Affordances and Actions: Requests for Confirmation as Devices for Implementing Challenging and Other Disagreement-Implicative Actions

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Abstract

This article examines how requests for confirmation (RfCs) can be used as devices for challenging or disagreeing with another participant, their talk, or their action(s) in informal interaction. Based on their defining pragmatic characteristics, we identify two generic interactional affordances RfCs offer their speakers: (1) a capacity to do questioning and (2) a capacity to forward propositional content. While these two affordances are generally utilized together, one or the other may be mobilized more strongly when bringing off challenging or disagreement-implicative actions. Drawing on interactional data in (Peninsular) Spanish and (American) English, and using conversation analytic methods, we illustrate how participants may differentially draw on these two basic affordances with respect to two major classes of “challengeables”: (1) a co-participant’s claims and assertions (or the stances with which they are delivered), and (2) a co-participant’s plans or decisions. We end with a discussion of the usefulness of an affordance-based approach.
Keywords

request for confirmation – challenge – disagreement – cross-linguistic conversation analysis – interactional affordances – action

1 Introduction

At first sight, soliciting confirmation from another for some piece of information appears to be a very innocuous thing to do. In fact, as one of the primary means for reassuring tentative or uncertain information, one would normally assume good faith when being asked to confirm or disconfirm the adequacy or correctness of some state of affairs. But requests for confirmation can also be used as a means for less innocent ends. Just like other forms of “questioning”, they can be used to question the other and to express doubt about, or to raise objections to, what they have said or done. Requesting confirmation can then be understood to be done in the service of challenging or disagreeing with a co-participant. It is such deployments of requests for confirmation in (American) English and (Peninsular) Spanish talk-in-interaction that constitute the focus of this paper.

In its basic and prototypical form, the act of requesting confirmation involves the requester advancing what they tentatively assume to be correct but are uncertain of – a “hypothesis”, as Bolinger (1978) would have it – and mobilizing the recipient, who is assumed to be authoritatively informed about the matter at hand, to establish (‘confirm’) or negate (‘disconfirm’) its actual (sometimes factual) correctness (Schegloff, 1996a: 180; König and Pfeiffer, this issue; Barnes, 2011; Küttner, 2016; see also Labov and Fanshel, 1977). As such, requests for confirmation have a clear and indisputable questioning import, deriving from the requester’s invocation of an asymmetric distribution of (access to) knowledge about the state of affairs addressed in the “confirmable” in favor of the would-be confirmer (Heritage, 2012, 2013; Heritage and G. Raymond, 2012). At the same time, however, the requester – in advancing their “hypothesis” – lays claim to, and reveals themself to have, some degree of knowledge about the confirmable state of affairs, even if it is presented as uncertain or tentative and treated as in need of intersubjective verification. Requests for confirmation therefore also have a basic capacity for introducing propositional content into the interaction.

In this paper, we conceive of these basic pragmatic features of requests for confirmation (RfCs) in terms of interactional affordances that speakers can differentially mobilize in the service of bringing off challenging or
disagreement-implicative actions. The concept of affordances generally refers to the possibilities an object offers for action, which may differ across potential groups of users of the object and the contexts in which they encounter or use it (see Gibson, 2015 [1979] for a more elaborate account). As Hutchby (2001) points out, affordances are “functional” in the sense that they are enabling, as well as constraining, factors in a given organism’s attempt to engage in some activity” (p. 448, italics in original). In relation to conversational objects, such as RfCs, these factors may also be sequential-interactional, in that the conversational object(s) in question may open up specific response spaces (Hutchby, 2001: 449–450). For the use of RfCs as vehicles for challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions, it thus makes sense to ask how the aforementioned basic pragmatic features of RfCs – conceived of in terms of interactional affordances – facilitate or constrain their use as challenges, and in how far they may (perhaps differentially) shape what respondents can do next.

We will show that some such challenging uses primarily draw on the questioning affordance of RfCs (their capacity to do questioning), whereas others primarily rest on their capacity to bring forward propositional content and to raise issues with respect to the co-participant’s talk or their action(s) (their propositional affordance). We will illustrate how each of these two affordances (their capacity to do questioning vs. their capacity to forward propositional content) can be differentially and context-sensitively mobilized, foregrounding one or the other more strongly, when RfCs are used to bring off challenging or disagreement-implicative actions. This differentiation appears to cut across different kinds of challengeables, suggesting that it is insensitive to the subject matter being challenged or disagreed with. Within the confines of this paper, we limit ourselves to illustrating this phenomenon with respect to two major classes of “challengeables”: (1) when challenging assertions and associated stances, and (2) when challenging plans or decisions. The point of our argument is that the aforementioned affordances derive from basic pragmatic features of RfCs and are thus generically available as interactional resources for participants when using RfCs as vehicles for implementing challenging or other disagreement-implicative actions, regardless of what is being challenged or disagreed with. But these basic affordances can be differentially

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1 Gibson’s original account also emphasizes the relational (user-specific) aspects of an object’s or artifact’s affordances (see Hutchby 2001: 448). With conversational objects, due to their thoroughly interactional character, the relational aspects cannot be so neatly distinguished from the functional aspects, however. We thus use the latter term in a more encompassing way than in Gibson’s original exposition.
mobilized – one more strongly than the other – when deploying RfCs as challenges, yielding different techniques of challenging.

The following sections offer a brief overview of prior interactional research on the use of interrogative and declarative question formats as vehicles for implementing challenging or other disaffiliative actions (section 2) and an outline of the materials and methods used for this study (section 3). We then consider three main ways in which RfCs are used to embody interactional challenges in our data. We gradually move into the analysis by revisiting a practice that is well-documented in the literature on repair and also figures prominently in our own data: the use of RfCs as pre-disaffiliative understanding checks (section 4). While generally well-understood, this device appears to mobilize the aforementioned affordances in artfully intertwined ways, such that their distinctness may be overlooked. To bring it (back) into view, we then offer an in-depth analysis of how RfCs are used to challenge co-participants (section 5), either by targeting their assertions and/or the stances with which those assertions are delivered (section 5.1), or by targeting their plans and decisions (section 5.2). In both of these domains, we will distinguish between uses that foreground one or the other of the two interactional affordances of RfCs more strongly. The paper ends with a brief summary of our argument and a discussion of its implications for future research (section 6).

2 Background: Questioning as a Vehicle for Challenging

Prior interactional research has amply demonstrated how question-formatted turns can be used to more or less subtly challenge or disagree with a co-participant in ordinary interaction.

The overall picture that emerges from this research is that interrogative formats (both wh-interrogatives as well as polar interrogatives) virtually lend themselves to implementing challenging and similar disagreement-implicative actions. Koshik (2003, 2005), for instance, has shown how English wh-interrogatives can be used as “rhetorical” questions (e.g., When have I?, How is it background?) to challenge the claims of a prior speaker by contextually conveying effectively the opposite of the proposition carried by the question (i.e., ‘I have never’, ‘It’s not background’). Beyond challenging the substance of verbal claims, more recent research suggests that such “rhetorical” wh-interrogatives can also be used to draw attention to the problematic character of a co-participant’s action(s) and to challenge the socio-normative adequacy or appropriateness of their conduct more generally (Laanesoo and Keevallik, 2017). Similarly, why-interrogatives have been shown, across a range
of languages, to be prone to get heard (and sometimes misheard) as challenges of the co-participant’s prior claims or actions (e.g., Günthner, 2000; Egbert and Vöge, 2008; Bolden and Robinson, 2011). And in Spanish, pero-prefaced what-interrogatives (‘but what …’) have developed into a more or less conventionalized format for taking issue with a co-participant’s response to a prior question (Ehmer and Rosemeyer, 2018).

More relevantly for the issues pursued in this article, prior research has also shown that, in specific environments, polar (yes/no-) interrogatives are equally usable as devices for challenging a co-participant and/or their claims, actions, and assertions. They can accomplish this either by conveying the reverse of what is expressed in the grammatical form of the questioning turn (e.g., Is it background? conveying ‘It’s not background’; see Koshik, 2002, 2005), or by inviting a response of the same polarity as that of the interrogative which would, however, press the speaker into openly disagreeing with the questioner or lead to self-contradiction, thereby essentially rendering the “question” unanswerable for its recipient (Heinemann, 2008). In English, negative interrogatives and reverse polarity tag-questions can likewise come off as challenging, or even hostile, if asked in the right way and in the right circumstances (see, e.g., Heritage, 2002, 2003, 2012, 2013; Keisanen, 2007). What all of these previous investigations have in common is that they start from one or more specific interrogative formats whose challenging import is then typically explained with reference to the “conduciveness” of the interrogative (Bolinger, 1957; Quirk et al., 1985: 808ff.) – what conversation analysts would call their “design-based response preference” (Sidnell, 2010: 86–87; see also Schegloff, 2007: 62–63; Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013: 213) – and the fact that they are issued from a (relatively) knowing (K+) position (see Heritage, 2012).2 The general mechanism that underlies these different usages can be summarized as follows: Speakers tweak the design-based response preference to their advantage (or rather their recipient’s disadvantage) by context-sensitively designing their questions in such a way as to invite affirmation or disaffirmation of propositions/assertions/positions that are more or less known to be interactionally

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2 Keisanen (2007) is a notable exception in this regard. While she, too, starts from specific grammatical formats (reverse polarity tag-questions and negative interrogatives) with their specific response preferences, her analysis places less emphasis on the questioner’s/challenger’s underlying knowledge state. Instead, what appears to be decisive in her analysis is that these turns call something in the prior speaker’s talk (e.g., an embedded claim, a stance, a position) into question and thereby cast it as doubtful. According to her, this may, but need not involve the invocation or assertion of discrepant (prior) knowledge on the challenger’s part.
“unfavorable” for the recipient (e.g., because they lead to open disagreement, self-contradiction, etc.), thereby challenging them or their positions.

