



Questions and responses in Dutch conversations

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ABSTRACT

Based on an analysis of 350 questions and their responses in a corpus of ordinary interactions, this paper gives a descriptive overview of the ways Dutch interactants formulate their utterances to make them recognizable as doing questioning and the options they rely on to respond to these questions. I describe the formal options for formulating questions and responses in Dutch and the range of social actions (e.g. requests for information, requests for confirmation) that are implemented through questions in the corpus. Finally, I focus on answer design and discuss some of the coherence relations between questions, answers, and social actions. Questions that are asked to elicit information are associated with the more prototypical, lexico-morpho-syntactically defined question type such as polar interrogatives and, mainly, content questions. Most polar questions with declarative syntax are not primarily concerned with obtaining information but with doing other kinds of social actions.

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1. Introduction

The analysis presented in this paper originated as part of a larger *comparative* study of question–response sequences in conversations across 10 different languages at the Max-Planck-Institute for Psycholinguistics (see Introduction to this issue). The goal of this study is to investigate how people design their questions and responses in spontaneous, informal conversation and to identify similarities and differences in the ways speakers' form and use questions and answers across different cultures and languages. Speakers across the world's languages have very different lexical, morphological, syntactic and intonational means of marking an utterance as a question (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985; König and Siemund, 2007). Based on an analysis of questions and their responses in a corpus of ordinary interactions, this paper gives a descriptive overview of the ways Dutch interactants formulate their utterances to make them recognizable as doing questioning and the options they rely on to respond to these questions.

In our daily interactions we perform many different actions with questions and we rely on many forms of utterances to ask questions. The relevance of distinguishing between sentence type (such as interrogative) and communicative function (such as request for information) is stated recurrently in the pragmatic literature (see for example Wunderlich, 1976; Levinson, 1983; König and Siemund, 2007). A declarative sentence such as “She is divorced, I think” can function as a question, a negative interrogative such as “Can't you shut up now” is not a question but is actually an order, and the interrogative sentence “Do you need a punch” is not a request for information but a threat (Klooster, 2001:108–109). The functions of different types of questions and answers in Dutch have been investigated by other researchers in qualitative studies of institutional interactions such as standardized and non-standardized social survey interviews

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(e.g. Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2000; van't Hof, 2006; Mazeland, 1992), and news interviews (e.g. Koole and Waller, 2005). In this study, I examine the options Dutch speakers have to design their questions and responses and the interactional usage of different types of questions in a corpus of *ordinary* Dutch interactions.

In section 2, I first describe the data and methodology. In section 3, I describe the formal options for formulating questions and responses in Dutch. In section 4, I describe the range of social actions that are implemented through questions in the corpus. Finally, in section 5, I focus on answer design and discuss some of the relations between questions, answers, and social actions.

2. Data and method

The data I rely on consist of a corpus of 13 different videotaped interactions with varying participants. Seven of the interactions are ordinary multi-party interactions between relatives and friends, the number of participants varying from 4 to 7. These interactions took place in the park, in the garden or at the dinner table. The remaining 5 interactions were recorded at a hair salon and involved the hair stylists and their clients. Although the participants were engaged in different activities while having the conversation, all conversations were maximally informal and naturally occurring (i.e., not arranged for research purposes). The analysis is based on a data collection of 350¹ Dutch question–answer sequences that I selected by looking at the first 10–20 min of each of these 13 interactions. I pre-set the duration (between 10 and 20 min depending on the length of the tape) of a stretch of talk before collecting the questions. If the audio quality was poor at the beginning of the tape because of background noise, then I started the tape at a point where the audio quality was good. I did not collect questions selectively from these interactions but took all questions from the stretch of talk I had selected. Utterances were identified as ‘questions’ according to formal and contextual features. For the project definition of “question”, see Stivers and Enfield, this issue. Briefly, an utterance was considered a question if it was either formally marked as such and/or sought information, confirmation or agreement as a next action. Additionally, I examined the intonation contours of all the declarative questions in the corpus with an impressionistic auditory analysis and additionally used the software PRAAT to measure the pitch on the utterance final syllable.

With respect to responses to questions, utterances that provided the requested information, confirmation, or disconfirmation were coded as answers. Furthermore, response designs were examined for whether they were verbal or non-verbal or a combination of both. The non-verbal components that I identified in my corpus were nods, head shakes, and shrugs.

In what follows I present the results from the coding of the Dutch corpus starting with the description of the lexico-grammatical and prosodic resources for formulating questions and their distribution in the corpus.

3. Lexico-grammatical and prosodic options for formulating questions

In this study, questions were initially classified according to the response they expect, resulting in the three major categories: Polar (yes/no-) questions, Content (Wh-) questions, and alternative questions (Quirk et al., 1985).

As Fig. 1 shows, polar questions were most frequent (73%, $n = 234$) followed by content questions (21%; $n = 66$) of the questions in the corpus. Together, these two question types account for 94%, with the remaining 7% ($n = 21$) being alternative

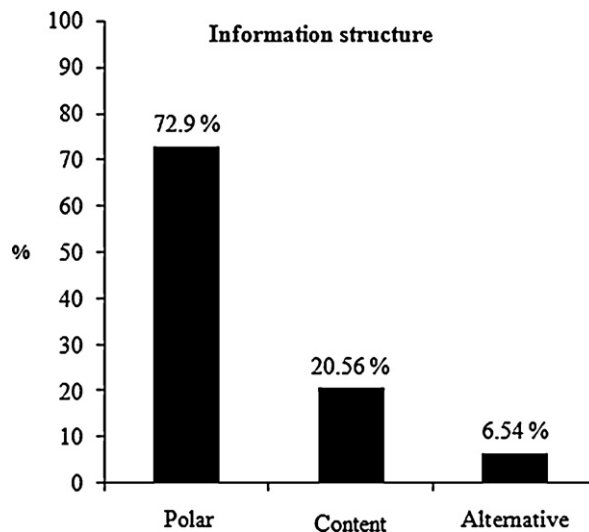


Fig. 1. Question types.

¹ For the analysis reported here, I excluded rhetorical questions, requests for physical actions and “through produced multi questions” (when the speaker produces multiple questions in one utterance). Therefore, the total number of question–answer sequences investigated here is 321 rather than 350.

questions. In the next sections I classify the subtypes of these three questions types with regard to their morphosyntactic design and to the ways they get answered. This classification is based partly on what is generally regarded as the most authoritative comprehensive Dutch grammar (Haeseryn et al., 1997) and on two more recent Dutch grammars (Vandeweghe, 2000; Klooster, 2001).

