The pragmatics of answers

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1. Introduction

It is clear that question theory and answer theory are bound together inseparably. In almost all accounts, an attempt at defining what a question is, is determined by what an answer is. And what might qualify as an answer always determines what a question is.

A speaker performs an action that solicits a response: It may or may not succeed. If it succeeds, it means that it must meet criteria of appropriateness, cooperativeness, informativeness, usefulness (Kiefer 1988: 257). If it does not succeed, this is due to reasons such as the following: The recipients may not hear or understand the talk, they may ignore it and continue to be involved elsewhere or initiate other actions, they may hear and understand but withhold their responses. Then, the speaker may abandon the attempt to get a response, may infer the recipient’s response but let it remain unarticulated or may pursue an articulated response (Pomeranz 1984: 152).

Responses are therefore treated either as successful or unsuccessful. The purpose of this paper is to prove that all the above successful and unsuccessful attempts are different techniques of answering; they are different not only in relation to different situations of use (Athanasiadou 1991a: 107) but also due to the different types of questions asked (Athanasiadou paper submitted).

2. Basic assumptions

In my attempt to construct a model of the speakers' needs inherent in questioning (Athanasiadou, paper submitted), I based my argumentation on the assumption that there are three types of the category of questions of interrogative form, each one exhibiting a variety of subtypes. This can be seen in the table below:

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1 This is a revised edition of a paper presented at the ESSE/2 conference, 4-8 September 1993, Bordeaux, France.
questions requesting confirmation or disconfirmation of assumed information

questions requesting unknown information

(A) **Questions Requesting Information**

- exam qs
- cross-exam qs

(B) **Questions Requesting Action**

- rhetorical questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>polite requests</th>
<th>invitations</th>
<th>suggestions/advice</th>
<th>instructions/orders</th>
<th>offers of help</th>
</tr>
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</table>

(C) **Unanswerable Questions**

**Table 1:** Model of types and subtypes of the category of questions

Type (A) in bold has the privileged status of prototypicality: The typical instance of the category of questions is when the speaker’s purpose or need is to elicit an informative answer from the listener. The speaker’s need to be supplied with information serves as reference point, on the basis of which other types extend.

Type (B), stands for the whole category of questions requesting action. The two types (A) and (B) are linked in that they code an expectation of a verbal or a non-verbal response, even though type (B), which extends from type (A), may not be fully compatible with (A), i.e. it may not necessarily request a verbal response.

Further elaboration of the category is possible: Questions requesting unknown or appropriate information emerge as subtypes of type (A). From each one of them there is further branching: Questions requesting confirmation or disconfirmation emerge from questions requesting unknown information, while examination and cross-examination questions emerge from questions requesting appropriate information. What these different subtypes have in common is that they all request information on the basis of different states of knowledge. Polite requests, invitations, suggestions/advice, instructions/orders, offers of help emerge as subtypes of type (B).

The marginal character of rhetorical questions is not only confirmed by the fact that no response is expected (they are called unanswerable questions), but also that they do not extend from any of the other two types of the category, since very few of their characteristics are shared with types (A) and (B); they only partially share some
of the others’ features; the broken lines are meant to reflect exactly this. If questions requesting action are less central members in the total picture of questioning, rhetorical questions are quite peripheral members.

My study of different types of answers is based on the above model of the category of questions. Various types of answers will be analysed not only in dialogic couplets and their chaining, but rather in a sequence of interchanges. This wide framework enables me to see why there is so much interrupting, nonanswering, restarting, overlapping. Also, when more than two persons participate, questions and answers function as part of the questioners’ effort to orient their respondents to a particular point, while others are either prepared to enter the discussion with a laugh, or assure that they appreciate (approve or disapprove) what is said. I will thus attempt to determine the question-answer pair in a wide setting where sometimes more than one interactants are involved.

Assuming that questions are intimately connected with their answers, a fact that was stressed in almost all accounts of questions (Diller 1984: 11-31; Hintikka 1978: 279, 1983: 159; Stenström 1988: 307, to name a few), one faces either of the following situations:

(I)

question 1
question 2
question n

: answer X

(II)

answer 1
answer 2
answer n

: question

Table 2: Matching of questions and answers

A given answer can be evoked by a number of questions, as in situation (I), and a given question carries with it a varied range of answers, as in situation (II).

