

# The question-response system in Mandarin conversation

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This article provides an overview of the question-response system in Mandarin Chinese from a conversation analytic perspective. Based on 403 question-response sequences from natural conversations, this study discusses the grammatical coding of Mandarin questions, social actions accomplished by questions, and formats of responses. It documents three grammatical types of questions, that is, polar questions (including subtypes), Q-word questions, and alternative questions. These questions are shown to perform a range of social actions, confirmation request being the most frequent. Also, this article reveals that the preferred format for confirming polar answers is interjection, while that for disconfirming polar answers is repetition. It provides a starting point for future studies on Mandarin questions and responses as well as a reference point for further crosslinguistic comparison.

**Keywords:** question, response, Mandarin, conversation analysis, social action, polar answer, interjection, repetition

## 1. Introduction

Question-response sequences are ubiquitous in social interaction. They provide a fundamental vehicle through which various social actions are accomplished, such as information request, confirmation request, invitation, repair, suggestion, and challenge (Bolden and Robinson 2011; Curl 2006; Curl and Drew 2008; Egbert and Vöge 2008; Heritage 2010; Koshik 2003, 2005). Taking a conversation analytic (CA) approach, recent studies have been fruitful in revealing how question-response sequences are organized in both normative and non-normative ways. It has been found that questions place powerful constraints on answers in different ways: (1) questions set topical and action agendas for answers; (2) they incorporate the speaker's presuppositions and epistemic stances; and (3) they are designed with preferences for certain answer types (Heritage 2002, 2010, 2012;

Raymond 2003; Schegloff 2007). These constraints, however, can be resisted, challenged, or even transformed (Bolden 2009; Hakulinen 2001; Hayashi and Kushida 2013; Heritage and Raymond 2012; Keevallik 2012; Kim 2013, 2015; Sorjonen 2001; Stivers 2018; Stivers and Hayashi 2010).

Extending the scope cross-linguistically, Enfield et al. (2010) present a series of works on the question-answer systems of ten typologically different languages in search of universals in human behavior. The ten languages are examined in terms of formal coding of questions, social actions accomplished through questions, normative organization of responses, preference for answer types, and the role of visible behaviors. Combining qualitative analyses of interaction and quantitative coding of relevant categories, these studies reveal both similarities and particulars that exist in the question-answer system across languages.

As a continuation, Enfield et al. (2019) offer a comparative perspective on how polar questions are answered in fourteen languages. They focus on two distinctive grammatical formats of answer, that is, interjection (e.g. *uh huh, yes, mm*) and repetition, which repeats part or all of the question. Their cross-linguistic comparison indicates a strong statistical preference for interjectional answers, which are argued to be pragmatically unmarked.

So far the Mandarin question-response system has not yet been examined in a way that allows for cross-linguistic comparison, despite a few studies having discussed specific aspects of the system (see Section 2 for a brief review). Not enough is known about how Mandarin speakers design and deploy questions in everyday conversation, how different formats of questions are employed to accomplish different social actions, how questions are responded to, and how different responses have different interactional import. Applying the coding scheme proposed by Stivers and Enfield (2010) to Mandarin data, the present study offers a more comprehensive introduction to the Mandarin question-response system with two particular aims. The first is to reveal the grammatical coding of Mandarin questions, the social actions accomplished by them, and the basic response types based on a large collection of question-response sequences in natural conversations, paving the way for cross-linguistic comparison. Second, it aims to use the CA approach to re-examine some much debated issues about Mandarin questions, such as question classification, sentence-final question particles, and interjectional answers. While an article-length study like this cannot provide an adequate discussion on these issues, the goal here is to contribute some CA insights to complement the previously discourse-functionally motivated solutions to some long-standing grammatical debates.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews prior studies on Mandarin questions and answers; Section 3 introduces the data and analytical methods used in this study; Sections 4, 5 and 6 investigate question

types, social actions, and response types respectively; Section 7 concludes this study.

## 2. Previous studies on Mandarin questions and responses

The topic of Mandarin questions has been approached from different theoretical orientations. While formal linguists have attempted to reveal the rules in which different interrogative structures and their meanings are generated (Cheng 1984; Dong 2009; Gasde 2001; Huang 1991; McCawley 1994), functionalists have offered insights on how questions are used in real-life communication – their grammatical formats and pragmatic functions.

Li and Thompson (1981), for instance, propose a classification of Mandarin questions, consisting of four types:

– Question-word questions (hereafter ‘Q-word questions’);

- (1) 你请谁吃饭?  
*Ni qǐng shéi chī fàn*  
 you invite who eat food  
 Whom did you invite to eat?

– Disjunctive questions (including both alternative questions formatted with *haishi* ‘or’ and A-not-A questions);

- (2) 你去还是他来?  
*Ni qù haishi tā lái*  
 you go or he come  
 Will you go, or will he come?

- (3) 你喜欢不喜欢他的衬衫?  
*Ni xǐhuan bù xǐhuan tā de chènshān*  
 you like NEG like he GEN shirt  
 Do you like his shirt or not?

– Particle questions (those ending with a final question particle);

- (4) 你能写中文字吗?  
*Ni néng xiě Zhōngwén zì ma*  
 you can write Chinese character QP  
 Can you write Chinese characters?

– Tag questions.

- (5) 我们去吃水果，好不好?  
*Wǒmen qù chī shuǐguǒ, hǎo bù hǎo*  
 we go eat fruit good NEG good  
 Let’s go eat some fruit, OK?

This early study, despite its fundamental contribution to the study of the Mandarin question-answer system, does not reflect the full range of questions in natural conversation due to its source of data, namely the researchers' own introspective knowledge of the language. Building on this work, a number of later studies center on identifying the pragmatic functions of different types of questions (Chu 1998; Shao 1996; Shao and Zhu 2002; Tsai 2011).

