

Questions

Formal, Functional and
Interactional Perspectives

Edited by
Jan P. de Ruiter



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*Formal, Functional and Interactional
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Bielefeld University



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Questions

The view that questions are 'requests for missing information' is too simple when language use is considered. Formally, utterances are questions when they are syntactically marked as such, or by prosodic marking. Functionally, questions request that certain information is made available in the next conversational turn. But functional and formal questionhood are independent: what is formally a question can be functionally something else – for instance, a statement, a complaint or a request. Conversely, what is functionally a question is often expressed as a statement. Also, verbal signals such as eye-gaze, head-nods or even practical actions can serve information-seeking functions that are very similar to the function of linguistic questions. With original cross-cultural and multidisciplinary contributions from linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and conversation analysts, this book asks what questions *do*, and how a question can shape the answer it evokes.

JAN P. DE RUITER is Professor of Psycholinguistics in the Faculty for Linguistics and Literary Studies at Bielefeld University, Germany.

Language, culture and cognition

Editor: Stephen C. Levinson, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics

This series looks at the role of language in human cognition – language in both its universal, psychological aspects and its variable, cultural aspects. Studies focus on the relation between semantic and conceptual categories and processes, especially as these are illuminated by cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies, the study of language acquisition and conceptual development, and the study of the relation of speech production and comprehension to other kinds of behaviour in cultural context. Books come principally, though not exclusively, from research associated with the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, and in particular the Language and Cognition Group.

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1 Introduction: questions are what they do

Jan P. de Ruiter

1.1 Definitional issues

What is a question? Many lay people, including cognitive scientists of varying persuasions, report having a pretty good idea about what a question is and do not see an urgent need to engage in hair-splitting about it: if one needs certain information that is lacking, and someone else has access to this information, one can specify the lacking information in the form of a question, formulate this question at the someone else, who will then, if he or she so chooses, provide the desired information, in the form of an answer. What's the big deal?

This “folk-model” (FM) of questionhood emphasizes the interrogative aspect of questions. The FM assumes that questions are devices that language users employ to cause others to share specific information. Because of the popularity of the FM, let us try to get a higher conceptual resolution in displaying this implicit theory about questions by presenting it in the form of a short fairy tale.

Once upon a time, there was a person, Q, who was basically satisfied with her life, but suddenly noticed that at this particular moment in time, there was definitely something missing. What was lacking was a piece of information, which we will call J. Q realized that her life would improve noticeably if she had access to J. It therefore became a high priority for Q to obtain J, or at least a copy of it. Now, for reasons that we shall not go into here, Q had good reasons to suspect that another person, let's call him A, was in possession of the desired piece of information J. So Q started working on a plan to obtain J from A. Because language is a reliable way to exchange informations like J, Q was able to use spoken language to pursue her goal of obtaining it. For this specific occasion, her being a member of a language community provided her with a special device called a question, which, if spoken by Q, is able to reliably encode and transmit Q's desire to obtain a copy of J from A. The basic idea being that A, upon recognizing the sought-after information J and Q's desire to obtain it, could be expected to be cooperative enough to provide J in the form of a supplied answer. This answer is another linguistic device, designed to provide the information that was revealed to be desired by Q, the poser of

Table 1.1 *Formal and functional questionhood.*

Formal	Functional	
	No	Yes
No	1) <i>It rains.</i>	2) <i>You're married.</i>
Yes	3) <i>Are you kidding?</i>	4) <i>What time is it?</i>

the question. So Q asked her question, got her answer from A, and both Q and A lived happily ever after.

If we accept this fairy tale as being at least roughly accurate in describing how questions and answers are used to ship information from where it is to where it is needed, social and linguistic complications emerge that make the FM seem inadequate and incomplete. For instance, how does Q know that A actually is in possession of the information she needs? Also, can Q expect A to comply with her request? And if so, at what social cost? Won't asking the question make Q look stupid? And what would Q owe A after receiving an answer? What linguistic form should Q choose to formulate the question? A statement with rising intonation? Or, if this is possible in the language Q speaks, by inverting the positions of the finite verb and the subject? And should Q provide a multiple-choice question with candidate answers or leave the question open-ended? And what can Q do to make sure that A will provide the information that is actually desired?

