

**Report on the second meeting of the DFG scientific network
"Interactional Linguistics – Discourse particles from a
cross-linguistic perspective" from 11-13 September 2019
at the Leibniz Institute for the German Language (Mannheim)**

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**1. The scientific network "Interactional Linguistics":
Research objectives, languages of investigation, members**

Language is a very powerful tool, if not the most sophisticated tool for establishing intersubjectivity in interaction. Although languages clearly differ in the grammatical forms that speakers apply to this end, there are communicative tasks which seem to be universal or which have to be addressed in any kind of verbal conduct – such as practices for turn-taking, repair and reference (Schegloff 2006). Cross-linguistic interactional studies can – among other things – determine whether the language-specific resources applied to accomplish these generic tasks are embedded in similar or different networks of interrelated forms and actions.

In recent years, question-response sequences have been studied widely in cross-linguistic interactional research (Enfield et al. 2019; Stivers/Enfield 2010; Enfield et al. 2010). While these large-scale studies yield interesting results, e.g. in terms of overall distributional differences of various question and answer types, to date little is known about similarities and differences in the formatting of particular question-response pairings. Request for confirmation sequences constitute an interesting field of study in this respect as they play a central role in documenting what speakers assume to be relevant information for the ongoing interaction and in negotiating epistemic rights and access at the same time.

Building on the "natural control method" (Dingemanse/Floyd 2014), which takes sequence structure rather than particular linguistic forms as a starting point, the scientific network "Interactional Linguistics – Discourse particles from a cross-linguistic perspective", funded by the German Research Foundation from 10/2018 to 09/2021 and coordinated by Martin Pfeiffer (University of Freiburg) and Katharina König (University of Münster),¹ sets out to conduct a cross-linguistic comparison of requests for confirmation (henceforth RfCs) as one generic format of sequence organisation. Languages provide different resources for RfCs: While some languages rather make use of particles for formatting an utterance in order to make relevant or to mobilise confirmation, or for formatting a subsequent turn as a response, which aligns or disaligns with the preceding RfC, others rely to a greater extent on resources such as prosodic marking or repetition. In order to determine how speakers accomplish RfCs in different languages, the network focuses on the varying role that discourse particles play in organising the sequentiality between RfCs and their responses. In particular, it conducts cross-linguistic comparisons on two types of discourse particles, namely question tags and response particles in their relation to other linguistic means by which RfCs can be brought about.

The network brings together an international group of interactional linguists to conduct research on RfCs in a range of typologically diverse languages:

¹ For further details see: <https://interactional-linguistics.org/>

- American and British English (Uwe Küttner, University of Potsdam; Beatrice Szczepek Reed, King's College London)
- Czech (Florence Oloff, University of Oulu)
- Egyptian Arabic (Michal Marmorstein, Hebrew University Jerusalem)
- Finnish (Aino Koivisto, University of Helsinki)
- Hebrew (Yael Maschler, University of Haifa)
- Japanese (Ryoko Suzuki, Keio University, Tokyo)
- Korean (Kyu-hyun Kim, Kyung Hee University, Seoul)
- Low German (Kathrin Weber, University of Jena)
- Mandarin Chinese (Xiaoting Li, University of Alberta)
- Polish (Jörg Zinken, Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Mannheim)
- Spanish (Oliver Ehmer, University of Freiburg)
- Standard German (Arnulf Deppermann, Leibniz Institute for the German Language, Mannheim; Alexandra Groß, University of Bayreuth; Katharina König, University of Münster; Martin Pfeiffer, University of Freiburg)
- Turkish (Yazgül Şimşek, University of Münster)
- Yurakaré (Sonja Gipper, University of Cologne)

Throughout the funding period, the network members meet in four three-day workshops. Two external experts, who give plenary talks and discuss the cross-linguistic research enterprise with the network members, are invited to each workshop. The inaugural meeting took place at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS) from 20-22 March, 2019, and was accompanied by Ryoko Suzuki and Kyu-hyun Kim, who both agreed to continue their cooperation with the network and to contribute observations from their languages of investigation.

