

Strategies and Counterstrategies in the Use of Yes-No Questions in Discourse

Author(s): Adrian Bennett

Proceedings of the 2nd Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1976), pp. 36-47

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

STRATEGIES AND COUNTERSTRATEGIES
IN THE USE OF YES-NO QUESTIONS IN DISCOURSE¹

Adrian Bennett

University of California, Berkeley

Native speakers of English overhearing the following two-speaker exchange would probably not have too much trouble getting a general idea of what is going on, even though they might not be able to contextualize some of the referential content of the exchange:

- (1) A: Do you do you think that you have a right to stop me from walking into the Fairmont hotel to listen to Dean Rusk? [Do you?]²
 B: [I have never/ I have never stopped you from walking into the hotel/
 A: [But this is what those/ people wanted to do that night.

I want to suggest that, despite the apparent ordinariness of this exchange, it can be made to appear upon analysis to consist of a number of peculiarities and that if we can make ourselves aware of these peculiarities we can gain some insight not only into what the participants are doing but also into how they manage to accomplish it.

This sort of analysis might be seen as a way of making the ordinary seem strange so that we can understand how it is put together.³ There are a variety of ways we might go about doing this. For example, we might look at the exchange in (1) from a syntactic point of view, following the lead of the very valuable work of Sacks, Schegloff and their associates on sequencing in conversation, or of work by Labov on the taxonomic analyses of recognizable discourse types such as ritual insults or narrative. If we took this approach we might notice that in (1) we have an ABA exchange in which A asks a question, B replies, and A takes the floor again to make an assertion. We could see this as three separate but related events and note that, especially as regards the first two events, we have a type of constructional unit in which given the occurrence of event A it is a safe bet that event B will follow. Sacks and Schegloff (1974) have characterized a large class of such discourse units under the rubric of "adjacency pairs," and they have given this unit a specific and perhaps too restrictive definition, noting that adjacency pairs have these three features: "(1) two utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speakers producing each utterance." Without quibbling over the details of this definition, it should be noted for the purposes of our

analysis of (1) that one of the important consequences for speakers of organizational units like adjacency pairs is that given the performance of a 'first pair part' by one speaker, the failure of a second speaker to produce a 'second pair part' is a noticeable absence in a conversation, and being noticeable can have consequences. Labov (1972) has expressed this notion of consequence in discourse very succinctly with regard to the pair question-answer: "If we consider the compelling character of all questions. . . it is clear that all requests, even the most mitigated, are to be heard against an unrealized possibility of negative consequences if they are not answered."

I want to suggest that, while we will need to call repeatedly on the insights of these workers in our analysis, we will not want to follow their approach exactly because we want to know more than the empirically observable recurrent patterns of discourse; we want to know how they get there in the first place and how they are made use of by conversationalists. The model of the actor implicit in the work of these scholars inclines toward a mechanistic view of speakers and hearers as relatively inflexible beings which may be more rigidly constrained by algorithmic rule-systems than perhaps real people actually are. They have not been able to present a fully convincing characterization of the decision-making processes actors use to construct meaningful exchanges nor of the relatively high degree of flexibility involved in these processes in everyday conversation.

Another approach we might follow and which we will certainly need to draw insights from is the work in the ethnography of communication. Although research in this field has not concentrated much on everyday conversation but has focused primarily on relatively formal exchanges in exotic cultures or subcultures, in an attempt to formulate the cultural knowledge required of participants in particular kinds of communicational events, such as the Japanese Rakugo performance (Sanchez:1975), entering a Yakan house (Frake:1975) or the obtaining and use of drugs by heroin addicts (Agar:1975), it is important to recognize that the most ordinary conversational exchanges could not take place at all without the establishment and use of a wealth of cultural background knowledge. However, once given a characterization of this knowledge, we still need to know how conversationalists make use of it to put a discourse together into a meaningful whole. For our purposes here we do not need an exhaustive characterization of the shared cultural understandings of the two speakers in (1), but will need to know only the following: This exchange is taken from a larger piece of talk which was a panel discussion conducted on public television in a major American city between several representatives of opposing socio-political groups. The discussion is about race relations and the character of the discussion is one of informal debate in which a controversy develops between two of the participants, A and B, of which the exchange in (1) forms a

