Questioning and responding in Italian

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ABSTRACT

Questions are design problems for both the questioner and the addressee. They must be produced as recognizable objects and must be comprehended by taking into account the context in which they occur and the local situated interests of the participants. This paper investigates how people do 'questioning' and 'responding' in Italian ordinary conversations. I focus on the features of both questions and responses. I first discuss formal linguistic features that are peculiar to questions in terms of intonation contours (*e.g.* final rise), morphology (*e.g.* tags and question words) and syntax (*e.g.* inversion). I then show additional features that characterize their actual implementation in conversation such as their minimality (often the subject or the verb is only implied) and the usual occurrence of speaker gaze towards the recipient during questions. I then look at which social actions (*e.g.* requests for information, requests for confirmation) the different question types implement and which responses are regularly produced in return. The data shows that previous descriptions of "interrogative markings" are neither adequate nor sufficient to comprehend the actual use of questions in natural conversation.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how people do 'questioning' and 'responding' in Italian and the perspective adopted is primarily an interactional one. The work presented here emerged as a contribution to a larger project on question–answer sequences developed at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. It originates with the coding scheme developed there and outlined in this special issue (see Stivers and Enfield, this issue). The line of argumentation, though, will mainly focus on one aspect of question–answer sequences: their recognizability during an interaction.

Questions are design problems for both the questioner and the addressee. I will provide a list of features and criteria that interactants seem to rely on in designing and recognizing utterances as questions. Two basic assumptions will be in place: a question is such because of its form and because of its normative implications once it is deployed (see Introduction to this issue). While most of the formal features belong to the linguistic domain (*e.g.* syntax, morphology, intonation), the normative implications of questions (i.e. the occurrence of a response) are interactional in nature and pertain to the sequential organization of social action and its accountability. Although the recognizability of questioning can be derived from formal linguistic features (*e.g.* syntax or intonation) and the distribution of knowledge and competence among interactants, the occurrence of these features must be analyzed by taking into account the context in which they occur and the local situated interests of the participants. On a micro-scale, this paper shows which resources individuals from a specific area (Emilia-

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Romagna, Italy) who speak a specific language (Italian) rely on to produce and respond to questions and how they do so in a recognizable way.

2. The language and the data

Italian is a Romance language spoken primarily in Italy by approximately 60 million people. It is a free-stress language that uses duration as the main stress cue (Bertinetto, 1980). As in other Romance languages stress is lexically distinctive and stressed syllables are generally penultimate (D'Imperio and Rosenthal, 1999; Lepschy and Lepschy, 1977), though antepenultimate, final and preantepenultimate stress can also be found. Italian has a strong tendency for SVO ordering. Different word orders are possible but are considered marked (*e.g.* dislocations and topicalizations). It has a rich repertoire of clitic pronouns and it is a null subject language (Rizzi, 1982), i.e. the subject is often dropped.

The so-called Standard Italian originates from the Tuscan dialect and it is usually spoken with local accents and the inclusion of local idioms. The Italian spoken in different parts of Italy is strongly affected by local dialects and so different varieties can be identified (*e.g.* Northern, Central and Southern varieties). This paper is based on the Northern Italian variety spoken in the Emilia-Romagna region, in particular on the variety spoken by people coming from Bologna, Forli' and Rimini. All the data were collected in Bologna and the 20 participants recorded were living in Bologna at the time of the recording. 7 were males and 13 females. 15 participants were originally from Bologna, 3 from Forli' and 2 from Rimini.[1] 18 of the participants were 20–25 years old and were university students at the time of the recordings while the remaining two individuals were 35 and 48 years old. They were all middle class and in each dyadic conversation the participants knew each other well.

The data for this paper consist of 10 video recordings of dyadic ordinary conversations made in participants' homes. All the interactions were naturally occurring (they were not elicited by the researcher) and all but one were recorded with two video-cameras. The researcher was not present in the room at the time of the recording and participants were allowed to do anything they wanted (*e.g.* eat, drink). The question–answer sequences presented here were collected from a corpus of 15 min of conversation from each interaction, for a total of 150 min of data. The total number of question–answer sequences collected (excluding rhetorical questions and requests for physical actions) is 342, and it is this database that I proceed to investigate.

3. Question types and distributions

This section shows which question types can be distinguished in terms of the response types that they make relevant.

In a lecture on questions during Fall 1964, Sacks (1992: 49) remarked that "A question has a form. And an answer doesn't, apparently. So we can talk about 'asking questions' and identify some object as 'a question', but we can't do that very much with 'an answer'." However, the design of a question usually projects which kind of answer would be expected, or at least which category of responses would count as possible answers. While every response (i.e. any utterance produced by the recipient of a question after the delivery of a question that addresses the question in some way) will be analyzed by the questioner in terms of how this might be interpreted as an answer (see *e.g.* Schegloff, 2007), not every response counts as a proper answer (*e.g.* "I don't know", "maybe", "huh?").

If answers and not just responses are what questions are particularly after, then understanding what kind of answers would be appropriate after a specific question becomes of great importance to recipients. Distinguishing question types in terms of the answers they project as expectable is then a useful way of approaching the issue of recognizability. In order to respond, the first heuristic that a participant can apply is one that helps establishing whether a turn is a question and what kind of response type that question makes relevant by design[2].

In Italian conversations, three main question types can be found: polar questions, content questions and alternative questions. Polar questions are designed to obtain as an answer a "yes" or a "no" (they are often referred to as yes–no questions)[3].

Table 1
Distribution of question types.

Question type	Instances (percentage) $n = 342$
Polar	59% (200)
Content	39% (135)
Alternative	2% (7)

(1) Polar Question (2GSTUDYING-vuoi 36:30)

```
01 B:   Tu  lo vuoi? ((sollevando una bottiglia di the' freddo))
        you it want
   B:   Do you want it? ((lifting a bottle of iced tea))
02      (0.2)
03 A: hh No grazie
        No thanks
   A: hh No thanks
```

Content questions are questions that contain a question word such as 'who' or 'where' (in English they are often referred to as wh-questions) and the answer that is expected belongs to the same ontological category of the question word (*e.g.* a person reference in response to 'who', a space reference in response to 'where').

(2) Content Question (2GSOFA-colori 34:30)

```
01 B: Che   colori usi?
      which colors  use.2s
   B: Which colors do you use?
02 B: Il  rosso e   il blu e   il verde per i   t(h)itoli hhh .hh
      the red   and the blue and the green for the titles
   B: Red and blue and green for the t(h)itles hhh .hh
```

Alternative questions are instead designed to provide the recipient with two or more options to choose from for the answer.

