

Understanding problems with “open” questions – what are your thoughts? *Hva tenker du* in Norwegian police interviews

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Abstract

Modern approaches to police interviews highlight the use of open questions and other strategies to enable the interviewee to give a free statement. One common question type in Norwegian police interviews is a question formulated with *hva tenker du* ‘what are your thoughts’ (about X/that/etc.). In this article, questions with this phrase are investigated and described using Conversation Analysis on audio recordings of police interviews. It is shown that the question type has different functions that depend on the sequential context of the question and its placement in the overall structure of the interview. On one hand, the analysis shows how important the context is in interpreting the use of this format, and how little the format itself influences the trajectory. On the other hand, the analysis also documents understanding problems, particularly in L2 interactions, suggesting possible issues with (too) open questions.

Keywords: police interviews; question types; open questions; conversation analysis; understanding problems.

Resumo

As abordagens contemporâneas às entrevistas policiais valorizam o recurso a perguntas abertas e a outras estratégias que permitam ao entrevistado prestar uma declaração livre. Um tipo de pergunta frequente nas entrevistas policiais norueguesas é formulado com *hva tenker du* ‘o que pensa’ (sobre X/isso/etc.). Neste artigo, as perguntas com esta expressão são investigadas e descritas com recurso à Análise Conversacional, a partir de gravações áudio de entrevistas policiais. Demonstra-se que este tipo de pergunta desempenha diferentes funções, que dependem do contexto sequencial em que ocorre e da sua posição na estrutura global da entrevista. Por um lado, a análise evidencia a importância do contexto na interpretação do uso deste formato e a reduzida influência que o próprio formato exerce sobre o rumo da interação. Por outro lado, a análise documenta também problemas de compreensão, sobretudo em interações com falantes de L2, o que sugere possíveis dificuldades associadas a perguntas (demasiado) abertas.

Palavras-chave: *entrevistas policiais; tipos de pergunta; perguntas abertas; Análise Conversacional; problemas de compreensão.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of a police interview is not to incriminate or punish the suspect or elicit a confession from them, but to gather information relevant to the investigation (Kelly, 2025). To ensure the proper treatment of suspects, it is important that they understand what is going on during the interview. The suspect, like any other interviewee, needs to understand, for instance, what kind of answer a question is aiming for. A question may however gain specific meaning in the context of a police interview or by occurring in a specific part of it, which may not be clear to the suspect. Issues of understanding may cause or enhance unjust interviewing, particularly if the suspect is a second language speaker (Berk-Seligson, 2009). Inexperienced suspects do not have the same knowledge about police interviews as a procedure compared to police interviewers.

The subject of questions in police interviews has received a lot of attention around “open” vs. “closed” questions (Grant et al., 2015). Research has focused on the appropriate use of question formulations that do not pressure the suspect into false admissions or providing wrong information or otherwise steer the interview’s value as evidence in a certain direction (Kelly, 2025).

This study addresses the topic of open questions by focusing on one specific open question format, Norwegian *hva tenker du* ‘what are your thoughts’, as used in police interviews. The first research question regards what it is used for, and how the understanding of it relates to the context and structure of police interviews. The next research question considers which issues of understanding that arise in response to it and show how they are handled in the police interview. Based on this, I discuss its properties and how its openness can be an issue for understanding.

The study shows that the question type is used to make the suspect comment on the case as part of the transition from the introductory formalities to the interview proper, and that it is used to let the suspect comment on evidence gathered by the police such as witness statements.

2. Background

2.1. The structure of police interviews

Interaction is structured in sequences consisting of individual turns delivered by different speakers (Schegloff, 2007). They may be structured around the goals and desires of the humans interacting, but in institutional interaction, participants are (usually) working towards certain goals as defined by an institution, through taking on certain institutionally recognized roles (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The purpose of a police interview, as set forth by the law, is that of information-gathering. Norwegian law requires that suspects are informed about their rights to

silence and a defense council (Påtaleinstruksen [Prosecution Instructions], 2025; Straffeprosessloven [The Criminal Procedure Act], 2025), and that they understand these rights. It also requires that suspects must be informed of the case, i.e., which crimes or allegations that are made (Bjerknes & Michaelsen, 2025, p. 329), and that suspects are given the opportunity to comment on the basis for the allegations (Bjerknes & Fahsing, 2024, p. 300).

Police interviews are structured through phases (Halley et al., 2023). This includes a contact establishment phase, an introduction to the terms of the interview, and the free recall phase seeking to gather a statement from the interviewee that is consistent and free. As part of this, TED (*tell, explain, describe*) questions are recommended as open question types that exert minimal influence on the interviewee, while giving them the opportunity to explain (Bjerknes & Fahsing, 2024, p. 42). Later in the interview, the suspect's statement can be examined through the clarification and challenge phase, and the suspect will also be given the opportunity to comment on other evidence or information gathered by the police (Bjerknes & Fahsing, 2024). Within these phases, questions can also be used to move between topics (Grant et al., 2015).