small part. Both A and B were well-known public figures at the time and their respective positions on race relations would have been part of informed public knowledge. The immediately preceding discussion has focused on demonstrators (i.e., "those people") who threw bags of blood at people going into a hotel to listen to a speech by Dean Rusk. Prior to the exchange in (1) speaker B has criticized the police for beating up and arresting some of these demonstrators.

The approach to the analysis of (1) that I want to take can be seen as an exercise in the reconstruction of what Schutz (1970) called the 'in-order-to' motives of actors, meaning by this "the state of affairs, the end, which the action has been undertaken to bring about." That is, instead of looking at discourse either as constructed of repeated surface patterns such as adjacency pairs, or as exchange events taking place against a formal set of culturally specific rules, I want to make the assumption that discourse is composed of more or less reasonable and reasoned acts which actors perform on their way toward achieving particular goals. I use the term 'reasonable' here not as any kind of claim for a rationalistic epistemology but merely to characterize what I take to be a fundamental working assumption of conversationalists; that is, that people say and do things in order to accomplish various communicational goals or acts. Given this assumption actors then go on to make inferences about what others are trying to accomplish. There is a kind of circular, self-contained system in this process such that we can often say either "A performed act X because he wanted to accomplish goal Y" or "A has accomplished goal Y which explains why he did act X." These inferences are based not only on what speakers say but on how they say it. Where choices are considered to be available for saying the same thing in terms of both propositional content and primary speech act (Searle: 1975), it can at least sometimes be presumed that particular choices senders make signify something about their intentions or in-order-to motives. As speakers we project plans across slices of discourse and as hearers we try to infer ahead of time what those plans are. Furthermore, in some cases these plans are designed to be transparent to hearers, while in other cases at least parts of them are designed to be opaque. In exchange (1) we will find both opaque and transparent plans working together simultaneously, and also that some possibly universal principles of discourse are made use of to carry out these plans.

To begin with I will attempt a possible reconstruction of what speakers A and B are trying to do in (1) and then go on to see if this reconstruction makes sense in terms of what we can actually observe there.

I see A as trying to construct a successful argument against B. Part of A's strategy is to avoid making this intention explicit. B tries to countermove against that argument, not by presenting either an answer to it or a counterargument against it, but by

attempting to prevent that argument from being brought to completion in the first place. Furthermore, B's attempt to countermove involves treating that argument as a non-argument. Then, following B's countermove A comes back with an effort to complete his argument anyway, and not by moving against B's countermove in any direct way, but by in turn treating it as if it were not a countermove at all. That is, A treats B's countermove neither as a failed attempt nor as irrelevant, but as if it were in fact a 'bad' move that causes B to fall into the trap A had set.

Accepting for the purposes of our (tentative) analysis that this characterization is more or less correct, let us go through exchange (1) and look at the ways language is being used and see if these can be made consistent with our reconstruction of the underlying action.

First note that A begins with a yes-no question that asks B to give an opinion. B gives a reply but notice that it is not exactly a reply to the question asked. Instead, by virtue of the fact that answers to yes-no questions--at least in the prototypical case--either affirm or deny the propositional content of the question, and by virtue of the operation of the Gricean maxim of relevance, B's answer pragmatically presupposes that a different question has been asked that might go something like,

(2) A: Have you ever stopped me from walking into the hotel?

Finally, notice that A does not take exception to this answer by calling attention to its irrelevance but treats it instead as a 'no' answer. We can tell this at least partly by his use of the connective 'but' and by his use of 'this' as a discourse deictic. The word 'this' in A's comeback, if his utterance is assumed to be relevant, necessarily refers to the proposition "X PREVENT Y from ENTERING HOTEL Z." The use of 'but' makes sense here if we assume that A takes B's answer to be a negation of the proposition. If B's answer were taken to be a yes, the use of 'but' here would be distinctly odd, as we can see in the following exchange:

(3) X: Do you think you have the right to block my driveway?
 Y: Yes, I do.
 X: ?But you're blocking my driveway!

