

Unasked questions

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<http://kvf.me/uq>

0. Introduction



(1) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

Picture by meta.ai

Circa Day 3 of any intro to semantics course

Generations of students after two classes on the fundamental role of truth-conditions in compositional semantics:

But what about questions?

A triumph

Karttunen 1977 (the very first paper published in *Linguistics & Philosophy*):

- don't ask what questions mean
- let's figure out what interrogatives mean when they occur in embedded positions
- the investigation shows that interrogatives denote sets of propositions
- "I leave open for the time being the problem of exactly how direct questions are to be derived."

A minimal picture of sentence type meanings

declaratives propositions

interrogatives sets of propositions

But, again, what about unembedded uses?

Two families of approaches

speech act operators

- unembedded isn't really unembedded
- an operator creates the speech act meaning
- sentence types go with specific operators

conventions of use

- propositions are used to make assertions
- sets of propositions are used to ask questions

Two families of approaches

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conventions of use

- propositions are used to make assertions
- sets of propositions are used to ask questions

But why these particular associations?

see Stainton 1999 specifically for questions

The plan

- study the mapping from sentence types/meanings to speech act force
- but the usual method (“when in doubt, embed”) can’t be employed
- so: look at cases where the canonical mapping is disrupted
- we do this here with interrogatives \rightsquigarrow questions

Sir John Lyons on asking vs. posing a question

Lyons 1977 articulates a notional distinction between two kinds of question acts:

[...] 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.

Hat tip: Gärtner & Gyuris 2012

Lyons' distinction is realized cross-linguistically!

We will see that languages can express the speech act of merely posing a question.

How is this distinction expressed?

This might have gone either way:

- unmarked interrogatives are used to merely pose a question and additional marking is needed to mark that an answer is required from the addressee
- unmarked interrogatives are used to ask a question of the addressee and additional marking is needed to mark that the question is merely posed

Possibly surprisingly, the second way is what we consistently find across languages.

To us, it remains a mystery why language works the second way.

Unasked questions

- **unasked questions** (UQs): questions that are merely posed, that is: not asked of someone, do not impose any obligation on the addressee to provide an answer
- We set out to understand how and why markers of unasked questions (UQ-markers) work.
- We explore the consequences of UQ-marking for theories of speech act force.

Outline

1. Survey of unasked questions and their properties
2. How to **model** the act of merely posing a question
3. How to **derive** the discourse effect of unasked questions
4. Speech act operators or conventions of use?

1. The properties of unasked questions

What are unasked questions?

Questions that are merely posed, not asked of someone, and therefore they do not impose any obligation on the addressee to provide an answer.

How to find unasked questions

Set up the scenario: two old friends sitting on a beach, sipping some beer, looking out on the ocean, reminiscing about someone they've lost touch with.

(1) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

A question that is merely posed, without the expectation that the addressee will provide an answer.

A growing literature

UQs are by now a fairly well-known phenomenon. Terms abound, so if you want to search for relevant literature, you might need a large set of search terms:

- conjectural questions
- nonintrusive questions
- deliberative questions
- (self-) reflective questions

We do not assume that these are all the same. There may be a rich typology here, with subtle distinctions, some of which the literature is beginning to identify. But, we will assume a big umbrella most of the time. In fact, sometimes, to make the discussion easier to follow, we will use intuitions about the closest UQ-analogue in English.

English

English may not have a dedicated way of marking unasked questions, but most authors will translate UQs into something like this:

(1) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

standard interrogative + slifted "I wonder"

(2) What might Charlotte be up to these days, I wonder?

optionally added possibility modal

UQs via particles

Greek *araye* (von Fintel & Iatridou 2017):

(3) Ti kani i Miranda tora **araye**

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

Other languages with UQ-particles: Romanian **oare** (Farkas & Bruce 2010, Farkas 2022), Turkish **acaba**, Hungarian **vajon** (Gärtner & Gyuris 2012, 2023, Farkas 2023), Albanian **vallë** (Rushiti 2023), West Flemish **kwestje** (Woods & Haegeman 2023), Russian **interesno**, Japanese *ka-na*, ...

UQs via evidentials

St'át'imcets (Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010):

- (4) swát=as= k'a ku=lhwál-ci-ts-as ti=ts'úqwaz'=a
who=SBJN= INFER DET=leave-APPL-1sg.OBJ-3ERG DET=fish=EXIS

'I wonder who left me this fish.'