2.2. Questioning in police interviews

Questions are usually considered devices for acquiring information, which happens as one person asks a question to another (de Ruiter, 2012). However, questions, or turns formatted with the same linguistic forms as questions, have been shown to have a larger functional width than 'just' questioning, and rarely constitute innocent cases of information retrieval (Koshik, 2003; Steensig & Drew, 2008). "Questions" can also be used for assessments (Heritage & Raymond, 2005) and requests/offers for action (and even multiple actions at once, Schegloff, 2007, p. 76).

In general, questions may be divided into multiple types (König & Siemund, 2007), but categorization based on form must not be conflated with categorization based on the functions of questions (Grant et al., 2015). The lexico-grammatical format of an utterance, for instance various "interrogative" forms, does not have a one-to-one-relation with the specific questioning action of a turn. Questions are also understood based on what happened earlier in the interaction (Pomerantz, 2021). Generally, a question is a request for information that makes it relevant for a recipient to perform an "informing" action. This way, *yes/no*-questions are requests for confirmation, for instance, and content questions are requests for specific information (Fox & Thompson, 2010). Questions can also seek an opinion (van Balen et al., 2022), and *hva tenker du* is one such resource for requesting opinions (Rossen et al., 2020).

In police interviews, questions are regularly posed to suspects as part of the interview. To properly facilitate information-gathering, a police interview should avoid influencing or manipulating the suspect into giving a particular answer. The Méndez principles (2021) advise against coercive interviewing techniques, including suggestive and leading questions. Questions in police interviews have been a large area of study, subdividing questions into types such as open vs. closed (Kelly, 2025). Open questions have been shown to be superior in terms of eliciting more accurate and true information. They include TED questions (Farrugia & Maras, 2023, p. 409).

An issue with open questions, however, is that the concept has been defined in different ways and has for instance been conflated with the grammatical category of *WH*-questions (Grant et al., 2015). The concept is also subject to misunderstanding, particularly regarding the relation between form and function, which leads to difference in their categorization (Powell et al., 2013). It has also been pointed out that the employment of open questions can be more or less appropriate in different circumstances (Powell & Guadagno, 2008), and that more knowledge is needed to improve training in their use (Zekiroski et al., 2024).

2.3. Opinion verbs in questions

Cognitive verbs and/or opinion verbs like *think* and *find* have been shown to be part of different interactional formats (Fiedler, 2024, 2025). They display considerable variation across languages, making most translations between English and Scandinavian imperfect (Levisen, 2012, p. 167). The question format *hva synes du* ‘what do you think’ is used to request specific assessments, i.e., evaluations of something, which may be delivered in the shape of copula clauses.

This study focuses on questions formulated using *hva tenker du*, approx. ‘what do you think, what are you thinking, what are your thoughts’ (next paragraph comments on the translation). This question is open in the sense that it allows a wide range of responses. The questioner’s and original formulator’s viewpoints may be absent or minimized, maintaining neutrality. Rossen et al. (2020), describing the Danish equivalent *hvad tænker du*, calls it a stance-eliciting question. This further openness often leads to a longer, reflective response. For this reason, I will distinguish these requests for reflection from requests for assessments.

The formulation *hva tenker du* can be translated as ‘what do you think’. A problem with this translation is that *what do you think* is the conventionalized way of requesting an assessment in English, i.e., it corresponds to *hva synes du*. English *think* is both used about opinion and cognition, but Norwegian *tenke* is mainly a cognition verb, though it has some uses that overlap with *synes* ‘think, find’, *tro* ‘think, believe’ and *mener* ‘think, mean’, and they might be novel (The Language Council of Norway, 2024). A different translation that reflects the request for reflection better could be ‘what is on your mind’ or ‘what are your thoughts’. To distinguish *hva tenker du* from the request for assessment while maintaining the cognitive meaning of *tenker*, I translate *hva tenker du* as ‘what are your thoughts’.

3. Data and method

The data consist of Norwegian police interviews with suspects. Audio and video recordings are routinely made in accordance with Norwegian law (Bjerknes & Michaelsen, 2025, pp. 145–146), and the current study is part of a project that was given access to around 100 recordings (see the descriptions in Svennevig et al., 2024; Diepeveen, 2024; but note that interviews have been added to the collection since). Many of the suspects are second language speakers of Norwegian. A collection (Schegloff, 1996) was then assembled consisting of approx. 130 cases of *hva tenker du* used by police interviewers.

These cases were then analyzed with Conversation Analysis. This method studies how the participants in an interaction treat the construction in focus by reference to

the way it is responded to and understood in the interaction (Sacks et al., 1974). Conversation Analysis has been used successfully for the study of police interviews (Grant et al., 2015). Excerpts are transcribed according to Svennevig (2020).

