

Notes on the use of interrogative-negatives with hostile content in educational communication

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1. Introduction to the research.

With this paper we propose the results of an analysis of a project addressed to the promotion of non-violent conflict management that took place in primary schools in Region Emilia-Romagna (Italy).

The methodological premise of our research was that an ethnographical analysis of interactions by which the project became concrete could impart the ability to recognise social structures and cultural forms of social intervention. Following this premise we focused our attention to the communication processes that involved social operators and children during the interventions, to analyse the influence of social structures of communication and cultural forms on the social interventions. All of the interactions we analysed, according to their features, were educational. What are the features of educational interactions? What we mean for “educational”? In which way educational communication influences the outcomes of social intervention? To answer to these questions, we have to start from a theoretical definition of education.

Traditionally, commonly endorsed and commonly observed norms and values are considered a prerequisite for an integrated society (Heyting *et al.* 2002). In Parson's view normative orientations materialise as social roles and role expectancies, therefore contribution of schooling and education to the integration of society consists in the furthering and strengthening of consensus on these basic values (Parson 1951).

Niklas Luhmann's sociology offers an alternative theoretical framework; Luhmann stresses that the fundamental function of education is not to impart knowledge, to discipline, to transmit social values and norms, but to minimise the improbability of social communication. Education imparts to pupils the ability to participate to social communication, that is to say to behave in a (largely) predictable way in social contexts. If one had to take into consideration the empirical multi-facets of other human beings, communication would be impossible. Because it is possible to simplify the complexity of psychic variability, speaking with one as a teacher, another as a pupil, and a third as

a beloved, makes communication possible (Luhmann 1984). “Teacher”, “pupil”, “beloved”, and many others in modern society, are social roles. We define social roles as “human beings made communicative through socialisation”.

In complex societies socialisation has to be a systematised process, necessary to reproduce social knowledge and capabilities acquired in long sequences of coordinated individual steps (Vanderstraen & Biesta 2006). We define this systemized process as “education”. The difference between education and non-systemised socialisation is that educational communication is always intentional, attributable to intentions, programmed on the basis of scientific premises (pedagogy).

Education is a communication process organised in a systematic way by educational organisations. Among educational organisation we have *schools*, where educational communication materialises as relations between social roles. Schools are educational organisation that have both an administrative and a pedagogical management. Pedagogical management is composed by educators that control the movement of pupils in a hierarchy of “educational steps”, each of them representing a standardised level of cognitive performances, defined by educational programs.

The concept of “*grammar of education*” (Tyack & Cuban 2000) describes the relations between social roles in schools. These relations are asymmetric, because educators instructs pupils but pupils do not instruct the educator. Grammar of education is based on expectancies attached to social roles; these expectancies enable modes of support and co-operation, excluding others, enhance particular types of experiences, at the expense of others.

Grammar of education involves the evaluation of pupils’ performances, with respect to standardised expectancies. Education has generalised expectancies about cognitive development of pupils: age is connected to a specific cognitive status. Grammar of education is also necessary to evaluate if pupils satisfy educational expectancies, by mean of specialised interaction systems (examinations) and the observation of their everyday participation to educational interactions.

2. Methodology of the research

The redundancy of evaluations creates expectancies about the “quality” of each pupil. In this sense educational communication transforms equality into inequality. Education builds hierarchies among pupils on the basis of the adherence of their cognitive performances to standardised expectancies. It follows that the marginalisation of pupils who do not satisfy standardised cognitive performances becomes possible (Baraldi & Iervese 2004). These effects of education are described as “secondary socialisation”, where “secondary” refers to the unpredictable and often unseen consequences of education as an intentional form of socialisation. Some researches describe as a secondary effect of education interpersonal conflicts arousing in communication among pupils,

most times as consequence of acts of criticism. (Putnam, 2001; Schneider, 2000). A recent research (Iervese, 2006) shows that parties could escalate the conflicts if they perceive face-threatening acts; in this case a violent resolution of interpersonal conflict is not improbable.

The promotion of non-violent conflict management was the object of the social intervention we analyse in this article. We offer here a short description of the intervention, that involved 250 children (ages 9-11) in eleven primary schools. Classrooms involved were split in teams of six children each, then asked to create a fantasy story based on four pictures chosen out of a set of seven. To accomplish their task, teams had to afford processes of decision-making (first off all to select four pictures of a range of seven) that could engender conflicts. In these cases trained social operators had to create the presuppositions of children's practice of dialogical conflict management, promoting dialogical forms of interaction.