The second meeting reported on here was hosted by the Leibniz Institute for the German Language in Mannheim from 11-13 September, 2019.² The workshop was joined by Tanya Stivers (University of California, Los Angeles) and Jakob Steensig (Aarhus University) as external experts. In the following section, we summarise their plenary talks. Moreover, we will give an overview of the major points discussed by the network members with regard to the cross-linguistic research agenda sketched out above, namely a working definition of request for confirmation sequences (3.1), the coding scheme (3.2), and possible topics and questions for comparative research (3.3). The report will conclude with an outlook on the future network meetings in 2020 and 2021 (4).

² We would like to extend our thanks to Arnulf Deppermann and his team at the Leibniz Institute for the German Language for hosting and organising the second network meeting.

2. Response particles in request for confirmation sequences – Plenary talks by Tanya Stivers and Jakob Steensig

Response particles in RfC sequences offer interesting insights into the social life of language: Not only do they deal with the task of doing confirmation or disconfirmation made relevant by the previous turn, they are also involved in managing the relative epistemic and social positioning of the interlocutors. Given the high variability of response formats and the sophistication of affective and epistemic stances which can be expressed by response particles, cross-linguistic studies have to identify generic descriptive categories that can enable a comparative analysis of the relevant organisational principles in the coordination of RfCs and their responses.

The plenary talks by Tanya Stivers and Jakob Steensig presented two different approaches to the interactional study of response particles in RfC sequences: While Stivers presented a classification scheme for response particles based on a large-scale collection of bipolar questions in which different interactional principles turn out to be relevant organising factors, Steensig's talk approached RfCs from a qualitative perspective, stressing the need for a fine-grained analysis of their sequential embeddedness and of the variety of actions and stances that response particles embody in these contexts. In the following sections, we will summarise their main lines of argument and the subsequent discussions.

2.1. Tanya Stivers: "Cooperation and Agency in Answers to Polar Questions"

In her talk, Tanya Stivers (University of California, Los Angeles, USA) focused on polar questions in English, including a range of different formats (e.g. questions with falling and rising intonation, as well as declarative and interrogative syntax). All of them have in common that they make a confirming or disconfirming response relevant. Stivers started with the observation that there are different ways of providing confirming answers, for instance interjections such as *yes*, *sure*, *of course* or partial or full repetitions like *she will*, etc. Since respondents can choose between these answering practices for doing confirmation, the question arises regarding what additional communicative work these different forms can accomplish.

At the beginning of her talk, Stivers started from the central idea that each polar question has an informational and a relational component: When answering a polar question, speakers not only provide confirmation or disconfirmation, but also manage the social relationship to the co-participant asking the question. Focusing on confirming answers to polar questions, Stivers introduced two principles that account for the differences in social-relational work that the various answering practices accomplish. The "cooperation principle" relates to aspects of alignment (action alignment, design alignment) and affiliation (supporting the other's stance, providing pro-social responses to an action). The "agency principle" comprises sequential agency, which relates to the responsibility for an action performed, and thematic agency, concerning the responsibility for the design of an action in a particular context. Based on these interactional principles, Stivers demonstrated how it is possible to distinguish between the different confirming answering practices within what she calls the "answer possibility space".

One major resource for answering polar questions are interjections, which Stivers defines as lexical, phrasal or bodily units that do not express a proposition, but assert the proposition introduced by the question, and are treated as complete answers by the interlocutors. On the one hand, there are unmarked interjections, such as *yes*, *yeah*, or *uh huh*, which accept the question's terms, the question's presuppositions and the reduced agency imposed by the question. With regard to the principles mentioned above, unmarked interjections express a high degree of cooperation and do not claim agency over the proposition expressed by the questioner. On the other hand, marked interjections can be used to challenge the askability of a question (upgraded interjections, such as *of course* or *absolutely*), treat answering as problematic (downgraded interjections, such as *possibly* or *maybe*), or to express reduced agency (acquiescent interjections, such as *okay* or *sure*). With the use of upgraded and downgraded interjections, respondents present themselves as only moderately cooperative (by either challenging the askability or answerability of the question at hand) and with low agency.