The important thing to notice in (1) is that, despite the literal irrelevance of B's reply, A takes no remedial action, such as re-doing his question or pointing out that B's answer is not to the point. This fact alone might lead us to suspect that as far as A is concerned B's answer is good enough for the purposes of the moment.

Given these few observations about the language use in (1)

can we connect them meaningfully to our reconstruction of the actions going on in (1)? This will involve asking questions like the following: If A wants to make an argument why doesn't he just assert his beliefs and give his reasons for believing them? Why does he go to the trouble of asking B a question? Furthermore why does he ask him a question, that given that A knows B's political position, A can probably predict the answer to? We can also ask why B doesn't answer the question directly but instead answers a different question. And finally we can ask why A in his comeback to B's reply doesn't do some kind of repair work.

We can begin to answer some of these questions by looking first at the question A asks. If A is in a position of wanting to make a certain kind of argument his use of a yes-no question can be seen to have certain advantages. First, as we noted above in our quote from Labov, the asking of a question creates the expectation of a reply such that not replying may be seen to have consequences. Secondly a yes-no question puts fairly strong constraints on the acceptability of the answer. In general an appropriate answer to a yes-no question either explicitly affirms or denies the propositional content of the question. This fact, plus the Gricean maxim of relevance places fairly strong limitations on what constitutes relevant propositional content in the reply. That is, the answerer cannot disregard the question and he cannot just talk about anything either. The answerer is thus constrained to commit himself. Compare this to a WH-question of similar propositional content:

- (4) A: What is your opinion about your right to prevent me from going into a hotel to listen to Dean Rusk?

This type of question does not put the answerer into quite such a tight corner. He need not commit himself to the question of whether he has a right or not. In contrast, a yes or no answer to a yes-no question commits the answerer to a belief in the truth or falsity of the propositional content of the question by virtue of the sincerity condition on the type of speech act Searle (1975) calls 'representatives'. This condition is that the speaker of an assertion commits himself to a belief in the truth of that assertion.

A third advantage of using a yes-no question in this context is that questions not only can be used to select a next speaker but have the further property that upon completion of a reply the rights to take the floor again can legitimately go back to the asker of the question and are even likely to do so. Thus, A can expect that if B gives a straight answer to his question, he, A, will get a turn to speak upon completion of the reply. If A wants to make a further point this has an obvious advantage (v.Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson:1974).

Thus from the point of view of making an argument, especial-

ly one in which you wish to defeat an opponent, the use of yes-no questions is particularly valuable because they can put pressure on your opponent to commit himself to a position. Given this commitment you can then easily make use of it as the antecedent to a conclusion which you can then draw. Since the answerer has already affirmed his belief in the truth of this antecedent, he cannot very easily deny the consequent, assuming you have obeyed the rules of logical inference.

I believe that this use of yes-no questions is simply one particular application of the general property of such questions that they can be used--and ordinarily are used--to get a hearer to commit himself to the truth of some assertion. There are thus a number of related uses for them in discourse which can be seen from the following examples:

- (5) (a) Focussing the hearer's attention; helps speaker to determine how to parcel information into given and new, topic and comment, etc.:

Do you remember that woman we were talking about last night?

- (b) Preliminary to a request; helps speaker to make sure his request will get him what he wants:

X: Did you get paid yet?

Y: Yeah.

X: Then how about paying me back the money you owe me.

- (c) As a polite request; the speaker can avoid imposing on the hearer by presupposing he is willing to do X:

Do you have the time?

- (d) Preliminary to a suggestion; helps speaker to determine whether the suggestion will be in order:

X: Do you like Truffaut's movies?

Y: Yeah.

X: Then lets go see Adele H.

- (e) Preliminary to an offer:

Do you need any help?

