

“‘Why was I late?’ ‘I don’t know.’” Tojolab’al Answers to Questions in Context

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1. Introduction

Dialogue has a particular urgency in Tojolab’al Mayan discourse. Responses are an important part of conversation, conversational narratives, narrative recitations, and ritual speech. Even in reported speech, conversational contributions from both parties will be heard in the quotation (Brody 2000a, b). In this paper I examine questions and answers in interactive discourse context, with the goal of trying to understand the scope of the Tojolab’al dialogical imperative with regard to questions and answers. I distinguish here between a response, which is any reply from the interlocutor, and an answer, which is a response that in some way addresses the question.¹ The questions and answers are drawn from a corpus of transcribed spoken conversations, narratives, tales, enacted rituals, and radio broadcasts; I include examples from both direct speech and reported speech. While I have taken care to provide here representative examples, I have not made any statistical analysis of the data. I have examined all of these questions in discourse context in relation to the presence or absence of an answer, and the nature and placement of the replies.

2. Questions and Politeness Theory

Question and answer is a sequence that carries special contextual, pragmatic, and cultural burdens. Grammatical and pragmatic approaches in the literature focus primarily on questions only. Questions and answers are considered together mainly with regard to language acquisition, classroom interaction, pragmatic appropriateness, in reference to specifically yes/no questions, or as conversation analytic adjacency sequences (Lakoff 1973; Pope 1976; Keenan, Schieffelin, and Platt 1978; Schegloff 1984, Jones 1999).²

¹ I follow Lakoff’s (1973) distinction between answer and response.

² Jones’ (1999) focus on answers in Welsh is exceptional. More typically, in over 240 pages on questions in seven languages, only 17 pages include mention or discussion of answers (Chisolm 1984).

Questions, responses, and answers have particular linguistic forms and culturally peculiar uses.

In Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (PT), questions may represent an imposition, or threat, by the questioner to the negative face of the interrogated, while putting her/his own positive face at possible risk of threat (Brown and Levinson 1987).³ Brown and Levinson catalogue the range of strategies speakers use to minimize impositions to face. For example, a question may be mitigated in its negative face threat through formulations of conventional indirection, or the use of expressions of deference, negatives, or hedges; an unmodified question is bolder. Brown and Levinson note (and have been critiqued for insufficiently considering [Keenan 1976]) that the precise nature of what constitutes an imposition is culturally defined. While PT is framed as focusing on the dyadic, the perspective taken is invariably that of the speaker who asks questions. Here I want to stress both roles, in that "questioning binds two people in *immediate* reciprocity" (Goody 1978: 23; emphasis hers). In dialogue, both interlocutors' contributions are important.

3. Tojolab'al Questions and Answers

Tojolab'al speakers ask questions in at least three ways. First, yes/no questions are formed using the dubitative evidential particle =ma 'dubitative, Y/N question marker', which is typically cliticized to the first non-fronted sentence element. The dubitative is at one end of a scale of evidential clitic particles that register the speaker's stance with regard to the truthfulness (Brody 1987, 2002). The second type of question consists of those constructed with question words: e.g., machunk'a 'who?'; jasunk'a 'what?'; b'aya 'where?' jas ora 'when?'; jas yuj 'why?'; jastal 'how?'; jaye 'how many?' (the forms here are given in their most elaborated variant, and many have several commonly used shorter versions, which also function as complementizers in complex sentences). I will give less attention here to the third category, where utterances in the form of statements can be understood in context as questions. Interactive discourse includes sentence fragments and interjections that are understood as questions in context. Questions with =ma and statement or fragment questions often have rising or other distinctive intonation. There are several ways that questions can undergo refinements to increase politeness in Tojolab'al; these include the use of respectful address terms, diminutives, negatives, interjections, first person inclusive plural, and substitution of first person inclusive plural for second person.

