5   Wordless questions, wordless answers

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5.1   Introduction

Questions and answers are a staple of gossip, discussions and business transactions. Questions are so useful that English has evolved three specialised types of sentences for them:

Wh-interrogatives (*Who did you see?*)
Yes-no interrogatives (*Did you see Jan-Peter?*)
Alternative interrogatives (*Did you buy the VW or the Toyota?*)

Indeed, most other languages have specialised types of sentences for questions as well (Sadock and Zwicky 1985).

But interrogative sentences are not themselves questions. Questions are things people *do* with language – what Austin (1962) called *illocutionary acts*. To ask a *yes-no* question, according to Searle (1969), is to do something that 'counts as an attempt to elicit [whether or not some proposition P is true] from hearer H'. People might ask someone a question with one of these interrogative sentences, but they could do it in other ways as well. Answers are also things people do with language, and yet they are *not* a type of illocutionary act. In this system, questions and answers belong to entirely different species. Surely, there is something missing here.

Enter the notion of *adjacency pair*, as proposed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973; see Schegloff 2007). Turns in conversation, they noted, often come in pairs, such as this question and answer:

(1)   ANNE: w- where are they going then,
         BRIAN: to Spain, (2.7.1232)

Adjacency pairs have four properties: (1) each pair consists of two turns; (2) the turns are from different speakers (here Anne and Brian); (3) the first and second parts belong to different utterance types (here *question* and *answer*); and (4) once one person has produced an utterance of the first type (a question), it is *conditionally relevant* for the second person to produce an item of the second type (an answer) as the next turn. Adjacency pairs range from

greetings (*Hi. Hi*) to farewells (*Bye-bye. Bye*). Still, the question-answer pair is prototypical of the genre.

But must questions and answers be spoken utterances? One day before class a student asked me about adding her homework to a pile of papers on a nearby table. She did not ask me in words. As recorded by my teaching assistant, she caught my eye and initiated this exchange:

(2) STUDENT: ((holds up paper with one hand, points at pile with the other))
     CLARK: ((nods))

It seems natural to say that the student asked me if she should put her paper in the pile, and I answered yes. Yet her question was accomplished without words, and so was my answer.

Enter the notion of *projective pair* (Clark 2004). Projective pairs, like adjacency pairs, consist of two communicative acts in sequence from different people, with the first part projecting the second. The difference is that either part may be *any* type of communicative act – spoken, gestural or otherwise. The proposal here is that question-answer pairs are a type of projective pair, and so one or both parts may be wordless.

5.2   Joint positions

People ordinarily exchange questions and answers to establish *joint positions*. Let us return a more complete version of 1:[1]

(1') ANNE: w- where are they going then,
      BRIAN: to Spain,
      ANNE: oh, (2.7.1232)

In turn 1, Anne specifies a to-be-completed proposition *They are going X-ward*, and in turn 2, Brian specifies information that completes it: *X is to Spain*. Together, they specify the jointly constructed proposition *They are going to Spain*.

But Anne and Brian did more than that. The two of them, in a discussion with their friend Ian, needed to establish a *joint position* about where Ian's parents were going before they could proceed with their discussion. They established the joint position with the question-answer pair plus its follow-up 'oh'. A position (as I use the term) is a proposition that one is committed to for current purposes. A *joint* position is a proposition that two or more people are *jointly* committed to for current purposes.

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[1] Most of my examples are drawn from the London-Lund corpus (Svartvik and Quirk 1980). Each is marked with a notation such as '2.7.1232', which refers to conversation 2.7 beginning at line 1232. In my notation, dashes mark one-beat pauses; periods mark half-beat pauses; commas and question marks mark ends of tone units; and paired square brackets mark overlapping speech.

People try to establish joint positions when these are needed in the current joint activity – their gossip, discussion or business transaction. Establishing a joint position takes a minimum of two steps. In a question-answer pair, one party initiates the process by specifying a *proposition at issue*:

1. Wh-questions (e.g., *Where are they going then?*) specify *incomplete propositions*, and project answers that complete the propositions.
2. Yes-no questions (*Did you sit with her?*) specify *either-or propositions*, and project answers that resolve the propositions with *yes* or *no*.
3. Alternative questions (*Did you buy the VW or the Toyota?*) specify *alternative propositions*, and project answers that select among the alternatives.

The second party completes the process by resolving the proposition at issue – by providing the projected information. It is these two moves that are called question and answer. But how do they work?

5.2.1   Joint construals and framing

Establishing a joint position ordinarily requires the parties to reach joint construals of the question and answer *taken together*. Sometimes, it takes extra steps to do that, as here:

(3) MAGGIE: you fancy it yourself do you? –
     JULIA: what, the men's doubles?
     MAGGIE: yeah,
     JULIA: well, more than the singles, yes, – (7.3e.278)

Maggie's question in turn 1 is apparently unclear to Julia, who asks for clarification in turn 2, and gets it in turn 3. (Turns 2 and 3 are called a *side sequence*, which I take up later.) By turn 4, Julia and Maggie seem to have reached a joint construal of Maggie's question (*you fancy the men's doubles yourself, yes or no*), which lets Julia proceed to her answer in turn 4.

