Alternative questions and their responses in English interaction

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This conversation analytic study investigates the sequential organization and question constraints of alternative questions in English with a focus on response formats. Building on research on polar and wh-questions (among others, Enfield, Stivers and Levinson 2010; Raymond 2003; Thompson, Fox and Couper-Kuhlen 2015), this article shows that responses to alternative questions that include a repeat of one of the alternatives are type-conforming, those that do not are nonconforming. Additionally, even though the concept of contiguity (Sacks 1973/1987) might suggest that the second alternative be confirmed, participants confirm either alternative unproblematically. Finally, my work shows that alternative questions can create difficulties for action ascription, because as they are being produced, they often resemble polar questions. My study adds to our understanding of question-answer sequences in English by providing an overview of an understudied question type in English. The data are in American English.

Keywords: alternative questions, type-conformity, question constraints, grammar in interaction, action ascription

1. Introduction

This conversation analytic study explores alternative questions (AQs) – questions that contain two or more alternatives in the format 'X or Y'[1] – in ordinary English conversations. Excerpt (1) from talkbank.org (MacWhinney 2007) serves as an initial example and illustrates the basic sequential organization of adjacency pairs consisting of an AQ first-pair part (FPP) and its second-pair part (SPP) response.

1. Theoretically, the number of alternatives connected by 'or' are infinite. My data includes examples of two and three alternatives as well as one example with five alternatives. See Section 4 for more details regarding my data.

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Excerpt 1. Chicken (CABank/CallFriend/eng-n/6862)[2]

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1  =>  F2: Does he eat m↑ea:t or only chicken.
2      F1: u::[m, <basically chicken.>
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Here, ‘or’ connects two alternatives (“meat” and “only chicken”). The response repeats a portion of the AQ to confirm one of the alternatives rather than (dis)agreement or (dis)confirmation tokens (i.e., ‘yes’/‘no’).

AQs, as they emerge (i.e., as they are being produced), syntactically resemble polar questions in their turn design *until* the second conjunct following the conjunction ‘or’ is produced. The similarities between turns-in-progress that shape up to be polar questions and those that shape up to be AQs highlight the action ascription troubles that emerging AQs can pose for participants. The average gap between turns is only about a third of the length it takes participants to plan and produce turns (Levinson 2012). Participants, then, prepare for their response while the question is still being produced; they must “assign at least one major action to a turn they have only heard part of so far” (Levinson 2012, 103), even if that action ascription is only a best guess. Participants’ responses to AQs reveal that they generally recognize the turn-in-progress as an AQ; however, the data also show that in several cases, participants treat an AQ in progress as a polar question.

To my knowledge, there has not been conversation analytic or interactional linguistic work on how interactants treat AQs and what kinds of constraints these AQs pose for recipients. In this paper, I analyze the sequential organization and question constraints of AQ question-answer pairs with a focus on different answer formats participants employ in those sequences.

2. Prior work on question-answer sequences

AQs are generally presented as one of three main question types: polar questions, wh-questions, and alternative questions (Biber et al. 1999; Enfield et al. 2010; Quirk et al. 1985; Stivers 2010).[3] Question-answer sequences – as a prime adja-

2. All data were transcribed according to the transcription system developed by Gail Jefferson (Heritage and Atkinson 1984). I use some additional notations to represent intonation (based on the Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2 (GAT 2) (Selting et al. 2009). Specifically, I use “?” for rising intonation, “,” for slightly rising intonation, “_” for level intonation, “;” for slightly falling intonation, and “.” for falling intonation. All AQs are marked with an arrow (=>) in the transcripts.

3. Sadock (2012) presents as the three main categories polar questions, content questions (or wh-questions), and rhetorical questions, including AQs in the first category. One could argue that polar questions are AQs, because the two alternatives for a response are ‘yes’ and ‘no’. How-

cency pair example (Schegloff 2007) – have been studied quite extensively within Conversation Analysis (CA) and Interactional Linguistics (IL), especially polar and wh-questions[4] (among others, Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018; Enfield et al. 2010; de Ruiter 2012; Fox and Thompson 2010; Hayano 2012; Heritage 2010; Heritage and Raymond 2012; Hester 2016; Kärkkäinen and Thompson 2018; Koshik 2005b, 2017; Lee 2012; Levinson 2012; Mazeland 2012; Pomerantz 1988, 2012, 2017; Raymond 2003; Raymond 2015; Robinson 2020, in press; Romaniuk 2013; Sadock 2012; Schegloff and Lerner 2009; Seuren 2019; Stivers and Hayashi 2010; Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen 2018; Thompson, Fox and Couper-Kuhlen 2015; Waring 2019; West 1983). In addition to Enfield et al.'s (2010) cross-linguistic comparison of questions in ten languages, questions have been studied in additional languages, including (but not limited to) Greek (Alvanoudi 2019), Russian (Bolden 2016), Estonian (Hennoste, Rääbis and Laanesoo 2017), Korean (Kim 2015; Lee 2015, 2016), Danish (Steensig and Heinemann 2013), Norwegian (Svennevig 2012), Finnish (Mikkola and Lehtinen 2019; Sorjonen 2001a, 2001b), German (Egbert and Vöge 2008; Egbert, Golato and Robinson 2009; Selting 1991), and Spanish (Raymond 2015).

