

13. Questions

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Mr. Nixon turned to me and quite casually asked, “Well, did you do any fornicating this weekend?” – David Frost

1. Introduction

The term *question* is, at least, used for two distinct types of entities:

- (A) A particular type of sentence; interrogative sentences or interrogatives.
- (B) A particular kind of action; the (speech) act of asking a question.

While (A) has mostly been the business of linguists and logicians, the researchers in the pragmatic tradition have concentrated their efforts on (B). Furthermore, many have taken their starting point in information questions, cases where the questioner is ignorant of something and asks his audience to fill him in. This is the case in a recent linguistic study on questions by Robert Fiengo. For Fiengo, questions represent incompleteness and by asking questions a speaker indicates his ignorance (Fiengo 2007). Along a somewhat similar line, Stephen Levinson suggests that the act of requesting information by asking questions is “something more like a prototype category, with possible degrees of questionhood in different dimensions” (Levinson 2012: 15).

One can label the two distinct types of entities above:

- (A) Formal questions.
- (B) Functional questions.

Formal questions have interrogative morphology, syntax or prosody, but need not be functional questions. Functional questions need not be interrogatively formatted, but still function as a way to elicit information, and as we shall see, also to elicit confirmation and agreement. From a speech act perspective the focus has been on functional questions, and the formal aspect only comes into play insofar as it has direct import on the study of the functions of questions.

The historical sources of pragmatics are diverse, but John Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* from 1962 and Paul Grice’s *William James Lectures* in 1967, chapter called “Logic and conversation” first published in 1975, stand out as landmarks. The linguist Geoffrey Leech wrote the following on the origins of pragmatics:

When linguistic pioneers such as Ross and Lakoff staked a claim in pragmatics in the late 1960s, they encountered there an indigenous breed of philosophers of language who had been quietly cultivating the territory for some time. In fact, the more lasting influences on modern pragmatics have been those of philosophers; notably, in recent years, Austin (1962), Searle (1969), and Grice (1975) (Leech 1983: 2).

Austin's original motivation was an opposition against the view that the function of sentences was only "to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (Austin [1962] 1975: 1). Austin noticed that not all sentences fit the true or false schema; interrogatives would be one type.

With regard to interrogatives, one may distinguish three aspects of language use:

- (I) A locutionary, or utterance act; uttering a question like "What's your name?".
- (II) An illocutionary act; performing the speech act of asking a question.
- (III) A perlocutionary act; whatever one achieves by (II), apart from performing the speech act of asking a question; like getting an answer.

Illocutionary acts can be classified in accordance with the particular illocutionary force they possess. Austin stressed that illocutionary acts are conventional acts and that their effects are "what we regard as mere conventional consequences" (Austin 1975: 103, see also: 14). Peter Strawson (1964) criticizes this side of Austin's theory, while Marina Sbisa (1984, 2001) defends and develops the view. Austin furthermore classified illocutionary acts into five major groups (Austin 1975: 151), and *ask* is listed among "expositives", i.e. verbs that can be used to make explicit expositive illocutionary acts (Austin 1975: 162). Austin's most prominent successor, John Searle, provided what has, in many ways, turned out to be the classical speech act analysis of questions.

2. The speech act analysis of questions

Searle inherits from the nineteenth century German philosopher Gottlob Frege the idea that an assertion that *p*, and a question whether *p*, have something in common, viz, that they express the same proposition, while they differ in force (Frege 1892, 1906, [1918] 1980; Searle 1968: 420). Michael Dummett argues that this distinction is already central in Frege's *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (Dummett 1981: 83–84; Frege 1892) and in a letter to Edmund Husserl in 1906 Frege writes that "[ä]quipollente Sätze haben, nachdem die behauptende Kraft, mit der sie etwa ausgesprochen sind, abgezogen ist, etwas Gemeinsames im Inhalte, und dies nenne ich den von ihnen ausgedrückten Gedanken" (Frege 1906: 102. See also Frege 1980: 22).

An assertion of the sentence *Jimmy Case was a footballer*, and asking a question by uttering the sentence *Was Jimmy Case a footballer?*, express the same proposition (that of Jimmy Case being a footballer), but differ in illocutionary force.

