Usage of *Of Course* in Conversation to Convey Discovery [*]

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1. Background and Aim of This Study

The minimal responses yes and no are sufficient answers in response to polar interrogatives. According to Stivers, 2010 (in Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011), 77% of English polar interrogatives are answered with either yes or no. Answers with anything other than the minimal response imply that there is a problem with the question, or a minimal response is interactionally insufficient. One such common response to polar interrogatives other than the minimal answer is *of course*. Using *of course* in response to polar interrogatives is said to imply that the question is unaskable, disconfirmation is impossible, and "contests the presupposition that both yes/no are possible answers" (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). Stivers (2010) maintains that this is very consistent across all instances of *of course* when used as a response to polar interrogatives, especially when it is turn initial. When it is *oh*-prefaced or used in combination with repetitional answers, the priority of *of course* may change but the overall interactional role of implying that the question is unaskable remains consistent.

In this paper, two main questions are addressed: First, whether the use of *of course* always implies that the question is unaskable and inappropriate when used as a response to polar interrogatives, and second, if there are any exceptions, what kind of characteristics do they have and are they particular to polar interrogatives.

2. Data and Method

Instances of *of course* were searched in the CallHome corpus (Canavan, Graff, & Zipperlen, 1997), CABNC corpus (spoken language segment of the British national corpus), (Albert, de Ruiter, & de Ruiter, 2015), (Santa Barbara corpus of spoken American English) (Du Bois, Chafe, Meyer, &Thompson, n.d.), the SOAP corpus (corpus of American soap operas) (Davies, 2011-2020), and the Movie Corpus (Davies, 2019-2020). The SOAP corpus is a collection of 22,000 transcripts from American soap operas from the 21st century. The Movie Corpus is a collection of over 25,000 movies from the 1930s to the present. Despite the vast amount of data, only 21 tokens of *of course* relevant for this study were found. This is mainly due to the fact that this paper addresses *of course* used next turn to polar interrogatives, which is a very particular form of usage concerning this token. All excerpts were transcribed using the GAT2 minimal transcription method developed by Auer, Couper-Kulhen, Meier, and Günthner (2011) except for Excerpt 5 for which the corresponding audio data could not be obtained.

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3. *Of Course* as Contesting Askability

Twelve out of twenty-one instances found in the corpora were aligned with previous studies that showed the use of *of course* implies that the question is unaskable and disconfirmation is impossible (Stivers, 2010; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018). One such example is Excerpt 1 in which two sisters are talking over the phone. In Excerpt 1, lines, 361-365 speaker A is telling speaker B about how she went with her father the other day to buy wine. When launching into storytelling, speakers anticipate alignment from their respondents with acknowledgement or continuers (Stivers, 2008). As there is no uptake by B after lines 361-362, A adds that they were having a sale. After noticing that B is not going to respond yet again, A recompletes her turn by adding that the wine on sale was the one that her father wanted. After a long pause, B responds with a polar interrogative "Are you talking to me?". In line 366, B responds to this by saying "O*f course* I'm talking to you". The use of *of course* implies that A was obviously talking to B and that B's question is unaskable. To this B defends the askability of her question by explaining that she could hardly hear A and therefore thought that A was talking to somebody else in lines 367 and 369. A's response token "o*h*" in line 368 provides "overt evidence of <her> updated knowledge states" (Tree & Schrock, 1999), marking that she now understands the reason for B's question. Acknowledging that A has understood B's intentions, B resumes the conversation in line 373 by explaining that she heard about A and their father's wine shopping from their father.

Excerpt 1 CallHome/eng/4092.cha (adapted)
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361    A:    but uh (.) yeah dad's already (.) dad and I went to buy
362          the wine the other day
363    A:    (--) and they were having a sale
364    A:    (--) on the wine dad wanted
365    B:    (---)are you talking to me?
366➔  A:    =of course I'm talking to you.
367    B:    =I can hardly hear you.
368    A:    =oh.
369    B:    =I thought you were talking to somebody else and like
370           put the phone down or [something.]
371    A:     [I'm] talking to you.
372    B:    =oh oh yeah=
373    B:    =no dad told me that.
374    A:    =oh he did tell you.
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The usage of *of course* is positionally sensitive, but according to Stivers (2010) the overall interactional role of implying that the question is unaskable remains consistent. This can be seen in Excerpt 2. Speaker B is a pregnant lady calling her friend speaker A. B was sharing her concerns about gaining weight during her pregnancy, and explaining that her

doctor did not tell her anything about her weight at her last appointment. In line 111 A asks B if she would rather have a doctor who tells her not to eat, to which B replies "no *of course* not". Although A's question is a polar interrogative, A draws from general knowledge that no one would likely want a doctor that tells them not to eat, and assumes that B would agree. In this case, B first responds with the polar negative no, and adds *of course* mid-turn. Starting her turn with no risks *of course* to be overlapped by A, thus lowering the priority of *of course* in B's response. However, *of course* still implies that the question is unaskable, which aligns with Stivers' (2010) argument.