Other languages with evidential UQ-markers: Gitksan and NeìePkepmxcín (Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010), Cheyenne (Murray 2010), Cuzco Quechua (Faller 2023), Japanese *daroo* (Uegaki & Roelofsen 2018, Hara 2024), ... [for some general discussion of evidentials and questions, see Korotkova 2016, San Roque, Floyd & Norcliffe 2017, Bhadra 2020]

UQs via (epistemic) modality

German verb-final Q + *wohl* (Truckenbrodt 2006, Eckardt 2020):

(5) Ob der Peter wohl immer noch kubanische Zigarren mag?
whether the Peter wohl always still Cuban cigars likes

“Might Peter still like Cuban cigars, I wonder?”

UQs via (epistemic) modality

Italian epistemic future (Eckardt & Beltrama 2019):

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

‘Where is the key, I wonder?’

More on epistemic modality and UQs: Giannakidou & Mari 2019

The common core: no answer required

For all the constructions we consider to be part of the UQ-umbrella, the descriptions agree on this: the UQ-marked interrogative does not impose a requirement on the addressee to provide an/the answer.

What *can* the addressee do?

- ~~remain silent~~
- minimally acknowledge the question
- engage in joint speculation
- volunteer an/the answer

Silence is not actually an option

Some authors state that the addressee of an UQ can remain silent:

- Eckardt 2020: p.4: “the addressee can remain silent”
- Eckardt & Beltrama 2019: p.125: “remaining silent is an unmarked reaction for the addressee”
- also: Woods & Haegeman 2023: p.832

We suspect this is not quite true.

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*).
- NB: You **can't** answer a canonical question with *ondos* or the like.

Much can be learned about types of responses in general from Goffman 1976, 1978.

The addressee can engage in (joint) speculation

(7) A: Ti kani i Miranda tora **araye**

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

B: Isos spudhazi iatriki. Oli i siggenis tis ine iatri.

Maybe studies medicine. all the relatives her are doctors

‘Maybe she’s studying medicine. All her relatives are doctors.’

The addressee can volunteer the answer

(8) A: Ti kani i Miranda tora **araye**

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

B: Spudhazi iatriki.

Studies medicine.

‘She’s studying medicine.’

But of course volunteering an answer doesn’t even need a question at all:

(9) A: I don’t know what the best kind of vodka is.

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

UQs are not (per se) self-addressed

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

- (10) a. Where the hell are the keys(, Kai)?
b. Hmm, (Kai,) where are the keys, I wonder?

UQs are not asked of the addressee

We conducted an experiment where we present the beach scenario and ask whether someone who overheard the conversation that included the UQ could report it as follows:

- “A wanted to know/wondered what Charlotte is up to these days.”
- “A asked what Charlotte is up to these days.”
- “A asked B what Charlotte is up to these days.”

Our informants preferred the first option, sometimes allowed the second option, but consistently rejected the third option.

UQs are not asked of the addressee

- (11) 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?’

Farkas 2022 reports a different judgment for Romanian. We were not able to replicate her judgment with our Romanian informants. As we will see, this might be an important dialect split.

The speaker is not **stating** that they are wondering

Murray 2010: “a statement of uncertainty”

(12) Tósa'é e-hoo'e-séstse Andy
where 3-live-RPT.3SG Andy

[Cheyenne]

‘Andy lives somewhere, I wonder where.’

We don't think this is correct for the UQs we have been able to gather data on.

(13) 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?

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

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

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

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

You'd be right to wonder what the deal is with English "I wonder" vs. "I'm wondering", and slifting versus the non-slifting. We don't know of any work on this.

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.

(16) Oli pistevun oti ime enoxi. To pistevis ke esi araye
all believe that am guilty. it believe and you 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, for example Turkish:

(17) Annenizin evlenmeden önceki soyadını öğren-ebilir mi-yim acaba?
your.mother's pre-marriage last.name learn-abil Q-1sg ACABA

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

Possible also in German, among others, but not possible, for example, with Greek *araye* or Hungarian *vajon!*

The extension of use to polite questions where one pretends to not expect an answer seems unsurprising, but it is clearly not automatic.

Interim summary

Many languages can mark interrogatives to signal that they are used to merely pose a question, without asking it of the addressee, without imposing a requirement for the addressee to provide an answer. We use the term “unasked questions”.

2. How to model the act of merely posing a question

A framework for modeling contexts

Structured context models:

Hamblin, Lewis, etc. → Farkas & Bruce 2010's "Table Model"

Components:

- DC (discourse commitments) of the individual participants
- Table (of issues to be resolved)
- Projected Set (of expected options for next DC of the addressee)

A framework for modeling contexts

Example of the context effect of a canonical question ($p?$):

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

Now, how can we capture what UQs do to a context?