(3) Alternative Question (2PPLAN-tredici 05:03)

```
01 B: Tredici  o quattordici torniamo
      Thirteen or fourteenth come.1p back
   B: (Is it) the thirteenth or the fourteenth we're coming back
02    (0.2)
03 A: Il  tredici
      The thirteenth
   A: The thirteenth
```

Table 1 shows the distribution of these question types in my conversational corpus.

Polar questions constitute the majority of questions in my corpus (59%), with content questions also constituting a substantial proportion of the data (39%) and alternative questions occurring only rarely (2%). These proportions are strikingly similar to the ones found in the ordinary conversations in almost all the other languages presented in this special issue (but see Hoymann, this issue). However, notice that in a different corpus of Italian questions in classroom interactions (Margutti, 2006) the proportions are very different. In a corpus of 156 teachers' questioning turns (partly interrogative, partly done through ECD[4]), Margutti finds that 36.5% are done through content questions, 25% are ECD, 15.4% are polar questions and 5.7% are alternative questions[5]. Interestingly, in one of the interactions of my corpus two friends are talking about their plans for the summer vacations and one asks for advice about cooking recipes for a boyscout camp. The "expert" first asks about the conditions under which the friend will have to cook and then instructs the other on how to prepare some dishes. In this specific interaction, the number of content questions reaches 49% of the total, polar questions are 45% and alternative questions are 6%. This shows that the larger activity participants are engaged in (*e.g.* instructing somebody vs. gossiping) and the roles they assume momentarily (*e.g.* instructor or expert) can affect the choice and use of questions formats.

Let's take a closer look now at how polar questions are designed to be recognizable as such in Italian conversations.

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[4] ECD stands for "eliciting completion devices" and they are usually declarative sentences that are incomplete and the teacher invites the students to complete them usually through intonational or nonverbal cues. Something like "Napoleon died the fifth of…" where the student would respond in chorus with "May".

[5] The remaining "questioning turns" do not have interrogative formats and are things such as statements or if-formatted utterances.
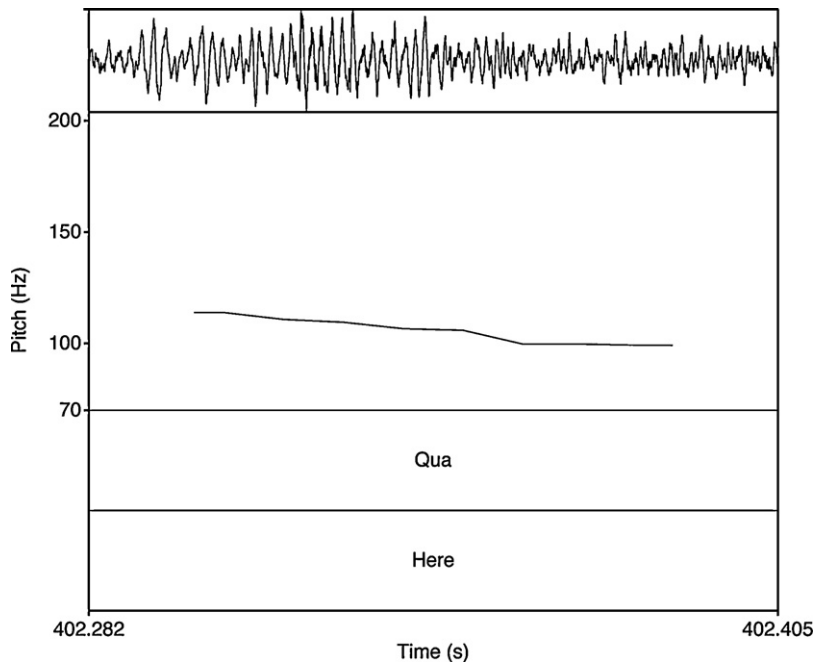
Fig. 1. "Qua" (here) pronounced as a declarative.

3.1. Polar questions

According to many researchers, Italian lacks any morphological or syntactic means of distinguishing polar questions from declaratives, so intonation carries the function of distinguishing the sentence types and indicating that a specific utterance is actually a question (*e.g.*, Avesani, 1990; Bertinetto and Loporcaro, 2005; Chapallaz, 1979; D'Imperio, 2002; Grice et al., 2005; Kori and Farnetani, 1983; Magno Caldognetto et al., 1978).

According to the same authors, polar interrogatives in Standard Italian are characterized by a rise on the final syllable of the sentence. However, the intonation contour of these questions has been claimed to be highly dependent on the regional variety under scrutiny. While Southern varieties exhibit a rise on the last accented syllable followed by a fall, as shown for Neapolitan by D'Imperio (2001) and for Palermo Italian by Grice (1995), most Northern and Central varieties seem to be characterized by a terminal rise. Figs. 1 and 2 show the different intonation contours on the word "qua" (here) when pronounced as a declarative statement (Fig. 1) and when pronounced as a question (Fig. 2) by the same male speaker in one of the interactions under scrutiny.

Given that the variety I am investigating is a Northern, the expectation was to observe the occurrence of a final rise in nearly all of the polar questions in my corpus, but as Table 2 shows, this was not the case. There was already reason to doubt that most polar questions in my corpus would end with final rise. In a study on the intonation of polar interrogatives read aloud by speakers from Bologna, de Dominicis (2002) found much variability so that some polar interrogatives would end with a rising final contour, while others would end with a descending contour. Moreover, in a study that compares how participants would produce questions in task oriented dialogue in Italian and then looking at how they would produce the same questions if they had to read them aloud, Grice et al. (1997) found that in the more spontaneous condition only 13% of questions ended with a final rise, while 78% of the read questions had a final rise. Given that most of the above mentioned research on intonation was based on read sentences, the likelihood that a closer look at naturally occurring data would have

Table 2
Distribution of intonation contours of polar questions.