Questions as such are "actions whose *main job* (...) is to request information. They make Answers, turns providing the information requested, relevant next" (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018, 218; original capitalization, building on Schegloff and Sack 1973; Schegloff 2007; among others). Asking a question does not automatically mean that the questioner is unknowing and the recipient knowing.[5] Polar questions offer an understanding, or advance a hypothesis (Bolinger 1978), for confirmation (Heritage and Raymond 2012; Pomerantz 1988; see also Betz and Deppermann (2018) on confirmables). AQs are similar but offer a choice between two understandings (rather than just one) and make relevant confirma-

ever, Bolinger (1978) argues that polar questions are not AQs; they seek confirmation/disconfirmation rather than provide true choices for the participants. See Riccioni et al. (2018) for a short summary of the two perspectives on AQs in the linguistic literature (i.e., polar questions as incomplete AQs versus polar questions and AQs as different question types). As the current study shows, participants in conversations do treat AQs differently from polar questions, providing empirical evidence for two distinct categories.

4. The literature uses various labels for these question: Yes/no-questions or yes/no-interrogatives (YNIs) (Raymond 2003) for polar questions, content questions (Hayano 2012) or question-word interrogatives (Thompson, Fox and Couper-Kuhlen 2015) for wh-questions, and 'or choice'-questions (Svennevig 2012) for AQs. I use the terms polar question, wh-question, and alternative question here.

5. This is not to imply that the distinction between knowing and unknowing is a binary one. Questions involve an epistemic gradient (Heritage 2012a, 2012b; Heritage and Raymond 2012) and participants negotiate their epistemic status as more or less knowledgeable (K+/K–).

tion of one of them. Different question types impose specific constraints as to what kind of a conditionally relevant next is an appropriate response (among others, Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018; Enfield et al. 2010; Hayano 2012; Heritage 2012a, 2012b; Heritage and Raymond 2012; Lee 2012; Raymond 2003; Schegloff 2007). For polar questions, responses that contain 'yes' or 'no' (including equivalent tokens such as 'uh huh' and 'yeah') are type-conforming; those that do not are nonconforming (Raymond 2003).[6] Responses can, of course, contain more than just these tokens. For instance, certain types of polar questions (i.e., request specifications) make relevant extended responses (Steensig and Heinemann 2013). Possible response types and formats include "non-answers/answers, partial/whole answers, direct/indirect answers" and repetitions and response tokens. (Enfield et al. 2010, 2615; Lee 2012)). Recipients can side-step a question's constraints with transformative answers (Stivers and Hayashi 2010), repeats (e.g., Bolden 2009), 'well'-prefaces (Schegloff and Lerner 2009), and no-knowledge claims such as "I don't know" (De Ruiter 2012; Enfield et al. 2010; Fox and Thompson 2010; Raymond 2003; Schegloff 2007). Repeat responses to polar questions in English are done for cause (Raymond 2003; Stivers 2010), for instance, to assert epistemic authority (Enfield and Sidnell 2015; Raymond 2003; Stivers 2005).[7]

Overall, Hayano (2012) and Lee (2012) provide an excellent overview of question design and response design. Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen (2018) condense research on question-response norms in American English: responses that contain answers are preferred over those that are non-answers, answers of the interjection-format are preferred (for polar questions), answers that confirm a question's proposition are preferred, and answers that accept, confirm, or grant ("optimal answers" (Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen 2018, 17) are provided faster than other answers. I turn to an overview of prior research specifically on AQs next.

3. Prior Research on alternative questions

AQs are the least frequent question type in English conversations. AQs make up less than 3% of English questions overall (Stivers 2010), they constitute less than 1% of questions in non-adult interaction (Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen 2018), and in courtroom interactions, only 3.5% of questions are AQs (Seuren 2019). Their infrequency may be one of the reasons they have not been investigated nearly as systematically or as extensively as polar and wh-questions.

6. See Thompson, Fox and Couper-Kuhlen (2015) on type-conformity and wh-questions.

7. See Bolden (2016) and Heritage and Raymond (2012) for distinguishing affirmation from confirmation in these contexts.

As Stivers (2010) shows, AQs occur in a variety of formats (for example, interrogative and declarative turn shapes). Of the eight instances of information-seeking AQs referenced in Stivers' study, five receive an answer as a response, three receive a non-answer such as no-knowledge claims. Sadock (2012), based on data from the TV show *The Simpsons* and the internet, discusses formal features of questions and focuses on intonation of AQs. Using the question "Is poo-poo one word or two", he illustrates that the pitch pattern for AQs is one that first rises on the first alternative, then falls but features a slight rise on the second alternative. Sadock contrasts this with the polar disjunctive question "Has science ever kissed a woman or won the Super bowl or put a man on the moon?" (where (dis)confirmation of all disjuncts is relevant next), where the pitch continuously rises and reaches its highest point turn-finally. This correlates with claims about intonation in compendium grammars such as Quirk et al. (1985), where final rising intonation for polar questions (and falling final intonation for wh-questions) is often noted.[8]

Seuren (2019) studied questions in a direct examination of an American criminal court case. His findings include that AQs "are presented as non-leading questions" (355) because they include multiple alternatives that are presented as exhaustive. Svennevig (2012) shows that in native/non-native interactions among Norwegian native speakers and non-native speakers in institutional encounters, AQs are regularly used. Questioners often reformulate an open question either as a polar question or as an AQ. AQ-reformulations provide "candidate answers to the original question" (189) and are deployed to assist non-native speakers with providing an appropriate response to a question that initially was treated as difficult to answer.

