Universität Konstanz

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

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IASM Workshop, ESSLLI

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

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

Indirect indexicality (Ochs 1992), enregisterment (Agha 2005), stance accretion (Du Bois 2002), Kiesling (2009, 2016)

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

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- *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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Questions

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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:

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1) Complement vs Negative Alternative questions

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2) "Open list" alternative questions

Do you want beer ↑ or wine↑?

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- Invites:
  (1a) ✔ Do you want something to drink?
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- Inferences:
  I just saw David
  (2a) ✔ Is he back from Toronto?
  (2b) # Is he back from Toronto or not?

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- Rhetorical questions:
  (3a) ✔ Are you crazy?
  (3b) #Are you crazy or not?

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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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- PQs and NAQs differ semantically:
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- For an alternative story, see Van Rooij and Safarova 2003

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The variable space:

- Variation between two questioning strategies
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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?

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A new type of phenomenon: Complement Alternative Questions (CAQs)

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→ A rating study

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Design

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- 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

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

Design

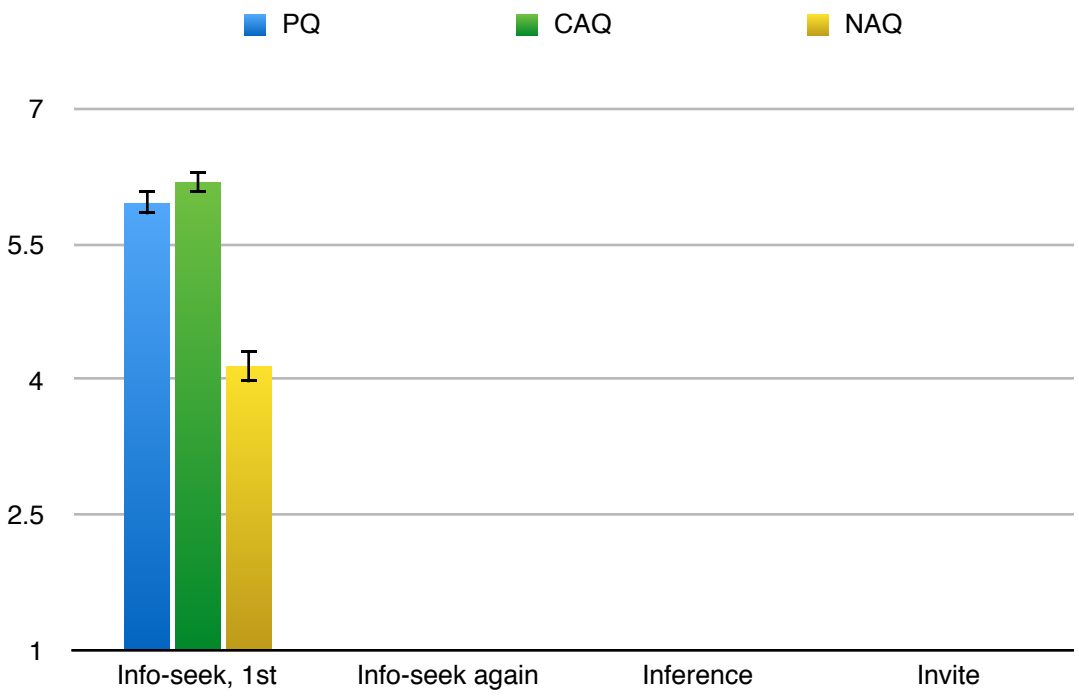
- A sample stimulus for **Info-seeking Ask, 1st time**

