Are you being insistent or are you being polite?
The social effects of alternative questions

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IASM Workshop, ESSLLI
Similar content, different effects

It's very cold outside. Paul asks John:

Hey, do you want a scarf?

Polar Question (PQ)

Hey, do you want a scarf or not?

Negative Alternative Question (NAQ)

Hey, do you want a scarf or are you ok?

Complement Alternative Question (CAQ)

These questions can be used by the speaker to convey different “social effects” on the hearer, at least in this context:

a) NAQs induce a sense of insistence/pushiness

b) PQs convey interest in the hearer’s well being

c) CAQs signal that the hearer has two equally valid options to choose from
Similar content, different effects

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It’s very cold outside. Paul asks John:

Hey, do you want a scarf? \hspace{1cm} \text{Polar Question (PQ)}
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These questions can be used by the speaker to convey different "social effects" on the hearer:

a) NAQs engender a sense of insistence/pushiness
b) CAQs preserve the interlocutor’s freedom

Polar Question (PQ)
Negative Alternative Question (NAQ)
Complement Alternative Question (CAQ)
Roadmap

1- Interactional social meanings

2- The phenomenon: alternatives and social effects

3 - The study

4 - Discussion and further research
Levels of social meaning
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Persona-level identity categories:

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Persona-level identity categories:
- Demographics (Age, Gender, Class)
- Sexual orientation
- Social types (e.g., Valley Girl, nerd)
- Social qualities (e.g., articulate, dumb, cool)
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- Presumptuous
Why should we explore interaction-based manifestations of social meaning?

The importance of the micro
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1) They often represent the first stage of how persona-based social meanings emerge and circulate
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Why should we explore interaction-based manifestations of social meaning?

1) They often represent the first stage of how persona-based social meanings emerge and circulate

2) They are intuitively tied to the conventional/illocutionary content of utterances, providing a window into how social meaning is informed by the denotation of linguistic forms
Recent strides
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- *the*: effect of establishing affective distance between the speaker and the referent (e.g., *the* Americans) —> semantic ability to bundle object-level individuals as a collective (Acton 2017);
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- *this/that:* solidarity effects —> presupposition that both interlocutors share a congruent spatial/affective perspective on the referent (Acton and Potts 2014);
- *the*: effect of establishing affective distance between the speaker and the referent (e.g., *the* Americans) —> semantic ability to bundle object-level individuals as a collective (Acton 2017);

- *this/that*: solidarity effects —> presupposition that both interlocutors share a congruent spatial/affective perspective on the referent (Acton and Potts 2014);

- *need*: presumptuousness —> the obligation conveyed by the modal is semantically directed at the hearer’s well-being (Glass 2015)
A new variable: questions
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- Thus far, focus on socio-pragmatics interface of specific words
A new variable: questions

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- Today we focus on a broader variables: questions as a speech act type
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**Questions**

1) By explicit calling upon the hearer to respond, they have marked interactional charge
A new variable: questions

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**Questions**

1) By explicit calling upon the hearer to respond, they have marked interactional charge

2) They come in variety of semantic/pragmatic variants, allowing us to focus on a range of potentially very different social effects (as opposed to just one)
A new variable: questions

Two case studies:

1) Complement vs Negative Alternative questions

Hey, do you want a scarf?

Polar Question (PQ)

Hey, do you want a scarf or not?

Negative Alternative Question (NAQ)

Hey, do you want a scarf or are you ok?

Complement Alternative Question (CAQ)

2) "Open list" alternative questions

Do you want beer or wine?

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Do you want beer ↑ or wine ↑?
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Non-canonical uses

- Bolinger 1978: Neg Alternative Questions (NAQs) are more restricted than Polar Questions (PQs)
Polar vs. Alternative Questions

Non-canonical uses

- Bolinger 1978: Neg Alternative Questions (NAQs) are more restricted than Polar Questions (PQs)

- Invites:
  (1a) ✔ Do you want something to drink?
  (1b) # Do you want something to drink or not?

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Polar vs. Alternative Questions

Non-canonical uses

- Bolinger 1978: Neg Alternative Questions (NAQs) are more restricted than Polar Questions (PQs)

- Invites:
  (1a) ✔ Do you want something to drink?
  (1b) # Do you want something to drink or not?

- Inferences:
  I just saw David
  (2a) ✔ Is he back from Toronto?
  (2b) # Is he back from Toronto or not?
Polar vs. Alternative Questions

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  (2b) # Is he back from Toronto or not?

- Rhetorical questions:
  (3a) ✔ Are you crazy?
  (3b) # Are you crazy or not?
Polar vs. Alternative Questions

Information-seeking uses

- Biezma 2009 and following: NAQs, but not PQs, can be used to re-ask a question that went unanswered:
Polar vs. Alternative Questions

Information-seeking uses

- Biezma 2009 and following: NAQs, but not PQs, can be used to re-ask a question that went unanswered:

Scenario: You are in charge of coordinating the cooks for the colloquium dinner. John is one of the cooks. Dinner is tomorrow and you need to know what is happening with the pasta.

