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Communicating COVID-19: A Linguistic and Discursive  
Approach across Contexts and Media

Comunicare il COVID-19: un approccio linguistico  
e discorsivo a media e contesti

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# COVID-19-Related FAQs as a Form of Online Institutional Communication

## An Exploratory Study

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone's life, and COVID-19 prevention and control measures have altered everyone's daily routine. Such measures have been put in place through legislative and regulatory acts, whose typical linguistic features make them not always accessible to the population they apply to. Therefore, other forms of communication have been used as a form of mediation, for instance by institutions and news media outlets, to share information on and thus facilitate the implementation of such measures among the population. This paper presents an exploratory micro-analysis of an English and an Italian webpage containing frequently asked questions (FAQs), a web genre often used for knowledge dissemination but still scarcely investigated from a linguistic perspective. The aim of the FAQs examined is to explain the provisions adopted to tackle the second wave of the pandemic (the two webpages were available online in September 2020) to a non-specialised and non-better specified audience. After briefly discussing the content distribution, the study adopts a conversation analysis perspective to identify the type of questions used and the (lack of) question-conditioned relevance in adjacency pairs.

*Keywords:* adjacent pairs; conversation analysis; FAQs; institutional communication; question-conditioned relevance.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION: FAQs AS A WEB GENRE

The first frequently asked questions (FAQs), which have become a recurrent component of websites, date back to the mid-1980s (Hersch

1997). However, the question-answer format has a much longer tradition outside the web environment. FAQs as we know them today are said to have “a very close antecedent in the paper world in the Troubleshooting section of technical manuals” and are also regarded as “a written form of a help desk or information desk” (Santini 2007, 235). The emergence of FAQs as a web genre may be explained as a response to new communicative needs of web users. As Giltrow and Stein (2009, 10) put it, FAQs arrived on the scene “to answer newly defined exigence”.

Following Santini’s (2008, 703) train of thought, “genres are textual categories that streamline communication relying on acknowledged conventions and raising predictable expectations” and “the conventions underlying the FAQs genre are represented by a sequence of questions about recurrent issues accompanied by related answers. When browsing FAQ web pages, users’ expectations are to find information or instructions to solve common problems”. However, nowadays FAQs cannot but be considered a web genre, and the environment in which web genres appear – the Internet – makes them inherently flexible. Therefore, while undeniably having a conventional, recognisable makeup consisting in a question-answer (Q-A) sequence, FAQs contain questions and answers that “are not structured in any particular way, [...] are not subjected to any rule of form, neither of presentation, nor of structuring” (Mounier and Paganelli 2004, 288). FAQs are thus particularly adjustable in terms of format and layout: they can take the form of stand-alone pages within websites or constitute separate sections with multiple subpages (usually organized per topic), they offer a variable degree of interactivity with web users depending on their layout, organization of contents and hypertextuality, etc. FAQs are extremely flexible not only because their “position and location in the hypertext hierarchy is highly variable” (Tomášková 2012, 122), but also because they can adapt to any sort of content, since the topics they address are highly dependent upon the subject matter of the website they are featured on. This all-round versatility makes FAQs a very popular format, which not only “is found on almost every Web site today, especially on commercial sites” (Strickland 2014, 24), but has also caught on in institutional settings, at both national and international level, such as in websites of governmental bodies, ministries, courts, health agencies, universities, European Union institutions, etc.

Despite their popularity and pervasiveness on the web, to the author’s knowledge FAQs as a genre belonging to institutional discourse have received no attention to date. It is thus the aim of this paper to take

a first, tentative step in the study of online institutional communication between governmental bodies and citizens through FAQs. In particular, this paper presents a micro-analysis of two web pages containing FAQs related to prevention and control measures adopted to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and in England.