Compared to the much larger body of research on Mandarin questions, responses have received significantly less attention. Li and Thompson (1981) consider the 'fittedness' between question and answer, suggesting that 'the natural answer' varies according to their corresponding question type: (1) for disjunctive questions, either 'A' or 'not A' constitutes a natural response; and (2) particle questions can be answered with the verb phrase in the question or its negative counterpart; alternatively, particle questions can also be answered with interjections such as *dui* 'right' or *bu dui* 'not right', or the copular *shi* 'be' or *bu shi* 'not be'. This finding is echoed in Turk (2006) and Tsai (2011).

Additionally, scholars have found that negative response tokens such as *bu shi* and *mei you* have grammaticalized such that they can do different kinds of interactional work beyond negation (Chiu 2012; Wang 2008; Wang et al. 2007; Yu 2004; Yu and Drew 2017), although these inquiries are not necessarily confined to question-answer sequences.

In the past two decades, a growing number of studies have taken a CA approach to examine various aspects of Mandarin questions and/or responses based on naturally occurring conversations. Three main themes have emerged so far. The first concerns the relationship between question and answer. Turk (2006) analyzes the projection mechanism in Mandarin question-answer sequences and explores the ways in which the grammar of the questions influences the grammatical shape of their responses. Wang (2020) probes into the grammatical conformity between question and answer in Mandarin, revealing that conforming answers and non-conforming answers have distinctive interactional imports. The second line of scholarship deals with different grammatical designs of questions, in relation to epistemics, sequence organization, and action formation. Tsai (2011) discusses the interactional relevance of two question formats (i.e. *-ma* particle questions and A-not-A questions), focusing on how these two formats are oriented to by both speaker and hearer and how the associated question-answer sequences unfold accordingly. Also examining these two question formats, Kendrick (2010) mainly addresses the epistemic dynamics incorporated in them and how they are involved in the formation of social actions. In a subsequent study, Kendrick (2018) analyzes a final particle *ba*, as used in questions, assessments, and informings, and discovers that it consistently downgrades the speaker's epistemic status across different sequential environments. In the same vein, Tsai (2019) investigates tag

questions, arguing that they assert independent epistemic access while simultaneously seeking confirmation from the party with higher epistemic authority. The last theme of the literature concerns non-verbal resources used in Mandarin question-response sequences. Li (2014) finds that Mandarin speakers recurrently lean toward their co-participant when initiating a ‘recipient intervening’ question and do not release the leaning body until a response is provided. She thus argues that leaning can serve as another resource to mobilize responses.

In sum, previous studies have offered insights on the specific workings of Mandarin questions and responses in everyday conversation, yet a more comprehensive study is needed to understand the full range of questions and responses in Mandarin, their statistical distribution and preference, as well as their similarities and uniqueness compared with other languages. Built on existing Mandarin literature and cross-linguistic works (Enfield et al., 2010; Enfield et al., 2019), the present study investigates the Mandarin question-response system more broadly and inclusively with the hope of laying some groundwork to bring Mandarin into the cross-linguistic discussion in this regard.

### 3. Data and analytic methods

The data of this study come from two sources: five face-to-face everyday conversations from the my own collection and two telephone conversations from the CallFriend Mandarin Corpus (Canavan and Zipperlen 1996), adding up to eight hours in total duration. All the conversations were recorded in the United States. The participants were native speakers from different parts of Mainland China.

Following Stivers and Enfield’s (2010) inclusion criteria, the present study has identified 403 question-response sequences. It should be pointed out that the term ‘question’ is defined more broadly in Stivers and Enfield (2010). In classic CA literature ‘question’ is distinguished from ‘interrogative’: the former is understood as a social action, while the latter is considered a grammatical form. However, in order to maximize cross-linguistic comparability, Stivers and Enfield (2010) adopt a more inclusive criterion:

A question had to be either (or both) a formal question (i.e., it had to rely on lexico-morpho-syntactic or prosodic interrogative marking) or a functional question (i.e., it had to effectively seek to elicit information, confirmation or agreement whether or not they made use of an interrogative sentence type).  
(2621)

The current study follows this criterion. To avoid confusion, it should be clarified that Section 4 identifies all possible grammatical formats that are able to accom-

plish the social action of questioning in Mandarin; Section 5 examines the full range of social actions that these formats are able to perform; and Section 6 discusses response types to the action of confirmation seeking, focusing specifically on responses to polar questions that carry out this action.

The questions and responses were coded according to the scheme proposed by Stivers and Enfield (2010) – including formal coding of questions, social action of questions, normative preference for response, and relative preference for answer types – except that visible behavior was not coded, as the CallFriend data do not provide visual information.

Analyses of sequences were done in the framework of conversation analysis (Goodwin and Heritage 1990; Lerner 2004; Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 2007). All data were transcribed with the conventions developed by Jefferson (2004)

#### 4. Question types in Mandarin

As reviewed in Section 2, Li and Thompson (1981) classify Mandarin questions into four categories. While this classification has been a frequent reference, there are two problems with it. First, particle questions and tag questions, despite being syntactically distinctive, share a fundamental semantic-pragmatic similarity, i.e. they project a response of a particular polarity. This fact recommends the regrouping of them together as polar questions. Second, according to Li and Thompson (1981), disjunctive questions include A-not-A questions and alternative questions with *haishi* ‘or’. In fact, the two subtypes have more differences than commonalities. A-not-A questions make relevant a polar response, while *haishi* questions typically provide two options for the respondent to choose from, which are not necessarily polar responses. For this reason, A-not-A questions are subsumed under polar questions in the present study and *haishi* questions form another category with a more universal label, alternative questions. Additionally, there is another subtype of polar questions not discussed in Li and Thompson (1981), that is, declarative questions. They do not have any interrogative marking and are highly context reliant (see Section 4.1.2 for details).

Therefore, three types of Mandarin questions can be identified: polar questions, Q-word questions, and alternative questions. My data show that polar questions are the most prevalent type (67%,  $n=270$ ), followed by Q-word questions (28%,  $n=113$ ) and alternative questions (5%,  $n=20$ ). Table 1 below shows the distribution of all question types. Next, I discuss each of the three question types.

