assessment of the referent (Heritage and Raymond 2006); (2) as its referent is part of the shared knowledge between the parties, the question is to be understood as a reverse polarity question, which conveys a strong preference for a *yes* answer (Koshik 2002; Raymond 2003). The reverse polarity is established by the context. The children are arguing, so it is obvious that they are not working appropriately.

By means of the interrogative-negative question in turn 1, the educator asserts his epistemic authority in establishing the rules which regulate the activity, epistemic authority concerning the rights to identity-bound knowledge in self-other relations (Heritage and Raymond 2005; Clift 2006). In example 1, the interrogative-negative questions in turns 1, 3 and 5 are designed to display the educator's critical stance on children's behaviour, and display a marked preference for a *yes* answer which aligns with that stance. Being questions with known answers, the interrogative-negative questions are understood by children as a way to force them to acknowledge the inconsistency between their behaviour and an activity rule established earlier in the morning. Children are aware that, by providing the preferred *yes* answer, they will perform the relevant action after each of the interrogative-negative questions, thus granting the educator the right to regain the status of speaker. Indeed, from the educator's perspective, the (preferred) *yes* answer is all that should be said after each of the interrogative-negative questions, and coincides with a transition relevance place (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974).

Instead of providing the preferred *yes* answer, children provide *non-conforming* answers (Raymond 2003) in Example 1, turns 2, 4 and 6. Children use the status of non-conforming answers as dispreferred second pair parts as a resource to make room for their voices in the interaction. Being dispreferred second pair parts, non-confirming answers destabilize the expected course of action, allowing children to make room for an

account of their conflict.

Non-conforming answers are cues for children's misalignment with the trajectory projected by interrogative-negative questions.

The interrogative-negative questions in Example 1 turns 1, 3 and 5 reduce the range of options for children: the only relevant action in the next turn is to provide an answer, and the only relevant *and* preferred next action is to answer *yes*. Interrogative-negative questions deprive children of the opportunity to explain their interest in the conflict.

By offering non-conforming answers, children refuse to disown their behaviour; however, the educator is not interested in hearing their accounts. His interrogative-negative questions are addressed to assist children's performance, and help them to correct inappropriate behaviour: children's misalignment with the interrogative-negative questions' preference is seen as an inappropriately defensive behaviour. The educator treats children's misalignment with the course of action projected by the interrogative-negative question as behaviour "to be corrected". He does not allow children to complete any of the accounts they start until, in Example 1 turn 7, he sanctions non-conforming answers with a strong negative assessment, accusing children of showing a lack of competence in relationship management.

In Example 1, children refuse to align with the course of action projected by the interrogative-negative question with reverse polarity, avoiding providing a "yes/no" answer. Episodes where children systematically refuse to

produce the expected second parts of question-answer adjacency pairs are rare in our data, and may be understood as cues for either total disagreement with the presupposition embedded in the question (i.e. children's behaviour is inappropriate and has to be corrected); or children's awareness that providing the preferred second pair parts would imply agreeing with this presupposition.

In Example 1, the educator treats children's misalignment to the course of action projected by the interrogative-negative question as accountable and sanctionable behaviour. By doing so, he reactivates the social asymmetry of the educational relation between an epistemic authority who has something to teach and the children, who, being incompetent social actors, must passively experience the educator's action and competences.

#### *4.2 Playing with intertextuality. The failure of a rhetorical device*

In Example 2 below, two children, Luca and Sara, are arguing about the script of their team's story. The educator's intervention is structured as follows: first, a positive-question with reverse polarity, preferring a *no* answer (Koshik 2002), is produced in order to force children to acknowledge the inconsistency between their common goal to produce a good story and their behaviour (turn 1). Once, Sara, one of the children, has provided the preferred *no* answer (turn 2), the educator produces an

interrogative-negative question to promote children's reflection on alternative ways of managing conflict (turn 3).