The first sentence is an assertion, which can be true or false, while the second, being a question, is neither true nor false; the difference is due to different illocutionary forces. Searle rejects Austin's distinction between locutionary acts and illocutionary acts, and instead distinguishes "the illocutionary act from the propositional act – that is, the act of *expressing the proposition* (a phrase which is neutral as to illocutionary force)" (Searle 1968: 420). Propositional acts – the act of expressing a proposition – represent an abstraction from full-blown illocutionary acts, and, as such, it does not make sense to ask about the truth-value of propositions, unless one considers them as part of illocutionary acts.¹ For Searle, the study of speech acts, among them questions, is a matter of force, and the speech act quality of questions that makes them questions is their interrogative force.

Searle's classic analysis of questions goes as follows:

1. *S* [speaker] does not know "the answer", i.e., does not know if the proposition is true, or, in the case of the propositional function, does not know the information needed to complete the proposition truly.
2. It is not obvious to both *S* and *H* [hearer] that *H* will provide the information at that time without being asked.
3. *S* wants this information (Searle 1969: 66).

The fulfilment of (1) through (3) is necessary for the successful and felicitous performance of the speech act of asking questions – call these the felicity conditions for asking questions (Searle [1975] 1979a: 44–45). Searle calls clauses 1 and 2 the preparatory rules, they relate to the interests of *S* and what *S* implies in the performance of asking a question. Clause 3 relates to what Searle calls the sincerity rule, since it refers to the psychological state expressed by *S* when asking a question (irrespective of whether *S* actually is in that state or not). It is clear from this analysis that Searle takes information questions to be the paradigmatic type of question. This is evident when Searle distinguishes between two kinds of questions: (a) real questions and (b) exam questions; in the latter case (as opposed to the former) *S* does not want to know the answer, but only wants to determine whether *H* knows the answer (Searle 1969: 66, 69). Questions count as attempts to elicit information; for Searle, this has to do with what he calls the essential rule, as it relates to the speech act's illocutionary point, i.e. the speaker's (assumed) main purpose in making that type of utterance.

One thing to note is that a variety of questions are like exam questions, in the sense that the questioner already knows the answer, but still wants the person addressed to answer. Interviews, public hearings, cross-examinations in court and other similar examples can be like exam questions in this respect. While Searle acknowledges exam questions as a type of question, and presumably would agree that interviews, public hearings, etc. should sometimes be regarded as on par with exam questions, Fiengo, on the other hand, dismisses them and thinks "Searle gives quiz questions too much prominence" (Fiengo 2007: 78). The only con-

clusion to be drawn from the existence of exam/quiz questions, according to Fiengo, is that “[q]uiz questions teach us that one may use a sentence-type that displays a lack without having that lack” (Fiengo 2007: 78). On the other hand, one could argue that exam-type questions also seek information, albeit another type of information; namely information about whether the addressee can (in the cases of exams, quizzes and the like) or is willing (in the cases of interviews, cross-examination and the like) to provide the right answer. Fiengo, however, insists that we ask questions to “display the lacks that we wish to relieve ourselves of” and so he rejects this line of argument (Fiengo 2007: 1). Fiengo focuses on epistemic reasons for asking questions (relieve ourselves of ignorance) and because of that he overlooks the common feature that all the above-mentioned types of questions share; they are all attempts to elicit an answer.

Do all acts of asking questions share this feature or adhere to this standard? Out-loud questions do not. An out-loud question is a type of soliloquy. It is an un-addressed wondering, a question to oneself, where one does not seek any response from anyone. Here is an example in Yéli Dnye (the Papuan language spoken on the Rossel Island) reported by Levinson (Levinson 2010: 2750):

K: *Daach:a* *anyi kêdê pwiyé.*
 man's.name where 3CERT.CI go
 ‘Where did Daach:a go?’

Other participants: (*no response*).