To the extent that I am aware, in most contexts of Tojolab'al interaction, social intimates, age-mates, and elders speaking to youths have legitimate access to more direct questioning than do strangers or youth speaking to adults, although elders may be more generally polite in their speech than youth. In-group members of family, religious sect, village, and neighborhood

³ "Negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others. Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62).

may have greater license to ask and may receive more direct answers, although still subject to age hierarchies. However, although almost all speech receives response, not all questions receive answers, or at least not immediately, and not all answers are informative.

In small communities such as villages or ethnic neighborhoods, any new information is newsworthy and privacy is at a premium. Haviland (1988) has described a situation for Tzotzil speakers in a village setting of general reluctance to answer any direct questions in order to safeguard personal privacy. The Tojolab'al imperative toward dialogue overcomes, at least in some contexts, the Mayan villager need for privacy characterized by Haviland; most questions in the corpus receive answers. The conversational segment in (1) demonstrates Tojolab'al speakers' strong proclivity toward dialogue, particularly the inclusion of responses in reported speech.

- (1) a. H: pero 0-j-ta`-aw-0 jun winik.⁴
 But COM-1E-meet-TVM-3A one man
 'But I met a man.'
- b. J: a.
 'Ah.'
- c. [self-reported Q] H: este ti 0-j-job'-ow-0--y-i`-0=a
 um then COM-1E-ask-TVM-3A--3E-take-3A=TERM

 "waj-0=ta=**ma** ja aktobus=i?"
 go-3A=already=DUB DET bus=NPT
 'Um, I asked him, "Did the bus go already?"'
- d. J: a.
 'Ah.'

⁴**Transcription conventions:** [-] morpheme break; [=] clitic attachment; [- -] compound; [-0] zero morpheme, [?] question, [.] sentence; [" "] reported speech; [**bold**] question words, dubitative particle; [*italics*] politeness markers; 1, 2, 3A first, second, third person absolutive; 1, 2, 3E first, second, third person ergative; CL cleft; COM completive aspect; COND conditional; DET determiner; DUB dubitative; EMP emphatic; FUT future; IN inclusive; INC incompletive aspect; IVM intransitive verb marker; LOC locative; MID middle voice; NPT noun phrase terminal; PAS passive; PL plural; PROG progressive; RELN relational noun; SBJ subjunctive; TERM clause terminal; TVM transitive verb marker. **Annotation conventions:** [Q] question; [A] answer; [R] response; [(...)] reported speech. **Sequencing convention:** all consecutive lettered examples are from sequential speech.

- e. [reported **A**] H: "0-waj-0=ta, wa`xa wa`xa t'an 0-el-i-0"
 COM-go-3A =already just just a.little COM-leave-IVM-3A
- x-chi-0.
 INC-say-3A
 "It's gone already, it went just a little while ago," he [the man] said.'
- f. J: a.
 'Ah.'
- g. H: "ay fwe la chingada.
 "Oh, the fucker went.'
- h. [self- reported **Q**] **jas lom** 0-j-k'ulan-0- -atrasar b'a" la-chi-iy-on.
 what reason COM-1E-do-3A- - be.late anyway COM-say-IVM-1A
 'Why was I late anyway?' I said.'
- i. J: a.
 'Ah.'
- j. [reported **R** and **Q**] H: "pwes saber y-uj=**ma** y-uj wa-la-waj-iy"
 well who.knows 3E-RELN=**DUB** 3E-RELN PROG-2A-go-IVM
- x-chi-0.
 INC-say-3A
 "Well, I don't know/who knows, are you still going?" he [the man] said.'
- k. [self- reported **A**] "miyuk."
 no
 'No.'
- l. [reported **R**] "a bweno."
 "Ah, good."
- m. [self- reported **R**] "este.. este kechan jun enkargo wa-x-j-k'an-aw-0
 um um just one errand PROG-INC-1E-want-TVM-3A
- j-jek-0--och b'a s-winkil
 1E-send-3A - -enter LOC 3E-owner
- j-naj-tikon--och=e" x-k-ut-aj-0.
 1E-house-1A.PL.IN--enter=TERM COM-1E-reply-TVM-3A
 "There is just something I wanted to send to my wife," I replied.'