Thinking about these questions about questions and their possible answers also reveals a definitional problem: one can define questions formally (e.g., by syntactic, semantic or intonational criteria or combinations thereof) or one can define them functionally (in the pragmatic, speech act sense), by identifying what they accomplish in interaction. However, formal and functional questionhood can and do vary independently. This is illustrated in Table 1.1. The examples in cells (2) and (3) show that there are formal statements that request information (2), and formal questions that do not (3).

In their influential typological work on questions, Sadock and Zwicky (1985) noted that there is generally speaking no useful correspondence between formal (i.e., grammatical) features and illocutionary function. This vague relationship between form and function potentially hampers the proper demarcation of the linguistic territory for this book.

One potential way of dealing with this problem is to study everything that fulfils some formal criterion of questionhood, and then see what its function is. If we choose that option, we will miss out on utterances that do not formally look like questions but, according to our functional intuitions, pretty much walk and quack like them.

Alternatively, we could define questions purely functionally, by identifying those communicative signals or acts that we can argue to have question-like properties. This perspective opens the possibility to widen our horizon and look at the “interrogative” properties of non-linguistic signals such as eye-gaze, facial expression and gesture. However, we would then have to ignore utterances that are formally marked as questions, which therefore have certain formal rights to be at least investigated for their potential function(s).

A further complicating challenge in defining questions is that they are like coasters in bars. Officially, the function of coasters is (I think) to provide an absorbing, cheap, and high-friction surface that one can put glasses on in order to avoid the surface of the bar getting too wet. In practice, however, coasters serve many additional purposes. They display commercial messages, they are used to write down phone numbers or theorems, they can be used in demonstrations of manual dexterity, they can be shredded to pieces by people who are nervous or bored, they can be used as aerodynamically unstable Frisbees, and they are excellent building materials for providing temporary support for wobbling tables. Questions are similarly multi-functional. In monologues, for instance, questions are effective ways to introduce topics, as I did in the first sentence of this chapter. Another classical exception to the rule that questions request information is the rhetorical question, as in the final sentence of the first paragraph of this chapter. The rhetorical question is a persuasive argument dressed up as a superfluous information request, the very point being that the request is superfluous. Questions are also famous for introducing presuppositions, in the so-called “loaded question”. “Do you still beat your wife?” is the classic textbook example, but as usual, reality beats fiction: in his Bruno persona, Sacha Baron Cohen once asked an Alabama football player in an interview: “Are you allowed to date other members of the team, or do you have to wait till the season is over?” Particularly intriguing in this loaded question is how the alternative formulation with ‘or’ appears to more than double the strength of the presupposition.

As Levinson suggests in his chapter, interrogativity in the interpretation of “requesting information” may well be the *prototype* for questions, just as coasters are “prototypically” meant to support beer glasses on a bar. Like coasters, questions can have a host of additional functions as well. This should not be too surprising: just as questions can do much more than merely requesting information, declarative statements can do many more things than providing it.

The liberating, and in our view fruitful solution we chose for this book is to avoid trying to define questions narrowly. We do not worry too much about solving the form/function-related problems mentioned above, and instead set out to investigate questions from an interactional, a functional and a formal perspective, focusing on what questions do, and how they do it. In this endeavour, we have explicitly focused as much as possible on real, natural language

used in informal interactions. In the remainder of this introduction, I will give a sneak preview of the different contributions in this book.

1.2 Interplay between form and function

In the first part of the book, the common theme is how form and function of questions are intertwined. Generally, the contributions in this part strongly illustrate the complex and multi-faceted relationship between form and function, and provide support for our eclectic approach to the issue of questionhood.

