Going general: Responding to yes–no questions in informational webinars for prospective grant applicants

Hansun Zhang Waring
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

Elizabeth Reddington
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

Di Yu
Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

Ignasi Clemente
Hunter College, USA

Abstract
While research on question–answer sequences has yielded important insights into the structures of responses and the actions they implement, the advising literature has illuminated how advice-giving may be resisted or avoided in certain institutional contexts. In this study, we examine the audio-recorded Q&A sections of applicant webinars delivered by a major philanthropic foundation in the United States, with a particular focus on the foundation representatives’ complex responses to audience members’ yes–no questions that seek specificity. Within a conversation analytic framework, we show how the practice of going general is engaged to manage the demands of being helpful to the individual questioner without appearing to guarantee a particular outcome while foregrounding the foundation’s principles and priorities for the broader audience. Findings of this study may be useful for formulating recommendations for foundation representatives tasked with communicating effectively with potential grantees.

Corresponding author:
Hansun Zhang Waring, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 West 120th Street, Box 66, New York, NY 10027, USA.
Email: hz30@tc.columbia.edu
Keywords
Advice seeking and giving, communicating with the public, conversation analysis, information-giving, institutional discourse, philanthropy, public communication, Q&A, question–answer sequence, resistance, resistance to advice-giving, responding to yes–no questions, specificity vs generality

Introduction
Webinars are an increasingly popular means of conducting presentations, lectures, and trainings online (Zoumenou et al., 2015). In addition to being a convenient and cost-effective platform, webinars provide opportunities for real-time interaction between facilitators and participants (De Gara and Boora, 2006). Managing these interactions, however, is not always a problem-free undertaking. In informational webinars for prospective grant applicants, for example, the foundation representative’s agenda of disseminating ‘general interest’ information may at times conflict with the prospective applicant’s interest in seeking out recommendations on how to proceed with a particular project in mind. As such, foundation representatives are placed in the somewhat difficult position of giving advice vis-a-vis the individual projects while preserving the official stance of disseminating information for the wider audience. In this article, we describe how representatives of a philanthropic foundation strike a delicate balance by engaging the practice of what we have roughly glossed as going general (also see Waring, 2017) in response to yes/no questions that seek specificity, and we do so within a conversation analytic framework (see ‘Data and method’ below).

Background
Responses to questions
In conversation analysis (CA), a growing body of studies has been dedicated to the various issues involved in responding to questions (Enfield et al., 2010; Lee, 2013). One major finding is that not all responses are equal: some are ‘preferred’ (i.e. occur with greater frequency or treated as expected), and others ‘dispreferred’; preferred responses are typically produced without delay, mitigation, or accounts, while dispreferred responses are produced with these features (Pomerantz, 1984). Answers, for example, are preferred over non-answers such as I don’t know or silence (Stivers and Robinson, 2006). In addition, responses to questions that embody aligning actions (e.g. granting of a request, acceptance of an invitation or offer) are preferred over those that convey non-aligning actions (Schegloff, 2007). Finally, with regard to yes/no questions, yes responses are preferred over no responses (Sacks, 1987). Of particular relevance to the focus of our study, type-conforming responses (i.e. responses that contain yes, no or an equivalent token such as yeah or uh huh) are preferred over nonconforming responses (i.e. responses that do not contain such tokens) (Raymond, 2003). Based on 325 instances of grammatically formed yes/no interrogatives (YNIs) from 10 large corpora of naturally occurring British and American conversations, Raymond (2003) found that type-conforming responses are far more frequent than nonconforming responses, which indicate some
trouble with or resistance to the question (see below). The author also calls attention to the notable restriction to type-conforming responses in certain institutional settings (e.g. courtrooms, standardized surveys).

A second major finding is that responses may be formatted in ways that display various stances toward, or degrees of resistance to, questions (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Drew, 1992; also see Raymond, 2003 above). One can evade answering by engaging overt practices such as justifying the shift or covert practices such as using subversive word repeats or operating on the question (Clayman, 2001). One can also treat a question as not having a straightforward answer by prefacing the response with *well* (Schegloff and Lerner, 2009) or a response as motivated independently of a prior action (Clayman, 2013). One can further push back on the underlying terms of the questions by prefacing a response with *oh* (Heritage, 1998), providing repetitional rather than *yes/no* answers (Heritage and Raymond, 2012), producing a clausal versus a phrasal response to a specifying *wh*-question (Fox and Thompson, 2010), challenging the question’s presuppositions (Ehrlich and Sidnell, 2006), and responding in ways that retroactively transform the terms and/or the agenda of the question (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010). Based on data from English and Japanese everyday conversations, Stivers and Hayashi (2010) show that a response can be designed to resist (1) the question’s terms through specifying or replacing an element in the question or (2) the question’s agenda by adjusting its focus, bias, or presupposition. Similar responding practices for resisting the constraints of questions are found in languages other than English and Japanese such as Russian (Bolden, 2009), Danish (Heinemann, 2009), and Catalan and Spanish (Clemente, 2015).

As can be seen, the existing work on responding to questions has yielded important insights into the preference structures of responses as well as the actions they implement, such as resisting a question’s terms, agenda, and presuppositions. Our phenomenon of interest also concerns to some degree the foundation representatives’ resistance to questions and, in particular, the specificity (or potential guidance/advice) sought by the audience’s *yes–no* questions. To some extent, this resistance to specificity has been documented in the advising literature.

**Resistance to advice-giving**

A persistent theme in the advising literature has been the avoidance of overt advice-giving (e.g. Butler et al., 2010; Limberg and Locher, 2012; Shaw et al., 2015 Silverman, 1997; Vehviläinen, 2012). By framing advice as general information for everyone (e.g. *We strongly recommend that people do X*), for example, the ambiguity of giving advice and giving information can be exploited to manage advice resistance (Kinnell and Maynard, 1996; Peräkylä and Silverman, 1991; Sarangi, 2000).