Polar question intonation contour	Instances (percentage) $n = 200$
Final rise	30% (60)
Rise on last accented syllable	29.5% (59)
Flat ending (not falling)	22% (44)
Rise on Q. word and flat ending	6% (12)
Other (declarative)	12.5% (25)
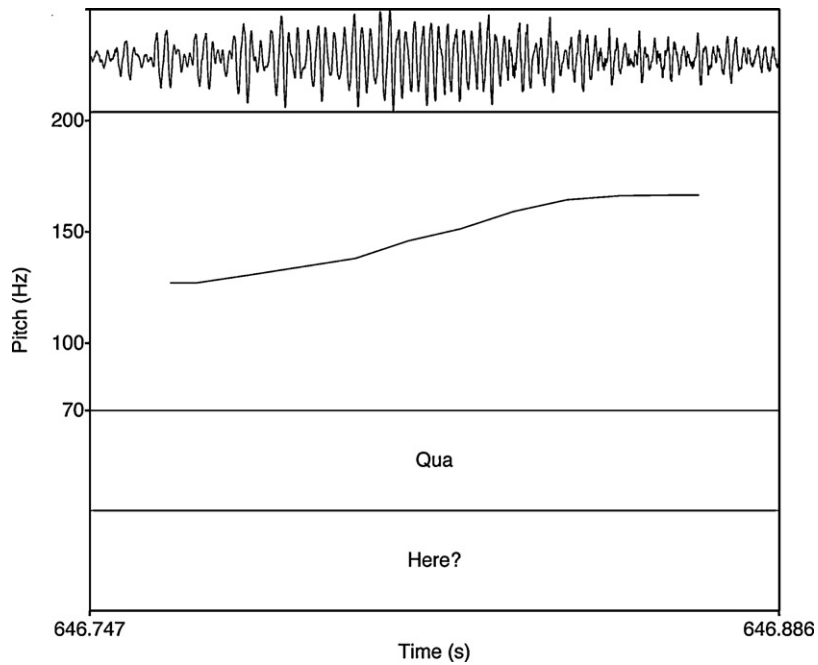
Fig. 2. "Qua" (here) pronounced as a question.
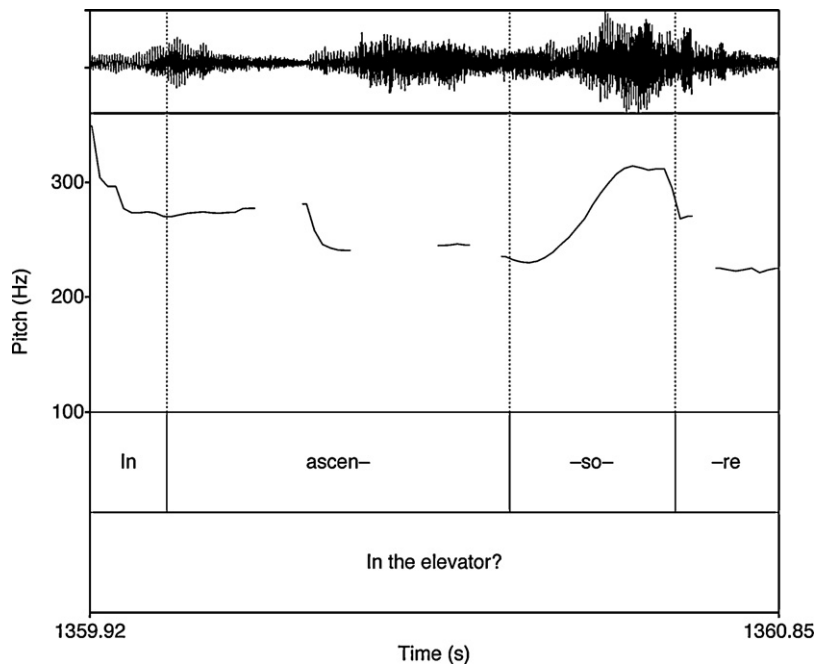
Fig. 3. Rising intonation on last accented syllable and then fall.

shown a different picture was high. If we look at Table 2 we see that in my corpus of spontaneous conversations, only 30% of polar questions actually end with a final rise[6].

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[6] Rise was first established auditorily by the author (a native speaker of the Italian regional variety under examination) and then measured using the software *Praat*. A rise of more than 5 Hz on the last syllable was considered 'final rise'. A rise of less than 5 Hz was considered 'flat ending'. The choice of 5 Hz as a boundary (see *e.g.* Hart et al., 1990 for criteria to establish hearable changes in pitch) is particularly strict, considering the fact that the interactions here examined occurred in participant's homes and not in sound booth experimental rooms. This means that the category "final rise" could actually be overestimated, rather than underestimated.
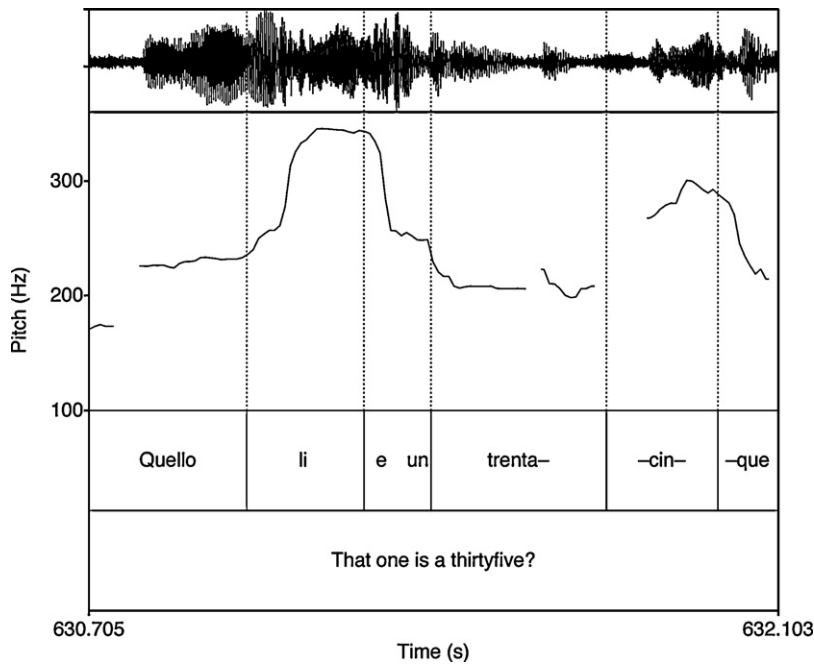
Fig. 4. Rise on focus and rising intonation on last accented syllable followed by fall.

Almost 30% of the questions end with a fall but have a rise on the last accented syllable (i.e. the marking that some Southern varieties are said to use to distinguish questions from declaratives). Figs. 3 and 4 show examples of this intonation contour.

Twenty-two percent of these questions have neither a rise, nor a fall (i.e. they end flat but this gives the impression of listening to a question, rather than a statement). Fig. 5 shows this intonation contour.

In 6% of cases there is a rise on words that appear to function, as far as polar questions are concerned, as question words for content questions. There is neither a rise nor a fall at the end of these utterances. The words on which there is a rise are the following: "hai presente" (you recall), "sai" (you know), "ricordi" (you remember), "hai visto" (you saw). All these verbs invoke the recipient's epistemic access to the information that will follow, and they are all conjugated for the second person (singular),

Fig. 5. No rise and no fall at the end of the utterance.