A second way of providing a confirming answer to a polar question is the use of a "transformation". This answering practice retrospectively alters the proposition introduced by the question and therefore, so to speak, confirms a different question than the one proposed. Transformations can be distinguished with regard to whether they retroactively transform the terms or the agenda of the question, while not challenging the action of questioning as such. The respondent adopts a position of reduced cooperation and high agency.

The third answering practice within the "answer possibility space" is "repetition". Repetitions are different from transformations in that they do not adjust the question's proposition. However, they resist the reduced agency imposed by the question, claiming epistemic rights over the proposition initially expressed by the questioner. Stivers' analysis of repetitional answers demonstrated that three categories have to be distinguished: epistemic-based, course of action-based, and agreement-based repetitions. In addition, as Stivers pointed out, modulations of the basic interactional functions can be accomplished through, for instance, gestures, smiles, prosody, prefaces, delays or hitches.

This overview of the "answer possibility space" provided convincing evidence for the different general functions of the various answering practices. These functions, Stivers argued, can best be described by analysing large-scale collections of the full range of answer possibilities contrastively. Moreover, the relative quantitative distribution of the different forms and formats used can yield interesting results for cross-linguistic studies: A language that favours repetition over interjections might place more value on agency rather than cooperation. Stivers concluded that question-response sequences constitute a microcosm to study how social relationships are being played out.

2.2. Jakob Steensig: "'Other things' that response particles do and how they can be studied"

In his plenary talk, Jakob Steensig (University of Aarhus, Denmark) started from the observation that RfCs are generally well-understood in terms of their sequential design, the action components involved and the relative epistemic stance-taking associated with requesting confirmation. While all of these features can be and have

been made part of large-scale coding-based corpus studies, Steensig's presentation drew attention to lesser-known aspects of RfC sequences that often cannot be adequately captured by the "next-turn proof procedure" or that do not lend themselves easily to formal coding procedures.

The relevant functions of RfCs, he argued, can only be understood if one conducts fine-grained qualitative analyses of the larger sequential and interactional contexts they are embedded in. Based on the analysis of video-recorded everyday dyadic conversations in Danish, Steensig pointed out four main aspects that can add to previous studies of RfCs and their responses:

Firstly, there might be other actions apart from requesting and delivering confirmation that RfC sequences accomplish depending on the larger interactional projects that RfCs are embedded in. Steensig illustrated this point with the example of an RfC in a troubles-telling. In this particular context, an RfC by the troubles-recipient may not only ask for the confirmation of some background information needed for processing the explication of the problem, but it can also be heard as giving advice at the same time. The troubles-teller can then either resume the ongoing narration, thus resisting a possible advice trajectory (as was the case in the example discussed by Steensig), or she/he can turn to the RfCs as advice.

Secondly, apart from expressing epistemic stance, RfCs can also have an affective dimension, as they usually work as devices which help to establish intersubjectivity and pro-sociality. Steensig presented examples in which their affective load was expressed by various linguistic devices such as extreme case formulations, 'dramatic' prosodic contours or gestures. In these RfCs, requesters do more than deliver information that has to be confirmed by the addressee; they also make relevant responses in which the respondents have to position themselves with regard to the affective stance of the RfC. The prosodic matching of a 'dramatic' contour can, for instance, work as an indication of affiliation.