Excerpt 2: CallHome/eng/4753.cha (adapted)
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111    A:    would you rather have a doctor who tells you not to eat
112→   B:    (-) no: of course not
113    A:    no: you want to have a doctor who's nice
114    B:    he tells me to take it easy if I get dizzy just go back
115          to bed I'm like great okay I do that anyway ((laughs)).
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4. *Of Course* as Discovery After Polar Interrogatives

Twelve out of twenty-one tokens of *of course* in response to polar negatives aligned with Stivers's (2010) argument. However, there were nine specific cases in which *of course* was used as a token to express discovery, rather than implying the askability of the question. An example is Excerpt 3, a conversation between speakers W, X, Y who are all staff at a night club. The three are speaking in a frustrated manner because it is already time to open, and they do not have enough change for the customers. X gives W 75 coins for change but in line 236, W mentions that that's not enough. X responds that that's all she has, and in line 240 Y suggests that they will have more change once customers start coming in. However, W reminds Y that they need thirty coins for the front door before the customers come in, and so 75 coins are indeed not enough. In line 243, Y acknowledges this and starts his turn with "shit *of course*", which indicates that he had forgotten about this and has now rediscovered this fact. After this rediscovery, he continues his turn after a brief pause and adds that he'll try to find someone to help solve this issue. In this excerpt, although disconfirmation of W's question in line 242 is impossible, the question itself is askable, as it allows Y to rediscover the issue at hand, and changes the course of conversational interaction henceforth.

Several pragmatic and prosodic features help differentiate *of course* used to indicate discovery with *of course* used to question the askability of the question. Pragmatically, *of course* used to indicate discovery is often used when the first speaker's polar interrogative is an accusation towards the second speaker. If the second speaker acknowledges this accusation and "discovers" what their fault is, the use of *of course* becomes a relevant response. *Of course* is often followed by an explanation of what the speaker discovered, or a

continuation of the conversation to indicate that the speaker has realized their fault and is responding to the first speaker's accusation. For example in Excerpt 3, speaker W accuses Y of his simplistic thinking, to which Y "discovers" that W's accusation is true. After using *of course*, he adds "yeah, right" which confirms W's accusation, and then continues with "well you might as well bring it down I'll see if I can find somebody," which is an attempt at restarting the conversation. Prosodically, when *of course* is used to indicate discovery it is often said in a final falling intonation and followed by a pause as in Excerpt 3. On the other hand, when *of course* is used to contest the askability of the question, it is often said in a final rising intonation and followed immediately by a continuation of the turn or by the second speaker's turn as in Excerpts 1 and 2.

Excerpt 3: CABNC/KBD/KBDRE000.cha (adapted)

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237   PS03W:   seventy five's not enough is it
238   PS03X:   (-)Well that's what they gave me.
240   PS03Y:    we'll get some on the front door as soon
241             people are
242   PS03W:   (---) well I need thirty for the front door don't I
243→  PS03Y:   shit(.) of course (--) yeah (.) right (.) well yo well
              you might as well bring it down I'll see if I can find
244             somebody
245   PS03W:   yeah
246   PS03Y:   in so
247   PS03W:   alright
248   PS03X:    and I'll get these sorted out
249   PS03W:   yeah get Terri get security to give you erm a hand and
250             get the shutters open at least
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Stivers' (2010) data sets were all conversations among several speakers. However, the use of *of course* to express discovery can also be found in self-talk and does not necessarily need to be next position to a question. Excerpt 4 is an example of *of course* used within self-talk. The speakers, Ivy, Fox, and Whitney are having a conversation in Ivy's house. Ivy is Fox's mother, and Whitney is Fox's girlfriend. In line 1 Ivy asks Whitney why she's dating her son so soon after breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, Chad. In lines 2-3, Fox defends his relationship with Whitney, to which Ivy replies that it seems like Whitney is rushing to keep something hidden from her son in lines 4-6. After Fox defends his girlfriend again in lines 7-8, Ivy comes to the realization that Whitney is pregnant in lines 9-10, as later revealed in lines 12-17. The *of course* in line 9 marks the point of Ivy's realization and is used to express the internal discovery of Whitney's pregnancy. The *of course* in line 9 can be understood as conveying discovery due to the same reasons in Excerpt 3, namely, final falling intonation, a pause following the discovery "*of course* why didn't I see it before", Ivy's accusation towards Whitney followed by her own discovery which is marked