## 2. COVID-19-RELATED INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH FAQs

The outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a prompt response from both national and international authorities, within the limits of their competence and scope. At a national level, in most cases this response consisted in the adoption of restrictive measures meant to stem the spread of the virus, and anyone who may have been affected by such measures had to be informed. In Italy, for example<sup>1</sup>, several *decreti del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri* (also known as *Dpcm*, ‘decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers’) were adopted, along with a series of *decreti ministeriali* (‘ministry decrees’), *decreti legge* (‘law decrees’), *ordinanze* (‘orders’) of the Ministry of Health, most of them immediately followed by press conferences and press releases to distribute new information and answer questions from the media. These official communication modes were surrounded by uninterrupted coverage on traditional news and social media outlets, which also contributed to the dissemination – and even distortion or sensationalisation – of official information.

In this paper, the focus is on one particular form of online institutional communication, i.e. FAQs on governmental websites, and for this reason all other forms of communication on COVID-19, which have already been discussed elsewhere (Garzone 2021; Janssen, Hendriks, and Jucks 2021; Jucks and Hendriks 2021; Tagliacozzo, Albrecht, and Ganapati 2021; Demata, Knoblock, and Zummo 2022), will not be addressed. Before delving into the micro-analysis, however, a consideration is in order. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the emergence

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<sup>1</sup> The measures adopted in Italy to curb the spread of COVID-19 are listed, in reverse chronological order, on <https://www.governo.it/it/coronavirus-misure-del-governo> and <https://www.sitiarcheologici.palazzochigi.it/www.governo.it/febbraio%202021/it/coronavirus-misure-del-governo.html> (last access 15/06/2022).

of two broad categories of FAQs available on institutional websites. The first category, which is frequently found in websites of local and state public health agencies, contains FAQs related to health issues, i.e. describing symptoms, testing procedures, preventive measures, treatment, vaccines, side effects, risks for vulnerable people and pregnant women, etc. Health-related FAQs (and, admittedly, health-related Q&A forums) are not a novelty of COVID-19: in fact, a quick search online reveals the existence of countless websites devoted to providing information on any branch of medical science. The literature also confirms a wide availability of health-related information online and an increasing online health information-seeking behaviour (Fox and Duggan 2013; Pang *et al.* 2014; Zimmerman and Shaw 2020; Abuhashesh *et al.* 2021). However, COVID-19 represents a turning point. Given the global need for health-related information, in the pandemic era ‘Dr. Google’ was consulted by almost anyone with an Internet connection and not just by those interested in a certain disease or showing specific symptoms, with COVID-19-related information reaching the entire world’s population, regardless of their health conditions.

The far reach of COVID-19-related information also applies to the second category of FAQs, which is of concern in this paper. This category contains FAQs providing legal rather than medical guidance, since they describe the restrictive measures in place and the possible changes compared to previous restrictions, rights and duties during lockdowns, limitations to the freedom of movement in certain geographical areas, etc. In other words, this second category of FAQs appears in institutional websites for informative rather than normative purposes and represents a “recontextualisation” and “reformulation” (Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004, 371) of the information contained in official, legally binding sources.

In this paper, a close look is taken at two comparable FAQs falling within the second category, one in Italian and one in English. The aim of the paper is to carry out a qualitative micro-analysis in order to observe how COVID-19 prevention and control measures adopted nationally in Italy and England have been transformed into question-answer pairs for informative purposes, with emphasis on the types of question asked (closed v. open-ended questions) and the (lack of) question-conditioned relevance.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The micro-analysis presented in this paper is based on the texts<sup>2</sup> of two FAQs belonging to the second category described in the previous section. The first FAQs are titled “*Fase 2*” – *Domande frequenti sulle misure adottate dal Governo*<sup>3</sup> (FAQs\_IT). They were available on the Italian Government’s website (*Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*) and amount to 4,089 tokens. The second FAQs are titled *Coronavirus outbreak FAQs: what you can and can’t do*<sup>4</sup> (FAQs\_EN) and were available on the UK Government’s website but applied to England only. The English text is longer than the Italian one, amounting to 6,667 tokens.

