Navigating Epistemic Landscapes: Acquiescence, Agency and Resistance in Responses to Polar Questions

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A polar question, Bolinger (1978:104) observes, ‘advances a hypothesis for confirmation.’ The respondent is invited to either affirm, or reject, a candidate proposition concerning a particular state of affairs (Pomerantz 1988). Polar questions thus set the terms within recipients' responses are to be constructed (Raymond 2003). Because polar questions are unavoidably designed for, or tilted towards either ‘yes' or 'no' (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Heritage 2010), they exert a preference for the agreeing or confirming response that Sacks (1987) discussed thirty years ago. Responses to polar questions take different forms in different languages. Sadock and Zwicky (1985) distinguish between yes-no languages (like English), agree-disagree languages (like Korean) in which, regardless of a question's polarity, a positive particle affirms its proposition and a negatively framed repeat denies it, and so-called 'mixed' languages. The latter may be exemplified by Finnish (Sorjonen 2001a, b) in which repeating the verb of the question is the basic form of affirmative response and other response tokens (such as "Joo") serve a more confirmatory function.

In this paper, our aim is to contribute to a developing body of knowledge about the design of questions and their uses by examining responses to polar questions in English. In particular, we aim to map various forms of agency and resistance in relation to questions. Our particular focus is on the emergence of this resistance in the opening elements of response, and here we build on the notion that turn-initial position is a critical location in the process of turn-construction and action formation (Schegloff 1987, 1996a).

Our starting point is Sacks' (1987) paper, first presented in 1973, on the preference for agreement and contiguity in conversation. The paper made two fundamental claims. First, Sacks argued that yes/no or polar questions are built for particular 'agreeing' responses - that is, responses aligned to the polarity of
the question and confirmatory of the proposition predicated in the question. And second, he observed that these responses are ordinarily and properly contiguous, that is, adjacent and with little or no silence between question and answer. These ideas have been a site of significant research in conversation analysis (Raymond 2003; Schegloff 1996b, 2007).

In developing these ideas, it is helpful to establish the notion of an epistemic gradient. With some exceptions (e.g., for 'exam' or 'known answer' questions etc. [Searle 1969]), the act of questioning, however it is managed, invokes a claim that the questioner lacks certain information (or lacks certainty about it). We will refer to this as a "K-" position. At the same time it also invokes the claim that that the addressee has this information (or is likely to have it). The addressee is projected as in a knowledgeable, or "K+" position. The act of questioning invokes this relative K-/K+ epistemic gradient between questioner and answerer, and, with it, the relevance of a response to the question.

Table 1: Some Elementary Claims invoked in Questioning

1. Questioner does not know the answer (with certainty) (K-)
2. Questioner believes the respondent knows the answer (K+)
3. Questioner has the right to ask the question
4. Questioner believes the respondent is willing/obligated to answer

1 and 2 are implicated in establishing an epistemic gradient.
3 and 4 are implicated in establishing the appropriateness of contiguous response.

At the same time, the act of questioning also invokes relevance and relational claims vis a vis the recipient. By a question, a questioner proposes that one relevantly could or should know the information requested, and thereby that others, specifically the recipient, do know it, and that the questioner has the (social) right to ask the question of the recipient, and that the recipient has a corresponding social obligation to respond. Although these rights and obligations are defeasible, they may play an important role in establishing the appropriateness of contiguous response.
Finally, the invocation of these claims underwrites the notion that the questioner will have been 'informed' (moving from K- to K+) by an answer, should accept or 'believe' the answer, and should index this with a response (such as 'oh' [Heritage 1984]) that acknowledges this acceptance and the associated shift in knowledge.

However, different question designs can adjust the depth of the epistemic gradient between questioner and respondent, encoding different degrees of information gap and different levels of commitment to the candidate answer advanced by the questioner. Consider the following four questions:

1. Who did you talk to?  
2. Did you talk to John?  
3. You talked to John didn't you?  
4. You talked to John?  

All four questions are united in assigning ultimate authority for the information being sought to the respondent. However they differ in the extent to which the questioner claims pre-existing access to the information under question. Each question establishes a distinctive gap in knowledge, a distinctive epistemic gradient, between questioner and respondent.