Fig. 6. Rising on "Presente" (you recall) and then flat ending.

although the subject is usually dropped. While utterances that start with these words may be considered B-event statements[7] (Labov and Fanshel, 1977), other B-event statements in Italian do not rise in pitch around words that invoke the recipient's knowledge or competence and do not end with a flat contour, but rather tend to end with a fall, like other declaratives. Given that in Italian, quest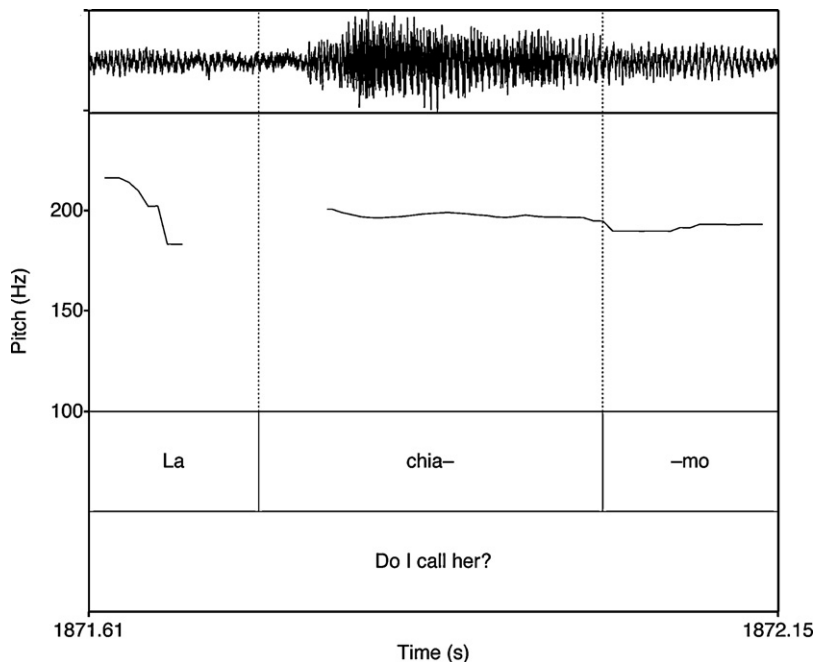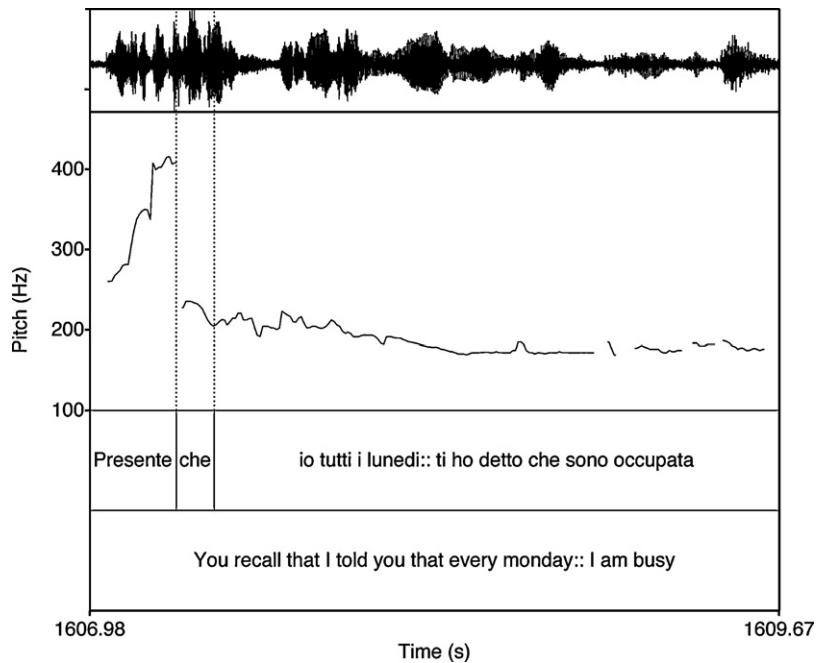ion words (wh-words) in content questions usually have a rise on them (see section 3.2), it looks as if these verbs conjugated for the second person work as question words for polar questions. This would suggest that, although rare, when combined with rising pitch, they could be morphological and prosodic markings of polar questions in Italian. Fig. 6 shows this intonation contour, where the pitch is downstepped immediately after the rise on "presente".

The remaining 12.5% of questions do not have any intonation contour distinguishable from a declarative: there is no systematic rise and the pitch falls towards the end of the utterance. This intonation contour can be seen in Fig. 7.

Why should we consider the 25 utterances that have this intonation contour polar questions? These utterances can be considered questions because of what they are about and because they make relevant a yes or no answer after their production. In particular, the utterances composing the category "other" are B-event statements (Labov and Fanshel, 1977). In these cases, if the speaker "states" something s/he cannot know as well as the recipient, confirmation or disconfirmation by the recipient is relevant and the latter typically treats the utterance as a question. Example 4 shows the context in which the question displayed in Fig. 7 was produced. It shows that participants treat these as utterances that require confirmation. Before line 1 in example 4, B asked A which exam A has to take and whether it is written or oral. At line 1 (that corresponds to the question shown in Fig. 5), B asserts that the exam is not in the laboratory but she does not actually know whether this is true or false. B is in fact seeking confirmation or disconfirmation by A, which she gets at line 3.