Aside from camouflaging advice as some other innocuous activity to manage advice resistance, participants may also resist advice-giving by maintaining a non-directive stance in certain institutional settings. Such a stance can be found in the context of risk communication in genetic counseling, driven by the counselor’s particular domain of (in)expertise as well as the principle of non-directiveness (Sarangi, 2010; Sarangi and Clarke, 2002). In response to clients’ requests such as *We would like your advice*, for example, the counselors would avoid direct advice-giving by giving information on what
Discourse & Communication 12(3)

others normally do in similar situations (Sarangi, 2010). In their study on Down Syndrome screening in a Hong Kong prenatal hospital, Zayts and Schnurr (2012) found that medical professionals respond to specific requests for advice such as Which is the best for me? by complying with these requests implicitly through information-giving, thereby upholding the ideology of promoting patient-centered autonomy. Promoting ‘client’ autonomy also figures centrally in education, where such promotion tends to clash with the need to provide guidance to students (Waring and Song, in press). Vehviläinen (2003), for example, shows how counselors in labor market training at a Finnish adult education center avoid providing solutions in response to student requests regarding matters that they should deal with themselves. The counselors do so by responding to the request but sanctioning it afterwards (e.g. You should not count on me for answers.) or by withholding advice and shaping the interaction into a questioning sequence, after which advice can be given as a reaction to the student’s response. These practices are implemented, according to Vehviläinen, with the aim of promoting students’ self-directedness.

The institutional mandate to empower students’ own decision-making that constrains the teacher’s advice-giving is also found in Limberg’s (2010) analyses of office hours at a German university. Similarly, resistance to advice-giving is revealed in He’s (1994) study on academic counseling at an American university, where advisors withhold certain information from students (e.g. personal opinions or expert judgment) for the purpose of fostering the latter’s ability to navigate the university system and make decisions for themselves.

Several studies have also explored how participants resist addressing a specific advice-seeking individual for the benefit of informing a wider audience. In his study on expert advising on call-in radio, for example, Hutchby (1995) shows how the expert tends to package his advice as general prescriptions and answers more than what the question asks. In an American Internet health column, the writer manages the public and personal domains of advice-giving through broadening the scope of the responding letter and addressing the wider readership directly, among other strategies (Locher, 2006).

Clearly, resistance to advice-giving is part and parcel of navigating certain institution-specific concerns and constraints (Drew and Heritage, 1992), such as promoting autonomy and appealing to a wider audience. The foundation representatives in our data face similar issues, especially with regard to the goal of informing the wider audience listening in on the webinar. In addition, the representatives also have an obligation to be informative without appearing to privilege or guarantee a particular outcome for a potential applicant (i.e. avoiding the pitfall of leading someone down a ‘rabbit hole’, as one foundation officer put it). The current project continues to explore how this tension between generality and specificity is managed and does so with a focus on responses to yes–no questions within a previously unexplored context – that of information webinars designed by foundation representatives for prospective grantees.

Data and method

Our database consists of 17 publicly available audio-recordings of webinars conducted in English, and in which presenters on behalf of a major philanthropic foundation in the United States present information on funding opportunities and address questions from
an audience of prospective applicants. Presenters typically include not only foundation officers but also individuals from other non-profit organizations, government agencies, or academic institutions who may be grantees or in partnership with the foundation in advancing its mission. As such, all presenters represent the foundations’ interests to various extents and are referred to as ‘foundation representatives’ in our article.

In this study, we examine a collection of 138 yes/no question-response sequences in which an audience member asks a yes/no question potentially relevant to preparing a particular proposal, and the response deploys the practice of going general. For each webinar, the audience is invited to submit questions through an on-screen chat box throughout the presentations. These questions are to be answered during the Q&A portion of the webinar after the presentations. There is routinely a brief delay before a question is responded to, which, according to one of the foundation officers, mainly involves ‘negotiating who is best equipped to reply’.

The Q&A portions were transcribed in their entirety using conversation analytic notations (see Appendix 1) and analyzed within a conversation analytic framework. CA aims to uncover the tacit methods of social interaction, or how participants understand each other and make themselves understood. Analysis revolves around ‘consistently and insistently’ asking a single question: why that now – that is, why something is said or done in that particular way at that particular time? (Heritage and Clayman, 2010: 14).

As noted earlier, our focus is on detailing how foundation representatives manage responding to specific audience questions within the institutional requirement of providing general information for the wider audience. The foundation’s written ‘guiding principles’ emphasize the importance of fair selection of grantees, responsiveness to grantees, and open and clear communication with the public. Although these principles do not translate directly into instructions for how to handle specific questions, one might argue that while responsiveness calls for individualized attention, upholding the principle of fairness requires not privileging one potential project over another (or suggesting a favorable outcome if one does X or Y), and open and clear communication involves in part the consistent reiteration of the foundation’s primary objectives.

The fact that there is indeed a concern for ‘going general’ oriented to by the participants themselves in interaction can be seen in the directives representatives give at the beginning of the Q&A sessions, such as Please ask ONLY general interest questions. Not surprisingly, the specific audience questions we examine are also produced in ways that at least blur the boundary between the specific interest in any individual project and general interest for the wider audience. One might argue, for example, that the X in Would the foundation be interested in X? is potentially relevant to, not just the question asker, but others in the audience as well. Our interest, however, is in showing how the responses are to various degrees designedly resistant to the individualized advice-giving trajectory – an option rendered possible and available by the questions. In responding to the question of Would the foundation be interested in X?, for example, a simple and definitive yes would be hearable as potentially advising the questioner to pursue the project related to X. On the other hand, a less straightforward formulation such as What we are looking for is ... would constitute information-giving vis-a-vis the yes/no question.
Analysis

As will be shown, while audience members routinely ask yes/no questions on specific topics presumably relevant to their own proposals, foundation representatives routinely orient to their institutional mandate to provide information that is useful to the audience as a whole and to avoid the appearance of offering specific advice on how to proceed with any one project. A practice that we have roughly glossed as going general (also see Waring, 2017) is mobilized to navigate this subtle tension between doing informing and doing advising.