The first question advances no hypothesis for confirmation and, claiming no knowledge concerning the target state of affairs, expresses the largest knowledge gap and the steepest epistemic gradient. While the fourth question asserts a possible answer to the question with some degree of certainty, and thus embodies a much smaller (or flatter) epistemic gradient. In general, declarative questions claim a more nearly equal epistemic footing with the respondent than do interrogatives, and are
more frequently used to seek confirmation for information that is already 'in play' (Raymond 2010, Turner 2009), though this aspect of their usage can also be the object of manipulation (Raymond 2010).

We now arrive at a source of tension for questions and their respondents. On the one hand polar questions position recipients as the parties with epistemic rights with respect to the knowledge domain being addressed. On the other hand they do so through actions which strongly restrict the terms within which those rights may be exercised. Moreover, additionally and depending on the question's design, they are unavoidably 'tilted' - exerting pressure on recipients to affirm, or alternatively deny, the state of affairs conveyed by the question's central proposition. In short, polar questions, while acknowledging the epistemic rights of respondents, also tend to restrict the exercise of those rights. Recipients, in turn may acquiesce to these restrictions, or resist them. In what follows, we compare y/n (or interjective) and repetitional responses as alternative responsive pathways.¹

**Yes/No and Repetitional Responses to Polar Questions**

Affirmative responses to polar questions in English can come in type-conforming (yes/no) (1) and repetitional (2) forms:

(1) [Field:1:1:14–20]
1 Mum: 'Av your family gone o_ff?
2 (.)
3 Les: -> Yes,
4 Mum: Oh ↓good,
5 Les: <At um: half past three: this morni_ng.
6 (0.3)
7 Mum: ↑Oh my word.

(2) [Breathless]
1 Doc: Miss:uz Robinson.
2 Pat: Yes.
3 Doc: Right. >Can I< jus’ put you on the machi:ne?
4 Pat: -> You can.

**Type-Conforming (Yes/No) Responses**

Raymond's (2003) research shows that answers to English polar questions should properly contain the word 'yes' or 'no' as the first item in the response, and that questioners design questions so as to permit answerers to respond in this way. Y/n responses are the most common form, occurring in about
75-80% of cases and overwhelmingly as the first item in a response (Raymond 2003; Stivers frth).

Raymond termed y/n responses to polar questions as 'type-conforming,' noting both their general preponderance, that departures from type-conformity are recognizably 'motivated' or done 'for cause,' and that departures have different sequential consequences from their type-conforming counterparts. Type-conforming y/n responses can occur solo as in (1) above, and in turn-initial position with additional components as in (3) below:

(3) [Field 1:1:89-94]
1 Les: Uh didyuh get yer garlic tablets.
2 Mum: -> Yes I've got them,
3 Les: Have yuh t- started tak[ing th'm
4 Mum: [I started taking th'm t'day
5 Les: Oh well do;n[e 
6 Mum: [Garlic'n parseley.

In (4) we see deferred type-conformity. The respondent postpones her type-conforming 'no' response to turn final position.

(4) [MidWest]
1 Doc: Do you have any drug allergies?
2
3 Pat: -> .hh hu=Not that I know of no.

In thus delaying her negative response to the physician's question, the patient is able to register a qualification to her response prior to its actual production.

Unelaborated type conforming responses have a number of significant features. They are indexically tied to the question to which they respond. They accept the terms of the question unconditionally, exerting no agency with respect to those terms, and thus acquiescing in them. Finally they tend to maximize the progressivity of the question-answer sequence towards sequence closure (Raymond 2003).

The following case illustrates these points to a remarkable degree. Here a British community nurse, called a health visitor (HV), is going through a check list of questions with a new mother. After asking if the father is employed and learning that he is a house painter, she asks if he's "got plenty of work on". The mother's nonconforming response is elaborate, and elicits an 'oh' response at line 3 And a further
acknowledgment at line 5. Subsequently the nurse offers a series of and-prefaced declarative questions across the rest of the sequence (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994).

