

# Information and affiliation: Disconfirming responses to polar questions and what follows in third position



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## Abstract

Polar questions offer a candidate proposition as a likely possibility, which can be disconfirmed in two different ways. They can be disconfirmed with what this paper terms 'negation' responses that merely negate the questioner's candidate proposition, or alternatively, with what this paper terms 'replacement' responses that assert a revised state of affairs in replacement of the questioner's proposition. This paper examines questioners' conduct in third position following these two forms of disconfirmation in Korean conversation. In about 53% of 70 sequences from audio-recordings of ordinary calls and calls to an airline service, questioners produce a question in alignment with the prior disconfirming response in third position. In airline service calls, questioners produce repetitive questions in third position following both negation and replacement responses. They enact registration, establishing correct information on record. In ordinary calls, by contrast, questioners may offer another, revised question following negation responses, whereas producing repetitive questions following replacement responses. They orient to (re-)establishing a common ground with respondents. This paper shows that the different ways in which third-position questions are used can be conditioned by the nature of interaction as well as the form of disconfirmation. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

A polar question, according to Bolinger (1978:104), sets up a "hypothesis for confirmation". It offers a candidate proposition as a likely possibility, incorporating a candidate answer that encodes the questioner's expectations concerning the matter at hand (Pomerantz, 1988). It formulates a most probable, ideal or legitimate scenario about the matter that is primarily within the respondent's epistemic domain, based on the questioner's knowledge and expectations (Pomerantz, 1988). A polar question thus proposes the questioner's candidate understanding and invites the respondent to affirm or reject that as a party with epistemic authority, while constraining the terms in which the matter at hand can be (dis)confirmed (Heritage and Raymond, 2012).

Overwhelmingly a polar question gets a confirming response (Stivers et al., 2009). According to Sacks (1987), confirmation is a preferred action. It is produced not only more frequently but also faster than disconfirmation (Sacks, 1987), as evidenced in a recent 10-language study (Stivers et al., 2009). This preference for confirmation is observed by questioners as well as by respondents who design their response so as to maximize elements of confirmation and avoid or minimize disconfirmation (for review, see Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013).

Questioners in particular, in constructing a polar question, design and propose their candidate proposition so as to permit the respondent to produce confirmation (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013; Raymond, 2003; Sacks, 1987). In order to

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permit confirmation, questioners have to take into account the respondent's situations, behaviors, etc., and offer a particular state of affairs that is appropriate for the respondent being addressed. They have to design their polar question for the respondent they target and enable the respondent's confirmation (see [Raymond, 2003](#)). Questioners can be held accountable for achieving such a question, particularly given the principle of recipient design ([Sacks and Schegloff, 1979](#)) along with the preference for agreement ([Sacks, 1987](#)).

Thus, when a disconfirming response to a polar question is due, it can not only require the respondent to provide a relevant elaboration and explain how the state of affairs is different, minimizing elements of disconfirmation. It can also indicate a 'failure' on the part of the questioner in achieving a recipient-designed question that permits confirmation. A disconfirming response can show that the questioner has failed to (correctly) take into account the respondent's situations and offer a most likely hypothesis that is appropriate for the respondent.

This paper examines two ways in which a polar question is disconfirmed and what questioners do in that context indicating their failure to propose a correct hypothesis. Consider extract 1 from a primary care visit, in which the doctor's candidate proposition is disconfirmed with a mere negation. The patient is a middle-aged woman with an adult daughter. At line 1, the doctor produces a polar question concerning the patient's marital status, incorporating 'married' as a candidate answer ([Pomerantz, 1988](#)). This shows the doctor's understanding that, for this middle-aged patient with an adult daughter, being married can be a most likely or desirable possibility ([Heritage, 2010](#)).

### (1) Midwest 3.4.6 (Heritage, 2010: 43)

1 DOC: -> Are you married?  
 2 (.)  
 3 PAT: -> No.  
 4 (.)  
 5 DOC: => You're divorced (°cur[rently, °)  
 6 PAT: [Mm hm,

At line 3, the patient disconfirms the doctor's hypothesis with "No" alone. This response, although type-conforming ([Raymond, 2003](#)), is in fact uninformative and uncooperative in that it does not deliver information for which the question was asked. The doctor's question is proposing one candidate marital status out of several options, such as divorced, widowed, etc., and the patient merely negates the single option proposed by the question without providing her marital status. This can make it necessary for the doctor to try again, e.g. by proposing another, revised hypothesis, especially given that the doctor has to get the information as part of a record keeping process. In third position at line 5, the doctor revises his initial hypothesis, proposing another marital status. The doctor renews the question to get the information, permitting confirmation at the second try.

Alternatively, a questioner's hypothesis can be disconfirmed by its replacement. In extract 2 from an opening of a school officer's call to the parent of a student, the respondent replaces the questioner's hypothesis with a new assertion. At line 3, the officer proposes the identity of the other party, inviting confirmation through the use of a rising intonation ([Schegloff, 1979](#)). In response, the mom produces a replacement of the identification proposed by the officer, displaying rejection of the officer's proposal (line 5).

### (2) Medeiros 1

1 Mom: Hello.  
 2 (0.5)  
 3 Off: -> Hello Mister Williams?  
 4 (0.8)  
 5 Mom: -> Uh: this is Missus Williams,  
 6 Off: => Uh Missus Williams I'm sorry.=This is Miss Medeiros from  
 7 Redondo High School calling?

Given the mom's replacement, the officer is not obligated to make another guess about the identity of the other party. At line 6, the officer instead enacts her registration of the new, replaced information by repeating the replacement ("Missus Williams"). Then the officer produces an apology, "I'm sorry", which shows an understanding that her 'wrong' guess about

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