3.1. Polar questions

Polar questions can be classified into polar interrogatives and declarative questions (König and Siemund, 2007). Dutch speakers rely on two morphosyntactic devices for marking interrogativity in polar questions: (1) changing the order of constituents (subject/verb inversion), and (2) attaching a turn final question or an interrogative particle to the end of a declarative clause (a “tag” question). Declarative questions are commonly constituted by a declarative clause and are formally not distinguishable from statements (Haeseryn et al., 1997). The overall distribution of these polar question subtypes can be seen in Fig. 2.

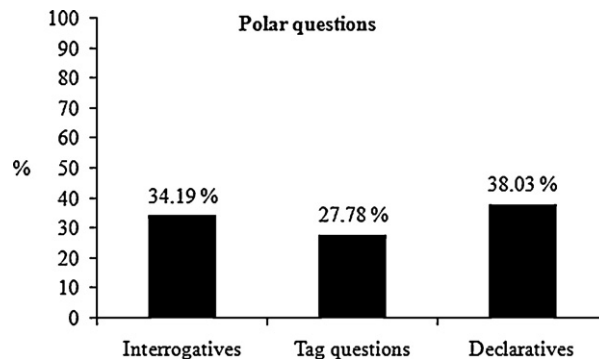


Fig. 2. Different types of polar questions.

Fig. 2 shows that among the polar questions the distribution between questions marked by subject/verb inversion (34%; $n = 80$) and tag questions (28%; $n = 65$) is nearly equal. Although considered together there are more polar questions which are marked morphosyntactically (62%; $n = 145$) than declarative ones (38%; $n = 89$), taken as a category on its own the declarative questions are the most frequently occurring type of polar questions in the Dutch corpus.

A common feature of all types of polar question is that they can be biased towards a positive or negative answer depending on their syntactic design; they are conducive. In Dutch, the response tokens are selected in accordance with the polarity of the question. Confirming answers in this system can have the form of “ja” (yes) or “nee” (no), depending on the polarity of the question (see Bolinger, 1957; Quirk et al., 1985; Haeseryn et al., 1997; Vandeweghe, 2000). A positively formatted polar question is confirmed with the positive response token “ja” (yes) and a negatively formatted polar question is confirmed with the negative response token “nee” (no). Dutch speakers can rely on a special response token, “jawel”, to give a disconfirming answer to a question with negative polarity.

In this section I describe the lexico-grammatical and prosodic resources for formulating polar questions and I show how their responses are matched to these design features.

3.1.1. Polar interrogatives

Of all polar questions 34% ($n = 80$) are constituted by subject/verb inversion. Similar to what Heinemann (2010) describes for Danish and unlike English, the formulation of an interrogative does not require an auxiliary verb in Dutch, as in example 1. The hair stylist is telling the client about her vacation plans and the positively formatted polar interrogative (line 1) is confirmed with the positive response token “ja” (yes).

Example 1: N010014

```
1 Cli:→ [Heb je] wel e:h (.) een halfpension ofzo.
      have you PAR a half-board or+so
      Do you have PAR uh: half-board or so.
2 (0.1)
```

- 3 HSt: Ja.
yes
Yes.
- 4 (0.4) ((nodding during silence))
- 5 HSt: Ja ook dat kon- eh: voor zes euro:
yes also that could for six euros
Yes also that could- uh: for six euros
- 6 HSt: [konde' we't] derbij boek[e'.
could we+it there-with book
we could book that additionally.
- 7 Cli: [Oh::,] [Oh.
Oh::, Oh.

The participants in example 2, Patrick and Mike, are brothers and they are talking about renting DVDs. Patrick himself is not a library member, and he requests confirmation from Mike in line 1 as to whether he also has no membership card. The negatively formatted polar interrogative here has a negative orientation and gets confirmed by Mike in line 3 with the negative response token “nee” (no).

Example 2: N006001

- 1 Pat: Heb je ook geen bibliotheekpasje (dan).
have you PAR none library membership card PAR
Do you not have a library membership card then.
- 2 (0.4)
- 3 Mik:→ Nee.
no
No.

In certain contexts however, negative interrogatives have affirmative assumptions and therefore they expect a “yes” answer. In example 3, Maaike had bought a silhouette with a butterfly motif as a present for Sake. While giving it to Sake, she requests confirmation in the form of a negative interrogative and Sake confirms her assumption initially with a “ja” (yes) and more strongly with “zeker” (certainly) (line 2).

Example 3: N003004

- 1 Mai: Vindt u die vlinders niet prachti[g]?
find you these butterflies not gorgeous
Don't you find these butterflies gorgeous?
- 2 Sak:→ [J]a, zeker.
yes certainly
Yes, certainly.
- 3 (0.9)
- 4 Sak: Ja.
yes
Yes.

3.1.2. 'Tag questions'

The Dutch speakers in the corpus used six different markers to mark an utterance turn–finally as a question (see Table 1 for an overview). In what follows, I describe five different markers as they occurred in the corpus referring to them as ‘tags’ and to this type of question as ‘tag questions’.

In Dutch, the particles “niet” (not) and “wel” (the affirmative equivalent of “niet”) occurring in clause-final position are deployed as question tags. These tags vary their form depending on the polarity of the statement, which means that tags with negative polarity like “niet” are attached to positively formatted statements and tags with affirmative polarity such as “wel” are attached to negatively formulated statements. I did not find any instances of the latter in my corpus. In this system, the response tokens are selected in accordance with the polarity of the tag. This means that a *positively formatted assertion* + *negative tag* is confirmed with the positive response token “ja” (yes) and a *negatively formatted assertion* + *positive tag* is confirmed with the negative response token “nee” (no). Consider example 4. Matthijs told his grandfather about a friend of his who does Tai Chi, a Chinese martial art. Grandfather produces an understanding check in line 1 to clarify the meaning of “Tai Chi” and Matthijs confirms it in line 3.

Example 4: N002029

1 Gfa: [Een soor-] (0.2) soort yoga is dat niet?
 a kind of yoga is that not
 A kin- (0.2) kind of yoga is that, isn't it?
 2 (0.2)
 3 Mat: Ja. ((nodding))
 yes
 Yes.

More commonly than using the interrogative tags “niet” or “wel” speakers use the negative fixed expression “of niet” and the positive fixed expression “of wel” to mark their utterance as a question. Example 5 is an illustration of the negative tag “of niet” that grandfather uses to ask his grandson Mark about his soccer training.

