Interactional management of claims of insufficient knowledge in police interrogations in English
Abstract
Claims of insufficient knowledge, such as *I don’t know* or *no idea*, are observable in a variety of contexts in spoken interaction. This discourse analytic study focuses on how six murder suspects in police interrogations formulate claims of insufficient knowledge and what spoken strategies police officers employ in responding to them. The data consists of audio-recorded transcripts of six police interrogations carried out in English, which resulted in a corpus of 170 115 word tokens, featuring 287 claims of insufficient knowledge in total, with the most frequently used one being *I don’t know*. Six different strategies of how police officers manage claims of insufficient knowledge were identified. The study also provides examples of the interactional outcome of the strategies utilized. The findings reveal that close-ended questions were deployed twice as much as open-ended questions, even though open-ended questions usually result in more informative responses, which one would expect to be a goal of police interrogations.

**Keywords**: Claims of insufficient knowledge, police interrogations, discourse analysis, pragmatics, speech acts, strategies.
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1. Introduction

Communication and human interaction are goal oriented. To reach a particular goal we, intentionally or unintentionally, construct our communication in a way which we deem likely to succeed. Sometimes participants can have very different goals within the same interaction, however. In police interrogations, for instance, which are a form of institutional communication, different strategies are used for different goals. The police officers’ goals are usually not the same as the suspects’. Police officers often want to acquire information that they consider necessary in order to solve their investigation, while suspects seek to reconcile “their potential sense of obligation to talk and be cooperative [...] with the need to give as little information as possible, especially if the information incriminates them” (Mason, 2016, p. 79). Sometimes that can result in claims of insufficient knowledge (henceforth CIK) by the suspect, such as *I don’t know* and *no idea*. Through corpus driven discourse analytic research, informed by speech act theory, this study focuses on those types of claims and how police officers manage them, i.e., how they formulate their responses. What are the most common strategies used by police officers when faced with CIKs, if any? Examples of instances where CIKs are expressed and responded to will be included in order to provide an insight into how CIKs can be formulated and what kinds of responses they receive.

The study is based on six publicly available transcripts of police interrogations with murder suspects, representing a corpus of 170,115 word tokens. The suspects are females and males, aged 19-69 years, all of them native speakers of English. Five of the transcripts are of US American police interrogations, while one is of a Canadian interrogation.

Research on CIKs in police interrogations is scarce, which is unfortunate since findings from such research can be important to train police officers.

The following research questions are posed:

1. How are claims of insufficient knowledge typically formulated in the data?
2. How do police officers manage claims of insufficient knowledge in the data?
2. Background

This section will include background information on police interrogations and the structures and methods associated with them, as well as an important aspect of American police interrogations, namely the Miranda rights and warnings. Besides that, the section will also present information regarding investigative interviews and the distinction between interviews and interrogations.

The choices made by all participants in police interrogations will often be very delicate and sensitive. As Coulmas (2017) claims, “whenever we speak we make choices” (p. 1). The choices of both suspects and police officers can have serious consequences: the suspect might face legal charges such as prison time and the police officer has a responsibility toward the victim, society as well as the accused one. In order to find the truth, police officers need to interrogate suspects with questions that are effectual and result in relevant information. When their questions are answered with CIKs, it is not hard to understand that police officers might not accept the CIK as true, considering the context and potentially conflicting agendas.

2.1. Police interrogations

According to Mason (2016), police interrogations often consist of four stages. The first stage is the formative stage, which is the stage that determines how evidence can be collected. The second stage is called the preparatory stage, in which the questions for the suspects are being formulated by the questioner, e.g. based on what the one accusing the suspect has said to the police. The third stage is called the argumentation stage, consisting of the questions and answers that are used in the interrogation of the suspect. This stage consists of the actual interrogation, where the police-suspect exchanges take place. Finally, the fourth stage is called the closing stage. As the name implies, at this stage the police officers complete collecting the information they sought for.

Within the argumentation stage, the police-suspect interaction, there is one aspect that is of great importance in the United States, and that is the Miranda rights and warnings. The Miranda rights include “the constitutional right of a person in custodial police interrogation to remain silent, enshrined in the Fifth Amendment privilege against self-incrimination” (Rogers, Harrison, Shuman, Sewell & Hazelwood, 2007, p. 178). Accordingly, police officers have to inform suspects of their rights and also make sure that they understand their rights.
before proceeding with the actual interrogation. This is known as the Miranda warning (Miranda Warning, 2019), which must be communicated in direct and explicit language (Rogers et al., 2007, p. 178). Miranda rights are not a part of the Canadian legal system, which instead has different cautions, including the right to remain silent, the right to legal counsel, etc. (Eastwood & Snook, 2010). The information regarding suspects’ rights might differ between the United States and Canada, but there are methods applied in police interrogations around the world, such as the Reid method (Kozinski, 2018).

The Reid method includes “guidelines”, as Mason (2016, p. 80) calls them, for police officers hoping to secure a confession from a suspect without having to use any physical force. This method focuses more on coercing through psychology instead, which may include manipulative tactics (Gudjonsson, 2003; Kassin and Gudjonsson, 2004; Mason, 2016). It often includes “confrontations, accusations and appeals to the suspects’ self-interests” (Mason, 2016, p. 80). These kinds of methods will reveal themselves mainly through the formulation of utterances. Kozinski (2018) is of the opinion that the Reid method should no longer be exercised due to its coercive nature, which according to him might be a reason for why some defendants produce false confessions. However, the man (and his company) behind this method claims that this method is “widely recognized as the most effective means available to exonerate the innocent and identify the guilty” (John E. Reid & Associates, Inc., 2014). Police interrogations following this method are, however, likely to produce coercive and possibly more aggressive language, compared to other methods, according to data presented in the following section.