For the purpose of this study, going general involves the foundation representatives’ practice of designing maximally informative responses to specific yes/no questions while resisting advice-giving on the potential projects to which those questions are addressed. This practice of going general is implemented through three different multi-unit turn response formats:

(a) yes/no+
(b) clausal yes/no+
(c) non-yes/no

Yes/no+ entails a clear yes/no (or equivalent lexical tokens such as sure, absolutely, certainly) somewhere in the response, but mostly at or near the turn-beginning, plus further talk. Clausal yes/no+ includes a clause that implements a yes/no response without using the tokens yes or no (e.g. Program evaluation would not be appropriate) plus additional talk. These clausal responses do not always repeat the exact wording of the questions but are nevertheless inferable as a yes or no. For example, with the question Would the foundation be receptive to X?, a clausal yes response might be X is something we would be open to evaluating. As will be shown in the following analysis, the plus (+) portions of (a) and (b) are not simple reiterations of confirmation or disconfirmation as in, for example, Yes, we are interested in X, but entail a great deal of interactional work. Finally, a non-yes/no response consists of a multi-unit turn that does not address the yes/no aspect of the question at all. Of the 138 yes/no question-response cases, 50 are yes/no+ (36%), 24 are clausal yes/no+ (17%), and 64 are non-yes/no (47%).

With this range of responses, (a) would be considered type-conforming, while (b) and (c), although not a format distinction made by Raymond (2003), nonconforming. Contrary to their rare occurrences in Raymond’s corpus, the nonconforming responses in our data are almost twice as many – a stark contrast to the institutional settings of courtrooms and standardized surveys discussed in Raymond (2003). Most importantly, however, while Raymond (2003) shows that type-conforming responses accept the constraints of the questions, and nonconforming ones problematize the questions, the focus of our analysis is on how the three response formats, regardless of their type-conformity, transcend to various degrees the constraints of the questions in ways that are both responsive and sensitive to specific institutional concerns associated with delivering informational webinars for (grant) applicants.

Yes/no+ format

In this section, we show three exemplars of ‘yes/no+’ responses deployed by the foundation representatives in answering audience questions that seek specificity. Type-conforming, unmitigated yes occurs on rare occasions; more often than not, the yes comes with some
sort of hedging, as is the case in our first example. Immediately prior to the segment, Dana has announced the commencement of the final Q&A session and that she will be reading through a couple of the chatted-in questions. As the segment begins, Dana reads a question that concerns the composition of the leadership institute, to which she herself proceeds to respond in line 06:

(1) five different organizations (WBA9 4208-4310)

01 Dana: HH the first one is (0.2) u:h ((reads))-should
02 (.) the participants attending the leadership
03 institute be representative of five different
04 organizations ideally.
05 ()
06 → .hhh U::M: Yes.
07 (0.2)
08 we:: we- (0.2) um (.) expect to see diversity: in
09 the five people that participate in the
10 leadership institute, .hh↓ u:h different
11 organizations, (.) different secto:rs,
12 (.) .hh um we have peop:le >you know<
13 on the teams that went through it back in the
14 fa:ll, (0.5) this year we ha:d .hh people from
15 the nonprofit sector: ,=from faith-based,
16 (.) .hh elected official:s, people
17 representing city:es, (.) .hh ↓um: people
18 >representing< educati:on, higher educati:on,
19 so there was a good mix and- and-. hh what
20 these people learn in the institute (.) they’re
21 really um (0.5) learning (.) >tools and methods
22 that they can< bring back and share with the
23 larger coalition.= so everybody will-
24 will (. ) um gain? from this institute?
25 .hhh >but we do wanna see< diversity in
26 that group.
27 (2.0)
28 >and the< next question is: ((reads))

As can be seen, Dana’s type-conforming and emphatically delivered yes is preceded by an inbreath and an elongated um as if a dispreferred response were forthcoming (Schegloff, 2010). This hedged delay may be alerting the audience to the fact that the ensuing yes is perhaps not as unproblematic as it looks and that it is expandable. Indeed, after a brief 0.2-second gap, Dana proceeds to state, not without some difficulty (see elongation, cut-off, pauses, and the repair initiating um), what we the foundation expect to see (line 08), thereby clearly marking what’s coming up as officially upheld by the foundation. In particular, she invokes diversity as the guiding principle for composing the leadership institute. Note that although the audience’s yes–no question seeks confirmation on the need to include five different organizations (lines 03–04), Dana’s response, as headlined by the ‘banner’ of diversity, lists a much wider range of configurations that include representatives from different sectors (lines 11–18). What gets highlighted is a
good mix (line 19) as opposed to the simple and straightforward five different organizations (lines 03–04) suggested by the questioner. Dana’s turn ends with a reiteration of we do wanna to see diversity in that group (lines 25–26), again conveying the foundation’s perspective through the institutional we.

Dana’s yes response to the audience question is qualified by her own talk both preceding and following the yes. While the yes confirms the acceptability of five different organizations, its preceding and subsequent qualifications caution the audience against a narrow understanding of eligibility by explicating and exemplifying the diversity principle. In the end, in addition to answering the question as framed by the audience member, the question Dana ends up answering also concerns the broader issue of how to select participants for the leadership institute – an issue applicable across contexts and relevant to the wider audience. In so doing, she traverses beyond the terms of the question and succeeds in maintaining her mission as a foundation representative of effectively disseminating information.