Example 5: N001048

1 Gfa: En dan- dat begint straks weer denk ik de train[ing]of [niet],
 and then that starts soon again think I the training or not
 And then- it starts soon again the training I think,
 2 Mar: [Ja.]
 yes
 Yes.

Next, there is the modal particle “toch?” (similar to the English “right?”), which can occur in mid-sentence position but can also be used as question tag in final sentence position. Although Haeseryn et al. (1997) state that “toch” only follows positive assertions it occurred after positive as well as after negative assertions in the corpus as can be seen in example 6, where the participants are talking about home beer tap installations. Mark assumes that beer does not get cooled in a home beer tender and requests confirmation of this from Mike in line 1. In this context, the speaker checks whether he and the recipient share the same assumption about or attitude to the proposition expressed by the negative declarative (Foolen, 2006:67).

Example 6: N007015

1 Mar: Da's ook niet gekoeld toch, (0.2) huistap,
 that+is also not cooled PAR (home) beer tender
 That's also not cooled right, (0.2) (home) beer tender,
 3 (0.5)
 4 Mik: Jawel,
 yes+PAR
 Yes it is,

In example 6, Mike’s “jawel” functions as a “reaffirmation” after Mark’s negatively formulated position (English uses emphasis ‘It does get cooled’) (Foolen, 2006:62).

Finally, the ‘pragmatic particle’ “hè?” is also frequently used (Foolen, 1996; see also Jefferson, 1981). Hè can be used to solicit responses to various types of actions that are not questions² as illustrated in example 7, where Nienke and Matthijs are

² The confirmation requesting tag “hè” is a parasitic item that gets its meaning only with reference to the previous utterance. Its function is to retrospectively mark the previous turn, whether assessment, offer or noticing, as an utterance seeking a response. Both reviewers pointed out that there is a difference between ‘soliciting responses to actions that are not questions’ and ‘marking utterances as questions’. Relying on a “broad” or “functional” definition of ‘question’ for the analysis presented in this paper, a turn consisting of an “assessment/offer/noticing/etc. + confirmation requesting tag” is then considered a “question”, not requesting information, but, in the case of assessments, seeking agreement through a request for confirmation.

having dinner with their grandparents. Matthijs is drinking a beer and Nienke makes an assessment, seeking agreement by adding the confirmation requesting tag “hè”.

Example 7: N002037

- 1 Nie: Bier smaakt er wel goed bij hè?
 beer tastes there PAR good with PAR
 Beer tastes good with it, doesn't it?
- 2 (0.2)
- 3 Mat: mt J(h)a.
 yes
 Yes,

The distribution of the 6 different types of tag questions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
 Distribution of tag questions.

Negative tags: “niet”, “of niet”	22 (34%)
Positive tags: “of wel”	4 (6%)
“hè”	31 (48%)
“toch”	8 (12%)
Total	65 (100%)

The distribution shown in Table 1 indicates that the Dutch speakers in the corpus have a preference for formulating assertions positively, attaching a negative tag. In this respect Dutch is similar to Danish (see Heinemann, 2010). The tag observed most frequently, accounting for 48% of all tags, is “hè”. Although “hè” is said to be a ‘neutral’ tag that can occur after both positively and negatively formed assertions (Haeseryn et al., 1997), it more commonly follows positively marked assertions and occurred only once in combination with a negatively marked assertion in the corpus.

3.1.3. Declaratives

Declarative questions are questions that have no formal (lexical, morphological or syntactic) marking. Dutch grammars (Hertog den, 1972; Haeseryn et al., 1997) treat this type of question as a polar question because it must be answered by “yes” or “no”.

The declaratively formed questions analyzed here involve not only clauses that exhibit unmarked word order (subject preceding the verb) but also sentence fragments such as noun, adverbial, or prepositional phrases. Almost two thirds (62%, $n = 55$) of the declaratively formed yes–no questions are a full declarative clause and slightly more than one third have a phrasal form, including single-word expressions (38%, $n = 34$).³ In what follows I describe some of the cues interactants rely on for assigning question status to a declarative utterance.

Dutch speakers regularly integrate lexical elements in the form of modal particles into the clause which support the questioning function of the utterance. These discourse markers can be (a) epistemic clauses (stance markers): *denk ik* (I think; see example 8), *geloof ik* (I believe/guess), (b) inferential connectives: *dan* (then), *dus* (so, therefore), (c) epistemic modal adverbs: *misschien* (maybe, perhaps), *waarschijnlijk* (probably), (d) hedging tags: *ofzo* (or so), and (e) modal particles: *wel*, *toch*.

Example 8: N002034

- 1 Sak: Zij is gescheiden denk ik?
 she is divorced I think
 She is divorced I think?
- 2 (.)
- 3 Tri: Nee nee nee.
 no no no
 No no no.

According to Table 2, more than half of the questioning declarative clauses in the corpus contain none of these discourse markers. The recipients nonetheless orient towards these utterances as doing questioning and provide an answer. This may be partly due to intonation.

³ Phrasal declarative questions regularly function (61% of the time) as echo-questions (Iwata, 2003) in these data, repeating at least one lexical item from the prior utterance with rising, ‘questioning’ intonation.

Table 2
Distribution of discourse markers in clausal declarative questions.

Declarative clause without discourse markers	30 (55%)
Declarative clause with discourse markers:	25 (45%)
(a) Stance markers	5 (20%)
(b) Inferential connectives	9 (36%)
(c) Epistemic modal adverbs	2 (8%)
(d) Hedging tags	4 (16%)
(e) Modal particles	5 (20%)
Total <u>clausal</u> declarative questions	55/89 (62%)

Using an experimental design, Haan (2002) tested whether there is an inverse relationship between the strength of acoustic features and the presence of non-acoustic markers of interrogativity. The results of her experiments show that declarative questions typically feature a high final boundary tone (87%) whereas polar interrogatives and tag questions do so less, and statements, not at all. Haan points towards the fact that utterance-final high is not exclusively tied to interrogativity, but that in statements it is a common device for signaling continuation or, at the level of discourse, turn-keeping (see also Caspers, 1998). In another comprehension experiment, Caspers (1998) investigated the difference between two Dutch intonation contours: (i) a rising pitch followed by level pitch until the end of the utterance and (ii) the combination of a rising pitch followed by a second rise on the utterance final syllable. The conclusions show that hearers reported only the latter to be a convincing way of marking a morphosyntactically neutral utterance as question.