2.2. Investigative interviews

Investigative interviews are quite different from the Reid method. One more investigative, rather than accusatory, procedure is called PEACE, which stands for “‘Preparation and Planning’, ‘Engage and Explain’, ‘Account’, ‘Closure’ and ‘Evaluate’” (Williamson, 2012, p. 124). According to Mason (2016), it is used by police officers in England, Wales, and other parts of Europe, New Zealand and Australia. In an investigative interview the main goal is not to obtain a confession, according to Dixon (2010), but to “get the suspect's account and then to check its authenticity by questioning and testing it against other evidence” (p. 429).

Open-ended questions are used in investigating interviews, such as *wh*- (what, why, who, when and where) and *how* questions. These types of questions do not restrict the suspects in
their responses as much as close-ended questions would, which might result in more informative answers. Therefore, close-ended questions such as “did you…” are not as common in investigating interviews, though they might be used for clarification, such as “did you just say yes?” or “was that a no?” etc. (Mason, 2016).

It can be hard to distinguish between ‘interrogation’ and ‘interview’ when it comes to police-suspect dialogue. According to Blair (2003) one distinguishing marker is “the presence or absence of an accusation during the interaction” (p. 2). Interrogations are accusatory, while interviews are not. Another factor is the goal of the interaction. The goal of interrogations is to obtain details of the crime in question, and hopefully a confession. The goal of interviews is information, and the information itself might also help determine the authenticity of its source (Blair, 2003).

The nature of the data used in the present study is not solely accusatory, with characteristics of the Reid method, nor solely investigative, with mostly open-ended questions, but a mixture of both, though without the aggressive nature of the Reid method; therefore, all six interactions will be referred to as interrogations, in order to avoid confusion.

2.3. The discourse of police interviews and interrogations
Researchers who use conversation analysis (henceforth CA) as their approach argue that ‘ordinary’ conversation is the principal way of interacting in the collective, societal world and that interactions within institutions comprise “systematic variation and restriction of activities and their design relative to ordinary conversation” (Drew and Heritage, as cited in Thornborrow, 2002, p. 2). Police interviews and interrogations are a form of institutional discourse. The institutional manner of an interaction can manifest itself through its structure and organisation (e.g. Hester & Francis 2001; Levinson 1992; Shah, Aizaz & Iqbal 2014 etc.). A typical example of that are the Miranda rights in the United States: in order for a police officer to question a suspect regarding a crime the suspect must have been read his or her Miranda rights (Tracy & Robles, 2009). They must be read in a certain way (i.e. unequivocally) and there is a clear pattern of who says what and when: it is always the police officer reading the Miranda rights and asking the suspect if he or she understands, to which the suspect responds.
Institutional spoken communication has also been described as an example of “strategic discourse” by Habermas (as cited in Thornborrow, 2002, p. 2) Habermas claims that strategic discourse is goal-oriented and heavily influenced by power, while communicative discourse, such as ‘ordinary conversation’, builds on equal participation to accomplish reciprocal understanding. In Habermas’ definition of institutional discourse as strategic, the asymmetry is related to the “unequal distribution of social power and status” (as cited in Thornborrow, 2002, p. 3). Other studies focus more on the participants’ different turn-taking strategies in institutional environments since it might indicate what the participants do (Thornborrow, 2002). For example, in police interrogations it is usually the police officer (or other representatives of the legal system), who asks the questions, and usually the suspect who answers.

Leo’s (2008) study has shown that when police officers question suspects in the hope of obtaining confessions or other important information, they use different strategies such as accusing and pressuring the suspect, attacking their denials and repeatedly confronting them, and even raising their voice, yelling at the suspect, etc. The goal with these strategies is to weaken the suspect and ultimately retrieve a confession (Leo, 2008). However, according to Shuy (1998), strategies such as face-saving can be effective, too, e.g. suggesting acceptable reasons for the suspect’s deeds, such as the suspect actually defending him- or herself. In some cases, the police officer should sympathise with the suspect and criticise the victim (Shuy, 1998).

There are different types of methods utilized when questioning suspects, e.g. the Reid method mentioned in section 2.1, or PEACE in 2.2. Some strategies might be used depending on the suspect and the crime in question. Shuy (1998) suggests, however, that police officers generally should embrace a less formal style when questioning suspects; their approach should be more conversational, e.g. using contractions, minimal responses such as *uh-huh* and *yeah*, and personalized comments such as saying *thank you*, verbally expressing concerns for the suspect's health, or even offering an apology. Some of the less formal styles might encourage the suspect to elaborate. Girgin and Brandt (2019) found that in L2 classrooms, minimal responses create interactional space; they allow the students to continue speaking. Snook, Luther, Quinlan and Milne (2012) also claim that the most effective methods and question types are not used as often in interrogations as they should be. Among the key elements of professional and rigorous interviews are many open-ended questions and listening
to the answer without interrupting, according to them. Snook et al. (2012) also claim that there are some question types that are best avoided due to the fact that they might result in imprecise answers that are not as developed as the answers to open-ended questions. These types include yes-no questions, that is close-ended questions; multiple-choice questions, which is when the one interviewing asks multiple questions together, such as “How are you? Are you all right? What can I get you? Do you remember me?”, without allowing the interviewee to respond. Snook et al.’s (2012) definition of multiple-choice questions is in contrast to other definitions of the term; leading questions, which are questions that are conveyed in a manner that indicates what the answer ought to be such as “It was a Wednesday, right?”, and forced-choice questions, which are questions that provide a restricted number of conceivable answers, such as “Are you covering up for yourself of somebody else?” (Snook et al., 2012, pp. 1331-1332).

