Unasked questions

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http://kvf.me/uq

Introduction

What happens when a question gets asked?

(1)   Where is Charlotte?

(2)   Does Peter still like Cuban cigars?

The "force" of speech acts

(3) Liza mailed the letter.

(4) Liza, mail the letter!

(5) Did Liza mail the letter?

speech act force, illocutionary force, illocutionary act potential, (canonical) discourse effect

The force of a question

Asking a question Q has the canonical intended effect that the addressee is obligated to assert the answer to Q.

Questions are **very** forceful

(6)   If it rains, invite your friends to come inside!

(7)   If it rains, where will we have lunch?

But not all questions

(8)   Where is Charlotte?

(9)   Where is Charlotte, I wonder?

German

Truckenbrodt 2006:

(10) Ob   der Peter wohl   immer   noch kubanische
      whether the Peter WOHL always still   Cuban

         Zigarren mag?
         cigars   likes

      "Might Peter still like Cuban cigars, I wonder?"

Greek

(11) Ti   kani i   Miranda tora araye
      What does the Miranda now ARAYE

      'What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?'

Italian

Beltrama & Eckardt 2019:

(12) Dove sarà   la chiave?
     where be:FUT:3SG the key

     'Where is the key, I wonder?'

Wo der Schlüssel wohl ist?

Unasked questions

- We introduce the term "unasked questions" (UQS) for questions that do not obligate the addressee to provide an answer.

- Other terms have been used: "conjectural questions", "non-intrusive questions", …

ACROSS

52 Alternative to a boot
53 *Lawn equipment with an engine*
54 Hole ___
55 Rite Aid rival
56 Like some questions that will never be answered
58 *Be in direct competition*
60 Bergdorf competitor
61 Saguaros, e.g.
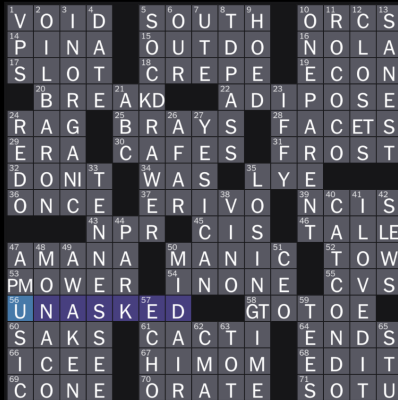64 They may be split or loose
66 Frozen treat

DOWN

26 A ways away
27 Confident assertion
33 Home of Dollywood
35 Moving too slowly, say
38 Prosecco o Chianti
40 Item of feline furniture
41 "Five stars!"
42 Oodles
44 Part of PRNDL
47 College-level H.S. class with scales and intervals

56 ACROSS   Like some questions that will never be answered

47 DOWN   College-level H.S. class with scales and intervals

12

Recent work

- Eckardt, Regine. 2020. Conjectural questions: The case of German verb-final *wohl* questions. *Semantics and Pragmatics* 13(9). 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3765/sp.13.9.

- Farkas, Donka. 2022. Non-intrusive questions as a special type of non-canonical questions. *Journal of Semantics* 39(2). 295-337. https://doi.org/10.1093/jos/ffac001.

The plan

- theories of force
- properties of unasked questions
- lessons for theories of force

Theories of force

Components of a theory of force

- what is the force?
- how should the force be modeled?
- where does the force come from?

The force of a question

Asking a question Q has the canonical intended effect that the addressee is obligated to assert the answer to Q.

Various ways of modeling the obligation

- structured context models
- common ground model

Structured context models

Lewis 1979 "Conversational Scoreboard" $\rightarrow$ Farkas & Bruce 2010 "Table Model"

DC_{Sp}	Table	DC_{Ad}
$\mathrm{info}(I)$=W	$\{\boldsymbol{p},\ \bar{p}\}$	
	ps: $\{\mathrm{DC}_{Ad}\cup\{p\},\ \mathrm{DC}_{Ad}\cup\{\bar{p}\}\}$	

Stalnaker's minimal agnostic model

Stalnaker 1998 "On the representation of context":

- the core component of the context is the common ground
  = all the mutually accepted facts

- the speech act that just happened happened in all of the
  worlds compatible with the common ground

- effects on the context can be simply stated as properties
  of those worlds

- not much else is needed

Where does the force come from?