As they belong to the FAQs genre, both texts are informative in nature and feature a fictitious dialogic structure where the sender, i.e. the institutional body being in the ‘expert’ position, anticipates the questions and doubts that the recipients, i.e. citizens, may have and provide answers to them in a troubleshooting fashion. Drawing on conversation analysis, but admittedly also departing from it, the Q-A sequences in FAQs could be considered adjacency pairs, which are defined as “sequences which properly have the following features: (1) two utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speakers producing each utterance” (Schegloff and Sacks 1973, 295). Since the Q-A pairs analysed in this paper belong to FAQs, which are a written web genre, some components in the definition must be reconsidered so as to suit the context in which the pairs appear. First, the definition must be broadened so as to encompass not only utterances but also strings of written discourse. Second, it must be extended beyond the boundaries of authenticity, since the pairs simulate the interactivity of authentic exchanges and reproduce a dialogic structure, but the actual producer is only one, namely the author of the text, which makes it a monologic text with a polyphonic intent.

Given the difference in length, it should come as no surprise that FAQs\_IT contain fewer Q-A pairs ( $n = 44$ ) compared to FAQs\_EN ( $n = 53$ ). Due to the limited length of the texts under examination, the

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<sup>2</sup> Although relevant when dealing with web genres, the usability and layout of the two webpages will not be addressed in this paper due to space constraints.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.governo.it/it/faq-fasedue> (downloaded on 02/09/2020).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/> (downloaded on 02/09/2020).

contrastive analysis described in this paper is qualitative and focuses on the content distribution and the formulation of Q-A pairs in the two languages. Since the texts reproduce a hypothetical dialogue between an institutional body and citizens, and despite them being written rather than oral, the formulation of the adjacent pairs, and in particular of the types of questions used (open-ended questions v. closed questions), the relation between questions and answers and the strategies to acknowledge the presence of the reader are investigated within a conversation analysis framework, drawing in particular on Schegloff (1968) and Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974).

#### 4. SECTIONS AND CONTENT DISTRIBUTION

Both FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN refer to what can be described, in hindsight, as a relatively quiet summer period, given that at the time (August 2020) the number of COVID infections was lower and the restrictions in place were more relaxed compared to the previous spring and the ensuing autumn-winter periods. Furthermore, both FAQs applied to the pre-vaccination era, which means that the ‘cans and can’t’s’ illustrated in them make no distinction between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals, as instead happened after the launch of the vaccination campaign.

Although mostly dealing with the same aspects affecting citizens’ lives and therefore with very similar contents, by comparing the sections in which the question-answer pairs are subdivided (*Tab. 1*) some differences can be noted.

First, FAQs\_IT are divided into eight sections while FAQs\_EN are divided into nine sections, the first of which is specifically dedicated to illustrating the changes compared to previous restrictions, with the very first question being particularly telling: *What is changing and what can I do that I couldn’t do before?* However, it must be noted that changes are also addressed elsewhere in FAQs\_EN, such as in section 4, where we can find the question *How is guidance to those shielding (clinically extremely vulnerable) being relaxed?* In FAQs\_IT, no separate section dedicated to changes is found, since these are addressed within each relevant section. This is the case, for instance, of the first question in the section devoted to ceremonies and other types of events, which reads *Con la ripresa di cerimonie, eventi, competizioni sportive etc. è venuto meno anche il divieto di*



*assemblamento*?<sup>5</sup> and thus implies a difference in restrictions compared to the past.

Table 1. – Division into sections of FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN.

FAQs_IT	No. OF Q-A PAIRS PER SECTION	FAQs_EN	No. OF Q-A PAIRS PER SECTION
1. Spostamenti, trasporti e turismo	16	1. Changes in restrictions	9
2. Lavoro	3	2. Social contact and events	10
3. Uffici pubblici	2	3. Visiting public places and taking part in activities	18
4. Pubblici esercizi e attività commerciali	4	4. Clinically vulnerable groups and clinically extremely vulnerable groups, and care homes	2
5. Attività produttive, professionali e servizi	1	5. Going to work and being COVID-19 Secure	4
6. Attività motorie/ sportive	5	6. Workers' rights	2
7. Università	2	7. Public Transport	3
8. Cerimonie, eventi, riunioni e attività culturali	11	8. Schools and Childcare	2
		9. Borders / international visitors	3