Here are two options:

1. add the option not to answer to the Projected Set (Farkas 2022)

$$ps(UQ(p?)) = \{DC_{Ad} \cup \{p\}, DC_{Ad} \cup \{\neg p\}, DC_{Ad}\}$$

2. no commitment on the part of the addressee is expected

(Gärtner & Gyuris 2023, Woods & Haegeman 2023)

$$ps(UQ(p?)) = \{DC_{Ad}\}$$

It could be that some UQs work the first way, and some the second way.

In fact, the “why ask me?” test for *oare* might show that some Romanian speakers have the first grammar, while others have the second.

What about the Table?

How do UQs affect the Table? We need some way to model that the speaker is posing the question, after all.

Some options:

- the issue is put on the Table
- the issue is not put on the Table, but instead added to a component of “possible future tables” (Bellingham, Beck & Hatcher 2020)
- the issue is not put on the Table, but the speaker commits, in a not-at-issue way, to being interested in the issue (something like this is proposed by Uegaki & Roelofsen 2018)

We are, for now, agnostic on the choices here. Much depends on assumptions about how the Table and the Project Set are interconnected.

For concreteness

A canonical question, $p?$, changes the context so as to

- put $\{p, \neg p\}$ on the Table
- project that the addressee will either commit to p or to $\neg p$

An unasked question, $UQ(p?)$, changes the context so as to

- put $\{p, \neg p\}$ on the Table
- project no change in the addressee's commitments

Possibly two types of UQs, corresponding to the two dialects of Romanian.

3. How to derive the force of UQs

Why do UQ-markers mean what they mean?

Here are two options:

- they just do: their semantics is stated as being about what the output context is like
(this is what Farkas 2022 does, for example)
- their illocutionary contribution follows from their truth-conditional semantics
(many people in the evidential/modal literature)

Of course it might be that some UQ-markers work one way and some the other.

We suspect, however, that there's always an element of conventionalization or grammaticalization.

The evidential/modal route

- Let's start with what we expect when we add an evidential/modal to a question: INFER-p? or MIGHT-p?.
- We'll assume that the anchor of the evidential/modal “flips” to the addressee.
- So, the meaning we get is a question roughly about what follows or is compatible with the addressee's epistemic state.
- Now, this is a reasonable thing to ask, in fact something that is easier to answer since the addressee just needs to consult their epistemic state, rather than determine what the external world is like.
- So, we don't expect any UQ-ness from such questions.
- Therefore, people who have explored this route argue that more is going on.

The evidential/modal route

- Accounts differ on what more is going on, but the common idea is that something is making the evidential/modal question hard or impossible to answer.
 - Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010: evidential gives rise to conflicting presuppositions, making the question impossible to answer
 - Giannakidou & Mari 2019: at the level of meta-evaluation the domain of possibilities is widened to an extent that makes the question impossible to answer
 - Eckardt 2020: the combination of V-finalness + *wohl* means that the question is about the pooled knowledge of the participants, making the addressee incompetent to answer the question
- The next step then is to say that the UQ-use is the natural consequence of the content of the question.

The evidential/modal route

- But hard/impossible questions aren't automatically UQs:
What is the name of the dog of my mother's second cousin?
- Eckardt has a response: "This should not be mistaken to predict that unanswerable questions never require answers. [A UQ] is not unanswerable by content, but by form : The speaker chose a particularly complex form instead of simply asking a standard question."
- However, this is in tension with much work on logical triviality (see for example Gajewski 2002, Chierchia 2021), which would predict that an expression that is defective "by form" would be ungrammatical.

The evidential/modal route

In the end, Eckardt actually acknowledges that the UQ-signal arises via conventionalization/grammaticalization:

- “joint speculation and silence are the possible (conventionalized) reactions to verb-final *wohl* questions in German”
- “B’s option to remain silent has turned into a conventionalized reaction”
- “The analysis [...] motivates the conventionalized reactions to verb-final *wohl* questions by their pragmatic properties in typical situations of use (i.e., where A believes B is unable to answer).”

Our conclusion

While the evidential/modal route to UQ-marking is a real and productive phenomenon, we think that there's a final leap of conventionalization or grammaticalization from a truth-conditional modal meaning to the kind of speech act level meaning we identified earlier.

4. Speech act operators or conventions of use?

What do UQs teach us about the determination of speech act force?