Koshik (2005a) explores AQs that initiate repair. She found that by presenting two candidate understandings, a participant can locate more precisely the trouble sources. Koshik (2005a) shows that there is generally not a preference for either first or second alternative. The exception involves error corrections, where there is a preference for confirmation of the alternative that will correct the error (which can be produced as the first or second alternative in the AQ itself). Park (2015) describes how participants use a similar practice to initiate repair: 'or'-prefaced turns. This format is used in third turn self-repairs when

8. But see Couper-Kuhlen's (2012) work on intonation, which convincingly demonstrates that both question types are produced with a variety of intonation contours. She shows that such claims do not hold up, because intonation works in concert with epistemics and with the specific social action accomplished by the question.

students project a dispreferred response. The *or*-prefaced[9] turn introduces an alternative that is cast as a correction to the initial question formulation. Koivisto (2017) investigates a similar practice in Finnish. She shows that participants rely on *vai*-increments ('or'-increments) when they are faced with a lack of uptake, allowing them to circumvent potential disagreement or disaffiliation.

Finally, Antaki and O'Reilly (2014) examine AQs in interactions where health practitioners ask children questions to determine appropriate mental health treatment. Based on the concepts of contiguity and preference for agreement (Sacks 1973/1987), they argue that answerers will orient to the second alternative in AQs. They argue that the more negative alternative is given first in an AQ, and that it is harder to agree with or confirm that alternative. Because of this, if a child were to confirm this more negative, first alternative, it would be "more diagnostically reliable" (338). Antaki and O'Reilly (2014) examined questions that feature micropauses prior to 'or' (i.e., those that could be seen as a polar question followed by an 'or'-prefaced TCU similar to those discussed by Park (2015) and Koivisto (2017) above), questions that as their second alternative spell out the negated version of the first, and questions ending in 'or no' (as in "do they have to be in order or no" (Antaki and O'Reilly 2014, 343)). It is important to note that a preference for either first or second alternative in AQs has not been established empirically; such a preference might, of course, exist in institutional encounters such as the one Antaki and O'Reilly (2014) investigate. Recall, however, that Koshik (2005a) shows that there is no preference for confirmation of either first or second alternative in AQ repair initiators. The analysis here further underscores that there is no such preference in ordinary conversation. Despite the scarcity of work on AQs, there is a general assumption that an AQ makes relevant "a statement as to which of the alternatives that the question presents is correct" (Sadock 2012, 107; see also Heritage and Raymond 2012; Park 2015; Rossano 2010; Riccioni et al. 2018) rather than 'yes'/'no'.

With the exception of AQs, CA and IL research on questions is robust. The current paper adds to our understanding of how question sequences are organized in English conversations by focusing on AQs. The analysis will show that AQs create contingencies different from other questions, and that emerging AQs – due to their similarities with polar questions – can pose action ascription challenges for interactants. The analysis will also show that responses that contain a (partial) repeat of one of the AQ-alternatives constitute type-conforming responses to AQs. In contrast to polar questions, repeat responses are not done for

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9. In addition to 'or'-prefaced turns, participants employ turns ending in 'or'. For Icelandic *eða*, see Blöndal (2008); for Swedish *eller*, see Lindström (1997); for English 'or,' see Drake (2015); for German *oder,* see Drake (2016) and König (2017); for Estonian *või*, see Keevallik (2009).

cause. As with other question-answer sequences, answers are preferred over non-answers and recipients of AQs can sidestep the AQs' constraints by, for example, providing a third alternative in their response.

4. Data

The data for this study come from the transcribed portions of mundane, dyadic telephone interactions found in the CallHome and CallFriend corpora on the publicly available database Talkbank (MacWhinney 2007) and from my own corpus of video-recorded, ordinary, multi-party interactions (roughly two hours). Participants range in age from eight to eighty and are all native speakers of American English from a variety of geographic areas in the United States. This corpus yielded 75 examples of AQs. 35 of these examples were employed as repair initiators and excluded here (see Koshik 2005a). This resulted in a collection of 40 information-seeking AQs.[10] Names, images and other identifiers have been anonymized in all data excerpts. All data for this study were collected in compliance with the regulations and policies set by the author's university's Institutional Review Board.

My collection does not include any examples where the second alternative is produced after a delay of uptake, that is, *separately* from the first alternative (such as those examined by Koivisto (2017) and Park (2015)). To be included in this data set, the AQ had to be produced as one unit turn, because response-pursuing 'or'-prefaced increments create different contingencies. Finally, examples of the format "Can she call you back or not" were excluded. In these instances, the second alternative is the negation of the first, and does not constitute a 'true' alternative. Drake et al. (2019) demonstrate that 'or not'-questions in German, English, and French in fact are treated as polar questions. Participants use a variety of AQ formats in my data, including interrogative and declarative formats (most frequent) such as "Was he American or Spanish" and "with your heart specialist or this was your regular doctor" where the prepositional phrase "with your heart specialist" is expanded into an AQ by linking the declarative clause "this was your regular doctor' via the conjunction 'or'. Participants also use phrases such as "A long time ago or recently". Finally, they combine declarative and interrogative clauses in AQs as in "Did your mother know or you didn't tell anyone"; both the declarative and the interrogative structure can be turn-initial or turn-final.