(2) ((S. Martino, Reggio E. Primary school. Children aged 10))

1. Edu: but: does your way of doing things help your work?
2. Sara: no
3. Edu: and: **can't you find** a solution?
4. Luca: as far as I can see no
5. Edu: mh? Do you think it's impossible to find a solution?  
**isn't it possible** for you to do anything together?
6. Luca: you're right (.) it is not possible
7. Edu: ah, we:ll (.) I'll be back later

Even though the interrogative-negative question (example 2: turn 3) is apparently aimed at finding out if children are able to find an alternative way to manage their conflict, it is a question with known answer, in that it has a piece of common knowledge as its referent. The educator expects children to be able to manage the conflict by avoiding non-constructive quarrelling, and children know that. Children understand the interrogative-negative question as an indirect speech act urging them to suspend their conflict by relying on intertextual references to the educator's expectations. Like all types of reverse polarity questions, interrogative-negative questions do not display their preference for a specific answer only through their

design. Questions which are similar in design may be interpreted as either reversed polarity questions or as questions which prefer answers of the same polarity, depending on the displayed knowledge state or epistemic strength with which the question is asked. Example 2 is taken from the last intervention in the project: children are expected to be able to manage conflicts without quarrelling, and they know that. This expectation represents the intertextual reference which works as a cue for the function of the interrogative-negative question, i.e. expressing a negative evaluation of children's behaviour, urging them to find a different way to manage the conflict.

The interrogative-negative question (example 2 turn 3) relies on the sequential properties of the question/answer adjacency pair. Children have to stop arguing to produce the relevant action after a question, that is to provide an answer. Moreover, the interrogative-negative question offers a *candidate* answer, giving children the sense of what the anticipated answer might be. According to Pomerantz (1988), offering a candidate answer is a resource for the speaker to guide the recipients towards giving particular information. Candidate answer questions are a common social object in many settings (Atkinson and Drew 1979; Arminen 2005; Heritage and Clayman, 2010), but in educational interaction they have a special relevance (Margutti 2006).

Providing or not providing a candidate answer in educational settings is an accountable action, which is subject to evaluation. Although in our data

children (the question recipients) typically abide by the constraints that interrogative-negative questions impose on them, they can and sometimes do resist these constraints.

In Example 2, the preference structure of the interrogative-negative question (example 2 turn 3) relies on intertextual references to shared expectations toward children's ability in conflict management. Differently from the interrogative-negative question in example 1 (turn 1) the intertextual reference remains implicit. The ambiguity of the intertextual reference provides a child, Luca, with the opportunity to subvert the educator's agenda. In Example 2, turn 4, Luca plays with intertextuality: as the intertextual reference of the interrogative-negative question in example 2, turn 3, remains implicit, he has a good hand in ignoring the preference it conveys. Luca gives the educator the piece of information she is asking for, treating the interrogative-negative question as if it were a real information request.

Luca's answer is an appropriate second part of the question-answer adjacency pair initiated by the interrogative-negative question in example 2, turn 3, and is therefore not accountable *per se*.

Luca defers the answer until the end of the turn in the interest of emphasizing his agency. By deferring the *appropriate yes/no* answer, Luca forces the educator to monitor his turn to search for the *preferred yes*. The educator has to refrain from intervening, even though the delay in proffering the *yes/no* answer foregrounds a dispreferred response.

Clearly, the educator may well sanction Luca's action: however, by sanctioning Luca's answer she would reveal that the interrogative-negative question in example 2, turn 3, was not a request for information, but an attempt at trying to force children to disown their behaviour. By sanctioning Luca's answer, the educator would explicitly show that she *is doing education*, rather than empowering children's voice.

Luca disaffiliates with the educator's intentions without misaligning with the course of action projected by the interrogative-negative question. A sanction against such relevant second pair part would represent a cue for asymmetry in the right to assess one's own position, and this that would be inconsistent with the presuppositions of the intervention.

After example 2, turn 4, the educator has no other option but to reiterate the interrogative-negative question (example 2, turn 5), and again Luca treats the interrogative-negative question as if it were a genuine request for information (example 2, turn 6). When it becomes clear that her strategy is ineffective, the educator leaves the interaction without having reached her educational goals (example 2, turn 7).

