

# **What was it again?—The pragmatics of repeated questions**

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## **1 Introduction**

Asking questions is common in daily conversation. People ask questions in many situations: small talk, interviews, and in the classroom. When the answer comes, however, people don't always comprehend it right away because speech perception is challenging. Many factors can interfere with listening comprehension: a lack of attention, linguistic variability, speaker variability, and background noise (Holt and Lotto 2010). When people don't get anything or only remember part of the information after asking a question, they repeat the question.

The current study framed repeated questions in the scope of requests for information. It hypothesized that repeated questions differ from other requests for information and they should be categorized separately as a unique function of requests. Table 1 shows a comparison between self-initiated repeated questions and other requests for information. In the self-initiated repeated question, the initiator (Person B in Table 1) asked his or her question twice. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), repeating the question could damage the hearer's face twice. Furthermore, Person B in the self-initiated repeated question was in actual demand of the information rather than simply engaging Person A in conventional social conversation. It is reasonable to expect that Person B would adopt more sophisticated request strategies to get to the desired information compared with other situations where Person B would not be in particular demand for that information.

Table 1: A comparison between repeated questions and other requests for information

Self-initiated repeated question	Asking	Requests for clarification and repetition
B: How is UW Madison? A: UW Madison is a great university. B: How was UW Madison again?	B: How is UW Madison? A: UW Madison is a great university.	A: UW Madison is a great university. B: Can you clarify/repeat? A: UW Madison is a great university.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Categorization of requests

According to Searle (1969), a request is a directive speech act to make the hearer perform some actions that he or she would not do otherwise automatically.

A detailed formal categorization of requests has been proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). They categorized requests by strategy types, point of view, downgraders, and upgraders.

It is also possible to categorize requests by their functions. Hassall (1999) differentiated asking (a request for information) from other requests in his study of requests in Indonesian. He proposed that requests for action and requests for information should be analyzed separately in terms of directness. Following that line, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2013) studied airplane service counter requests and categorized the requests into requests for information and requests for action. Huynh (2011) defined asking for clarification as a speech act, which requests the speaker to explain the meaning or intention that he or she wanted to convey. People also use requests for repetition. Leech (2014) provided some examples of using apology as requests for repetition such as “sorry”, “excuse me”, and “pardon”, when the listener wants the speaker to repeat his or her words.

Based on the above studies, it is possible to categorize requests as requests for actions and requests for information. Requests for information include asking, requests for clarification, and requests for repetition. However, the categorization does not cover repeated questions.

### 2.2 Face-threatening theories

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive face is the desire to be liked, appreciated, and approved. Negative face is the desire not to be imposed upon,

intruded, or otherwise put upon. A request is a negative face-threatening act and causes possible damage to the hearer's negative face.

There are also three social factors that have an impact on face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson 1987): power (the degree the hearer can impose his own plan at the expense of the speaker), social distance (how often do hearer and speaker interact and what they exchange), and imposition (cultural and situational ranking of the seriousness of the speech act).

### **2.3 Repeated questions**

Few studies have been done to specifically examine question repetition as a speech act. A study by Shih and Kochanski (2003) showed that when people asked for credit card numbers and telephone numbers, they sometimes would miss a few digits. Consequently, they would then ask for the numbers again with a rising intonation on what they didn't hear clearly. However, repeated questions are not limited to the scenarios of asking credit card numbers and telephone numbers.

Kasper (2006) studied repeated questions using both the speech act research approach and the conversation analysis approach. The author argued that the speech act research approach is good at identifying differences between the first question and the repeated question, while conversational analysis approach can account for the differences with the help of context. The data in Kasper's study, however, were not representative. First, the study only included two excerpts of conversation, which are not sufficient to present the overall patterns of repeated questions. Second, the repeated questions in the data were all other-initiated. In other words, the speaker repeated the question upon request by the listener. However, some repeated questions can also be self-initiated when the speaker finds it necessary to ask again. Table 1 shows an example of the self-initiated question.