Similarly, as far as English is concerned, declaratively formatted questioning turns have been shown to come off as disaffiliative when they ask for re-confirmation of something said previously, thereby halting the progressivity of the ongoing sequence and disaligning with its unfolding trajectory, which is commonly understood as raising problems with, or objections to, what the co-participant has previously said, or done with what they said (Antaki, 2012; see also Steensig and Larsen, 2008 for a similar observation in Danish interactions). Here, too, a fundamental ingredient contributing to the disaffiliative character of these turns resides in the fact that they address matters the questioning participant can/could or evidently does know, wherefore they cannot be heard as genuinely asking. Rather than being tied to “interrogativity” as a formal feature, then, the potential for questioning turns to get heard as challenging or disaffiliative in character seems to rest substantially on the epistemic status of the questioner and the sequential context in which the questioning turn is produced (Heritage, 2002, 2012; see also Schegloff, 1984). In addition, prosodic and/or embodied resources may endow questioning actions with a challenging import (with respect to prosody, see, e.g., Günthner, 1996 for why-questions; Benjamin and Walker, 2013 as well as Couper-Kuhlen, 2020 for other-repetitions; Keisanen, 2007 for polar questions). Remarkably, the contexts in which questions are used as vehicles for challenging are often ones in which disagreement or disaffiliation is already relevantly “in play” prior to the production of the challenging questioning turns (e.g., Koshik, 2002, 2003, 2005; Keisanen, 2007; Heinemann, 2008).

Our paper seeks to build on and complement this earlier research by analytically proceeding in the opposite direction. The account we offer starts not from a specific grammatical form(at), but takes a generic functional device as its point of departure: requests for confirmation (RfCs). Like (genuine) questioning, requesting confirmation is essentially characterized by a recipient-tilted epistemic asymmetry and is typically associated with accomplishing work in the epistemic domain of social interaction (Heritage, 2012, 2013; Heritage and Raymond, 2012): RfCs as conventionally understood are produced from a

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3 Why-interrogatives are a bit of an exception in this regard. As Bolden and Robinson (2011) have argued, because they interrogate the co-participant’s reasons for their action(s) and thereby hold them accountable for said action(s), why-interrogatives more or less inevitably communicate a stance that the co-participant’s action(s) do not accord with commonsense and are thus inappropriate or unwarranted. Differences in the speaker’s epistemic access to the accountable event may therefore primarily shape how strongly any given why-interrogative implicates this challenging stance.
moderately less-knowing (K-) position and primarily serve to (re-)assure bits and pieces of information about which the RfC-speaker can legitimately claim some degree of knowledge, while the co-participant is nonetheless treated as having epistemic primacy and authority with respect to the matter-at-hand (Schegloff, 1996a: 180; König and Pfeiffer, this issue; Barnes, 2011; Küttner, 2016; see also Labov and Fanshel, 1977).

Their epistemic foundation notwithstanding, RfCs are highly versatile and polyfunctional objects that can be deployed to accomplish a range of other social actions and interactional functions, some of which extend beyond the epistemic domain (see König, Pfeiffer and Weber, in prep.). Our focus here will be on how participants employ this device and mobilize its affordances to bring off challenging (and other disagreement-implicative) actions in (American) English and (Peninsular) Spanish talk-in-interaction. In the interest of generality, we will confine ourselves to uses that are attested in each of our samples and can therefore reasonably be assumed to exist in both languages. By adopting this functionally driven and cross-linguistic (though decidedly not comparative or contrastive) perspective, we aim to arrive at a better understanding of what makes RfCs suitable devices for more or less subtly challenging a co-participant, their claims or their action(s), regardless of the language-specific grammatical resources speakers have at their disposal in these two languages (on which, see Ehmer, in prep.; Küttner and Szczepek Reed, in prep.). This is not to say that aspects of linguistic form(atting) are unimportant. However, by switching perspectives and focusing on pragmatic commonalities in RfC use across English and Spanish, questions about language-specific peculiarities in their formal realization can be held off until later. They may be revisited once we have reached a better understanding of the functional mechanisms that underlie the deployment of RfCs as vehicles for challenging in both languages.

Moreover, given that, in terms of their epistemic underpinnings, RfCs obviously differ from interrogatively and declaratively formatted turns that are produced from a knowing (K+) position and that are hearable as challenging, or at least not genuinely asking for confirmation, on those grounds (e.g., Koshik, 2002, 2003, 2005; Heritage, 2002, 2003; Steensig and Larsen, 2008), there is clearly something to be learned from taking this alternative and complementary analytic tack.

3 Materials and Methods

The data for this study are drawn from larger base collections of more than 200 RfC sequences in each language that were compiled for the Scientific Network
Interactional Linguistics (König and Pfeiffer, this issue). The (American) English collection was sampled from a diverse set of audio- and video-recorded informal face-to-face and telephone interactions among friends and family members. This set included some “classic CA” video data (Hoey and C. W. Raymond, 2022), randomly selected phone calls from the CallFriend and CallHome corpora (MacWhinney, 2007), as well as some newer video-recordings of face-to-face interactions gathered for various research purposes. The (Peninsular) Spanish collection was sampled from video-recorded interactions between friends drawn from the free conversation section of “The Nijmegen Corpus of Casual Spanish” (NCCSP, Torreira and Ernestus, 2010). All data have been recorded with the informed consent of the participants and represent occasions of informal interaction. The sampling of the base collections followed the procedures outlined in König, Pfeiffer and Weber (in prep.).

To better understand the nature of the sub-collections used in this article, it is important to emphasize that we did not initially focus on challenging actions. Rather, these cases emerged as a functionally distinct subset during a phase of individual and independent analytic engagement with the cases in our base collections. As such, we did not specify in advance what constitutes a challenging action and then compiled our sub-collections on the basis of such criteria. Instead, we conducted case-by-case sequential analyses of the cases in our respective base collections and set pertinent cases aside in a separate sub-collection whenever we happened to come across them (Schegloff, 1987, 1996a; Hoey and Kendrick, 2017). In assembling these sub-collections, we relied solely on co-participants’ treatment of the RfCs as somehow challenging and/or other co-occurring evidence in the sequential context for the identification of pertinent cases. One consequence of this approach is that we do not (try to) systematically distinguish between RfCs that implement challenges or related disaffiliative actions directly and those that appear to merely adumbrate or foreshadow them and are thus perhaps better understood as challenge- or disagreement-implicative (see, e.g., Monzoni, 2008; Steensig and Larsen, 2008). As long as participants somehow oriented to them as challenging or disagreement-implicative, they were included in our respective sub-collections.

Both analysts then got together and discussed the cases in their sub-collections of RfCs that they found to implement challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions. Cases in which participants’ orientation was somehow vague or questionable and for which no inter-analyst agreement could be reached were systematically excluded from the sub-collections. This procedure yielded sub-collections of 25 instances in the English sample (7 %
of the base collection) and 43 instances in the Spanish sample (16% of the base collection). Given the disaffiliative character of the targeted RfC-actions, these numbers are expectably low. But they are consistent with the general frequency trends observed for comparable actions in earlier studies (see Keisanen, 2007: 257; Heinemann, 2008: 57; Steensig and Larsen, 2008: 115–116), especially when similar sampling procedures were used (Zinken and Küttner, 2022: 304–305).

4 Getting Started: Pre-disaffiliative Understanding Checks Revisited

Let us begin by revisiting a well-documented interactional practice for adumbrating disaffiliative (and sometimes challenging) actions that can involve the production of RfCs as vehicles for doing so. We know from the extant literature on conversational repair that this domain intricately intersects with the interactional management of agreement/disagreement in social interaction (Schegloff et al., 1977; see also Jefferson, 2018: chapter 10; Küttner, 2019). The partial intersection between these two domains is particularly evident in the cross-linguistically well-documented use of other-initiations of repair (OIRs) as pre-disagreements, i.e., as harbingers of upcoming disagreement or disaffiliation (e.g., Schegloff, 1997, 2007; Svennevig, 2008; Dingemanse and Enfield 2015; see also Enfield 2015: 125; Floyd 2015: 486). Given that one of the most common practices for the other-initiation of repair consists in offering candidate understandings (see, e.g., Kendrick, 2015 for English), essentially a type of request for (re-)confirmation (Schegloff et al., 1977; Heritage, 1984: 319; Schegloff, 1997; Antaki, 2012), it is not surprising that such pre-disaffiliative/pre-disagreeing uses of “repair-like” RfCs figure prominently in our sub-collections. As one would expect, these cases involve a speaker producing a RfC, ostensibly so as to assure their adequate understanding of what it is that the co-participant has just said (i.e., in the given context, the RfC could be paraphrased as ‘Do you mean X?’; Schegloff et al., 1977: 378–379). Notably, this entails that the RfC speaker condenses the co-participant’s preceding description(s) into a specific concept and offers it up for (dis)confirmation (cf. Zinken and Küttner, 2022). What is crucial for such RfCs to be clearly recognizable as pre-disaffiliative understanding checks at the moment of their production is that the speaker somehow (e.g., prosodically, with embodied means) displays a critical stance toward the confirmable (X) and makes it clear that X is, from their point of view, objectionable, so that, with reference to the preference for agreement (Sacks,
confirmation would actually be dispreferred, because it would manifest disagreement between both parties (cf. Bilmes, 2014).4

Consider extract (1) from the Spanish data as a first example. Here, three friends are discussing possible destinations and activities for a joint trip. In responding to a proposal from Ricardo to go to a mountain range (Ruta del Cares), Camilo has expressed his preference for going hiking rather than rafting. Ricardo has attended to this as indicating softness or possibly even fear on Camilo’s part and begins to tease him by calling him a maricón (‘wimp’ or ‘coward’) in line 01. He then goes on to make an alternative proposal (Davidson, 1984).