10. Given the small percentage of AQs reported in Stivers (2010), and my focus on AQs that do not initiate repair, this number is not surprising.

Regardless of syntactic structure, participants in my data treat these AQs as questions.

The majority of AQs in my data set are AQs consisting of two alternatives. In one instance, the AQ consists of a five-item list (a participant in a board game is asked which set of game pieces he would like to have via a list of five color choices). Only seven instances include three alternatives. In my data, the third alternative can be a wh-clause such as "you feeling energetic or tired or how you going', the phrase "or what" as in "Are you buying or are you just gonna rent or what", or another interrogative clause as in "Is it a windows for workgroups *or* a windows three one version *or* is it a Windows ninety-five slash NT version". Questions with more than two alternatives are responded to in the same ways as questions with just two alternatives.

5. Analysis

In this section, I focus on how recipients of AQs deal with AQ constraints by outlining two response formats found in my data: (i) responses that contain a repeat, (ii) responses that provide a third alternative. I also discuss challenges in terms of action ascription that can arise for recipients of AQs.

5.1 Response type 1: Repeat responses

The data illustrate that a response that repeats at least a portion of one of the alternatives of the AQ constitutes an appropriate next and typed response. Either alternative can be confirmed unproblematically. Repeats in response to AQs do not have to be identical. In most cases, the repeat is a partial repeat.[11] Excerpt (2) is a first example of cases in which the response contains a repeat. Here, Sara tells Deb about a man she befriended during her recent vacation to Puerto Rico.

11. Schegloff (1996) defines identical repeats based on lexical criteria; that is, repeats that are lexically the same as that which is repeated, with the exception of potential prosodic changes, deictic shifts, and "speaker change adjustments" (179). Adjustments due to speaker change are, for instance, pronoun shifts. If participant A asks participant B "is that still yourself" and the answer is done via a repeat, the reflexive pronoun will likely be modified from "yourself" to "myself" in "it is still myself". A different intonation contour, however, is interactionally consequential (Couper-Kuhlen 1996; Curl 2005; Curl, Local and Walker 2006; Ogden 2006; Persson 2015). Repeating what another has said will always involve some degree of modification. In this study, repeats that match the original more closely and those that do not did not emerge as interactionally consequential categories. Hence, I refer to all repeats as 'repeats'.

Excerpt 2. American (CABank/CallFriend/eng-n/6239)

```
1        Sa:  .hhh one of the most important thing is to get that
2             beer on ice=hihi[hi hahaHAHAHA =I] was like OH I LOve
3        De:                  [hahahahahaha    ]
4        Sa:  You. [hehehe          ]
5    =>  De:       [was he American] or Spa:ni[sh]_
6        Sa:                                  [ A]m↑erican.
7        De:  °w↑o:w.°
8        Sa:  >I mean_< he like_ (0.6) >I don't know;< he got kicked
              out of three colleges
```

In lines 1 and 2, Sara presents what this man said about beer as reported speech. She also presents her reaction – "Oh I love you" (lines 2 and 4) – as reported speech.[12] Deb joins in with Sara's laughter. Note that her laughter begins after Sara has already produced two laughter tokens. Jefferson's work (e.g. 1984b) shows that laughter placed any later than this would be heard as unaffiliative. Some slight misalignment between the participants might also account for Sara's very positive assessment of this man, "I was like Oh I love you" (lines 2 and 3).[13] Deb then poses a follow-up question "was he American or Spanish" (line 5). This is the AQ of interest and functions as an information request. The grammatical format of the AQ is an interrogative clause with an embedded noun-phrase conjoin. This FPP makes relevant a SPP next. The response, which repeats the first portion of the noun-phrase conjoin, is provided immediately, without any delays, hedges, or accounts; in fact, it is provided in slight terminal overlap. Deb receipts this answer with an assessment in third position (line 7), treating the AQ-response as an appropriate and fitted next.

In Excerpt (3), Angela and Jessica are playing the board game *Risk* together with two other participants. It is Angela's turn to play.

Excerpt 3. Territories

```
1        An: SO_ WHat- (ONe)? when you get like pieces >at the
2    =>      beginning;=do you count how many< you ha:ve or how many
3            territories you have.
4        Je: how many territor[ies.
5        An:                  [oh damn. °one two three four°
```

Here, the AQ (line 2 and 3) functions as a request for information about an aspect of the game rules. The choice is between how many pieces one has (alternative X) versus how many territories one has (alternative Y). The AQ encodes the two alternatives in a full interrogative clause with an embedded clausal 'or'-conjoin. Jessica provides a relevant SPP (line 4) by repeating one of the alternatives. Specifically, the response turn consists of a partial repeat of alternative Y, "how

12. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that these utterances are done as reported speech but do not necessarily constitute reported speech.

13. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this precise laughter analysis.

many territories". This response is again produced immediately, without any delays or hedges. It is treated as a fitted and appropriate response to the AQ, as evidenced by Angela's assessment in line 5 and her move to continue the game play.

In Excerpt (4), A and B are talking on the phone. Line 1 constitutes a new topic. A is asking B a question on behalf of a third party, Spencer. The topic seems to be B's upcoming wedding event at which Spencer will be the photographer.

Excerpt 4. Spencer (CABank/CallHome/eng4184)

```
1       A:  I was talking to Spencer?
2       B:  uhhuh?
3   =>  A:  ((lip smack)) and .hhh He: nee:ds to know:_ .hh a- whether
4           there'll be more than one set up or <just one set up;>
5           (0.5)
6       B:  [°((lip smack))° ju[st one.
7       A:  [.h                [>now the< set up would be:_ you know,
8           everybody being photographed in the same place.
9       B:  yeah I know; >yeah< just one.
10      A:  one. okay:? .hh and then he needs to know
```

The AQ (line 3) is an embedded, indirect question "he needs to know whether there'll be more than one set up or just one set up". As a type of compound turn constructional unit (similar to *if….then* formats), which "projects continuation with a specifiable type of second part" (Mazeland 2012, 477), "whether" projects a second alternative early. In my data, this is the only example in which a turn's syntax projects two alternatives. Immediately following the AQ, there is a pause of 0.5 seconds. Then, B produces a lip smack, signaling that she is getting ready to respond. In overlap with this lip smack, B's in-breath also signals impeding speakership. B's talk starts slightly sooner than A's talk. B's turn (line 6) constitutes a response to the AQ; it is a partial repeat confirming alternative Y ("just one set up"). It is produced after a pause and in partial overlap with A's response pursuit in form of an explanation for one of the alternative's implications.

A continues his turn (line 7 and 8), which contains features typical of overlap: He rushes through the first two words before slowing down once he is in the clear (Jefferson 1984a, 1986). A provides evidence as to why the first alternative might be the better set-up. If the first alternative were to be chosen, then not everyone would be photographed in the same place. Because this account is provided in overlap, I argue that it is not in response to the repeat-response from line 6, but in response to the pause in line 5. In line 9, B asserts that she knows and is aware of what A has just explained via "yeah" and an explicit "I know", claiming K+ status (Heritage and Raymond 2012) regarding this information. Then, she reaffirms, this time explicitly with a "yeah", the alternative her repeat had already confirmed before. She then repeats her original partial-repeat answer ("just one") to the AQ again (line 9). This time, A receipts this answer by repeating it ("one") and producing a third-position receipt ("okay"). The "okay" also marks sequence closure and transitions to the next sequence (Beach 1993, 1995; Schegloff 2007;

Thompson et al. 2015). The repeat-answer to the AQ is thus treated as an appropriate response.

Even though the excerpt contains a "yeah"-token in the second response turn to the AQ, it further demonstrates that a (partial) repeat of one of the alternatives satisfies the constraints of an AQ. The partial repeat of one of the alternatives is produced at the first relevant point – after the AQ itself (albeit after a pause). Following the additional explanation by A due to the pre-response delay, B first attends to that explanation and then provides a second response to the AQ. This second AQ response features the confirmation token "yeah" followed by the partial repeat. I suggest that this "yeah" token reaffirms the original repeat response rather than one of the original question's alternatives.

In addition to responses that consist of repeats only, participants also produce responses that include 'no' prior to the repeat. In Excerpt (5), we join M1 and RHO about four minutes into the call. Prior to the excerpt, M1 explained the recording procedure. Line 1 comes after a previous sequence has been closed.

Excerpt 5. One call (CABank/CallFriend/eng-n5220)

```
1  =>  RHO: >can you just make< one call or can you call your
2           ↑mom and dad [or_
3      M1:               [nah;=↑just one.
4      RHO: °just one   c[all.°
5      M1:               [and I chose you.=how bout that.
```

The AQ in line 1 consists of two full interrogative clauses joined by 'or' and functions as an information request. This turn ends in turn-final 'or' (Drake 2015), which is overlapped by M1's response (line 3). M1's response begins in terminal overlap and contains more than just a (partial) repeat of one of the alternatives. Specifically, he disconfirms alternative Y with "nah" and moves on to confirm alternative X with a partial repeat "just one". His response turn thus addresses both alternatives. RHO receipts this response with a modified repeat of the repeat-response in line 4, treating M1's response as an appropriate next.

These four excerpts demonstrate that participants regularly repeat one of the alternatives in their responses to AQs. Twenty-two of the forty samples include a repeat in the response. Fourteen include a repeat only, eight include a repeat and 'no'. Of the fourteen repeat-only responses, seven repeat the first alternative, six repeat the second alternative; one response repeats one of five AQ-alternatives. Of the eight that include a 'no' in addition to the repeat, the repeat confirms the first alternative, the 'no' disconfirms the second alternative (in one instance, this is reversed). Overall, then, the numbers suggest that the second alternative is confirmed less frequently than the first alternative. However, confirming either first or second alternative is done unproblematically in my data set, highlighting that participants do not orient to the first or second alternative as being preferred (in line with Koshik's (2005a) work on repair-initiating AQs).