## **3 Research methods**

### **3.1 Research questions and predictions**

The current study extended this scope from asking about numbers in Shih and Kochanski (2003) to asking general wh-questions. The focus of the study is the self-initiated repeated question, which is different from Kasper (2006). Self-initiated repeated questions are used when people first ask a question and then for any number of reasons decide to repeat the question. The research questions included:

1. When people ask repeated questions, would they ask differently when asking a second time, even with the desired information remaining unchanged?

2. If people ask the same question differently for the first time and second time, how are they different?
3. How imposition and power/distance affect the way people ask the question again?

Based on the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1987), this study predicts that:

1. People will use strategies in their second question to remedy the threat to the face of a listener and they will ask the second question differently from the first question.
2. People will more often remedy the threat to the face of a listener of higher power and greater distance (professor) than that of a listener of equal power and close distance (friend).
3. As for imposition conditions, people will more often remedy a threat to face when the imposition is high.

### **3.2 Participants**

Eleven native speakers of English aged 22 to 28 participated in the study (3 females, 8 males). They all were undergraduate or graduate students at a university in the United States.

### **3.3 Research design**

A written discourse completion task (WDCT) was used in the study to elicit data. In the WDCT, participants first read a description of a scenario and then wrote what they would say under the circumstances.

Following Rose (2009), there were two roles in the WDCT scenarios: a friend and a professor. The friend represented equal power and close social distance and the professor stood for higher power and greater social distance.

There were four imposition conditions. Leech (2014) pointed out that request for repetition can be caused by either the speaker or the hearer, depending on who is “at fault” for the unsuccessful communication. For example, if the hearer did not pay attention, then he is at fault. If the speaker spoke too fast, then he is at fault. The current study hypothesizes that the more the person who asks the question is at fault, the higher the imposition is. The four conditions ranked by their imposition from highest to lowest are as follows:

1. the person who asked forgot the answer
2. the person who asked didn't hear clearly
3. the person who answered talked too fast
4. the person who answered gave a wrong answer

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There were eight scenarios in the WDCT (2 roles \* 4 conditions). In all scenarios, participants assumed the role of a college student, a role in which they all have experience. The eight scenarios included:

1. asking a friend who is coming to a party
2. asking a friend where he or she bought a snack
3. asking a friend what the names of some good restaurants are
4. asking a friend when a comedy show is
5. asking a professor who is in charge of a scholarship
6. asking a professor where a lab meeting is
7. asking a professor what will be covered on the mid-term
8. asking a professor when his or her office hours are

### **3.4 Data collection**

The WDCT used in the current study elicited participants' response twice for the same question. There were 16 questions in total (2 roles \* 4 conditions \* asked 2 times). After each question, there was a box on the page for the participants to fill in their answers.

Participants were first cued to ask a question. Then, one of the imposition conditions was provided as a reason to prompt them to repeat the question. For example, the first question prompt was: "You want to attend the computer science lab meeting. You want to ask the professor where the meeting room is. What would you say?" The second question prompt was: "The professor said 'Edison Hall, room 2050'. Somehow, you could not remember the exact location a few seconds later. Now you want to ask again. What would you say?"

The order of the two roles (friend, professor) was counter-balanced across participants. Some participants read four friend scenarios first, others read four professor scenarios first. The four imposition conditions were randomized across the four scenarios of friend and professor.

The WDCT was sent to each participant individually in a word document format by email. Participants were encouraged to provide more than one answer for each question.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The coding for speech acts was based on *Requests and Apologies: A Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns* (CCSARP) by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1989). The response to each question by participants was divided into three parts: address term(s), the head act, and adjunct(s) to the head act. "Address term" refers to name and attention-getter, "head act" refers to the indispensable speech act, and "adjuncts to the head act" is the context of the head act. In the current study, the

head acts were categorized by question types shown in Table 2. Adjuncts were categorized as supplementary information to the head acts, such as “thanks”, “compliment”, “sorry”, and “goal”.