**Table 1.** Distribution of Mandarin question types

	Tokens	Percentage
Polar	270	67%
Q-word	113	28%
Alternative	20	5%
Total	403	100%

#### 4.1 Polar questions

Mandarin has three syntactic ways to construct polar questions: by adding a sentence-final question particle, by transforming the predicate into an A-not-A form, or by adding a question tag. A declarative sentence can also serve as a polar question with certain prosodic and/or sequential features. Particle questions account for the absolute majority (58%), and declarative questions come next with 23%. Table 2 presents the numbers and percentages of the subtypes of polar questions.

**Table 2.** Distribution of polar questions by subtype

	Tokens	Percentage
Particle	157	58%
Declarative	63	23%
A-not-A	30	11%
Tag	20	8%
Total	270	100%

##### *Particle questions*

The predominant way of forming polar questions in Mandarin is by adding a sentence-final particle to a statement. The unmarked question particle is 吗 *ma* (Chao 1968; Chu 1998; Li and Thompson 1981), which accounts for 67% of all particle questions in my data. The rest includes 啊 *a* (including its phonetic variants 呀 *ya* and 啦 *la*), 吧 *ba*, and, 哈 *ha* (see Table 3).

Different from *ma*, these particles are not exclusively used for question marking; they are used in statements as well. Rather than plainly questioning, these particles modulate the epistemics of questions in different ways.

Consider the particle *a*, which has been traditionally thought as softening the query (Chao 1968; Chu 1998; Li and Thompson 1981; Lu 2005). Wu (2004) and Wu and Heritage (2017) show that this particle indexes an incongruity of knowl-

**Table 3.** Distribution of particle questions by question particle

	Tokens	Percentage
<i>ma</i>	104	66%
<i>a/ya/la</i>	25	16%
<i>ba</i>	17	11%
<i>ha</i>	8	5%
other	3	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100%</b>

edge or information between what the previous speaker just said and what the *a* speaker presumes to be true. This observation is supported by my data, in which *a* is found to initiate a repair or to convey the questioner's surprise, both arising from an information gap between the interlocutors.

Extract (6) below exemplifies that how *a* indexes such a gap. Prior to this extract, Yi advised Kai against the last unit along a corridor when choosing an apartment. Kai inquires about the reason (line 1), which clearly puts herself in a less knowing position (K-) regarding this matter (Heritage 2012). After explaining to Kai about the general principles of *feng shui* (lines 3–5, omitted), Yi produces a negatively framed question (line 6), 'you don't know these?', with a final particle *a* indicating the speaker's surprise arising from Kai's lack of knowledge in this regard.

(6) question particle *a* indexing knowledge incongruity between participants

(ZYLK)

- 01 Kai: 走廊最后的房间有什么原由吗? =  
*Zoulang zuihou de fangjian you shenme yuanyou ma?*=  
 corridor last SP room have what reason QP  
 Is there any reason for the last room in a corridor?=  
 02 Yi: =一般走廊最后一个房间是阴气比较重。  
*=Yiban zoulang zuihou yi ge fangjian shi yinqi bijiao zhong.*  
 usually corridor last one CL room COP yin-energy  
 relatively heavy  
 =Usually the room at the end of a corridor has relatively  
 heavier yin energy.  
 ((lines 03–05 omitted))  
 06 Yi: → 你不知道这些啊?  
*Ni bu zhidao zhexie a?*  
 you NEG Know these QP  
 You don't know these?  
 07 Kai: ^我不知道, 我只知道说: 房子(.)就是床不能靠墙放。  
*^Wo bu zhidao, wo zhi zhidao shuo: fangzi (.) jiushi bu neng kao qiang fang.*  
 I NEG know I only know DM house DM NEG can  
 against wall put  
 ^I don't know, I only know that: house (.) well bed cannot  
 be put against the wall.



The next most frequent particle, *ba*, has been considered a marker soliciting agreement and indexing uncertainty (Chu 1998; Li and Thompson 1981), or lowering the speaker's epistemic status, thereby softening the tone (Kendrick 2010, 2018; Lu 2005) when used at the end of a polar question. My data, in line with previous findings, suggest that *ba* essentially puts a proposition on the table to which the questioner lacks epistemic commitment and thus seeks confirmation from the recipient. And *ba* questions are by design tilted toward an affiliative answer.

There is another question particle, *ha*, observed in my data. Similar to *ba*, it seeks the confirmation from the recipient regarding the proposition advanced by the questioner; yet it embodies a higher epistemic stance than *ba*, suggesting a stronger likelihood of securing agreement (Yin 1999; Yang and Wiltschko 2016). The emergence of *ha* as a question particle is very recent and has been argued to be a result of dialect influence<sup>1</sup> (Yin 1999). Therefore, it is not as common and widespread as the other question particles.

In addition, previous studies discussing *ne* have generally agreed that *ne* signals that the current question is in connection with the co-participant's previous claim, expectation, or belief (Chao 1968; Chu 1998; Li and Thompson 1981; Lu 2005; Qin 2012).

### *Declarative questions*

The next most frequent type, declarative questions, are syntactically declarative sentences. What makes them recognizable as questions is usually prosody (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; see Zeng et al. 2004 for Mandarin declarative question prosody) or their underlying action (Enfield et al., 2019). When a speaker makes an assertion primarily within the recipient's domain of authority (Stivers and Rossano 2010), it is routinely treated as a question that attracts a response (i.e. a confirmation or a disconfirmation). Extract (7) provides an example of a declarative question (in line 1).

#### (7) declarative question (LJWHJJ)

- 01 Jia: → *Alhambra*也有华人区?  
*Alhambra ye you huaren qu?*  
 PN also have Chinese region  
*Alhambra also has a Chinese area?*
- 02 Jing: 嗯, 对呀.  
*En, dui ya.*  
 INJ right MP  
 Uh-huh, right.