Another difference that can be discerned from *Table 1* is that while FAQs\_IT address only higher education (*Università*) and completely ignore lower levels of education, FAQs\_EN feature a section named *Schools and Childcare*, which also mentions universities in passing. This difference may be explained with the period in which the measures described in the FAQs were in force, i.e. when pupils were enjoying their

<sup>5</sup> With the resumption of ceremonies, events, sports competitions etc., has the ban on public gatherings been lifted? (all the translations of Italian FAQs are by the author).

summer break. Indeed, while in the Italian text schools are not even mentioned in a non-term time and no future measures are envisaged, in the English texts two Q-A pairs deal with future safety standards regarding children's return to education settings in September. Another section that can only be found in the Italian FAQs is *Uffici pubblici* ('Public administration offices'), which explains the rules applying to accessing public administration buildings and receiving public services. The reason for a separate section is that the legal provisions regarding workplaces in force in Italy at the time distinguished between the public and the private sector. In the English FAQs, on the contrary, no specific reference is made to public service, since the same rules applied to any public and private workplace.

As regards the other sections, they cover approximately the same topics without necessarily coinciding in terms of content distribution. For example, the topics included in the single section *Spostamenti, trasporti e turismo* ('Travelling, transport and tourism') in FAQs\_IT are scattered over three sections in FAQs\_EN, namely *Visiting public places and taking part in activities* – which also covers topics included in *Attività motorie/sportive* ('Physical exercise/sports') in FAQs\_IT –, *Public Transport* and *Borders / international visitors*. Conversely, what is subsumed under the single heading *Going to work and being COVID-19 Secure* in FAQs\_EN is actually spread over three sections in FAQs\_IT, namely *Lavoro* ('Working'), *Pubblici esercizi e attività commerciali* ('Retail and catering businesses') and *Attività produttive, professionali e servizi* ('Manufacturers, suppliers and professionals').

Another interesting fact is that, again, the Italian text reflects the period in which the measures were applicable but also the specificity of the Italian territory: in fact, one Q-A pair expressly addresses seaside resorts and beaches. Curiously enough, though, the section devoted to *Attività produttive, professionali e servizi* only contains one Q-A pair whose link to the relevant topic is very feeble. Indeed, the Q-A pair addresses the possibility for TV shows – either live or recorded – to be filmed with live audience, which seems a rather unexpected aspect to be inserted under such a broad heading and included in such far-reaching FAQs.

Although the analysis of the content and hypertextuality exceeds the scope of this paper, a brief digression is deemed necessary to explain a difference between the two texts with regard to the type of content included in the answers. Although FAQs\_IT feature references to external sources (n = 24), their number is much lower than the number of such references in FAQs\_EN (n = 71). The distribution of references

to external sources between references with a hyperlink and references without a hyperlink is also interestingly different: in FAQs\_IT only 6 out of 24 references are a hyperlink to the relevant external source, whereas in FAQs\_EN 61 references are a hyperlink. This different approach to relevant sources of information (FAQs\_IT mainly refer to *Dpcms* and ministerial websites, FAQs\_EN to COVID-19 Secure guidelines and gov.uk) reflects on the type of information provided in the answers. In many cases, FAQs\_IT illustrate the applicable restrictive measures and specify the relevant official legal source (most often, the *Dpcm* of 11 June 2020), as in the following example.

Quali sono le regole per utilizzare i mezzi pubblici?

Gli accessi ai mezzi pubblici sono contingentati in modo da garantire la possibilità del rispetto del distanziamento interpersonale. È obbligatorio l'uso della mascherina o di altri dispositivi di protezione delle vie respiratorie. Nel dettaglio le regole relative ai mezzi pubblici sono indicate nell'allegato 14 del *Dpcm* 11 giugno 2020. Sono altresì da seguire le indicazioni delle competenti autorità locali e del personale preposto al trasporto.<sup>6</sup>

On the contrary, in FAQs\_EN we cannot find references to statutory acts or other sources of law but rather hyperlinks to external sources providing guidance on various aspects of citizens' everyday life, as in the example below.