It may also take extra effort to establish a joint construal of the *answer*, as in this interview of a student for admission to a university:

(4) DESMOND: u:h is there any . u:h present-day novelist which you regard as .
               particularly good,
     EWAN: u:m . well going ou- outside the strictly English school, I
               [I like .   um]
     DESMOND: [what do you mean by the strictly] English school,
     EWAN: oh well American, . u:h I like . I rather like um . Steinbeck's . style,
               (3.5b.627)

In turn 3, Desmond interrupts Ewan's answer to ask for clarification of 'strictly English school', and Ewan obliges before going on.

Every joint position has a framing – a spatial or conceptual perspective, frame of reference, or point of view – on which the two parties must ordinarily agree. In 1, Anne presupposed that Ian's parents were *going* (not the more specific *flying*) somewhere, and Brian framed the destination as *Spain* (not the more specific *Catalonia* or *Barcelona*). Together, they established a joint position with the framing: *Ian's parents are going to Spain.*

When people are faced with a framing they cannot accept, they often negotiate a framing they *can* accept (see Drew 1992). In 5, a British lawyer, Seth, is interrogating a witness about a visit to her ageing mother:

(5)   SETH: did you sit with her, whilst, . she completed the meal, -
      TESSA: I was in the room, while she was having it, yes, .
      SETH: and then uh ((continues)) (11.1.37)

In turn 2, Tessa could have answered with a simple 'yes', but she does not. Instead, she alters the framing of Seth's question first. She did not 'sit with her mother' but merely 'was in the room'; her mother did not 'complete the meal', but merely 'was having it'. In Seth's framing, *Tessa sat with her mother whilst her mother completed the meal*. In Tessa's framing, *Tessa was in the room while her mother was having the meal*. Seth nevertheless accepts Tessa's reframing by going on to his next question. Seth and Tessa's final joint position was framed as much by her as by him.

5.2.2   *Uses of joint positions*

People do not exchange questions and answers without a purpose. They often need a proposition they can consider valid or true for their current joint activity to proceed. In the courtroom, for example, Seth and Tessa needed to establish a joint position to serve as her official testimony. Other times people need joint positions about who is going to do what next and for whom.

Requests are one example. Consider this question-answer pair in a restaurant (from Merritt 1976):

(6)   CUSTOMER: Can I have hot chocolate with whipped cream?
      SERVER: Sure. ((leaves to get))

In this exchange, the customer and server establish the joint position, *the customer can have hot chocolate with whipped cream*. They use it as a preliminary to the obvious next joint position: *the server is to bring the customer hot chocolate with whipped cream*. Indeed, the server acts on the second joint position as if they had established it explicitly. The question in 6 is often called a *prerequest* (see Schegloff 2007).

Offers often work the same way. Consider these two question-answer pairs in a restaurant (from Merritt 1976):

(7)   CUSTOMER: Do you have the pecan Danish today?
      SERVER: Yes, we do.
      SERVER: Would you like one of those?
      CUSTOMER: Yes, please.

In the first pair, the customer and server establish the joint position, *the restaurant has the pecan Danish today*, and in the second pair, the joint position, *the customer would like one of those*. But this, again, is preliminary to a third joint position, *the server is to bring the customer a pecan Danish*, which the server acts on as if they had established it explicitly. Although examples 6 and 7 hardly do justice to requests and offers, they illustrate other joint positions that get established with questions and answers.

5.3   Form and function

But how do people identify something as a question or answer in the first place? Clearly, not by form alone (see Levinson, 1983). Questions can be asked not only with interrogative sentences (as in 1, 4, 5, 6, 7), but in other ways, too. In 8, a prospective student (Helen) has just ended an interview with a professor (George):

(8)   HELEN: and now I have to see the u:h
      GEORGE: Tutor to Women Students, and the secretary will tell you how to find
                her,
                [.   all right]
      HELEN: [thank you very much] indeed (3.1b.1018)

When Helen says 'And now I have to see the u:h [pause]' George takes her as requesting him to complete her utterance, which he does. It is as if she had asked 'And now I have to see who?' and he answered 'the Tutor to Women Students'. Helen and George created a question-answer pair, but without the standard forms (see Lerner 1991; Wilkes-Gibbs 1986).

At the heart of question-answer pairs is the proposition at issue. Typically, it is the first party who *raises* the proposition at issue, and because of conditional relevance, it places *prospective* constraints on the next turn. But conditional relevance works the other direction too. When the second party responds, he or she places *retrospective* constraints on what they take to have come just before.

5.3.1   *Prospective and retrospective interpretations*

People often let each other know how they are construing certain events around them, but without telling them explicitly. Take this apology:

(9)   ROBERT: ((waits as Peter pours beer into his glass))
      PETER: oh . **sorry** I'm pouring that out the wrong way (1.7.186)

With 'sorry' Peter apologises to Robert for the way he poured the beer. He does not *tell* Robert that his prior action was a gaffe. Rather, he *presupposes* that it was a gaffe – no matter how Robert saw it – and apologises for it. So with 'sorry', Peter places a *retrospective* interpretation on what he had just done. All so-called expressive speech acts work this way (Searle 1975), as illustrated here:

Expressive	Prior event at issue	B's response
Apology	B does something that offends A	'Sorry!'
Thanks	A does B a favour	'Thanks!'
Congratulations	A achieves something positive	'Congratulations!'
Surprise	A reveals a surprise	'Aha!'