The eight instances that include a 'no' show that the repeat remains crucial to avoid ambiguity and to satisfy the question constraints. The repeat also demonstrates the recipients' orientation to the question as an AQ. In most examples, then, recipients of AQs first attend to the more recently produced portion of talk first, enacting the principle of contiguity (Sacks 1973/1987). However, Sacks had speculated that participants might be compelled to confirm both alternatives (first the second alternative and then the first alternative). This is not the case in my data. When participants' responses attend to both alternatives, they explicitly disconfirm one and confirm the other. This format also exemplifies that participants quite easily (in thirteen of twenty-one instances) "reach into the body of the question" and choose "the more hidden alternative" (Antaki and O'Reilly 2014, 338), i.e., the first alternative.

Just like responses to polar questions that minimally contain a 'yes' or 'no' are type-conforming responses (Raymond 2003), so – too – are responses to AQs that contain a repeat of one of the alternatives provided in the question. They are treated as appropriate; questioners accept the repeat via third-position receipts, assessments, or by moving on to a new sequence. They do not lead to repair initiations or other talk that would suggest trouble, indicating that the questioner accepts and treats the response as appropriate. The examples also show that participants treat AQs differently from polar questions. Instead of confirming with a 'yes' token, they confirm with a repeat of one of the alternatives. Repeat responses are generally produced immediately and without hedging (but slight delays as in Excerpt (4) can occur). They are produced and treated as straightforward, type-conforming responses. In contrast to responses that include a repeat *and* a 'no', responses that include a repeat *and* a 'yes' (in which the 'yes' confirms one of the alternatives) do not occur in my data, reinforcing that a repeat functions as the default confirmation type in AQ-responses. In addition to repeating one of the two alternatives, participants also sometimes introduce a third alternative in response.

5.2 Response type 2: Third alternative responses

Responses to AQs that contain a repeat of one alternative are overwhelmingly produced in preferred turn shape formats, although participants can (and do) produce repeat answers that include slight delays. Dispreferred turns (among others, Pomerantz and Heritage 2012; Schegloff 2007; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977; Sidnell 2010) can include pro-forma agreements, delays, accounts as well as epistemic phrases such as "I don't think" (Kärkkäinen 2003) and other hedges such as "well" (Heritage 2015; Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen 2018; Pomerantz 1984; Schegloff and Lerner 2009). Such features amount to various ways in which inter-

actants break contiguity with questions and index misalignment. Overwhelmingly, repeat-containing responses are treated as type-conforming and preferred responses in my data. They move the initiated action forward. Excerpt (6) and (7) illustrate that in contrast to these repeat-containing responses, those that do not contain repeats are – in my data set – always produced as dispreferred turns, indicating issues with the question as it was asked. Excerpt (6) shows a first example. Prior to the transcript provided, Sara told Deb about how she and her friend spent time together in Puerto Rico.

Excerpt 6. Little Guest House (CABank/CallFriend/eng-n/6239)

```
1        SAR:  and then we'd fall asleep but;
2              (.)
3        SAR:  U[m:,
4   =>   DEB:   [does she have a nice pla:ce or >does she live< in a do:rm
5              or [what_]
6        SAR:     [   n:]No:, she:- (0.4) no.=a:ctually she's moving right
7              now, .hh But U:m,
8              (0.6)
9        SAR:  no. SHe rents a r::roo:m:,
10             (1.1)
11       SAR:  >it's kind of like< this little house or guest house type
12             thing, behi:nd, (.) >the people's house?<
13       DEB:  m hm,
14       SAR:  .hh and that's where she: (.) has a bedroom or whatever;=
15             =but, >uh< she's kind of had some problems cause_ I don't
16             know; (.) this morning I guess she woke up and there were
17             (her) like fifty fli:es in her room;=and so she sprayed;
18             and she's (.) moving out. (.) [°today.°]
19       DEB:                                [o:h.    ]
```

In line 4, Deb asks a question about Sara's friend's living arrangements. This information request takes the shape of an AQ consisting of two full interrogative clauses, followed by a turn-final "or what"-phrase. The X alternative is "does she have a nice place" and the Y alternative is "does she live in a dorm or what". In overlap with "what", Sara begins her response with a 'no' token, and the cut-off pronoun "she". After 0.4 seconds, Sara repeats the "no", followed by "actually" and an account for why neither alternative can be confirmed: The friend does not have a place and she does not live in a dorm; she is moving. After more delays in line 8, Sara repeats the "no" one more time followed by a third alternative: "she rents a room". In what follows, Sara describes the living arrangements in some more detail. This explanation reveals why the question, as it was asked, was difficult to answer, and accounts for the dispreferred turn shape format. Not only did neither of the two alternatives of the AQ apply, the third alternative was not even "nice" and the living arrangements had just changed in the morning of the day of the phone call. In line 19, Deb claims to have understood the situation by producing a change of state token (Heritage 1984).

The next excerpt illustrates this pattern further. In Excerpt (7), we join a group of friends playing the board game *Risk*. Prior to the excerpt, Angela has rolled two dice as part of her game move.