The declarative questions in the corpus are almost equally divided: 49% ($n = 44$) have rising pitch and 51% ($n = 45$) have falling or level pitch (pitch that neither rose nor fell). This result suggests that in naturally occurring interactions terminal rise does not seem to be crucial for a declaratively formatted utterance to be interpreted as a question. In experimental contexts where the sentences are read aloud and recipients cannot rely on context, intonation may play a more major role in assigning question status to a declarative sentence. In a non-experimental context, it might be that such pragmatic features as epistemic domain may be important for the allocation of a questioning function to a declarative (Janssen and Verhagen, 2002).

In the corpus, almost all declarative questions contain information that the listener has more access to and/or more “rights” to know about than the speaker, because it concerns states or events associated with the listener’s *domain of knowledge*, e.g. his or her individual emotions, experiences, preferences, biography, family, profession and work place, or vacation. Labov and Fanshell (1977) call these types of statements *B-event statements* and example 9 is an illustration of this. The hair stylist (a young woman) told her client that she recently moved from the city to a small village, where she bought a house together with her boyfriend. In line 1, the client offers his explanation of her reasons to leave the city. He thinks this is because of the cheaper housing. After a long pause (line 3) the hair stylist disconfirms his understanding of the situation, giving the real reason why they moved there.

Example 9: N011004

- 1 Cli: → Maar je bent er ook puur alleen natuurlijk nou=
but you are there PAR pure only of course PAR
But you are there really only
- 2 Cli: =vanwegen het huis,
because of the house
because of the house,
- 3 (0.7)
- 4 HSt: Ts nou mijn vriend die komt uit het dorp. (.) En eh: ja
PAR my boyfriend he comes from the village and yes
Ts well my boyfriend he’s from the village. (.) And uh:
- 5 die heef- die- eigenlijk altijd aangegeve’ dat die daar
he has he actually always indicated that he there
yeah he has- he- actually always indicated that he
- 6 eigenlijk eh: in die buurte daar nooit nie’ weg will.
actually in that regions there never not away want
actually uh: never wants to go away from that region.

3.2. Content-questions

Dutch content-questions contain a question word at the beginning of the clause: *wie* (who), *wat* (what), *waarop* (on what), *welke* (which), *waar* (where), *waarheen* (where to), *wanneer* (when), *waarom* (why), *hoe* (how), *hoeveel* (how many). The most frequently used question is the *wat*-type (what). The distribution of the question words that occurred in the corpus is displayed in Table 3 in descending order.

Table 3
Distribution of content questions.

Wat (what)	25 (38%)
Object ^a	7
Event	5
Repair	13
Waar (where)	10 (15%)
Wanneer (when)	8 (12%)
Hoe (how)	8 (12%)
Hoeveel (how many/much)	8 (12%)
Wie (who)	4 (6%)
Waarom (why)	3 (5%)
Total	66 (100%)

^a “Object questions”: Questions that refer to things in the world, e.g. a name: “Hoe is die Japanese naam dervoor, of die Chinese naam.” (What’s the Japanese name for this, or Chinese name.). “Event questions”: Questions that refer to events in the world: “Wat ga je doen?” (What are you going to do?).

It should be noted, that speakers deploy *wat* relatively frequently to deal with problems in hearing or understanding of the prior talk, referred to as conversational “repair” (Schegloff et al., 1977; Drew, 1997). In the corpus, 52% ($n = 13$) of the *wat*-type questions fall into this category. In example 10, Rik asks Karin about her vacation plans (line 1), and after he gets distracted by Maaïke, who is addressing him to offer him a piece of cheese, he initiates repair in line 12 “Wat zeg je?” (What did you say?), which Karin answers with a more elaborate repetition of her utterance from line 9 (line 13).

Example 10: N003038

- 1 Rik: Je hebt nog vakantie (of niet)?
you have still holidays or not
You still have holidays PAR?
- 2 (0.2)
- 3 Kar: Ja, nog tw:- een week.
yes still one week]
Yes, still tw- one week.
- 4 (.)
- 5 Rik: Oh ja.
EXC yes
Oh yes.
- 6 (0.2)
- 7 Rik: [>Waar naartoe?<]
where to
Where?
- 8 Mai: [Rik ook?] ((offering a piece of cheese to Rik))
Rik also
Rik (you) too?

⁴ Example 10 also shows two instances of an ‘elliptical’ content question. The two-word questions “Waar naartoe” (where to; line 7) and “wat doen” (do what; line 14) are interpreted by the recipient as something like “Where are you going on vacation” and “what are you doing there” respectively. There are relatively few cases of these elliptical content questions (‘wat’ (*what*)-questions that function as repair initiation excluded here) in these data (12%, $n = 8$).

- 9 Kar: Naar Denemarke` d[us] e:h
to Denmark PAR
To Denmark so u:h
- 10 Mai: [Rik] ((handing over cheese to Rik))
Rik
- 11 (1.0)
- 12 Rik:→ Wat zeg je?
what say you
What did you say?
- 13 Kar: Ik ga nog naar Denemarke' [mijn zus (woont daar)]
I go PAR to Denmark my sister lives there
I am going to Denmark my sister lives there
- 14 Rik: [Wat leuk, wat doen,]
what nice what do
How nice, to do what,

3.3. Alternative questions

Alternative questions are formally similar to polar questions. However, the speaker expects the recipient to make a choice between two offered alternatives and respond by repeating one or more of the alternatives mentioned in the question. In example 11, the hair stylist and her client are talking about the client's vacation in Greece.

Example 11: N009013

- 1 Hst:→ Wel groot eiland? of eh valt mee.
PAR big island or uh falls with (lit.)
Is it a big island? Or uh not so big.
- 2 (.)
- 3 Cli: Ehm,
Uhm,
- 4 (0.7)
- 5 Cli: Ik denk als je: de lengte meet dan kom je (honderd)
I think if you the length measure then come you hundred
I think if one measures the length then you will reach one
- 6 Cli: kilometer dus het is niet heel groot.
kilometers PAR it is not very big
hundred kilometers, (so) it is not very big.

The client's answer is substantially delayed by pauses and the vocal marker "ehm" (lines 2–4), and she epistemically downgrades ("Ik denk" [I think]) her disconfirmation of the first part of the alternative question in line 1 by first guessing about the island's size and finally answering that the island is not very big.

Taking a closer look at the examples from the corpus though, it turns out that in nearly half of the cases recipients treat these alternative questions like polar questions, answering the first alternative before the second one gets fully articulated by the speaker. In example 12, the client had just told the hair stylist about the hotel in Greece where she was going to spend her vacation.