1. It has been reported that *ha* is widely used in Northern Mandarin, especially in Beijing, Tianjin, and Northeastern Mandarin varieties, and has been observed entering Standard Mandarin recently (Yin 1999; Yang and Wiltschko 2016).

### A-not-A questions

A-not-A questions present two choices of opposite polarity – one affirmative and one negative. The A slot can be occupied by either a verb (Extract 8), an adjective (Extract 9), an adverb, or even an aspect marker (Chen and He 2001; Li and Thompson 1981). Verbs are found to be the most frequent occupants of the A slot (90%,  $n=27$ ), with 有没有 *you-meí-you* ‘have-not-have’ ( $n=12$ ) and 是不是 *shi-bu-shi* ‘be-not-be’ ( $n=7$ ) being the prevailing verb configurations.

#### (8) A-not-A question formatted with a verb (ZYLK)

- 01 (5.0)  
 02 Kai: → 对哦你>有没有<在学校参加志愿者活动?  
*Dui o ni >youmeiyou< zai xuexiao canjia zhiyuanzhe huodong?*  
 well MP you have-NEG-have at school participate volunteer activity  
 Well >have you< participated in any volunteer activities at university?  
 03 Yi:  
 没有‘我太懒’.  
*Meiyou ‘wo tai lan’.*  
 NEG-have I too lazy  
 (I) haven’t ‘I’m too lazy’.

#### (9) A-not-A question formatted with an adjective (LLM)

- 01 Chen: 你住几个人的寝室?  
*Ni zhu ji ge ren de qinshi?*  
 you live how-many CL people SP dorm  
 You live in a dorm room of how many people?  
 02 Ling:  
 三:个:.  
*San: ge:.*  
 three CL  
 Three:.  
 03 Chen: → 你住得觉得舒服不舒服?  
*Ni zhu de juede shufu bu shufu?*  
 you live SP feel comfortable NEG comfortable  
 Do you feel you live comfortably or not?  
 04 Ling:  
 我觉得挺好的因为我的roommate都是学霸:。  
*Wo juede ting hao de yinwei wo de roommate dou shi xueba:.*  
 I feel pretty good SP because I SP roommate all COP  
 straight-A-student  
 I feel it’s pretty good because my roommates are all  
 straight A students:.

### Tag questions

Tag questions have been traditionally defined as a statement plus a short A-not-A tag such as *shi-bu-shi* or *dui-bu-dui* (Li and Thompson 1981). My data show that there are other types of tags such as 是吧 *shi ba* ‘yes?’ and 对吧 *dui ba* ‘right?’ attached to a statement to form a confirmation-seeking question (see Extract 10).

#### (10) tag question with *dui ba* ‘right?’ (LLM)

- 01 Chen: → 你说的是十个周对吧?  
*Ni shuo de shi shi ge zhou dui ba?*  
 you say SP COP ten CL week right QP  
 You are saying (it’s for) ten weeks right?  
 02 (0.5)

03 Ling: 对.  
Dui.  
right  
Right.

## 4.2 Q-word questions

Q-word questions are formed with interrogative pronouns such as *shei* ‘who’, *shenme* ‘what’, *zenme* ‘how, why’, *weishenme* ‘why’, and *nali* ‘where’. See Table 4 below for the distribution of Q-word questions. *Shenme* ‘what’ (36%) is the most frequent interrogative pronoun used in Q-word questions, followed by *zenme* ‘how’ (19%), *weishenme* ‘why’ (11%) and *nali/na’er* ‘where’ (11%), consistent with cross-linguistic findings.

**Table 4.** Distribution of Q-word questions by interrogative pronouns

	Tokens	Percentage
<i>shenme</i> ‘what’	41	36%
<i>zenme</i> ‘how’	29	16%
<i>weishenme</i> ‘why’	12	11%
<i>nali / na’er</i> ‘where’	12	11%
<i>shenme shihou</i> ‘when’	8	7%
<i>duoshao / ji</i> ‘how many’	7	6%
<i>shei</i> ‘who’	5	4%
<i>nage</i> ‘which’	4	4%
<i>duojiu / duochang shijian</i> ‘how long’	2	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100%</b>

It should be noted that Mandarin nominal interrogative pronouns (e.g. *shei*, *shenme*, *nali*) may also function as indefinite pronouns denoting notions such as ‘whoever’, ‘anyone’, ‘whatever’, ‘anything’, ‘wherever’ and ‘anywhere’ (Chao 1968; Li 1992; Li and Thompson 1981). A review of non-interrogative uses of Mandarin interrogative pronouns can be seen in Lee et al. (2017).

In my data, it is common to find interrogative pronouns serving as indefinite pronouns in polar questions, as in (11). *Shenme* in this case is used as an indefinite pronoun, meaning ‘any’.

(11) interrogative pronoun *shenme* as an indefinite pronoun (LLM)

01 Ling:→ 有什么问题吗?  
You *shenme* wenti ma?  
have what question QP  
Are there any questions?  
02 (3.0)

### 4.3 Alternative questions

The last question type is alternative question, which is formatted with *haishi* ‘or’. Alternative questions typically offer two options for the respondent to choose from (see Extract 12).

#### (12) alternative question (CallFriend\_5636)

- 01 B: 你你在哪儿呢现在?  
*Ni ni zai nar ne xianzai?*  
 you you at where MP now  
 Where are you, now?
- 02 → 在家还是在学校?  
*Zai jia haishi zai xuexiao?*  
 at home or at school  
 At home or at school?
- 03 A: 在家.  
*Zai jia.*  
 at home  
 At home.

Alternative questions can also take the form of ‘A or what’, where one option is provided and followed by an interrogative pronoun. This type of question provides only one option as the candidate answer and leaves the other option open to the respondent (see Extract 13 below).

#### (13) alternative question (CallFriend\_5636)

- 01 B: → 你是指语言方面还是什么?  
*Ni shi zhi yuyan fangmian haishi shenme?*  
 you COP refer language aspect or what  
 Are you referring to the language aspect or what?
- 02 A: \*嗯\*.  
*\*En\*.*  
 INJ  
 \*Uh-huh\*.

