

Accounting for *comment*-questions

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Abstract

We show that different readings of French *comment* ‘how (come)’ interrogatives in film scripts vary in the likelihood of being followed by an account in the same turn. REASON uses, which aim to resolve a conflict between the speaker’s expectations and the situation depicted by the preadjacent, are most likely to be followed by an account. METHOD uses, which ask for ways to realize the preadjacent, come second, followed by MANNER. MEANS uses, which often feature verbs of speech, are least likely to be accounted for. We argue that REASON questions are more intrusive than other readings because they can deny a discourse commitment or indicate violated presuppositions.

1 Introduction and overview

An account in interaction is defined as “a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior” (Scott and Lyman, 1968, 46). Baranova and Dingemane (2016, 642) distinguish between “providing reasons and providing accounts in interaction”, viewing “reasons as a more general phenomenon that involves causal statements for any behaviour. An account is a subtype of a reason used in the context of a delicate action”. Asking a question can be a delicate action, intrusive (Farkas, 2022; Kaneko, 2024), and even impolite when targeting assertions or presuppositions by the interlocutor (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 102). We hypothesize that REASON questions, which aim to resolve a conflict between the speaker’s expectations and the situation depicted by the preadjacent (the proposition conveyed by the interrogative clause without the operator), are particularly intrusive and therefore more likely to be followed by an account. An instance of these are French *comment* ‘how (come)’ questions, as in (1) (Fleury and Tovena, 2018, 2021; Fleury, 2021).

- (1) OSCAR Mais **comment** on peut perdre son clitoris ?! Ça se perd pas, ce truc-là !

‘But how can you lose your clitoris?! You can’t lose it, that thing!’

LOUISE J’ai plus aucun plaisir, plus rien.
‘I don’t get any pleasure any more, none.’
(Tout le Plaisir est pour Moi)

In (1), the turn continuation (Sidnell, 2012; Couper-Kuhlen, 2012) after the REASON *comment*-interrogative can be seen as an account. We use observations from French film scripts (fictionalized interaction) to explore the relationship between *comment*-interrogatives and turn continuations with accounts. Given the repeated empirical finding from different quantitative measures that scripted dialogue for audio-visual entertainment is a “close approximation” (Levshina, 2017, 311) of unscripted and informal conversations and “successfully imitates” (Bednarek, 2018, 124) its linguistic characteristics, we expect our findings to be replicable with natural conversational data. We find that accounts are frequently provided in turn continuations after *comment* questions, particularly those inquiring about REASONS (1). They occur less frequently in turn-continuations after METHOD (2) and MANNER questions (3), and infrequently after uses of *comment* that ask for the MEANS to do or say something (4) and after OTHER uses such as clarification requests (5).

- (2) RACINE Et sinon de l’alcool, vous en avez? *‘Or alcohol, do you have any?’*
PEIGNE L’alcool c’est interdit dans le camp. *‘Alcohol is forbidden in the camp.’*
RACINE **Comment** je fais si y’a rien ici ?
On l’opère au couteau sans anesthésie ?
Je vais le tuer votre mec.
‘What do I do if there’s nothing here? Cut him open without any anaesthetic? I’m going to kill your boy.’ (Nos résistances)
- (3) DJAMILA [...] je peux leur payer [...] *‘[...] I can pay them [...]’*

ANNE Et la place de votre copain, de votre partenaire, vous la voyez **comment**, alors ? Parce que vous dites : « Je ».
‘And the role of your boyfriend, of your partner, how do you see it, then? Because you say: “I”.’ (Les Bureaux de Dieu)