By "dialogue" the semantic of social intervention meant a specific communication form. Features of dialogue could be summarised as follows (Gergen *et al.* 2001; Gudykunst 1994; Isajiw 2000; Littlejohn 2004): 1) distribution of active participation in interaction; 2) addressing of participants' interests and/or needs (empathy); 3) expression and display of personal attitudes and stories; 4) checking participants' perceptions; 5) active listening; 6) appreciation of actions and experience; 7) interactive feedback on the participants' actions; 8) avoidance of intimidating assertions.

The practice of dialogue requires social operators to 1) respect the turn of talk of their interlocutors, to show their unconditioned appreciation for their self-expression. It means to avoid overlapping and turn taking outside transition relevance points; 2) make use of rhetorical tools to promote the socialisation of reflection about everyday experience through self-narration.

To analyse data we used Conversation Analysis (CA); CA offers rigorous concept that describes structural features of organisation of human interactions (Schegloff, 1991; Heritage 1995). In this article we discuss the way by which one of these structures, interrogative-negative questions, influenced the intervention, with regard to the issue of its consistence with its promotional epistemology. In the framework of Luhmann's theory of education, CA imparts us the ability to observe if operators practised a genuine dialogical communication during their interventions, or if they activated different communication forms to pursue educational goals.

We gathered data through video recording of interactions. We think that, since the publication of Goodwin's work on the interactive coordination of gaze, posture, and sentence construction (1981), researches at the intersection of language and interaction needs videotape technology.

It is true that camera's "eye" suffers from unidirectionality and must be positioned with the needs of analysis in mind. Another obvious concern is what effect being videotaped will have on the behaviour of the participants to communication processes. But while we are sure that we are having some effect on our subjects, it also seems clear that they habituate themselves to our presence and

we become less influential over time.

Moreover, advantages of video recording are compelling. Identifying speakers is made much easier by watching, not just the movement of lips, but the motion, gaze, and posture of participants. Much of the taken-for-granted fabric of our social existence can be exposed under repeated viewings of well-recorded material that render it in sufficient detail that an analyst can move closer to an account of what is actually happening, as opposed to what he or she assumes is happening (Zuengler & Fassnacht 1998).

3. The use of interrogative-negative questions in educational communication

In the case of deviant behavior, in conflict with expectations educational communication process, deviancy provokes no doubt about the actual validity of the criterion explanation, therefore pupils' deviance is understood as an ascribable action, stimulating the assumption that something is wrong with its performer (Schneider, 2000). We have observed that interrogative-negative questions are often designed to favor a response from the pupils that contrasts with their earlier statements or actions, while not permitting them to do so without acknowledging inconsistency (Heritage, 2002).

((Castel San Pietro, Bologna. Primary school. Children age 10))

- 1 Op: scusate ma: (.) non facciamo confusione (0.7) la
2 decisione che Raggi partecipa ad uno e all'altro
3 gruppo è stata presa questa mattina in aula, no?
4 Pia(G1): però noi:
5 Op: se dovevate dire: (0.3) dovevate dirlo al mattino;
6 hh non vi siete sentiti prendere la decisione?
7 Lucia(G1): °no è che:°
8 Op: questo è un problema hh vostro, non credete?
9 Raggi(G2): sì, >ma poi l'abbiamo detto [anche-]<
10 op: [non] mi interessa,
11 questo è un problema vostro, che sta portando via 10
12 minuti (.) è inutile che alzate la mano[↑] perchè in
13 un quarto d'ora non siamo riusciti a trovare una
14 soluzione a un problema: banale

1 Op: *excuse me but: (.) to avoid misunderstanding (0.7)*
 2 *the decision that Raggi would perform for both team*
 3 *has been taken this morning, ain't that?*
 4 Pia (G1): *but we:*
 5 Op: *if you had to tal:k (0.3) it was this morning; hh*
 6 *did you listen to yourselves taking the decision?*
 7 Lucia (G1): *°no, it is tha:t°*
 8 Op: *this is your problem hh, don't you think?*
 9 Raggi (G2): *yes, >but then we said [also-]<*
 10 op: *[I'm not] interested in it,*
 11 *it is your problem, that is taking away 10 minutes*
 12 *(.) stop raising your hand[↑] in a quarter of hour we*
 13 *weren't able to find a solution to a proble:m that*
 14 *seems to me very easy*

Two groups are arguing because group 1 (G1) has asked to a member of group 2 (G2) to perform as an actor in the representation of their fantasy story. In lines 1-3 the operator, with an interrogative-negative question, try to lead children to acknowledge inconsistency of their behavior; that would be the first step of their reflection on alternative way to manage conflict.

