

Yes/no questions as conversational expanders: their effects on discourse and identity-in- interaction

Keywords

co-construction, recipient-design, elicitation, elaboration, identity-in-interaction, yes/no questions

This paper explores how yes/no questions work as conversational expanders, and therefore impact on discourse and identity-in-interaction. Two interactional contexts are examined, a celebrity interview and a teacher-student conversation. Transcripts of these conversations reveal that the interviewer and teacher offer confirmation-seeking questions as a means of identifying worthwhile topics, while the interviewee and student use them to disclose new information. While it can be argued that their identities as teacher and student do not really change through these actions, what these participants do display is an adjustment of their turn-by-turn discourse identities that helps maintain the conversation. Such interactional work reminds us that situated identities such as teacher/student and language expert/novice are not rigidly predetermined, but negotiated and reaffirmed on a turn-by-turn basis.

本論はyes/no questionがどのようにして会話を展開し、ディスコースやインタラクション中のアイデンティティに影響を与えるかを考察するものである。有名人へのインタビューと教師-生徒間の会話の二種類の対話において、単なるyes/no以上の会話へと拡充するために、参加者がどのようにyes/no questionを利用するかを調査した。対話の使用例によると、インタビューをする人や教師は適切な話題を探し出す手段としてyes/no questionを使うのに対し、インタビューをされる人と生徒は新しい情報を得るために使っていることが分かった。教師-生徒というアイデンティティ(役割)がこの会話で変化するわけではないが、参加者たちは会話を継続させるためにターン交代の度にディスコース・アイデンティティを調整していく。会話において進行中の話題を広げて行くその作業は、言語専門家(教師)が質問し素人(生徒)が答える、といった単純明快な関係以上のアイデンティティの動きを示唆するものである。

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A successful celebrity interview in some respects mirrors what language teachers often hope to accomplish in their talk with students: The generation of interesting information through extended talk. Interviews and teacher-student conversations are both forms of institutional talk that largely depend on questions to organize the interaction. In interviews, the interviewer designs questions so that the interviewee, as a teller of personal knowledge, uses their responses as opportunities to confirm and elaborate. This feature of institutional talk has implications for language teachers interested in eliciting more talk from students.

Questioning and identity-in-interaction

Before we examine some extracts from these two interactional contexts, it is worth looking briefly at some prior Conversation Analytic (CA) research on questioning. Heritage and Roth (1995) found five types of questions in their corpus of news interviews: yes/no questions, tag questions, declarative questions, WH-questions, and alternative questions. While knowing the forms that questions take is useful, we also need to observe how they occur within a sequence of turns in order to discover how the participants' pragmatic intentions are

displayed. Raymond (2006) finds that a speaker can use yes/no questions to *constrain* or shape how another participant responds in subsequent turns (p. 119). The questions are *recipient designed* by the inquirer to elicit new or further information (Sacks, 1992: 453). The interviewee in turn contributes by initially either agreeing or disagreeing with the inquiry (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008) and such responses are *routinely understood and treated* by participants as opportunities to elaborate (Heritage, 1985: 115). No matter what the questioner does, the continuity of talk is dependent on how the interviewee responds. The projected course of talk is shaped by how each response builds on the question in the prior turn.

It is also worth considering how interactional identities are displayed when speakers use yes/no questions. The answerer is cast as the teller and the questioner becomes the listener who encourages the telling. What this co-managed activity of cooperation and accommodation suggests is that there is no strict or pre-determined division of conversational work in which the questioner is solely responsible for asking questions and the answerer only answers what is asked. Co-accomplishing shared actions and responsibilities through talk also makes visible our moment-to-moment understandings of self and other.

Identity means different things to different people. Here, I am interested in identity as an interactional resource, or *how identity is something that is used in talk* (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998: 1) (Original emphasis). Zimmerman (1998) notes speakers can make public their current understanding of self and others at three distinct levels, as outlined in Table 1.