Thirdly, Steensig argued that RfCs also have to be understood in their relation to the participation framework and speaker identities: RfCs are interpreted within the relative interactional roles that speakers have established. If speaker A has been ratified as a narrator, RfCs are not likely to be understood as topic profferings or as efforts to take the role of primary speaker. Instead after the RfC sequence, speaker A can resume their storytelling without further ado. Apart from these "structural" roles, identity ascriptions can also bear on the development of RfC sequences. Speakers who request re-confirmation even though the answer has already been given in the preceding context express their surprise concerning the information given, and also indicate that they have reason to be surprised. This move might work as a claim to a particular identity position from which one is 'entitled' to be surprised.

Fourthly, Steensig emphasized that more attention should be paid to differences in the formal realisation of RfCs and response particles. Only by relating the different formats to each other can one determine the full functional potential of each variation. Differences in their prosodic design, the timing of their delivery as well as aspects of the subsequent sequential context such as expansions or third turns have to be taken into account, too. Moreover, Steensig pointed out that he found a recurrent pattern of minimal answers accompanied by nodding, suggesting that they should be analysed as 'multimodal packages'.

Steensig's analyses clearly show that RfCs and their responses are involved in more than just indicating or negotiating who is more or less knowledgeable. In the subsequent discussion he stressed the implications of his observations for coding-based approaches to the study of RfCs: On the one hand, in-depth qualitative analysis can draw attention to hitherto understudied aspects, which can lead to new coding categories that can then feed into cross-linguistic research. On the other hand, overarching dimensions such as identity and affective stance might not be easily codeable, although they can be relevant sequence-driving aspects. Steensig concluded by saying that one should nevertheless try to include them in the cross-linguistic analysis of RfCs.

3. Topics of the meeting: Delimiting RfCs, coding, and investigating request for confirmation sequences

Rather than taking a broad approach to question-response sequences in general, the scientific network focuses on RfCs as one particular sequential format in which a first turn makes a second relevant in such a way that the latter is heard as a confirmation or disconfirmation. This, of course, calls for a sound action description by which RfCs can be identified and collected for further coding and analysis. The following section (3.1) will present what has been termed "the narrow working definition of RfCs" in the course of the network meetings. In section 3.2, we will give a general overview of the coding categories that were identified as relevant for a cross-linguistic comparison in data sessions during the first two network meetings. Finally, we will lay out some of the overarching research questions that the members of the scientific network wish to address in the two meetings to come (3.3).

3.1. Working definition for request for confirmation sequences

In the first two meetings, one of the important and challenging tasks for the network members was to agree on a working definition for the phenomenon being studied – the RfC sequence – in order to be able to build comparable collections. Even though various interactional studies make use of "request for confirmation" as a functional category (Bolden 2010; Seuren/Huiskes 2017; Stivers/Enfield 2010), so far there is no general or consensual description of RfCs that does not depend (at least in part) on language-specific formal criteria (such as declarative syntax). Therefore, none of the existing descriptions can readily be deployed to all the languages of investigation in the network. Based on individual data sessions during the first meeting, network members identified a set of core cases, which everyone agreed should be included in the collections for each language. We took this core collection as a basis for a working definition which, among others, comprises the following main criteria:

- An RfC is uttered by a requester. It expresses the proposition that is to be (dis)confirmed, that is, the confirmable has to be introduced to discourse by the requester; it does not repeat what has been said by someone else.
- RfCs express a particular epistemic stance within a particular relative gradient of epistemic statuses. They propose a relatively flat, recipient-tilted epistemic

gradient. That is, R claims partial knowledge (some access, some certainty, some right to claim knowledge) about the proposition, but treats the addressee as having more knowledge (better access, more certainty, more right to claim knowledge) about the matter at hand (also see Couper-Kuhlen/Selting 2018: 238).

- The RfC can but does not have to relate back to prior topic talk in various ways: For example, it can be presented as an upshot/a formulation of a candidate understanding, as a challenge to the prior talk, or it can document prior assumptions that contradict parts of the prior talk. However, it is also possible that it introduces a new topic.
- An RfC makes a confirming or disconfirming response by another participant relevant as a second, where confirmation is generally treated as the preferred and disconfirmation the dispreferred alternative. In a third turn, the requester can acknowledge the status of the information expressed in the other participant's (dis)confirming response (e.g. as something they remember, as new information, or as something they did not expect).
- (Dis)confirmations can but do not have to contain response particles. RfCs can also be followed by non-verbal actions, by a non-response (which is treated as noticeably absent) or a response which does not confirm or disconfirm, but rather qualifies the underlying assumption of the RfC.