Excerpt 7. Dice (author's corpus)

```
1  =>  An:  do we add em ↑up or is it just like individual dice.=
2      Je:  =uhm
3           (.)
4      Al:  [I think it's the-]
5      Je:  [I think it's the] highest_ like_ it just gives you
6           better chances of getting a higher [one.
7      An:  [Oh:. damn.
```

Here, the AQ contains two interrogative clauses linked by 'or'. Alternative X is "do we add em up" and alternative Y is "is it just like individual dice". The response is delayed by "uhm", a micropause, and the epistemic marker "I think" (Kärkkäinen 2003). The turn "it's the highest like it just gives you better chances of getting a higher one" is responsive to alternative Y, as it provides an account for why alternative Y applies (i.e., it is the highest die that counts, not the total of adding up both dice), but it does not confirm alternative Y straightforwardly. The response does not contain a repeat of one of the alternatives, and it is produced with dispreferred turn elements. The response also indicates that the question, as it was asked, is difficult to answer, because as Angela's negative assessment in line 7 indexes, the confirmation of alternative Y is disadvantageous for her game move.

In my data, providing a third alternative is one way that participants use to indicate that the question as it was asked is difficult to answer on its terms, making these responses a type of transformative answer (Stivers and Hayashi 2010), sidestepping the AQ constraints. Neither of the propositions are confirmable as asked. In these response types, accounts are usually produced. In my data, in thirteen examples, participants confirm neither alternative and instead present a third alternative altogether. In three of these examples, the response contains a "no"-token (as did Excerpt (7) above) and in seven instances, the response contains no such disconfirmation token. While such third-alternative responses sidestep the AQ constraints, they constitute answers to the AQ-FPP, thereby demonstrating that responses that contain an answer are preferred over non-answers (Stivers, Sidnell and Bergen 2018; Schegloff 2007; Stivers and Robinson 2006; Stivers et al. 2009).

5.3 AQs and action ascription

My data also contain five instances in which an AQ is first oriented to as a polar question. When participants treat the question in progress as a polar question, and when they confirm the proposition of that turn-in-progress while that turn

is still being shaped, the answerer engages in subsequent additional interactional work. Excerpt (8) is illustrative of the cases in which AQs are (initially) oriented to as polar questions.

In Excerpt (8), M2 had asked M1 if he had looked further into the requirements for a job, and M1 replies that it depends on whether he will get the clerk of the works job. M2 initiates repair on that in line 1.

Excerpt 8. Clerk of the works (CABank/CallFriend/eng-n/6952)

```
1        M2:  get the what?
2        M1:  the clerk of the works job. you kno:w, ru- uh overseeing
3             construction of the .hh library addition in town;
4        M2:  .hhh
5             (0.9)
6    =>  M2:  o:h=okay;=is tha:t (.) is that something with the town
7             of Newtown or is [that ] <still: yourself.>
8        M1:                   [yeah.]
9             (0.3)
10       M1:  well_ y- n:o. it's still myself.
```

After the repair solution in line 1, M1 begins to explain in more detail the "clerks of the works job". M2 receipts this information with "oh okay" (line 6), indexing a change of state (Heritage 1984), and adds a follow-up question requesting information. This AQ consists of two alternatives: overseeing the library construction could be "something with the town of Newtown" or it could be that M2 continues to be self-employed ("is that still yourself"). M1 produces a confirmation with "yeah" (line 8) in overlap with M2's emerging AQ production, thereby orienting to the turn in progress as a polar question. The confirmation is uttered *after* 'or', it is produced prior to the second alternative. When the "yeah" is produced, only one alternative is available for confirmation.

However, having interpreted the emerging question to be a polar question turns out to be premature. M2 continues the production of the AQ (rather than dropping out of overlap), and he treats the "yeah" as *not* responding to his question; in other words, the "yeah" is treated as a response that is not appropriate at this moment in the interaction. Once the AQ has been fully produced, there is a pause of 0.3 seconds (line 10). M1 then begins formulating his responding turn. It is prefaced with "well", indicative of a non-straightforward response (Schegloff and Lerner 2009; Heritage 2015), followed by what could be the beginning of another 'yes', but the cut-off after "y" is followed by "no", which disconfirms his earlier positive response. Finally, M1 produces an answer that satisfies the constraints of the AQ: a repeat of alternative Y: "it's still myself". The additional interactional work that is necessary here as part of the response to the AQ is a result of M1's initial 'best guess' action ascription having been incorrect. Once the AQ was fully formed and had been recognized as such, M1 revises his earlier response into one that corresponds to the AQ constraints.

This excerpt shows that when recipients orient to the question in progress as a polar question, they provide confirmation tokens as a response. When the question in progress continues to shape up into an AQ, these initial positive responses are subsequently modified. In my data, participants do not produce disconfirmations as 'early' responses to the question in progress. Given that confirmations are produced more quickly than disconfirmations (Stivers et al. 2009), this is not surprising. Note that 'no' can be part of a an AQ-response only if the response includes a repeat or a third alternative.