The particulars of any instance of talk reveal ways in which the speakers are orienting to each other's identity. Richards (2006) builds on this idea by examining the dynamic nature of identity construction in classroom exchanges between a teacher and students. In one example, students from Thailand are explaining *klongs* (canals) to the teacher who momentarily becomes a learner of the culture. The situated identities of teacher and student become less segregated when questions and answers serve as open-ended vehicles available to both parties for personal expression and learning. By looking at samples of interactants' language-in-use, we become aware of the range of actions that go together to make up a question sequence.

Analysis

To get a clearer idea of how yes/no questions work as conversational expanders and therefore impact on discourse and identity-in-interaction, this paper examines segments from two interactional contexts, a celebrity interview and a conversation-for-learning (Kasper, 2004) between a teacher and a student. The interviewer and the teacher both offer yes/no questions as a means of exploring topics worth developing.

We will begin by considering an excerpt from an interview with the actor Johnny Depp, who is known for his reluctance to be interviewed. However, here he is not only cooperative in answering questions, but also discloses additional information of his own accord.

Table 1. Zimmerman's view of identity-in-interaction (Zimmerman, 1998: 90-91)

discourse identities	moment-to-moment interactional displays of self and other, such as <i>current speaker, listener</i> or <i>story recipient</i>
situated identities	orientations to self and other that are <i>brought into being</i> through a sequence of talk, such as <i>teacher, student</i> or <i>call-taker</i>
transportable identities	those visible aspects of identity that are based on personal attributes such as gender and age, that travel with a person and so may therefore be made relevant (by self or other) through conversation

Extract 1. Celebrity interview (*Inside the Actors' Studio*, recorded 2002)

James Lipton (L) interviews Johnny Depp (D)

- 1 L: Tell me first plea::se about
2 the name Depp. Do y'know its::
3 origin?
4 (2.0)
5 D: .h No I >don't don't< really
6 know the origin but I do know
7 what it means in German.
8 L: What does it mean.
9 (2.2)
10 D: Idiot.
11 ((Audience laughter))

In discussing the meaning of Depp's name, Lipton's general request (lines 1-2) is followed by a specification of that request through a yes/no question (lines 2-3). In his response (lines 5-7), Depp does not simply answer the question, but also signals that he has more to say. He seeks permission to continue in a sequential position that Schegloff (2007: 38) calls a *pre-telling*. By saying, *But I do know what it means in German*, Depp is claiming his current epistemic state differs from Lipton's (and the audience's), which sets up the next turn for Lipton to request the information from Depp. In the next turn (line 8), Lipton gives the floor to Depp to elaborate.

Notice that the opening yes/no question (*Do you know its origin?*) narrows the scope of the broad request, but does not necessarily limit the recipient to a simple yes/no response. The request prior to the question invites Depp to say virtually anything connected to his name, but the yes/no question limits the scope and serves as a prompt to talk about the meaning of his name. The sequence of (1) pre-telling, (2) go-ahead questions, and (3) the eventual telling offer evidence that the participants orient to the yes/no question as a chance to define the scope of the nominated topic and to prompt the ensuing talk. This extract demonstrates how the interviewer used certain interactional practices to expand and adjust his role as questioner to include facilitator and accommodator. Attention

is paid not only to the questions, but also their consequences. The interviewee then has a chance to go beyond the boundaries of the answer and say more.

We will now consider how a similar sort of practice is used by a teacher to encourage a student to talk. Like interviewers, teachers look for ways to elicit the kind of responses that will expand the talk by setting up turns so recipients can talk extensively. In the following extract, taken from a corpus of my own conversations with a student, a yes/no question is used to check understanding. Masako, the student, is telling me about her experience as a high school yearbook editor.

Extract 2. Masako no. 5, school yearbook editor (Nakamura, 2006: 239)

- 1 M: Yeah.
2 (3.1)
3 And I get many stress.
4 T: Oh: [h.
5 M: [Hh
6 T: So you are th:e (.) only one
7 writing (.) this book?
8 M: No.
9 (1.5)
10 But >I am< chief.
11 T: U:h.
12 M: So (2.7) five or six student
13 (.) help me.