Extract (1) Espeleología ‘speleology’5 (esp_nccsp24, rfc210, 1824–1836 sec)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>RIC: &lt;&lt;h, all, :-)&gt; mariCÓN;&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wimp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>(-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>RIC: podemos ir a las cuevas de v/ de val#porQUEro;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we can go to the caves of v of Valporquero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>04</td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is not to say that understanding checks without such concurrent stance displays are necessarily less (pre-)disaffiliative. They may be uttered without any such display and their (pre-)disaffiliative character can remain “hidden-from-view” until it surfaces at a later point in the sequence (i.e., it can be non-recognizable at the moment of its production). Insofar as making it recognizable at the moment of the understanding check’s production entails a speaker’s choice to do so, we feel legitimated to speak of such uses as designedly challenging or disagreement-implicative. Moreover, recipients are quite attentive to the sheer possibility of such (pre-)disaffiliative deployments of other-initiatives of repair (see Schegloff, 2006 on “possibles”). In fact, this is part of what renders them so effective as devices for managing incipient disagreement without letting it surface (Svennevig, 2008).

Transcripts follow the GAT 2 conventions for the respective language (Couper-Kuhlen and Barth-Weingarten, 2011 for English; Ehmer et al., 2019 for Spanish). Multimodal transcriptions follow Mondada (2016). Throughout the examples, the focal RFCs are marked with single-lined arrows (->), their responses with double-lined arrows (=>).
In line 05, Camilo responds with a RfC that can be understood to check his adequate understanding of Ricardo’s alternative proposal. At the same time, this RfC transforms Ricardo’s proposal to go to the caves of Valporquero into a proposal to do espeleología (‘speleology’, line 05) by reformulating the proposed destination in terms of an attendant activity to be done there. By suggesting that Ricardo’s proposal boils down to engaging in a scientific rather than a leisure activity, Camilo can be heard to adopt a critical stance toward this proposal and to express his disinclination to accept it. His bodily-visual comportment supports such a hearing, as he slightly lowers his head, raises his eyebrows, blinks multiple times in quick succession and gives Ricardo a look that conveys some degree of surprise or skeptical disbelief that he would indeed propose such a thing (see Figures 1 and 2). Camilo thus clearly deploys the RfC as a vehicle for tacitly criticizing and thereby challenging Ricardo’s proposal. And Ricardo hears it that way, as he responds with a delayed NO and defends his proposal by reframing it as espeleología a lo Burro (‘speleology, the donkey-ish ((stupid/ignorant)) way’, line 06) which seeks to reject the criticism implied in Camilo’s RfC by cancelling any implication that the proposed activity is intellectual or scientific in character.

A very similar sequential trajectory can be observed in Extract (2) from the English data. Here, Lara and Pablo are discussing options for renovating one

In the given sequential context, this may be done as a sort of retaliative retort for Ricardo calling him a maricón and questioning his masculinity. The relevant line of reasoning goes “you call me a wimp for suggesting hiking, and now you propose speleology?”. 
of their bathrooms. Specifically, the issue is what sort of tiles to put in it. In line 01, Pablo proposes to use tiles that are “on the silverish side”.

Extract (2) Aluminum (Phil:10:004)

01 PAB: i thInk they gotta be on the SILverish (0.2) side.
02 (1.8)
03 LAR: <<h> tI'm not> putting sIlver in the bAtsh?
04 =on the SHO:Wer,= 
05 =you hAve to put like a plai:n: (2.5)
06 PAB: ↑'LIGHT.=
07 a li:ght (0.2)
08 LAR: S:ILver.
09 (1.0)
10 PAB: you look at the bla:ck TILE;=
11 =that tile they HAVE,
12 LAR: YEAH,=
13 PAB: =and you pick a l:ight TILE;=
14 =that blends INto that.=
15 =[white is too (WHITE;)]
16 → LAR: =[are you saying aLUminum? ]
17 → aLUminum? 
18 ⇒ PAB: aLU:minum-loo:kin'==#
19 =somethin’ like THAT.
20 (0.8)
21 PAB: [([WHITE/WHY?])
22 LAR: [ she won’t ] do? (.)
23 PAB: [ GLA:SS= ]
24 LAR: [she won’t] do aluminum in the SHOWer;=
25 =she’s already made tha[t CLEAR. ]
26 PAB: [the GLASS?]
27 (0.5)

Here, disagreement is already well in play by the time the focal sequence is produced (in lines 16–19). Lara responds to Pablo’s initial proposal with a straightforward objection (lines 02–03). Moreover, when Pablo subsequently backs down and states that the tiles should at least be of a “light” color (lines 06–07), she resists this attempt at compromise by re-issuing a partial repeat of Pablo’s initial proposal (S:ILver, line 08), thereby clearly indicating that this is unacceptable to her (cf. Robinson, 2013). Rather than confirming that this is what he was proposing, Pablo takes a step back and begins to explicate his reasoning by starting from a common baseline, the black tiles they already agreed on (lines 10–11). He then goes on to make it clear that what he really meant to suggest was to complement those black tiles with something “light” and shiny.
rather than with any kind of plain-colored (e.g., white)\textsuperscript{7} tiles (lines 13–15). This is when Lara produces the focal RfC, which, with its meta-communicative frame (\textit{are you saying X}), initially comes in the guise of an understanding check (line 16).\textsuperscript{8} Note, though, that the offered candidate, \textit{aLUminum}, stands in a hyponymic relationship to what Pablo had originally suggested (\textit{SILverish}, line 01) and can therefore be understood as an attempt to pin him down to a more specific option than he has so far been willing to commit to. Pablo resists this attempt, however, by responding with a term-transformative answer (Stivers and Hayashi, 2010; Stivers, 2022): His \textit{aLU:minum-loo:kin’=somethin’ like THAT} (lines 18–19) attends to the candidate Lara just offered as going into the right direction of what kind of tiles he is envisioning but refuses to fully commit to this particular option and treats it as one among many. This kind of response can also be understood to embody his anticipation that Lara, after already having objected to silverish tiles, is unlikely to approve of aluminum. Indeed, she receipts even his term-transformative answer with a facial expression of disapproval (see Figures 3 and 4). Moreover, when she relays the tiler’s clear refusal to \textit{do aluminum in the SHOwer} (lines 24–25), she also reveals that the candidate she just offered Pablo for confirmation was not really an option in the first place. Whether or not her RfC in lines 16–17 was indeed strategically issued with the somewhat Machiavellian intent of setting Pablo a trap – one that he did not fully fall for in the end – this continuation of the sequence offers clear evidence for its use as a pre-disagreeing challenge of Pablo’s proposal.

To sum up, in the previous examples we have seen how speakers use RfCs to implement interactional challenges. On the surface, the RfC is used to check its speaker’s adequate understanding of a co-participant’s prior contribution by offering a candidate understanding up for confirmation. This primarily mobilizes the RfC’s questioning affordance. At the same time, the candidate understanding that is being offered boils the co-participant’s preceding description(s) down to a specific concept that is contextually (made) recognizable as “undesirable” or “untoward” (i.e., the speaker adopts a critical

\textsuperscript{7} A little later, he also rejects cream-colored tiles as an option, lending further support to the analysis that when he says “light”, what he has in mind are tiles that are shiny (though not necessarily metallic), as opposed to anything matt finished. Also note his later alternative proposal of using glass tiles in this respect (lines 23 and 26).

\textsuperscript{8} It is noteworthy that such meta-communicative formulations are rather infrequent and “marked” in informal interaction (Drew, 2003; Steensig and Larsen, 2008; Zinken and Küttner, 2022). When they \textit{are} used, they are typically invested with additional, and not uncommonly disaffiliative, interactional meaning (see also Küttner, 2019). In this light, the fact that Lara drops this framing device and treats it as dispensable (Schegloff, 2004) when recycling her turn from overlap (line 17) may be understood to “take it down a notch”.