Where we are:

- UQ-markers mean that the output context of an unasked question has the relevant issue on the Table but the Projected Set does not encode an expectation of the addressee to provide an answer.
- So, clearly we have elements whose meaning pertains to the speech act performed by the sentences they are part of.

What does this teach us about how speech act force comes about or is determined?

Does it help us choose between the two options we saw earlier?

- covert speech act operators
- conventions of use

Monotonicity

The approach in Farkas 2022, 2023 makes the contribution of the Romanian marker *oare* monotonic in the following sense:

- the canonical discourse effect of a question is fully applied: the issue is put on the Table and the Projected Set contains the possible answers
- if nothing else happened, the addressee would be expected to assert one of the possible answers
- *oare* can operate on the output context of the underlying question and add the additional possibility of not answering to the Projected Set
- so, *oare* is not undoing or overriding the effect of the question
- the account is compatible with either having speech act operators or conventions of use

Weakening is harder

If UQ-markers produce a trivial Projected Set that contains no informative contribution by the Addressee, which is what we have been arguing, things get less straightforward.

In fact, we find disagreement in the literature.

Weakening cannot/should not be done with speech act operators

Giannakidou & Mari 2019:

But, of course, relaxing the illocutionary force cannot be stated meaningfully if we assume that a speech act operator is present in the question. If such an operator existed, manipulation would entail either that the operator is flexible in force — which is another way of saying that it is ‘ambiguous’; or it would entail that another operator is used. Either option would be stipulatory because it doesn’t predict when and why this happens. We will provide, instead, a semantic explanation for the relaxing of the illocutionary force. The apparent force manipulation can more plausibly be understood as suggesting that there is no illocutionary operator in the sentence. [...] It may be time to think anew the idea of illocutionary force operators as syntactic objects that are present in the syntactic structure of sentences.

Weakening can only be done with speech act operators

Lauer 2015:

- The existence of adverbs like *frankly* is not a compelling reason to assume speech-act operators, because the contribution of *frankly* is additive.
- According to Zimmermann 2004, *wohl* operates on a speech-act operator to weaken the induced commitment.
- But a *frankly*-style treatment seems plausible, if we assume that the Declarative Convention leaves open the degree of commitment, rather than specifying absolute commitment.
- The Cuzco Quechua hearsay-evidential *-si* does not make an additive contribution. This seems to indicate that *-si* **completely obliterates** the effect the declarative otherwise would have.
- Unless the hearsay-evidential can be analyzed as a kind of quotation device, it seems to provide the strongest case for (non-additive) illocutionary modification, and thus for speech act operators.

Our take

Non-monotonic/non-additive illocutionary modification

- can be analyzed in a speech act operator system (pace Giannakidou & Mari),
- but also can be analyzed in a conventions of use system (pace Lauer).

And we *should* at least try to develop an analysis without speech act operators, just like Giannakidou & Mari advocated.

A sketch

How can we reconcile the following?

- Unembedded interrogatives trigger a convention of use that puts the issue on the Table and produces a Projected Set that expects an answer from the addressee.
- UQ-markers require that the Projected Set is trivial, contains no informative contribution by the Addressee.

Two ideas:

- The Interrogative Convention applies first and then the UQ-marker overwrites the Projected Set.
- The UQ-marker is interpreted first and requires that whatever else happens, the Projected Set is trivial. The Interrogative Convention only affects context components (such as the Table) that aren't already specified by explicit markers.

What will be needed

- A non-monotonic system for determining illocutionary force.
- Conventions can have defaults and special cases/exceptions.
- We think we see this idea in some of the UQ-literature, but we don't know of a formal implementation.
- Prior art, in general on non-monotonicity in illocutionary force assignment, includes Perrault 1990, Asher & Lascarides 2001.

A related principle

von Fintel & Iatridou 2017: p.314:

Default Strength of Speech Acts

When a speaker utters a sentence, this is understood with the highest level of speaker endorsement compatible with the context and any strength/weakness markers in the sentence.

This principle is modeled after the principle called “Contextually Determined Speech Act Force,” proposed in von Fintel 2003 for the special case of possibly epistemically weakened assertions.

Formal implementation to come



Summary

- Languages find ways to signal that a question is merely posed, rather than asked of someone. We call such constructions “unasked questions” (UQs).
- UQ-markers often, but not always, evolve from evidential/modal markers. If so, there is a final leap of conventionalization/grammaticalization.
- The semantics of UQ-markers needs to be stated at the level of discourse effects/speech acts.
- We are optimistic about a formal implementation that captures UQ-marking without assuming that there are covert speech act operators.

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