There are of course other cases of this type, but the main point is that yes-no questions get hearers to make a commitment which then gives the speaker something concrete to go on in carrying a plan to a successful conclusion.

We can now turn to B's reply and again ask why he gives the kind of answer he does. As regards this there are at least three assumptions we might make. First we might assume there is a misunderstanding; either B thinks he is answering the question presupposed by his answer, or he knows he didn't quite catch the question but just wants to give some sort of answer, etc. Second

we could assume that B intends his answer to be construed as an implicit negative answer to the question asked by way of implicatures based on Gricean maxims of relevance. In this case we would say that he intends to convey this meaning by getting A to recognize this intent. There are reasons in the rest of the conversation from which (1) is excerpted for not supposing either of these alternatives, but I will not take space to go into them here. Instead I suggest a third possibility, and that is that B has recognized A's unavowed attempt to lay a trap for him and seeks to prevent this. In order to make this assumption, B has to further assume that A is (1) not just asking for information, and (2) is not trying to convey an implicature by getting B to recognize certain intentions of A to do so. B will have to assume instead that (3) A is using language strategically. This assumption is I believe based on a rhetorical principle of language in discourse which I will return to in a moment

If B's reply is a counterstrategy to A's strategy then we can see it has certain advantages. B is in a position of obligation; he must say something. A failure to reply in this debate situation may give the audience the impression he is inept or is hiding something. By giving an answer that presupposes a different but related question has been asked, he manages to do two things: (1) he avoids giving a yes or no reply to the actual question asked, (2) he gives an answer which is at least topically relevant and wards off the charge of evading the issue.

There are other strategies that B might have used to serve these purposes, some of which have been investigated by Weiser (1975). For example he might have said one of the following:

- (6) (a) Why do you ask?
- (b) I won't answer that, you're just trying to trap me.
- (c) Oh gee, I left my keys in the car.
- (d) Wait a minute, I think the moderator is trying to tell us something.

B could also give a false answer, such as saying yes when he really believed no. This could be taken as either a joke or as serious. If a joke then B could be charged with being unserious about serious issues. If serious he could be accused of being against democratic principles of free speech. The replies in (6) also have serious drawbacks in this context of **informal** debate. (6a) would allow A to say "I'm just trying to get your views clear" and then to repeat the question. (6b) leaves B open to the challenge that he is afraid to engage in open discussion. If B uses (6c) he will seem particularly inept as a political leader. (6d) might get him off the hook more gracefully but it has three disadvantages, one being that the moderator will say "No, go ahead"; a second being that the moderator will talk and then reselect A giving him a chance to pursue his ques-

tion; a third being that the moderator will talk and then select some other panel member, neither A nor B, thus not giving B a chance to make any further points of his own.

There is another strategy B might use which happens to be fairly common and that is to hedge his answer in some way and use this as a wedge to make a point which has the effect of disarming A's conclusion before it is made:

- (7) B: No, but it's not a question of whether I have the right or not; the question is whether people like Dean Rusk should be in power at all.

This last strategy might have been effective because it might have turned the argument around to B's advantage. It has the disadvantage of giving A the opportunity to parry it by saying something like, "No we're talking about rights of free speech, not whether Dean Rusk is or is not a good leader." (This in fact does happen earlier in the conversation before the exchange in (1) occurs).

None of these strategies is airtight, and that includes the strategy B actually does use. This leads us to the final utterance in (1), A's comeback to B's reply, which, as we have seen, treats B's reply as if it were a negative answer to the question A had originally asked. Why doesn't A take explicit notice of the skewed quality of B's reply and come back with something like, "No I'm asking about what you think your rights are, not about what you have or have not done in the past " I suggest that A doesn't do this because he is less concerned with the clear and efficient exchange of information than with drawing the conclusion of his argument. That his comeback overlaps B's reply might lead us to suspect this in fact.