(4) 2PLUNCH1-laboratorio 05:27

```
01 →B: Non e' in laboratorio
        Not is in laboratory
   B: It is not in the laboratory
02    (0.5)
03 A: E' in laboratorio ma  devi    usare il computer
        Is in laboratory  but must.2s use   the computer
   A: It is in the laboratory but you must use the computer
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The fact that very different intonation contours of polar questions can be found in this conversational corpus challenges previous claims about a unique or even a prototypical intonation marking of questions in Italian (see Levinson, this issue for a

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[7] B-event statements are statements through which the speaker formulates some matter over which the recipient has better or more authoritative access (*e.g.* recipient feelings or experiences, recipient's opinions, recipient's plans for future courses of action).
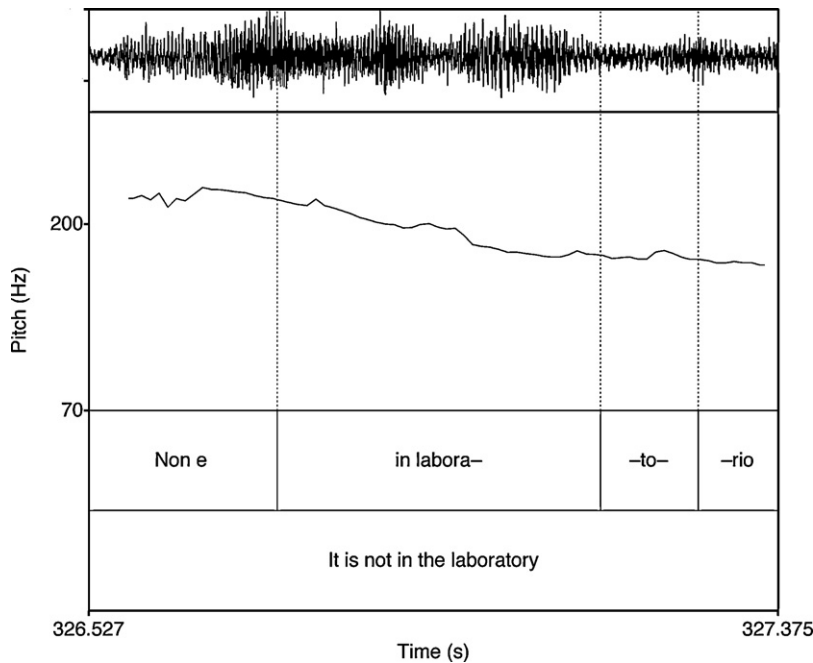
Fig. 7. Declarative intonation contour for polar question.

similar problem in Yélî Dnye). Every participant produced multiple instances of these varieties of question intonation. Some participants produced instances of each contour type. This suggests that the difference does not lie in the variety spoken by the individuals but rather in the questions themselves and in what the speakers are doing with those utterances in terms of social action. For the sake of space, it is not possible to investigate further when participants deploy each intonation contour, though we can briefly focus on one of them because of its peculiarities: the rise on the last accented syllable[8] followed by a fall. A closer look at the data shows that questions with a rise on the last accented syllable are usually deployed by speakers to display surprise or disbelief[9] about what has just been said. Example 5 (line 4 corresponds to Fig. 1), for example, occurs while A is gossiping with B about a possible relationship between a student and a professor. B is trying to figure out which student A is talking about and at line 2 refers to her as "the one in the elevator".

(5) 2GCOLL-ascensore 22:35

```
01 B: Ah non lo  sapevo  questo particolare. Ah no e'    vero.
      Oh not cl. know.1s this   detail      Oh no be.3s true
   B: Oh I did not know about this detail. Oh no it is true.
02    qu(h)ella in ascens(h)ore si'.
      that      in elevator    yes
   B: the o(h)ne in the elev(h)ator yes.
03    (0.5)
04 →A: In ascensore? Questa [mi manca.
      In elevator   this     me miss.3s
    A: In the elevator? I do not know about this.
05 B:                      [No si' eh mi ha detto Claudia…
                            No yes eh me  said.3s Claudia
    B:                      [No yes eh Claudia told me…
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[8] We might also refer to this pattern as "rising on the pitch accent", as other authors did for works on other Italian varieties. However, the fact that the term "pitch accent" is used in the literature to describe very different systems and it is not always used coherently, leads me to favor a more objective "rising on the last accented syllable" label. An anonymous reviewer suggested re-analyzing the data in terms of broad and narrow focus, as this might show more order in the data and it might provide a unifying way of interpreting rising intonation in polar and content questions. This valuable enterprise is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

[9] Analyzing questions in English, Hirschberg and Ward (1992) suggest that larger pitch ranges indicate incredulity and smaller ones indicate uncertainty. It is certainly possible that part of the sense of disbelief inferable in these questions comes from the fact that the rise is higher than in other questions. Yet, it remains striking that rather than simply making the pitch rise higher on the last syllable, speakers actually also move the rise to the last accented syllable. In other words, the noticing here is that the rise is anticipated in questions displaying surprise and disbelief. The pitch range might play a role as well but this has not been systematically investigated.

Table 3
Distribution of content question types.

Wh-type	Instances (percentage) n = 135
Cosa (What "event")	14% (19)
Cosa (What "object")	15% (20)
Cosa (What "prior talk")	13% (18)
Come (How "manner")	16% (21)
Quanto (How much)	10% (13)
Dove (Where)	9% (12)
Quando (When)	8% (11)
Chi (Who)	8% (11)
Perche' (Why)	7% (10)

The reference to the elevator is picked up at line 4 by A, who asks about it and then explicitly mentions that she does not know of anything that happened in the elevator (of the university department). Notice that B starts responding to the question in line 4 before A completes her second TCU ("I do not know about this"). B confirms the reference and then proceeds with the beginning of a telling to explain how that reference came to be (something a friend of theirs told B). In this example, besides the intonation contour, we have additional evidence that the speaker of the question is surprised and is asking for further clarification.

Apart from intonation, there are also turn final markings for polar questions. In my corpus there are only 10 tag questions and 18 other questions use lexical items usually deployed for tag questions as the only word in the question (*e.g.* "no?"). Tag questions are usually produced with either rising intonation on the tag or at least not falling intonation and the words used are usually: no, okay, eh.

This section has therefore shown that there are at least three ways in which a questioner might design an utterance so that it is recognizable as a polar question, rather than a simple declarative: specific intonation contours, epistemic asymmetries (B-event statements) and sentence final lexical markers (*e.g.* no, eh, okay).

3.2. Content questions

Italian has numerous question words that can be used to ask content questions. Table 3 shows their distribution in my corpus. Note that only 8% of content questions are about personal references and almost half contain the question word "cosa" (in isolation or in the structure "che cosa"), which literally means "thing".

According to previous studies, there is usually a pitch rise on the question word and it is usually claimed that the following contour is falling (*e.g.* Chapallaz, 1964), though other acoustic investigations of content questions in Northern varieties of Italian suggest that often content questions end with a final rise (Magno Caldognetto et al., 1978). In my corpus, 33% (45/135) of content questions end with a pitch rise. The fact that 1/3 of content questions end with a pitch rise while 2/3 do not, confirms the need for a more fine-grained analysis of the situations in which they are produced with a final rise in addition to a pitch rise on the question word.

In addition to lexical and intonational markings, question words that work as arguments require inversion in Italian interrogatives. The evidence comes from the fact that the subject cannot occur between the wh-operator and the inflected verb (*e.g.* Rizzi, 2001). In other words, the syntactic order goes from SVO to OVS in content questions. Examples 6 and 7 show this pattern.

(6) 2PSOFA-sottolinei 34:34

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B: Cosa sottolinei  tu?
   What undeline.2s you
B: What do you underline?
```

(7) 2PLUNCH1-Casco 12:07

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B: Quanto   costa   un casco?
   How much cost.3s a  helmet
B: How much does a helmet cost?
```

There are however two question words that do not require any inversion: 'perché' (why) and 'come mai' (how come).[10] If we look at example 8 where the subject "you" is dropped, the subject could occur after "perché" or after the verb. In the first case, because of pro-dropping, it would put the focus on "you" rather than on the thing eaten. In the second case, it would be

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[10] In my corpus of questions I do not have any instance of questions containing 'come mai', so I focus on questions containing the question word "perché".

a case of right dislocation of the subject, rather than a normal construction.