Our next case involves a no response to the audience’s question. The segment begins with Betty reading a question regarding whether a proposal should be aligned with one of the three hubs (lines 05–07), to which Joy responds in line 09:

(2) align with hubs (WBA10 5435-5513)

Joy’s response begins with a turn-initial um (Schegloff, 2010) that suggests a possible dispreferred second pair-part in the works, as materialized in the ensuing no (Sacks, 1987). In keeping with the typical format of dispreferred responses that involves delay, mitigation, or accounts (Pomerantz, 1984), Joy’s no is then expanded into a full clausal no that slightly mitigates the negative response with necessarily does not (lines 09–10). She then rushes past the possible completion of the clausal turn-constructonal unit (TCU) (Sacks et al., 1974) and stops at a point of maximal grammatical control (Schegloff,
1996) (i.e. after the *um* which clearly projects more to come) (line 10). What follows is a clarification of what they were *speaking to earlier* (line 11) – one that entails the *no duplication* principle that, again, the institutional ‘we’ expects from a wide range of proposals (lines 13–15). Like the principle of *diversity* invoked in the prior extract, the principle of ‘no duplication’ is what Joy resorts to as she resists catering exclusively to the specificity pursued by the question. This resistance is further evidenced in the ending of her turn, where she conveys a negative stance toward that specificity by replacing the questioner’s positively framed *align* with the negatively intoned *mimic* as she emphasizes what *we’re not asking you* to do (lines 15–16)

In both segments, the foundation representative produces a response that transcends the type-conforming *yes/no* to spotlight a certain guiding principle upheld by the foundation that is applicable, but not limited, to the specific matter being queried. In other words, beyond answering the question of whether a specific X should be done, the ‘plus’ portion of the representative’s response shifts to answer a different sort of question – that of what the driving principle behind decisions on X is (also see Stivers and Hayashi, 2010). In so doing, the foundation representative resists the restraint projected by *yes/no* questions that seek specificity related to individual projects and chooses, instead, to use the opportunity to reiterate basic foundation principles for the wider audience that may in turn effectively address a range of questions that no longer need to be asked. Stivers and Heritage (2001) also show how in comprehensive history-taking during doctor–patient interaction, patients sometimes go beyond the *yes/no* by bringing in additional materials from their life world as a way of expressing their concerns. The plus portions of our foundation representatives’ responses, as has been shown, manifest a different set of institution-specific concerns.

**Clausal yes/no+ format**

Responses to the audience’s *yes/no* questions do not always include a type-conforming *yes* or *no* or their lexical equivalents. In some cases, foundation representatives offer a *yes/no*-equivalent response in clausal form. Instead of *Yes*, for example, in response to *Do you fund qualitative research?*, a *yes*-equivalent clausal response would be *We do fund qualitative research* or *We’re open to qualitative research*. A clausal *yes/no+* response then includes the *yes/no*-equivalent clause plus additional components. In this section, we consider two such cases, with the first involving a *no*-equivalent response and the second a *yes*-equivalent one. In the first segment below, the audience question concerns whether there is a *preference toward certain types of data sources and methodologies* (lines 02–03). While foundation guidelines may stipulate which types of proposals are *appropriate*, preference is a less definable matter. In other words, the question does not lend itself to an easy *yes/no* answer:

(3) preference for data or methods (WBA19 2023-2058)

01 Bonnie: .hh u::h *↑*here’s a question, Mary for 02 you::. ((reads))-is there a preference 03 towards certain types (. ) of data sources 04 and methodologies?
Mary: \(\text{“s}^{\text{°}}\text{↑o° I \text{↑} wouldn’t say there’s a preference?”}\)

um but we are looking for strong empirical research with reasonable and rigorous methods. Given the investigator initiated approach of this call for proposals, we leave this open to the applicants to determine the methods that are best suited to answer their research questions as well as what data sources are available and appropriate.

Bonnie: <and \(\text{here’s another question? ((reads)}\)

Note that after Mary’s turn-initial so, delivered in raised pitch and sotto voce and hearable as projecting a ‘long story’, her no-equivalent clausal response is packaged with the hedging I wouldn’t say as well as rising intonation (line 06). While ‘there’s no preference’ would constitute a categorical denial, I wouldn’t say frames the issue as a matter of wording and invites the recipient to search for what I would say. Indeed, as with the other cases we have observed, Mary does not stop at answering the question as it is asked. Her denial of a preference is immediately followed by an account, prefaced with um but, of what we are looking for (line 07). As can be seen, in lieu of certain types of data sources and methodologies in the audience question, Mary emphasizes strong empirical research and reasonable and rigorous methods (lines 07–08). In so doing, she resists the question’s agenda (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010) that seeks clarity on the foundation’s preference and appears to presuppose such a preference for certain data and methods (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative). She then further resists offering a solution by highlighting the investigator initiated approach that invites the applicants to determine the suitability of their data sources and methods to answering their questions (lines 10–14). Mary, in other words, manages to formulate a response to the question in such a way that foregrounds the foundation’s priorities of supporting strong and rigorous research for an audience with a variety of potential data sources and methods suited to their individual projects.