4. Analysis

Formulations with *hva tenker du* serve a range of purposes. This section analyses how they work and what kinds of trouble that may arise with some of them. The first subsection will focus on two practices: the use of *hva tenker du* to request reflections on the accusation as part of the initiation of the interview, and on the use of it to present evidence to the suspect or gather his opinion about the information that the police have. They seem to be the most salient functions in the data, and their use reflects the phase of the police interview that they occur in. The second subsection will focus on different types of understanding problems that occur in sequences with *hva tenker du*.

4.1. Practices in the structure of police interviews

4.1.1. Presentation of accusation

Hva tenker du is often used as a request for reflection or assessment, as part of eliciting a suspect's comment on an accusation. The suspect may have received some information about the possible crime as part of the introduction to the interview or in earlier interactions with the police, but an initial comment on the accusation is commonly elicited right after the introduction (of formalities and rights) is finished as a way to start the suspect's statement (Byrman, 2017).

The formulation can both be used before or after the mention of the accusation, e.g., *hva tenker du om at du er mistenkt for en voldtektssak* 'what are your thoughts on being suspect in a case of rape?' or *hun har da anmeldt deg for et seksuelt omgang som skal ha skjedd ((date, time))*, *hva tenker du om det* 'she has then reported you for sexual intercourse that allegedly took place on ((date, time)), what are your thoughts on that'. The first uses *hva tenker du* followed by the accusation as an object in the construction, often leading to a syntactically complex formulation, while the second mentions the accusation first and then asks *hva tenker du om det* 'what are your thoughts on that' afterwards, referring back pronominally. In some cases, however, the accusation has been mentioned earlier as part of the introduction to the interview situation or the arrangement of the interview, which means the interview can refer back and may not necessarily name the case type as explicitly as in these cases. The amount of detail given varies.

The goal of an interview is to allow the suspect to give a statement with the suspect's perspective on something that has led to a report. Depending on the details of what has happened, the situation may entail the telling of events on a specific date or an account of why someone would frame them as guilty, for instance. The use of an open question like *hva tenker du* does not reveal to the suspect which beliefs or evidence the police may have. However, the suspect's knowledge or impression of whichever situation could have led to the accusation will shape the form of the answer.

In most cases, it seems that the question requests an assessment of or reflection on the accusation, such as denial or conveying an emotional reaction. In (1), the inter-

viewer has been explaining the procedure and rights and now mentions that unpleasant questions may be asked.

(1)

- 01 P: det kan være at du kan oppfatte mine spørsmål som: detaljert:
it may be that you can perceive my questions as detailed
 02 og kanskje ubehagelig? (0.4) .hhh men det er for at jeg trenger å
and maybe unpleasant but that is because I need to
 03 belyse saken på en best mulig måte.
illuminate the case in a best possible way
 04 (0.4)
 05 P: bare så[nn at] du er klar over det
just so that you are aware of it
 06 S: [ja]
yes
 07 P: .mhhh (0.7) ja (0.4) .hhhhh da tenker jeg vi starter.
yes then I think we start
 08 (0.6)
 09 S: ja,
yes
 10 P: hva: **hva tenker du** om om saken
what what are your thoughts about about the case
 11 du er anmeldt for,
you are reported for
 12 (1.7)
 13 S: det her er et s- et falsk eh: (.) anmeldelse,
this here is a s- a fake uh report

In L07,¹ the interviewer announces that ‘we start’, which marks a transition from the introduction phase, the last part of which is shown in L01-05, to the suspect’s statement. After *ja* ‘yes’ from the suspect, the interviewer then asks in L10-11 ‘wha- what are your thoughts about about the case you are reported for’ using the formulation *hva tenker du*. In this interview, the accusation has been mentioned earlier. The suspect responds by stating that it is a false accusation and has thus understood the question as making it relevant for him to assess the accusation. Other responses of this kind in the collection include more direct assessments such as ‘it’s nonsense’ or claims of not knowing.

In other cases, the question is responded to with claims detailing events or relations, or other potential arguments against the accusations. In (2), the suspect states his emotional response towards hearing the accusation and then attempts to explain the events on a certain date. Before the excerpt, the interviewer has stated the rights and talked with the suspect about his job, early life, values and other personal topics. Some time into the interview, the interviewer asks for a comment on the accusation:

(2)

- 01 P: .hhh eh: jeg kunne tenke meg: eh: **hva tenker du** om
uh I would like uh what are your thoughts about
 02 at du er mistenkt for en voldtektssak?
((the fact)) that you are suspect in a rape case
 03 S: altså jeg er i sjokk, (0.3) jeg vet ikke hva jeg ska si.
well I am in shock I don't know what I should say

¹L followed by a number refers to the line with that number in a transcript.

- 04 (2.6) ((interviewer starts typing))
 05 HHh den dagen- ((suspect clears throat))
 that day
 06 (1.2)
 07 ska jeg bare begynne å forklare?
 should I just begin to explain²

In this case, the interviewer utters *hva tenker du* in L01-02. The suspect's response consists of an initial description of his surprise, followed by the supporting claim that he does not know what to say. Afterwards, the suspect says 'that day', seemingly beginning to offer a statement detailing events that happened on the day of the possible crime. However, the suspect clears his throat, stops and then asks if he can start explaining. Afterwards, the interviewer asks him to wait and then poses questions about his relation to the offended.