5.1 Who is allowed to go to work?

With the exception of the organisations listed in this guidance on closing businesses and venues, the government has not required any other businesses to close to the public – it is important for business to carry on.

It is at the discretion of employers as to how staff can continue working safely. Working from home is one way to do this, but workplaces can also be made safe by following COVID-19 Secure guidelines.

Your employer should consult with you on how you can work safely, and must ensure workplaces are safe if they are asking you to return, as above.

If you are clinically extremely vulnerable<sup>7</sup>, you can go to work as long as the

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<sup>6</sup> What rules apply to public transport? | Public transport is subject to capacity constraints so as to ensure social distancing. The use of face masks or other respiratory protective devices is compulsory. The rules regulating public transport are detailed in Annex 14 of *Dpcm* of 11 June 2020. The rules of the competent local authorities and the indications of public transport staff are also to be abided by.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-onshielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protectingextremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>.

workplace is COVID-19 Secure<sup>8</sup> but should carry on working from home wherever possible.

## 5. QUESTION-ANSWER PAIRS

In what follows, a closer look is taken at the types of questions used in the Q-A pairs. However, before doing so two interesting facts are worth mentioning. The first is that, on average, the questions in FAQs\_IT are longer than the questions in FAQs\_EN, the former amounting to 16.82% (688 tokens) of the whole text compared to 7.89% (526 tokens) of the latter. While this may be attributed to the inherent differences between the two languages, it is also true that in some cases the Italian questions tend to be much more detailed than English questions. An eloquent example of this is found in a question on visiting care homes and similar facilities, where the Italian text specifies all the possible types of facilities in the very question: *Sono un parente o un conoscente di un paziente ospitato presso una struttura di lungo degenza, o in una residenza sanitaria assistita (RSA), o in hospice, o in strutture riabilitative, per anziani, autosufficienti e non, posso andare a fargli visita?*<sup>9</sup>

The second interesting – though again not particularly surprising – fact is that, having FAQs\_EN more sections than FAQs\_IT, they also contain more Q-A pairs (53 v 44). What is important to notice in this regard is that in FAQs\_IT the number of pairs coincides with the number of questions, meaning that each pair contains only one question, whereas in FAQs\_EN the number of questions (n = 56) is higher than the number of pairs, meaning that some pairs contain more than one question, such as in this example: *Can I visit outdoor tourist sites? What about indoor ones?* The presence of more than one question in a single turn certainly affects the analysis of conditional relevance (see section 5.2 below).

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.

<sup>9</sup> I am a relative or friend of a patient in a long-term care facility, a nursing home, a hospice or a rehabilitation care centre for either self-sufficient or non-self-sufficient seniors. Can I go and visit them?

### 5.1. Question types

The first step in the analysis of Q-A pairs consisted in identifying the type of questions used in the two FAQs, which are summarized in *Table 2*.

*Table 2. – Distribution of question types in FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN.*

	FAQs_IT	FAQs_EN
Question-answer pairs	44	53
Questions	44	56
Closed questions	30	31
Open-ended questions	14	24
Pairs with no questions	0	1

The most frequent question type in both FAQs are closed questions, i.e. questions triggering either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ as a preferred reply. Although in both texts closed questions prevail over open-ended questions, they do so in different proportions: they represent slightly over 69% of all questions in FAQs\_IT and slightly over 55% in FAQs\_EN. The reason for a higher number of closed questions than open-ended questions may be explained by considering the target readers, the content of the two texts and the time of publication. As mentioned above, in both FAQs the target readers, who are ideally also the ones asking the questions, are citizens looking for information on what they are or are not allowed to do in a specific period characterized by more relaxed measures compared to those in force in spring 2020. Therefore, having experienced lockdown measures, they are somehow expected to have a certain cognizance of what behaviours may or may not be subject to regulation or limitation and thus to look for confirmation or confutation of their expectations. Two examples will help clarify this point:

Can I visit people indoors?

Can I share a private vehicle with someone from another household?

The questions above show that the potential citizens asking them are assumed to be aware of the fact that the activities mentioned (visiting people indoors, sharing private vehicles with non-family members) may be forbidden.