In police interrogations, it is important to establish the facts of the event that has occurred and the suspects’ involvement. Prefaced questions can make an important difference when trying to achieve this. And-prefaced questions help evolving the facts of the discussed topic, while so-prefaced questions “mark the event and develop its (con)sequence” (Johnson 2002, p. 103). These kinds of questions are also used with the aim of assessing and summarising the suspect’s previous answers, which helps to focus the upcoming questions on special details that can be crucial. These questions can also challenge the suspect and result in the suspect reformulating a previous answer, which might make it possible for the police officer to explore further (Johnson, 2002). There is plenty of research on questions such as do you know? and do you remember? in police interviews regarding witnesses and children. However, not as much can be found regarding police-suspect interaction.

2.4. Knowledge and recollection
Speaking of the participants in an interaction, Taleghani-Nikazm (2015) claims that “They assess and negotiate who knows what information, how much they know, how they know it, and how certain they are about it” (p. 267). Since police interrogations are goal-oriented, with one of the goals being the obtainment of relevant information, the details of suspects’ knowledge can be of more significant interest in police interrogations than in ordinary everyday conversations.
This study acknowledges recollection as related to knowledge; therefore, CIKs will also include utterances such as *I don’t remember*. Recollection, just as knowledge, is a part of everyday discourse as well as institutional ones, e.g. police interrogations. Participants of interactions “recall and recount events in their lives” (Edwards 1996, p. 263), sometimes in response to questions such as *Do you remember?*, just as *I don't know* (henceforth IDK) can be an answer to questions such as *Do you know*?

According to You (2014), the interrogative *Do you know* can function to examine one's “knowledge, understanding and/or recognition” of something or someone (p. 32). The fundamental use of *Do you remember* in ‘everyday conversation’ is “to support a speaker’s action such as back up a claim, provide landmarks and challenge another participant” (You, 2014, p. 197). You (2014) claims that *do you know* is usually found prior to *do you remember* when they “occur together in the same sequence of conversation” (p. 195). One theory as to why that might be is that "do you know is less ‘imposing’ on the recipient’s knowledge domain" (You, 2014, p. 195). The phrases carry different expectations of the recipient. There might be more expectations of “epistemic access” concerning *do you remember*, than with *do you know* (You, 2014). You (2014) established that in both English and German there are some cases where *do you know* was uttered before *do you remember*, with the function of “introducing the reference with *remember*” (p. 99).

2.5. Claiming insufficient knowledge

Claiming insufficient knowledge can have different agendas and functions. Beach and Metzger (1997) claim that through interaction one can disclose if the one claiming insufficient knowledge in fact knows or not. One way of claiming insufficient knowledge is to use the common phrase *I don't know or no idea*. The findings of Tsui (1991) revealed the different functions of IDK, apart from replying to questions regarding information. Sert and Walsh (2013) summarised those findings “as a preface to a disagreement, an avoidance of an explicit disagreement, a minimisation of impolite beliefs, a marker of uncertainty, an avoidance of commitment and an avoidance of making an assessment” (p. 544).

In previous research regarding epistemic disclaimers, such as claims of insufficient knowledge, IDK has been the focal point. A reason for that might be the fact that it is among the most used markers in English in terms of ‘epistemic stance’ (Kärkkäinen 2003; Lindström, Maschler & Pekarek Doehler, 2016).
According to Tsui (1991), IDK is usually considered as a response to questions. In responses to questions, that is second position turns, IDKs can become stand-alone replies and bear literal meaning (Lindström et al., 2016). If so, they can “fail to collaborate with promoting the progress of the activity through the sequence” (Stivers & Robinson, 2006, p. 373). According to Weatherall (2011), IDKs can also function as “prepositioned epistemic hedges – displaying that the speaker is less than fully committed to what follows in their turn of talk” (p. 317). These types of hedges can occur when one is uncertain about what one is about to communicate, or when one is ‘preparing’ the participants for imminent utterances that might be overstated or of no literal meaning (Weatherall, 2011). Keevallik’s (2011) study showed that by claiming insufficient knowledge, one can evade demonstrating one’s reluctance to answer questions; it is a “disaligning action” (p. 187), which can be expected to occur quite often in police interrogations. However, in general terms, answering with IDK is rather uncooperative and not encouraged in social situations, which might be one of the reasons why speakers often elaborate their answers further after uttering IDKs, with the aim of stating the reason for their claimed lack of knowledge or recompense for their insufficient knowledge (Beach & Metzger, 1997; Keevallik, 2011; Lindström et al., 2016; Maschler, 2012; Maschler & Dori-Hacohen, 2018; Pekarek Doehler, 2016; Stivers & Robinson, 2006). Contexts such as police interrogations, which are goal-oriented, may limit the participants’ choice of variations as to how CIKs such as IDK can be utilized (Beach & Metzger, 1997; Drew & Heritage, 1992).