In their methodological paper on coding schemes for question-response sequences for a study of 10 languages (the Levinson study quoted above is one of them) Tanya Stivers and Nicholas Enfield describe out-loud questions as “[q]uestions delivered to no one in particular often with lower volume [that] do not appear to be designed to secure a response” (Stivers and Enfield 2010: 2623). This is supported by Trine Heinemann’s study of the question-response system of Danish, where out-loud questions comprise only 2% of the recorded questions and her reported example – “*Hvor bli’r mormor a’* (What’s keeping grandma)” – is not treated by the on-listeners “as a genuine question that they are expected to answer” (Heinemann 2010: 2717). Out-loud questions are interrogatively formatted, but they should not be treated as genuine questions, since in uttering an out-loud question a speaker does not appear to look for an answer, and on-listeners treat the speaker as doing something else than asking a question (see also Stivers 2010: 2772). Out-loud questions are formal, but not functional questions. This way of handling out-loud questions is in keeping with the general speech act view on questions. One might then suggest a broader sincerity rule for asking questions, namely that the speaker wants an answer (whereas Searle’s sincerity rules states that the questioner wants information from the addressee). Questions count as attempts to elicit answers and the minimal illocutionary point of the speech act of asking a question (i.e. the speaker’s (assumed) purpose in making that type of utterance) is to get the addressee to

provide an answer. One can then argue that among the various types of questions – the various functions of questions – information questions are paradigmatic or prototypical questions, since, while all answers provide some sort of information, only information questions have eliciting information as their sole illocutionary point.

The idea that there is a minimal sincerity rule for asking questions that states that the speaker wants an answer also helps explain why rhetorical questions do not count as questions, even though they are interrogatively formatted. Not only does the utterance of a rhetorical question violate the sincerity rule for information questions (for example, a speaker who thinks the addressee has done something childish and communicates that by the rhetorical question *How old are you?* does not want any information about the addressee's age), but it also violates the minimal sincerity rule for asking questions, since the speaker does not even want an answer. Rhetorical questions are formal, but not functional questions. To discount rhetorical questions as not being genuine questions is in agreement with most linguists' understanding of rhetorical questions. In her study on questions and their responses in Tzeltal, Penelope Brown writes that "rhetorical questions (which comprised 22% of the Tzeltal data) were omitted, as they have quite different sequential implications" (Brown 2010: 2628). In other words, while questions are asked in order to get answers – a question makes an answer relevant – rhetorical questions do not make any answers relevant, since their illocutionary point lies elsewhere. Likewise, Cornelia Ilie in her study on what people do with rhetorical questions notes that "[a] rhetorical question is a question used as a challenging statement to convey the addresser's commitment to its implicit answer, in order to induce the addressee's mental recognition of its obviousness and the acceptance, verbalized or non-verbalized, of its validity" and a rhetorical question's "main discursive functions" is to "*induce, reinforce, or alter assumptions, beliefs, or ideas, in the addressee's mind*" (Ilie 1994: 128).

One way to understand rhetorical questions is to view them as indirect speech acts. An indirect speech act is a speech act where the speaker performs (or makes as if to perform) one speech act, while also indirectly performing another speech act. The latter speech act is the performance's main (or only) illocutionary point. Searle's classic example of an indirect speech act is the utterance of the question *Can you reach the salt?* in order to perform the speech act of requesting that the addressee pass the speaker the salt (Searle 1979a). According to Searle "a speaker may utter the sentence 'Can you reach the salt?' and mean it not merely as a question but as a request to pass the salt" (Searle 1979a: 30). Similarly, we might view an utterance of a rhetorical question as a speech situation where the speaker asks a question (makes as if to ask), while the speaker also performs the speech act of making a statement.² Allowing that a speaker can perform more than one speech act by a single conversational move, as Searle does in the quote above, may be called the multiple speech acts model of conversational contributions.

In Searle's taxonomy, "[q]uestions are a subclass of directives, since they are attempts by [the speaker] to get [the hearer] to answer, i.e. to perform a speech act" (Searle [1975] 1979b: 14; see also Searle 1969: 66). This formulation sits well with the suggested minimal requirement for an utterance counting as a question. While assertives express beliefs, and fit "words to world", directives express wants or desires, and their "direction of fit is world-to-words" (Searle 1979b: 12–14). In general, the basic purpose of a directive utterance (words) is to bring about the state of affairs (world) specified by the utterance's propositional content. If you, for example, order someone to leave the room by uttering *Leave the room!*, then your illocutionary point is directive; to make the world comply with (or fit) the words by having the person actually leave the room. With information questions the illocutionary point, however, is not to bring about the state of affairs specified by the propositional content of the question, but rather to bring about another type of state of affairs; that of the addressee providing information about the truth-value of the state of affairs specified by the utterance's propositional content. One could, perhaps, on this basis, argue that questions deserve a speech act category of their own; at least, one can conclude that they are untypical directives (if they are to count as directives at all).