- (4) ANNE En fait votre mère elle, elle bloque sur le fait que vous puissiez vous retrouver enceinte ou bien que vous ayez des relations ? *‘So does your mother have any reservations about you getting pregnant or having relationships?’*
 DJAMILA Je sais pas, j’ai jamais discuté avec elle. *‘I don’t know, I’ve never spoken to her.’*
 ANNE Elle n’est pas, **comment** dire ? Vous êtes d’origine... *‘She’s not, how can I put it? You’re from...’*
 DJAMILA Algérienne. *‘Algerian.’* (Les Bureaux de Dieu)
- (5) MARTHA Bientôt, quand on sera en... *‘Soon, when we’re in...’*
 LÉNA Bientôt **comment**? *‘Soon what?’* (Calamity)

2 Corpus study

2.1 Data

We created a corpus based on 99 film scripts from the website *Lecteurs Anonymes*. We extracted and annotated 626 uses of *comment*, categorizing them according to their respective readings and whether the turn was continued after the sentence or turn constructional unit that contained *comment*. We identified 140 accounts in turn continuations. The other turns with *comment* either changed topic or continued without directly accounting for the *comment*-interrogative, as in (4).

2.2 Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of accounts according to the readings of *comment*. Figure 1 displays the adjusted standardized residuals (ASRs) of a χ^2 test on this table (bar width indicates n). While only two tendencies reach statistical significance ($ASR > 1.96$ for $p < .05$), more tendencies are visible. *Comment*-interrogatives that ask for REASONS are followed by accounts as turn continuations significantly more frequently than the other readings. This is particularly true compared to the frequent MEANS uses of *comment*, which often involve self-

Table 1: Accounts by reading of *comment*

	other	man.	rea.	mea.	meth.	Sum
acc.	2	66	23	20	29	140
no acc.	19	227	42	114	84	486
Sum	21	293	65	134	113	626

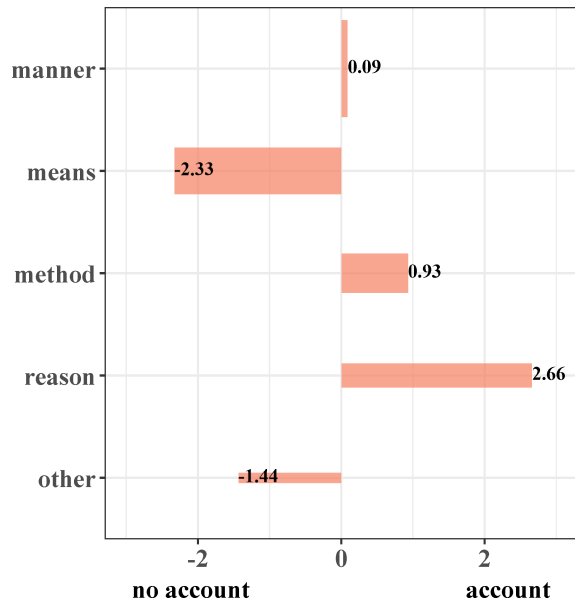


Figure 1: ASRs of a χ^2 test on Table 1

and other-addressed requests for ways of referring to something (formulations) or to someone (names). MANNER and METHOD uses are more heterogeneous and pattern between these two tendencies.

3 Interpretation and conclusion

We have shown that METHOD and REASON questions are prone to be followed by turn continuations that provide reasons for the request itself. This is indicative of reconfigurations of the context state (i.e., Table, Projected Set, Commitment Sets, Common Ground; Farkas and Bruce 2010), with such uses of *comment* often targeting assumptions related to the prejacent previously held to be part of the Common Ground, or signalling the speaker’s refusal to update their Commitment Set until reasons are provided that render the prejacent consistent with the Common Ground. The scarcity of accounts for MEANS uses of *comment* might be due to the prevalence of verbs of speech, as in (4), that tend to be self-addressed questions (no interrogative flip) or non-intrusive questions (the hearer’s answer need not solve the issue) (Farkas, 2022, 316). Future research needs to explore this connection in greater detail.

Acknowledgments

This work has been partially funded by the Hubert Curien Partnership of Campus France with the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Grant ID 57701768.

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