CIKs that are related to recollection are no exception regarding the variety of functions. Coulter claims the following: “I forget X’ can be used to imply that X was previously known, whereas the ostensibly similar ‘I don’t remember X’ need imply no such prior knowledge, making such an expression useful, for example, as a courtroom ‘evasion device’” (Cited in Edwards, 1996, p. 283).

Edwards (1996) claims that an utterance such as I don’t remember (or other formulations that refer to someone not remembering), works very well when one wants to “avoid the yes-no strategy of interrogation, while avoiding blame for avoiding it” (p. 283). One of the ways to respond to CIKs is an epistemic status check.
Epistemic status checks (henceforth ESCs) are related to somebody's state of knowledge and thus also to claims of insufficient knowledge. An ESC can manifest itself in utterances such as “you don’t know?” or “you have no idea?”. Sert (2013) defines ESC as “a speaker’s interpretation of another interactant’s state of knowledge” (p. 13). Research on ESCs specifically is limited and, to my knowledge, more or less non-existent with regard to police-suspect communication. However, the data and methods applied in this study, which will be presented in the following section, might provide an insight into the role of ESCs in such a context.

3. Data and method

This section will include information on the data this study is based on the methods used to collect and analyse it, as well as ethical considerations.

3.1. Data

The data for this study consists of publicly available transcripts of six audio-recorded interrogations of murder suspects. As previously mentioned, five of the transcripts are of American police interrogations and one is of a Canadian police interrogation. Together they form a corpus of 170,115 word tokens. The suspects are both men and women, between 19 and 69 years old. They are all native speakers of English. The transcripts were selected from a website called SCRIBD, which provides its readers and subscribers with an extensive collection of various reading materials. The transcripts used in this study are thus open to the public, which means that this study is based on secondary data. Even so, no names will be revealed or any kind of information that would help to identify either the suspects or the police officers included in the data. This is in accordance with the ethical guidelines by the Swedish Research Council (2017), especially chapter 3 condition B, regarding “the handling of sensitive personal data” (p. 31).

3.2. Methodology

This is a corpus driven discourse analytic study with a pragmatic approach informed by speech act theory. The concordancing software AntConc was used to search for CIKs and revealed the word know to be the eighth most frequently used word in the data. The seven most frequently used words were function words. This interesting finding led to a cluster analysis in AntConc of the word know. The cluster analysis revealed the frequent use of I
don’t know, which thus constituted the foundation for this study and developed into its main focus: CIKs and how they are managed by police officers. What follows is a list of the most frequently used clusters of the word know:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Cluster</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>374</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>and you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>do you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>don’t even know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>I don’t even know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study is corpus driven in the sense that corpus linguistics is not identified as a method of this study. However, the corpus, especially the findings on know and I don’t know, is considered the unique primary source for this study (McEnery & Hardie, 2012).

Since clusters such as I don’t know, I don’t remember, no idea, etc., as previously mentioned, can have various functions and meanings, it was necessary to do a qualitative analysis of the hits in the context of the sequences preceding and following them, in order to identify the genuine CIKs. For example, if IDK is part of the utterance “I don’t know, this might sound weird, but I think she did it”, where I don’t know does not answer any question but functions as a hedge to mark uncertainty, it would not be included as a CIK.

According to Wetherell and Potter (1988), discourse analysis “involves developing hypotheses about the purposes and consequences of language” (p. 170). Johnstone’s (2018) description of how discourse analysis differs from other approaches to language and communication captures the essence of its relevance to a study like this, as the distinction “lies not in the questions discourse analysts ask but in the ways they try to answer them: by analyzing discourse – that is, by examining aspects of the structure and function of language in use” (p. 3). The focus of discourse analysis goes beyond the grammatical structure of language; it acknowledges the context in which the language is used for communication. By performing discourse analysis, one can detect patterns and also acquire knowledge of how the relationship between the ones communicating influences the language. How we use language affects social identities as well, and by deploying discourse analytical methodology, one can examine how this happens (Paltridge, 2006). Since the goal of this study is to disclose how the police officers represented in the data manage CIKs in police interrogations, which are a
form of institutional discourse, discourse analysis is the methodology of choice. What do the police officers do, in terms of spoken communication, when faced with CIKs? What techniques do they use and how often? Since these types of questions are the focus of this study, speech act theory is the natural choice of framework.

Speech acts fall within the subfield of linguistics called pragmatics. Two philosophers of language, John Langshaw Austin and John Searle argued that there is more to language analysis than referring to utterances’ truthfulness or falseness, at a time when this was not a generally accepted belief (Paltridge 2006). Paltridge (2006) explains that we usually want our utterances to be taken literally, though sometimes not, in case they are indirect speech acts. Stadler (2011) claims that terms such as implicit and explicit, meaning 'indirect' and 'direct', are often applied in research regarding speech acts and politeness. Speech act theory is based on the idea that “in saying something, we do it” (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Paltridge, 2006, p. 12). Speech acts are a part of every form of discourse: “we can make requests, ask questions, give orders, make promises, give thanks, offer apologies, and so on” (Altikriti, 2011, p. 1374), all of these being speech acts. However, it is about understanding, too: "speech act theory attempts to explain how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers infer intended meaning from what is said" (p. 1374). Participants in spoken interaction must be able to interpret even the implicit speech acts in order for the communication to succeed in terms of understanding each other and being able to produce logical contributions to the discourse (Altikriti, 2011).