In these four cases, B provides a retrospective interpretation for the prior event by presupposing it to be an offence, favour, accomplishment or surprise.

Answers to questions also presuppose interpretations of what came just before. In most cases, these interpretations confirm B's understanding of A's question, but in others, they actually help determine what A is taken to mean. In one study (Clark 1979), a woman named Susan telephoned a hundred local restaurants and asked, 'Do you accept credit cards?' The restaurant managers responded in four main ways:

Type	Manager's response	Construal of S's utterance
Yes only	'Yes, we do.'	Yes/no question
Yes + list	'Yes, we accept Mastercard and Visa.'	Serious pre-request
List only	'We accept Mastercard and Visa.'	*Pro forma* pre-request
No only	'No, we don't.'	Any of the above

The managers who responded 'Yes, we do' presupposed Susan was asking a *yes-no* question and nothing more. But those who responded with a list of credit cards presupposed she was asking the *yes-no* question in order to make a *pre-request*, a preliminary to a request for a list of credit cards (see Schegloff 2007). These presuppositions were crucial to what Susan was henceforth taken to mean. What she was taken to mean was one thing for the one set of managers but another for the other set. The paradox is that it was the second party (the manager) who determined which of two things the first party (Susan) was henceforth to be taken to have meant.

5.3.2   *Yes and no*

Yes and *no* are specialised for answering *yes-no* questions. Take this exchange from a call to a restaurant (Clark, 1979):

(10)   SUSAN: Do you accept American Express cards?
         MANAGER: Yes.

In responding 'yes' the manager (1) presupposes a *yes-no* proposition at issue, *the restaurant accepts American Express cards, yes or no*; and (2) commits to the proposition being valid for current purposes. Other managers said 'no' committing to the proposition not being valid for current purposes.

The crucial point is that *yes* and *no* display retrospective interpretations that can be used in establishing the *yes-no* proposition currently at issue. Take this exchange about a school called Charterhouse:

(11)   SIDNEY: well David Tate had a boy at Charterhouse, ((falling intonation))
         TOM: yes he did,
         SIDNEY: m, and he used to come and ... (2.2a.319)

In turn 1, Sidney asserts that Tate had a boy at Charterhouse. In using falling intonation, he appears to expect Tom to accept this proposition without comment. But Tom does not accept it without comment. By saying 'yes he did', he *retrospectively* interprets the proposition about Tate to be at issue, and he answers it *yes*. He retrospectively treats Sidney's utterance not as an assertion but as a *yes-no* question.

Retrospective interpretations are even clearer when the answer is 'no', as in this exchange:

(12)   REYNARD: that means that there will be two questions only, ((falling intonation))
         SAM: uh no, there'll be three questions, you'll get an essay ... (1.1.1011)

Reynard seems confident in his assertion in turn 1, but Sam thinks he is wrong. How should he correct Reynard? He could say 'You're wrong ...' or 'Don't you mean three questions?' Instead, he treats Reynard's proposition as if it were at issue, and he answers it *no*. He retrospectively interprets Reynaud's utterance not as a simple assertion, but as raising a *yes-no* proposition at issue.

Propositions at issue, therefore, can be raised and resolved in several ways. The standard way is prospective: The first party raises a proposition at issue, and the second party tries to resolve it as projected. Another way is retrospective: The first party takes some action, and the second party retrospectively treats it as a proposition at issue.

5.4   Primary questions, primary answers

People in conversation engage in at least two lines of communication at once. The *primary line* is about their official business – the joint activity they are engaged in – such as gossiping, discussing politics, transacting business or playing tennis. The *collateral line* is about the primary line itself – what the participants produce, say and mean in their talk about the official business. The goal of the primary line is to advance the official business whereas the goal of the collateral line is to manage the communication that advances the official business.[2]

Questions and answers are used in both lines of communication. In 4, there was a question-answer pair of each kind, which I have separated out here:

(13a) DESMOND: u:h is there any . u:h present-day novelist which you . regard as
                        . particularly good,
        EWAN: u:m . well going ou- outside the strictly English school, I I like
                        . u:h I like . I rather like um . Steinbeck's . style,
(13b) DESMOND: what do you mean by the strictly English school,
        EWAN: oh well American,

The question-answer pair in 13a deals with the university interview, the official business, whereas the one in 13b deals with Desmond's and Ewan's communication in that interview, what Ewan meant by 'strictly English school'. As illustrated in 13b, collateral signals are typically positioned within, between, alongside or fused with the primary signals they are addressed to. Let us look first at the primary line, starting with answers.

5.4.1   Wordless answers

Answers are supposed to resolve a proposition at issue, and that can be accomplished entirely by gestures. By gesture, I mean *any movement or positioning of the body that a producer displays to a recipient as a communicative act.* Producers can move or position their hands, arms, faces, heads, shoulders, torsos, entire bodies, and even pencils, pointers and pianos.

Gesturing, like other communicative acts, is based on three *methods* of signalling (Peirce 1955; see Clark 1996, Clark and Gerrig 1990):

Indicating. When Adam points at a car and tells Bess, 'That car is mine,' he is using his finger as an *index* for the car. Gestural indexes include pointing at, gazing at, tapping on, holding up, and moving objects.