To sum up, polar questions are the most diverse and complex category among all Mandarin questions. Within this category, particle questions show the highest level of diversity. The question particles not only encode questionhood but also communicate interactional nuances such as modulating the epistemic stance embodied in the question, signaling the connection with the recipient’s prior utterance or position, and projecting the type of response. Some new question formats have been discovered through the examination of conversational data. Tag questions can be formatted with *dui ba* ‘right?’ and *shi ba* ‘yes?’ in addition to the regular A-not-A tags. Alternative questions can take the ‘A-or-what’ form, opening one option for the recipient. Also, the non-interrogative use of interrogative pronouns has been observed, in particular, forming polar questions with a question particle (e.g. Extract 11).

## 5. Social actions performed through questions

In my data, confirmation request (53%,  $n = 215$ ) stands out as the most prevalent social action performed by Mandarin questions, followed by information request, repair initiation, and assessment. The Other category includes less frequent actions such as suggestion, invitation, and accusation. As can be seen in Table 5, Mandarin Q-word questions and alternative questions are predominantly used for information requests (94% and 85% respectively), while polar questions are mainly built for confirmation requests (79%).

**Table 5.** Distribution of social actions by question type

Social action	Polar	Q-word	Alternative	Total
Confirmation request	215 (79%)	0 (0%)	2 (10%)	215 (53%)
Information request	32 (12%)	106 (94%)	17 (85%)	157 (39%)
Repair initiation	10 (4%)	2 (2%)	1 (5%)	13 (3%)
Assessment	7 (3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (2%)
Other	6 (2%)	5 (5%)	0 (0%)	11 (3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>270 (100%)</b>	<b>113 (100%)</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>403 (100%)</b>

Among polar questions, tag and declarative questions are mostly used for confirmation requests. Particle questions, although largely employed for confirmation requests, can still serve as a vehicle for requesting new information (10%). A-not-A questions, which have been traditionally considered free of questioner assumption (Li and Thompson 1981), can in fact incorporate assumptions, as in confirmation requests. In addition, more than half of A-not-A questions are built for information requests. See Table 6 for their distribution. Four examples are then provided below to illustrate each of these social actions.

**Table 6.** Distribution of social actions by subtypes of polar questions

Social action	Tag	Declarative	Particle	A-not-A
Confirmation request	20 (100%)	58 (92%)	124 (79%)	13 (43%)
Information request	0	0	16 (10%)	16 (53%)
Repair initiation	0	3 (5%)	7 (5%)	0
Assessment	0	0	7 (5%)	0
Other	0	2 (3%)	3 (2%)	1 (3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>20 (100%)</b>	<b>63 (100%)</b>	<b>157 (100%)</b>	<b>30 (100%)</b>

Extract (14) shows a confirmation request done through an A-not-A question. Prior to this fragment, Mao showed Chen a text message from their mutual friend Zhang, based on which Chen inferred that Zhang was unhappy. Incorporating this assumption, Chen's question (line 1) seeks confirmation from Mao, who is a more knowing party.

(14) A-not-A question requesting confirmation (LLM)

- 01 Chen: → 他是不是不开心了?  
*Ta shibushi bu kaixin le?*  
 he COP-NEG-COP NEG happy MP  
 Is he unhappy?
- 02 Mao: 他没有不开心啊, 他没有不开心, 他很开心。  
*Ta meiyou bu kaixin a, ta meiyou bu kaixin, ta hen kaixin.*  
 he NEG-ASP NEG happy MP, he NEG-ASP NEG happy, he very happy.  
 He isn't unhappy, he isn't unhappy, he is very happy.

Information requests can be seen in Extract (12) and (13) in Section 4.2.

The next example, (15), shows a Q-word question being used as an other-initiation of repair. Kai makes a statement that drinking tea can be addictive (line 1). At line 2, Yi repeats the auxiliary *keyi* 'can', followed by the interrogative pronoun *shenme* 'what', and thus locates the particular spot where the trouble occurs. While this instance targets a specific item in the prior utterance, *shenme*, when used alone, can initiate open-class repair as well, indicating problems of hearing or understanding. Polar questions, by contrast, are frequent vehicles for other-initiation of repair that identifies a specific trouble source.

(15) Q-word question as repair initiation (ZYLK)

- 01 Kai: 我觉得喝茶可以上瘾。  
*Wo juede he cha keyi shangyin.*  
 I think drink tea can get-addicted  
 I think drinking tea can get addictive.
- 02 (0.5)
- 03 Yi: → >可以什么<?  
 >*Keyi shenme*<?  
 can what  
 >Can what<?
- 04 Kai: 可以上瘾:。  
*Keyi shangyin:.*  
 can get-addicted  
 Can get addictive:.

Among all question types, only polar questions – more specifically particle questions – have been observed to be employed for assessments. In Extract (16), Kai asks Yi, a female international student in a US university, whether she eats in the residential dining halls (line 1), and Yi responds affirmatively (line 2). An assessment is offered subsequently by Yi in line 5, in the form of a rhetorical question, which does not seek confirmation but conveys a proposition of the opposite polarity, i.e. that there is no place worth eating in the nearby area, as an account for why she typically eats at the residential dining halls. Note that this

assessment is formatted with *shenme*, which serves as an indefinite pronoun here meaning ‘any’ (see Section 4.2). Yi’s assessment, partially overlapped with Kai’s just-initiated turn, compels Kai to abandon her unfinished turn and motivates a response from her. At line 6, Kai produces a negative form, *mei you*, to align with Yi’s stance (line 7).