An important factor that needs to be considered when discussing speech acts is presupposition, which regards the assumption that the participants of an interaction share the same “knowledge of a situation and/or of the world” (Paltridge, 2006, p. 60). Lack of shared knowledge increases the risk of misunderstandings in communication.

4. Findings and analysis

This section will present the analysis of CIKs by murder suspects, how they are formulated and what type is most frequently used. It will also, more importantly, include the analysis of the techniques police officers tend to use when faced with CIKs in police-suspect communication.
4.1. Claims of insufficient knowledge

This study will include *I don’t remember* as a CIK, since it is relevant to claims of knowledge. However, the results will clearly differentiate between recollection and knowledge. The four most frequently used CIKs, which are presented in Figure 1, were *I don’t know* (including 11 *I don’t even know* and two *I honestly don’t know*), which represents 70.7% of all CIKs; *I don’t remember* (also including *I can’t remember*) representing 14.3%; *No* with 7%; and *No idea* with 2.8%. Other formulations functioning as CIKs in response to questions, such as *don’t know* and *I don’t*, occurred as well, but very rarely.

![Figure 1. The most frequently used claims of insufficient knowledge.](image)

In total, there are 287 CIKs in the data, though some CIKs occur within one utterance, e.g. “I don’t remember no names. I don’t even remember meeting them”. In total, CIKs feature in 240 different utterances. They stand alone in 38.8% of the occurrences, including four slightly enhanced variants occurring only once each: *God, I don’t know, but I don’t know, that I don’t know, I don’t know, dude*. The rest of the time, the CIKs were accompanied by more elaboration. In Extract 1 and 2, I will exemplify the two most frequently used types of CIKs. Due to ethical considerations, no names of either suspects or police officers are reproduced here. In the extracts, S stands for the suspects and P for the police officers.

Extract 1 is an example of how the CIK *I don’t know* can function in a police interrogation; in this case it stands alone and is a response to an open-ended question.
**Extract 1: I don’t know**

1. P: Why didn’t you want to stop the demon?
2. S: I don’t know
3. P: Because you – I think you like the demon.
4. S: No, I don’t.
5. P: Why didn’t you stop it then?
6. S: I don’t like the demon. I don’t like the demon. I don’t like the demon. I don’t like the demon.

Line 1 consists of P asking an open-ended, wh-question, which S answers with a CIK in line 2. In line 3, P accuses S of liking the demon, a claim that challenges S. In line 4, S reacts to that challenge and denies it. P then counters that statement in line 5, with a reformulation of the first question, further challenging S to answer. One possible interpretation of S’ utterance in line 6 is that he or she reacts to the challenge in a stressful manner, repeating the answer four times.

Extract 2 shows how the CIK I can’t remember can function in a police interrogation, which in this case is similar to the CIK in extract 1; it stands alone and is a response to an open-ended question.

**Extract 2: I can’t remember**

1. S: Four months.
2. P: Four months. Okay. I got to take notes because I’m old. What’s your friend’s name?
3. S: I can’t remember.
4. P: You can’t remember? You know him from where?
5. S: School.

In line 1, S replies to a previous question with an informative answer consisting of two words. P then formulates the same two words as a turn-initial repeat in line 2, followed by an ‘okay’ that probably marks information receipt. Line 2 continues with a statement made by P that explains the reason for why he is taking notes. However, this claim can possibly also function as a way to ‘lighten the mood’ and make S more relaxed, which may result in increased willingness to provide information. At the end of line 2, there is an open-ended, information-seeking question, which S responds to with a claim of not remembering in line 3. The
beginning of line 4 consists of a recognition check followed by another open-ended, information-seeking question. Line 5 is a one-word answer by S, short but at least informative.

These examples show us some of the ways CIKs can be formulated, but also in what kind of situations they can be uttered. In addition, they show how police officers can manage CIKs, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.2. How police officers manage claims of insufficient knowledge

Considering the extensive amount of data, many different strategies to deal with suspects' CIKs are represented in it. This study will focus on the six most frequently used ones, which correspond to 80% of all the instances identified. Examples of each strategy will be provided with names of both suspects and police officers deleted. S represents the suspects and P represents the police officer. Figure 2 presents the different strategies and how often they were utilized:

![Figure 2. The different strategies utilized by police officers when faced with claims of insufficient knowledge.]