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[2] The process is recursive. Managing talk is itself a joint activity that needs managing, and that may create a third line of talk collateral to the second, and so on (see Clark and Schaefer 1989; Clark 1996). Turns 5 and 6 of example 39 are in the third line.

Depicting. When Adam holds his hands 40 cm apart and tells Bess, 'I caught a fish this long,' he is depicting the length of the fish. The most common gestural depictions are iconic gestures and parts of quotations.

Symbolising. When Adam winks at Bess while saying, 'Why don't you serve the kids asparagus?' he is using the wink as a *conventional symbol* for 'I'm kidding'. Gestures of this type include so-called emblems such as nodding, thumbs up and crossed fingers.

Most gestures are composites, or combinations, of these methods. Suppose Adam asks, 'Do you have the key?' while shaping his index finger like a key and pointing it at a keyhole. His gesture combines the depiction of the key with an index to the keyhole. I will focus on composite gestures that are designed primarily to indicate, to depict or to symbolise.

People can often answer Wh-questions about the identity or location of an object simply by pointing, as in these constructed examples:

(14) CLARK: ((to classroom of students)) Who needs a syllabus?
        STUDENT: **((raises her hand))**
(15) ADAM: ((in parking lot with Bess)) Which car is yours?
        BESS: **((points at a nearby car))**
(16) JANE: ((holding out a tray with glasses of wine)) Red or white?
        KENNETH: **((takes a glass of red wine)) Thanks.**
(17) SERGEANT: ((to line of soldiers)) Who will volunteer for guard duty
                        tonight?
        PRIVATE: **((takes one step in front of line))**

In 14, the student could have said, 'I do' while raising her hand, but she did not need to. Her gesture was enough. The same goes for 15 through 17.

People can answer Wh-questions with depicting gestures as well. Many Wh-questions invite or even require depictions, as in these constructed examples:

(18) ADAM: How big a fish did you catch?
        BESS: **((holds hands 40 cm apart))**
(19) TARA: (to piano teacher) How fast should this étude go?
        JOSEPHINE: **((taps pencil at a tempo of 120))**
(20) HERB: How do you pronounce Cologne in Dutch?
        JAN: **'Keulen.'**
(21) HERB: What is the shape of your new office?
        JAN: **((draws a sketch on paper))**

In 18, Bess could have produced 'This long' along with her gesture, but when the proposition at issue is clear enough, as in 18, all she needs is the gesture.

People can answer still other Wh-questions with symbolising gestures, as in these actual and constructed examples:

(22) REPORTER: ((yelling to President across the White House lawn))
                          What do you think of the Senate vote on your Supreme
                          Court nominee?
      PRESIDENT: **((produces a thumbs-up))** (from TV news)

(23) LADY CAROLINE: Mrs. Kettle and the children are, I suppose, at the sea-
                          side?
      SIR JOHN: **((shrugs his shoulders))** (Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No
                          Importance*)

(24) LILA: How did you do on the final exam?
      MARK: **((holds up crossed fingers))**

By using a gesture, the President, Sir John and Mark were able to answer in
silence.

And, finally, people often answer yes-no questions with head nods or
head shakes alone, as in these examples from plays by Dickens, Shaw and
Buchman:

(25) OVERTON: This is your letter? ((Shows it))
      GENTLEMAN: **((nods assent solemnly))** (Charles Dickens, *The Strange
                          Gentleman*)

(26) MRS DUBEDAT: Will you bring the man up here, Mr Walpole, and tell him
                          that he may see Louis, but that he mustnt exhaust him by
                          talking?
      WALPOLE: **((nods and goes out by the outer door))** (George Bernard
                          Shaw, *The Doctor's Dilemma*)

(27) CHE: You have a boat?
      FIDEL: **((Fidel shakes his head))**
      CHE: Money?
      FIDEL: Not yet. (Peter Buchman, *Che: Part One*)

In these and other plays, nods are often specified as 'nods assent solemnly',
'nodding slowly', 'nods and smiles', and 'nods, winks, and smiles'. So head
nods and head shakes, like *yes* and *no*, can be further marked for certainty,
enthusiasm and affect.

Some questions, therefore, are answered solely with gestures. Indeed, questions
like 'Where is it?' or 'How do you do that?' may be impossible to answer without
a gesture, and from there it is a small step to answer with the gesture alone.

5.4.2   Wordless questions

Wordless questions tend to get established retrospectively. One way is with
'yes', as in opening a conversation (see Schegloff 1968):

(28) BEN: ((to Charlotte reading a newspaper)) Charlotte?
      CHARLOTTE: ((looking up at Ben)) Yes?
      BEN: I was wondering ...

In turn 1, Ben uses the vocative 'Charlotte' to let Charlotte know that he
wishes to speak to her. In turn 2, she uses 'yes' to agree. But if Charlotte's
'yes' is the second part of a question-answer pair, what is the first part she is
presupposing?

The proposal here is that Charlotte presupposes Ben's action in turn 1 as
raising a proposition at issue. But what proposition? It must be one she believes
is jointly the most salient to them in their current joint activity: *She is willing
to talk to him now, yes or no.* If this were the question, she could answer it
'yes', as she did in 28, but she could also have responded 'Hold on', 'Just a
minute', or 'Not now', which all seem possible for her to say. The question she
attributes to Ben is one he never expresses in words.