(5) (SA1:9)
1 HV: Has he got plenty of work on,
2 M: He works for a university college.
3 HV: Oh.
4 M: So he's in full-time work all the time.
5 HV: *Yeh.*
6 (0.4)
7 HV: And this is your first baby.
8 M: -> Ye(p).
9 (0.3)
10 HV: That you had a normal pregnancy.
11 M: -> Ye(h).
12 (1.1)
13 HV: And a normal delivery,
14 M: -> Ye(p).
15 (1.4)
16 HV: *Right.*
17 (0.7)
18 HV: And she didn't go into special care.
19 M: -> No.
20 (1.8)
21 HV: *And she's bottle feeding?*
22 (1.2)
23 HV: *Um.* (0.4) and uh you're going to Doctor White
24 for your (0.6) post-natal?
25 M: -> [Yeah.

The epistemic gradients built into these questions are extremely 'shallow' as indexed in the declarative construction of the questions. That they are part of a bureaucratic course of action is indexed by the and-prefaces to the questions (Heritage and Sorjonen 1994), and is reinforced by the physical presence of the check list in the nurse's hand. The mother's responses are highly abbreviated, and hearably contracted on occasion with the plosive "p" sound (lines 8 and 14). This is a sequence of questions and responses in which neither party seems to have much of a stake. The mother's responses fully acquiesce to the terms of the questions, which they treat as insignificant and as not requiring elaboration. This example illustrates the maxim that "little questions get little answers."

The same can be said for the first two, but not the third, question in (6):
The patient's departure from an affirmatory response to the doctor's question at line 8 is managed in a turn that also departs from type-conformity, and which also significantly departs from the agenda set by the question.

The maxim that "little questions get little answers" can have a reflexive correlate: "little answers assert that questions are little". This reflexivity is exploited by then US Attorney General Janet Reno in a television interview centered on administration concerns about violence on television:

Faced with tendentious questioning that invites Reno to acknowledge that she may attempt to abridge first amendment rights, Reno curtly rejects these questions with unelaborated type-conforming responses. She thus treats them as unworthy of the elaborated responses that are otherwise mandatory on television interview shows (Clayman and Heritage 2002).
Repetitional Responses

As noted by Schegloff (1996b), Raymond (2003). Heritage and Raymond (2005) and Stivers (2005) repetitional responses, in contrast their type-conforming y/n counterparts, assert the respondent's epistemic and social entitlement in regard to the matter being addressed and do so by 'confirming' rather than 'affirming' the proposition raised by the questioner, thereby claiming more epistemic rights over the information required than the original polar question conceded. Thus the earlier described type conforming y/n responses to polar questions contrast with cases like (8) below, in which the interviewee (IE) repeats the interviewer's "making money" as a response (lines 11 and 12). The reviewer's declarative question here unpacks the IE's earlier allusive reference to "practical reasons" (line 8) as a reason for writing children's books:

(8) [Schegloff 1996b:183 Interview with Susan Shreve about her recent novel]
1 IR: Why do you write juvenile books.
2 IE: (0.5)
3 IR: [that- b-
4 IE: [Because I love child[ren
5 IR: [having [children?
6 IE: [I really do=:.hh I enjoy
7 children:. .hh I started writing: (. ) juvenile books
8 fer entirely pra:ctical reasons, .hh
9 (. )
10 IE: [u- u-
11 IR: --> Making money:
12 IE: --> Making [money
13 IR: [Yes (laughter)
14 IE that- that practical reason hhh

Here the IE's repetition of the IR's "making money" (to which she appends "that practical reason" at line 14) asserts authorship of, and control over, the allusion contained in "practical reasons" by confirming, rather than merely assenting to it. In this case and others like, as Schegloff (1996b) has shown, repetition is a practice for confirming an allusive remark as having been allusive. It does so by asserting the confirmer's epistemic right to adjudicate on the correctness of the inference made by the recipient, an inference drawn from the confirmer's previous statements.