- covert speech act operator (perhaps some kind of abstract imperative) in the syntax of questions many people

- no operator; instead: convention of use

von Savigny, Condoravdi & Lauer

NB: we have here an apparent form-meaning mismatch!

The worst possible theory

- structured context + covert speech act operator
- A matrix interrogative used to ask a question contains an operator $\mathcal{Q}$ that denotes a function from structured context to structured contexts that maps any context into one whose projected set contains only the various possible complete answers to the question.

Since this is the worst theory, it's also the most popular.

The minimal agnostic theory

- minimal agnostic model of contexts + conventions of use
- When someone utters a matrix interrogative, they thereby (propose to) change the world to one where the addressee has the obligation to assert the complete true answer to the question.

The idea

We should be able to learn how the force of questions arises by studying how UQ-markers yield questions that do not have the force of typical questions.

Properties of unasked questions

Asking a question vs. posing a question

Lyons 1977:

> *What seems to be required, in fact, is a distinction between* ==*asking a question*== *of someone and simply* ==*posing the question*== *(without necessarily addressing it to anyone). When we pose a question, we merely give expression to, or externalize, our doubt; and we can pose questions which we do not merely expect to remain unanswered, but which we know, or believe, to be unanswerable. To ask a question of someone is both to pose the question and, in doing so, to give some indication to one's addressee that he is expected to respond by answering the question that is posed.*

A quintessential UQ-scenario

Two friends are sitting on a bench, looking out at the sea, watching the waves, only occasionally saying something. One of them says (in Greek):

(13) Ti   kani i   Miranda tora araye
      What does the Miranda now   ARAYE

      'What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?'

The speaker is not stating that they are wondering

(14) A: Why are you going through these old books?

   B: I'm wondering whether there is hidden evidence
       that Henry VIII had a seventh wife.

   B': #Is there hidden evidence that Henry VIII had a
       seventh wife, I wonder?

(15) A: I'm wondering what Miranda is doing now.

   B: Why are you telling me that? I don't need to know that.

(16) A: What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?

   B:#Why are you telling me that? I don't need to know that.

UQs are not (per se) self-addressed

Any question can be self-addressed or addressed to someone other than the speaker.

(17) a. Where the hell are the keys(, Kai)?

b. Hmm, (Kai,) where are the keys, I wonder?

UQs need to be acknowledged

- Stony silence is not a canonical response
- But it is perfectly fine to just acknowledge that the question has been posed (maybe just a nod) or accept it as a good question (*indeed*, German *tja*, Greek *ondos*)
- You can't answer a canonical question with *ondos* or the like

This also shows that UQs are in fact addressed.

UQs *can* be answered

(18)   A: What's the best kind of vodka, I wonder?

        B: Well, it's horse-radish vodka, of course!

UQs are not asked of the addressee

(19) A: Istanbul-da hava nasıl acaba? Turkish
          Istanbul-loc weather how ACABA

      'What is the weather in Istanbul, ACABA'

    B: #Neden bana sor-uyor-sun?
        Why to.me ask-impf-2sg

      #'Why are you asking me?'

UQs are not optional questions

(20)   The police interviews a suspect:
       You do not have to answer any of the questions. Any
       answer you give may be used against you.
       First question: where were you at 5pm (#UQ)?

Also, consider a typical form on the web that marks required answers with an asterisk. Questions that you do not need to be answered do not have the asterisk.

Such questions cannot be UQ-marked.

UQs when answer is not available

UQs are perhaps most typical in scenarios where an answer is not available: the speaker knows that neither she nor the addressee knows the answer.

See again the idle questions while hanging out at the beach.

UQs when answer is in principle available

But UQs are also possible when the addressee is known to have the answer but the speaker chooses to not constrain the conversational future by asking a canonical question.

(21) Oli pistevun oti ime enoxi. To pistevis ke esi
     all believe that am guilty. it believe and you
       araye
       ARAYE

     Everybody thinks I'm guilty …do you believe it too -UQ?