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or negative stance toward the formulated concept or understanding). This transformative operation mobilizes the RfC's capacity to introduce new content into the interaction (and stances toward that content that go along with it). The fact that a disaffiliative or disagreeing response is prefigured as being contingent on the recipient's confirmatory response, makes confirmation more difficult and challenging for the recipient. And we saw recipients wrestle with these difficulties in the above examples (recall that the replies consist of a disconfirming response followed by a defensive, re-framing account in Extract (1) and of a transformative answer in Extract (2)). Importantly, this device mobilizes both of the generic affordances of RfCs simultaneously (and to a similar degree), so that their interactional distinctness may be overlooked. In what follows, we will try to unpack their distinctness by focusing on RfCs that differentially mobilize one or the other affordance more strongly in bringing off the challenging or disagreement-implicative action.

5 The Two Distinct Affordances of RfCs in the Service of Challenging

To get a clearer sense of the interactionally distinct ways in which the general affordances of RfCs can be mobilized in the service of bringing off challenging or disagreement-implicative actions, we now zoom into cases in which participants differentially mobilize one or the other affordance more strongly. To highlight that these different techniques are generically available as a participant resource, regardless of what it is that is being challenged with the RfC, we illustrate each of these methods in relation to two major classes of “challengeables". The first concerns the veracity of another’s claims and assertions or the genuineness of specific stances with which they are delivered. The second concerns the acceptability or feasibility of another’s plans or decisions. These two kinds of challengeables emerged as common and recurrent in our data. We refer to them as ‘classes’, because they exhibit qualitative differences that merit their analytic distinction. As we elaborate below, when challenging assertions and associated stances, challengers take issue with the veracity, genuineness, or factuality of what they have been presented (or how it has been presented to them). By contrast, when challenging plans or decisions, challengers take issue with the practicality/feasibility or acceptability of what their co-participant has decided to do (i.e., ‘how they wish to go about things”). Across these two domains, we find that participants, when using a RfC to construct a

9 We note that this difference between ‘the factual’ and ‘the practical/acceptable’ appears to loosely correspond to (or map onto) three basic orders that have been shown to matter for...
challenging move, can either harness its questioning import, or its capacity to advance propositional content more strongly.

5.1 **Challenging Assertions and Associated Stances**

Though certainly not pervasive, participants show a very basic orientation to the veracity and truthfulness of what they are being told. This general orientation is particularly manifest in the practices deployed for receiving news and displaying surprise, some of which involve the production of more or less ritualized displays of disbelief (e.g., Heritage, 1984; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006; Thompson et al., 2015; see also the contributions by Aldrup, Gipper et al., as well as Mamorstein and Szczepak Reed in this issue). When produced in less ritualized environments, similar displays of disbelief, doubt or skepticism toward a co-participant’s claims or assertions and the stance(s) with which they are delivered can take on a challenging quality (Keisanen, 2007). In the following, we will illustrate how the two basic affordances of RfCs can be differentially mobilized – one more strongly than the other – to construct such doubt or skepticism. One technique consists in primarily **mobilizing the questioning affordance of RfCs**. Consider extract (3) from the Spanish data as a first example. Here, Rita and Carolina are discussing the relationships of some of their shared friends. The discussion turns to a couple named Sofia and Cristo, who Rita is closer with than Carolina.

**Extract (3) Movidas ‘quarrels’** (esp_nccsp25, rfc234, 1340–1351 sec)

01 CARO: “h y sofía y cristo tienen alguna vez movidas?=

and (do) Sofia and Cristo ever have quarrels

---

the organization of human action in interaction: the epistemic, the emotional/affective, and the deontic order (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014). As will become clear, challenges to the veracity of a co-participant’s assertions or the genuineness of their associated stances mainly concern aspects pertaining to the epistemic and/or emotional/affective order, while challenges to the practicality/feasibility or acceptability of a co-participant’s plans or decisions appear to fall within the realm of the deontic order.

Saying that this orientation is “not pervasive” is meant to serve as a reminder, preserving an awareness for the fact that participants in ordinary social interaction are not eternal skeptics and do not systematically doubt everything they hear/are being told. It was Alfred Schütz who argued that “the organization of practical action cannot proceed on the basis of systematic doubt” (Sharrock and Anderson, 1991: 55). Unless (or until) they have reasons to suspect otherwise, participants ordinarily trust that they are not being lied to and that what they are being told is genuine and true (see also Garfinkel, 1963).
02 =<<p, creaky> o NO.> or not

03 RITA: (~) °h pues supOngo NO? well I suppose so, right?

04 (.)

05 RITA: como todas las [paREjas; ] like all (the) couples

06 1-> CARO: [<<creaky> NO,>=no] te cuentan No? They don’t they tell

1-> N[Ada.] you anything

07 1= RITA: [ !N:]O!:; (.) no

08 1= <<all> cristo no me CUENta esas cOsas.> Cristo doesn’t tell me those things

09 (.)

10 2= CARO: y sofía tamP[Oco.] and Sofía neither

11 2= RITA: [ °h ]°h (.) <<p> NO.> (. ) hhh° no

13 (0.9)

14 2= RITA: °hh (.) es algo que tienen m:uy entre ELlos; it is something they keep very much to themselves

The sequence begins with Carolina asking Rita whether Sofia and Cristo ever have quarrels. With the incrementally added o NO (‘or not’, line 02), the question is designed in a way that constrains the recipient’s response options to a simple binary choice between “yes” and “no” (see Drake et al., 2021). This treats Rita as perfectly capable of answering the question in those terms. Rita, however, disaligns with this projected sequential trajectory and the tacit attributions embodied in Carolina’s turn. She responds with a delayed pues-prefaced turn, which treats the question as problematic (C. W. Raymond, 2018). Specifically, her epistemically hedged supOngo NO (‘I suppose so, right?’, line 03) takes issue with the epistemic positioning of her as possibly knowing
about or being able to assess the state of Cristo’s and Sofia’s relationship with any great certainty. To the contrary, with her response, Rita positions herself as not being particularly well-informed about the subject matter of possible quarrels going on between them. This is further underscored by her continuation, in which she surmises that they compare to other couples in this respect (line 05), thereby implicitly conveying that she does not have privileged access to their private life. It is this slightly evasive answer, and specifically the epistemic stance with which it is delivered, that Carolina subsequently begins to probe with a first RfC in line 06. Her RfC works to question Rita’s display of “no access” to Cristo’s and Sofia’s private life and treats it as remarkable, unexpected and accountable (cf. C. W. Raymond and Stivers, 2016). The doubly negated, scalarized formulation no te cuentan NAda (‘they don’t tell you anything’) serves to upgrade Rita’s “no access” claim and, by upping the ante for confirmation, casts doubt on its veracity. Rita’s early and emphatic confirmatory conformation with a prosodically marked !N:O!: (line 07) displays her orientation toward this skeptical import of Carolina’s RfC. Moreover, her subsequent continuation with cristo no me CUENta esas cOsas (‘Cristo doesn’t tell me those things’, line 08) not only offers a defensive account for her prior “no access” claim, it also qualifies Rita’s confirmation of the RfC by confining its scope to her conversations with Cristo. At this point in the sequence, then, Rita appears to be rather wary of how far she will take her claims, suggesting that she heard Carolina’s RfC as challenging the truthfulness of her (epistemic) claims.

Interestingly, Carolina refuses to let Rita off the hook at this point and continues her line of questioning by issuing another y (‘and’)-prefaced RfC in line 10. By seeking confirmation for the inference that Sofia does not tell her such things either, it targets precisely the “wriggle room” that Rita’s qualifying extension of her prior confirmation created. Carolina’s persistence in this line of questioning and her insistent solicitation of (re)confirmations and accounts for Rita’s prior “no access” claims have the effect of increasingly conveying skepticism or doubt toward their truthfulness and thus to challenge them (see also Keisanen, 2007). An orientation to this effect can again be seen in Rita’s response. This time around, her confirming NO is delayed and quietly produced

11 This bears some resemblance to the use of extreme case formulations in English (Edwards, 2000). In Spanish, such doubly negated, scalarized formulations are fairly common and semantically less “extreme”, however.

12 At the same time, the non-specific reference form esas cOsas (‘those things’) may be specifically deployed to mark matters pertaining to Cristo’s and Sofia’s relationship as belonging to a larger class of things that are properly glossed as “private” and thus inaccessible to Rita. A corollary of this presentation is that, by implication, it may reflexively cast Carolina’s asking as “intrusive” or “nosey”.

---

The text continues...
(line 11). And when it receives no accepting uptake from Carolina and almost a second of silence ensues, she offers an upgraded defensive account stating that both Cristo and Sofia are very much committed to maintaining secrecy about such matters (line 14).

Whereas, in the previous extract, a series of RfCs was used to challenge an assertion (sequentially produced as an answer to a question) by repeatedly questioning the epistemic stance with which it was delivered, the following example from an English telephone conversation shows that claims and assertions, and derivatively their speakers’ credibility, can likewise be challenged by constructing doubt or skepticism not toward the epistemic but toward the affective stance with which they are delivered. Again, this is accomplished by drawing on the questioning affordance of RfCs, which are used to call into question the genuineness of the conveyed stance. We join two friends, Lisa and Valerie, on the phone. Prompted by an inquiry from Lisa, Valerie has just launched a telling about a recent encounter between herself and her ex-girlfriend Anne, which was introduced with “Anne and I, we had the most interesting interaction the other night” (data not shown).