In this case, the suspect thus assesses the accusation as surprising and indirectly denies the allegations through this. The case also shows an instance of the suspect initiating a description of relevant events without being requested to do so by the interviewer.

The next case illustrates a response that starts arguing against the accusation. Before the excerpt, the suspect has been reading the charge.

(3)

- 01 ((2 minutes where suspect reads physical document))
 02 P: hva tenker det o- **hva tenker du** om den siktelsen.
 what are ye- what are your thoughts on that charge
 03 (5.0)
 04 S: eh(m): (0.6) hva jeg tenker om det?
 uh(m) what my thoughts are on that
 05 (0.4)
 06 P: forstår du: (.) innholdet?
 do you understand the content
 07 (0.8)
 08 S: °selvfølgelig gjør jeg det,°
 of course I do
 09 P: mm:.
 10 S: men eh (1.6) .snfh (.) m:en eh (1.7) *eh:*
 but uh but uh uh
 11 (bare) jeg sier det på den måten da (1.0)
 (just) I say it in this way then
 12 jeg er ikke noen voldelig person,
 I am not a violent person

After the suspect has read a document formulating the accusation, the interviewer uses *hva tenker du* (L02) to request a response from the suspect. After a repair sequence, during which the suspect confirms that he understood the charge (L06-09), the suspect returns to answer the question with a repeated *men* 'but' and some hesitation tokens

²In Norwegian, *forklare seg* (literal translation 'explain oneself') is used in the legal sense 'give a statement'. However, *forklare* also means 'explain'. In cases like this, it can be ambiguous whether the intended meaning is that of explaining or giving a statement. The same applies to the noun *forklaring*, either 'explanation' or '(legal) statement'.

(L10). He describes himself as not being a violent person (L12), which is delivered as an argument against the accusation.

In this case, the suspect’s answer to the question (after the repair sequence L06-09) becomes the beginning of a longer argument against the accusation, continued after the excerpt where it develops into an account of a series of events. In contrast to (2), the suspect continues without asking, and the interviewer does not guide the trajectory in another direction. This type of answer is less of an assessment, but more of an open reflection.

As shown in (1-3), these questions may often lead to the suspect giving a statement or providing other type of commentary on the accusation. The question often marks the end of the introduction phase. The initial answers often perform an assessment of the accusation, in terms of veracity or surprise, in many cases amounting to denial. Answers can also perform reflections, often longer responses relating to the accusation.

The practice can be used as an unmarked, stepwise transition into a statement. This works since suspects are aware that they will have the opportunity to respond to allegations of criminal activity. Because of this expectation, a somewhat vague question like *hva tenker du* does not need to be explicit about requesting such a comment. This way, the use of the question does not only build on sequential context but also works due to the expectations surrounding the institutional context. However, not all suspects necessarily respond this way but have trouble understanding the question (which I return to later in the analysis).

4.1.2. Presentation of information

The formulation is also used when the interviewer presents information about the case, such as statements by victims or witnesses, camera evidence or other kinds. Part of the purpose of an interview is to allow the suspect to comment on the reason behind an accusation (Påtaleinstruksen [Prosecution Instructions], 2025, § 8-2). Such comments can include possible alternate explanations or interpretations, or assessing the accusation as erroneous or false. The interviewer will often present the information or claims based on it and then ask what the suspect thinks of it.

This is comparable to eliciting comments on an accusation, but the information is presented for comment later in the interview, after the suspect’s statement.

In (4), the suspect’s response consists of an alternate explanation. The suspect is accused of sexual assault, and the interviewer has earlier provided claims from the offended’s statement. One of these is brought into focus again (cf. ‘as I said’) in L01:

(4)

- 01 P: som jeg sa: ((NAME1)) så har- har også ((NAME2)) forklart
 as I said ((NAME1)) then ((NAME2)) has- has also explained
 02 >som jeg har sagt til deg< at ehm:
 as I have said to you that uhm
 03 at dere skal ha servert eh: dem drikke
 that you(PL) supposedly served uh them drinks
 04 men at du ikke selv: drakk,
 but that you didn't drink yourself
 05 S: ja
 yes

through complex (multi-part) turns, where the suspect, in principle, has the opportunity to respond in multiple places, but does not do so before being prompted. In these cases, *hva tenker du* can be used to clarify that the complex turn is complete and that a response (beyond a continuer) is sought. A longer case is seen in (6), where the interviewer presents information from the offended (mentioned by name) about a conversation with the suspect, which includes multiple claims:

(6)