Following the above schemata things may be in a more or less straightforward way, but they may also be complicated, since we do not always have the straightforward matching of questions and answers independently of the fact that they may abound in one or in the other part. As my corpus analysis has shown even from the very beginning, we often have shifts from answers to replies and then from replies to responses. The nature thus of the respondents’ reaction varies and the wide framework with a sequence of interchanges among interactants helps me characterise this
relationship. But I will first attempt to define the three basic terms: response, reply and answer.

According to Goffman a response is an act, linguistic and otherwise with the following properties: It originates from an individual and is inspired by a prior speaker, it tells us something about the individual's position or alignment in what is occurring, it delimits what the "is occurring" is, establishing what it is the response refers to, it is given attention by others, i.e. it is assessed, appreciated, understood at the current moment (Goffman 1981: 35). A reply is one type of response, namely a response in which the alignment implied and the object to which reference is made are both conveyed through words or their substitutes. A reply is thus a linguistically correct reaction.

Dictionary entries (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1987) exhibit the following picture of these notions: A response is a reply (I asked him a question but he made/gave no response), an action done in answer (she opened the door in response to the knock), a positive or favourable reaction (he responded with a laugh). It is thus generally every possible reaction to a question with polite and favourable implications and/or implications of agreement.

A reply is something said, written or done as a way of answering (what did you say in reply to his suggestion?), (she replied that she couldn't come). It is a polite form of answering but without necessarily any favourable implications; a reply may be of an agreeing but also of a disagreeing nature. This latter character draws one more distinctive line between a reply and a response. A stronger form of this latter character of 'reply' is given by 'retort' and 'rejoin' which mean to answer showing disagreement (are you ready? why should I be ready when you're not? she retorted).

An answer is what is said, written or done as a result of someone asking a question (we must answer these questions as soon as possible). An answer is either of a neutral character or specifically used for the answering of questions; it thus contrasts with the polite reply and the general reaction of response.

The brief survey of the three terms shows that different types of answering are used due to different situations of use. This fact has led me to the hypothesis that different types of questioning have either responses or replies or answers as reactions. This hypothesis will be tested in corpus material taken from A Corpus of English Conversation by J. Svartvik and R. Quirk 1980. The major advantage of this corpus is natural language dialogues, since it comprises genuine face-to-face conversations by native British speakers. The study of randomly selected extracts will be analysed below.

3. Answers to questions of type A

3a. Answers to questions requesting unknown information

The extract below is a conversation between two speakers: A is a female academic of 45 years and B a male academic of 28 years.
Extract I (S.1.6)

(1) A: where do you come from?
(2) B: you mean where was I before?
(3) A: yes.
(4) B: history.
(5) A: [m]
(6) B: immediately before I was teaching in a school in Egypt.
(7) A: ooh...and you're an LSE product with statistics or something, are you?
(8) B: um, it's, well, I'm employed as a mathematician — statistics is what I should know and I don't know anything about it really.
(9) A: [laughs]
(10) B: Programming computers — that's what I do.
(11) A: yes, do you know M. Bowen over at the computer unit?
(12) B: [m]
(13) A: nice boy, sure he'd help you if you got stuck.
(14) B: [laughs]
(15) A: I've been a friend of M's mother.
(16) B: have you?
(17) A: oh I know M. when he was in knickerbockers.
(18) B: yes?
(19) A: oh, yes.
(20) B: that's interesting; how old is he? cos I found this very difficult to guess on looking at him.
(21) A: Malcolm?
(22) B: [m]
(23) A: oh dear, I think M. is 27, 28 perhaps a bit more, I don't know.

The first question is a question requesting unknown information which is not straightforwardly followed by the reply history. Another question-answer pair is embedded in between. This embedding is not at all infrequent in question-answer interactions; indeed there may be numerous levels of embedding, so that a question and its answer may be many utterances apart (Merritt 1976: 334). Insertion sequences of the above type, i.e. one question-answer pair embedded within another, (or even a statement and its acceptance embedded within a question-answer pair), are of great interest in their own right, since they structure considerable stretches of conversation: the specific embedded pair is meant to clarify what the question was about. The same exchange is met in (20)-(23). The only difference is that the question how old is he is given an account. The reply, on the other hand, is characterised by the use of qualifiers oh dear, I think, I don't know, which denote the speaker's uncertainty about providing the correct amount of information. The reply in (8) to the leading information question (7) is a dispreferred one: First of all there is a delay in answering right away, which is further strengthened by the use of two preface markers um, well and a hesitation
marker it's. Although a statement is provided *I'm employed as a mathematician*, this is followed by an account *statistics is what I should know and I don't know anything about it really*, i.e. a carefully formulated explanation for the provided statement. And when speaker A laughs, speaker B provides the reply in (10) of a direct, straightforward form. (16) and (18) are responses of interrogative structure meant to give signs of appreciation which are very brief indeed. Speaker B does not respond with a reply, but with an expression of his reaction or attitude to such a statement. In this way, the chain itself has a unitary, bounded character.