## (16) polar question as assessment

(ZYLK)

- 01 Kai: 你一般都是在学校宿舍那边吃吗?  
*Ni shi yiban dou shi zai xuexiao sushi nabian chi ma?*  
 you COP usually all COP in school dorm there eat QP  
 Do you usually eat in the (dining halls) of the school  
 dorms?
- 02 Yi: >对啊<.  
 >*Dui a* <.  
 right MP  
 Right.  
 (0.5)
- 03 Kai: 我觉[得,  
*Wo jue[de,*  
 I think  
 I thi[nk,
- 05 Yi: → [不然这里(.)这这一片有什么值得吃的吗hh?  
 [*Buran zheli(.)zhe zhe yi pian you shenme zhide chi de ma*  
 hh?  
 otherwise here this this one area have what worth eat SP QP  
 [Otherwise here(.)this this area has anything worth eating  
 hh?
- 06 Kai: 没有=.  
*Meiyou=.*  
 NEG-have  
 No=.
- 07 Yi: =对呀.  
 =*Dui ya.*  
 right MP  
 =Right.

## 6. Response types

When a question is produced, three types of responses are possible: (1) an answer, which directly addresses the question; (2) a non-answer response, which fails to directly deal with the question (including other-initiation of repair); and (3) no response (Stivers and Enfield 2010). My data show that, in Mandarin, answer ( $n=327$ , 81%) is statistically preferred over non-answer and no response (see Table 7), consistent with the patterns found in other languages.

Table 7. Distribution of response types in Mandarin questions

Answer	Non-answer	No response	Total
327	66	10	403
81%	16%	2%	100%

While answers are generally constrained by their prior questions, the aspect and/or the extent of being constrained vary across question types. Polar questions, among all types, are the most constraining because they reduce the relevant answers to two alternative tokens, for instance, prototypically *yes* and *no* in English (Raymond 2003). Thus, I consider responses to polar questions in this section.

### 6.1 A typological perspective on polar answers

Sadock and Zwicky (1985) classify languages into three types based on how polar questions are answered:

1. a ‘yes-no’ system, in which an interjectional answer such as *yes* or *no* matches the question’s polarity;
2. an ‘agree-disagree’ system, in which an interjectional answer indicates the agreement or disagreement with the questioner’s proposition, regardless of the question polarity (e.g. Q: *Do you not see them?* A: *Yes* [= ‘Yes it’s true, I do not see them’]);
3. an ‘echo’ system, in which the answer repeats the main verb in the question with or without additional materials (e.g. Q: *Do you not see them?* A: *I do not see them*).<sup>2</sup>

Enfield et al. (2019) criticize Sadock and Zwicky’s proposal for obscuring a more basic two-way distinction, that is, *interjection* and *repetition*, since both ‘yes-no’ and ‘agree-disagree’ systems utilize interjectional responses. Enfield et al. (2010) and Enfield et al. (2019) report that languages generally employ more than one strategy, and interjection is the cross-linguistically preferred response type. In what follows, I examine Mandarin polar responses, both confirming and disconfirming, to find out whether this global preference holds for Mandarin.

Following Stivers and Enfield (2010) and Enfield et al. (2019), I define *interjection-type answers* as answers that do not assert a proposition in and of themselves but do confirm or disconfirm one. *Repetition-type answers* are defined as answers that repeat fully or partially the elements without qualitative semantic alternation. All other types of answers are labeled *Other*, which mainly includes transformative answers (Stivers and Hayashi 2010).

### 6.2 Interjectional responses to Mandarin polar questions

First of all, it is necessary to delimit interjectional responses because interjection in Mandarin is a fussy category that lacks a clear and consistent definition. Tradi-

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2. Examples in (2) and (3) are quoted from Enfield et al. (2019).



tionally, interjections are understood as stand-alone particles that are syntactically independent from the sentence and do not have fixed lexical tone (Chao 1968), such as 喂 *wei* (when answering phone calls), 嗯 *en* (signaling assent or acknowledgement), 呃 *e* (a marker of hesitation), and 哦 *o* (indicating a change of state), just to list a few. Not all interjections can be polar responses. In Chao's list, only 嗯 *en* and 啊 *a* (with low falling tone) can be used as polar answers. I term this group of interjections, which do not function otherwise, as *primary interjections*.

On the other end of the delimitation problem is a group of emerging interjections from other lexical classes that are frequently used to respond to polar questions, such as 好 *hao* 'good', 对 *dui* 'right', 行 *xing* 'alright, okay', 是 *shi* 'be' (Chui 2002; Lü 1980/2004; Wang et al. 2010), and their negative counterparts 不 *bu*, 不是 *bu shi*, and 没有 *mei you*, among others. I consider them *secondary interjections*, because their interjectional uses are derived from their lexical semantics. The distinction between primary and secondary interjections is in accord with earlier studies on English interjections (Ameka 1992; Norrick 2009).

However, one issue arises from the definition of secondary interjections. When secondary interjections respond to questions that are formatted with the corresponding adjective/verbs, should they be considered interjectional or repetitive responses? For example, as an answer to the question *ni shi Beijing ren dui bu dui?* 'are you from Beijing, right?', how should *dui* 'right', as an answer, be analyzed?

My solution is to recognize cases like these as repetitive answers. When secondary interjections respond to questions that do not contain the corresponding adjectives/verbs, they are considered interjection-type responses. Admittedly this is an analytical decision, yet it is supported both theoretically and empirically. First, secondary interjections are in the process of pragmaticalization (Diewald 2011; Heine 2013). One characteristic of pragmaticalization is the expansion of occurring contexts. That is, the further into this process, the more diverse the context in which these markers can occur. In this case, they are expanding to answer questions that they are not grammatically fitted to. This is both evidence for their pragmaticalization and for the validity of analyzing them as interjections when they do not repeat any part of the prior question. Empirically, not all interjections have the same level of pragmaticalization; some are more full-fledged than others. For instance, *meiyou* is found in Wang (2020) to occur more often as an interjectional response (68%) than as a repetitive response (32%). By contrast, *bushi* is found in the same study more frequent as a repetitive response (79%) rather than an interjectional response (21%), suggesting a lower degree of pragmaticalization.