As regards open-ended questions, i.e. questions whose preferred answer is neither ‘Yes’ nor ‘No’, they represent a minority in the two texts under examination. Despite their different formulation compared

to closed questions, they also assume a certain background knowledge on allowed or prohibited behaviours in the reader/information-seeker. This is especially true for the questions addressing the relaxation of anti-COVID measures in the *Changes in restrictions* section in FAQs\_EN, which are open-ended questions enquiring about what was or was not allowed after such relaxation, as shown by the three examples below.

What is changing and what can I do that I couldn't do before?  
What else will change in the next few months?  
What should I still avoid doing?

However, this is also the case for most of the questions in the other sections, such as in the following two examples which imply that safety standards were to be put in place in care homes and that there were some differences between those who were allowed to go to work and those who had to work from home, respectively.

What safety standards will need to be put in place in care homes?  
Who is allowed to go to work?

The analysis also revealed an exclusive trait of FAQs\_EN, which is the presence of an adjacent pair where the first element is a statement rather than a question.

My employer is asking me to come to work but I'm scared.

Although the first turn in the adjacent pair takes the form of an affirmative statement, it could anyway be interpreted as a "What if" question, so the pragmatic function of the first turn is preserved despite its 'deviant' syntactic formulation.

## 5.2. *Question-conditioned relevance*

As said in the preceding section, the number of closed questions exceeds the number of open-ended questions in both FAQs. What is now in order is a thorough examination of Q-A pairs so as to examine whether they are "genuine adjacency pairs" or "interactive pairs", i.e. pairs "where the question and its answer are closely related not only semantically but also by means of grammatical cohesive devices [...] which makes the answer dependent on the question for interpretation of its meaning" or "pairs in which the answer is both formally and semantically independent of the question" (Tomášková 2012, 123). However, to investigate the relationship between the questions and the relevant answers in

the pairs, here termed question-conditioned relevance, we need to bear in mind that the texts feature two types of questions (see section 5.1 above) and that they trigger different types of answers, which require different types of cohesive devices.

Table 3. – Distribution of interactive pairs in FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN.

	FAQs_IT	FAQs_EN
No. of pairs with a closed question	30	31
No. of interactive pairs	18 (60%)	12 (38.71%)
No. of non-interactive pairs	12 (40%)	17 (54.84%)
No. of pairs with an open-ended question	14	24
No. of interactive pairs	4 (28.57%)	5 (20.83%)
No. of non-interactive pairs	10 (71.43%)	19 (79.17%)
No. of pairs with no question	0	1
No. of interactive pairs	0	0
No. of non-interactive pairs	0	0

Table 3 shows that question-conditioned relevance is more represented in pairs featuring closed questions rather than those containing open-ended questions, with 60% and 38.71% of pairs with a closed question as the first turn being interactive pairs in FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN respectively and 28.57% and 20.83% of pairs with an open-ended question as the first turn being interactive pairs in FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN respectively. The higher number of interactive pairs in Q-A sequences containing closed questions may be explained by the very fact that closed questions prototypically trigger either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ as their answer (or at least as the beginning of the answer). The presence of ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ evidently makes the answers dependent on the question. Yet, what comes after the initial ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ may vary, as shown in the following two examples.

Can I send my teenagers to their youth club?

Yes, you can. However, you should advise your children to maintain social distancing, wash their hands regularly and limit social interaction outside of these formal activities with anyone you do not live with.

È possibile attivare iniziative di aggiornamento e di formazione in modalità agile?

Sì. È possibile promuovere percorsi informativi e formativi in modalità agile.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Can training and continuing education activities be held remotely? | Yes. Education and training courses can be delivered online.

In the English example, the affirmative answer is followed by a sentence starting with ‘However’, introducing a statement to the contrary of the initial ‘Yes’, since recommendations for the prevention of COVID-19 (rather than restrictions) should be observed despite the lift on the ban on clubbing. Conversely, in the Italian example the sentence following the affirmative answer is simply a paraphrase of the question, which does not expand on the information provided in the answer.