In the next segment, the audience queries whether X is considered research (lines 05-07), and upon being selected by Ellen, Nora accepts with sure and proceeds to explicitly frame her response as an answer to the question (line 10). As it turns out, however, the answer is not a definitive one but a possible yes delivered in a clausal format (line 10):

(4) evaluation of implementation (WBA6 2903-3023)

Ellen: the first question. HH i:s, (0.2)

\(\text{you indicated this program specifically}\)

targets funding research. yes? we did indicate

that many times. HH and (. program or policy
implementation is not eligible. so is
evaluation of the implementation of a program
or policy considered research. hhh Nora
do you wanna elaborate on that a bit, h
(0.5)

Nora: → sure. um (.) tch the answer is that evaluation
of uh program or policy can be research,
but it depends on how well-framed it is. h and how (0.2) how uh rigorous and generalizable
(.) the findings will be. so the research needs
to really be a rigorous evaluation it needs to go
beyond the simple. hh pre- post questionnaire,
.hh and uh (0.5) the majority of fundings. h must
to the- the program. hh uh itself. h and uh finally
we would wanna know how generalizable it would
be to a large enough population that (it) would
actually. h move the needle on population health.
(0.5)

Ellen: great. I think that’s- that’s a helpful clarification.
.hh ((continues to next question))

In line 10, Nora’s clausal response is prefaced with *um* followed by a micro-pause and *tch*, possibly adumbrating trouble of some sort (Schegloff, 2010). Thereafter, instead of producing a straightforward ‘yes’ or ‘no’, she places what follows in the frame of *the answer is that* along with a partial repetition of the question’s subject *evaluation of uh program or policy*, thereby further delaying the actual answer. The predicate or the actual answer is yet again delayed with the (0.8) second pause (line 11) before it is produced with the stressed and elongated epistemic modal *can*, suggesting the possibility of such work being considered research – a possibility contingent upon a list of criteria introduced by the phrase *but it depends on* (line 12). By appending the possibly yes-clausal response as such then, Nora manages to rise above the specificity of program or policy evaluation to espouse the foundation’s interests in seeking and supporting rigorous and generalizable research (line 13, 15 and 20). At the same time, she is able to address the audience’s specific concerns in the case of program evaluation by outlining what would not be considered rigorous (lines 15–16) and what should not receive the majority of fundings (line 17).

In sum, the clausal format appears to be a useful resource for delivering more nuanced responses to questions that do not clearly lend themselves to a straightforward yes/no. In both cases above, while the clausal yes/no answers the specific questions, in the plus portion of the responses, the foundation representatives go general by underscoring the foundation’s priorities, the reasoning behind the priorities, and further interpretations of those priorities. In so doing, they partially resist the constraints set forth by the questions while preserving their footing as ambassadors charged with the task of publicizing the foundation’s missions.
Non-yes/no format

Some clausal responses do not contain any *yes/no* answers to the questions. As will be shown, the foundation representatives choose instead to skirt the issues by reiterating what they are *looking for*, explicating why they are looking for X, and inviting potential grantees to make their own decisions on the appropriateness of their projects in light of the foundation’s priorities. We consider two such cases in this section. In the first excerpt below, the audience’s question of whether the foundation would give a grant to a certain type of organization is responded to with neither a *yes/no* nor a clausal *yes/no*:

(5) durable medical equipment (WBA12 3453-3522)

```
01 David:   (reads)-will the foundation consider
02 granting an organization. that supplies
03 durable medical equipment to
04 under-served people with disabilities.
05 (0.8)
06 → we are looking for organizations that
07 represent the four sectors. business,
08 philanthropy, media, and (1.0)
09 Cate:  °faith-based°
10 David:  and faith-based.
11 Cate:  °>that’s [right.]<°
12 David:               [if the- ] if the applying
13 organization fits in those categories. (0.8)
14 then the answer’s yes.
15 Cate:  °>mhm,°
16 Cody:  ((reads))-does nonprofit association ((continues))
```

Notably, David restates what we are looking for – organizations that represent *four sectors* (lines 06–07) – information that is presumably included in the general call for proposals. The listing of the four sectors is completed in collaboration with Cate (lines 07–11). He then goes on to invite the audience to decide for themselves whether their specific organization fits into these categories (lines 12–14). Note that although we see the *yes* token in line 14, it is certainly not a *yes* response to the audience question. Rather, it is a *yes* that the audience has to arrive at on their own based on their own judgment. In so doing, David offers the resources for the audience to find answers without committing to an interest in any specific organization. In fact, shifting the responsibility of finding answers back to the audience (e.g. *it’s up to you*) is a move foundation officers repeatedly deploy in our data set. In the meantime, David’s listing of the four sectors serves as a useful reminder for the wider audience who may then check their own eligibility against these categories. In other words, while responding to the question to some extent, David also resists specific advice-giving by going general and maintaining the information-giving stance.

While David’s response provides the resources for audience autonomy, Claire’s response in the next segment rejects the terms of the question entirely when the audience asks whether a particular citation format needs to be followed (lines 02–04):
Claire’s resistance to the question’s agenda can be observed as early as line 04 in the midst of her reading of the question as she speeds up and abandons the reading entirely with a cut-off. The ensuing assertion of we not being sticklers for form is preceded, not surprisingly, by some trouble (uh- you know (0.2)), given its ‘(self)-interruptive’ and dis-aligning stance toward the question. The contrastive nO:T being sticklers with its prosodic emphasis is hearable as treating the question as pre-supposing that the foundation are sticklers. The claim of the foundation’s concern for substance (line 06) is then further specified with what we’re not looking at (lines 08–11). Similar to what we have observed in the prior segment, Claire then essentially invites the audience, beginning with the if clause that embeds the principle regarding the inclusion of references, to decide for themselves whether such inclusion would be appropriate (lines 14–18), at which point her response is presumably complete.

With a but followed by a brief pause and some quick speech perturbation, however, Claire continues with a reiteration of we’re looking for substance (lines 19–20), which is explicated with the importance of diving into a needy and worthy problem ... to change the world (lines 21–23). She ends with a so-prefaced summative statement using the
anaphoric that to highlight the rationale of the program (i.e. resources devoted to substantive change in the world) (lines 24–26).