Children understand the rhetorical valence of interrogative-negative and its hostile contest, and refuse to align with operator's utterances, that is to say they refuse the role of people in need of education (lines 4, 7, 9).

The operator (lines 10-14) surrogates the reflection of children on conflict management he/she failed to sustain with a harsh negative evaluation of their behavior, explicitly accounting them for lack of competence in relationships' management. By doing so, he/she gives him/herself the opportunity to impose the ending of the argument, but it does not come priceless. The expression of an evaluation of pupils' behavior reactivates asymmetries between social roles in education, that are inconsistent with the promotional goals of his intervention.

Even if our data suggest that negative-interrogative questions could be an effective tool for educators to project expected answers by children, most times the "hidden agenda" of operators is understood by children. This imparts to children the capability to neutralise operators' educational strategies.

The understanding of the pragmatic function of educator's seek of information allows children to perform rhetorical counter-attacks. Among the rhetorical techniques available for children the most commonly used that reminds the "jujitsu technique" (Fisher *et al.* 1991): children use the

rhetorical form of the operator against him/her.

((Castel San Pietro, Bologna. Primary school. Children age 10))

1 Op: ma: questo vostro modo di fare aiuta a fare il lavoro?
2 Sara: no
3 Op: e: non potete trovare una soluzione?
4 Luca: secondo il mio punto di vista no
5 Op: Mh? secondo te è impossibile trovare una soluzione? non è
6 possibile per voi fare niente assieme?
7 Luca: è vero (.) non è possibile
8 Op. ah, o:k (.) passo dopo

1 Op: *but: your way of acting helps your work?*
2 Sara: *no*
3 Op: *so: can't you find a solution?*
4 Luca: *from my point of view, we don't*
5 Op: *Mh? you think it is not possible to find a solution?*
6 *Isn't it not possible for you to do anything together?*
7 Luca: *you're right (.) it is not possible*
8 Op. *ah, we:ll (.) I'll be back later*

Two children, Luca and Sara, are arguing about the script of their team's story. The operator's intervention follows a common rhetorical structure in the educational communication processes we analysed.

- 1) a first question aims to lead pupils to acknowledge the inconsistency among their goal to produce a good story and their actual behaviour;
- 2) once he/she attains that objective, an interrogative-negative question is uttered to promote children's reflection on alternative ways of conflict management.

Rhetoric of education is not always efficient: as children understand the pragmatic function of interrogative-negative question they avoid to align with operator's hidden (but now discovered) expectancies. Children are able to escape the role of people in need of education, by mean of the jujitsu technique. In the interaction, the refusal of education materialises as an alignment to the first part of an adjacency pair, represented by operator's question. In this way Luca is able to reject the educational communication without becoming accountable of deviant behavior, as he gives to the

educators nothing else than the information he/she wanted.

The interrogative-negative question is repeated at line 5-6, and again Luca uses the jujitsu technique (line 7). When it becomes clear that his/her rhetorical strategy is ineffective, the educator leaves interaction, without having reached his/her educational goals.

4. Final remarks: the limits of educational communication in promoting social participation of children

Our data show that a refined rhetoric tool as interrogative-negative questions cannot secure the attainment of educational goals. It is true that social structures of educational communication, materialised as the grammar of education, impart to educators the ability to activate social asymmetries to pursue educational goals, but it is also true that grammar of education makes it easy for children to recognise educational intentions, bringing them to mistrust the opportunity of autonomous participation.

Interrogative-negative questions rely on grammar of education. They presuppose that social operators control the trajectories of interactions, exploiting role asymmetries. Even though these events of communication have to be understood as operators' efforts to create the condition for the transmission values, norms and knowledge thought to be necessary to sustain dialogical conflict management, they cost the failure of promotional goals, that is to say the failure of the social intervention.

As soon as they understand the educational intentions of social operators children try to avoid communication; if they are forced to participate to educational interaction, they limit their social participation to the lowest levels.

Even if we focused on interrogative-negative questions our conclusion, accordingly to data we gathered, could be extended also to strategic organisation of turn-taking and exploitation of repair; therefore, we think that the problem is that educational communication is not an efficient medium for the promotion of social participation.

The limits of educational communication we observed suggest that for social workers that operates among adolescents and young adults, dialogue is an opportunity to experiment, to make their work more effective and the projects in which they are involved more efficient.

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