**Extract (4) Over it** (CH-En-6625 06:20–06:34)

```
01 LIS: [ hi hi hi ]=
02 VAL: [<<:-)> i’m Serious;]=
03 LIS: =[hi hi hi ]
04 VAL: =[it was so] FUNny;
05 oKAY;
06 so you knOw [like ](. ) o’h like (.) like whEn we broke UP,=
07 LIS: [°oh ]
08 VAL: =she (. ) Already kinda was Interested in this other GUY.=right?
09 LIS: [RI:(h)OHT,]
10 VAL: [ TO:by. ]
11 RIGHT?
12 o’h oKAY;
13 so (.) [ he’s ]
14 -> LIS: [<<all> so are you> com]plEtely 0Ver that by now;
15 (0.2)
16 => VAL: oh TO:tally?
17 (0.2)
18 LIS: [<<skeptical> m_H:M,>]
19 VAL: [ <<:-)> Total]ly,
20 oKAY;=
21 =so> (. ) o’h so we go to the (. ) the wI:ld BEAT;
((telling continues))
```
With her intensified assessment it was so FUNny in line 04, delivered in smile voice like much of the rest of the story’s introduction, Valerie projects that the story will be an amusing one (Selting, 2017). During the story-beginning, she mentions her breakup with Anne and publicly recalls the fact that Anne was emotionally two-timing her with a guy called Toby toward the end of their relationship as relevant background (lines 06, 08, 10). Bringing this presumably heartbreaking experience up in the background portion of what has been projected to be(come) an amusing story licenses the inference that Valerie is by now in a position to adopt a lighthearted stance toward the breakup. And it is this understanding that Lisa formulates as having been implied by what Valerie has told her so far and that she offers up for confirmation in line 14 with her inference-marked so are you completely Over that by now (Drew, 2018: 250–251). Note that this RfC features interrogative syntax with final falling intonation (which is somewhat uncommon in American English RfCs, see Kittner and Szczepik Reed, in prep.) and an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, 2000). Like the doubly negated, scalarized formulation in the previous example, using this extreme case formulation raises the stakes for simple, unqualified confirmation, as this would accept the terms of the RfC and therefore entail that Valerie is “completely over it”, as opposed to, say, merely accepting it or coming to terms with the way their relationship ended. In other words, the “extremity” of the confirmable proposition makes a straightforward and simple confirmation somewhat more difficult and therefore less likely. Here, the interrogative design foregrounds the RfC’s questioning import and conveys greater uncertainty about the likelihood of the referenced state of affairs being the case than a corresponding declaratively formatted RfC would (Heritage and G. Raymond, 2012), while still treating it as somewhat probable given Valerie’s introduction of the story and its delivery (Robinson, 2020). Taken together, these design features work to convey the speaker’s doubt or skepticism toward the underlying proposition being true (i.e., that Valerie really is completely over it), which, in turn, contributes to the RfC’s challenging import.

Neverthelesss, Valerie elects to respond with confirmation. She does so in a very marked way, however, using an oh-prefaced upgraded interjection (totally) that ends in final high-rising intonation (line 16). All of these features of the response’s design indicate that Valerie orients to the RfC as problematic with regard to its “askability”, i.e., she counter-challenges the necessity or legitimacy of asking it (Heritage, 1998; Stivers, 2019, 2022; see also G. Raymond, 2010; Stivers, 2011). Moreover, by treating confirmation so clearly as a “no-brainer”, in a context where the RfC’s design sought to make confirmation more difficult,
Valerie recognizably and designedly pushes back against the RfC’s agenda. This suggests that she has not only recognized, but also attempts to undermine or sidestep the challenging import of Lisa’s RfC.

As can be seen from how the sequence continues, Lisa appears to see this through, though, as she responds to Valerie’s confirmation with further skepticism. While, on an interpersonal level, Valerie’s confirmation could be taken up as good news, Lisa produces no such affiliative uptake and instead responds with a delayed, non-valenced acknowledging receipt which comes off as “skeptical” (\textit{m.H:M}, line 18). Notably, Valerie seems to hear the absence of (immediate) uptake for her response in line 17 as either a display of skepticism on Lisa’s part, or as Lisa waiting for further elaboration. With her unelaborated resaying of her confirmatory interjection in line 19, Valerie can be understood to attend to both of these possible hearings, as it can be understood to emphatically insist on its truth value, while at the same time also refusing to elaborate the matter further. She then unilaterally closes off the sequence with an \textit{oKAY} (line 20) before resuming her telling in line 21. Note, however, that both her resaying as well as the unilateral resumption of her telling are done in smile voice. Reading between the lines, this delivery may index a tacit understanding between the two that “Valerie being completely over it” is perhaps a bit of an overstatement and not “totally” true (see again Edwards, 2000 on such non-literal affordances of extreme case formulations). In any case, this further development of the sequence renders visible that Lisa’s RfC in line 14 was produced to call into question and cast doubt on the light-heartedness with which Valerie presented her break-up with Anne in the background section of an amusing story. It was deployed as a vehicle for subtly challenging the affective stance Valerie adopted toward the reported events.

Another, somewhat different way in which RfCs can be deployed as vehicles for challenging a co-participant’s claims or assertions consists in using them to proffer confirmables that, if confirmed, would lead to self-contradiction. Such uses are quite reminiscent of the “unanswerable questions” described by Heinemann (2008) and draw on the RfC’s \textit{capacity to introduce propositional content} more strongly. Extract (5), taken from a phone call between a couple called Yoheved and Matthew, is a pertinent case from the English subcollection. Yoheved has just told Matthew about an “elementary reunion” she attended the day before, including a report of how it felt strange for her to see her former

\footnotesize{At the same time, the fact that Lisa uses a continuer-like form that features bi-labial closure may be understood to index that, while she remains skeptical about the truthfulness of Valerie’s response, she also will not continue to probe the issue further (see Jefferson, 1984a, 1993; see also Schegloff, 1982).}
schoolmates, because all of them have gone through a lot of changes since she last saw them back in high school (on her account, approximately 8 years ago). At the beginning of this extract, Matthew produces a summons in line 01 (Schegloff, 1968) and a pre-pre in line 04 (Schegloff, 1980) to stage his response: A description of his own relationships to former schoolmates from elementary school. At its core, this consists of an emphatic assertion of their nonexistence, with a local accumulation of multiple extreme case formulations – one used to “repair” and intensify the other (Wilkinson and Weatherall, 2011) – which are given further prominence through their marked prosodic delivery (note the micropause before, and the dense accentuation in, !A!nyO:ne at the end of line 07, as well as the slower, rhythmic delivery of line 09 with dense and extra strong accentuation throughout).


01 MAT: BABE? hh°
02 (0.2)
03 YHV: [YEAH?]
04 MAT: lemme [lemme] lemme TELL you something.
05 (0.4)
06 YHV: [YEAH?]
07 MAT: °h[hh] I did not keep in contact with (. ) !A!nyO:ne.
08 (0.5)
09 MAT: <<len, rhythmically> nOt 0::ne !PER!son.>°h <<all i went to eleMENtary school with.>>
10 (0.5)
11 YHV: [(g)°hh]
12 MAT: [ °hh ] i remEmber when i: (. ) acsh u::h
13 (jus’) randomly [met Up with (xxx) ]
14 -> YHV: [<<h> did(n’) NICK go to] elementary school
15 with you?°h
16 => MAT: oh HELL no.
17 YHV: [ NO?]°h
18 => MAT: he went to d u:[h HI]GH school with me.
19 YHV: [°H::H. ]
20 MAT: i mE[t him i] mEt him sophomore year HIGH school.

Insofar as Matthew’s response belittles the emotional significance of Yoheved’s reported experience, it is strongly disaffiliative in character and Yoheved’s lack of uptake in lines 11–12 appears to betoken this.14 When Matthew begins to con-
continue (and arguably double down on) his report, Yoheved interrupts him with a turn-competitive incoming (French and Local, 1983) to issue the RfC did(n’)

**NICK** go to elementary school with you (line 15). She uses the RfC to invoke presumptive discrepant knowledge: A person she knows Matthew is still in touch with and who she presumes went to elementary school with him. If confirmed, this would undermine the absoluteness of Matthew’s claim and actually invalidate it (Edwards, 2000). Since the RfC is hearable as inviting confirmation with a yes-like response (see Heritage, 2002; Heinemann, 2008), it seeks to press Matthew into self-contradiction and works to challenge his claim. Matthew’s emphatic disconfirming response with *oh HELL no* (line 16) testifies to the recognizability of this challenging import on his part. By receipting Matthew’s rejection and his subsequent counter-informing correction as news (see the *NO*? in line 17 and the ‘O::H in line 19; compare Robinson, 2009; Heritage, 1984), Yoheved defers epistemic primacy to him and acquiesces to his authoritative knowledge about who he went to school with. This constitutes clear evidence that her challenge was based on presumptive knowledge.