A related case is (9): here Jenny infers from Vera's disappointed sounding account of an invitation that is no longer viable (lines 6 and 7), that her visitors have left. Again repetition is used to confirm the inference.
As noted by Heritage and Raymond (2005), Vera's use of repetition prior to the type-conforming 'Yes' privileges 'confirmation' over 'affirmatively answering the question' in this sequence in an move that asserts her epistemic rights over the matter in question:

While these repetitive responses remain indexically tied to the questions to which they respond, they differ from straightforward anaphoric yes/no responses. Specifically, they resist the field of constraint exerted by the question in three respects: (i) they modify the terms of the question by confirming, rather than simply affirming, the propositional content of the prior yes/no question, (ii) they exert agency with respect to those terms, asserting more authoritative rights over the information at issue, than the questioner had already conceded through the design of the question, and (iii) relative to yes/no responses, they are associated with sequence expansion.

In the cases described so far, recipients use repetition to exert what may be termed epistemic agency in response to questions that set the terms of response. In so doing, they claim primary rights to the information that, they claim, is fully within their purview. But repetitive responses can also exert agency in contexts where interrogative structures are used to implement other undertakings.

For example, the use of "I do" in a traditional wedding ceremony, imparts an element of agency to the assent that would otherwise be lacking in a more pallid "Yes" or "Okay" response.

(10) [Traditional Wedding Vow]
1 Rev: Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife.
2 Hus: --> I do.

This kind of agency is also highly visible in cases like (11) where a physician asks permission to access a
Here the repetitive format of the patient's assent implicitly asserts her right to deny the request.

As (10) suggests, there are actions in which an affirmative type-conforming response can be too acquiescent, and imply insufficient agency and commitment to a course of action being assented to. This is particularly the case for deferred action requests (Houtkoupin-Steenstra 1987; Lindstrom frth), where a simple 'yes' response is insufficient. This is dramatically illustrated in the case below where Emma, newly separated from her husband, asks her daughter Barbara to call him on her behalf. Her first request at line 8, prefaced with assertion "I NEED hhHE:L:P.hh", is met with a simply "Ye:ah," (line 10). Its evident insufficiency is shown in Emma's response ("HU:H?h") at line 11:

At line 18, Emma repeats her request which is responded to with a second "Ye:ah,". This time, Emma renews her request which an emphatic "↑PLEA--:SE," and, attracting yet another insufficiently agentive
"Ye:ah." (line 22), attempts to consolidate her daughter's undertaking by recommending that she reverse the charges on the call.

In sum, while both type-conforming y/n and repetitional responses are valid responses to polar questions, they differ in the extent to which they are acquiescent or agentive in relation the questions that set the terms of response. The more agentive repetitional responses tend to be deployed in circumstances where the respondent wishes to insist on epistemic primacy in relation to some element of information or their rights in relation to a course of action, and where a greater degree of commitment to a future course of action is mandated by a question than is expressed by an acquiescent type-conforming response token.² We may conclude that repetitions exert more agentive leverage on the terms of the questions to which they respond than type-conforming y/n responses thereby constituting a basis in practice for a wide range of actions.

**Repetitional Agreement as Leverage for Disagreement**

If repetitional responses to polar questions assert agency in relation to the terms of the question, this agency can be mobilized through turn-initial repeats and leveraged into epistemic authority for subsequent disagreements. In the following cases, a turn-initial repeat is followed by turn components that revise the initial position of the respondent in ways that break away from the terms of the question. Thus in (13), the question is about the child of a colleague living abroad. As indexed by the questioner's "I guess," the respondent has absolute epistemic rights in regard to the information requested, and he asserts them with an initial repetition which is then leveraged into a disconfirmation of the question's declarative claim.

(13) [JH:FN]

1 A: He's totally bilingual now I guess.
2 B: He is but....

Cases like (13) converge with the canonical [agree + disagree] format described for disagreeing second assessments by Pomerantz (1984).³
In (14), the respondent's repetitive use of the prior question's frame in a fully sentential response is ancillary to a fuller resistance to – literally – the terms of the question.

(14) [Sacks, 1987[1973],

1 A: --> How about friends. Have you friends?
2 B: --> I have friends. So called friends. I had friends.
3 --> Let me put it that way.