You: Are you making pasta?
John: (Silence and dubitative faces)
You: (4a) ✔ Are you making pasta or not?
You: (4b) # Are you making pasta?
Logically opposite alternatives

Biezma and Rawlins 2014, 2016

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Logically opposite alternatives

Biezma and Rawlins 2014, 2016

− PQs and NAQs differ semantically:
  − PQs: \{p; \ldots\} - p plus contextually salient alternatives
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- This makes them:
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- For an alternative story, see Van Rooij and Safarova 2003
Broadening the picture

The variable space:

- Variation between two questioning strategies
  - PQs: interactionally neutral, non-exhaustive, flexible across uses
  - NAQs: interactionally insistent, exhaustive, limited to a specific context
# Broadening the picture

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Two questions:

1) What are other possible correlation patterns between interactional effects and strategies to spell out alternatives?

2) Are semantic exhaustivity/pragmatic highlighting alone sufficient to account for Alternative Questions, Markedness and Illocution: an Experimental Study
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Two questions:
1) What are other possible correlation patterns between interactional effects and strategies to spell out alternatives?
2) How can they be explain semantically/pragmatically?
A new case study

A new type of phenomenon: Complement Alternative Questions (CAQs)
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(5a) Is it a boy or a girl?
(5b) Is it heads or tails?
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The puzzle:
- They pose logically opposite alternatives ➡️ They should induce cornering
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- Yet, they do not seem to convey the same degree of interactional insistence
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➔ A rating study
Roadmap

1- Interactional social meanings

2- The phenomenon: alternatives and social effects

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4 - Discussion and further research
Design

- Factor 1: Type of question.
  - Levels: PQs, NAQs, CAQs, control
- Factor 2: illocutionary goal of the speaker
  - Inferences, Invite, Info-seeking Ask 1st time, Info-seeking ask again

- Sentences presented in written form
- 32 items total, 8 for each context type
- 24 fillers
- 48 participants recruited on Mechanical Turk
Design

Prompt: How natural does this question sound in light of the goal of the speaker? 1…7

Design Alternative Questions, Markedness and Illocution: an Experimental Study
Design

A sample stimulus for **Invite**

- Context: It’s very cold outside. Tom has an extra scarf in his backpack and wants to offer it to his friend Mark, who isn’t wearing one. Tom thus turns to Mark and asks:
  - **PQ**: Hey, do you want a scarf?
  - **NAQ**: Hey, do you want a scarf or not?
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  - **Control**: Hey, do you want a beer?
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- A sample stimulus for **Inference**
  - **Context**: Right before the beginning of spring break, George sees camping equipment all around Joe’s house and wonders why it is there. Thinking that Joe might be going camping during the break, George thus asks him:
    - **PQ**: Are you going camping for spring break?
    - **NAQ**: Are you going camping for spring break or not?
    - **CAQ**: Are you going camping for spring break or are you doing something else?
    - **Control**: Are you having a good day today?
Design

- A sample stimulus for **Invite**
  
  **Context:** It’s very cold outside. Tom has an extra scarf in his backpack and wants to offer it to his friend Mark, who isn’t wearing one. Tom thus turns to Mark and asks:

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  **Control:** Are you having a good day today?

  **Prompt:** How natural does this question sound in light of the goal of the speaker? 1…7
Design

− A sample stimulus for **Info-seeking Ask, 1st time**
Mary runs into Greg on the street. It's been one year since they last saw each other, so they want to catch up:
Greg: "Hey! What's new?"
Mary: "I just got a puppy!"
**PQ:** Greg: Oh! Cool! Is it a male?
**NAQ:** Greg: Oh! Cool! Is it a male or not?
**CAQ:** Greg: Oh! Cool! Is it a male or a female?
**Control:** Greg: Oh! Cool! Do you like baseball?

− A sample stimulus for **Info-seeking, Ask Again.**
**Context:** Mark checks in at a hotel. After the receptionist hands him the keys, the following exchange ensues:
Receptionist: "Sir, would you like to have breakfast directly served in your room"?
Mark: "Is there a charge for it?"
Receptionist: "It’s a great service. Our customers love it"
Mark: "Ok, but is there a charge for it?"
Receptionist: "You can also order food from the special menu".
**PQ:** Mark: "Is there a charge for it?"
**NAQ:** Mark: "Is there a charge for it or not?"
**CAQ:** Mark: "Is there a charge for it or is it free?"
**Control:** Mark: "Is there cable in the room?"
Results

![Chart showing results for Info-seek, 1st, Info-seek again, Inference, and Invite with categories PQ, CAQ, and NAQ.](chart.png)
Results

A bar chart showing the results of an experimental study. The chart compares PQ (in blue), CAQ (in green), and NAQ (in yellow) across different tasks: Info-seek, 1st (5.5), Info-seek again (approximately 3.7), Inference, and Invite. The chart highlights a significant difference in the results between Info-seek, 1st, and Info-seek again.
Results

Alternative Questions, Markedness and Illocution: an Experimental Study
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Summary

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Summary

- NAQs are restricted to contexts in which the speaker asks a question again

- Better than NAQs to make invites, ask rhetorical questions and ask info-seeking questions to ask questions again

- What explanation can we provide to CAQs' behavior?