Example 12: N009016

- 1 Hst:→ (Ha) je zelfs vaker naar dat plaatsje dan gewee[st of] gewoon
you even more+often to that place then be or just
Have you then even been to that place before or just
- 2 Cli:→ [Ja.]
yes
Yes.

- 3 Hst: naar Griekeland,
to Greece
to Greece,
- 4 (.)
- 5 Cli: Nee, nee, dat plaatsje.=
no no that place
No, no, that place.
- 6 Hst: =Oh ja:
EXC yes
Oh yes.

The client answers the question in overlap before the alternative second part is articulated by the hairdresser and confirms that she has been to that same place before with a “ja” (yes) in line 2. After having heard the second part of the alternative question, the client gives a second answer in line 5, where she disconfirms the second alternative with two disconfirmation tokens “nee, nee” and reconfirms the first alternative by repeating “that place”. The answers to the first alternatives that occur in overlap with the question turn’s second alternative exhibit the answerer’s orientation towards progressivity in interaction (Stivers and Robinson, 2006). The quick answers to the first alternatives can be analysed as the speaker’s cooperativeness allowing for quicker sequence closing. However, the questioners do not abandon their turn in progress, even when they receive an answer. The tendency of recipients to answer questions that contain several response options ‘prematurely’ has also been shown by Houtkoop-Steenstra (2000) in her analysis of interactions in standardized survey interviews, where overlapping ‘premature’ answers are treated as interruptions by the interviewer and where an overlapping answer does not deter the interviewer from articulating all other answer options. Thus in both contexts, questioners already embarked on the delivery of an alternative question do not abandon their turn even though the recipient has already answered the question’s first alternative.

The two different ways of answering an alternative question could be accounted for by the general principle of preference organisation in interaction. In English, preferred responses, normally affiliated or agreeing in character (Heritage, 1984:269), are delivered more quickly compared to dispreferred ones (e.g. Pomerantz, 1984); this has also been shown to hold for Dutch interactions (see Mazeland, 2003). Table 4 provides some distributional evidence.

Table 4

Distribution of answers in overlap with alternative questions.

Type of answer	Confirming the first alternative	Disconfirming the first alternative	Total
Overlapping question, answer produced before articulation of the second alternative	7 (35%)	4 (20%)	11 (55%)
No overlap, answer produced after completion of the second alternative	2 (10%)	7 (35%)	9 (45%)
Total	9 (45%)	11 (55%)	20 (100%)

In a study of question–answer sequences in primary classroom interaction, Margutti (2006) demonstrates how teachers use alternative interrogatives with a regular pattern to guide students in choosing the right option by placing the correct answer in second position. The question is whether alternative questions in ordinary conversations are also regularly built in such a way as to indicate a preference as to which part of the questions should get confirmed by the answerer. The use of discourse markers, prosody (as it is the case for declarative or tag question), or word order⁵ could be an indication for the preference for one answer over the other, but it lies outside the scope of this study to investigate this issue.

In this corpus, I also found 3 instances where the speaker revises the polarity of the tag question or polar interrogative by continuing with “*of niet*” (‘or not’), or “*of wel*”, an extension in which the polarity of the preceding question is reversed. These 3 cases differ from the prototypical alternative questions in that the speaker offers the addressee two alternatives concerning the polarity of the answer,⁶ as can be seen in example 13. The participants were talking about a cat named Heiden, and Henk asks in line 1, whether this is a Greek name.

⁵ One of the reviewers noted that the two alternatives presented in the alternative question in example 12 are not exactly mutually exclusive: “naar Griekenland (to Greece) is more general than “naar dat plaatsje” (to that place). In cases like example 12, the more specific candidate precedes the more general and with respect to word order in alternative question it would be an interesting inquiry to find out whether this is a general phenomenon.

⁶ One of the reviewers pointed to the fact that it might be problematic to analyze them as alternative questions. Arguably, they are similar to polar questions which offer the speaker to choose between an answer with positive (yes) or negative (no) polarity. However, in the cases described here, the alternative between an answer with positive or negative polarity is made explicit by the speaker. In Mandarin Chinese, for example, there is a special type of polar question called the A-not-A question which is formed with the main verb followed by negation (e.g. *nǐ hē bu hē jiǔ?* You drink not drink wine?). The A-not-A question is used only in a neutral context in which the questioner has no assumption concerning the proposition that is being questioned (Li and Thompson, 1981). I did not find any references to this type of question in the Dutch (comprehensive) grammars. With respect to the coding then we decided that this type of question would fit best in the category of alternative questions.

Example 13: N003035

- 1 Hen: Komt uit Griekenland niet? of niet.
comes out Greece not or not
It comes from Greece right? or not.
- 2 (0.6)
- 3 The: Nee.
no
No.
- 4 (0.3)
- 5 The: ['t- het] is een schaatser.
it is an ice skater
It- it is an ice skater.
- 6 Hen: [Oh ja,]
yes
Oh yes,

The tag question “Komt uit Griekenland niet?” (comes from Greece not?) conveys the positive assertion that the name is Greek and conveys the speaker’s expectation for an affirmative response. This is turned into an alternative question by means of the “of niet” (or not) extension of the turn in which the polarity of the preceding question is reversed. Thea’s answer “Nee” (no) disconfirms Hen’s positive assertion (first alternative) but confirms the negative assertion that Hen indirectly offers as second alternative by reversing the polarity of the first alternative with “of niet”.

This subcategory of tag questions in Dutch could be analyzed as a method for minimizing the risk of disagreement among the interactants. Their function seems to be similar to something that has already been observed by other researchers for cases where a speaker redoes a question with reversed polarity to pursue a (confirming) response (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). By revising the polarity of the question, the speaker allows for the answer that would be disconfirming the first part of the question to automatically be agreeing with the second part (see also Lindström, 1996).

4. Action

Questions are used in many different circumstances and for a variety of communicative or pragmatic functions. In this section I first give an illustration of the different types of actions that were implemented by questions before providing an overview of their distribution in the corpus.⁷

4.1. Information requests

The most typical action attributed to questions, requesting information, is done mainly with content-questions (56%) followed by polar interrogatives (67%). In example 14, the participants are having dinner and are talking about when they have to go to work the next morning.

