Highlights

* Interlocutors need to rapidly identify the pragmatic content of turns in order to respond appropriately in real-time conversation.
* In particular, responding to content questions constitutes a harsh cognitive environment.
* Languages may adapt to this ecology in order to facilitate rapid turn taking such as providing a low-level phonetic cue to upcoming questions.
* Wh-words sound systematically similar within a language, controlling for some basic confounds.
* This effect is greater in languages that place the wh-word at the beginning of clauses.