Hassall (1999) proposed that the directness of requests for information should be analyzed differently from other requests. He defined a direct question as a question that only asks for information. Questions that ask for anything other than information are indirect. However, this definition cannot distinguish directness in the current study because all the utterances asked for information. Therefore, the definition was modified, focusing on formal characteristics instead of functional characteristics.

In order to define directness here, questions were first divided into six types by form. Since the scenarios in the current study always prompted a wh-question, it is reasonable to regard wh-questions as direct questions. However, embedded questions with a wh-word in the subordinate clauses are generally considered as indirect. Therefore, direct questions here were defined as questions that contain wh-words in the main clause and all other questions are considered indirect. Table 2 presents the categorization of questions.

In summary, all utterances were analyzed in terms of address terms, head act, adjunct(s), and directness. Table 3 shows a sample of coding in a scenario of asking a friend where she bought a snack.

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Table 2: Categorization of questions

Question types	Definition	Example in the data	Directness
Wh-question	Contains wh-words in the main clause	“When is your office hour?”	Direct
Yes/no question	Begins with an auxiliary verb and can be answered by “Yes” or “No”	“Are you available on Tuesday?”	Indirect
Tag question	Contains a declarative sentence and a tag at the end	“Tuesday 10am, right?”	Indirect
Confirmatory question	Contains part of the answer and is used to confirm the complete answer	“Office hour is Tuesday ...?”	Indirect
Rhetorical question	Used to express opinion rather than asking for information	“Don’t we have class on Tuesday?”	Indirect
Embedded question	Contains wh-words embedded in a subordinate clause	“I wonder when is your office hour?”	Indirect

Table 3: A sample of coding the data

	Utterances	Address	Head act	Adjuncts	Directness
First time	“Amy, these are great! Where did you get them?”	Amy	Wh-question	Compliment	Direct
Second time	“Slow down. What store was that?”		Wh-question	Request to slow down	Direct

## 4 Results and discussion

The research aims to answer three research questions: 1. Do people ask the repeated questions differently from their original questions? 2. If so, how are the repeated questions different from the original questions? 3. How imposition and power/distance affect the repeated question?

In order to answer the first and second research question, the current study compared the directness, head acts, and adjuncts in the first questions and the

second questions. Common strategies in the second questions were also identified. To provide evidence for the third research question, the directness, head acts, and adjuncts in different roles and imposition conditions were compared.

The numbers in all the following tables represent the numbers of the occurrences of an item. The percentages in the parentheses are the proportions that the item accounts for. All the percentages were rounded to integers.

#### **4.1 Are the first question and second question different?**

Table 4 shows the numbers and percentages of the direct questions and indirect questions in the first questions and second questions. Speaking of directness, there were more direct questions than indirect questions in the first questions. In the second questions, direct and indirect questions were almost equal.

Table 5 shows three major head acts and adjuncts in the first questions and second questions. With regard to head acts, participants used wh-questions most frequently both in the first questions and the second questions. Participants used requests in both the first and second questions, but they used more requests in the second questions. Yes/no questions were only used in the first question, while rhetorical questions were only present in the second question. However, the adjuncts were totally different for the two questions. When asking the first questions, participants tended to provide a goal (what they need the information for), a compliment, and appreciation. However, in the second questions, participants often expressed apology, gave an excuse, and asked the speaker to slow down.

Despite requesting the same information, participants asked the two questions differently. The second questions contained more requests, apologies and excuses, and were more indirect. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), indirectness can minimize the threat to the hearers' face. These results confirm the prediction that asking questions is face-threatening and repeating the questions is more face-threatening. Therefore, people modify their second question to make it less face-threatening.