Stephen Levinson addresses the severely understudied question of what the social and informational economics of questions are, for both questioner and answerer. By focusing on the differences in both information content and social 'value' between polar and Wh-questions, he provides theoretical scaffolding for studying this aspect of questions that generates testable quantitative typological predictions. An interesting spin-off of this endeavour is a "functional space" over different types of questions, assuming that the interrogative aspects of questions function as a prototype.

Jerry Hobbs collects and analyses a task-based dialogue corpus to study how groups of people exchange information in order to build up a Conversational Record (a set of relevant mutual beliefs) in a professional decision-making context. Questions are an important tool for arriving at a mutually agreed-upon conversational record. At the end of his chapter, Hobbs uses his corpus to convincingly demonstrate that even in the constrained situation of a group decision process the mapping of form and function onto one another is complex and underdetermined.

Tanya Stivers and Federico Rossano approach the function and form issue from the functional and interactional side: they approach questions as just one of the different ways people use to get their interlocutor to respond. In their view, there are several ways to accomplish this function, of which using a syntactically identifiable linguistic sentence type is only one. Prosody, epistemic asymmetry and non-verbal signals such as eye-gaze (and their combinations) are all additional ways of securing an interlocutor's response.

In the final chapter of this part, Herbert Clark takes the arguably even more extreme position that there are wordless (non-linguistic) versions of both questions and answers. He argues that for many linguistic question/answer adjacency pairs, there are equivalent visible actions. These actions include, but are not limited to, gestures. He provides illustrative examples for a wide range of linguistic question and answer types, including polar questions. Clark also identifies what he terms "parasitic questions" (even though the host utterance does not appear to suffer much), describing how question-functionality, for instance in the form of an intonation contour, attaches itself to a non-question utterance.

1.3 The structure and prosody of questions

The second part of this volume is concerned with the prosodic aspects of questions. It reveals that even in the (relatively) limited domain of questions, the central puzzle of intonational phonology remains largely elusive. It turns out to be extremely difficult to establish a reliable mapping between intonational contours and their pragmatic function. This is not to say that the findings of the three contributions below are fruitless; on the contrary, they reveal a great richness in the varying meanings intonational contours can express, as well as a fascinating variety of mysterious interactions with the grammatical, epistemic and interrogative aspects of questions.

The first chapter in this part is a contribution by Jerry Sadock, who kindly provides us with a refresher of the typological overview of the formal marking of questionhood, based on the seminal paper by Sadock and Zwicky (1985). Applying their criterion that a sentence type can be identified if a formal property regularly co-occurs with an illocutionary function to the typological data reveals that there is no overarching category that contains both polar (yes/no) questions and Wh-questions. Perhaps one of the causes of this intriguing phenomenon may be found in the economic analysis of questionhood by Levinson (this volume). Sadock then proceeds to investigate whether intonation contours can be seen as grammaticalized in the sense of providing an arbitrary conventional system that maps contours onto functions. After intonationally inspecting a number of examples from *The Simpsons* and a dialogue between Donald Rumsfeld and himself, he concludes that they cannot.

Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen addresses a related question, studying the accepted “wisdom” that polar questions tend to have rising intonation, whereas Wh-questions do not. After thoroughly analysing a number of casual conversation fragments from a radio show (featuring fascinating discussions on the attractiveness of chest hair), Couper-Kuhlen shows that the accepted wisdom about the relationship between syntactic type and intonation is disconfirmed. The type of question, the conversational activity, and the epistemic degrees of certainty expressed in questions are all necessary sources of information to understand question intonation in natural conversation.

In the final chapter in this part, Aoju Chen addresses a number of intriguing issues regarding accent placement in Wh-questions in Dutch and the role of information structure therein. Two influential theories by Lambrecht and Michaelis (1998) and Haan (2001) both agree that the Wh-word is a focused constituent, but differ about whether the Wh-word and other words later in the sentence can (also) be accented. Chen uses a corpus of Dutch naturalistic conversations and a logistic regression model to show that (to name just a few of her findings) information structure does have an influence on whether the Wh-word is accented or not, and that the Wh-word is not always accented