In the extract below:

Extract II (S.1.1)

1. A: But what functions do people variously feel, I mean, are you all members of a research project or just a group, I mean is Marilyn assistant, I mean is she a lecturer, or...
2. B: no, Marilyn does no teaching, I imagine she's a research assistant.
3. A: yeah.

speaker A, a male academic of 44 years, sets up an information question series which start from the whole: *People, all, members of a project*, the aim possibly being to seek an answer about one member of the set of questions, in this case a specific person taken as an example: *Marilyn*. Speaker B, also a male academic but of 60 years, is not meant to reply to the whole of what he has heard, for what form could his reply take? He thus disregards the first two introductory questions and decides to reply directly first to the last question *is she a lecturer?* paraphrasing it *she does no teaching*, and then refers to the question before last by repeating speaker's A words, his aim being to cover as much ground as possible giving an account of what speaker A sought.

Extract III (S.1.11)

1. A: and how long ago was that?
2. C: and that was the beginning of June.
3. A: that was the beginning of June?
4. B: was it really? as long...
5. A: was it really?
6. B: ...long ago as that?
7. C: yes...[m]... the 7th of June.
8. B: uh uh.
9. A: beginning of June, so July, August, that's two, so it's four or five.
10. B: well, she was three months then, five, six, seven, she's only got two months to go.
11. A: didn't she say before something about being a Christmas baby?
(12)  C: maybe.

In the above extract there are three speakers: A is a female housewife of 60 years old, mother of C and future mother-in-law of B. B is a male computer specialist of 30 years and C a female research worker of 20 years. During informal conversation, especially of a multiperson kind, we have shifts from replies to responses and vice versa. Speaker’s A information question is answered directly by speaker C. The answer provided by C is repeated by speaker A in the form of question. Speaker’s C answer gives rise to two consecutive questions by speakers B and A. Here, the same question was it really? is shared by two persons; speaker B steps in and finishes off as long ago as that? what speaker A has begun.

All this is done for the edification of speaker C, who in (7) after yes, [m], and a delay, provides the response the 7th of June. This response leaves matters in an unsatisfactory state; a turn thus is provided by the initial speaker in (9), who, talking to herself, thinking loudly, makes an assessment exhibiting a clear preference for agreement with speaker C. This is encouraged and further promoted by speaker B in (10). The three part interchange ends up with a mitigated response by speaker C in (12) due to the conducive question in (11). This biased question exerts an influence as to the content of the respondent’s response (Athanasiadou 1991c: 11). To this direction contributes the negative property didn’t she say...?

3b. Answers to questions requesting appropriate information

In the case of examination questions, typically taking place in classroom talk between teacher and students or in interviews between an academic and a student, the teacher’s or the academic’s purpose is to uncover that each and every student has learned about a given matter and to correct and amplify from this base. The consequence of this educational imperative is that classroom or interview interaction can come to be parcelled out into three-move interchanges, namely question, answer, evaluative comment on answer, as can be seen in the extract below:

Extract IV (S.3.5)

A: have you read very much Shakespeare?
B: [m], well...read I I study the plays, I’ve studied about [m] four or five [m].
A: those are for examination purposes.
B: well, also a little outside, yes, [mhmm].

A is a male academic of 40 years who interviews B a male prospective undergraduate. In classroom or in interview situations, a speaker obliges a number of persons to cite their answers to a problem or opinions on an issue. Here, the respondents' replies may
not be answers but responses that follow in sequence, resulting in an array for comparative criticism, as can be seen in the next extract with the same speakers of extract IV:

Extract V (S.3.5)

A: how many times is Hamlet alone with his mother can you remember?
B: [m]... I think it's just that one scene.
A: just that one scene, yes, and isn't that perhaps the reason why the ghost appears in that scene?
B: [mhm] perhaps... yeah.
A: well can you see what point there may be in that? come on you've learnt the part, I know.
A: yes [m] [laughs] I'm just turning it over you see.