In the segment then, the foundation representative rejects the terms of the question entirely and responds with an alternative framing and reiteration (also see Stivers and Hayashi, 2010), not just for the questioner, but the general audience, of the institutional priority on substance and what such substance entails. An advice-giving stance in this case would perhaps involve further engagement with the specifics of which citations may or may not qualify as ‘appropriate’. One might argue then that the direct reaching for the general policy embodies a degree of resistance to advice-giving in part through suggesting that the wrong question is being asked.

In the above two cases, the individual questions are not directly responded to. Rather, the foundation representatives reject the terms of the question entirely or shift the decision-making responsibility back to the questioner before returning to an explication of the foundation’s focus, priority, or mission. In so doing, they resist, or at least limit, the possibility of engaging with individual advising while fulfilling their responsibility of clearly and effectively disseminating information to an audience of potential grantees. At the same time, audience questions that seek specificity are arguably addressed to varying extents as well, just not within the parameters within which they are raised.

**Discussion and conclusion**

In this article, we have shown that in responding to prospective grantees’ yes/no questions that seek specificity, foundation representatives routinely deliver ‘big package’ responses with multi-unit turns that do more than answer the question as posed. As such, they leverage the three formats of yes/no+, clausal yes/no+, and non-yes/no to transcend the specifics of the question and reiterate the foundation’s principles and priorities, which are regularly introduced with linguistic routines such as again, as long as, and what we’re looking for is with the institutional we. While remaining responsive to audience questions to various extents, this move to go general or reach for the bigger picture embodies various degrees of resistance to the terms dictated by the questions and to individualized advice-giving. While yes/no+ provides (dis)confirmation of the issues raised by the questions, clausal yes/no+ does so with greater qualification or indirectness, and non-yes/no represents the more extreme approach of not directly addressing the questions at all.

The three different formats present different affordances for the foundation representatives to accomplish their professional work. While yes/no+ is fitted to the availability of a straightforward response, clausal yes/no+ facilitates the delivery of a more nuanced yes/no, and non-yes/no is done to reject the terms of the question, handle rare exceptions, and firmly shift the responsibility of assessing how specific projects fit with foundation priorities back to the questioners. With this range of formats, the foundation representatives manage the delicate balance between giving advice and giving information, which can be represented on a continuum with increasing emphasis on informing, or in other words, resistance to the appearance of doing individual advising (see Figure 1).

In sum, we started with an interest in the ways in which the multi-unit responses in our data appear to resist the specificity sought by the questions and aim instead to
address broader issues and principles related to funding opportunities. We propose that this practice of going general is one way in which the foundation representatives navigate a tension between doing informing on general matters and doing advising on specific matters related to particular projects. By going general, foundation representatives are able to provide potentially useful information on how to interpret application instructions and requirements, and they can do so without appearing to be giving advice on particular projects, or by extension, guaranteeing a favorable outcome for any particular proposal.

While Steensig and Heinemann (2013) have shown how certain yes/no questions (e.g. expansion eliciting questions) are designed to elicit responses that expand upon the type-conforming ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (also see Raymond, 2010), our focus has been not on the questions, but on the ‘big package’ responses and what these responses may look like in the institutional context of informational webinars for (grant) applicants. As such, our findings contribute to the growing body of literature that documents the complexity, and in particular, resistance, involved in responding to questions. Similar to Fox and Thompson’s (2010) claim that clausal responses to specifying wh-questions may indicate resistance to prior questions, we have shown that such resistance exists in the case of yes/no questions as well. Similar to Stivers and Hayashi’s (2010) participants in ordinary conversation, the foundation representatives in our data also produce transformative answers but do so not for the sole purpose of problematizing the terms and agenda of the questions. The transformation is leveraged here to manage being helpful to the individual while remaining maximally informative to the wider audience, as in part evidenced in the yes/no+ format (absent in Stivers and Hayashi’s data) that includes a clear and straightforward response to the question. Compared to the scarcity of nonconforming questions in Raymond (2003), their prevalence in our data may speak to the particular institutionality of informational applicant webinars where foundation representatives face a complex set of interactional demands that defy the straightforwardness embodied in type-conforming responses. We have also made a further distinction between two specific formats of nonconforming (clausal yes/no and non-clausal) and demonstrated the interactional affordances of these formats. More importantly, we have shown that even with what would be considered type-conforming responses delivered in the yes/no+ format, the participants display some sort of resistance to the constraints of the question through the plus (+) portion of the talk. In other words, the three formats represent a nuanced set of resources, with increasing or decreasing resistance to the question’s agenda, for crafting complex responses sensitive to the needs of the individual, the audience, and the foundation – responses that

![Figure 1. Three response formats.](image-url)
cannot be easily categorized as conforming or nonconforming, or accepting or resisting. While such degrees of question resistance are gauged in Stivers and Hayashi (2010) by whether the resistance targets only the question’s terms or includes its agenda as well, we offer another lens for considering degrees of resistance – via a set of response formats in informational webinars.

These findings also contribute to the advising literature with regard to resistance to advice-giving in particular. First, similar to the advice-givers in Hutchby (1995) and Locher (2006), who package their advice for a broader audience over the radio and the Internet, the foundation officers in our data also design their responses, especially in the ‘plus’ portions of yes/no+ and clausal yes/no+, for a wider audience that extends beyond the individual questioner. Second, rather than exploiting the advice-information ambiguity to camouflage advice as information, thereby softening its edge as targeting an advice recipient, in the context of applicant webinars, information-giving is deployed in a slightly different way – to move away from or to withhold advice-giving. The issue, therefore, is less about giving advice diplomatically and more about striving to maintain some distance from giving advice at all. Finally, this resistance to advice-giving is reminiscent of that in education and medical contexts, where advice may be withheld for the benefit of promoting autonomy (e.g. He, 1998) or upholding a patient-centered ideology (e.g. Sarangi, 2010). In the context of informational webinars for grant applicants, while promoting autonomy is a palpable concern as manifested in such routine phrasings as it’s up to you, there appear to be other constraints specific to the setting as well. In addition to striving to frame discussions as relevant to the whole audience and doing so within a single response slot, without the benefit of the interactive back-and-forth featured in other types of advising encounters, the officers also have an obligation, as noted earlier, to be informative without appearing to guarantee a particular outcome for a potential applicant.