It is no figure of speech to describe Ben's question as *wordless*. Charlotte
cannot assume it was 'Can I talk to you now?' and answer 'Yes, you can'; or
'Will you talk to me?' and answer 'Yes, I will'; or 'Would you mind talking
to me for a moment?' and answer 'Not at all.' The proposition at issue has no
identifiable linguistic form. It is, literally, wordless.

Telephone rings can also be the occasion for wordless questions. As Schegloff
(1968) noted, 'Intercom calls, for example, are typically answered by a "yeah"
or "yes"', a point he illustrated with these two calls to police dispatchers:

(29) CALLER: ((rings dispatcher's telephone))
      DISPATCHER: Yeah?
      CALLER: Tell 85 to take that crane ...

(30) CALLER: ((rings dispatcher's telephone))
      DISPATCHER: Yes.
      CALLER: Uh Officer Novelada.
      DISPATCHER: Yes, speaking.
      CALLER: Why uh this is Sergeant ...

The callers in both 29 and 30 used the telephone ring to summon the dispatch-
ers, and they, in turn, answered 'yes'. In doing so, they placed retrospective
interpretations on the rings as indicating the proposition at issue, *you are in a
position to talk now, yes or no*.

Certain joint activities are initiated by the mere placement and orientation
of the participants' bodies (Clark 2003). One example is buying tickets in the
Amsterdam central train station in 1978 as described by Brouwer, Gerritsen
and de Haan (1979):

The traveller [who has stepped up to a ticket window] ... has to talk into the microphone
placed in a thick pane of glass that separates the traveller from the ticket seller. The
traveller is the one who initiates the speech act. The ticket seller does not say anything
before the traveller has spoken.

Imagine that Antje (a traveller) is buying a ticket in 1978 from Pieter
(an agent):

(31) ANTJE: ((places herself at ticket window, gazes at clerk))
      PIETER: ((already sitting behind ticket counter, meets Antje's gaze))
      ANTJE: retour Utrecht ('Return ticket to Utrecht')
      PIETER: tien gulders alstublieft ('Ten guilders please').

Antje requests Pieter's attention by placing herself at the window and gazing at him, and he responds by returning her gaze. It is as if she had asked, 'Can you wait on me?' and he answered 'Yes?' In this characterisation, both her question and his answer were wordless.

But did Peter truly treat Antje's placement plus gaze as a question? Related evidence suggests yes. Here is the opening of a conversation recorded in a drug store as I was buying two items from a clerk named Stone (Clark 1996: 31):

Clark walks up to a counter and places two items next to the cash register.
  Stone is behind the counter marking off items on an inventory.
  Clark, looking at Stone, catches her eye.
  Stone, meeting Clark's eyes, 'I'll be right there.'
  Clark, 'Okay.'

Stone clearly construed my placement and eye gaze as asking her to serve me. But to complete her inventory, she needed to 'block', or put off, the expected answer 'yes' (see Schegloff 1968), and she did just that by saying 'I'll be right there.'

Wh-questions can also be wordless. In a remote village in Turkey, some friends and I were having dinner at a family-run restaurant when the monolingual owner engaged each of us in an exchange something like this:

(32) OWNER: ((displays three fresh fish on a platter))
      CLARK: ((points at one of them))

I interpreted the owner as asking 'Which fish do you want for dinner?' and I answered by pointing. We accomplished our question-answer pair entirely with gestures.

Finally there are follow-up questions. On entering a restaurant in California, I left my coat with the hostess, who stored it in a closet behind her counter. When I left, she and I had this exchange (based on notes taken immediately afterward):

(33) CLARK: I'll need to get my coat.
      HOSTESS: Sure. ((opening closet behind counter)) Which one is it?
      CLARK: The tan one ((pointing)).
      HOSTESS: This one ((pointing))?
      CLARK: No, to the right.
      HOSTESS: **((points at another coat))**
      CLARK: **Yes.**
      HOSTESS: ((hands me the coat))

In turn 4, the hostess asked me her question with a speech-gesture composite, but in turn 6, she used the gesture alone. It is natural to treat the gesture alone as posing the same *yes-no* question as the speech-gesture composite. Both were answered with a *yes* or *no*.

5.4.3   Parasitic questions

A parasitic question, in my terminology, is a wordless question that is carried by an expression that is produced for another purpose. Take 'Pardon?' in this example:

(34) ABIGAIL: is it . how much does Norman get off, —
      BILL: **pardon?**
      ABIGAIL: **how much does Norman get off,**
      BILL: oh, only Friday and Monday, (7.3c.146)

In turn 2, Bill says 'pardon' to apologise for missing what Abigail said. But in doing so, he adds rising intonation. According to Bolinger (1989), rising intonation signals 'unfinished business', that is, a proposition at issue. But what proposition? The question Abigail answers is not 'Do I beg your pardon?' but rather 'What did you say?' Where did that question come from? Note that Bill could have expressed his apology and his question in two moves, saying 'Pardon me. What did you say?' What he did instead was exploit the first act, 'Pardon', as the carrier, or *parasitic host*, for the intonation that signals the second act. His question is indicated by the intonation, but is not expressed in the words that carry it. It is a wordless question.