From the analysis of extracts, the answers of questions requesting unknown or appropriate information can be either replies or responses in information questions and answers or responses in examination questions. It is thus evident that there is a range of potential answers to a question requesting information. In fact, there may be many responses to questions other than answers which nevertheless count as acceptable ones. In a question like:

(1) What does John do for a living? (Levinson 1983: 293, 307)

potential reactions can be statements of ignorance as I've no idea, I don't know, re-routes better ask Mary, refusals to provide an answer for numerous reasons, challenges or rejections of the presupposition or sincerity of the question he doesn't, partial answers oh this and that, or denials of the relevance of the question what's that got to do with it?

4. Answers to questions of type B

4a. Answers to questions requesting action

The expectation of a verbal or a non-verbal response is one of the parameters that gave me a further proof of the common link between the two types, i.e. of questions requesting information and questions requesting action. Questions requesting information are formulated to satisfy the questioner's need for a linguistic reaction, while questions requesting action are formulated to satisfy the questioner's need that someone does something. Thus, the questioner who expresses a request expects it to be met verbally or non-verbally.
Furthermore, a query concerning e.g. the time can be signalled by a phrase or by a gesture such as pointing to the other’s watch or one’s own bare wrist. The response to this query can be a verbal reply it’s 5 o’clock or a verbal substitute (five fingers held up). Both modes of response let the questioner know that his/her message has been correctly received and seen as proper. Also, words may not be addressed by words or their gestural substitute, but by a physical doing, a nonlinguistic deed which may comply with, for instance, a request. So, when in reaction to being asked for providing something the respondent passes it. Here, words may accompany the responsive action, as in the dialogue below, but not necessarily:

(2) A: what do you want mum?
   B: I’d love one of those pears.
   A: well, have a pear.
   (S.1.11)

Not all potential answers to a question are of equal standing: There is a ranking operating over the above alternatives such that there are responses that occur as simple turns:

(3) A: I wonder, is there any chance of seeing you tomorrow?
   B: Yeah.

The granting of the above request is done without any delay and with a minimal granting component Yeah. The rejection of a request such as the one below:

(4) A: I wonder, is there any chance of seeing you tomorrow?
   B: Um, I doubt it.
   A: Uhm huh.
   B: The reason is I’m seeing Elizabeth.
   (Levinson 1983: 308)

is delivered after some delay, by preface markers such as um, huh showing their dispreferred status, by a non-minimal turn I doubt it, instead of no, and finally followed by an account or reason for the difficulty of performing the request. So the same markers employed for the preferred and dispreferred questions requesting information are also used for questions requesting action.

Together with polite requests, I will discuss invitations and offers, but not suggestions/advice and instructions/orders, since the same principles and parameters seem to apply to all types of questions requesting action.

Invitations can be accepted:

(5) A: Why don’t you come up and see me sometimes?
   B: I would like so.
Here, speaker B gives a simple turn without delay and possibly in partial overlap with the question (Levinson 1983: 333 referring to Atkinson & Drew 1979: 58). When invitations receive refusals or declinations we have delays, the particle well, which standardly prefaces and marks dispreferreds, we have mitigated refusals: *I don’t think I can* and accounts or explanations for the dispreferreds.

Just as directives (polite requests, invitations, suggestions, instructions) aim at inducing actions from the addressed recipient, so we can anticipate a class of acts through which the speakers commit themselves to a course of action — namely the commissives which among others comprise offers. Commissives are similar to directives in that in the interchanges involving either, the speaker is willing to perform an action for the sake of the addressee (an addressee is invited, offered for help, advised or a solution is suggested to him). The difference is that in offers the request is to be performed by the speaker and not by the addressee. Thus, while invitations or polite requests direct the addressees to future actions, offers commit the speaker to a future course of action. In addition to that, words and actions interweave as can be seen in the table below with the two sets of examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directive</th>
<th>Commissive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Would you put your finger on the knot?</td>
<td>A: Would you like me to put my finger on the knot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: [Does so]</td>
<td>B: Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Thanks.</td>
<td>A: [Puts finger on knot]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: It’s okay.</td>
<td>B: Thanks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Directives vs Commissives*