If we compare this case to extracts (3) and (4) above, it becomes apparent that the challenges are brought off by differentially mobilizing the two basic affordances of RfCs. Although the RfC is designed interrogatively, the challenge in extract (5) rests primarily on the RfC’s capacity to forward propositional content. This content is designedly challenging in that it invokes discrepant presumptive knowledge that would undermine the speaker’s prior claim or assertion if it were to be confirmed. In this respect, the RfC in extract (5) is interactionally not too dissimilar from someone forwarding a (counter-)argument in a discussion or a dispute. And indeed, it could be responded to as things could be much worse. The way he elaborately stages his response, however, does not support such an interpretation. In fact, this staging procedure sequentially delays his response, something that is typically done with disaffiliative or dispreferred responses rather than with affiliative or preferred ones. Yoheved’s lack of uptake and the very fact that she goes on to challenge his claim also do not suggest that she heard Matthew’s account in those benevolent terms.

15 Because of the assimilatory juncture between *didn’*t and *Nick*, which end and begin with the same sound ([n]), it is not possible to definitively determine the polarity of this RfC. While this is irrelevant to our argument, we do note the following: If it has positive polarity (*Did Nick go to elementary school with you?*), this case is an instance of a “same polarity question” in Heinemann’s (2008) sense. If it has negative polarity (*Didn’t Nick go to elementary school with you?*), it resembles the negative interrogatives described by Heritage (2002), which can be deployed in a challenging fashion by inviting yes-like responses for recognizably (or known-to-be) hostile question content. Here, the RfC’s propositional content is contextually “hostile”, because it advances discrepant presumptive knowledge and seeks to undermine the absoluteness of Matthew’s claim. Accordingly, the RfC would come off as challenging regardless of its polarity (see also Edwards, 2000).
such (e.g., with okay yeah there’s Nick, but we met long before elementary school) or with an orientation to its informative value (Matthew could, for instance, respond with a recollection claim Oh that’s right, there was Nick/I forgot about Nick; see Küttner, 2018). The interrogative design may then primarily work to weaken the contradictive force of Yoheved’s turn. It marks the forwarded knowledge as presumptive, concedes epistemic authority to Matthew and practically offers him to disconfirm it as factually wrong (compare, e.g., But Nick went to elementary school with you). In other words, it allows her turn to remain recognizable and treatable as a request for confirmation, rather than a straightforward objection, while mobilizing the RfC’s propositional affordance to challenge Matthew’s claim.

The challenges in extracts (3) and (4), by comparison, work differently. The challenging speakers in these extracts primarily mobilize the RfC’s questioning affordance to cast doubt on their co-participant’s claims and assertions by calling the stances with which they are delivered into question. Specifically, the RfCs are used to question the circumstances that would render these stances credible and/or defensible. Accordingly, these challenges could not be taken up in the same way(s) as the challenge in extract (5) could (e.g., as informative). Insofar as these two kinds of challenges appear to open up slightly different response spaces, they can be seen to rest on qualitatively distinct mechanisms that differentially foreground one or the other basic affordance of RfCs more strongly. We also see these different mechanisms at work when speakers challenge a co-participant’s plans or decisions, rather than their claims and assertions. So their use cuts across different types of challengeables, which, as we argue in the next section, suggests that these two techniques are generically available as a participant resource when using RfCs as vehicles for implementing challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions.

16 In (American) English, this may but need not involve the use of interrogative syntax. In Spanish, it can’t and has to be accomplished with non-interrogative formats. So while it is tempting to think that, at least in English, interrogative syntax works to contextualize the mobilization of the RfC’s questioning affordance, this may also be accomplished without it. And as extract (5) shows, RfC’s with interrogative syntax can in turn primarily mobilize the RfC’s propositional affordance. There would thus seem to be no direct (1:1) relation between the use of interrogative syntax and (either of) the two affordances in English.

In this connection, it should be remembered that our interest here is not in specific formal realizations of challenging RfCs in the two languages but in the functional mechanisms that make RfCs usable in those ways in both languages. Our focus is on pragmatic commonalities rather than formal differences. As we make clear below, the specific role that the (un)availability of interrogative syntax as a design feature plays when RfCs are used as vehicles for challenging actions in the two languages awaits further study.
5.2 Challenging Plans and Decisions

A second major class of “challengeables” in our data concern not the other’s claims and assertions, but their plans and decisions. Rather than calling the truthfulness, veracity, or genuineness of the co-participant’s talk into question, such challenges contest the acceptability of a decision or convey skepticism toward the necessity of a future action or the feasibility of a planned undertaking. As in the case of RfCs that are used to challenge a co-participant’s claims or assertions, speakers can accomplish this by drawing on the generic affordances of RfCs in different ways. These parallel the two techniques outlined in section 5.1. Speakers may either primarily mobilize the questioning affordance of RfCs, or harness the RfC’s potential to forward challenging propositional content (its propositional affordance) more strongly. We begin with a case from the Spanish sub-corpus in which the questioning affordance of RfCs is mobilized to challenge the acceptability of a decision. Here, two friends, named Lúcas and Raffael, are discussing their romantic relationships. Raffael has been dating two women, called Ana and Corina, at the same time. Lúcas has just asked Raffael about the status of his current relationship with Corina and now calls on him to decide for one of the two women (lines 01–03).

Extract (6) Decidido ‘decided’ (spa_nccsp08, 555,6–599,2 sec)

01 LUC: pues TÍO- (.)
    well mate

02         vamos a VER;
    let’s see

03         <<creaky> eh> [deCÍdete] por Alguien;
    eh make a decision (decide yourself) for somebody

04 RAF:               [°h      ]

05 (1.0)

06 RAF: sí_sí yo me he deciDido.=
    yes yes I have made a decision

07 =e[lla lo SAbe;]
    she knows it

08 LUC:   [o ANa       ] (.o <<creaky> ELla.>
    either Ana or she

09 (0.2)
RAF: pues sí ella lo Sabe;
   well but she does know it

(0.7)

LUC: te has decidido por Ana.
   you have made a decision for Ana

RAF: (−) <<h> SÍ?>
   yes

LUC: pero-
   but

VES?=es que ESo (. ) es; °h
   you see ? it’s that this is

a esa mierda es a la que me reFIERo;
   this is the shit that I am talking about

((20 lines omitted in which they discuss the appropriateness of Lúcas’s diction))

LUC: lo que (.) quiero sabEr ES- (0.4)
   what I want to know is

raffaEL; (−)
   Raffael

no me puedes decIr un DÍA; 81.5)
   you can’t tell me on one day

Ana me tiene hasta las peLOtas;=
   I am sick of Ana

=o estOy hasta los coJOnes de ana=−
   or I am fed up with Ana

=y al dia siGUIEnte tío decIr;
   and on the next day, mate, tell me

<<all, dim> me he decantado por ANa;>
   I have inclined myself toward/decided for Ana

no TÍO;
   no, mate
Raffael responds to Lúcas’s request to make a decision by stating that he already made a decision (line 06) and that Corina (referred to with *ella* ‘she’) already knows about this (line 07). In overlap with the latter part of Raffael’s response, Lúcas expands on his request from line 03 by explicitly naming Raffael’s options and urging him to decide for either Ana, or Corina (again, referred to with *ella* ‘she’, line 08). Raffael then simply restates that Corina already knows about his decision, without further elaboration of what it amounts to. This leads to a gap of 0.7 seconds (line 11) in which Lúcas may be seen to wait for a corresponding announcement of the decision and Raffael may be seen to withhold it. This interactional “standoff” ends with Lúcas’s production of a request for confirmation, done with final falling intonation: *te has decidido por ANa.* (‘you have made a decision for Ana’, line 12). While lexically Raffael responds with a simple confirmation particle *<<h> SÍ?>>* (‘yes’, line 13), this response is prosodically marked with a high-rising pitch contour, indexing Raffael’s awareness that more is at stake than a simple unpacking of his decision. More specifically, Raffael’s *<<h> SÍ?>>* can be heard to push back against Lúcas’s RfC by counter-challenging its “askability”, much like Valerie did with her *oh to:tally?* in Extract (4) (compare G. Raymond, 2010: 121–124). This response suggests that Raffael hears Lúcas’s RfC as embodying, or at least adumbrating, a critical stance toward his (Raffael’s) decision for Ana. This stance is then further elaborated over the course of the subsequent sequence in which Lúcas quite clearly calls the “reasonableness”, and with it the acceptability, of Raffael’s decision for Ana into question. He does this by pointing out how his decision for Ana is inconsistent with his (apparently recurrent) complaints about being in a relationship with her (lines 38–42). All of this serves to construct skepticism toward this being the right decision and thus contests its acceptability.