Example (17) shows a primary interjection, *en*, responding to a question formatted with the copula verb *shi*. The polar question in (18), likewise designed with

the copula *shi*, is responded to by a secondary interjection *dui* ‘right’. (19) shows a secondary interjection responding negatively to a polar question.

(17) primary interjection in a confirming response (LJWHJJ)

- 01 Jia: ^哎我(.)我现在真的很喜欢用微商的东西>\*我跟你说\*<.  
^Ai wo(.)wo xianzai zhende hen xihuan yong weishang de  
dongxi  
>\*wo gen ni shuo\*<.  
INJ I I now really very like use WeChat-goods SP  
things  
I to you say  
^Ah I(.) I now really like to use WeChat goods >\*I'm telling you\*<.  
02 (0.3)
- 03 Jing: 是真的有用吗?  
Shi zhende youyong ma?  
COP really useful QP  
Are (they) really useful?
- 04 Jia: → 嗯.  
En.  
INJ  
Uh-huh.

(18) secondary interjection in a confirming response (ZYLK)

- 01 Yi: 你室友是台湾人啊?  
Ni shiyou shi Taiwan ren a?  
your roommate COP PN person MP  
Is your roommate from Taiwan?
- 02 Kai: → 对:: [台湾的,  
Dui:: [Taiwan de,  
right PN SP  
Right:: [Taiwan,  
03 Yi: [有没有矛盾啊?  
[You-mei-you maodun a?  
have-not-have conflict MP  
[Do you have conflicts?

(19) secondary interjection in a disconfirming response (CCMMZM)

- 1 FY: 是是是欧洲人吗? =  
Shi shi shi Ouzhou ren ma=  
COP COP COP Europe person QP  
Is is is he from Europe?=  
2 CC:→ =没有 h祖国人,  
=Meiyou (h)Zhongguo [ren,  
NEG China person  
=No, (he is) (h) Chin[ese,

### 6.3 Repetitional responses to polar questions

Repetition-type responses repeat part or all of the prior question. Minimally, they include part of the predicate of the question (see Extract 20 below) with the only exception being tag questions, whose repetitional answers consist minimally of the verb/adjective in the tag (see Extract 21). Repetition can be non-minimal, including other parts of the preceding question, as shown in (22).

It has been argued that repetitional responses assert higher epistemic and social entitlement than interjectional responses (Heritage and Raymond 2012; Raymond 2003; Schegloff 1996; Stivers 2005). If we look into repetitional

responses, non-minimal repetitional answers exert even more agency and claim more epistemic rights over the information at issue than minimal repetitions.

Compare (20) and (22). The response in (20) repeats the auxiliary only, whereas that in (22) repeats both the subject and the verb. In (20), Kai tells Yi that she is taking Japanese Linguistics this semester (line 1). This raises Yi's doubts about Kai's qualification for taking that course (line 2), since to her knowledge one needs to pass Japanese 3 as a prerequisite. To respond to Yi's particle question, Kai deploys a minimal repetitional answer (line 3), *keyi* 'can', repeating only the auxiliary in the question. This format assents to Yi's agency as well as the terms of her question.

By contrast, in (22), Jia's non-minimal answer *wo zhidao a* 'I know' (line 2) asserts independent epistemic access to the information in question, challenging the questioner's presupposition that Jia may not know the city of Guangzhou. The final particle *a* evokes a contrast between the speaker's actual epistemic stance and what has been assumed by the interlocutor, and therefore reinforces speaker's pre-existing knowledge or experience regarding the matter in question.

## (20) minimal repetitional answer

(ZYLK)

- 01 Kai: 噢我还选了一门那个: Japanese Linguistics, CM123.  
*Ou wo hai xuan le yi men nage: Japanese Linguistics, CM123.*  
 INJ I also choose ASP one CL DM Japanese Linguistics CM123  
 Oh I also enrolled in the: Japanese Linguistics, CM123.
- 02 Yi: 你可以选吗?  
*Ni keyi xuan ma?*  
 you can choose QP  
 Can you enroll (in that course)?
- 03 Kai:→ 可以.  
*Keyi.*  
 can  
 (I) can.
- 04 Yi: 不是说要过了三吗?  
*Bushi shuo yao guo le san ma?*  
 NEG say have-to pass ASP three QP  
 Don't (they) say that (one) has to pass (Japanese) 3?
- 05 Kai: *hh* 为什么我选到了?  
*hh weishenme wo xuan dao le?*  
 why I choose COMP ASP  
*hh* how come I (was able to) enroll in it?

## (21) minimal answer repeating the question tag

(CallFriend\_4257)

- 01 B: 嗯, 他太太也要来对吧?  
*En, ta taitai ye yao lai dui ba?*  
 INJ his wife also will come right QP  
 Well, his wife will also come right?
- 02 A: → 对.  
*Dui.*  
 right  
 Right.

## (22) non-minimal repetitional answer

(LJWHJJ)

- 01 Jing: 你知道广州吗?  
*Ni zhidao Guangzhou ma?*  
 you know PN QP  
 Do you know Guangzhou?

02 Jia: → 我知道啊。  
*Wo zhīdao a.*  
 I know MP  
 I know.

#### 6.4 Transformative responses to polar questions

Despite the constraints set by questions, respondents can actively resist them using various strategies. Among them, transformative answers retroactively modify the grammatical design and/or agenda of the prior question, essentially addressing “a somewhat different question than was originally posed” (Stivers and Hayashi 2010, 2).

Extract (23) shows a transformative response with a term replacement. Kai asks Yi whether Yi’s friend studies French out of interest (line 1). The key term *gan xingqu* ‘be interested’ is replaced in Yi’s response with a different formulation, *juede Fawen bijiao youyong* ‘feel French is relatively useful’.

#### (23) transformative response (ZYLK)

01 Kai: 她是因为感兴趣所以去学吗?  
*Ta shi yinwei ganqingxu suoyi qu xue ma?*  
 she COP because be-interested so go learn QP  
 Is (it) because she is interested so she learns (French)?