However, if one takes the line that the minimal illocutionary point of asking a question is to elicit an answer, the above observation that questions are untypical directives looks less problematic. The standard function of asking an information question is to get information, but that is not always what the questioner primarily aims for. In the cases of exam questions, cross-examination questions and so on, that function is not needed or present. In other cases like asking for confirmation of some proposition (for example; *John left the party, didn't he?*) or agreement with some propositions (for example; *She's beautiful, isn't she?*), that function is secondary/not central/peripheral. These latter two examples are also tag-questions. In tag-questions what marks the utterance as a question (indicate interrogative force) is tagged onto the utterance as it ends. Tag-questions are often used to elicit confirmation or agreement: this is the case in, for example, Tzeltal (Brown 2010), Dutch (Englert 2010), Danish (Heineman 2010), and Japanese (Hayashi 2010).

In fact, it turns out (as I will return to in Section 4) that it is not the case that the overwhelming majority of questions are asked in order to get new information. For example, in Tzeltal 58 % of all questions are confirmation seeking questions, leaving information questions at second place with only 33 % (Brown 2010: 2637–2638), while in languages where information questions are the largest category like Lao (42 %) and American English (43 %), other categories are still substantial. Enfield reports that in Lao 28 % of all questions seek confirmation and 16 % seek agreement, and Stivers' study of American English shows that 21 % of all questions seek confirmation and 31 % initiate repair (repair is when, for example, the addressee didn't quite hear what the speaker said; *What?* or *Huh?*, and/or cannot quite believe what the speaker uttered; *He woke up where?*) (Enfield 2010: 2654–2656;

Stivers 2010: 2776). This gives us reason to think of question asking as a directive speech act, since the communicative aim of getting an answer in the shape of confirmation, agreement or repair has a straightforward world to word direction of fit.

3. Questions in conversation I: Speech acts and politeness theory

The speech act view does not provide us with a full understanding of how question asking is embedded in conversations and the larger social context in which conversations take place. An example of this is that while speech act theory can accommodate the fact that one can use a formal question to issue a request (*Can you close the window?*), an offer (*Would you like a lift?*), a challenge (*Would I lie to you?*), etc., it remains silent as to why a speaker chooses such indirect forms instead of direct ones. Also, given speech act theory's focus on information questions, it seems odd that we often hedge our questions (*Do you know the way to San Jose?* instead of *What's the way to San Jose?*), given that the hedge is superfluous from the perspective of getting information about directions to San Jose.³ Furthermore, given the armchair nature of a philosophical tradition like speech act theory, the theory needs to be corroborated with empirical evidence from disciplines that study how people actually talk. In short, we need to bring the speech act tradition in closer contact with pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

In pragmatics and sociolinguistics, politeness research has developed into a fertile field of study. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's efforts to establish a universal theory of politeness have proven to be its most influential branch (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; but see Lakoff 1973, 1979 and Leech 1980, 1983 for alternative models). In Brown and Levinson's theory, the other main historical sources of pragmatics, namely Grice's theory of conversation with its various conversational principles and maxims – in particular his Cooperative Principle (Grice [1975] 1989), and Erving Goffman's classical theory of face (Goffman 1955), are joined in a well-received synthesis. Drawing on empirical studies, Brown and Levinson argue that our polite conversing can explain why speakers stray from the Gricean principles, since polite forms may mitigate the potential face-threats which, for example, questions can represent. Politeness is a socially motivated deviation from the Gricean maxims of conversation; "no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5).

According to politeness theory, questions are not only devices for the questioner to obtain information of some sort, they are also embedded in a complex social network of face concerns that one must take into consideration when asking questions. Questions, as Esther Goody pointed out, may "also carry [...] command messages" (Goody 1978: 19; cf. 23). Asking a question may impose upon the addressee, committing him to answer, and, as such, may be a face-threatening act. There are social costs for the addressee when being asked a question, and the ques-

tioner can mitigate or soften the face-threatening aspects of asking a question by posing the question indirectly or by using hedges. There are also social costs for the questioner. Levinson mentions 5 potential social costs on the part of the questioner.