- 01 P: ifra hva ((NAME)) har sagt (.) hos politiet (1.9)
from what ((NAME)) has said at the police
- 02... ((40 seconds where the interviewer presents
statements from the offended))
- 03 (1.5)
- 04 P: o:g (.) ((NAME)) ska da ha sagt at eh (0.8)
and ((NAME)) supposedly then said that uh
- 05 hun ikke kan skjønne (.) at du er glad i han, som har
she cannot understand that you like him who has
- 06 forgrepet seg på henne, (0.4) og som har gitt henne hasj (0.6)
assaulted her and who has given her weed
- 07 og som gjør henne til en junkie.
and who turns her into a junkie.
- 08 (4.6)
- 09 P: **hva tenker du** om: det jeg har sagt?
***what are your thoughts** about what I've said*
- 10 (2.1)
- 11 S: *jeg vet ikke hva jeg ska si om det her*
I don't know what I shall say about this here
- 12 (3.9)
- 13 P: vi kan dele opp litt
we can split it up a bit

In L01, the interviewer introduces his upcoming talk as a presentation of information given by the offended. In L02 (left out), he mentions the circumstances of the conversation and moves on to present different claims by the offended and the suspect that are relevant to the case.

The last set of claims is seen in L04-07, which is delivered in a way comparable to the ones omitted. The delivery divides it into parts, often with pauses between, often ending with a slightly rising pitch (Svennevig, 2018; Svennevig et al., 2024). L07 ends with a falling pitch, and so did earlier claims too (e.g., right before L03). The suspect does not use the pauses (including the one in L08 after a falling pitch) to comment on the information or initiate repair. The interviewer then requests a comment in L09 with *hva tenker du om det jeg har sagt* ‘what are your thoughts about what I’ve said’. The first person pronoun use (rather than ascribing the claims to the offended) might frame the interviewer as siding with the offended, possibly making it more difficult to disagree. After 2 seconds, the suspect replies that she does not know what to say. In contrast to “no comment”-responses (Stokoe et al., 2016), this is not an established kind of answer and is ambiguous between showing unwillingness to answer or genuine lack of knowledge. The interviewer proposes to go through the parts individually (L13), displaying an understanding of the information or question as complex, and the suspect’s response as an inability (rather than unwillingness) to answer.

In this case, the suspect does not by themselves take the turn and comment on the information before being prompted. Here, *hva tenker du* becomes a formulation that prompts a response, particularly by referring back to statements provided earlier, thus clarifying when and what the suspect should comment on.

Generally, we see that the formulation *hva tenker du* is used to elicit a comment on something, often performing a request for assessment or reflection. This practice can be used as a device for marking phases of the interview (in the sense of transitioning from introduction to the suspect's statement or indexing the current phase as presenting information for comment), and for clarifying when the suspect is supposed to answer. While a question about someone's thoughts could in principle receive a large range of responses, it turns out that responses regularly assess and/or reflect in ways relevant to the case by engaging with the claims. This may be due to the sequential context of the police interview and the suspect entering this interaction with the expectation (and possible intention) of arguing against accusations, but also due to information or accusations against or about someone inviting response from them (Drew, 1992; Labov & Fanshel, 1977, p. 100). The difference in answers reflect the open nature of the question type, and the wide space for response types.

4.2. Issues of understanding

Above, it was shown how speakers make sense of *hva tenker du* as a question format, and how an important factor in that understanding was the context, in the sense of the sequential order and phase model of police interviews. This contrasts with cases examined in this section, where the format is not understood or fails to elicit a response like the above that contributes to the progress of the interview. In fact, the cases in (2), (3) and (6) already contain some issues of understanding. Not all issues are seriously "problematic", as cases also illustrate how the issue is later resolved.

The issues generally fall in two (non-exclusive) types: Those where the type of response is subject to discussion, reformulation or explicit instruction, and those where the suspect gives a non-answer response such as 'I don't know'.

4.2.1. Negotiation of the right kind of answer

In some cases, the desired kind of answer comes about through some kind of negotiation. In (7), the interviewer presents the accusation (L01-02):

- (7)
- 01 P: hun har da anmeldt deg for h e: et eh: (.) .hhhh seksuelt omgang
she has then reported you for an uh intercourse
- 02 som som ska ha skjedd ((DATE, TIME)).
that that supposedly happened at ((DATE, TIME))
- 03 (0.6)
- 04 °hva° tenker du om det. hh
what are your thoughts about that
- 05 (3.0)
- 06 S: hva jeg tenker om det?
what my thoughts are about that
- 07 P: mm: ,
- 08 (0.8)
- 09 S: ska jeg begynne å forklare meg eller? ska jeg
should I start to give a statement or should I

- 10 (1.8)
 11 P: tenkte at du egentlig først sk- kan si hva du tenker
thought that you actually first sh- could say what you think
 12 sånn innledningsvis, om eh:m om det du har blitt beskyldt for?
like initially about uhm about what you have been blamed for
 13 (1.0)
 14 S: *det er* f (0.5) tull
it is nonsense
 15 (0.4)
 16 P: tull?
nonsense

This sequence shows repair arising in response to the question format, first in the reconfirmation sequence of the formulation (L04-07), but more importantly in a clarification sequence. Here the suspect asks whether he should give a statement, ending with a possibly unfinished alternative in *eller ska jeg* ‘or should I’ (L09). The interviewer then clarifies that the intended answer is for the suspect to make an initial comment on the allegations. Now the suspect offers such a comment, assessing the report as *tull* ‘nonsense’ (L14). The interviewer displays understanding and acceptance of this answer, through repetition (L16). Afterwards, the interviewer requests the suspect to provide a statement.