By foregrounding how the institutional tension between ‘doing (general) informing’ and ‘doing (individual) advising’ may be navigated, our detailing of this professional expertise may offer a useful basis for developing materials for training future ‘ambassadors’ for the foundation’s mission – a step toward identifying ‘best practices’ for webinar facilitation (Zoumenou et al., 2015) in a particular context. Aside from articulating and making available a range of strategies for handling such questions, training sessions may be held where future ambassadors are invited to consider, for example, the specific cases as documented in the paper, brainstorming for potential responses to particular questions and examining actual responses for the specific ways in which they are effective. While existing training is likely to involve the delivery of monologic ‘stump’ speeches, a focus on handling sometimes unforeseen audience questions would fill an important gap in such training. Finally, while the webinar format has the clear advantage of being efficient, the ‘one-shot’ question and answer format necessarily incurs certain limitations. There is no way to gauge, for example, whether a question has been adequately addressed from an audience’s perspective as the moderator is the one who typically offers the sequence-closing third (Schegloff, 2007). Reflecting on the profits and pitfalls of this particular format for information dissemination may yield useful insights into maximizing its affordances and minimizing its constraints.
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Oktawia Wójcik and Alyson Silk at RWJF for providing useful guidance and crucial resources throughout the project. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewer for calling our attention to some highly relevant literature and for pushing us to articulate our contributions with greater precision. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2017 International Institute of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (IIEMCA) Conference (Columbus, OH, USA).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

References

Bolden G (2009) Beyond answering: Repeat-prefaced responses in conversation. Communication Monographs 76(2): 121–143.
Butler CW, Potter J, Danby S, et al. (2010) Advice-implicative interrogatives: Building ‘client-centered’ support in a children’s helpline. Social Psychology Quarterly 74: 216–241.
Clayman S (2001) Answers and evasions. Language in Society 30: 403–442.
Clayman S (2013) Agency in response: The role of prefatory address terms. Journal of Pragmatics 57: 290–302.
Clayman S and Heritage J (2002) The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on The Air. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Clemente I (2015) Uncertain Futures: Communication and Culture in Childhood Cancer Treatment. Oxford; New York: Wiley Blackwell.
De Gara C and Boora R (2006) Using elluminate as a simple solution for telehealth initiatives for continuing medical education. In: Reeves T and Yamashita S (eds) Proceedings of World Conference on E-learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education. Chesapeake, VA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education, pp. 476–480.
Drew P (1992) Contested evidence in a courtroom cross-examination: The case of a trial for rape. In: Drew P and Heritage J (eds) Talk at Work: Social Interaction in Institutional Settings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 470–520.
Drew P and Heritage J (eds) (1992) Talk at Work: Social Interaction in Institutional Settings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Ehrlich S and Sidnell J (2006) ‘I think that’s not an assumption you ought to make’: Challenging presuppositions in inquiry testimony. Language in Society 35: 655–676.
Enfield NJ, Stivers T and Levinson SC (2010) Question–response sequences in conversation across ten languages: An introduction. Journal of Pragmatics 42(10): 2615–2619.
Fox B and Thompson S (2010) Responses to wh-questions in English conversation. Research on Language and Social Interaction 43: 133–156.
He AW (1994) Withholding academic advice. Discourse Processes 18: 297–316.
He AW (1998) Reconstructing Institutions: Language Use in Academic Counseling Encounters. Greenwich, CT; London: Greenwood.
Heinemann T (2009) Two answers to inapposite inquiries In: Sidnell J (ed.) *Conversation Analysis: Comparative Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 159–186.

Heritage J (1998) Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry. *Language in Society* 27: 291–334.

Heritage J and Clayman S (2010) *Talk in Action: Interactions, Identities, and Institutions*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Heritage J and Raymond G (2012) Navigating epistemic landscapes: Acquiescence, agency and resistance in responses to polar questions. In: De Ruiter JP (ed.) *Questions: Formal, Functional and Interactional Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 179–192.

Hutchby I (1995) Aspects of recipient design in expert advice-giving on call-in radio. *Discourse Processes* 19(2): 219–238.

Kinnell AM and Maynard D (1996) The delivery and receipt of safer sex advice in pre-test counselling sessions for HIV and AIDS. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24: 405–437.

Lee S-H (2013) Response design in conversation. In: Sidnell J and Stivers T (eds) *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 415–432.

Limberg H (2010) *The Interactional Organization of Academic Talk: Office Hour Consultations*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Limberg H and Locher MA (eds) (2012) *Advice in Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Locher MA (2006) *Advice Online: Advice-giving in an American Internet Health Column*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Peräkylä A and Silverman D (1991) Reinterpreting speech-exchange systems: Communication formats in AIDS counseling. *Sociology* 25(4): 627–651.

Pomerantz A (1984) Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In: Atkinson JM and Heritage J (eds) *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 57–101.

Raymond G (2003) Grammar and social organization: Yes/no interrogatives and the structure of responding. *American Sociological Review* 68: 939–967.

Raymond G (2010) Grammar and social relations: Alternative forms of yes/no-type initiating actions in health visitor interactions. In: Freed AF and Ehrlich S (eds) ‘Why Do You Ask?’ *The Functions of Questions in Institutional Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 87–107.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, Gail. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 50(4), 696–735.

Sacks H (1987) On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In: Button G and Lee JRE (eds) *Talk and Social Organization*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 54–69.