In order to treat B's reply as constituting a negative answer A must treat it as the second of the three alternative ways we mentioned earlier of treating this reply; i.e., as being meant to convey an implicature by virtue of getting A to recognize this intention. This involves the further assumption that B's reply actually does accord with the Gricean principles of cooperation and relevance. The point here is not whether B's reply was meant to be taken this way but that A goes on to act as if this were the case, and he does this in order to serve his own purpose which is to defeat B in a debate. Thus A's argument can be roughly sketched along these lines:

- (7) (a) You have said that you do not think you have the right to prevent me from doing X.
 (b) Therefore you will think it wrong for others to do this (Given certain assumptions that civil rights are equally true for all members).
 (c) But you have implied earlier that you support 'those people' who attempted to do just that.
 (d) (b) and (c) cannot both be true in the same world

at the same time.

- (e) Therefore you contradict yourself.
- (f) If you contradict yourself you are wrong, etc.

Notice that in his comeback to B's reply A does not make this argument explicit. He especially does not directly accuse B of being self-contradictory. This has the advantage in the context of this kind of informal political debate of letting the audience draw this conclusion for themselves. Furthermore, if A had made such an explicit accusation he would leave himself open to the charge that he was less interested in discussing issues than in discrediting B.

We can now return to a question raised earlier, which was: given that B sees A as setting a trap when he asks his question, what enables him to make this recognition? We can note in passing that a variety of factors go into such recognitions and that they range across all channels of communication as well as involving making use of any other information that might seem relevant at the time, derived either from general cultural knowledge or from the rest of the discourse. I want to pass over these however to suggest an operating principle that may have universal or at least widespread application in the processing of language in discourse. I will refer to this principle as the Principle of Expressivity. I mean this to be not so much a rule of conversation that should be added to Grice's maxims, but as a rhetorical principle which can be derived from one of the four 'charges' that Slobin (1975) places on any natural language, namely that a natural language should be clear, processible, simple and expressive. The last of these he divides into two categories, semantic and rhetorical, and it is the charge to be 'rhetorically expressive' that is particularly relevant here. However, instead of seeing this charge as a requirement for a complete natural language, I want to present it as an assumption that speakers can make use of in both the construction and interpretation of discourse. I will give it a tentative and informal characterization as,

THE PRINCIPLE OF EXPRESSIVITY: Assume that language with its accompanying paralinguistic and nonverbal channels of communication has the capacity to enable speakers to perform any communicational act they may want to perform.

I call this a rhetorical principle for two reasons. First, it has a speaker corollary that, like the much-maligned mythical beast the High School English Teacher, tells language users what to do:

SPEAKER COROLLARY: Be as effective in your use of communicational channels as you need to be or want to be.

Second, the Principle of Expressivity does not seem to operate in quite the same way as the Gricean rules of conversation. In fact it is more akin to those metarules in board games like chess

that tell players they are supposed to be as effective as they can be. But there is something like a Hearer Corollary that nevertheless can enter into the decision-making process hearers are involved in when making inferences about what speakers are trying to do:

HEARER COROLLARY: Assume that speakers are being as effective as they need to be or can be.

Turning now to B's reply in (1) I would argue that the Hearer Corollary enables B to understand A's question as being 'more than it seems', and conversely for B to assume that A's question is not more than it seems would require B to 'set aside' the Hearer Corollary as not relevant for this exchange and to assume that A is not being as effective a language user as he could be. If he made this latter assumption, B might then conclude that A was just asking for information and we would expect B--if he understood the question--to give a relatively straight answer, which he of course does not do. Furthermore the Gricean maxims won't necessarily lead B to make the assumption that A has something up his sleeve because A is not trying to get B to recognize this intention but is in fact masking it.