The educator's interrogative-negative questions involve assumptions, or cultural presuppositions, that must be true in order for the question to be valid. In example 2, interrogative-negative questions involve a culture-specific concept of education, whereby education must guide children's socialization. From the educator's perspective, by arguing about the story's script children show their need for education. Thus, they have to learn from

the educator better ways to manage their conflicts.

Our data are in line with Stivers and Makoto's (2010) analysis of question-answer adjacency pairs in mundane conversation. In particular, they show that interrogative-negative questions are a resource for speakers to build a case for particular points of view in educational contexts as well. In our data, educators use interrogative-negative questions as a resource to advance, albeit implicitly, the claim for a knowledgeable status with regard to the correct way to manage conflicts.

Hence, interrogative-negative questions are cues for the link between the local distribution of rights and responsibilities regarding what educators and children can accountably know, whether they have rights to articulate it, and in what terms, on the one hand, and the identities of educators and children, on the other.

Luca's answers to interrogative-negative questions refuse both the latter's presuppositions and the claim for a knowledgeable status with regard to the correct way to manage conflicts advanced by the educators. They resist the agenda of the questions, i.e. what the questioner is doing with those questions (Bolden 2009; Stivers and Makoto 2010).

Despite some pedagogical concerns, example 2 provides evidence that children are competent communicators. For instance, they are able to understand the educators' use of intertextual references as cues for their hidden agenda which foreground that their are *doing teaching*, rather than *providing empowerment of children's voices*. In this way, children acquire

the ability to break free from the constraints of interrogative-negative questions, and exert agency in proposing alternative agendas and challenging cultural presuppositions of the interactions. Not surprisingly, when children understand their educator's objectives and the motivations behind interrogative-negative questions as cues for a representation of them as incompetent social actors in need of education, they will tend to mistrust the opportunity of active participation in the interaction.

## **5. Conclusions. On the limits of educating to autonomy**

In the interventions analyzed, educators resort to various strategies, such as interrogative-negative questions, to reduce the possibility of surprises and risks for educational activities. In the contexts where the limitation of risks is a priority, educators systematically try to actively orient children's participation, giving education the form of a monologue.

Educators' efforts at controlling children's participation are cues for a culture of education that looks at children as incomplete persons, who can achieve a better understanding of conflict management through a passive experience of educators' values and competence. As noticed by Boyd and Heritage with regard to the relation between doctors and patients during medical interviews (Boyd and Heritage 2006), educators, in order to establish a relationship with children (as doctors do with patients), cannot

avoid communicating assumptions and expectations about themselves, children, and their mutual relationship. Interrogative-negative questions are cues for these assumptions and expectations, which represent the cultural presuppositions of the educational encounter from the educators' perspective.

Even in primary educational settings, interaction is not completely under the educator's control. If children understand what education expects them to do and learn, they can avoid it, or even subvert it (Luhmann and Schorr 1979; Vanderstraeten and Biesta 2001; Vanderstraeten 2003).

Our data show that children can break free from the constraints placed by interrogative-negative questions challenging their presuppositions. Like all types of social activities (Peräkilä 2006), interrogative-negative question-answer adjacency pairs in educational settings are co-constructions, which necessarily involve complementary actions on the part of both educators and children.

In this article, we have focused on the limits of the empowerment of children's voice as it is done in interaction, an often neglected aspect of research in education. We have focused on the paradox of a monophonic promotion of polyphony, where asymmetries of power between educators and children end up excluding children from active participation.

Throughout the article, we have pointed out some questions: What is the importance of learning and doing in a way that meets the educator's expectations?, To what extent do the cues for an educational relationship

(where adults are the competent persons who educate not-yet-complete persons) influence children's expectations and their attitude toward the interaction?, Can the paradox of a polyphonic dialogue emerging from monophonic educational discourse be solved?

To sum up, the basic question concerns the absolute importance of role performances within educational interactions, and its relation to the empowerment of children's voices. Good intentions and theories are just a part of the picture. We believe that further research must be conducted at the intersection of linguistic and social structures of educational practices in order to transform educational practices from monophonic discourses to polyphonic dialogues.

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