Taking this delimitation as a starting point, all network members compiled a collection of examples, amounting to approx. 200 instances of RfCs for each language. For each of the languages, where possible, we used data from everyday interactions among adults (friends or family, preferably 2-4 interlocutors, preferably video data) in which participants do not deal with a particular task but rather engage in casual, open-ended small talk in a non-mobile setting (sitting around the dinner table, sitting on a sofa, etc.). This procedure was intended to ensure comparability among the collections.

While the conceptualisation presented in this section helps to identify core cases of RfCs, part of the second network meeting was concerned with discussing instances of RfCs that border on other practices and often do more than merely requesting confirmation. It was generally agreed that collection building should be inclusive rather than exclusive concerning these cases.

3.2. Coding scheme

Based on the collection of roughly 200 core cases of RfC sequences per language, network members would code each requesting turn and each responding turn according to a coding scheme which was developed and tested in data sessions and group discussions during the first two meetings.

This preliminary coding scheme is supposed to encompass a set of categories which can be of relevance for the cross-linguistic comparison of RfCs. While we do not have the space to introduce and discuss the individual codes here, we would like to present a general overview of the main categories which have proved to be of significance for a comparative approach to RfCs. With regard to the request for confirmation, we included the following categories:

- Speaker: Who utters the RfC?
- Anchor: Does the RfC relate to prior topic talk or does it introduce a new topic?
- Position of anchor: Does the RfC anchor on the preceding turn or is it found in the wider sequential context?
- Type of knowledge to be confirmed: Which type of knowledge (e.g. factual or inferential) has to be confirmed?
- Polarity: Is the RfC expressed in an utterance with positive or negative polarity?
- Type of negative polarity marking: Which strategies does the requester employ in order to mark the negative polarity of the confirmable?
- Syntactic complexity: How extended or complex is the syntactic format of the confirmable?
- Syntactic mark-up: Which syntactic form does the confirmable take?
- Interrogative marking: Is the confirmable (lexically, morphologically, syntactically, prosodically) marked as an interrogative?
- Modulation: Is the RfC modulated in terms of marking its epistemic stance?
- Inference marking: Is the RfC in some way marked as an inference from prior talk?
- Connectives: Does the RfC contain connectives which do not (primarily) index inference?
- Tag: Does the RfC contain a tag?
- Integration of tag: Is the tag prosodically integrated or not integrated in the RfC?
- Final intonation/prosody confirmable: What is the final intonation pattern of the (last) TCU expressing the RfC (possibly including prosodically integrated tags)?
- Final intonation tag: If the tag has its own contour and is realised as a separate intonation phrase, what is its final intonation pattern?
- Series of RfCs: Is the RfC part of a series of RfCs?
- Multimodal design: Does the requester use non-verbal resources to frame the RfC?
- Other actions: Which other actions does the RfC accomplish/border on?

Concerning the responses to RfCs, we decided on the following coding categories:

- Response: Is there a response?
- Multiple responses: Are there responses from different co-participants in a multi-party conversation?
- Verbal response: Is there a verbal response?
- Non-verbal response: Is there a non-verbal response?

- Prefacing elements: Does the response contain (a) prefacing element(s) such as change-of-state tokens or discourse markers?
- Response token: Does the response contain a response token?
- Cluster of response tokens: Is there more than one response token?
- Position of the first response token: Which position in the responding turn does the response token take?
- Repeat: Is the response formatted as a (partial) repeat of the RfC?
- Type of repetition: To what extent does the response repeat (elements of) the RfC?
- (Non)expanded response: Is the response non-expanded (e.g. response particle only) or expanded (turn continuation by the respondent after e.g. a response particle)?
- Confirmation: What does the response do? Does it clearly confirm or disconfirm? Or does it do neither, or qualify the assumptions made in the RfC?
- Overlap: Is the response realised in (partial) overlap with the preceding RfC?