Sarangi S (2000) Activity types, discourse types and interactional hybridity: The case of genetic counseling. In: Sarangi S and Coulthard M (eds) *Discourse and Social Life*. London: Pearson, pp. 1–27.

Sarangi S (2010) Professional values in interaction: Non-directiveness, client-centredness and other-orientation in genetic counseling. In: Pattison S, Hannigan B, Pill R, et al. (eds) *Emerging Values in Health Care: The Challenge for Professionals*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 163–185.

Sarangi S and Clarke A (2002) Zones of expertise and the management of uncertainty in genetics risk communication. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 35(2): 139–171.

Schegloff EA (1996) Turn Organization: One Intersection of Grammar and Interaction, In Interaction and Grammar (Ochs, Elinor, Schegloff, Emanuel A, Thompson, Sandra, eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, vol. 2, pp. 52–133.
Schegloff EA (2007) Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schegloff, E. A., & Lerner, G. (2009). Beginning to respond: Well-prefaced responses to wh-questions. Research on Language and Social Interaction, 42(2), 91–115.

Schegloff, EA (2010), Some Other “Uh(m)”s””. Discourse and Society, 47,(2): 130–174.

Shaw C, Potter J and Hepburn A (2015) Advice-implicative actions: Using interrogatives and assessments to deliver advice in mundane conversation. Discourse Studies 17(3): 317–342.

Silverman D (1997) Discourses of Counselling: HIV Counselling as Social Interaction. London: SAGE.

Steensig J and Heinemann T (2013) When ‘yes’ is not enough – As an answer to a yes/no question. In: Reed BS and Raymond G (eds) Units of Talk – Units of Action. Amsterdam; Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 207–242.

Stivers T and Hayashi M (2010) Transformative answers: One way to resist a question’s constraints. Language in Society 39: 1–25.

Stivers T and Heritage J (2001) Breaking the sequential mould: Answering ‘more than the question’ during comprehensive history taking. Text 21: 151–185.

Stivers T and Robinson JD (2006) A preference for progressivity in interaction. Language in Society 35: 367–392.

Vehviläinen S (2003) Avoiding providing solutions: Orienting to the ideal of students’ self-directness in counseling interaction. Discourse Studies 5(3): 389–414.

Vehviläinen S (2012) Question-prefaced advice in feedback sequences of Finnish academic supervisions. In: Limberg H and Locher MA (eds) Advice in Discourse. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 31–52.

Waring HZ (2017) Going general as a resource for doing advising in mentor-teacher conversations. Journal of Pragmatics 110: 20–33.

Waring HZ and Song G (in press) Advice in education. In: MacGeorge E and Van Swol L (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Advice. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 217–236.

Zayts O and Schnurr S (2012) ‘You may know better than I do’: Negotiating advice-giving in Down Syndrome screening in a Hong Kong prenatal hospital. In: Limberg H and Locher MA (eds) Advice in Discourse. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 195–212.

Zoumenou V, Sigman-Grant M, Coleman G, et al. (2015) Identifying best practices for an interactive webinar. The Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences 107(2): 62–69.

Author biographies

Hansun Zhang Waring is Associate Professor of Linguistics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University and founder of The Language and Social Interaction Working Group (LANSI). As an applied linguist and conversation analyst, her work has appeared in journals such as Research on Language and Social Interaction, Journal of Pragmatics, Text and Talk, Discourse Processes, and Discourse Studies. She is the author of Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy (with Jean Wong; Routledge, 2010); Theorizing Pedagogical Interaction: Insights from Conversation Analysis (Routledge, 2016); and Discourse Analysis: The Questions Discourse Analysts Ask and How They Answer Them (Routledge, 2018).

Elizabeth Reddington is a Doctoral Candidate in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she has also served as an Adjunct Instructor and President of The Language and Social Interaction Working Group (LANSI). Her interests include applying conversation analysis to the study of interaction in institutional settings, particularly classrooms. Her co-authored work has appeared in Linguistics and Education; HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research; and the Journal of Second Language Writing.
Di Yu is a Doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University and current president of The Language and Social Interaction Working Group (LANSI). Her research interests include media discourse, humor, and the use of multimodal resources in interaction. Her co-authored work has been published in Language Learning Journal, Working Papers in TESOL and Applied linguistics, and Research on Children and Social Interaction.

Ignasi Clemente is an Anthropologist and a Linguist. He teaches at the City of New York University and is Honorary Senior Research Associate at the Louis Dundas Centre for Children’s Palliative Care, Institute of Child Health, University College London. His research interests include childhood studies, chronic and terminal illness, pain and suffering, health communication, and multimodality and corporeality in multilingual settings. His book, Uncertain Futures: Communication and Culture in Childhood Cancer Treatment (Wiley Blackwell), was awarded the 2017 Modest Reixach Book Prize from the Catalan Society of Sociolinguistics.

Appendix 1

Transcription notations

.  (period) falling intonation
?  (question mark) rising intonation
,  (comma) continuing intonation
-  (hyphen) abrupt cut-off
::  (colon(s)) prolonging of sound
word  (underlining) stress
WORD (all caps) loud speech
°word° (degree symbols) quiet speech
↑  word (upward arrow) raised pitch
↓  word (downward arrow) lowered pitch
>word<  (more than and less than) quicker speech
<word>  (less than & more than) slowed speech
<  (less than) jump start or rushed start
hh  (series of h’s) aspiration or laughter
.hh  (h’s preceded by dot) inhalation
(hh)  (h’s in parentheses) inside word boundaries
pt  lip smack
[ ]  (lined-up brackets) beginning and ending of
simultaneous or overlapping speech
= (equal sign) latch or contiguous utterances of the same speaker

(2.4) (number in parentheses) length of a silence in 10ths of a second

(.) (period in parentheses) micro-pause, 0.2 second or less

((points)) (double parentheses) transcriptionist comment