Example 14: N004001

- 1 San: Hoe laat moet je morge' weg?
how late have to you tomorrow away
When do you have to leave tomorrow?
- 2 Jel: Ik ga half zes uur weg, dus e:h wel vijf uur deruit.
I go half six o'clock away PAR PAR five o'clock there-out
I am leaving at five thirty, so I have to get up at five.

4.2. Repair initiation

Repair initiations occur relatively frequently (21%) in the Dutch corpus, and are mainly carried out through declarative questions. The most typical types of repair initiation are often lexical, phrasal, or even sentential repeats of the just prior utterance. This could account for the relatively high number of declarative questions in the Dutch corpus. Example 15 is an

⁷ For comparison across the different languages, the action types were divided in 5 major categories that occurred most frequently. The category ‘other’ was added to list highly infrequent types of action.

instance of two lexical repeats (lines 5 and 14). It is taken from an interaction between the hair stylist and her client who are talking about their vacation plans.

Example 15: N010003

- 1 Hst: Waar ging je ook weer naar toe?
where went you also again to
Where was it that you went?
- 2 (0.1)
- 3 Cli: Xanos.
Xanos
Xanos.
- 4 (0.2)
- 5 Hst:→ Xano[s].
Xanos
Xanos.
- 6 Cli: [G]rieks eilandje.
Greek island
Greek island.
- 7 (0.2)
- 8 Hst: Oh,
EXC
Oh,
- 9 Cli: (Ja.)
yes
Yes.
- ((several lines of talk omitted))
- 10 Hst: En hoe lang ga je naar eh Xanos?
and how long go you to Xanos
And for how long are you going to Xanos?
- 11 (0.1)
- 12 Cli: Elf dage'.
eleven days
Eleven days.
- 13 (0.2)
- 14 Hst:→ Elef.
eleven
Eleven.
- 15 (.)
- 16 Cli: Ja n' beetje rare:- (1.0) een beetje=
yes a bit strange a bit
Yes a bit strange- (1.0) a bit of
- 17 Cli: =een [raar aan]tal maar=
a strange number but
of a strange number but=
- 18 Hst: [Oh da's wel lekker.]
PAR that+is PAR great
Oh that's great.
- 19 Cli: =e:h het [() kon niet anders.]
it could not different
uh: there was no other option.

In line 1 the hair stylist asks her client where she is going on vacation. The client answers by saying the name of the place. In line 5, the hair stylist produces a full repeat, and the client responds with an alternative formulation of the place reference. After some talk in between, the hair stylist produces another repeat repair initiation in line 14. The client confirms the repeat with 'Ja' (yes) at the beginning of her utterance and then also accounts for the fact that she booked for eleven days by saying that she had no other option. The first repair initiation in line 5 is treated as an understanding problem concerning the place reference. The second repeat repair initiator in line 14, however, seems to be treated by the recipient as marking the prior talk as not meeting the recipient's expectations in some way (Drew, 1997; Jefferson, 1972) and thereby making relevant a different type of response. The speaker who does the repair in line 16 accounts for the fact that eleven days is a 'strange' or unusual period of time to book a vacation.

4.3. Requests for confirmation

Requests for confirmation are the most frequently occurring type of action in the corpus (similar to Danish). In example 16, Ton requests confirmation from Mark with a declarative question also making his own state of knowledge explicit by proposing that he is not certain, but 'believes' (line 1) that his grandson Mark went to a town called Havelte with his soccer team for a competition (a B-event statement⁸ by virtue of the recipient's epistemic primacy).

Example 16: N001055

1 Ton: En Ha:velte ware' jullie geloof ik welles [naar t]^oe
 and Havelte were you:PL believe I PAR+once to
 and to Havelte you have also been at some time, I believe?

2 Mar: [Nee.]
 no
 No.

3 (0.2)

4 Mar: °Nee nee.°
 no no
 No no.

4.4. Assessments

Assessments, like requests for confirmation, are exclusively done with polar questions. Most of them are tag questions and speakers regularly use 'hè' to solicit agreement from the recipient. In example 17, Trijntje is talking about an artist and makes an assessment in line 1 and requests confirmation in line 3.

Example 17: N002021

1 Tri: Nou ze heeft het wel in der hoofd en in der handen,
 PAR she has it PAR in her head and in her hands
 Well, she really has it in her head and in her hands,

2 (0.2)

3 Tri: Hè?
 PAR
 Right?

4 Mat: ((nodding)) Ja.
 Yes
 Yes.

⁸ See page 12 for the definition of 'B-event statement'.

4.5. Suggesting, offering, and requesting

Actions like suggesting, offering, and requesting are also almost exclusively (98%) implemented with polar questions. The speakers in the corpus recurrently deploy polar interrogatives to make a request for example, as can be seen in example 18, where the hair stylist asks one of her clients whether she can take a magazine that lies in front of the client so that she can hand it to another client.

Example 18: N008006

1 Hst: Mag ik eentje meeneme' ?
 may I one take
 May I take one?
 2 (0.3)
 3 Cli: Ja.
 yes
 Yes.

Table 5 provides an overview of the social actions and their distribution in the corpus.

Table 5

Distribution of social actions by question type.

Social action	Polar	Q word	Alternative	All question types	Distribution of social actions in the corpus
Information request	33 (35%)	51 (54%)	11 (11%)	95 (100%)	95/321 (29%)
Other initiation of repair	50 (75%)	15 (22%)	2 (3%)	67 (100%)	67/321 (21%)
Confirmation request	120 (9%)	0	7 (6%)	127 (100%)	127/321 (40%)
Assessment	21 (100%)	0	0	21 (100%)	21/321 (7%)
Suggestion/offer/request	7 (88%)	0	1 (2%)	8 (100%)	8/321 (2%)
Other	3 (100%)	0	0	3 (100%)	3/321 (1%)
Total questions	234/321 (73%)	66/321 (21%)	21/321 (6%)		321/321 (100%)

The majority of questions function as requests for confirmation (40%) and, perhaps surprisingly, only 30% are actually requests for information. A relatively high number of questions (21%) are deployed to initiate repair, addressing hearing or understanding problems in the interaction. In the Dutch corpus, as is also the case for other languages of the project, there is a linguistic division of labor between the three main question forms and the actions they accomplish. Table 5 also shows that speakers deploy certain question formats, sometimes exclusively, to perform certain type of actions. Table 6 gives a more detailed overview of range of action types that are implemented by the various subtypes of the polar questions.

Table 6

Distribution of social actions by polar question type.