The answer also shows that an initial assessment of the accusation is an expected answer to this question (supporting the analysis of excerpts 1-3), and that it is treated as something different from the statement. Otherwise, the repair does not add anything to the question.

In (8), the problem regards the roles in the interview. The interviewer has presented the accusation right before the excerpt, but before that, the interviewer explained that he is interested in the suspect’s immediate thoughts on it (comparable to 7).

(8)

- 01 P: og når jeg sier det til deg (0.6) **hva tenker du** da (0.8)
and when I say that to you what are your thoughts then
 02 at politiet mistenker deg for det.
that the police suspects you for that
 03 (1.4)
 04 S: hva jeg tenker, (.) eh: dere skal spørre meg og jeg
what my thoughts are uh you(PL) shall ask me and I
 05 skal: eh: fortelle det, (.) hva det er
shall uh tell it what it is
 06 (1.3)
 07 P: ja,
yes
 08 S: ja hva h h altså jeg f- jeg forstod ikke helt hva du:
yes what well I u- I did not fully understand what you
 09 mente med det. men eh
meant by that but uh
 10 P: ehm sy- sy- synes du det er det:- skjønner du at
uhm d- d- do you think it is do you understand that
 11 politiet (.) mistenker deg? eller synes du det er rart
the police suspects you or do you think that it is strange
 12 at politiet mistenker deg for noe sånt noe.
that the police suspects you for such a thing

After presenting the accusation, the interviewer asks the suspect for a comment using *hva tenker du* (L01-02). The suspect first repeats the question (as in 7) and then states that ‘you shall ask me and I shall, uh, tell’ (L04-05). This seems to acknowledge the open-ended nature of the question, being at odds with his expectation that an interviewer asks (more specific) questions. After *ja* ‘yes’ from the interviewer, the suspect says he did not fully understand what the interviewer meant. The interviewer then reformulates it as a choice between two candidate answers: understanding (using *skjønne* ‘understand’) the reasoning behind the accusation or finding (using the opinion verb *synes* ‘find’) it strange.

This shows how the formulation with *hva tenker du* had to be reformulated, after an explicit claim of not understanding it. It also illustrates that the goal is an overall comment on the validity of the accusation. The use of *rart* ‘strange’ also frames a relevant answer as assessing.

These cases show that understanding issues arise in response to *hva tenker du*. However, we also see some ways that the interviewer can reformulate and secure understanding. Awareness of these reformulation opportunities is important as such sequences are at risk of introducing leading questions. As deviant cases, they also support the description given earlier.

4.2.2. Not knowing what to answer or answering ‘nothing’

Answering ‘I don’t know’ in a police interview can be a form of denial but is distinct from a claim of not having done something or disagreement about a witness statement. The response from the interviewer can clarify the suspect’s account (Yao & Zhai, 2025).

Excerpt (9) contains a case where *hva tenker du* is used (unsuccessfully) to repair the understanding problems with a different formulation used to present the accusation (also showing how *hva tenker du* is one resource among others to request a comment on the accusation, supporting the earlier analysis). The excerpt starts right after the introduction phase, ending with the question whether the suspect is willing to make a statement (L01-03).

(9)

- 01 P: er du villig til å forklare deg?=
are you willing to give a statement
- 02 S: =ja
yes
- 03 P: ja?
yes
- 04 (2.9)
- 05 P: hvordan stiller du deg til eh: (.) mistanken?
how do you position yourself to uh the suspicion?
- 06 S: (t-) hva mener du
what do you mean
- 07 P: hvordan stiller du deg til:
how do you position yourself to
- 08 denne mistanken politiet har imot deg
this suspicion the police has about you
- 09 (0.6)
- 10 S: jeg (.) forstår [ikke spørsmålet]
I do not understand the question

- 11 P: [hva hva]
 what what
- 12 **hva tenker du** om det. at du er eh: anmeldt for dette her
 ***what are your thoughts** about it, that you are reported for this*
- 13 S: (a j-) hva jeg- hva jeg tenker om det? ikke noe spesielt.
 what I- what my thoughts are about that, nothing special
- 14 (25.8) ((interviewer is typing in silence))
- 15 P: (hva/ja) kjenner du til disse anmeldte forholdene?
 (what/yes) do you know about these reported circumstances
- 16 (0.4)
- 17 S: nei ass(å)
 no PRT

The suspect’s comment on the accusation is first requested with *hvordan stiller du deg* ‘what is your position’ (L05), a somewhat formal phrase. The question is not understood, as the suspect replies with *hva mener du* ‘what do you mean’, which initiates repair and claims a lack of the knowledge needed to make sense of the question (Raymond & Sidnell, 2019) and does not offer any attempt at fixing possible issues. Furthermore, treating the issue as a clarification problem first (cf. *mener* ‘mean’) instead of as a hearing problem is a dispreferred choice (Mazeland & Zaman-Zadeh, 2004). The interviewer then repeats the question, slightly reformulated (L07–08), which still does not help as the suspect replies by explicitly saying that he does not understand the question (L10).