Prior to this segment, Masako had talked at length about her hardships with the yearbook, while I provided only minimal receipt tokens, such as *oh* and *uhuh*. When I do say more (lines 6-7), I use a yes/no question. Since she has not mentioned that she is doing the editing alone, at this point I am possibly trying to *confirm an allusion* or an impression (Schegloff, 1996: 181) that her stress comes from doing all the work by herself.

Masako initially responds (line 8) by disagreeing with my candidate understanding and then (after a gap of silence) adds a reason for her

disagreement. The elaboration (lines 8, 10, 12 and 13) makes it clear that she is not working alone. The sequential timing or positioning of the yes/no question is important. It is only when Masako mentions getting *stress* that the door is open to ask a question to check about a possible cause. As the teacher, I help the student talk more by identifying something which can be checked and elaborated. This *inferential probe* (Heritage, 1985: 108) offers Masako an opportunity to illuminate the situation.

In Extract 1, Lipton extends the topic by giving the go-ahead for Depp to say what his name means in German. In Extract 2, I extend the talk by offering a candidate understanding. In both instances, the interviewer and teacher follow up on topics the interviewee and student offer as worthy of further talk. So the role of the questioner in the case of expanding talk includes not only asking questions, but also designing questions for the recipient that are sensitive to what has been said. Such questions can only be asked after listening and reacting to the other person's turn.

In the interview, the interviewer does his own preliminary work (lines 1-2) before asking the yes/no question. In the teacher-student talk, the question arises not out of a need to introduce a new topic, but rather to help the student-teller extend the topic in progress.

Conclusion

Yes/no questions in the context of open-ended talk can serve as prompts to facilitate mutual understanding. Such questions can pursue an elaboration in support of the initial yes or no answer. Studying features of the interaction in relation to identities reveals how teacher and student can work as co-participants to extend talk. The examples here not only show how talk was expanded, but also the range of interactional work involved.

While the situated identities (e.g., teacher, student) appear to remain intact, a detailed examination of the various discourse identities that come into play reveals that the division of labor between questioner and answerer begins to adjust to the joint project of eliciting and disclosing personal information beyond the specific questions asked. The interactional

work performed by teacher and student in these instances moves from pedagogic concerns to conversational ones. Identity and discourse are inextricably linked: The participants' interactional identities are shaped by the discursive actions they are pursuing, which in turn influence how they view each other. There is more to being a teacher and a student than adhering to inflexible roles of language expert and novice. When taken on a turn-by-turn basis, our identities as teachers and students are actually made up of a myriad of ephemeral discourse identities, some of which enable the novice to direct the expert.

The structural difference between the yes/no questions in the two extracts may offer practical applications for teachers. The first extract featured a standard interrogative form of a yes/no question where the auxiliary verb comes before the subject. By saying *Do you know its origin?* the questioner is seeking information that the other person possesses. In the second extract, a different type of yes/no question is formed with *So* + declarative + rising intonation. The questioner is seeking confirmation of something possibly alluded to in prior talk. The first type of question can be asked with little reference to what has been said previously since the question is designed to initiate a new sequence of talk, while the second type refers to something that has already been said, and therefore checks understanding.

The first type of question can be used by teachers to introduce topics or to explore whether a topic is promising in terms of producing more talk. The second type can be used once a topic is underway. A negative response to the first question signals that the topic cannot move forward, but a negative response to the second question does not discourage further talk. Even though the recipient disagrees with the candidate understanding, the design of the question succeeds as the student clarifies the situation.

By seeking confirmation and elaboration through the use of a variety of yes/no questions, teachers and students engage in an interactional practice that eases some of the rigidity of roles that traditionally links the identities of questioner and answerer to those of language expert and novice. More meaningful and elaborate talk is possible when such identities are adjusted and

shared in pursuit of the common goal of greater communicative engagement by both parties.

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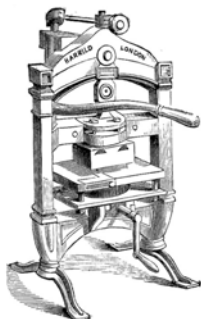
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