(8) 2PLUNCH1-mangi 08:46

```
B: Perche' (↓) lo mangi (↓)?
   Why         it eat.2s
B: Why do you eat it?
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The additional interesting feature of the question word "perché" (why) is how it usually occurs in conversation: 88% of the instances of "perché" in my corpus occur as one-word questions, in contrast with all other question words, which occur in isolation no more than 10% of the time (see distribution of lexical questions in section 4.2). In other words, speakers do not usually specify what they are requesting an account for, and the recipient has to rely on the sequential position of the question to infer it. "Perché" (and "come mai") moreover, also forms a different class among question words because its scope is over the sentence and not just a word or a phrase. All these differences in its deployment suggest that asking "why" is a different sort of action than asking any other content question. We know, indeed, that requesting explanations or accounts is usually a socially dispreferred action (Schegloff, 2007) and that other languages (*e.g.* German) have different words to distinguish an affiliative "why" question (wieso) from a complaint implicative one (warum) (Egbert, 2008). Notice, moreover, that no single phrase is ever sufficient as a response, contrary to every other content question.

Returning to the syntactic structure of content questions, in 8% of content questions the subject is topicalized (left dislocation) and precedes the question word, as in examples 9 and 10.

(9) 2PPLAN-ruolo 06:18

```
A: Ma  tu  che   ruolo avrai
   But you which role  have.2s
A: But you which role will you have
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(10) 2PEXAM-Fedrigo 49:18

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B: Fedrigo qual'     e'?
   Fedrigo which one is
B: Fedrigo which one is (he)? ((talking about a professor))
```

Left dislocation of the subject in content questions occurs either because the speaker is introducing a new topic and starting a new sequence or because s/he is suddenly switching topic in the middle of a turn at talk (see, *e.g.*, Duranti and Ochs, 1979; Monzoni, 2005).

Content questions in Italian can therefore be recognized by the occurrence of question words, of specific rising intonation on those question words and by syntactic inversion (though not for all of them). Finally, additional syntactic movements can occur and are usually deployed to achieve specific interactional goals, such as favoring recipient comprehension by orienting them immediately towards a new topic or a topic shift[11].

3.3. Alternative questions

Alternative questions in Italian present an interesting problem in terms of recognizability: participants often treat them as polar questions and respond to each alternative separately. Alternative questions usually present two or more alternatives out of which the recipient should pick. Example 3 showed an instance of an alternative question. However, if we look closely at how that question is formed, we notice that the object is moved to first position and is therefore topicalized (it is the only one in this corpus that has a marked syntactic construction). This feature is relevant in terms of how alternative questions are often understood and responded to. Indeed, with the default word order that presents two alternatives at the end, recipients often (in 3 out of 7 alternative questions) respond with a yes or a no in overlap with the second alternative, therefore treating the question as a polar question (see Englert, this issue). It should be added that often the first alternative is presented with final rise, which makes the ambiguity for the recipient even higher. Example 11 shows this potential problem in terms of recognition of alternative questions. Here B is asking A which type of flower she wants to make with beads.

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[11] See Monzoni (2005) for a more detailed interactional account of how some syntactically marked constructions in Italian can be interactionally exploited to accomplish specific social actions.

(11) 2PERLINE-questa 06:06

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01 B: Vuoi    fare que[sta o que]sta ((indicando due oggetti))
      Want.2s do   this    or this
   B: Do you want  thi[s one or th]is one ((pointing to two objects))
02 A:                [Si']
                     Yes
   A:                [Yes]
03 A: No
      No
   A: No
```

B here treats the alternative question in progress as a polar question and after having responded "yes" to the first alternative (see line 2), she responds "no" to the second alternative (see line 3). The fact that the first alternative is produced with final rising intonation and that "vuoi fare questa?" would be a perfectly correct polar question contributes to the misunderstanding of whether the question is complete at "questa". It could indeed be produced with final rise only after the second alternative, yet in this case the presupposition of the questions would be different (*e.g.* a question such as "do you want coffee or tea?" with rising only on 'tea' would be taken to be asking whether the recipient wants any refreshment at all, implying that the recipient might not want anything). In the end, B obtains the information she needed, yet the question design was not ideal. The possibility of obtaining a yes–no response after only the first alternative is produced might account for why there are so few alternative questions in the interactions in these data.

4. Questions packaging

In section 3 I described different linguistic design features that are usually deployed while asking questions in Italian and in particular I emphasized the use of specific intonation contours, specific lexical/morphological markings and syntactic movement (inversion). I also mentioned that epistemic asymmetry in participant's access to what a question is about will also favor an interpretation of a specific utterance as a question. Stivers and Rossano (2010) claim that each of these features can be used to mobilize response in interaction by signaling interrogativity and a speaker's expectation of a response to the ongoing utterance/action. Another response-mobilizing feature is speaker gaze. The following section addresses how gaze is deployed while asking questions.

4.1. GAZE

A feature that can be added to questions to increase pressure for a response is speaker gaze towards the face of the recipient. According to Rossano (2010), in dyadic interactions in Italian the occurrence of mutual gaze during a first pair part (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) in a sequence, but also just the occurrence of speaker gaze towards the recipient at all, increases the likelihood of obtaining a response. In a recent paper comparing gaze behavior during questions in dyadic interactions in three unrelated cultures, Rossano et al. (2009) find that in all these cultures speakers tend to gaze at their recipients while asking questions (on average above 70% of the time), while recipient gaze behavior differs across cultures. Moreover, in every culture examined, questioners gaze at recipients more than recipients gaze at questioners.

Table 4 shows the occurrence, in Italian, of speaker gaze towards addressee, recipient gaze towards the speaker and the occurrence of mutual gaze across question types. In general, in this corpus speakers look at addressees 73% of the time, while recipients look at speakers 66% of the time. Mutual gaze occurs in 56% of the questions.

Table 4 shows that speakers look at recipients more than vice versa in polar questions and in alternative questions, but this is not the case for content questions, where the percentages are almost equal. Moreover, speakers look more at recipients during polar questions and alternative questions than during content questions. Notice, in particular, that all alternative questions in this corpus are produced with speaker gaze towards the recipient and remember the observation in section 3.3 concerning the likelihood that a recipient will treat them as polar questions and respond immediately after the first alternative. If speaker gaze is one of the cues that a response is relevant, then it is reasonable that in questions that are morphologically, syntactically and/or intonationally marked early in the question, it is less crucial that speakers look at

Table 4
Gaze behavior across question types.