with *of course*, and the explanation of her discovery "I know exactly what Whitney's up to".

In a different light, the *of course* in line 9 can be considered as a response to Ivy's own polar question, "Whitney are you hiding something from my son?" in lines 5-6. At the point of lines 5-6, Ivy's question was askable and disconfirmation was possible. However, after realizing that Whitney is pregnant, it can be considered that Ivy dismisses the askability of her question in lines 5-6 by using *of course* in line 9. However, in this excerpt *of course* is not used as a direct response to her own question as in "*Of course* Whitney is hiding something from my son." Rather, it is more natural to regard the *of course* in this excerpt as a token of discovery within self-talk due to the prosodic and pragmatic features described above.

Excerpt 4: *Passions* (adapted) (Passions Complete Collection, (2019)

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1 IVY: Why do you have to be with Fox so soon after being with Chad?
2 FOX: (-) Look, mom (.) Whitney and I have been close for a while
3      now and now that we're free to love each other (-) why wait?
4 IVY: h° (--) Why rush? I mean (.) it's almost (.) as if Whitney is
5   hiding something (.) Is that it Whitney are you hiding something
6     from my son?
7 FOX:  Ok h° mom (.) come on please? Whitney is not taking advantage
8        of me (.) Why would she?
9 IVY:   (---) hh° Oh, my goodness (-) °hh Of course why didn't I see
10       it before (--) I know exactly what Whitney's up to.
11 FOX:   (---) and what's that exactly
12 IVY:   hh° Whitney HAS to be with you (.) fox (.) because she's
13        pregnant
14   FOX:   Is this true (.) Whitney (-) Are you pregnant?
15   IVY:   h° Don't make me call sam and have him bring home a lie
16          detector.
17  WHI: (--) Yes (-) fox (---) hh° Your mother's right I'm pregnant.
18   FOX:   (---) h° Well (.) I can't believe it.
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Although these cases are rather rare compared to the abundant examples that align with Stivers' (2010) argument, it is important that not all cases of *of course* after polar interrogatives are used to contest the askability of the question. *Of course* can be used in next turn after the first speaker and also within self-talk to indicate discovery. *Of course* used as discovery is marked with prosodic features such as a final falling intonation and a pause following the use of *of course*, and also with pragmatic features such as an accusation before the use of *of course* and an explanation of the speaker's discovery afterwards.

5. *Of course* as Discovery After Non-polar Interrogatives

Moving into a broader perspective from Stiver's (2010) argument of *of course* in response to polar interrogatives, *of course* used to express discovery can be used in conversational sequences besides polar interrogatives. Nine out of twenty-one instances were found from the corpora. Excerpt 5 is a conversation from the movie *Spark: A Space Tail*. Kraken slick is a spacetime that is necessary for the characters to return home from space. As the characters run out of slick (made out of a substance named Kraken), speaker A brings up the idea of creating their own slick in line 8. Speaker B responds by saying "Oh, *of course*, why didn't I think of that?" in an ironic modality to convey the message that A's idea is ridiculous and inconsiderable. In this excerpt, the question that precedes *of course* – "What if we made our own slick?" is a suggestion and not a polar interrogative. Here *of course* is used in the same meaning as in Excerpts 3 and 4 expressing the discovery of a new idea. The irony in line 9 changes the meaning from pure discovery of a new idea to convey the message that the idea is absurd and not a great idea at all. A understands the irony in B's response and starts the next turn with "No, seriously" which marks that A thinks his idea is seriously worth considering and has no room to accept B's sarcasm.