In a very similar fashion, speakers may challenge a decision by calling the necessity of the (course of) action the co-participant has decided for into question. This is evident in the following English example, in which two nuns, Barbara and Alice, are talking on the phone. Barbara is currently in France. In the meantime, Alice seems to be taking care of everything in their community. At the beginning of this extract, Alice raises a new topic by asking a polar question about the existence of a radiator key (lines 01–04). The question is constructed in such a way as to explicitly mention the reason for its asking: its purpose is to locate the key in order to enable Alice to *blEed the RAdiators* (line 03). The question is thus recognizably produced in the service of fulfilling the prerequisites for engaging in this larger project.
Initially, Barbara responds somewhat uncooperatively. Rather than providing information about where Alice can find the radiator key, she simply affirms her possession of one with two continuier-like *mh_m* tokens (lines 05–06). This occasions a follow-up inquiry from Alice into Barbara’s knowledge of where to find the key, which invokes trouble in remembering its location as a possible account for Barbara’s preceding minimal response (cf.
Küttner, 2018). Barbara’s epistemically hedged response in line 08 aligns with this attribution and answers the question as best as possible. Alice receives this with an *O:::H::=O:KAY*, (lines 09–10), which treats the answer as both sufficiently informative and actionable, while also proposing to close down the sequence (Schegloff, 2007: 127–142; Couper-Kuhlen, 2021). Barbara, however, chooses to extend her response (line 11) and to further hedge it epistemically (line 13), which engenders a reference clarification request from Alice (*the green one?*, line 14). As it happens, this clarification request remains unanswered, as Barbara, in overlap, initiates another turn in line 15 with which she issues the RfC *do you have to BLEED the radiators?* (line 17). This RfC carries a narrow focus accent on the verb *BLEED*, which focuses on the action Alice has previously mentioned in the reason for her initial inquiry (line 03) and tacitly contrasts it with an unspecified set of other, possibly less effortful actions. The semi-modal *have to* serves to present the action in question as arising out of obligation or necessity rather than personal choice. In concert with the interrogative frame, the RfC is thus carefully designed to question the necessity of the particular action Alice is set to carry out, thereby challenging her plan/decision to do so.

Another remarkable feature of this RfC is its sequential placement, or displacement rather. It is not just delayed in its turn (through the pre-beginning inbreath and the *uhm* in line 15), it is also delayed in the sequence, since a first possible place of introduction would arguably have been right after Alice’s announcement of her plan to bleed the radiators in lines 03–04, i.e., it could have been produced as a pre-second insert expansion (Schegloff, 2007: 106–109). In its actual place of production, the RfC is sequentially disaligning. It is used to re-open a sequence that had progressed to (and beyond) a point of possible sequence closure without any overt indication of a problem with Alice’s plan, “only” to problematize it now. This late sequential placement of the RfC may in itself contribute to marking its action as possibly delicate and dispreferred.

Alice’s response to the RfC consists of a delayed confirmation followed by a referential clarification of which radiators she has in mind (line 19), displaying her understanding that she and Barbara might have been talking cross

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18 This turn is hearable as a RfC on sequential grounds. The fact that Alice plans to bleed the radiators has been established earlier on in the sequence, as part of her initial query in lines 01–04. This piece of information is thus already topical. Given that Alice has made it clear that she entertains this plan, it is probable that she has somehow determined that this action is necessary, and it is this additional, inferable aspect of what they have already discussed for which Barbara’s turn solicits confirmation (see also Enfield et al., 2019: 288; Stivers, 2022: 41–42).
purposes. In presuming that this clarification could sufficiently account for her decision to bleed the radiators, she initially treats Barbara’s RfC as in the first place embodying an understanding problem rather than targeting an issue with the acceptability of her decision/plan to bleed the radiators. Barbara’s delayed and slightly elongated *okay* receipt (line 21), however, suggests otherwise. It conveys reluctant acceptance of this account at best (compare Beach, 2020). And it is heard that way by Alice, who responds by offering another, slightly more defensive account in line 22 which invokes a third party (Tom) as a deontic authority for her decision to bleed the radiators (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012; see also Fox, 2008; Pomerantz, 1984b). In the end, this evidential account is successful in persuading Barbara that bleeding them is indeed necessary (see lines 23–26). The RfC in line 17 then works to challenge Alice’s decision to carry out this action by calling into question whether it is really necessary. In addition to conveying skepticism toward the necessity of this action, in and through the ways in which the matter is ultimately resolved, Barbara colaterally also challenges Alice’s competence and thus her deontic authority to make this decision.

The other main way in which RfCs are deployed to challenge plans or decisions in our data draws not so much on their questioning potential but rather on their *capacity to introduce propositional content*. This capacity may be mobilized to construct doubts about the feasibility of a plan whose implementation the co-participant has so far treated as unproblematic. This can be accomplished by using the RfC to raise possible obstacles to, or problems with, the co-participant’s plan, thereby proposing that they have not (yet) taken the full range of relevant contingencies into account. Consequently, these RfCs have some informative value and could in principle be receipted as such (e.g., with *Oh, I hadn’t thought about that* or *Oh right, I forgot about that completely*). Much more commonly, however, they are dismissed and receipted with explanations that defend the feasibility of the original plan. This is also what happens in the following example, taken from the same phone call as Extract (5) above. Matthew and Yoheved are a couple in a long-distance relationship. They are currently discussing Yoheved’s homecoming to Philadelphia. Earlier in the call, Yoheved has expressed her hope for being able to get an earlier flight to Philadelphia, because otherwise she would have a 9-hour layover in Los Angeles. In lines 01–02, Matthew issues an inquiry which raises a problem Yoheved’s itinerary creates with regard to a plan they had apparently made before, viz. that, on her way home, Yoheved will meet up with her mother to receive a sweatshirt for Matthew. Yoheved’s plan to fly through Los Angeles appears to jeopardize this plan.
Although delayed substantially (see line 03), Yoheved responds to Matthew’s trouble-exposing inquiry with a troubles-resistant, “no problem”-type answer in line 04 (compare Jefferson, 1984b). Her pushback against Matthew’s problem invocation is embodied in her use of a non-anaphoric reference form in her response (i.e., my mommy’s gonna drive down THERE. rather than she’s gonna drive ...; see C. W. Raymond et al., 2021).19 Matthew’s lack of uptake of that explanation (line 05), which leads to Yoheved’s incremental turn-expansion (line 06; see Schegloff, 2016), may be understood as a harbinger of his reluctance to accept this as a feasible plan. His continued reservations become manifest when he produces the RfC even if you catch an earlier FLIGHT? (line 07), which is designed as an appendor question (Sacks, 1992, I: 528; Lerner, 2004). This RfC is not so much questioning Yoheved’s plan (as, e.g., How is that supposed to work?), but rather raises an issue with it by putting forth a contingency that she may not have been taking fully into account, viz. that if she really manages to catch an earlier flight to Philadelphia, meeting up with her mother may not work as planned any longer, since Yoheved’s layover may then not be long enough for her mother to actually drive down from San Francisco.20 By being syntactically built as an other-continuation (Sidnell, 2012), Matthew’s turn

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19 We note the possibility that Matthew’s selection of the reference form your mommy in line 02 itself already constitutes a marked choice (Schegloff, 1996b; Stivers, 2007) and that Yoheved’s repetition of this form pushes back against this aspect of the turn’s design rather than its agenda. Her response nevertheless conveys that the issue Matthew is raising isn’t one to begin with.

20 Again, note that this could in principle be received with an indication of a change-of-state and some form of realization (e.g., Oh, right ... that wouldn’t work).
quite literally tags a condition onto Yoheved’s response and requests confirmation for whether it is still valid under this condition. At the same time, raising a possible obstacle for a plan can be understood to cast doubt on its feasibility, to suggest that it is ill-conceived, and thus to challenge it.

The 1.7 seconds of silence that it takes Yoheved to launch a response testify to the interactional difficulty that Matthew’s RfC seems to create for her. The response she eventually produces both rejects and corrects the understanding the RfC displayed, or more precisely the premise on which it was built (i.e., the initial well NO in line 09 cannot be heard as a disconfirming response, but as a repair-initiating rejection component in a larger turn that does third-position repair; see Schegloff, 1992). By explaining that her family will already be in Los Angeles when Yoheved arrives there, she corrects the premise that her mother will come down to Los Angeles at a specific point in time which is temporally coordinated with Yoheved’s layover there or her arrival time (i.e., she explicates and self-repairs what she meant with my mommy’s gonna drive down THERE in line 04). Matthew, however, remains doubtful that this will work out as planned as is evident in his delayed and drawn out, hearably “ironic” receipt of Yoheved’s correction with S::U::RE (line 13, see Clift, 1999).

In sum, this example illustrates how participants may use a RfC to forward propositional content that (potentially) conflicts with a co-participant’s plans or decisions. In such cases, the challenging import of the RfCs does not so much rely on their questioning potential but involves the construction of doubt by using it to point to a contingency that may not have been (fully) considered.

6 Summary, Discussion, and Conclusions

This paper has examined the use of requests for confirmation (RfCs) as devices for implementing challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions in (Peninsular) Spanish and (American) English talk-in-interaction. In its purest (or we might say, basic) form, the act of requesting confirmation invokes a recipient-tilted epistemic asymmetry with respect to the “confirmable” matter. And although the would-be confirmer is treated as being authoritative about the relevant state of affairs, the confirmation-soliciting participant is not entirely ignorant or uninformed. To be able to offer a “confirmable” hypothesis up for confirmation, the RfC-speaker needs to possess (and interactionally claim) some degree of presumptive knowledge about the matter at hand. Consequently, the epistemic gradient between the two parties is generally rather shallow.
These characteristic pragmatic features of RfCs are connected to two generic affordances that RfCs offer their speakers. On the one hand, they allow speakers to introduce propositional content into the interaction. On the other hand, because this content is offered as a tentative and confirmable hypothesis, they also have a questioning import. We have shown how both of these affordances can be differentially mobilized when using RfCs to produce interactional challenges. Participants may draw on the questioning affordance of RfCs more strongly to construct doubt about or skepticism toward (something in) the co-participant’s talk or their action(s), thereby challenging the other’s credibility or reasonableness for example. Alternatively, participants may primarily draw on the RfC’s potential to forward propositional content (its propositional affordance), so as to raise issues with the co-participant’s talk or their action(s). And these different techniques can shape the response space after the request for confirmation in particular ways (e.g., the latter may be receipted as informative).