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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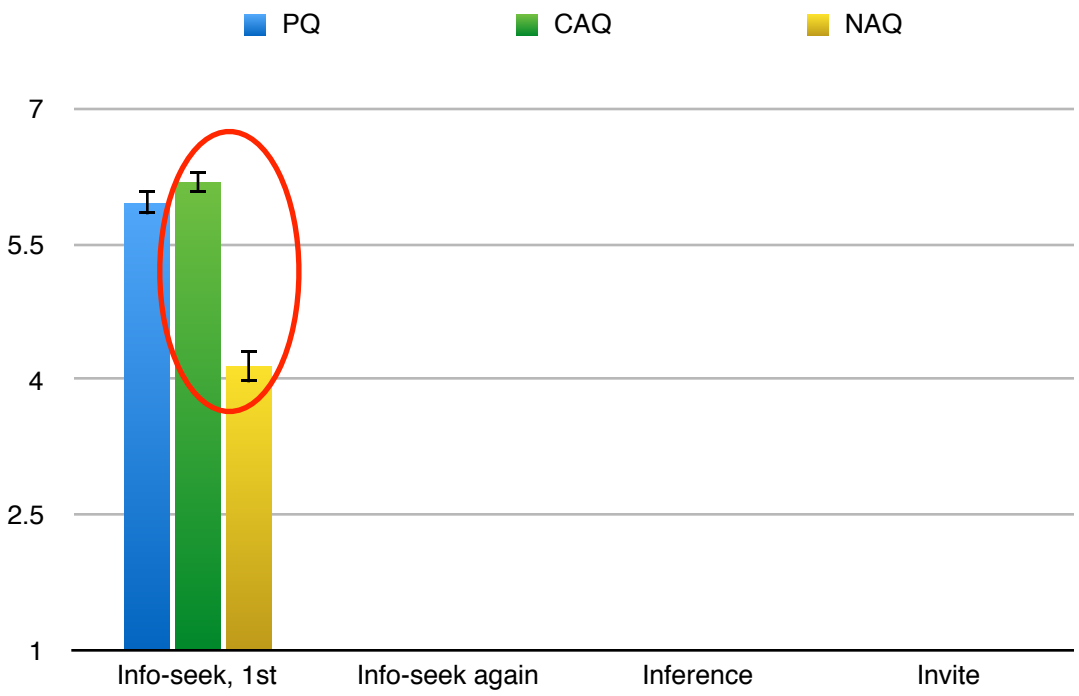
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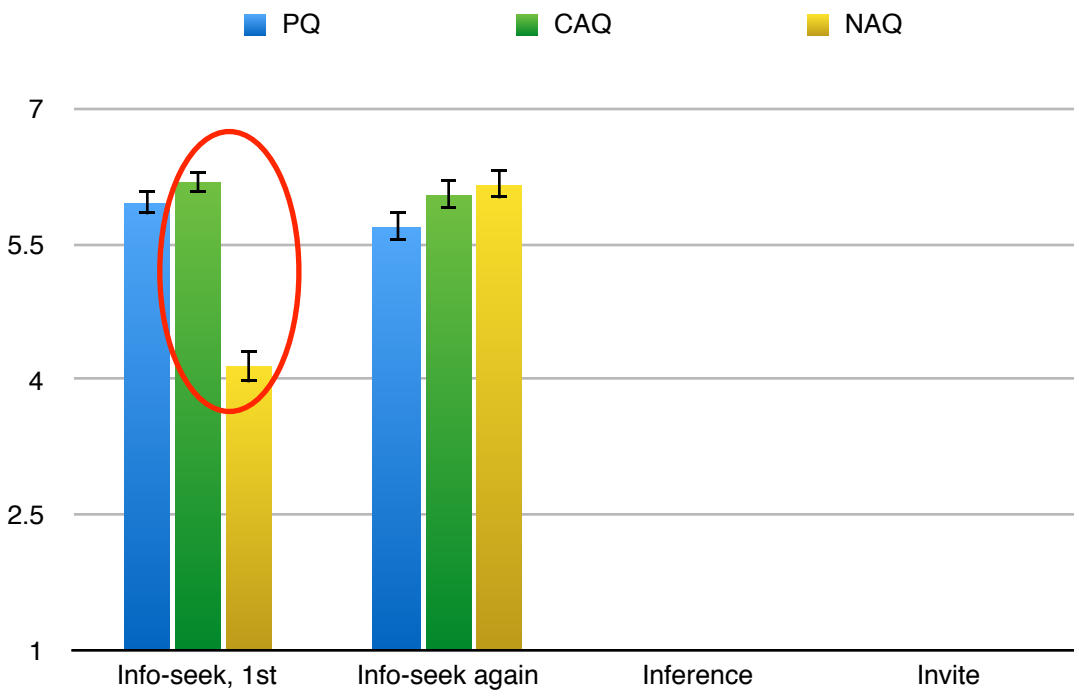
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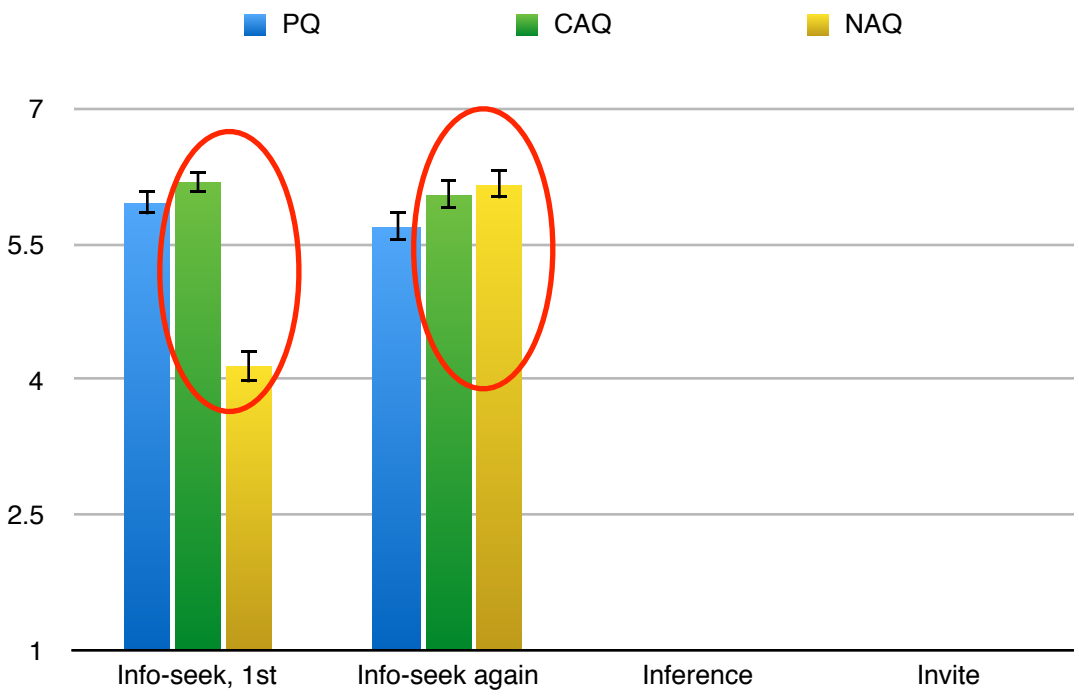
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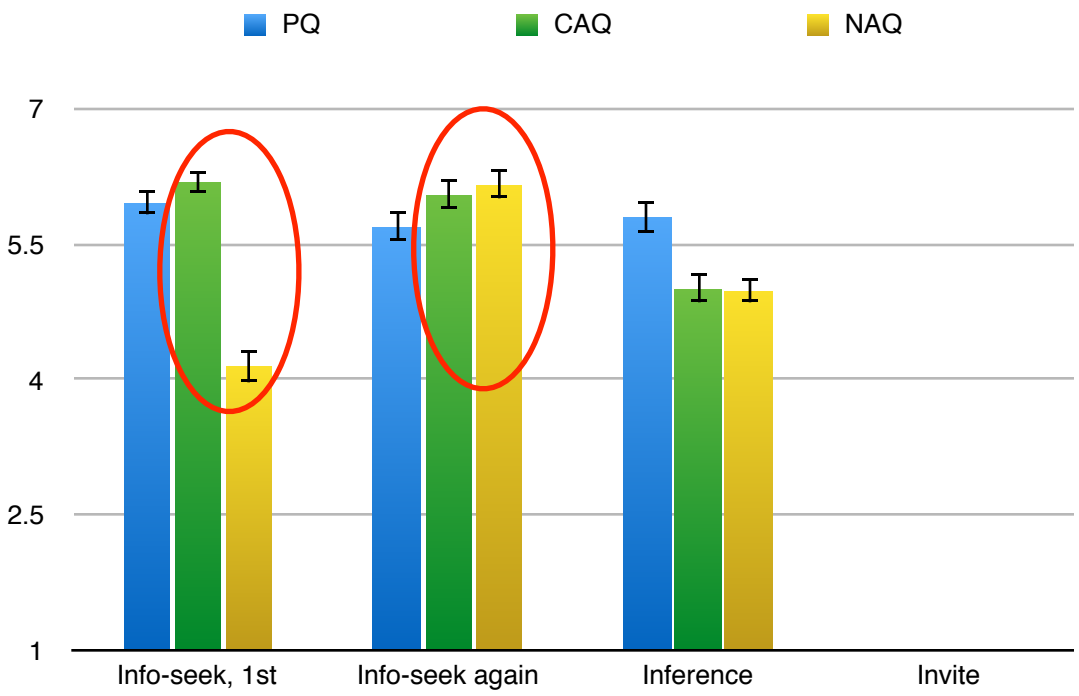