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Table 4: Directness in first questions and second questions

Directness	First question	Second question
Direct questions	72 (67.9%)	49 (49%)
Indirect questions	34 (32.1%)	51 (51%)

Table 5: Major head acts and adjuncts in first questions and second questions

Head acts	First question	Wh-question	73 (67.5%)
		Yes/no question	16 (15%)
		Request	10 (9%)
	Second question	Wh-question	47 (46%)
		Request	27 (26%)
		Rhetorical question	10 (10%)
Adjuncts	First question	Goal	19 (49%)
		Compliment	15 (38%)
		Thank	2 (5%)
	Second question	Apology	39 (32%)
		Excuse	27 (22%)
		Wait, hold on, slow down	16 (13%)

### 4.2 What strategies are used in the second questions?

Table 6 shows the six most frequent combinations of head acts and adjuncts. As shown in Table 6, the head acts in the second questions alternated between wh-questions and requests. The adjuncts in the second questions were usually apologies and excuses.

The results show that participants used apologies and excuses most frequently in adjuncts to remedy the threat to the listener's face. Expressions of thanks and excuses are negative face-threatening acts and cause damage to the speaker's face. Apologies are positive face-threatening acts and cause damage to the speaker's face. In addition, the participants could not prevent the second face-threatening act because they had to ask the question again. Therefore, they adopted a threat-to-threat strategy. While causing threats to listeners' face, they also caused damage to their own face. In this way, the face-threatening effect was remedied.

However, participants sometimes also used bare wh-questions without any adjunct. For example, in a friend scenario, one participant wrote: "Where did you buy these? They're so good" (first question) and "Where?" (second question). In a professor scenario, one participant replied: "Hey. I'm trying to find and apply for some scholarships. Who should I go to for that?" (first question) and "What's the

name again?” (second question). This is an atypical pattern because there was no difference between the first and second question.

Table 6: Common patterns in the second questions

Wh-question + apology	9 (9%)
Wh-question + apology, excuse	6 (6%)
Request + apology	5 (5%)
Wh-question + excuse	4 (4%)
Wh-question	4 (4%)
Request	4 (4%)
Total patterns	102

### 4.3 How power/distance affect the second questions

Table 7 shows the numbers and percentages of direct questions and indirect questions in friend and professor scenarios. The percentages of direct questions and indirect questions are the opposite for friend and professor scenarios. Participants tended to be direct in a friend scenario and be indirect in a professor scenario.

Table 8 presents the numbers and percentages of three major head acts and adjuncts in friend and professor scenarios. Wh-questions and requests were used in both scenarios. However, more wh-questions were used in friend scenarios, whereas more requests were used in professor scenarios. In addition, rhetorical questions were used only in friend scenarios while confirmatory questions were used only in professor scenarios. As for adjuncts, both scenarios contained apologies and excuses. However, in friend scenarios, requests to slow down were used, but appreciation was expressed in professor scenarios.

More requests were used when speaking to a professor, but there was no difference in adjuncts between professors and friends. The results also confirm the prediction that people will more often remedy the threat to face of a person with higher power and greater distance (a professor) than of a person with equal power and close distance (a friend).

Table 7: Directness in friend and professor scenarios

Directness	Friend	Professor
Direct questions	34 (67%)	15 (30%)
Indirect questions	17 (33%)	34 (70%)

Table 8: Major head acts and adjuncts in friend and professor scenarios

Head acts	Friend	Wh-question	32 (62%)
		Request	11 (21%)
		Rhetorical question	5 (10%)
	Professor	Request	16 (33%)
		Wh-question	15 (31%)
		Confirmatory question	7 (14%)
Adjuncts	Friend	Apology	18 (27%)
		Excuse	16 (24%)
		Wait, hold on, slow down	15 (23%)
	Professor	Apology	21 (38%)
		Excuse	11 (20%)
		Thank	7 (13%)

#### 4.4 How imposition conditions affect the second questions

In Table 9, Table 10, and Table 11, the label “forgot” stands for “the person who asked forgot the answer”, “unclear” means “the person who asked didn’t hear clearly”, “too fast” represents “the person who answered talked too fast”, and “mistake” refers to “the person who answered gave an wrong answer”. Table 9 shows the numbers and percentages of direct and indirect questions in four imposition conditions. Table 10 shows the numbers and percentages of three major head acts in four imposition conditions. Table 11 shows the numbers and percentages of three major adjuncts in four imposition conditions.