Question type	SGAZE	RGAZE	MGAZE
Polar *n* = 200	76% (152)	64% (128)	57% (114)
Content[a] *n* = 133	68% (90)	70% (93)	55% (73)
Alternative *n* = 7	100% (7)	71% (5)	71% (5)
Total *n* = 340	73% (249)	66% (226)	56% (192)

[a] In 2 content questions the speaker of the question is momentarily not visible and therefore it is impossible to assess his/her gaze behavior. The percentages presented in the table exclude these 2 questions.

Table 5
Speaker gaze behavior during polar questions.

Polar question	Speaker gaze → recipient
Final rise ($n = 60$)	70% (42)
Rise on last accented syllable ($n = 59$)	69% (41)
Flat ending (not falling) ($n = 44$)	84% (37)
Rise in Q. word and flat ending ($n = 12$)	75% (9)
Declarative contour ($n = 25$)	92% (23)
Total ($n = 200$)	76% (152)

recipients to indicate that this is something that should obtain a response. Following this logic, and focusing on polar questions, we should see that in utterances that do not have a clear intonational marking of their being questions rather than statements, speakers should look more often at recipients. Table 5 shows that this is indeed the case.

In the questions produced with the two intonation contours that the literature claims to be the prototypical intonation contour of polar questions[12] ("final rise" and "rise on the last accented syllable") speakers look at recipients 70% and 69% of the time. In the few questions with a rise on question words and flat ending we see that speakers look at recipients in 75% of the cases. However, in the questions that have a flat ending we find that speakers look at recipients in 84% of the cases and for questions that have a declarative contour speakers look at recipients in 92% of the cases. The difference in the proportion of speaker gaze towards the recipient between, *e.g.*, questions ending with final rise and the questions with declarative contours, is statistically significant even with this small corpus.[13] One possible explanation for these differences is that speakers orient towards the possibility that a recipient might treat "question" utterances produced with flat ending or declarative contours as statements, and therefore adding speaker gaze might signal that a responsive turn is expected.

4.2. Minimality

Other interesting features of naturally occurring questions are their minimality and how speakers rely on recipient understanding of prior talk in designing their questions. Italian questions are often produced without a verb (Serianni, 2000) and when this feature is combined with the fact that Italian is also a pro-drop language, the result is that many questions are quite minimal and elliptical and thus potentially problematic to decode. Example 12 is a case in point. A has told B that he is planning to bring an old scooter (the Ciao) to Bologna and they have been talking about which kind of gas it might use. After a few seconds of silence B produces the question at line 1.

(12) 2PLUNCH1-funziona 13:48

```
01 →B: F(h)unziona?
        Work.3s
    B: ((It)) w(h)orks?
02    (0.5)
03 B: Il  Ciao.
        The Ciao
    B: The Ciao.
04    (1.3)
05 A: Cosa?
        What?
    A: What?
06 B: Il  Ciao funziona?
        The Ciao work.3s
    B: The Ciao works?
07    (0.5)
08 A: Si' che  funziona
        Yes that work.3s
    A: Yes that it works
```

The question at line 1 is not responded to and at line 3 A specifies what was the subject of the verb at line 1, treating the lack of response as a problem in inferring the subject of the verb at line 1. After more silence, at line 5 A produces an open class repair initiator (Drew, 1997) and at line 6 B repeats the question at line 1, but this time she makes the subject explicit. A

Table 6
Distribution of TCU types among polar questions.

TCU type in polar questions	Percentage (instances) $n = 200$
Lexical	19% (37)
Phrasal	15% (31)
Clausal/sentential	66% (132)

Table 7
Distribution of TCU types among content questions.

TCU type in content questions	Percentage (instances) $n = 135$
Lexical	20% (27)
Phrasal	4% (6)
Clausal/sentential	76% (102)

Table 8
Distribution of means for selecting next speaker.

Means for selecting next speaker	Percentage (instances) $n = 342$
Gaze	73% (249)
Address terms	1% (3)
Domain of authority	80% (273)
Register	0.3% (1)

then responds to the question (line 8). While examples such as 12 do occur, most of the time participants do not have any trouble responding quite elliptical questions and they can do so because of the sequential positioning of the questions within a course of action (see, *e.g.*, example 5).

Following Sacks et al. (1974) classification of turn constructional unit[14] (henceforth TCU) types and focusing on the TCU that is doing questioning, I distinguish between lexical questions (questions made of just one word, *e.g.* example 12), phrasal questions (questions made of a single phrase, *e.g.* example 5) and clausal questions (questions made of at least an entire clause, *e.g.* examples 1, 2 and 3). Tables 6 and 7 show that the distribution of questions done via lexical TCUs is approximately the same between polar and content questions, while more polar questions than content questions are done via phrasal TCUs.

In total, 30% of the questions in this corpus are either lexical or phrasal. It is possible that the high incidence of minimal questions correlates with the fact that all these interactions occur in face-to-face and therefore additional visible cues such as gestures, facial expressions and gaze could be deployed to disambiguate what the speaker is referring to. In situations such as the one represented in example 1, where a person offers something to drink to the other, this might be particularly likely and as such minimality might correlate with specific actions, such as offerings. Yet, an empirical comparison with conversations on the phone would be necessary to provide evidence supporting this hypothesis.

Finally, one concern for a speaker in designing a question is also to make sure the recipient knows that she is the person being selected to speak next (Lerner, 2003). This corpus is made of only dyadic interactions and as it does not include rhetorical questions, all questions uttered by a participant address the recipient and select her as the next speaker in a way or another. However, there are other means through which a speaker can select a participant as the next one to speak: speaker gaze towards the recipient, using address terms, invoking the recipient domain of epistemic authority or using a particular register. Table 8 shows that speaker gaze towards the recipient and invoking the recipient domain of epistemic authority were recurring very often in the questions of this corpus.

This section has shown how question packaging relies on the sequential positioning of questions in a conversation and that elliptical constructions are not rare. By constructing minimal questions, speakers assume that the recipient will understand which response would be relevant and what the question is about because of the content and the gist of the talk that preceded it.

5. Social actions

In order to respond to a question, a participant cannot rely simply on an understanding of which question type an utterance might belong to. What is needed is also a recognition of the social action the question is performing (*e.g.* requesting information, confirmation or clarification). Sometimes the specific action that a question is implementing is not

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[14] The units out of which turns are built.

Table 9
Distribution of actions in the question corpus.