After the suspect’s turn, the interviewer uses *hva tenker du* about being reported. The suspect answers, first by repeating the question as some kind of understanding check, then by answering with ‘nothing special’ (L13). This answer is not particularly cooperative (in line with the earlier dispreferred repair initiation) and does not accept the premise of having an opinion about being reported to the police. The interviewer’s typing seems to accept it as an answer by indicating that something worth noting in the report was said.

However, after typing, the interviewer asks the next question ‘(what/yes) do you know of these reported circumstances’. The suspect answers it as a polar question through *nei ass(å)* ‘no’ (L17). The answer’s claim of not knowing may be seen as a denial of the crime. After this, the interviewer moves on to talk about the suspect and his person. In this case, the suspect’s denial of knowledge of the events at the end contrasts with the non-cooperative answer to *hva tenker du* and the other understanding issues before that, which suggests that the questioning made the suspect appear less cooperative possibly due to a lack of understanding.

Responses claiming no knowledge also occur when *hva tenker du* is used to present witness statements. In (10), the formulation occurs multiple times:

- (10)
- 01 ((39 seconds where the interviewer is typing in silence))
- 02 P: **hva tenker du** om at eh::::::::::::m
 what are your thoughts about that uhm
- 03 (0.4)
- 04 ((NAME)) har sagt atte du var til stede?
 ((NAME)) has said that you were present
- 05 (1.9)

- 06 S: mm jeg vet ikke
mm I don't know
- 07 (3.2)
- 08 P: >du kan (ikke) på en< måte >se for (deg) en< annen grunn
you can (not) in a way see for (you) another reason
- 09 til hvorfor han sa det. eller- hvorfor han
for why he said that or- why he
- 10 (1.0)
- 11 S: nei jeg vet ikke hvorfor han har sagt det
no I don't know why he said it
- 12 P: nei.
no
- 13 (1.6)
- 14 S: o:g jeg vet ikke hvorfor navnet mitt
and I don't know why my name
- 15 har (.) kommet opp (.) i det hele tatt. .hh=
has come up at all
- 16 P: =mm.
- 17 (1.9)
- 18 ja som sagt så er det jo ((NAME)) som har
yes as stated then it's PRT ((NAME)) who has
- 19 på en måte nevnt navnet ditt i saken her da.
in a way mentioned your name in this case
- 20 (2.4)
- 21 S: mm: jeg vet ikke jeg har ikke vært opp i noe sånt.
mm I don't know, I have not been up in such things
- 22 (38.7) ((interviewer is typing in silence))
- 23 P: **hva tenker du** om det: at han eh (på en
***what are your thoughts** about the fact that he uh (in a*
- 24 måte har) sagt navnet ditt?
way has) mentioned your name
- 25 (2.2)
- 26 S: mm: nei jeg vet ikke hvorfor han har sagt navnet mitt?
mm no I don't know why he has mentioned my name
- 27 P: nei
no
- 28 (1.8)
- 29 men **hva tenker du** selv da? (x x x) (.) hva
*but **what are your thoughts** yourself then? what*
- 30 kjenner du på når du hør (n:) du hør
do you feel when you hear you hear
- 31 (at noen han) har sagt du har vært til stede?
(that someone he) has said you were present
- 32 (0.5)
- 33 S: det er jo feil sagt fordi jeg var jo ikke til stede.
it is PRT wrongly said because I was PRT not present
- 34 jeg møtte han, (.) og jeg ventet på å bli kjørt hjem?
I met him and I waited to be driven home

In L02-04, the interviewer presents a witness statement and requests the suspect's comment on it through *hva tenker du*. This is responded to with *jeg vet ikke* 'I don't know'. In response to further questions from the interviewer, the suspect keeps responding with 'I don't know'-responses (L11, L14, L21). When the suspect does claim not to have been part of the events, a long pause ensues after which the interviewer then uses *hva tenker du* to ask the suspect about their thoughts on being mentioned

(L23-24). This is again responded to with an ‘I don’t know’-response. The interviewer then initiates another question (L29), starting with *hva tenker du selv da* ‘what are your thoughts yourself then’, which is reformulated into *hva kjenner du på* ‘what do you feel’ (L30). The new formulation is a more explicit request for assessment, and specifies the witness statement (again, as in L04) as being about the suspect’s presence. After this, the suspect responds differently. He describes the witness statement as wrong, claims not to have been present (L33), and then provides a different possible reason for the witness having seen him (L34).