(I can go on and say, don't tell me now please — I'm not ready
to hear it … — but I can also say nothing, hoping you'll say, "Of
course not!!") Thanks to Despina Oikonomou for this observation

UQs for politeness

Some languages can use their UQs for purposes of politeness:

(22) Annenizin   evlenmeden önceki   soyadını öğren-ebilir
      your.mother's pre-marriage last.name learn-abil

    mi-yim acaba?
    Q-1sg   ACABA

    'Can I learn your mother's maiden name-ACABA?'

Analysis of unasked questions

Problems for previous analyses

We think that the data we have assembled are problematic for all existing approaches to UQs.

- not necessarily self-addressed
- not necessarily unanswerable
- not asked with the option not to answer
- not asked of the addressee at all
- …

Our core idea

- UQs are merely posed, not *asked of* the addressee Lyons!
- UQs are presented as questions of interest
- but answering them is not thereby put on the immediate agenda

The tasks ahead

1. model the force of UQs
2. derive the force of UQs

The challenge of non-monotonicity

- Q → obligation to answer
- Q+UQ → no obligation to answer
- So, Q+UQ doesn't have the cumulative (monotone) effect of Q plus the effect of UQ!

How do UQs "circumvent" the canonical force of questions?

Farkas 2022's account is monotonic

DC_{Sp}	Table	DC_{Ad}
$\mathrm{info}(I)$	$\{\boldsymbol{p}, \bar{p}\}$	
	ps:$\{\mathrm{DC}_{Ad} \cup \{p\},\ \mathrm{DC}_{Ad} \cup \{\bar{p}\},$ $\mathrm{DC}_{Ad} \cup \{\mathrm{info}(I)\}\}$	

But we've seen data that this account doesn't capture.

A better model of UQ-force in the Table model

Bellingham, Erica, Hanno Beck & Richard Hatcher. 2020. A discourse model for "undirected speculation." In Monika Kirner-Ludwig (ed.), *Fresh perspectives on major issues in pragmatics*, 163–180. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003017462.

- introduce a Table* component (= possible future tables)
- UQs put a question on the Table*
- addressee does not need to take up the question

In Stalnaker's model

- UQs create a context in which the speaker has expressed interest in the answer to the question, without imposing an obligation on the addressee to provide the answer

Non-monotonicity

Whichever way we model the force (Table*, Stalnaker), the combination of Q+UQ is non-monotonic.

The speech act operator view has it easy

- easiest: we could say that UQ-markers block the presence of the $\mathcal{Q}$-speech act operator
- also easy enough: treat the UQ-marker as a (non-monotonic) modifier of the $\mathcal{Q}$-operator

Without speech act operators?

Lauer, Sven. 2015. *Speech-act operators vs. extra-compositional conventions of use: What are the issues?* Slides from a talk at the Workshop on Speech Acts, Zentrum für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS), Berlin.
http://www.sven-lauer.net/work/output/Lauer-SpeechActs-Berlin.pdf.

Lauer's claim: Illocutionary force modifiers that make a non-additive contribution to the force are incompatible with the idea that sentential force is specified by extra-compositional means.

OTOH: a reason to doubt speech act operators

If there were a $\mathcal{Q}$ speech act operator, we would expect that it can be conditionalized (which has been argued for conditional assertion, conditional imperatives, …). But recall:

(7)   If it rains, where will we have lunch?

This has no conditional question reading!

This observation is due to Stefan Kaufmann

OK, so what then?

- We would like to work out a convention-based analysis.
- Non-monotonicity can be captured after all, because conventions can have defaults and special cases/exceptions.

Compare

- The default convention in territories of the USA is to drive on the right.
- In the US Virgin Islands, however, the convention is to drive on the left.
- The special convention overrides the default convention.

The vision

- Unless a more specific convention applies, uttering an interrogative places the addressee under the obligation to assert the answer to the question.

- Uttering an UQ-interrogative expresses that the utterer has an interest in the answer to the question.

Formal implementation to come

Ask me anything!