1. **Follow up questions**: When police officers were facing CIKs, they often managed them by asking the suspect a follow up question. This strategy represents 41.8% of the instances identified in this study. The different types of follow up questions will now be presented, including their characteristics and functions, as well as how frequently they appear.
Out of all follow up questions, 69% were close-ended while 31% were open-ended. These results were quite surprising, considering that through open-ended questions one could obtain elaborate responses containing more information (e.g. Mason, 2016), which one might think of as a more attractive option in police interrogations. The use of do you know and do you remember questions as a strategy managing CIKs is evident in 5.1% of the questions. Questions that function as confirmation checks, as they are widely known (e.g. “But again, you don’t remember your phone number?”), represent 7% of the questions. Another type of question that may contain words such as right? are leading questions. They represent 2.5% of the questions following CIKs. This question type is one of the types of questions that could lead to indefinite answers (Snook et al., 2012). This study differentiates leading questions from confirmation checks by defining questions formulated as reformulations of what the police officer or the suspect uttered earlier, with the aim of confirmation, as confirmation checks. Questions with another perspective on the topic, something that has not been mentioned or implied earlier, or questions regarding a ‘new’ topic, with the characteristics of leading questions, are identified as leading questions.

One of Snook et al.’s (2012) other suggestions of question types to avoid was forced-choice questions, which is a type of question representing 5.7% of the questions following up on CIKs. They may be used with an intention to obtain specific information, if the asker believes that the CIK is a sign of reluctance to tell the truth rather than an actual sign of insufficient or no knowledge. However, this study cannot make any sort of claim regarding that. In addition to the findings of the types of questions facing CIKs, how they were introduced transpired as an interesting finding. Through a review of the literature, an expectation of what kind of prefaces one could expect emerged, such as so- and and-prefaces (Johnson 2002). However, the results revealed that many other prefaces are frequently used. The most common preface in the data of this study is the well-preface. It occurs in 10.8% of all the follow up questions, closely followed by the so-preface, which is used in 10.1% of the follow up questions. The and-preface only occurs in 1.3% of the questions. Two other prefaces that were employed were the let me ask-preface and the I mean-preface. They were deployed only four times each, each one introducing 2.5% of all the follow up questions. The figure below presents the most common follow up questions and how frequently they were used.
Figure 3. The most frequently used follow up questions.

Extract 3 demonstrates how a follow up question was deployed as a strategy when P was faced with a CIK:

Extract 3
1. P: Okay. Nineteen years old. Where were you born? What City?
2. S: I don’t know.
3. P: You don’t know. Do you know what state?
5. P: Florida. Have you lived down here your whole life?

In line 1, the police officer asks two open-ended, information-seeking questions where the second question specifies the first one, which increases the chance of receiving the preferred answer. In line 2, the suspect claims insufficient knowledge. At the beginning of line 3, the police officer formulates an epistemic status check displaying openly that it is S who lacks knowledge. This is followed by P asking a close-ended question, about the same subject but with a wider approach, which could possibly result in more information. In line 4, S provides a one-word answer that turns into a turn-initial repeat in line 5 by P. P moves on by asking a close-ended question, which results in an affirmative answer by S in line 6, providing more information about the suspect. In this case, taking a different approach by using another question, as P does in line 3, resulted in relevant information about the suspect. It helped P
formulate yet another question (in line 5), which may or may not contribute to eventually finding out what is of ultimate concern in the interrogation.

2. Challenge/pressure: As the name implies, the function of this strategy is to challenge and pressure the suspect in order to elicit more information or, presumably the best outcome from the point of view of the police, a confession. This strategy represents 11.4% of the utterances identified in this study. Extract 4 demonstrates what form this strategy can take in response to a CIK:

Extract 4
1. P: Okay. So you don’t know Lee’s last name.
2. S: I don’t know if she’s using a married name or her maiden name neither.
3. P: Let’s, let’s be honest you don’t want to tell me Lee’s last name.
4. S: No I don’t, know...
5. P: Okay.
6. S: He, he got ah, she got a son named Rocky.

In line 1, P ascribes insufficient knowledge to S, which is followed by an affirmative claim of insufficient knowledge in line 2, accompanied by additional aspects of the issue at hand, which S claims to lack knowledge of as well. It is in line 3 where the challenge and pressure take form. P challenges S by implying that S is not being truthful and the CIK is invalid, i.e. that the motivation behind IDK is not its literal meaning. Line 4 seems to be a denial of P’s claim, which P then either acknowledges as information received or possibly as a mark of P terminating the discussion on that specific topic, most likely with the aim of moving on. Okay can carry different meanings and functions, so it can be challenging to determine the specific use of okay in situations like these, especially when details such as intonation are not marked. Even though P’s okay could possibly indicate the end of that specific discussion, S continues on the same topic in line 6, providing additional information. The additional information might be a result of the challenge and pressure from P, when S cannot provide the information P is seeking; he or she provides other, potentially relevant, information without being asked any question. If that is the case, then the strategy was effective. In what follows, I will describe the use of okay in this database.
3. **Okay**: Only instances where *okay* occurs at the beginning of an utterance are included in this category. A so-called *okay*-preface can designate forward movement (Beach, 1995). However, one needs to keep in mind what Levin and Gray (1983) claim, namely that “probably OK is the most versatile utterance in English” (p. 195), with various functions and meanings. Prefaced-okay is very frequently used by the police officers in this database. This interactional resource occurs in 10.8% of the utterances identified in this study. Extract 5 is an example of this strategy:

*Extract 5*

1. P: Why did you need that? Do you know why you bought that?
2. S: *I don’t know why.*
3. P: *Okay.* What gauge is it?
4. S: Twelve gauge.
5. P: Twelve gauge? Is it a full size stock or is it collapsible stock or what is it?