Here the intervening phrasal turn constructional unit (tcu) "So called friends" establishes distance between the initial assertive confirmation in the first tcu, and its ultimate reversal in the third. And in (15), a patient's problem presentation is interdicted by the doctor's effort to initiate history taking (line 11):

(15)

1 Pat: (I'm here on false pretenses.)<I think.
2 ....
3 ....
4 ((7 lines omitted))
5 ....
6 Pat: I asked my husband yesterday 'cause I could feel: (0.8) (cause)
7 I: could feel this li'l mole coming. And: uh (0.5) (he) (. ) I:
8 hh thought I better letchya know--uh well I asked my husband 'f
9 it was in the same place you took off thuh (0.5) "thee (mm)
10 thee:"( [    ]
11 Doc: [That's why you've come in be[cause of the mole.
12 Pat: --> [that's why I ca:me, but=
13 Doc: =H[ow long 'as it been-]
14 Pat: --> [t h i s m o r ning-] I: I didn' I hadn't looked yesterday
15 he said it was in the same place but 'hh but I: can feel it
16 nah- it's down here an' the other one was up here so I don't
17 think it's: th'same one at a:ll.

The patient resists this intrusion with an epistemically agentive repeat at line 12, which she leverages into a continuation (lines 14-17) in which she explains why the problem may be a false alarm, thus preempting the doctor's attempt to begin a medical investigation and downgrading the seriousness of the problem.

Finally in (16) which is taken from a 911 call in the context of a full emergency, the same practice – fully repeating the question verb – is deployed in the context of an alternative question, and forms the basis for a quite different response (see also Drew 1992):

(16) [Dallas Call]

1 911: Okay iz this uh house or n' apartmen'?
2 Clr: It- it is a home

As can be seen the response entirely departs from the alternatives presented in the initial question.
In sum, repeats exert agency in relation to the terms of a question, by claiming epistemic primacy in relation to the question's propositional content while, simultaneously, beginning to relax the indexical dependency of the response in relation to the question to which it responds. By beginning, if only incipiently, a fully sentential response, they 'reserve the right' to resist or depart from the terms of the question and adumbrate, if only potentially, such departures.

**Repetition with Negation**

Repetition in response design can be a vehicle for the incorporation of negation through which the terms of questions can be overturned. In each of the following two cases, partial repetition of the prior turn is associated with negation. This negation is used to launch a subsequent expansion which departs very substantially from the terms of the original question. In these cases, the question's agenda is subverted, and replaced with an alternative agenda that is suited to the answerer's objectives.

In (17) from a pediatric medical visit, the clinician's examination has so far yielded no positive symptoms except a cough. Finding that she cannot truthfully answer that her child has been coughing "a lot," the mother seeks to introduce another aspect of the child's cough symptoms that was not raised by the question: its peculiar "deep" sound. She launches this information through a negated repetition of the symptom inquired into by the clinician at line 1.

(17) [Pediatric Visit]
1  Doc:     Has he been coughing uh lot?
2           (0.2)
3  Mom: --> .hh Not uh lot.=h[h
4  Doc:                      [Mkay:?,
5  Mom: --> But it- it <sound:s:> deep.
6           (1.0)
7  Mom: --> An' with everything we (heard) on tee v(h)ee=hhhh
8           => Ewe got sca:re.£
9  Doc:     Kay. (An fer i-) It sounds deep?
10           (...)  
11  Mom:     Mm hm.

This practice is a commonplace one in contexts where patients wish to avow the existence of symptoms that were not directly asked about by physicians (Drew 2006; Stivers 2007).
A similar practice is deployed in (18) by an interviewee who wishes to resist an implication of the interviewer's question (lines 6-7) that his is an anti-union organization:

(18) [WAO: Gouriet]
1   IR:     If occasion 'rises again will you take similar
2       action?
3   IE:     W'll we have never hesitated so far to uh (0.3) take
4       action where (. ) freedom is being abused.
5       (1.5)
6   IR:     So there might be: ( .) another occasion on which you
7       will: use the law against unions.
8   (.)
9   IE:     hh Not necessarily against unions but against any (.)
10      body uh which has become over mighty (. ) uh and is
11       abusing its responsibilities. = hh Uh if that happens to
12       be a trades union so be it, = But we're not (. ) I repeat
13       not uh (0.2) looking out uh for trouble to -- to bash the
14       trades unions...........