Parasitic questions are often found in summons-answer sequences. In 28, when Charlotte says 'yes' to Ben, she presupposes that he is asking something like 'Are you willing to talk to me?' But in adding rising intonation to 'yes', she is in turn asking Ben, roughly, 'What do you want?' This is a parasitic question carried by the host word 'yes', a question that Ben answers in the next turn:

(28a) CHARLOTTE: ((rising intonation on 'yes')) (= 'What do you want?')
       BEN: I was wondering …

Ben, too, asks a parasitic question in 28 when he adds rising intonation on 'Charlotte?' He could have said 'Hey' or 'Hey Charlotte' or 'Charlotte', with falling intonation. But by adding rising intonation, he is taken to be asking a parasitic question:

(28b) BEN: ((rising intonation on 'Charlotte')) (= 'Are you willing to talk to me now?')
       CHARLOTTE: Yes

Ben's question is carried entirely in the intonation, so it, too, is wordless.

In the primary line of conversation, therefore, people can both ask and answer questions without words. It is just that the current joint activity must be clear enough to enable them to do so.

5.5   Collateral questions, collateral answers

It takes work to keep a conversation on track. The participants ordinarily try as they go along to establish and maintain the mutual belief that they have understood each other well enough for current purposes. This process, called *grounding*, makes liberal use of question-answer pairs (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986; Clark and Schaefer 1989; Clark and Brennan 1991). When people have not heard or understood their partners, all they need to do is ask ('What did you say?' 'What do you mean?' 'Do you mean Charles?') and, once they have cleared things up, go on. I will examine two patterns of questions and answers in collateral communication – side sequences and bound sequences.

5.5.1   Side sequences

Problems of hearing, interpretation and understanding are often resolved in what Jefferson (1972) called *side sequences*, as in example 3, repeated here:

(3)   MAGGIE: you fancy it yourself do you? –
       JULIA: **what, the men's doubles?**
       MAGGIE: **yeah,**
       JULIA: well, more than the singles, yes, – (7.3e.278)

When Julia does not understand Maggie's 'it', she initiates a side sequence with a question, and Maggie completes it with an answer. Once they resolve the issue, Julia returns to answer Maggie's original question.

Side sequences can be initiated not only with spoken questions but with gestural ones. In one study (Clark and Krych 2004), two people, called the *director* and the *builder*, were seated at two ends of a small table. The director was given a model of ten Lego blocks and required to tell the builder how to make a copy of it from other blocks. The two partners could see each other; the director could see the builder assemble the copy; but the builder could not see the director's prototype. Their actions were captured on video.

The participants in this task relied heavily on gestures for grounding what they said. One type of gesture was *poising*. When matchers believed they understood where the next block was to go, they would often *poise* the block over the candidate location (without attaching it) as if asking, 'Is this where it goes?' and the director said *yes* or *no*. Here is an example (in which Danny is director):

(35)   DANNY: And now get (.75 sec) a-uh eight piece green, (1.50 sec) and join the
                  two so that it's al[l symmetric-   yeah]
        ED: [((poises block over target location))]
        DANNY: [right in the center].
        ED: [((attaches block))]

Ed begins the stroke of his poise in the middle of Danny's 'all'. Danny sees the gesture and suspends speaking 0.5 sec later (marked by the hyphen on 'symmetric-') to say 'yeah' and confirm Danny's gesture. In doing so, they create a side sequence:

(35a)   ED: ((poises block over target location)) (='Does the block go here?')
         DANNY: Yeah, right in the center

Ed poses his initiating question by means of a gesture alone.

Ordinarily, people try to speak without overlapping each other (Sacks *et al.* 1974, de Ruiter, Mitterer and Enfield 2006), and yet they are willing to produce *gestures* that overlap with speech. In 35, Ed did not wait for Danny to finish speaking, but started his gesture the moment he thought he knew where the block should go. People may prefer to speak in the clear, but they are willing to gesture when ready.

But gesturing when ready can lead to problems. Consider 36:

(36)   JANE: Put it on the [((right hand))] [half of the- yes]
        KEN: [((*lifts block*))] [((*poises block over target
                                                      location*))]
        JANE: (0.2 sec) of [the green   ] rectangle
        KEN: [((*attaches block*))]

In line 1, Jane interprets Ken's gesture as asking about the target location. She realises that if she waits to say 'yes', Ken might assume the answer is no and move to another location. To prevent this, she suspends speaking after 'of the' (0.3 sec and after the apex of Ken's gesture) and completes the side sequence:

(36a)   KEN: ((*poises block over target location*)) (='Does the block go here?')
         JANE: Yes

Only then does she complete her utterance. Overall, only 36% of the speakers who suspended their utterances returned, as Jane did, to complete them. The other 64% abandoned them and went on to the next instruction ('Now take ...').