Excerpt 5 : *Spark: A Space Tail* (adapted)

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1    A:    So to get back, we will need another Kraken slick.
2    B:    Hahaha
3    A:    What's funny?
4    B:    So we're just gonna go jump in a slick and go home?
5    A:    Why not?
6    B: Well to begin with, we're fresh out of Kraken. And I don't think
7          the little guy counts as one.
8    A:    What if we made our own slick?
9    B:    Oh, of course, why didn't I think of that?
10   A:    No, seriously. What is a Kraken slick? What is it made of?
11   B:    Polaron energy.
12   A:    Polaron energy. We can harness that, can't we?
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6. Discussion

As discussed above, the use of *of course* as a response to polar interrogatives does not necessarily always imply that the question is unaskable and inappropriate. It can also be used to indicate discovery after both polar and non-polar interrogatives and within self-talk. The syntactical structure of the previous turn is not a determining factor, thus it does not always need to be a polar interrogative as illustrated in Excerpts 4 and 5. Instead, there are certain pragmatic and prosodic factors that define whether *of course* can be used as a response to indicate discovery. Pragmatically, there needs to be some sort of contextual

influence that triggers the second speaker's discovery. This can be an accusation as in Excerpts 3 and 4 or a suggestion as in Excerpt 5. Prosodically, an *of course* used as discovery is often marked by a final falling intonation and followed by a pause.

The use of *of course* is positionally sensitive. When *of course* is used to imply that the question is unaskable and disconfirmation is impossible, it can be used in various positions. According to Stivers (2010), if either yes or no comes before *of course*, the affirmation/negation of the question is prioritized and the askability of the question comes second. This is because both pragmatically and syntactically, the turn can be completed at yes/no and *of course* is prone to a higher risk of being overlapped. For example, in Excerpt 1 *of course* precedes the turn while in Excerpt 2 *of course* comes after no. In Excerpt 6, Alina asks Lenore if she knows where Beverly Glen is to which Lenore asks Alina a polar interrogative "North or South of Sunset?" Alina then replies "Oh south, of course way down". In this excerpt, Alina first replies with the discourse marker *oh* after which she replies with the answer "South" to Lenore's question and adds "of course way down". Lenore response "oh" is overlapped with Alina's turn as she takes it that Alina's turn is complete after she has given her answer, "South". In this way, the polar interrogative question *of course* can come at the end of the response after first responding to the question although it is more likely to be overlapped by the second speaker.

Excerpt 1 @Loc: adapted from CallHome/eng/4092.cha
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365   B:    (---)are you talking to me?
366→  A:    =of course I'm talking to you.
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Excerpt 2 @Loc: adapted from CallHome/eng/4753.cha
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111   A:    would you rather have a doctor who tells you not to eat
112→  B:    (-) no: of course no:t
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Excerpt 6: @Loc: SBCSAE/06.ch   adapted
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1479   ALIN: you know where Beverly Glen is? (-) It's one of those
1480    streets off of there (-) It's a nice[little              ]
1481   LENO [North (-) or south (-)
1482     of Sunset]
1483→ ALIN:  (-) Oh south of [course Way down ]
1484   LENO: [ Oh ]
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However, when *of course* is used to indicate discovery, it will only come at the beginning of a turn or in the middle and not at the end as seen in Excerpts 3, 4, and 5. Although further analysis is necessary to determine the reason to this positional sensitivity, it is most likely because a speaker will rarely if not ever come up with a new idea or thought at the end of their turn. Even if the thought comes up at the end of their turn, they will usually

add an utterance after using *of course* to notify the other speaker what they have realized such as in Excerpt 4.

7. Conclusion

Previous studies have revealed that when *of course* is used as a response to polar interrogatives, it contests the askability of the question (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018; Stivers, 2010). Close examination of instances of *of course* in conversational corpora has revealed that while Stivers's (2010) argument is highly versatile, it is not consistent across all instances. In some specific conversations, *of course* is used as a token to express discovery rather than implying the askability of the question. In these cases, *of course* changes the course of conversational interaction and either the question is askable or disconfirmation is possible. Moreover, *of course* used to express discovery does not need to be next position to a polar interrogative. It can be used in self-talk and other forms of interrogatives.

When *of course* is used to indicate discovery, it is prefaced with some sort of contextual influence such as accusations or suggestions that trigger the second speaker's discovery. Prosodically, an *of course* used as discovery is often marked by a final falling intonation and followed by a pause. While *of course* is not positionally sensitive when used for contesting askability, it can only be used at the beginning or middle of a turn when indicating discovery. This is most likely due to the fact that an explanation regarding the discovery is made after using *of course* to notify the responder what the speaker has realized.

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