Here the interviewee offers a negated repetition of the interviewer's "against unions" and then proceeds to present his organization as opposed to "any body that has become over mighty" (lines 9-10), and this in turn is leveraged into a general statement that his organization is not looking to "bash the trades unions" (lines 13-14).

Conclusion

Writing of questions in general, Bolinger (1957:4) says that a question 'is fundamentally an attitude...it is an utterance that 'craves' a verbal or other semiotic (e.g., a nod) response. The attitude is characterized by the speaker's subordinating himself to his hearer.' Yet in other literatures, especially those dealing with medicine, law and the mass media, questioning is treated as powerful and constraining in its demands on the respondent. In these literatures, a primary focus has fallen on the constraining character of polar questions which do, indeed, set the terms of response in ways that are less 'subordinating' -- as Bolinger's (1978) subsequent treatment of them as 'advancing hypotheses' clearly acknowledges.

In this paper we have revisited the contrast between y/n and repetitive responses as methods of responding to polar questions. It is clear that repetition, in contrast to y/n responses, asserts the respondent's epistemic and social entitlement to the matter being addressed and does so by 'confirming'
rather than 'affirming' the proposition raised by the questioner. By claiming more epistemic rights over the relevant information than the original yes/no question conceded, repetitional responses 'push back' on the underlying terms of yes/no questions.

The underlying mechanics through which yes/no responses 'affirm' (or deny) while repetition 'confirms' inheres in the fact that repetitive responses are incipiently less anaphoric and indexically dependent on the questions to which they respond than are y/n responses. These responses not only assert more than is necessary to affirm the state of affairs proposed in a polar question, but also set up turn initial environments from which confirmation (or disconfirmation) may be leveraged into responses that more extendedly depart from the terms of the questions that were, at least initially, their proximate point of departure.

In question-answer sequences, speakers reflexively position themselves in a multidimensional space of rights and obligations. Answer design is a 'second window' into the landscape of rights and obligations that are projected by question design. These include the weighting of a question's relevance, contesting its agenda, presuppositions or preference structure, and matters beyond the scope of this paper such as whether it should have been asked at all, whether a response is an answerer's obligation or voluntary dispensation, and how committed the answerer is to the course of action projected by the answer.
References:


Notes

1 Other forms of resistance not described here include prefacing responses with 'oh' (Heritage 1998), 'well' (Schegloff and Lerner 2009) and address terms (Clayman frth; Rendle-Short 2007), 'transformative' answers (Stivers and Hayashi 2010) and responses like 'of course' that overtly challenge the need for the question to be asked (Stivers frth).

2 Ford and Thompson (frth) report that whereas phrasal responses to WH-questions do simple answering, clausal responses are frequently indicators that the respondent has a problem with the prior question. In a finding that strongly parallels the argument of this paper, they note that responses that incorporate clausal repetitions (and are not prefaced by the items listed in Note 1) index resistance to the prior question's assumptions.

3 For example, in the following case, Eve reports a third party's opinion about the movie "Midnight Cowboy" – a movie which her interlocutors have recently seen. In response to her report that the friend found the movie depressing, both interlocutors respond with oh-prefaced repeats of that evaluation, before proceeding to differently evaluate the move as "fantastic" and "beautiful."

[JS:II:61:ST]
1 Jon: We saw Midnight Cowboy yesterday or [suh- Friday.
2 Eve: [Oh?
3 Lyn: Didju s- you saw that, [it's really good.
4 Eve: [No I haven't seen it
5 Eve: --> Jo saw it 'n she said she f- depressed her
6 Eve: --> ter[rible
7 Jon: --> [Oh it's [terrib[ly depressing.
8 Lyn: --> [Oh it's depressing.
9 Eve: Ve[ry
10 Lyn: --> [But it's a fantastic [film.
11 Jon: --> [It's a beautiful movie.

Here both oh-prefacing and repetition are used to assert primary access to the movie (Heritage 2002), as a prelude to an evaluate it in a way that is at variance with the earlier assessment.