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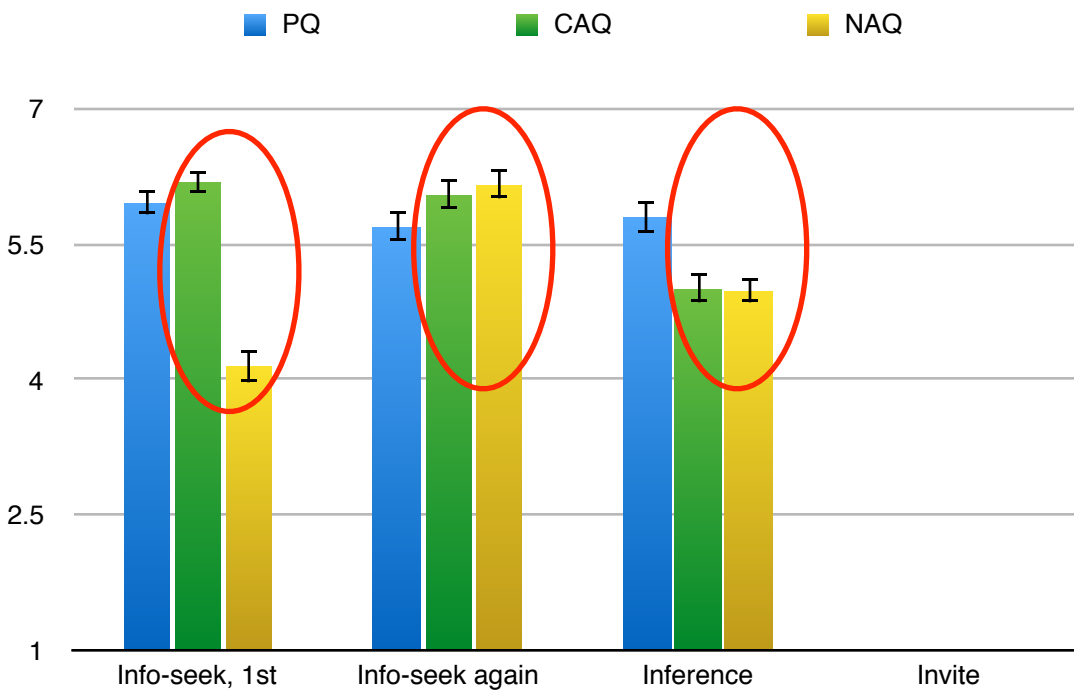
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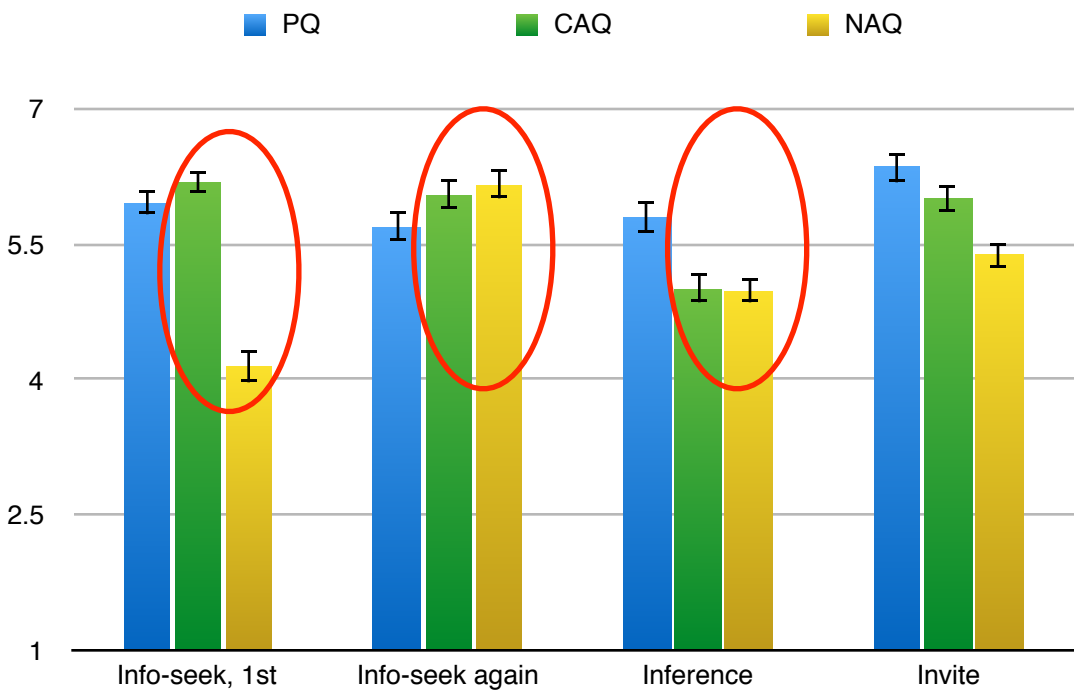
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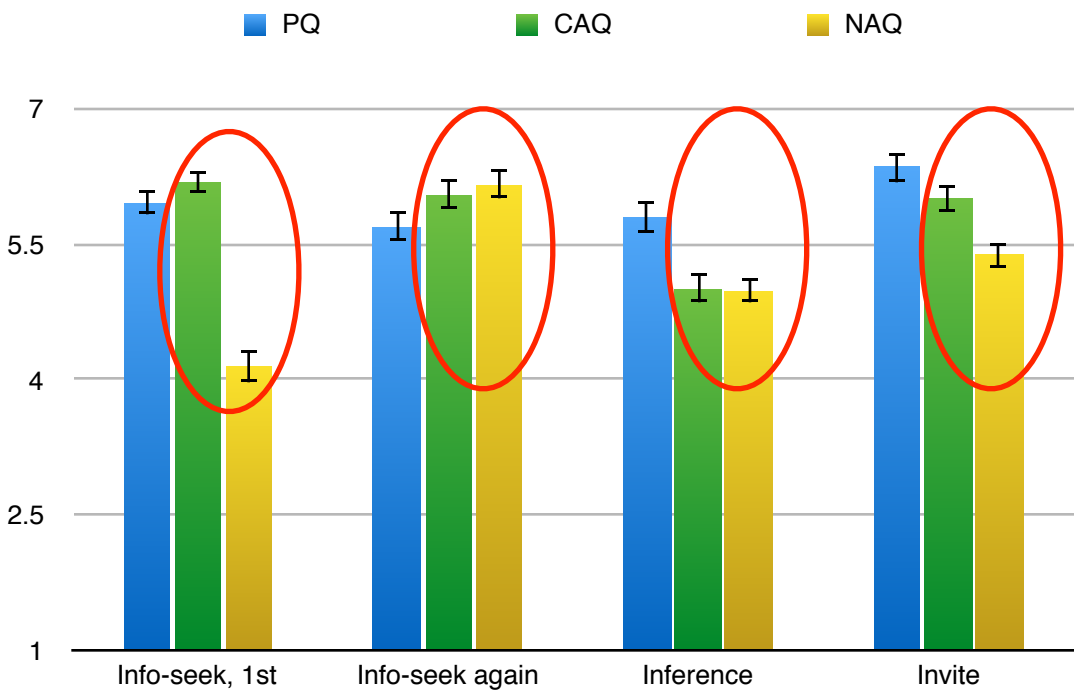
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  - Better than PQs to ask-questions again
- It can’t be about semantic exhaustivity alone

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- 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;
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Alternative questions with rising intonation on both disjuncts

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- Not easily answered with "yes/no"

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At the US Customs

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

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- Can this effect ever be socially perceived as insistence?
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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

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- Questions are a fruitful testbed to explore the interaction between different types of meanings

- Semantic and pragmatic analysis can yield important insights into how social meaning emerges and circulate

Thank you!

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