People can time their gestures with precision and then use that timing for communicative purposes. In 37, Susan is telling Tess where to put the next block in her Lego model:

(37)   SUSAN: but only covers the (1.0 sec) [(0.4 sec) last two (0.1 sec) n]ot
        TESS: [((*poise 1 --------*))]
        SUSAN: those [two (0.05 sec) not] th [at two (0.03 sec) bu]t-

```
TESS:        [ ((poise 2 – – -)) ]   [ ((poise 3 – – – -)) ]
SUSAN:   [(0.03) yes tho]se two
              [ ((poise 4-)) ]
```

Tess tries out three locations one after the other (poises 1, 2, and 3) with Susan saying *no* to each try. The first side sequence is this:

(37a)   TESS: ((*poise 1*)) (='Do you mean these two?')
        SUSAN: not those two

Yet once Tess hits on the right location (poise 4), Susan says 'yes', and Tess stops trying new locations. Precision timing of gestures allows people to be opportunistic and efficient (see Clark and Krych 2004; Jefferson 1973).

Builders in the Lego task used poising, pointing at and exhibiting Lego blocks – all of them indicating gestures – hundreds of times. About 35% of the time, they gestured without speaking, but the other 65% of the time, they combined the gestures with expressions like 'Okay?' 'Like this?' and 'These two?' It is no surprise that directors interpreted 'Okay?' plus a gesture as a question. But they answered *yes* or *no* just as often to the gestures produced on their own. They treated the questions *without* words as equivalent to the questions *with* words.

5.5.2   Bound sequences

Questions and answers for collateral purposes can also be initiated *within* utterances, as here:

(38)   MORRIS: I wrote off to . Bill, . uh who had presumably disappeared by this
                  time, certainly, **a man called Annegra? –**
        JUNE: yeah, Allegra,
        MORRIS: Allegra, uh replied, . uh and I . put . two other people ((continues))
                  (3.2a.59)

Morris produces the phrase *a man called Annegra* as part of the clause *a man called Annegra replied*. But he suspends speaking at the end of the phrase, pronouncing it with what Sacks and Schegloff (1979) called a *try marker*, a rising intonation and a slight pause. Morris does this to ask June, mid-utterance, whether she recognises who he is referring to. Once she answers 'yeah' (and corrects *Annegra* to *Allegra*), he returns to his utterance and goes on.

Morris's question is what I will call a *bound question*, and his question plus June's answer, a *bound sequence*, as here:

(38a)   MORRIS: ((*rising intonation on 'a man called Annegra'*)) (= 'Do you
                  recognise who I mean by *this*?')
        JUNE: yeah, Allegra,

Morris performs his question ('Do you recognise who I mean by *this*?') by adding rising intonation to the carrier phrase *a man called Annegra*. Unlike a parasitic question, his question refers to the very phrase on which it is produced. The question contains the carrier phrase, in effect, as a direct quotation: 'Do you recognise who I mean by "a man called Annegra"?' So a bound question, in my terminology, is a question that refers to the carrier phrase on which it is performed. And a bound sequence is a sequence initiated by a bound question.

Bound sequences are different from side sequences. Morris could have checked on June's understanding with a standard side sequence, as in this variant of 38:

(38b)   MORRIS: I wrote off to . Bill, . uh who had presumably disappeared by this
                  time, certainly, a man called Annegra – **you know who I mean?**
        JUNE: **yeah, Allegra,**
        MORRIS: Allegra, uh replied, . uh and I . put . two other people
                  ((continues))

Instead, Morris initiated a sequence with a wordless question bound to the phrase he was asking about.

Bound sequences are common in instalment utterances (see Clark and Schaefer 1989). Consider this example from a British telephone conversation:

(39)   BETTY: Banque Nationale de Liban? —
        ALICE: **yes?**
        BETTY: nine to thirteen? .
        ALICE: **sorry?**
        BETTY: nine . to . thirteen?
        ALICE: **yeah? .**
        BETTY: King Edward Street —
        ALICE: **yeah? -**
        BETTY: London .
        ALICE: **yes?** ((continues)) (8.1f.638)

Here, Betty is giving Alice an address in instalments. She produces turns 1, 3 and 5 with try markers, and turns 7, 9 and beyond with a list intonation, a fall-rise plus pause. Alice treats each instalment as *also* representing a bound question 'Did you get this?' and answers each question 'yeah' or 'yes'.

5.5.3   Acknowledgements

This brings us, finally, to what Jefferson (1984, 2002) called *acknowledgement tokens*. In 40 Ann is telling Burton about a wedding near Cambridge, England:

(40)   BURTON: how how was the wedding, -
        ANN: oh it was it was really good, it was uh it was a lovely day,

BURTON: **yes,**
ANN: and . it was a super place, . to have it . of course,
BURTON: **yes, -**
ANN: and we went and sat in an orchard ((continues)) (7.31.1441)

In lines 3 and 5, Burton says 'yes'. But why did he say anything? And why 'yes'?

Burton's 'yes' belongs to a large heterogeneous class of items I will call *side responses*. These are brief items a partner produces to address what the current speaker is saying or doing but usually without taking the floor. Side responses are often *yes, no*, or related words, but they may also be nods, smiles, laughter, brief assessments or other items. What Burton meant by 'yes' was determined in part by its contrast with other potential side responses, including 'uh-huh', a nod and 'go on'.

So why 'yes'? The proposal is this: *Certain side responses are designed to be second parts of bound sequences that retrospectively help establish the bound questions to which they are answers*. In 40, when Ann says 'it was a lovely day', and Burton says 'yes', it is not that he is agreeing with her ('Yes, I agree'). After all, he did not know it was a lovely day. Rather, he is retrospectively treating 'it was a lovely day' as carrying the bound question 'Do you understand this?' or 'Are you following me on this?' and he answers it with 'yes'. Her question and his answer together form the bound sequence:

(40a)   ANN: ((*exhibits "it was uh it was a lovely day"*)) (= 'Do you understand this well enough for current purposes?")
        BURTON: yes,

I will call this the *bound sequence proposal*.