Line 1 consists of two versions of the same question, the first one being open-ended and the second one close-ended. A possible consequence of asking multiple questions at once is that only the last question is answered. However, in this case, *I don’t know why* answers both of the preceding questions. S claims insufficient knowledge in line 2. In line 3, P produces a “third turn receipt”, which according to Beach (1995), is an “easily recognizable pattern” “comprised of “Question → Answer → [“Okay” + Topic Shift]’” (p. 274). The *okay* is followed by an open-ended question, which receives an answer in line 4. Line 5 consists of a turn-initial repeat of the previous response in line 4, followed by an open-ended question. The last line consists of an explicit answer. This case is similar to Extract 3. The initial question does not lead to the answer sought for; however, asking another, different question eventually results in other information that might be relevant to the case.

4. ** Clarification and elaboration**: This strategy involves instances when police officers clarify something and/or provide the suspect with information regarding the subject discussed. This strategy occurs in 10.1% of the instances identified in this study. Extract 6 provides an example of this strategy. In the following example the name of a victim has been deleted and replaced with 'X'.
Extract 6
1. P: Okay. What are the drawings around? I mean it looks like a little dog, it looks like a poodle actually.
2. S: I don’t know.
3. P: Actually what it is, is bloodstains. You know, and it’s human blood. Lots of it, it’s called blood letting. Remember we talked earlier about ah, special lighting for different situations that the police use. We talked about the for, the special lights it’s the same mattress under different light.
4. S: Um, hum.
5. P: This mattress is in your Dodge, in your motor home, camper whatever the heck you want to call it. Now some of the guys joke around, call it a poodle but it’s not, it’s actually it’s kinda sad and this is X’s blood.

In line 1, P asks an open-ended question, which he/she provides his/her own opinion of. In line 2, S claims insufficient knowledge. In line 3, P starts to clarify and elaborate on the subject by providing the answer and also doing a so-called recognition check: backing one's claim by referring back to experiences that the people communicating have experienced together or have in common (You, 2014; Antaki & Leudar, 1990). In line 4, S produces minimal responses, which function as a way of indicating that S is participating and listening. In line 5, P continues to clarify and elaborate, where the previous clarification and elaboration worked as a foundation for line 5, where one can notice some pressure building up and guess where the communication is going. Clarification and elaboration can function in different ways depending on the context: sometimes it might be used for clarifying a concept, words, meaning, etc; at other times, as in Extract 6, it is in the sense of clarifying or elaborating on the subject being discussed.

5. Minimal responses: Minimal responses generally signify one’s participation in the communication at hand (Reid, 1995). In this study, the definition of minimal responses aligns with those cited in Reid (1995, p. 494), corresponding to utterances such as um hmm, uh huh, and the word yeah. It does not include the words right, yes or okay. Both information receipt and acknowledgement tokens are included. This strategy occurs in 4.5% of the instances identified in this study. Extract 7 provides an example of its use:
Extract 7

1. P: More than ten you think?
2. S: Possible. But I don’t know.
3. P: *Um, hum.* Lots I bet eh, over all those years.
4. S: Quite a few.
5. P: Who’s the ah, the best butcher you’ve ever seen?

Line 1 is a close-ended question asked by P. Line 2 starts with a one-word answer, followed by a CIK. In line 3, the minimal response can be found, *Um, hum.* According to Reid (1995), some argue that minimal responses cannot be regarded as turns. However, Reid (1995) claims that her “data indicates that minimal responses can be turns but are not necessarily so, therefore this is not a defining criterion” (p. 495). Considering the data in this study, I would agree with Reid. As previously mentioned, minimal responses display listenership, and can mark information receipt. That seems to be the function of the minimal response in this case. It indicates that P is participating in the interaction and listening to S. Following the minimal response is an utterance of a presuming nature made by P. In line 4, S responds to this with a form of confirmation, without providing any further information such as numbers. Line 5 comprises an open-ended question asked by P. The problems with analysing the minimal responses in the material are the same as those brought up in regard to *okay:* the transcripts do not include any marks on pitch, pauses, etc., making it more challenging to comment on the function of the minimal responses in examples such as this one.

6. Epistemic status check: This strategy only occurs in 2.9% of the identified utterances in this study. Extract 8 features an example of this strategy:

Extract 8

2. P: ‘98. How old does that make you?
4. P: Nineteen. Okay. All right. Let me do this. You want – you want a cold water?
5. S: I don’t know.
6. P: You don’t know if you want a cold water? It was hot out there. I know I want to get a cold water. So if I come back with a cold water –
7. S: I don’t deserve it.
In line 1, S provides a response to a previous question. P formulates a turn-initial repeat in line 2, of S’s previous answer, marking the receipt of the information provided. Then P asks an open-ended question. Line 3 contains the answer to that question, a single word. Line 4 begins with another turn-initial repeat, this time of the answer in line 3. Following are three discourse markers: okay, all right and let me do this. According to Adolphs and Carter (2013), discourse markers typically mark the “opening and closing of topics” (p. 76), which is the case here. After these discourse markers follows a close-ended question, which S then replies to by a CIK in line 5. Line 6 is where the epistemic status check appears, you don’t know if you want a cold water?. P’s turn continues, where a suggestion or a scenario-influenced question appears to take form, although the line might mark a possible ‘overlap’ as Heldner and Edlund refer to it (2010, pp. 555-556). Line 7 is a claim by S, that seems to indicate remorse, guilt, or at least low thoughts about him- or herself (if not falsely so). This is an utterance that can be further probed since it might result in useful information for further questions.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has analysed various claims of insufficient knowledge made by six different murder suspects in police interrogations. The analyses revealed different formulations of CIKs and how frequently they were used. IDK was by far the most frequent one, representing as much as 70.7% of all CIKs, while I don’t remember only represented 14.3%. It was expected that the majority of CIKs would be IDK since, as previously claimed, IDK is among the most used markers in English in terms of epistemic stance (Kärkkäinen, 2003; Lindström, Maschler & Pekarek Doehler, 2016). However, since Coulter claimed that by uttering I don’t remember one does not necessarily imply prior knowledge, which makes it a useful expression especially in contexts such as police interrogations, a more frequent occurrence of the phrase was expected and therefore the substantial difference was rather surprising. Other than that, the results regarding the different CIKs and their frequencies were not surprising, once more considering that the literature mentions IDK as one of the most used markers in English in terms of epistemic stance (Kärkkäinen 2003; Lindström et al. 2016; Maschler & Pekarek Doehler, 2016). The results also revealed that the CIKs were often accompanied by further information and elaborations rather than standing alone. They were ‘stand-alones’ in only 38.8% of the occurrences.
Epistemic status checks occurred in 2.9% of all instances in response to CIKs. Even though the number itself is not that high, it was the sixth most commonly used strategy. While there are studies on ESCs in, for example, teacher-student interactions, such as Sert (2013) and Houen, Danby, Farrell and Thorpe (2018), there is not much in terms of police-suspect interaction, if any.

The main focus of this study was how police officers manage CIKs. The results include the six most frequently used techniques, where alternative questions represented the most substantial share, 41.8%. The other most common strategies were (in the order of frequency) challenge/pressure, okay, clarification and elaboration, minimal responses, and epistemic status check. Minimal responses encourage the suspects to talk. With findings like Girgin and Brandt's (2019), according to which minimal responses create interactional space and therefore allow students in L2 classrooms to continue speaking, one might think minimal responses should be an important feature of police-suspect interaction, since many other aspects of interrogations have the opposite effect, not allowing the suspect to talk. For example, the findings revealed that out of all follow up questions, 69% were close-ended questions and only 31% open-ended ones, which is interesting considering that both Mason (2016) and Snook et al. (2012) claim that open-ended questions result in more information. Snook et al. (2012) also claim that methods and question types that are considered effective are not utilized as often as they should be, which the data of this study seem to prove:

Our analysis of questioning practices in a sample of interviews with suspects and accused persons showed that best practices are not being followed often. In general, the overarching finding is that interviewers failed to use practices that allow suspects or accused persons to talk and provide information freely. Rather than using practices to facilitate the extraction of information, interviewers tended to ask many short-answer questions, asked few open-ended questions, dominated the talking time, and requested free narratives infrequently. (Snook et al., 2012, p. 1334)

If open-ended questions tend to result in more information, one would think of them as the obvious alternative. In my data, many of the close-ended questions could very easily have been formulated as open-ended questions. Instead of “can you tell me how many…” (which allows the suspect to answer yes/no), the questions could “how many…”.
It is difficult to tell why certain methods and question types are not being used to the extent they should be, and further research might have to be conducted on the issue. However, it may not be a linguistic issue so much as one regarding the attitudes among police officers towards new methods of questioning suspects.

Methods and strategies affect how police officers interact with suspects; for example, the Reid method often results in more manipulative and more coercive language (Kozinski, 2018). However, the interrogations analysed in this study cannot be said to represent one single method. The language used was generally not very accusatory, which it very well could have been considering the context. It did feature typical interrogation characteristics such as leading questions, forced-choice questions, and asking multiple questions together, which were referred to as strategies best avoided by Snook et al. (2012). It is possible that typical characteristics of police interviews, e.g. open-ended questions, occur in police interrogations as well, while accusations and the typical characteristics of police interrogations would not be suitable in police interviews. Based on the fact that typical interrogation characteristics were utilized, together with the fact that accusations did occur (though only seven times in total, in a corpus of 170 115 word tokens), one might conclude that the data should clearly be defined as interrogations. However, the data also shows a rather informal approach to questioning suspects, as Shuy (1998) suggested it should, including contractions and continuers, which are referred to as minimal responses in this study. The analysis here suggests that police-suspect interaction can at times be complex and represent more than one way or method of communicating.

This study is limited by its data. It was challenging finding material, since police interrogations (recordings, transcripts, etc.) are often confidential material. The lack of audio recordings limited the chances of analysing silence, stress intonation, etc. Sert and Walsh (2013) demonstrated that CIKs can be produced by facial expressions and gestures as well, but since the data of this study consists of transcripts, no analyses of the participants’ body language could be conducted.

The limited data cannot reveal any patterns that could be claimed to be typical of all police interrogations. However, this study does contribute to our insights into the communication in this field and may even inform English for Specific Purposes (ESP), to the extent that the results can be helpful for police officers who speak English as their first or second language.
and have to conduct interrogations of English-speaking suspects. The results of this study might also help police officers recognize how CIKs can be formulated and the different functions they can have, as well as gain a better understanding of how to manage CIKs in English and the positive effects of open-ended questions versus close-ended ones.
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