The answer (or parts of it) provided by the suspect in L33-34 could conceivably have been used to respond earlier. Disagreement with the witness could have been expressed after the first use of *hva tenker du* (L02), while the alternate description of events could have been provided after the interviewer’s request for such in L08-09. It indicates that *hva tenker du* failed to communicate the kind of answer expected, as such answer was only provided after reformulating to *hva kjenner du på* (possibly also informed by the intervening sequences).

In summary, we have seen various ways that understanding problems can occur and how repair attempts follow. While the issues may get resolved, a suspect’s indications of problems with understanding in police interviews may seem like uncooperativeness, which portrays the suspect in a negative light. It also hinders the progression of the interview, and difficult-to-understand questions may cause confusion for the suspect about the trajectory of the interview. It is possible that the openness – the wide response space – of the question type contributes to the unclarity about what a relevant answer is, and that it can make the suspect not confident enough about which answer to give (possibly combined with a fear of overtalking or lack of knowledge about how it will affect the trajectory of the interview).

5. Concluding discussion

The analyses raise points about the limits of question type openness in police interviews, the practices of requesting comments on claims, and the way that the structure of the police interview matters in the interaction.

The study has shown that the format *hva tenker du* ‘what are your thoughts’ is commonly used in police interviews, and that it is often used in one of two functions related to the police interview structure: to make the suspect assess or reflect on the validity of the accusation in a general manner early in the interview, and to allow the suspect to comment on information gathered by the police (such as witness statements). Both of these elicit some kind of opinion towards a claim about the suspect. Each function constitutes an open type of question, and the relevance of the answer comes about through the structure of police interviews in terms of interview phases. Specifically, the suspect may choose to provide an initial assessment of the accusation because of the early positioning and the expectation that such a statement is relevant to provide, while comments on information are provided as the information often contrasts with the suspect’s earlier statement (Drew, 1992). This also shows us how the structure of police interviews is an interactional achievement.

As a question type, *hva tenker du* performs a request for assessment or reflection, making it relevant for the next speaker (in this case a suspect) to assess a claim. The

relevant response may have the shape of an assessment or longer argument but can be provided in different ways (though not as a single-word response). The question format does not require a specific answer format (possibly as part of its reliance on context). This is in line with the description by Rossen et al. (2020) of the equivalent formulation in Danish (*hvad tænker du*) in open dialogue sessions as part of mental health treatment, where it is described as a resource that elicits viewpoints on what another person has said and that has less constraining force than other question types.

For this reason, *hva tenker du* can be considered a type of open question, in line with recommendations in research on questioning in police interviews. However, the study has also shown that many suspects have trouble understanding what they are supposed to answer. The very open nature of the question, combined with the high stakes or a fear of saying too much at a police interview, may contribute to the understanding problems and lead to unnecessary repair sequences. This indicates that some questions can be too open, especially in combination with lack of procedural knowledge about police interviews.

By showing that questions are interpreted depending on the context of the overall interaction and place in the interview, the article also supports the idea that the description of question types in police interviews should focus less on “words” (i.e., formal question types) and more on function, taking an interactional perspective (Grant et al., 2015; MacLeod & Haworth, 2016). Understanding how suspects infer the purpose of a question based on factors beyond (or together with) the question format (Pomerantz, 2021) can inform interview practice.

Furthermore, the study has further described the practice of asking the suspect for an initial assessment of an accusation (Byrman, 2017). These early questions are subject to variation and may affect the later trajectory of the interview (Hanssen, 2022; Nyroos & Söderlundh, 2025). The analysis shows how the interviewer may treat them as distinct from a statement or explanation, giving them a structural role in the interview phases. The use of *hva tenker du* is a less formal choice for this request than *hvordan stiller du deg til* ‘what is your position towards’ (lit. ‘how do you position yourself to’), and a less restricting choice than asking if the suspect believes or denies the claims.

The study also showed some ways that suspects respond when they are not sure what to answer. One type of response is that of stating that you do not have any thoughts about the matter at hand, which seems to hinder progression as it does not provide an answer, and does not initiate repair either. Since most of the data comes from L2 speakers of Norwegian, they might be more likely to have trouble understanding *hva tenker du* as a question format. This is in line with constructions with opinion verbs being known to pose possible trouble for L2 speakers and occurring in a range of different constructions (Horbowicz & Nordanger, 2021), and that questioning also may be an issue for L2 speakers (Filipović, 2022). However, the study also shows how repair sequences and reformulations can solve understanding problems.

In conclusion, practitioners should be aware that the use of open questions can make the understanding of the interaction depend more on the context (both the sequential and institutional aspects of it), keeping in mind that suspects usually have less experience with the police interview context than interviewers. Furthermore, the study

shows how questions are understood in relation to police interview phases and how they are part of constructing the phase division of police interviews.

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