1. He does not know the information requested, while the addressee presumably does. (Potential danger: face loss due to ignorance.)
2. He wants the information, and cares about the matter questioned. (Potential danger: clues to speaker's current interests and concerns.)
3. He thinks he has a right to know the information, and the addressee the rights to give it. (Potential danger: speaker can be mistaken, with loss of face all around.)
4. He judges that the addressee will give him at least some truthful information. (Potential danger: speaker may need to act as if he believes the information provided.)
5. He will owe the addressee something for the information, to whom it can be attributed. (Potential danger: the addressee may want parallel information from the speaker.) (Levinson 2012: 20).

Notice that Levinson's points 1 and 2 are close cousins to clauses 1 and 3 in Searle's speech act analysis, and that Levinson's point 3 should (as I will show in Section 5) be associated with the phenomenon of unwarranted questions (both parts of Levinson's point 3 are captured in Borge 2007: 1690–1692, 1698). Given these potential social costs of asking questions, both for questioner and addressee, it is not surprising that even a simple question like asking for directions “is normally phrased politely, with apologies for stopping the anonymous party, and thanks offered freely for the help” (Levinson 2012: 20). Brown and Levinson give a careful presentation of the various politeness strategies people employ to mitigate the face-threatening potential of questions (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987); mitigation being described by Bruce Fraser as aiming at “the reduction of certain unwelcomed effects which a speech act has on the hearer” (Fraser 1980: 341). (See also Caffi, this volume.)

One classic mitigation device is the question-hedge strategy where one reformulates a direct request or order as a question, thereby producing an indirect request. In linguistics, a “hedge” is “a particle, word, or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set [e.g. of speech acts]” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 145). By employing a hedge in performing a particular member of the speech act set, the speaker modifies the force of that speech act (as first observed by George Lakoff 1973; see also Brown and Levinson 1987: 145). Formal questions are particularly well suited to perform the double function of both reducing potential face-threats, while at the same time being able to issue requests, orders or statements (in the case of rhetorical questions). Unlike speech act theory, politeness theory provides a rationale for indirect speech acts. Here is an example from Tamil, reported by Brown and Levinson, of politely requesting a cigarette (instead of directly asking for one) by using a formal question:

sikaraTT koNTuvantirukka maaTTiinkaLee?

'You wouldn't have brought any cigarettes, would you?' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 143. See Brown and Levinson 1987: 143–144 for other ways of making similar sort of indirect requests).

Hedges are also used to mitigate potential face-threats of functional questions. Let us return to the example of asking for directions. By employing a variety of hedges, one can, for example, reformulate an information-question about some topic *x* as a question about the addressee's ability to answer the question about *x* or his knowledge about *x*. Instead of the more direct and face-threatening (1), one could apply a mitigating device and use (2)-(5).

- (1) Where's the Brooklyn Bridge?
- (2) Could you tell me where the Brooklyn Bridge is?
- (3) You couldn't tell me where the Brooklyn Bridge is, could you?
- (4) Do you know where the Brooklyn Bridge is?
- (5) You wouldn't know where the Brooklyn Bridge is by any chance?

A speaker asking a question imposes on the addressee, making him provide an answer; in the given context, the seriousness of the question with regard to its face-threatening potential is measured along three parameters: the social distance between speaker and addressee, the relative power which a speaker holds over his addressee, and the absolute ranking of the imposition in the particular culture that the speaker and the addressee share (Brown and Levinson 1987: 74–76).

The extent to which a questioner chooses to employ mitigating devices depends on considerations about the addressee and the social distance between speaker and addressee. According to Brown and Levinson, face-concerns, including the need to be polite, must be communicated, albeit not necessarily in so many words: "politeness is *implicated*" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 22; see also Brown and Levinson 1987: 3–7). If a speaker asking a question employs a mitigating device in order to minimize or, at least, soften potential face-threats, then that is something a speaker communicates (though not always by expressing it verbally). Someone who is asked for directions to the Brooklyn Bridge and answers (with the appropriate pointing gesture) that it is "Over there somewhere" will be interpreted as communicating and intending to be recognized as communicating, not only that the Brooklyn Bridge is in the general direction of the pointing gesture, but also that he does not know exactly where the Brooklyn Bridge is (the latter is what the speaker implicates; see Grice 1989: 33). Similarly with politeness, someone who asks for directions to the Brooklyn Bridge by using (2)-(5), not only wants to communicate and intends to be recognized as communicating that he would like information about the location of the Brooklyn Bridge; the speaker also implicates that he respects culturally determined politeness standards (see Brown and Levinson 1987: 7, 58). To a certain degree this seems correct. Often, a speaker not only

wants his audience to recognize his being polite, but also wants them to recognize that he is making a conscious effort to be polite.