For the next meeting, each member will refine the coding of the 200 instances of RfCs according to the aforementioned categories, enabling a quantitative comparison of the forms and functions of RfCs in the respective languages. The rationale behind building coded collections of equal size is twofold. On the one hand, the codings can be used as a basis for capturing quantitative differences and similarities across languages (Enfield et al. 2010). On the other hand, the coding scheme can be treated as a heuristic instrument which can be used to identify relevant instances for a more fine-grained sequential analysis and by which new research questions can be generated (Steensig/Heinemann 2015).

3.3. Possible research topics

The results of the coding procedure will form the basis of a general quantitative overview of the relative distribution of different strategies with which RfCs and their responses are accomplished in the languages of investigation. Moreover, during the second meeting, the network members also discussed possible additional research topics for which different sub-groups will conduct more qualitative analyses.

As the final selection of research foci depends (in part) on the results from the quantitative overview, we are not yet able to present a definitive research agenda here. However, we can briefly describe some of the ideas that came up during the workshop:

- Differentiating RfCs and related social actions: One of the network's objectives might be to develop criteria that enable us to distinguish between RfCs (narrow working definition) and related actions, such as newsmarks, requests for affirmation, requests for information, or assessments, and to be able to map out differences in their linguistic mark-up and their sequentiality in the network's languages of investigation.

- Non-expanded and expanded responses: Building on previous studies of responses to questions (cf. Hakulinen 2001; Keevalik 2010; Steensig/Heinemann 2013), another idea would be to compare the interactional import of non-expanded and expanded responsive turns. In a cross-linguistic approach, we could identify subclasses of RfCs which make expanded responses relevant, describe different ways of response expansion and determine what kinds of actions the varying response formats accomplish.
- Multimodal resources: In several of the languages investigated in the network, purely bodily responses are very rare. However, quite often, we find combinations of verbal and bodily means in responses to RfCs. These observations give rise to several questions. When are speakers licensed to use employ solely non-verbal responses? Which bodily resources do they mobilise in response to RfCs in the different languages under study? Are there language-specific differences regarding the timing of verbal and non-verbal resources? Can some of the response practices, e.g. 'nodding + minimal positive token' be viewed as "response packages" (Kärkkäinen/Thompson 2018) in the different languages?

In addition to these possible research topics, there are other challenges awaiting investigation. For instance, some network members report large quantitative differences in the amount of RfCs per conversation. In some interactions, RfCs are extremely frequent, in others they are almost entirely absent. The network's research could help to shed a light on the factors that promote the use of RfCs and to determine if there are certain activities or interactional projects across languages that particularly lend themselves to RfCs.

4. Outlook

The network "Interactional Linguistics" will organise two more meetings in the next two years. In the next meeting, which will take place in Freiburg from 23-25 September 2020, we will attempt to develop a comprehensive perspective on discourse particles in RfC sequences. Leelo Keevalik (University of Linköping, Sweden) and Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen (University of Helsinki, Finland) will participate as external experts in order to support the network in this endeavour. The final meeting is scheduled for September 2021 at the University of Münster. Mark Dingemanse (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, the Netherlands), and Jan Lindström (University of Helsinki, Finland) have agreed to join us for this workshop, which will be devoted to the cross-linguistic systematisation of particles in RfC sequences.

Moreover, the research carried out within the network is intended to result in several publications, among them a synoptic article that offers a quantitative overview of cross-linguistic similarities and differences regarding RfC sequences, a methodological paper that presents our coding scheme as a documentation of our approach and additional qualitative articles that look into the details of how RfC sequences work in different languages.

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