Now, members of the *yes*-family (*yes, yeah, yep, uh-huh, m-hm*, and head nods) cannot be used interchangeably, nor can members of the *no*-family (*no, nah, nope, uh-uh, hm-hm*, headshakes). *Yes* and *no* are appropriate in court, but the other members normally are not. *Uh-huh* is used, roughly speaking, to express assent, but with less commitment than *yes* or *yeah*, with the closed-lips version *m-hm* implying even less commitment. Head nods and head shakes are especially useful as continuous, overlapping and silent responses (see Morency *et al.* 2010). All of these actions can be exaggerated, repeated ('yes yes yes') or changed in speed, with various effects.

By the bound sequence proposal, these different side responses should reflect different bound questions, and evidence suggests they do. Here are four functions that have been identified for side responses of the *yes*-family (based on Jurafsky, Shriberg, Fox and Curl 1998; Goodwin 1986; Jefferson 1984):

1. *Acknowledgements*. These mark 'passive recipiency' (Jefferson 1984), acknowledging that the current speaker 'is still in the midst of some course of talk, and shall go on talking'.

2. *Exiting acknowledgements*. These mark 'incipient speakership' (Jefferson 1983). They acknowledge what the current speaker is now saying, but signal the partner's expectation of immediately taking over as speaker.

3. *Agreements*. These mark agreement or acceptance of what the speaker has just said (and may be a form of what Jefferson (2002) called 'affiliation responses').

4. *Assessments*. These make positive or negative assessments of what the current speaker has just said, as with 'Good God!' or 'How nice!' (Goodwin 1986). Some members of the *yes*-family can be used as assessments, as in 'Yes yes yes!' and 'Yes quite'.

These four functions are associated with different side responses. In Jurafsky *et al.*'s (1998) analysis, the first three functions (and explicit *yes-no* questions) yielded the following percentages of *yes, yeah, uh-huh* (including *m-hm*), and *right*:

		yes	yeah	uh-huh	right	others
1.	Acknowledgements	1%	28%	45%	9%	17%
2.	Exiting acknowledgements	2%	59%	17%	7%	15%
3.	Agreements	6%	36%	4%	17%	37%
4.	Answers to *yes-no* questions	18%	62%	14%	0%	6%

Simple acknowledgements (as identified by judges) tended to be *uh-huh* and *yeah*, whereas agreements tended to be upgraded to *yeah* and *yes*. And as Jefferson (1984) noted, *uh-huh* gets upgraded to *yeah* in acknowledgements used for exiting. All of these contrast with the consent markers *okay* and *all right* (Bangerter and Clark 2003).

Bound sequences like these generally help streamline conversation. Speakers in a dialogue normally seek timely evidence from their partners that they are being understood. One way to get this evidence is to initiate side sequences such as 'Do you see?' 'Right?' or 'Don't you think?' A more concise way, however, is to try to set up bound sequences. The trick is to get partners to construe certain stretches of speech as carrying bound questions such as 'Do you understand this?' or 'Do you agree with this?' If the partners are cooperative, they will provide answers that are appropriate to the questions – nods, 'm-hm', 'yes', 'terrific' or 'okay'. The advantage of bound sequences over side sequences is that they are not disruptive and require fewer turns. The disadvantage is that they leave the bound questions for partners to interpret, and that is riskier.

Burton's 'yes' in 40 is sometimes characterised as an 'acknowledgement' (Jefferson 1984, 2002) and sometimes as a 'continuer' (Schegloff 1982). These

terms represent different theoretical claims. Viewed as an acknowledgement, 'yes' means (roughly) 'yes, I acknowledge what you are saying' and, by implication, 'so please continue'. Viewed as a continuer, 'yes' means (roughly) 'go on' and, by implication, 'because I am following you so far'. Which view is correct?

The evidence favours acknowledgements. According to the bound sequence proposal, Burton says 'yes' because he is answering a bound *yes-no* question. If the most side responses are answers to bound *yes-no* questions, they, too, should be members of the *yes*-family, and they are. This holds not only in English, but in German (*ja*), French (*oui*), Spanish (*sí*), Japanese (*hai*), Mandarin Chinese (*shi, wei*), Russian (*da*), Greek (*vai*) and Hebrew (*ken*). If Burton had been inviting Ann simply to continue, he should have used words like 'go on', 'continue', or 'and?' Although items like these do occur, it is the variants of 'yes' that predominate.

To conclude, questions and answers may be expressed with or without words. Many questions and answers are wordless because they are gestural, but others are wordless in other ways. Parasitic questions are carried by spoken hosts, as with 'Pardon?' 'Charlotte?' and 'Yes?' And bound questions are carried by the very phrases they refer to and are often answered with acknowledgements ('yeah', 'uh-huh' or nodding). To assume that questions and answers are linguistic acts would miss these phenomena. Questions and answers belong not so much to language as they do to communication.

Questions

Formal, Functional and Interactional
Perspectives

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2012