This argument has been theoretical in two ways. First, I do not want to claim that the particular imputations about A's and B's in-order-to motives are facts which I have 'proven'. I have merely tried to demonstrate a method of analysis whereby, trying to make the ordinary seem strange, we make a reasoned attempt to reconstruct the motives of actors, 'reasoned' insofar as hypotheses are tested against observable communicational phenomena in a systematic way. There is no ultimate method that will without fail tell us in any absolute sense what actors are 'doing' in any given exchange. Once an analysis has been done it should be tested against judgments of what actors themselves see each other as doing. Ways of doing this have been suggested in Gumperz (1975) and Erickson (1975). Secondly, this discussion has been theoretical in that it tries to show what assumptions people operate on when they try to make a skilled use of language to accomplish certain goals. Some of these assumptions might be candidates for universal principles operating in language use, such as certain aspects of Searle's speech act theory, particularly the sincerity condition on speech acts, Grice's rules of conversation, especially the maxim of relevance and the rules for implicature, certain principles of sequencing and turn-taking, such as those suggested by Sacks, Schegloff, et al, and perhaps some rhetorical principles like the Principle of Expressivity.

Finally, I want to emphasize that, as Weiser (1975) has usefully pointed out, we can look at communication as being accomplished in two ways, one involving what she calls 'communicative devices' whereby speakers intend utterances to accomplish purposes by means of getting the hearer to recognize this intention, and the other which she calls 'conversational strategems'

whereby speakers intend utterances to accomplish purposes by some other means than by getting the hearer to recognize this intention. We can make two extensions of this distinction. First, we can extend the accomplishing of purposes beyond the utterance level to include all channels of communication including the nonverbal. A rich understanding of what goes on in communication can only be accomplished by looking at both verbal and nonverbal levels together. Second we need to realize that the two ways of accomplishing purposes Weiser has delineated should not be seen as mutually exclusive alternatives for doing the same things, but as two melodic lines that run through communicational exchanges simultaneously working in counterpoint to each other. That is, the two means of accomplishing ends function reflexively in the sense that communicative devices make possible the use of conversational strategems, and conversational strategems constrain the interpretation or decisions speakers and hearers make about what communicational devices are in effect. There has been an understandable emphasis in linguistics on the study of communicational devices, but I would suggest that in so doing we are not only missing half of what is going on in the use of language in its practical applications, but that without understanding both we cannot fully understand either one.

FOOTNOTES

1. This work, especially with respect to suggestions for a theory of discourse based on an interactional model, owes much to John Gumperz, whose patient teaching over the past few years has provided me much illumination and encouragement.
2. Connected slash marks in (1) = overlapping talk.
3. I owe this characterization of interactional analysis to Fred Erickson (personal communication).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agar, Michael. 1973. *Ripping and Running*. Seminar Press.
- Erickson, Frederick. 1975. Gatekeeping and the melting pot: interaction in counseling encounters. *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 45, no. 1 (Feb. 1975), 44-70.
- Frake, Charles. 1975. How to enter a Yakan house. In M. Sanches and B. Blount (eds.) *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use*. Academic Press.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In Cole and Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*. Academic press.
- Gumperz, J. J. 1975. Language, communication and public negotiation. To appear in Sanday, P. (ed.) *Anthropology and the Public Interest: Fieldwork and Theory*. Academic press.
- Labov, William. 1972. Ritual insults. In *Language in the Inner City*. U. of Pennsylvania.

- Sacks, H. and E. Schegloff. 1974. Opening up closings. In R. Turner (ed.) *Ethnomethodology*. Penguin.
- Sacks, H., E. Schegloff, and G. Jefferson. 1974. A Simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation. *Language*, Vo. 50, no. 4, 696-735.
- Sanches, M. 1975. Falling words: an analysis of a Japanese Rakugo performance. In Blount and Sanches (eds.) *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use*. Academic Press.
- Schutz, Alfred. 1970. *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*. U. of Chicago.
- Searle, J. 1975. Indirect speech acts. In Cole and Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics III: Speech Acts*. Academic Press.
- Searle, J. 1975. A Classification of illocutionary acts. Ms
- Slobin, Dan I. 1975. Language change in childhood and in history. Working Paper no. 41, Language Behavior Research Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley.
- Weiser, Ann. 1975. How to not answer a question: purposive devices in conversational strategy. In *CLS 11*, 649-660.