Idea:
The "or not" formulation of the second disjunct
The results

Summary

- NAQs are restricted to contexts in which the speaker asks a question again
- PQs natural in all tested non-canonical uses, and in discourse-initial info-seeking uses
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- While NAQs pronounce both alternatives, they do not present them as pragmatically equal;

- Insistence stems from a combination of "no third option given" and emphasis on p, which presupposes that p has already been asked.

- Such a move intrudes on the interlocutor's conversational space, severely constraining their possible moves.
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- Combination of "no third option given" and emphasis on $p$, which presupposes that $p$ has already been asked
NAQs and insistence

- While NAQs pronounce both alternatives, they do not present them as pragmatically equal;
- They express the second disjunct in terms of the first one, as opposed to as an independent proposition (see Biezma and Rawlins 2014 on bundling);
- Their effect is twofold:
  - They lead the the listener to pick between two exhaustive/exclusive alternatives;
  - They also signal that one of them is more important than the other.
- Combination of "no third option given" and emphasis on $p$, which presupposes that $p$ has already been asked

This strategy maximally constrains the interlocutor’s options.
CAQs and freedom
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  - Invites: A rejection look like a legitimate (or at least acceptable) option
  - Discourse-initial questions: Equal status of alternatives doesn’t presuppose that ?p has already been asked
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This strategy minimally constrains the interlocutor’s options.
A third type?

Alternative questions with rising intonation on both disjuncts

- They introduce an underspecified set of alternatives: \{beer, wine, x:x is in the same class\}
- Typically associated with a very welcoming/cooperative attitude towards the listener
- Not easily answered with "yes/no"
A third type?

Alternative questions with rising intonation on both disjuncts

- Do you want [beer ↑] or [wine ↓]? AltQ
A third type?

Alternative questions with rising intonation on both disjuncts

- Do you want [beer ↑] or [wine ↓]? AltQ
- Do you want [beer or wine↑]? PQ

Intuitively:
- They introduce an underspecified set of alternatives: {beer, wine, x:x is in the same class}
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  AltQ

- Do you want [beer or wine↑]?  
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- Do you want [beer ↑] or [wine↑]?  
  ????

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A third type?

Alternative questions with rising intonation on both disjuncts

- Do you want [beer ↑] or [wine ↓]? AltQ
- Do you want [beer or wine↑]? PQ
- Do you want [beer ↑] or [wine↑]? ????

Intuitively:

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At the US Customs

Agent: Are you paying for the trip ↑ or is your institution funding you ↑?
A third type?

At the US Customs

− Agent: Are you paying for the trip ↑ or is your institution funding you ↑?
  Me: I’m being reimbursed

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A third type?

At the US Customs

- Agent: Are you paying for the trip or is your institution funding you?
  Me: I'm being reimbursed
  Me: # Yes

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A third type?

At the US Customs

- Agent: Are you paying for the trip ↑ or is your institution funding you ↑?
  Me: I’m being reimbursed
  Me: # Yes
  Me: # No
A third type?

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Questions

A third type?
A third type?

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- Agent: Are you paying for the trip ↑ or is your institution funding you ↑?
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Questions

- How is the "talk more, please" effect derived pragmatically?
A third type?

At the US Customs

- Agent: Are you paying for the trip up or is your institution funding you up?
  Me: I’m being reimbursed
  Me: # Yes
  Me: # No

Questions

- How is the "talk more, please" effect derived pragmatically?
- Can this effect ever be socially perceived as insistence?
A third type?

At the US Customs

- Agent: Are you paying for the trip ↑ or is your institution funding you ↑?
  Me: I’m being reimbursed
  Me: # Yes
  Me: # No

Questions

- How is the "talk more, please" effect derived pragmatically?
- Can this effect ever be socially perceived as insistence?
- How are the possible alternatives depending on the social context?
What we have learned

- The nature of these effects is crucially tied to the conventional and illocutionary meaning of the utterance that conveys them.
- Questions are a fruitful testbed to explore the interaction between such different types of meanings.
- Semantic and pragmatic analysis can yield important insights into how social meaning emerges and circulates.
What we have learned

- The nature of questions’ interactional effects is crucially tied to the conventional and illocutionary meaning of these speech acts
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Thank you!

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For questions, comments, additional materials, please contact Andrea Beltrama (andrea.beltrama@uni-konstanz.de)