	Polar interrogative	Tag question	Declarative question	Total type of action
Information request	22 (67%)	2 (6%)	9 (27%)	33 (100%)
Other initiation of repair	8 (16%)	3 (6%)	39 (78%)	50 (100%)
Confirmation request	37 (31%)	46 (38%)	37 (31%)	120 (100%)
Assessment	5 (24%)	13 (62%)	3 (14%)	21 (100%)
Suggestion/offer/request	5 (72%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
Other	3 (100%)	0	0	3 (100%)
Total questions	80 (34%)	65 (28%)	89 (38%)	234 (100%)

Table 6 shows that assessments are most frequently done with tag questions in this corpus. Declarative questions are used for repair initiation but also for confirmation requests. For information requests, the speakers in this corpus mainly rely on polar interrogatives.

5. Responses to questions

Questions are one of the main interactional resources participants rely on to mobilize response from other individuals. By asking a question the speaker expects from the other participant a relevant next action—an answer. In multi-party interactions,⁹ the addressee of the question was clearly selected by the speaker in 95% ($n = 274$) of the cases. There are

⁹ I excluded the dyadic conversations ($n = 6$) for this analysis. In a dyadic conversation the question is always addressed to the only other participant in the conversation.

Table 7

Speaker gaze for next speaker selection by recipient epistemic domain.

Speaker gaze	Question in addressee's domain of epistemic authority	Question not in addressee's domain of epistemic authority	Total speaker gaze
At addressee	162 (83%)	34 (17%)	196 (95%)
Not at addressee	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	11 (5%)
Total question in domain of epistemic authority	169 (82%)	38 (18%)	207 (100%)

several ways in which one can select a specific recipient (see Lerner, 2003; Sacks et al., 1974 on speaker selection). Obviously one can use an address term, such as the name of the person, however address terms are used only in 4 questions in this sample. For next speaker selection questioners rely overwhelmingly on speaker gaze (90%) and on the domain of epistemic authority (80%), which means that the information requested concerns states or events associated with a particular listener's *domain of knowledge*, like his or her individual emotions, experiences, profession, interests etc. Thereby the question may be designed for a particular recipient and by virtue of that address a particular recipient. As Table 7 shows, speakers generally seem to combine the two selection practices.

The practices deployed for next speaker selection in Dutch are generally successful. Almost all responses (96%) in the corpus are given by the selected speaker.

Not all questions, though most, get responses and not all responses to questions can be considered answers. Any sort of communicative action whose primary business is to deal with the speaker's question was treated as a response. As described in Stivers and Enfield, this issue, a non-answer response might be 'Ik weet niet' (*I don't know*), or 'misschien' (maybe), and the initiation of repair (e.g. "What?"), or a gestural response such as a shrug, or laughter, etc. Fig. 3 shows the distribution of the different response types in Dutch.

Most questions receive an answer (83%), fewer a non-answer response (13%) and only very few do not get responded to (4%), with little variation among different question types. This result generally holds for all languages analyzed in this project.

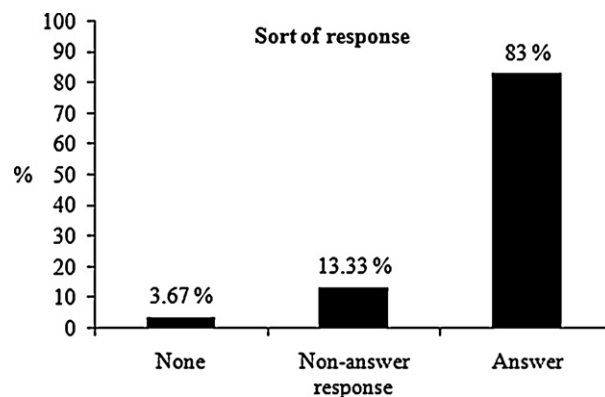


Fig. 3. Distribution of response type.

5.1. Responses and fittedness

Coherence relations between the question (first pair part) and the answer (second pair part) of question–answer sequences are constructed interactively by two different speakers and they operate on several dimensions. These dimensions include (1) the context of the question, (2) the grammatical form of the question, and (3) the action that a speaker launches with the question in a specific context. Each of these dimensions sets specific constraints on the answer to a question. In what follows I describe some of the different ways in which yes–no questions can be answered.

5.1.1. Type-conforming answers

Type-conforming answers to yes–no questions meet the formal constraint of providing a 'yes' or 'no' (Raymond, 2003). One dimension of type-conformity is the answer format. Some polar questions receive plain 'minimal' answers such as 'ja' (yes) or 'nee' (no). Other yes–no questions require non-minimal answers, answers that consist of more than a single (dis)confirmation token. Example 19 shows instances of both answer types. Patrick is talking about a DVD box set of a Dutch comedian that he would like to have. In line 1 he tells Michael that he is thinking about getting the box set if it is not too expensive.

Example 19: N006003

- 1 Pat: () Maar als (dat) zeg maar niet zo heel
but when that say but not so very
But let's say if that isn't not too
- duur is d-die box dan neem ik gewoon die box wel mee.
expensive is that box then take I simply that box PAR with
Expensive that box, then I'll just take that box.
- 2 (0.2)
- 3 Pat: Ik bedoel als- als zo'n box twintig vijftwintig euro
I mean if if such+a box twenty twenty-five euro
I mean if- if such a box costs twenty, twenty-five euro,
- 4 kost (pff) [(ik bedoel)]
costs I mean
I mean
- 5 Mic:→ [Om te ko]pe' bedoe[l je.]
for to buy mean you
To buy you mean.
- 6 Pat: (Ja)]
yes
Yes
- 7 (0.7)
- 8 Pat: Maak ik der een kopietje van en da[n (e:h-)]
make I there a copy of and then
I'll make a copy of it and then uh:m
- 9 Mic:→ [Maar hebbe'] ze die niet
but have they them not
But don't they have them
- 10 bij de bib dan,
at the library PAR
at the library PAR,
- 11 (0.3)
- 12 Pat: (Ja) maar ik heb geen bibpas meer.
yes but I have none library card anymore
Yes, but I don't have a library card anymore.
- 13 (0.1)
- 14 Mic: Okay.
okay
Okay.