- n. J: a.
‘Ah.’
- o. [reported **R**] H: "a bweno."
"Ah, good."

(modified from Brody 2001: 136-8)

The question / answer sequence that inspired the title of this paper is in reported utterances (1h) and (1j). (1) is part of a longer conversational narrative (Brody 2001); here H is telling his male cousin and age-mate a story about how he missed a bus. I present this segment of conversational narrative at length to offer a feel for the detail of response provided within normal reported speech in an everyday conversational narrative between intimates. The question in question, more expressively translated as ‘Why in the world was I late, anyway?’, is rhetorical. It does not seek information that the other can provide, and the reported response is not particularly interesting or informative. Yet both question and response are dutifully included as part of the story, and their presence at least supports the phatic conversational relationship between the cousins, if not also between H and the man he encountered. The unanswerable self-reported question in (1h) is immediately followed not only by a reported response, but also by a further reported information-seeking question in (1j), the self-reported answer to which is given in (1k). In (1l), the other’s response is reported, and in (1m), H self-reports providing more detail of information than would have been strictly necessary. H is reporting this interaction to an intimate who already knew about the intended errand, so there is no serious issue of information control at stake. What we don’t know, of course, is what H and the man actually said to each other. The verbal comments of cousin J who is hearing the story are confined here to back-channel responses, which are also crucial to the dialogic nature of Tojolab’al conversation. With both sides of dialogue reported within dialogic conversation, the segment in (1) demonstrates dialogue within dialogue (Brody 2000a, 2000b, 2002).

4. Formulaic Questions and Answers

Formulaic questions and answers form an important part of formal ritual speech dialogue in Tojolab’al. With little room for variation in the question, which requires not only an answer, but a particular answer, ritual speech offers a fixed prototype for understanding questions and answers in general (Irvine 1979). Their fixed structure is part of what makes these segments formulaic, along with the cultural practices that accompany them.⁵

Prescribed interactive behaviors and prescribed question and answer forms reinforce each other. The ritual question and answer in (2) exhibits a high density of polite features: diminutive, possessive, respectful address terms.

⁵ The ritual speech examples here are from an enactment of a courtship petition.

Heavy use of politeness features occurs not only in ritualized exchanges of greetings; all of the talk in the courtship petition text is saturated with politeness.

- (2) a. **Q:** ti=**ma** ay-a *k-ala kumare?*
 LOC=**DUB** be=2A 1E-DIM *comadre*
 ‘Are you there, my dear comadrita?’
- b. **A:** ti *kumpare.*
 LOC *compadre*
 ‘Here, compadrito.’

Outside of ritual speech there is more leeway in the formula. The exchange in (3) is between two women engaged in barter; in the midst of their economic transaction, they exchange formulaic pleasantries, which enhances their intimacy (Brody 1996). In the phatic interval within bartering, there is always an answer to a formulaic question; the answer is part of the formula.

- (3) a. **Q:** i **janek**’ wa-x-ek’-0 ja wa-bida=i?
 and **how** PROG-INC-pass-3A DET 2E-life=NPT
 ‘And how is your life going?’
- b. **A:** pwes lek=ni ti wa-x-ek’-0=a.
 well good=EMP then PROG-INC-pass-3A=TERM
 ‘Well, it is going well.’
- c. **Q:** lek=**ma** ay-0 ja y-al `untik=i? **janek**’ ay-a?
 good=**DUB** be-3A DET 3E-DIM child=NPT **how** be-2A
 Are the children well? How are you?
- d. **A:** lek-0.
 Good-3A
 ‘Fine.’

The everyday formulaic questions in the sequence in (4) are unanswerable by virtue of being part of a radio broadcast. The intimacy presumed by the questions, as in (3), serves to enhance the sense of connection between the radio announcer and audience, providing a phatic impetus for including these questions at the beginning of a morning radio broadcast.

