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# Language and bodily resources: ‘Response packages’ in response to polar questions in English<sup>☆</sup>

Elise Kärkkäinen<sup>a</sup>, Sandra A. Thompson<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Oulu, Finland

<sup>b</sup> University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

## Abstract

In this paper, using English conversational data, we examine type-conforming responses (Raymond, 2003) to polar (yes/no) interrogatives, and find that such responses show recurrent patterns in terms of their linguistic and bodily production. Specifically we show that these type-conforming responses often occur in sync with bodily-visible movements to form units that we call ‘type-conforming response packages’, or ‘response packages’ for short.

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## 1. Introduction

Interactional Linguistics has witnessed a recent focus on ‘units’<sup>1</sup> and the role of embodied actions in the production of linguistic units.<sup>2</sup> Recently as well, there has been a growing interest in responsive actions.<sup>3</sup> Stimulated by research in these directions, in this paper, using English conversational data, we examine responses to polar (yes/no) questions, and find that such responses show recurrent patterns in terms of their linguistic and bodily production. Specifically we show that these responses tend to occur in sync with bodily-visible movements to form units that we will call ‘response packages’.

## 2. Previous research

### 2.1. Type conformity

Raymond (2003, 2013) has introduced the principle of ‘type conformity’ into the discussion of norms for responding to polar questions. Based on the fact that first pair parts formulated as *yes/no* questions in English make *yes* or *no* relevant in response, Raymond proposes that for English, a response to such a first pair part with either a *yes* or a *no* in initial position can be understood as a ‘type-conforming’ response. As Heritage and Raymond (2012: 183) put it, type-conforming

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [sathomps@linguistics.ucsb.edu](mailto:sathomps@linguistics.ucsb.edu) (S.A. Thompson).

<sup>1</sup> See especially Barth-Weingarten (2016), Ford (2004), and Szczeppek Reed and Raymond (2010).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Ford et al. (2012), Iwasaki (2011), Keevallik (2013), Lerner (2003), Li (2014a,b), Mondada (2007), Rauniomaa and Keisanen (2012).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Heinemann (2008), Keevallik (2013) Raymond (2003) and Thompson and Fox (2015).

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the preference claim, see Walker et al. (2011), who note that participants can find both negative and affirmative answers insufficient.

responses “accept the terms of the question unconditionally, exerting no agency with respect to those terms, and thus acquiescing in them.” [Heritage and Raymond \(2012:183\)](#) go on to say that type-conforming responses “tend to maximize the progressivity of the question–answer sequence toward sequence closure.” Responses departing from the constraints embodied in the grammatical form of such a question, then, are designated ‘nonconforming’.

[Raymond \(2003\)](#) argues that type-conforming responses, containing either a *yes* or a *no* or equivalent tokens such as *yeah*, *mhm*, *huh uh*, etc., are the preferred type of response in English (947), and are typically much more common than nonconforming responses (947).<sup>4</sup>

For our study of response packages, we decided to begin with type-conforming responses since being more frequent, there is reason to expect that they will be more likely to be ‘packaged’ than nonconforming responses. Pending further research, we remain agnostic as to the extent to which the response packaging we observe is tied only to type-conformity.

For this paper, we follow [Steensig and Heinemann \(2013\)](#) in distinguishing between simple type-conforming responses, and those which are followed by elaborations by the responder, referring to these four types as:

- y *yes* (single-token affirmative)
- y+ *yes* plus elaboration
- n *no* (single-token denial)
- n+ *no* plus elaboration

## 2.2. Bodily-visual research

[Goodwin \(1979, 1981\)](#) was arguably the first to advocate the holistic integration of the construction of actions, activities, and sense-making in understanding the organization of talk-in-interaction. Both subsequent research of Charles and M.H. Goodwin and other recent research has considerably furthered our understanding of the range of semiotic resources drawn on by participants in interaction.<sup>5</sup>

While [Raymond \(2003\)](#) does not consider visual phenomena in his study of responses to polar interrogatives, [Stivers \(2010: 2779\)](#), in her study of American English question-response sequences, notes that “as answers to questions, vocal and kinesic responses differ in their communicative import.” In about a third of her collection, she reports, both a vocal and a kinesic response was delivered, though very few kinesic responses were anything else than a head nod or a head shake. In contrast, as we shall see, in our data, about 2/3 of our type-conforming responses consist of both a “vocal” and a “kinesic” response, and we had very few responses that were simply “kinesic”. We note that the coding system used for the project reported in [Stivers, 2010](#) allowed for shrugs, pointing gestures, eye brow flashes and the like, but that these were only counted if they clearly provided either an answer or a non-answer response ([Stivers and Enfield, 2010: 2625](#)). Yet it is possible to view vocal and kinesic actions as *co-constructing* the responding action, and it is this type of phenomenon that we will be investigating in this paper.

Rossano's recent work on gaze in interaction suggests that gaze behavior figures prominently in the design of responses. [Rossano \(2012\)](#) notes that some activities require more sustained gaze by the recipient toward the speaker (e.g., tellings) or by the speaker toward the recipient (e.g., questions) than others, suggesting that this relative freedom, perhaps not surprisingly, depends on the gaze expectations associated with the ongoing course of action. He further argues that gaze in interaction is indeed not organized primarily by reference to turns-at-talk, but is rather primarily organized in relation to sequences of talk and the development of courses of action or ongoing interactional projects; our data are entirely consistent with his findings. We will present evidence that gaze behavior can be a significant component of a response package, organized by reference to the responding actions in their sequential contexts (sometimes within longer interactional projects), as well as to turns-at-talk. In what follows we will pay close attention not only to gaze but to all bodily-visual behavior in the production of responses to questions.

## 3. Data

Drawing on four video-recorded conversations, totalling 3¼ h, in North American English among friends and family members, we base this paper on a collection of 78 responses. We included in our collection every instance of type-conforming responses of all four types, *yes* and *no*, both simple and elaborated. We did not include nonconforming responses; comparing response packages between type-conforming and nonconforming responses must thus await further investigation.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of the preference claim, see [Walker et al. \(2011\)](#), who note that participants can find both negative and affirmative answers insufficient.

<sup>5</sup> See especially [Deppermann \(2013\)](#), [Fasulo and Monzoni \(2009\)](#), [Keisanen and Kärkkäinen \(2014\)](#), [Stivers and Sidnell \(2005\)](#), and [Streck et al. \(2011\)](#).

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