The close relationship that characterises questions requesting information and questions requesting action is further proved by the identical way they are answered:

| A: Do you know the time? | A: Can you reach the salt? |
| B: Yes. | B: Yes. |
| A: What is it? | A: Would you? |
| B: Five o’clock. | B: Yes. (or: Gets it, gives it) |

*Table 4: Questions requesting information vs questions requesting action*

5. **Answers to questions of type C**

5a. *Unanswerable questions*

The third type of questions belongs to the so-called ‘unanswerable questions’ due to the fact that an answer or any other kind of response is not expected by the respondent but
it may be given by the speaker him/herself. An individual can, and not infrequently
does, respond to him/herself. Sometimes, this takes the form of an actual verbal reply
to the semantic content of his/her own utterances:

(6) Do you think they would do that for you? [pause] They certainly would not.

Self-responses are not uncommon — self-correction is actually a common form. A
rhetorical question that takes the question-asking form is not delivered with the intent
of eliciting a specific answer. So, listeners do not respond with a reply but with an
expression of their ‘reaction’ or attitude to such a statement or comment.

Extract VI (S.1.6)

A: oh dear, what was he — I can’t even remember what he was doing the day I
went to his lecture, but I remember that he brought out three things in Old
English, you classicists, you’ve probably not done Old English, have you? course
you haven’t.
A,B: [laugh]
B: laughs...[m]

The above extract exhibits very common features of informal interaction; the individual
is replaying a part of his/her past experience in narrative form. Such replays may be a
few sentences long, but sometimes considerably longer, a paragraph. The signs of
appreciation by A and B together and afterwards by B are responses for the whole
story and its telling.

It is evident that in some types of rhetorical questions, in which opinions,
impressions or comments are stated emphatically and in an exclamative way, no answer
is required. It might, however, be the case that speakers ask rhetorical questions to
seek the respondent’s agreement or confirmation:

(7) Isn’t that a nuisance?!
(8) I ask you, can such a man be innocent?

Given the above assessments expressing the speakers’ judgement, a second assessment
is sometimes due with a clear preference for agreement.

6. Concluding remarks

On the basis of the schematic model of the category of questions of interrogative form
with the three types (type A of questions requesting information, type B of questions
requesting action and type C of unanswerable questions), I have attempted to study the responses that accompany them, assuming that answers are intimately connected with their questions, my ultimate aim being to characterise the outcome of this connection.

The corpus analysis showed that answering a question differs according to types of questioning. This may be schematically seen in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requests for Action</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Replies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Qs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination Qs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses (Rhetorical)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Types of answers according to types of questions

Information questions receive both replies and/or responses; we have indeed shifts from replies to responses and vice versa. This is partly due to the fact that questions requesting information can be coded together with questions requesting action, since expecting a verbal response is a case of expecting a response in general. The reaction to examination questions can be both an answer and/or a response. In questions requesting action we have responses which can sometimes but not necessarily be accompanied by verbal replies. In rhetorical questions no response is required but even if in some exceptional cases it is, then this is for the sake of social relationships involved (agreement, confirmation) and not for the sake of providing information or action. A reply, thus, is the prototypical reaction to an information question, an answer is the prototypical reaction to an examination question, a response is the prototypical reaction to a request for action, and no reaction to a rhetorical question, as may be presented below:

Information Questions  Replies
Examination Questions  Answers
Requests for Action   Responses
Rhetorical Questions

Table 6: Overview of types of questions and types of answers

However, there is considerable intermingling: Information and examination questions
can be answered by responses and, in exceptional cases, the response of a request for action is accompanied by a verbal reply, while rhetorical questions, which are prototypically unanswerable, may receive a response.

This intermingling is by no means arbitrary. It may be due to the different situations of use, purposes of speaker and hearer, but also due to the dynamic tension that exists between the grammatical form and the communicative function of questions and answers.

It is obvious that although the general approach for the study of answers serves its purposes as a first synthesis, it is certainly to be deepened by further research on more corpus material that would reveal to what extent the form of the answer may help determine its function. However, I have attempted to show that responses, replies and answers are not very clearly delimited types and contain a number of well justified nuances within the conceptual category — the category of answers — they belong to.

References


Athanasiadou, Angeliki (paper submitted) The category of questions.