- (4) a. **Q:** **jas** chi-0 ja waw-altzil-ex amigo?
what say-3A DET 2E-heart-2PL friend
 ‘How are you, friends?’ [lit. ‘What do your hearts say, friends?’]
- b. **Q:** **jastal** el-0 aw-ujil-ex ja k’a`uj=i?
how go-3A 2E-RELN-2PL DET day=NPT
 How did the day start for you?

By taking the formulaic question / answer sequence as a prototype for understanding other questions and answers in Tojolab'al discourse, I realize that I risk the appearance of elevating ritual speech over everyday conversation. While continuing to argue that conversation is the matrix for all other discourse genres (Brody 1993), I find that the heightened discourse (Sherzer 1987) and formal qualities of ritual speech provide a structured sequence of question / answer, which can guide in interpretation of more contextualized and locally strategic forms of language use.

5. Conversational Questions and Answers

In Tojolab'al conversation, (5), we can find immediate and straightforward answers to questions, as in formulaic speech (3).

- (5) a. **Q:** J: y-uj=**ma** waj-i-a chonab'?
3E-RELN=**DUB** go-TVM-2A Comitán
'Did you go to Comitán?'
- b. **A:** C: 0-waj-i-on chonab'.
COM-go-IVM-1A Comitán
'I went to Comitán.'
- c. **Q:** J: **jas ora?**
what time
'When?'
- d. **A:** C: 0-waj-i-on chonab' ja b'a domingo il=i.
COM-go-IVM-1A Comitán DET LOC Sunday here=NPT
'I went to Comitán this Sunday.'

The immediate context for these simple direct question / answer sequences is interaction between female friends, J and C; we will see that intimacy between interlocutors over-rides issues that are problematic in other contexts.

When uncomfortable topics are broached by a non-intimate interlocutor, answers may be polite, invoking the same politeness features found in ritual speech, as in (6), where J and A are only acquaintances, and A is considerably older.

- (6) a. **Q:** J: **janek'**=xa wa-la-tup-j-i-0 ja dosena?
how.much=now PROG-2E-pay-PAS-IVM-3A DET dozen
How much are you paid for a dozen?
- b. **A:** A: *kechan*=ni *ala* mil.
only=EMP DIM thousand
Only just a thousand.

(6a) is a blunt question, regarding the frequently discussed but always uncomfortable topic of money. Economic matters are a subject of continual interest in a community of scarce resources. Questions about money are in fact often asked, but they are also often uncomfortable to answer for several reasons, including: reluctance to reveal the extent of one's own resources; the risk of revealing that one has spent a lot, or paid too much; or that one will be asked to get another in on a good deal. Discomfort in answering is often reflected by some kind of modification toward politeness; in the answer here we see the use of hedge, diminutive, and emphatic.⁶

Reluctance to answer questions seems to center on culturally touchy topics. Although possessions and money, personal future plans and activities, misfortunes, and behaviors judged as not quite normal are all topics of avid interest and arise frequently in conversation, direct questions about these topics often meet with reluctance to answer. J's question about the peculiar habits of A's drunken, indigent husband receives an uninformative response in (7b).⁷

- (7) a. **Q:** J: **jastal** wa-x-wa`-0=b'a.
how PROG-INC-eat-3A=anyway
 'How can he eat, anyway?'
 b. **R:** A: **saber**.
 who knows?
 'Who knows?'

A's response may also reflect her negative attitude toward her husband.

6. Repeated Questions and Answers

Repetition is a generally salient feature of Tojolab'al discourse which is used strategically in interaction (Brody 1986, 1994). Interlocutors may call for elaborated answers when a question is not answered to their full satisfaction the first time. Clarification of a point of information in conversational narrative may involve a series of questions that continues until the interlocutor is satisfied. A reluctant co-conversationalist involved in a touchy topic may attempt to avoid answering a question the first time around (although background noise is always a factor), but a repeated question usually receives a response, if not an answer.

- (8) a. **Q:** J: **jas ora** oj waj-an **esperansa**=b'a?
what time FUT GO-2A Esperanza=anyway
 'When are you going to Esperanza, anyway?'