Action	Percentage (instances) $n = 342$
Information request	47% (160)
Other initiation of repair	18% (63)
Confirmation request	27% (93)
Assessment	2% (6)
Suggest/offer	3% (10)
Other (pre-tellings, tease)	3% (10)

Table 10
Distribution of actions by question type.

Action	Polar $n = 200$	Content $n = 135$	Alternative $n = 7$
Information request	26% (52)	75% (101)	100% (7)
Other initiation of repair	17% (34)	21% (29)	0
Confirmation request	46.5% (93)	0	0
Assessment	2.5% (5)	1% (1)	0
Suggest/offer	5% (10)	0	0
Other (pre-tellings, tease)	3% (6)	3% (4)	0

Table 11
Distribution of response types in the entire question corpus.

Responses	Percentage (instances) $n = 342$
Answer	60% (204)
Non-answer response	24% (81)
No response	16% (57)

straightforward. This means that a closer look at the corpus could yield important information in terms of what kind of actions are often implemented through questions. Table 9 shows that almost half of the questions in my corpus are used to request information, that 27% are used to request confirmation and that slightly less than 20% are used to initiate repair when there is a problem with the preceding talk. It also happens, although rarely, that question formats can be used to assess, suggest or offer, or even to initiate a telling or introduce a new topic in the conversation.

A closer look at the distribution of actions by question type (see Table 10) clearly shows that in these data polar questions are used to implement a large variety of actions, while content questions are used for a more restricted variety of action types (*e.g.* not for requests for confirmation or for offers) and alternative questions mainly to request information.

Moreover, whereas half of polar questions are used to request confirmation and only 26% to request information, 75% of content questions are used to request information. This is particularly relevant in terms of the observation in section 3 that depending on the activity and task at hand, one question type might be deployed more often than another. The differences in the number and type of actions that can be implemented through a specific question type partly explains why in this interactional corpus almost 60% of the questions are polar ones.

6. Responses

Throughout this paper I have repeatedly focused on the importance of understanding what makes questions recognizable objects in interaction. However, I have not provided much evidence to show that recipients recognize when a turn is asking a question and what it is that the question is asking for. Looking at how questions are responded to can tell us something about their recognizability but also something about the complexity of responding. Table 11 shows that 84% of questions in my corpus receive a response: either an answer or a non-answer response (*e.g.* "I do not know", "maybe"). Thus, recipients recognize questions as objects after which a response is due.

Table 12, however, shows that the percentages of response types vary considerably depending on the question type.

Ninety percent of polar questions receive a response, whereas only 73% of content questions do. Less than half of the content questions get a proper answer, compared to 70% of polar questions. This confirms the common sense idea that it is easier, from a processing point of view, to answer yes or no than to provide a more specific answer to a content question. It should be noted, however, that the reason why questions do not get answered or get a non-answer response are multiple and can go from not having heard the question at all (*e.g.* because it was produced in overlap or because the recipient was distracted), to social reasons such as the dispreference of the question or of the answer (*e.g.* questions or answers that threaten the 'face' (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1967) of the other participant) or the difficulty of providing a precise response. It is

Table 12
Distribution of response types by question type.

Responses	Polar $n = 200$	Content $n = 135$	Alternative $n = 7$
Answer	70% (141)	44% (60)	43% (3)
Non-answer response	20% (39)	29% (39)	43% (3)
No response	10% (20)	27% (36)	14% (1)

Table 13
Distribution of answer forms in response to polar questions.

Answer form for polar questions	Percentage (instances) $n = 141$
Type conforming (yes/no)	89% (125)
Repeat	10% (14)
Marked agreement	1% (2)

not possible to address these aspects further here, although other recent works (Rossano, 2010; Rossano et al., 2009) do so in some detail using an Italian database similar to the one used for the current paper.

If we look closer at the answer forms produced in response to polar questions, we see in Table 13 that 89% of them are a "yes" or "no" or its visible counterpart (a nod or a head shake). This suggests that in Italian the preferred response to a polar question is a "yes" or a "no", rather than a repetition (see Brown and Hoymann, this issue for another pattern) and participants consistently orient towards this in their choice of response types.

Moreover, remembering that in Italian a negatively framed question is confirmed by responding "no", 76% (107/141) of answers to polar questions are confirming answers.

Finally, the occurrence of speaker gaze during questions has a clear effect on recipients' responses. If we focus just on the answers, 51% (105/204) of them have a visible component (*e.g.* a nod or an emblematic gesture). This percentage becomes even more impressive if we simply consider how many answers to polar questions have a visible component: 68% (96/141). The abundance of visible components in participants' responses provides additional evidence of the importance of speaker gaze during the question and after the question: it allows for the production of visible responses or at least visible components to the responses. A visible response is functionally effective only if it can be seen. We know that if a participant looks towards the other during a conversation, s/he tends to fixate on the face for 90–95% of the time and that gestures are rarely fixated on, but yet information from them is acquired and processed (Gullberg and Holmqvist, 2006; Gullberg and Kita, 2009). Once the gaze of the questioner is on the recipient face, visible components can be produced while delivering a response, and in Italian conversations this happens quite often.

7. Conclusions

This paper has presented an overview of question–answer sequences produced in natural conversations in Italian. The main focus has been the design features that make questions recognizable objects in interaction with empirical evidence that participants recognize them as such by providing the projected answers in response. By looking at dyadic ordinary conversations in Italian, we saw that some ways of marking an utterance as a question previously suggested in the literature (in particular rising intonation in polar questions) do not accurately describe the many ways in which questions get asked in interaction. These include the way content questions and alternative questions are produced and how gaze is deployed during the production of questions even in dyadic interactions (which is to say, even when they are not used to select the next speaker). We saw too that the packaging of questions displays a great reliance on the sequential organization of talk in interaction. The social actions that are implemented through questions are multiple and yet strongly correlated to the question types used. Finally, the occurrence of many responses with a visible component displays that the presence of speaker gaze towards the recipient has a direct effect on the way in which a question is responded to.

These multiple levels of order, the fact that most of their formal features belong to the grammatical system of the languages we speak and the kind of social actions that can be accomplished through questions suggest that they are of great importance for human beings. The fact that individuals will often find themselves in trouble in terms of knowledge, common ground information (see, *e.g.*, Clark and Brennan, 1991) or more generally in terms of the possibility of completing specific courses of action lead the social system to favor the existence of quick and effective ways of requesting to provide a participant with what s/he might lack or need. The fact that among the few sentence types shared by apparently every language (Sadock and Zwicky, 1985) there is one (interrogative) specifically dedicated to obtaining from others immediate and direct answers to our (usually knowledge related) problems should alert us to the crucial role that question–answer sequences play in human sociality and human relationships and invite further and more detailed investigations of this domain.

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