In general, the patterns of “I forgot”, “I didn’t hear clearly”, and “the person who answered talked too fast” were similar, while the pattern of “the person gives a wrong answer” was different.

In terms of directness, the conditions of “forgot”, “unclear”, and “too fast” had more direct questions, while the condition of “mistake” had more indirect questions. As for head act, in the conditions of “forgot”, “unclear”, and “too fast”, participants used wh-questions and requests more frequently. However, under the condition of “mistake”, participants used rhetorical questions more often. With regard to adjuncts, people also more often said “wait” and employed apologies and excuses in the conditions of “forgot”, “unclear”, and “too fast”. However, people tended to provide evidence, ask yes/no questions, and express appreciation more frequently in the condition of “mistake”.

The differences in the above paragraph indicate that the person at fault is an important factor in phrasing the second question. People evaluate who is at fault for failed communication. When the speaker gave a wrong answer, the participants

didn't use apologies and excuses in their second question. In other cases, however, they apologized and gave an excuse to reduce the face-threatening effect. Therefore, these findings confirm the prediction that people will more often remedy the threat to face when they are at fault compared with when the person who answers the question is at fault.

Table 9: Directness in four imposition conditions

Directness	Forgot	Unclear	Too fast	Mistake
Direct questions	14 (58%)	17 (63%)	16 (67%)	2 (4%)
Indirect questions	10 (42%)	10 (27%)	8 (33%)	23 (92%)

Table 10: Major head acts in four imposition conditions

Forgot		Unclear		Too fast		Mistake	
Wh-question	14 (56%)	Wh-question	15 (56%)	Wh-question	16 (67%)	Rhetorical question	9 (36%)
Request	9 (36%)	Request	10 (37%)	Request	6 (25%)	Yes/no question	4 (16%)
Confirmatory question	2 (8%)	Yes/no question	1 (4%)	Confirmatory question	1 (4%)	Negation	3 (12%)
Total	25	Total	27	Total	24	Total	25

Table 11: Major adjuncts in four imposition conditions

Forgot		Unclear		Too fast		Mistake	
Apology	11 (38%)	Apology	14 (39%)	Apology	12 (35%)	Evidence	5 (25%)
Excuse	7 (24%)	Excuse	11 (31%)	Excuse	8 (24%)	Yes/no question	3 (15%)
Wait	4 (14%)	Wait	3 (8%)	Hold on, slow down	4 (12%)	Thank	2 (10%)
Total	29	Total	36	Total	34	Total	20

#### **4.5 Limitations and future study**

Although the written discourse completion task (WDCT) has been widely used in pragmatics research, the method has some limitations. WDCTs only tell us what the participants think they will say, rather than what they will say in reality. In addition, WDCTs cannot capture phonological clues such as intonation. In the future, studies can be done with different research methods such as an oral discourse completion task, interviews, and role plays. Moreover, future studies can explore repeated questions in different languages and cultures.

### **5 Conclusion**

The current study investigated self-initiated repeated questions in English. When people have to ask the same question for a second time, they tend to ask the question differently. The second questions contain more requests, apologies and excuses, and are more indirect. In addition, people tend to use apologies and excuses to mitigate the threat to the listener's face. However, there were also a few atypical cases when the second questions are in the exact form as the first questions. The degree of power/distance and imposition can affect the way people repeat the questions. More requests were used when speaking to a professor, but there was not difference in adjuncts between professors and friends. This shows that people will more often remedy the threat to face of a person with higher power and greater distance (professor) than that of a person with equal power and closer distance (friend). People will also evaluate who is at fault for unsuccessful communication. They will more often remedy the threat to face when they are at fault compared with when the person who answers the question is at fault.

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