As emerges from *Table 3* above, question-conditioned relevance in open-ended questions is much less frequent. In the English example below, the question refers to businesses that need to remain closed “by law”. The latter element is not repeated in the answer and must therefore be considered implicit, but the relation of question-conditioned relevance is further reinforced by the fact that the answer uses the first-person pronoun “we” to refer to the Government, and thus to the “law”.

What will need to remain closed by law?

Some businesses will need to remain closed, as we have assessed that they cannot yet be made sufficiently COVID-19 Secure. [...]

In the Italian example below, question-conditioned relevance is of a different type and is determined by the fact that the second turn fails to provide an answer to the question but rather directs the reader to an external source, namely the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation’s website. Since the second turn does not take up any of the elements mentioned in the question, the reason for being referred to an external source must be found in the question itself, and thus makes the second turn dependent on the first one.

Quali regole valgono dal 3 giugno per gli spostamenti da e per l'estero?

Per maggiori informazioni si consiglia di consultare il sito del Ministero degli affari esteri e della cooperazione internazionale.<sup>11</sup>

### 5.3. *Lack of question-conditioned relevance*

Going back to *Table 3* above, we can notice that the number of adjacent pairs characterized by a lack of question-conditioned relevance outnumber those in which cohesive devices are used to establish a

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<sup>11</sup> What rules apply to travelling to and from foreign countries as of 3 June? | For more information visit the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.



relation between the two turns. In other words, in both texts under examination the answers that are not both semantically and grammatically dependent on the relevant question are more frequent than those in which such a dependence can be traced. The following two examples contain closed questions which are not followed by a 'Yes' or 'No' answer and constitute non-interactive pairs.

Can I use public transport if I'm seeing friends in a park or going to my parents' garden?

You can help control coronavirus and travel safely by walking and cycling, if you can. However where this is not possible, you can use public transport or drive. [...]

Posso spostarmi fuori regione?

Dal 3 giugno 2020 è nuovamente consentito spostarsi tra regioni diverse per qualsiasi motivo. Gli spostamenti interregionali potranno comunque essere limitati, solo con provvedimenti statali (decreti del Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri o ordinanze del Ministro della salute), in relazione a specifiche aree del territorio nazionale, secondo principi di adeguatezza e proporzionalità al rischio epidemiologico effettivamente presente in dette aree.<sup>12</sup>

In the English example, the lack of cohesion is further supported by the formulation of the second turn, which first suggests alternative means of transport as preferred options and only later introduces the real answer to the question. The absence of a 'Yes' answer can be observed also in the Italian example, where no question-conditioned relevance is observed also because of the use of personal and impersonal forms: while the first turn is expressed in the first person singular ('posso spostarmi'), the second turn uses an impersonal form ('è consentito spostarsi') and the passive ('gli spostamenti interregionali potranno [...] essere limitati'), which implies governmental intervention. Due to space constraints, the use of reader engagement devices such as personal pronouns in FAQs is not analysed here, but in the author's view their role deserves to be further investigated in order to explore both the involvement and the visibility in FAQs of web users, who are the recipients and the fictitious question askers.

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<sup>12</sup> Can I leave my region? | As from 3 June 2020, crossing regional borders is allowed again for any reason. Cross-regional movements may in any case be restricted, only by means of governmental provisions (decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers or orders of the Health Minister), in specific areas of the national territory, in accordance with the principles of adequacy and proportionality to the epidemic risk actually present in such areas.

A lack of question-conditioned relevance can be detected also in open-ended questions in both texts. In the English example below, for instance, the question begins with a generic ‘What happens if’. While coherence is created through the use of personal pronouns (‘I’ in the question, ‘you’ in the answer), the second turn instructs the reader on what to do after being contacted by the public health authority and therefore is more appropriate to answer a ‘What should I do if’ question.

What happens if I am on holiday in England and I am contacted by NHS Test and Trace?

If NHS Test and Trace contacts you while you are on holiday to tell you that you have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus, you should tell your accommodation provider immediately and make arrangements to return home as quickly and directly as you can.  
[...]