There are, however, features of conversational contributions like asking questions that seemingly manifest the speaker's face concerns, but which are not communicated in the sense that the speaker intends the addressee to recognize them as communicated. Consider again the case of asking for directions to the Brooklyn Bridge and add this time that the addressee is a NYPD officer and that the questioner is a person who is nervous and fidgety around policemen.

(6) Excuse me officer, er, I'm a bit lost actually and, well, er, I'm looking for the Brooklyn Bridge, er, could you tell me where it is?

One way to interpret the sounds *er* and *well, er*, together with the seemingly superfluous information about *being a bit lost*, would be that the speaker is nervous about asking a police officer, because of face concerns. On the other hand, the questioner would not want or intend to communicate his nervousness to the police officer he is addressing. The nervousness manifested by the questioner in (6) is due to the speaker's face concerns and his attempt to mitigate any face threats by being polite, but it is not implicated. Politeness theory seems to get this wrong (or, at least, fails to capture such features of conversational contributions), while speech act theorists are (suspiciously) silent on the matter. This motivates us to cast our net wider and include conversation analysis – the empirical study of talk-in-interaction – where these kinds of features of asking questions are identified (as we will see in the next section).

A further and even more important motivation for complementing speech act theory and politeness theory with conversation analysis, is that conversation analysis methodology has made possible the discovery of a variety of features of conversations, which our language intuitions seem to be silent about and which would otherwise have gone unnoticed. These features display a high degree of systematicity as do conversations in general, and as I will show in the upcoming section, bringing in conversation analysis further helps to ground the speech act of asking questions in its various conversational contexts.

4. Questions in conversation II: Speech acts and conversation analysis

One of the strengths of conversation analysis, as it was pioneered by Harvey Sacks, Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, is that it is an inductive science, driven by empirical data gained by audio- or video-recording of ordinary everyday conversations (Schegloff and Sacks 1973: 290). In conversation analysis, what counts as a contribution comprises conversational features of a much wider scope than is the case in either speech act theory or politeness theory. Levinson mentions a variety of sub-sentential units which are functionally active in conversations, such as

“non-linguistic vocalizations (e.g. laughter), non-vocal actions (like handing someone something requested), and sheer silence (e.g. after a loaded question)” (Levinson 1983: 291. See also Mey 2001: 150–151).

We have already seen that there are various kinds of questions (information seeking questions, confirmation seeking questions, agreement seeking questions, tag-questions, out-loud questions, rhetorical questions and so on). With respect to the study of functional questions – questions that seek to elicit an answer – the speech act tradition has focused on information seeking questions. However, a recent conversation analysis study on question-answer systems in 10 languages reveals a more complex picture. Call this study by this group of researchers; the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study/group; Enfield, Stivers and Levinson (2010). All the studies recorded maximally informal social interactions, where the conversational participants were in familiar circumstances and knew each other well. Among the types of questions that aim at eliciting an answer, the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson research group identified the following types of questions (Stivers and Enfield 2010: 2623):⁴

- (1) Information questions; *What's in this drink?*
- (2) Confirmation questions; *So, you'll stay a little longer?*
- (3) Agreement questions; *Isn't that a great song?*
- (4) Repair questions: *She did what?*
- (5) Suggestion/offer/request questions: *Would you like to come along?*

One thing to note is that these categories are not mutually exclusive. One can ask a question like *You'd like to come along, won't you?* which seems to be both a confirmation question and also a suggestion/offer/request question. If one accepts Searle's multiple speech acts model of conversational contributions, then this is unproblematic.