This section illustrates that AQs pose unique interactional challenges for participants. Emerging AQs syntactically look like polar questions until the second conjunct following the coordinating conjunction 'or' is produced;[14] this can lead to recipients of AQ-turns initially orienting to the emerging turn as a polar question. If participants follow their best guess in terms of action ascription too soon, they might provide an answer consistent with the constraints made relevant by polar questions rather than those of AQs. This illustrates that with the case of AQs, action ascription is not "only a best guess" (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018), but action ascription itself emerges as turns are being produced. When a participant's action ascription is left "uncorrected in the following turn(s), [it] becomes in some sense a joint 'good enough' understanding" (Levinson 2012, 104). These instances show that when the understanding of a turn-in-progress is not 'good enough', participants engage in subsequent interactional work. Of course, recognizing a particular turn-in-progress's structure does not automatically mean that the action that turn implements is recognized. The action of information-seeking is commonly implemented via polar questions, which further complicates AQ recipients' action ascription. They might be ascribing "information seeking" to a turn or they might project that confirmation or disconfirmation is relevant next, but when the AQ fully emerges, this action requires responses of a format different from those for polar questions, i.e., repeats, and *not* other types of confirmations are oriented to as type-conforming and relevantly appropriate nexts in response to AQs.

Prosodic cues might be a resource that can help disambiguate polar questions from AQs. Sadock (2012) shows (based on scripted examples) clearly different intonation patterns for AQs in comparison to disjunctive polar questions. The intonation pattern for his AQs shows a rise on the first alternative, subsequent falling intonation and a secondary slight rise on the second alternative. The current study does not systematically investigate the AQs' intonation patterns, but Sadock's (2012) description seems to apply based on perceptual analysis only.

14. Recall that in my data set, only one example contains syntactic elements that project more than one alternative via a whether-format.

Sadock (2012) describes the intonation pattern for disjunctive polar questions as continually rising intonation that reaches its highest point turn-finally. However, if systematic analysis of AQ intonation patterns in naturally occurring talk confirms Sadock's (2012) findings, then those patterns might not be that helpful for participants in the moment when AQs are being produced. If there is a rise on the first alternative of AQs, this rise could be interpreted as being the final rising intonation of a polar question. The picture gets further complicated, because not all polar questions feature turn-final rising intonation (see Couper-Kuhlen 2012). Future research can establish more systematically how prosodic cues might be employed in aiding participants in action ascription and in disambiguating AQs from polar questions.

6. Concluding discussion

In this paper, I argue that AQs make relevant a response that contains at least a repeat of one of the alternatives; the response may include 'no' tokens, but in these cases, the confirmed alternative nevertheless gets repeated. These repeat responses are treated as appropriate nexts, as type-conforming responses. Responses that do not include a repeat of one AQ-alternative are nonconforming. In these nonconforming responses, participants resist the AQ constraints and respond with a third alternative (here, too, 'no' tokens can be produced as part of the response). Those responses are produced as dispreferred turns. Finally, participants may modify a 'yes' response that turns out to have been given prematurely when participants treat the question in progress as a polar question first, leading to additional interactional work. Overall, AQs then make relevant more than a confirmatory 'yes' or disconfirmatory 'no', because these tokens would create ambiguity as to which alternative is being (dis)confirmed. In line with Koshik's (2005a) work on repair initiating AQs, either first or second alternative can be confirmed unproblematically.

AQ sequences share features with other question-answer adjacency pairs. Most notably, they require specific type-conforming responses next, similar to polar questions (Raymond 2003). Consistent with other question-answer sequences, AQs create constraints as to what ought to come next. These constraints have been described as limiting. Romaniuk (2013), for instance argues that AQs are a way to "tighten the reigns' (161) in interviews, and as such, are suitable for response pursuit actions. In my information seeking AQs, participants overwhelmingly respond unproblematically. Although participants can sidestep the AQ constraints (as they can for other question types as well), they do not show an orientation to the AQ being more limiting than other question types. A fascinat-

ing area for further research would be to examine if and how the specific syntactic format of an AQ is employed for specific purposes. In other words, participants might employ an AQ consisting of an embedded conjoin (as in Excerpt (2)) in different interactional environments than an AQ consisting of two full interrogative clauses (as in Excerpt (6)).

Research on polar questions has found that confirming responses are preferred and that they are provided more quickly and more frequently than disconfirmations (Lee 2016; Sacks 1973/1987; Stivers et al. 2009; also Pomerantz and Heritage 2012). Kärkkäinen and Thompson (2018) work on response packages of type-conforming responses includes "some support to Sacks's (1987) arguments that questions are designed to elicit a yes response" (222). Interactants have also been shown to "design their response so as to maximize elements of confirmation and avoid or minimize disconfirmation" (Lee 2016, 159; also Pomerantz and Heritage 2012). This applies to AQ sequences as well: Of the 21 instances in which repeats are provided as a response, only seven contain a "no" as part of that response. The more frequent response type is the one that contains simply the confirmation repeat and avoids explicit disconfirmation via 'no'. This also ties back to Sacks (1983/1987) observations about potential pressure to agree with both alternatives. My data does not show any instances in which both alternatives are confirmed. Participants clearly treat AQs as creating constraints that make relevant a repeat response confirming one of the two alternatives proffered. These typed responses promote contiguity and progressivity in interaction most straightforwardly.

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