In line 5 Michael produces an understanding check in the form of a declarative question, and Patrick confirms it with a minimal “Ja” (yes) in line 6. Here, Patrick’s minimal answer is sufficient and Patrick continues his telling. In line 9, Michael asks Patrick to confirm whether the library has the box set, hereby implicitly suggesting that Patrick could borrow it instead of buying it. Patrick’s answer in line 12 is non-minimal, consisting of two units. First, he confirms that the box set is available at the library with a “Ja” (yes). In the second unit, he declines Michael’s proposal of getting the box from the library by giving an account “maar ik heb geen bibpas meer” (but I don’t have a library card anymore). Michael accepts the answer with an “okay” (line 14). Michael’s question is a request for confirmation and at the same time a proposal/suggestion, and it would not be sufficient to only confirm this question with a minimal *Ja* (yes) (see also Schegloff, 2007).

5.1.2. Non-conforming answers

Another possibility in answering yes/no questions is a marked agreement such as “natuurlijk” (of course), “zeker” (sure), or “inderdaad” (indeed). When speakers respond with “Of course” for instance, they contest the presupposition of the question that both confirmation and disconfirmation are possible and treat the question as something that, based on existing epistemic access, should not be insinuated (Stivers, *in press*). In the corpus, only 5 cases were marked agreements. Though, they never occurred in isolation, which would be possible in Dutch, as in English, but were always preceded by a “ja” (yes).

Dutch also has the particle “hoor” that occurs in clause-final position and can be used as part of a marked response to a request for confirmation in the form of “ja hoor” (yes + *hoor*) and “nee hoor” (no + *hoor*). I found 8 instances of this answer type in the corpus. In example 20, the client had just taken seat and previous to line 1 the hair stylist did inquire about how the client wants her hair cut. In line 1 she formulates a candidate understanding of the client’s haircut, that it should be shortened quite a bit, in the form of a request for confirmation. The client confirms this with “ja hoor” in line 3.

Example 20: N009005

```

1  Hst:    dus mag wel een flink stukje v^an af.
        so may PAR a huge piece from of
        So a bunch of hair may be cut off.

2          (.)

3  Cli:    Ja hoor.
        yes PAR
        Yes

4          (0.5)

5  Hst:    Okay.
        okay
        Okay.
```

In this example, the hair stylist’s request for confirmation functions as a request and must be confirmed for the course of action, in this case the actual cutting of the hair, to be furthered. By granting the request using the answer format “ja hoor”, the client orients towards the relevance of her response to further this encompassing activity (Mazeland and Plug, *forthcoming*).

Polar questions can also be answered by full or partial repeats of the question but this is rare in Dutch. I found only one case where a speaker confirms the question with only a repeat as in example 21.

Example 21: N003048

```

1  Pie:    Maar dat is gratis geloof ik.
        But that is free believe I
        But that’s for free I believe.

2          (.)

3  Hen:→ D^a’s gratis.
        that+is free
        That’s for free.
```

There are five cases where the question gets answered initially with a (partial) repeat followed by other confirmation tokens. The participants in example 22 are talking about sailing. Sander just told Jelle that he would like to start sailing in small competition sailing boats. Jelle asks a clarification question about which type of sailing boat Sander has in mind and gives a candidate understanding in line 1 (‘Laser’: a type of single-handed competition sailing boat). The formulation “soort laser” (kind of laser) in the question gets transformed into a confirming “een laser” (a laser) in the answer.¹⁰ The answerer subsequently adds another three confirmation tokens (line 2).

Example 22: N004008

```

1  Jel:    Soort Laser ofzo [eh:,
        kind of laser or so
        Kind of laser or so uh:,

2  San:→   [Een Laser ja precies (0.3) ja.
        a laser yes exactly yes
        A laser yes exactly (0.3) yes.
```

¹⁰ Stivers and Hayashi (*in press*) showed how *transformative answers* in English and Japanese are used to point to problems with a number of aspects of the question (e.g. the presupposition of the question, or the action the question implemented).

In comparison to the other languages investigated in this project, the Dutch speakers in the corpus seem to be unusual in the reduced frequency with which they rely on repetition in answers, particularly on repetition alone. It is similar to Danish in this respect (see Heinemann, 2010). Conversation analytic research has shown that repetition in English interactions asserts the respondent's authoritative rights concerning the matter at hand (Schegloff, 1996; Raymond, 2003; Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Stivers, 2005; Heritage, forthcoming.). In examples 21 and 22, the respondents are the experts on the matter that is being addressed by the question and their way of answering the question seems to express their epistemic entitlement to the matter at hand. With their preference for direct type-conforming answers (88%, $n = 158$) over non-type conforming answers, the Dutch speakers in the corpus do not in this way tend to express their resistance to the terms of the question as frequently as speakers from other languages. However, more research is necessary to explore the function of repetitive answers in Dutch and in other languages to show which practices recipients deploy to show resistance to the question. In sum we can say that in addition to a preference for providing an answer to a question, the Dutch speakers in the corpus seem to have a strong preference for delivering type-conforming answers.

Generally, most (82%) of the polar questions received confirming answers. Declarative questions are most likely to receive confirmation (80%, $n = 71$), compared with 72% ($n = 47$) of the tag questions and 50% ($n = 40$) of the polar interrogatives. Among tag questions, questions formed with the particle *hè* are strongly associated with confirmation (96%).

In terms of distribution, most responses in the Dutch corpus involve only a vocal component (70%). However, 30% of all responses include a combination of a vocal and a non-vocal response. Only 3% of responses involved only a visible response. Most visible responses were answers to polar questions. Interestingly, 84% of the answers that include a visible response were confirming answers, while only 16% were disconfirming answers, which mean that the Dutch speakers in the corpus are more likely to add a visible component to their answers when they are confirming.

6. Summary and conclusions

This paper has provided a distributional overview of the occurrences of different forms and communicative functions of questions in a corpus of Dutch ordinary interactions. In line with what authoritative Dutch grammars say about questioning, Dutch speakers deploy polar, content and alternative questions to do questioning. Polar questions are the most frequent type of question occurring in the corpus. Polar questions are formulated as with interrogatives, declaratives and tags but most polar questions in the corpus were asked with declaratives. According to experimental findings, rising intonation plays a crucial role in interpreting declarative sentences as questions, but this does not seem to be the case when they are uttered in actual talk-in-interaction. Clearly there is an interplay between question type (e.g. declarative versus interrogative) and the social action that the question is doing in conversation. Questions that are asked to elicit information are associated with the more prototypical, lexico-morpho-syntactically defined question type and are mainly content questions followed by polar interrogatives. Most polar questions with declarative syntax are not primarily concerned with obtaining information but with doing other kinds of social actions such as initiating repair, or securing agreement (with assessments for example). Finally, this article has shown that responses are usually done by the selected individual, are fitted, type-conforming to the question, and are mostly confirming.

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