In the Italian example below, despite being linked to the same topic, the two turns do not correspond to a prototypical question-answer pair. The second turn states that religious ceremonies may be held under the circumstances specified in the legislative instruments specified, and would thus imply the presence of a question formulated differently (e.g. Are religious ceremonies allowed? or When are religious ceremonies allowed?) compared to the one actually used in the text, which enquires what the decree provides regarding religious ceremonies.

Cosa prevede il decreto per lo svolgimento delle cerimonie religiose?

Le funzioni religiose con la partecipazione di persone si possono svolgere, purché nel rispetto dei protocolli sottoscritti dal Governo e dalle rispettive confessioni, di cui agli allegati da 1 a 7 del Dpcm 11 giugno 2020.<sup>13</sup>

The lack of question-conditioned relevance observed in the examples above does not mean that the answers are completely irrelevant to or incoherent with the questions preceding them. However, contrary to Q-A pairs featuring interactivity, in these cases the answers represent a deviation from possible preferred replies, since their formulation (rather than content) does not meet the answers expected to constitute the second turn in the adjacent pairs involved. Although the information to be provided as an answer to the first turn is actually there, it is conveyed

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<sup>13</sup> What does the decree provide for with regard to religious ceremonies? | Religious services involving the participation of people can be held provided that the protocols undersigned by the Government and the relevant religious confessions referred to in Annexes 1-7 of the *Dpcm* of 11 June 2020 are abided by.

in a dispreferred way. Although further research is necessary, it can be argued that the lack of question-conditioned relevance in FAQs could hinder the accessibility, clarity and comprehensibility of the texts, for instance and especially when there is a shift in focus from the agent expressed through a personal pronoun to an impersonal structure or when the actual answer to the questions comes later in the text, only after other – still relevant though not strictly on topic – information has been provided.

## 6. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

The study illustrated in this paper represents a first (and work-in-progress) attempt to examine a specific form of institutional communication between governments and citizens, namely FAQs, and does so by applying conversational analysis as a theoretical framework. In particular, the study consists in a micro-analysis of COVID-19-related FAQs with a two-fold aim: (i) to identify the type of questions used in the two texts and (ii) to observe the Q-A sequences in order to assess whether they are characterised by question-conditioned relevance.

The study shows that in both FAQs\_IT and FAQs\_EN closed questions are preferred over open-ended questions and Q-A pairs are more frequently characterised by the absence rather than the presence of question-conditioned relevance. The latter fact discloses the fictitious nature of the dialogic interaction in the adjacent pairs and may play a role in the degree of accessibility, clarity and comprehensibility of the information provided in the second turn, i.e. the answer, an aspect that is believed to be worth addressing in the future by taking into account the principles of clear writing for effective institutional communication.

Given that the study examines only two instances of this web genre, it undeniably has several shortcomings. Firstly, the findings only apply to the two texts analysed and cannot be in any way generalised to any other FAQs. A broader study encompassing a corpus of FAQs is thus needed, both because this web genre seems to be severely under-researched from a linguistic perspective and because especially the linguistic choices leading to the absence of question-conditioned relevance should be investigated thoroughly. Secondly, the FAQs examined were produced in a very specific period of the pandemic, namely after the

first wave when the anti-COVID restrictions were being relaxed both in Italy and in England. However, as the pandemic timeline witnessed an alternation of easement and strengthening of restrictions, it would be interesting to carry out a short-term diachronic study to check whether and how the institutional communication on COVID-19 prevention and control measures through FAQs changed in the various phases of the pandemic. Finally, as highlighted by Giltrow and Stein (2009, 11), Internet genres are characterised by “cross-cultural convergence” and in this analysis, despite all its limitations, this emerges as regards the topics addressed by the FAQs and the choices in terms of question type and question-conditioned relevance. However, as only hinted to in section 4, given that the FAQs examined are embedded in different legal systems, geographical areas and cultural backgrounds, differences concerning the legal systems involved or culture-specific elements may still come to the fore and affect the adjacent pairs used, so divergences despite the cross-cultural convergences in this web genre may constitute another avenue for future research.

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