

Answers are remembered better than the questions themselves

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Linguistic focus in communication

We used **question-answer pairs**, a structure that is extremely common in communication, to test **the effect of focus on memory**.

Background

- We can use linguistic focus in conversation to highlight information that is new or important.
- Focussed items tend to be remembered better than items that are neutral or non-focussed.
- Most studies on focus and memory use focussing structures that are extremely rare in communication, often clefts, such as “It is the sunflower that should move under the crab”.
- Questions are very common and can put the answers in focus.
- So, are the answers to questions remembered better than the questions themselves?

Frequency of focusing structures

In an analysis of a corpus of spontaneous conversation in German (GECO; Schweitzer & Lewandowski, 2013, 2014), question-answer pairs occurred in 31% of turns as opposed to clefts, which occurred in 0.002% of the turns.

Methods

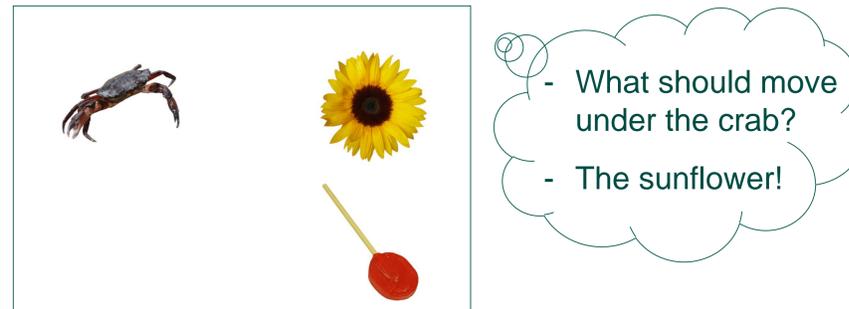
The hypothesis that answers are remembered better than questions was tested using a **study - test paradigm**.

Forty-eight participants took part in this experiment.

Study phase

At study, participants saw three items and listened to **two-speaker question-answer exchanges** about them.

In 8 of the 72 trials, participants saw a **comprehension question** that ensured they were paying attention.

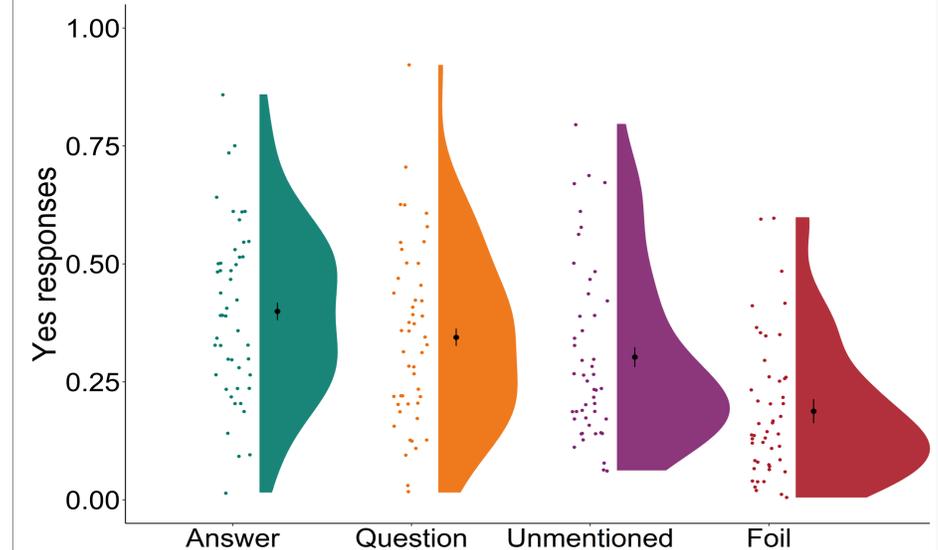


Test phase

At test, participants completed a **Yes/No recognition memory task**, in which they saw the names of all the pictures presented in the study phase intermixed with an equal number of new **nouns**.

The test phase was conducted **online a day after the study phase**.

Results



Percentages of yes-responses for the names of objects appearing in questions and answers, and for unmentioned objects and foils.

Questions were remembered 6% better than answers ($\beta = 0.27$, $SE = 0.06$, $CI = 0.15, 0.39$, $z = 4.51$, $p < 0.001$).

Memory advantage for answers

There was a **memory advantage for nouns in answers** over in questions.

This extends earlier work demonstrating a memory advantage for focussed information.

Importantly, this advantage is obtained in utterance types that are very frequent in everyday spoken communication.