Crucially, however, this is a matter of gradience (or weighting) and not mutual exclusiveness. When producing a request for confirmation participants always mobilize both affordances to some extent. Some of the cases we presented here as examples for cases in which speakers primarily draw on the RfC’s questioning affordance to bring off the challenge, for instance, also feature upgraded or extreme case versions of the inferences that are offered up for confirmation. Similarly, when RfCs are used to primarily raise issues with a co-participant’s claims, plans or actions, they are nevertheless still designed in ways that make them hearable as putting those issues up for confirmation. And in a way they have to be, for otherwise they might not be interpretable as (challenging) requests for confirmation any longer, but as straightforward objections or contradictions (compare, e.g., Didn’t Nick go do elementary school with you with well Nick went to elementary school with you or even if you catch an earlier flight? with not if you catch an earlier flight in this respect). So while participants can be understood (and on occasion be shown) to orient toward the differential invocation of these two affordances, which merits their analytic distinction, as interactional resources, they are typically mobilized together. As we have seen with the case of pre-disaffiliative understanding checks, their simultaneous invocation may even let their interactional distinctness disappear from view.

In this connection, it may also be useful to place our argument in a broader context by considering other devices that (minimally) make confirmatory responses relevant next and can be used to challenge or “disagree with” a co-participant. One such device is the partial questioning repeat (Jefferson,
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1972; Robinson, 2013). Unlike the RfCs considered here, partial questioning repeats (PQRs) do not have the capacity to advance or introduce new content into the interaction (qua constitutive features of their composition). But they do have similar questioning affordances, along with particular other affordances that inform their use. In addition to “doing questioning”, PQRs enable their speakers to indicate that the item that is being offered as a candidate repeat was at least (and potentially adequately) heard as that particular item, which makes them apt devices to implement repair-related actions that deal with problems in understanding. As has been shown with English data, PQRs can come off as disagreeing or even challenging actions, however, when they are understood to have been issued from a(n ascribed) knowing (K+) position, i.e., when the recipient has no reason to believe that the producer of a PQR experienced any form of trouble understanding the target item (Robinson, 2013). This is visible in the following example, in which Dee, who has just returned from a longer stay overseas, reports that she is inclined to grant her now ex-boyfriend’s recent request to help him pay his phone bill, which accrued for the long-distance phone calls he made with Dee during her stay abroad. May has initially strongly rejected this idea (data not shown), but Dee now defends it.

**Extract (9) Letter** (taken from Robinson, 2013: 269) (adapted and shortened Jeffersonian transcript)

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19    Dee: Well (. ) no=no. (th’)=thing is though is like I
20         w:ould help 'Im pa:y it. be[cau]se (. ) h:e: ( . )
21    May:                            [Yeh-]
22    Dee:       pa:id for e:verything. >like< (. ) >(   )<
23            seriously this guy spent like twelve thousand
24    dollars (h)on (h)our r(h)el(h)atio(h)ns(h)ip.
25    or some[thing. (   )]
26 -> May:        [Twelve thousand]\d?
27 => Dee: .hh Like he w(h)ent tuh- he flew to see=me: ( . )
28 =>      three ti:mes,=
29    May: =R:i[:ght. ye]ah that’s tru[e.   ]
30    Dee:     [Was it? ]             [>An’=’e]’s< paid
31    for all thuh phone bills, ...
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Here, May uses a PQR as a “challenge to the accuracy of twelve thousand dollars as an amount spent by the ex-boyfriend on the relationship” (Robinson, 2013: 270). And Dee’s response with a justification which defends its accuracy (lines 27–28) displays that she heard this PQR as a challenge. We can note
that there is no reason (contextual or otherwise) for Dee to assume that May has encountered problems in understanding what "twelve thousand" (dollars) means in this context (see Robinson, 2013: 269–270 for a more detailed analysis). As such, May solicits confirmation for the accuracy of this fact from a relatively knowing (K+) position, essentially requesting reconfirmation of what Dee has just told her (see also C. W. Raymond and Stivers, 2016). In other words, to be interpretable as challenging or disagreeing, the PQR’s affordance to do “genuine” (i.e., understanding-related) questioning needs to be recognizably overridden. This is their unique way of being usable as vehicles for challenging or disagreement-implicative actions.

The point of this discussion is that, in absence of the other main affordance we have identified for the RfCs considered in the present article (the propositional affordance), a device that works similarly sequentially and pragmatically (the PQR) evidently relies on an epistemic subversion of its questioning affordance when used as a vehicle for challenging (see also Antaki, 2012). The fact that this is not the case with the RfCs considered here, which are uniformly (qua definition) produced from a moderately less knowing (K-) position, supports two of our main points: First, the two affordances of RfCs, while being distinguishable analytically, interlock in multifarious ways, with differentially mobilizing them being available as a participants’ resource when using RfCs to bring off challenges. If “advancing propositional content” is unavailable as an affordance of the focal device (as with PQRs), then epistemic status becomes a key ingredient in bringing off challenging actions (together with features of their prosodic and/or embodied delivery, see Benjamin and Walker, 2013; Couper-Kuhlen, 2020). Conversely, if “advancing propositional content” is available as an affordance of the device in question (as with our RfCs), then epistemic status, while still important (again, see Antaki, 2012; Steensig and Larsen, 2008; C. W. Raymond and Stivers, 2016), is arguably less central as a participant’s resource for bringing off challenges and disagreement-implicative actions (see also Zinken and Küttner, 2022). Second, it follows, then, that epistemic status is but one factor that may contribute to the challenging character of a questioning action. To be sure, the RfCs considered here may vary with respect to how certain or tentative their speakers are about the forwarded “hypothesis” in each case, and that might shape the recognizability or the strength of the challenge in different ways, but they are all addressed to recipients who are (treated as being) authoritatively informed about the matter at hand. That being the case, other aspects appear to be relevant to the challenging import of these RfCs, such as how the RFC relates to prior utterances semantically, what stances or positions people convey with it or alongside its production, and how recognizable those stances are in context. Similarly, it
matters whether or not the RfC is produced as part of a series of RfCs, since the repetitiveness of requesting confirmation for a given state of affairs can, in and of itself, contribute to the expression of doubt or skepticism toward the given state of affairs.

Finally, and on a slightly grander note, let us briefly reflect about our approach. Rather than starting from a specific linguistic form, like many previous studies have, we have chosen to start from a generic functional device (requesting confirmation) that is polyfunctional and lends itself to various interactional deployments. We have focused on one particular deployment: chiefly, our analytic endeavor has been to understand (better) how requesting confirmation can become a vehicle for challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions. We have therefore engaged in an analytic explication of a particular case of what Sidnell (2017: 325–326) has referred to as the “vehicular structure of action” (see also Stivers et al., 2023 as well as Schegloff, 2007: 73–74, 169 and his notion of “double-barreled actions”).21 In doing this, it has proven useful to consider the fundamental pragmatic characteristics of the basic action (requesting confirmation), to conceive of them in terms of specific, yet generic interactional affordances they offer its speakers, and to see how these affordances are (differentially) mobilized in the service of bringing off the vehicular or derivative action (challenging, disagreeing or prefiguring such disagreement). This approach allowed us to situate our analysis on a level of analytic granularity at which we could (at least momentarily) bracket the relevance of language-specific differences between English and Spanish (e.g., that English has a syntactic interrogative, whereas Spanish doesn’t). This is not to say that these linguistic differences are unimportant or do not matter interactionally. On finer levels of analytic granularity, they are more than likely to have important interactional effects (see Sidnell and Enfield, 2012). They may, for instance, play an important role as far as marking different degrees of (un)certainty or tentativeness with respect to the confirmable is concerned, and, as mentioned previously, that might shape the recognizability or the strength of the challenge that is brought off with the RfC in various ways.

The analysis we offer here, with its focus on basic pragmatic features of RfCs – conceived of in terms of generic interactional affordances they offer its speakers – and how these can be mobilized in the service of bringing off challenging and other disagreement-implicative actions, operates on a higher level of analytic granularity. But we believe that this is a fruitful perspective to adopt in the analysis of polyfunctional interactional objects, and perhaps in

21 Basically, this refers to the fact that turns “can function doubly, both as actions in their own right and as vehicles or formats for other actions” (Schegloff, 2007: 73).
cross-linguistic research on interactional pragmatics or action formation more generally. To the extent that an action's (or device's) generic functional or interactional affordances are inseparably connected to what that action or device is, what co-constitutes and defines it as an action/device, they also appear to constrain what other actions can be derived from it (or to what other uses that device may be put). And given that languages differ remarkably in terms of the linguistic resources they furnish their speakers, this more functionally driven action-and-affordance-based approach – by allowing analysts to momentarily bracket these linguistic differences – appears to be a rather suitable one for cross-linguistic research on pragmatics and/or action formation. It allows us to see (pragmatic) commonalities or similarities across languages more clearly, where this might put us in a better position to make more sense of their (linguistic) differences.

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