02 Yi: → ^她是觉得法文比较有用。  
 ^*Ta shi juede Fawen bijiao youyong.*  
 she COP think French relatively useful  
 ^She thinks French is relatively useful.

#### 6.5 Distribution of polar responses

The distribution of the three polar response types is summarized in Table 8. Mandarin interjectional answers (39%,  $n=88$ ) do not significantly outnumber repetitive and transformative answers. This seems to contradict the findings of Enfield et al. (2019), i.e. that interjection is the statistically preferred type. Since Enfield et al. (2019) focus on confirming responses only, separating confirming from disconfirming responses in my data allows for valid comparison. When this is done, interjections are observed to be used more often than repetitions in confirming responses, whereas repetitions are favored in disconfirming responses (see Table 9).

**Table 8.** General distribution of the grammatical types of polar responses

Interjection	Repetition	Transformative	Total
88	79	57	224
39%	35%	26%	100%

**Table 9.** Answer formats in confirming vs. disconfirming responses

	Interjection	Repetition	Transformative	Total
Confirming	65	44	10	119
	56%	36%	8%	100%
Disconfirming	12	34	26	72
	17%	48%	36%	100%

The distributional difference in confirming and disconfirming responses is not surprising if we consider the sequential features of different responses. Interjectional responses do not convey any propositional content; instead, they are retrospectively tied to the prior question and thus rely on the specific formulation offered by the prior speaker. This makes interjectional answers inherently acquiescent to the design and the agenda of the question. This explains why interjections are more frequently used in confirming answers. By contrast, repetition answers assert the proposition in themselves, thus claiming more epistemic authority over the information at issue (Heritage and Raymond 2012). Therefore, this format is often deployed to deliver a disconfirming response, challenging the questioner's agency or the epistemic gradient presumed by the questioner. Even more radical in this regard are transformative answers, which problematize the terms or the agenda of the prior question. It is the most incongruent answer type. That is why transformative answers are the second favorite format (36%) for disconfirming responses, behind only repetition (48%).

Another issue arises if we compare Mandarin interjections (in confirming answers) more closely with Enfield et al. (2019). In eleven out of the fourteen languages investigated in their study, interjections account for over 80% of responses to polar questions. Among the three languages in which interjections account for less than 80% of responses in their study, the 'repetition-prominent' status of Brazilian Portuguese (55%) has been shown to be simply a result of different categorizing methods. The lack of statistical preference for interjectional response in  $\neq$ Åkhoe Hai|lom (51%) and Tzeltal (34%) has been explained in terms of their cultural norms (e.g. resistance to coercion). Why, then, does Mandarin likewise have an only marginal statistical preference for interjection (56%)? While a full discussion would merit a separate article, I offer some preliminary explanations here.

First, Mandarin lacks a set of generic polar interjections like *yes* and *no* in English. *Shi* and *bushi*, usually translated as *yes* and *no*, are not true equivalents to *yes* and *no*; instead, they are secondary interjections, which are primarily used as copular verbs. In the current study, *shi* and *bushi* are counted as interjections only when they respond to questions formulated without *shi*. Second, in languages

where generic polar interjections can be used to answer all polar questions, the choice between an interjectional format and a repetitional format is pragmatically or interactionally driven. In Mandarin, however, such a choice is not completely interactionally motivated because some question formats place grammatical constraints on the response shape. For instance, A-not-A questions, although they are polar questions, essentially put two options on the table for the respondent to choose from. Take for example, *ni qu bu qu Beijing?* ‘are you going to Beijing?’ An interjectional answer, *shi* or *bushi*, would cause confusion as to which polarity the respondent is aligning with. However, a repetitional response, *qu* ‘go’ or *bu qu* ‘not go’, can avoid such confusion and make an unequivocal answer. To sum up, the lack of generic polar interjections and the special grammatical constraints imposed on responses are factors, possibly among others, that contribute to the relatively lower percentage of interjectional answers in Mandarin.

## 7. Conclusions

This study has provided an overview of the Mandarin question-response system, in particular the ways in which Mandarin speakers design their questions and responses as well as deploy questions to accomplish social actions.

It has been found that polar questions, among all the question types, exhibit most diversity and complexity. They are found in four formats, i.e. particle questions, declarative questions, A-not-A questions, and tag questions, which are employed rather differently for social actions. While the majority of tag questions (100%) and declarative questions (92%) are used for confirmation requests, more than half of A-not-A questions are built for information requests. As for polar answers, previous studies have demonstrated that interjection is the pragmatically unmarked option and thus enjoys cross-linguistic preference over repetitional response. In Mandarin, however, interjections do not significantly outnumber repetitions as in many other languages. Two characteristics of Mandarin polar answers have been discovered in the present study. First, Mandarin does not have generic polar interjections like *yes* and *no*, and instead has two sets of interjections: primary interjections such as *en* and *a*, which confirm a proposition acquiescently, and secondary interjections such as *shi* ‘be’ and *dui* ‘right’, which have developed or have been developing from other lexical classes. Second, the statistically preferred format differs between confirming and disconfirming responses: the former favors interjection while the latter favors repetition.

This study sheds new light on some existing linguistic debates such as Mandarin question classification, question particles and interjectional responses by incorporating CA insights. Applying the cross-linguistic coding framework devel-

oped by pioneering studies to Mandarin data, the current study makes it possible to compare the Mandarin question-response system with those of other languages. It is my hope that this article will serve as a starting point for future studies on Mandarin questions and responses as well as a reference point for further cross-linguistic comparison.

## Abbreviations

The abbreviations used in the morpheme-by-morpheme glossing line are as follows:

ASP	aspect marker
CL	classifier
COP	copula verb
COMP	complement
DM	discourse marker
GEN	genitive
INJ	interjection
MP	modal particle
NEG	negative marker
PN	proper noun
QP	question particle
SP	structural particle
VOC	vocalization.

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