⁶ The emphatic particle =ni is at the opposite end of the scale of evidential clitic particles that includes the dubitative =ma; =ni indexes the greatest degree of believability (Brody 1987, 2002).

⁷ The Spanish usage is common and appears also in (1j); the Tojolab'al equivalent appears in (10d).

- b. **R: A: ja?**
what
 ‘Huh?’
- c. **Q: J: jas ora** oj waj-an esperanza=b’a?
what time FUT GO-2A Esperanza=anyway
 ‘When are you going to Esperanza, anyway?’
- d. **R/A: A: mi na`b`en.** mi chikan-uk-0. me`y b`olmal.
 NEG know. NEG what-SBJ-3A. NEG be exchange
 ‘Who knows? There’s nothing. There’s nothing to exchange.’

In (8a), when J asks her about her future plans to travel to a village to barter, A seems not to hear (8b); when J repeats the question, A first provides an uninformative response, but then goes on to informatively expand her response into an answer. Reluctance to answer a question may be a signal that the topic is touchy, but the relationship between interlocutors is important; note the similarity of topics in (5) and (8).

7. Reported Questions and Answers

Having discussed at the outset a conversation full of reported questions and answers, I want to include here one more example from a radio program in Tojolab’al where the announcer passes along greetings between listeners (Brody 2000b). In (9), the announcer reports that a listener has dropped by the station with a note asking if he would mind sending a broadcast greeting for her. He conveys both the note’s request, which he politely couches as a question, and answers that he will, of course, comply.

- (9) a. 0-ek’-i-0 este 0-ek’-0--y-a`-0--kan ja
 COM-pass-IVM-3A um COM-pass-3A- -3E-give-3A - -stay DET

 y-al s-ju`un=i.
 3E-DIM 3E-paper=NPT
 ‘She passed, um, she passed to leave her little note.’
- b. **(Q): wa-x-y-al-a-0 laj=ma** y-a`-a-0 oj
 PROG-INC-3E-say-TVM-3A agree=DUB 3E-give-TVM-3A FUT

 w-a`-0- -ek’=i ja s-patilab’il j-k’ujol it=i.
 2E-give-3A - -pass=TERM DET 3E-greeting 1E-heart this=NPT
 ‘She said, would he agree, will you pass on my greetings.’

- c. **A:** klaro ke oj=o.
clear COM FUT=TERM
'Of course.'

Here the announcer invokes the presence of his interlocutor (via her note), reports her question, and provides his answer.

8. Rhetorical Questions

Although rhetorical questions in Tojolab'al neither require nor receive answers, they do take the interlocutor into account; they provide a format for the display of opinions and attitudes. In (10), the respondent to a dramatic conversational narrative about a crazy man expresses her agreement with the story-teller's assessment of the man's state using a pair of rhetorical questions.

- (10) a. **Q:** b'a=to oj s-na`-0 ek'-uk-0=a?
how=still FUT 3E-know-3A pass-SBJ-3A=TERM
'How would he know where he was passing?'
- b. **Q:** eske **jastal** jaw kwando jomel=xa s-'olom=i?
but **how** that when broken=now 3E-head=NPT
It's that how would he since he is crazy?
(modified from Brody 2000a: 99)

Rhetorical or unanswerable questions as in (10), in (1h), and those posed on the radio (4), allow expression of speakers' attitudes and evidence intimacy (Freed 1994). In (10), the grammatical questions function as listener responses.

9. Conclusion

The Tojolab'al dialogic imperative certainly extends to questions and answers. Those questions that do not receive answers at least receive responses. Questions on delicate topics (money, personal business, strange behavior) are deflected with uninformative replies or sheathed in politeness when posed by non-intimates. What is clear from examination of questions, responses, and answers in context is that in responding, the answer or lack of answer and the way the response is made may carry the same PT face risks for the responder as questioning does for the interrogator. The answer is in the interaction.

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