As was pointed out at the end of Section 2, many functional questions are not information questions, though the category of “information question” is a large category in all the 10 languages studied by the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson group. In 6 of these languages, information questions is the main type of questions, but in only two of these languages do information questions compound more than 50 % of all the questions (ʘAkhoë Hai||om and Yélî Dnye). Confirmation questions are most frequent in 3 languages (Dutch, Japanese and Tzeltal) and only in Korean are repair questions the most frequent type of questions (though the distribution is quite even in Korean with 33 % repair questions, 31 % information questions and 29 % confirmation questions). Only 3 languages had more repair questions than confirmation questions (ʘAkhoë Hai||om, American English and Korean) and ʘAkhoë Hai||om is the only language in the study, where “speakers virtually never request confirmation, while in the other languages requests for confirmation make up between 20 % and 50 % of all questions” (Hoymann 2010: 2736). Hoymann explains this by reference to hunter-gatherer studies, and suggests that the hunter-ga-

therer “social culture of †Ākhoe speakers leads them to pose questions in a way that is less coercive and less restricted of the answerer”, which has as a natural consequence that †Ākhoe speakers are less likely to ask confirmation questions (Hoymann 2010: 2736). This way of thinking of conversational style as closely tied to the types of tasks the speakers primarily need to worry about (that language is essentially tied up with communicative aims and actions) and how their society is organized (which dictates the face-concerns, see Brown and Levinson 1987: 74–76) sits well with both speech act theory and politeness theory. Furthermore, all the types of questions mentioned above aim at eliciting an answer and, as argued in Section 2, we might still regard information questions as having a special status among the different types of questions, while taking into account the other social dimensions of asking questions. This gives credence to Levinson’s suggestion (as quoted in the introduction) that information questions should be seen as a sort of prototype question, where other functions and facets of questionhood are allowed over a variety of dimensions (Levinson 2012: 15).

The Enfield, Stivers and Levinson group distinguished between three main types of questions at the level of logical semantic structure:

- (1) Polar questions: Polar questions present a proposition and ask the addressee to confirm/disconfirm or agree/disagree; two opposite answers are possible (*Do you take sugar in your tea? A possible answer is Yes or I take sugar in my tea.*)
- (2) Content questions (aka wh-questions): Content questions presuppose some proposition and then ask the addressee to fill out a missing element. Content questions contain an interrogative phrase (a question-word or wh-word in English) like *where, what, who* and the like (*Where did you put your hat? which presupposes that the addressee has a hat and put it somewhere.*)
- (3) Alternative questions: Alternative questions present two or more propositions and then ask the addressee for affirmation of one of these alternatives (*Should I stay or should I go?*).

Ekkehard König and Peter Siemund claim that the interrogative function is universal for all languages (König and Siemund 2007). There is nothing in the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study that suggests otherwise. Indeed, the languages in the study “conform in that polar and wh-questions are unrelated in form, wh-questions have the usual sort of special forms, and responses show the same priorities as in other languages (for fast cooperative, adequate answers)” (Levinson 2010: 2741). So in all languages we find the speech act of asking questions (interrogative function), but how do speakers manage to do that?

One way to do it would be to use a sentence type associated with the type of the question the speaker aims at asking. A particular sentence type often accompanies these types of questions (polar-questions, content-questions, etc.), though not necessarily. The issue of how to understand the relationship between form (interrogative morphology, syntax or prosody) and function (that a question is being

asked) has received a fair amount of attention in the speech act tradition. It has been argued in the speech act tradition that any speech act can be made explicit by use of a performative formula (*I hereby ask you a question*), but “from the point of view of the evolution of language, the explicit performative must be a later development, than certain more primary utterances” (Austin 1975: 71). Explicit performatives are also rare in everyday conversations. How then do speakers code, mark or indicate the illocutionary force of the speech act they (intend to) perform? This is the question of illocutionary force indicating devices, and clearly an illocutionary force indicating device like mood (sentence type) is well adapted to do the job.

The choice of sentence type is in many cases sufficient for indicating illocutionary force and thus for asking a question, but is the sentence type or some other formal feature also necessary for an utterance to function as a question? The phenomenon of indirect speech acts already shows that there is no direct correlation between sentence type and the function of an utterance. One might still insist that even though there is no one-to-one relationship between form and function (as, for example, rhetorical questions show), there must be some correlation between formal aspects of the utterance (some syntactic, morphological, etc. marking) and its interrogative force. Consider declarative questions as brought to our attention by conversation analysis, where one asks a question by using a declarative sentence type. In her study of Dutch conversations, Englert reports that 38 % of all polar-questions are declarative questions (as opposed to interrogative questions and tag-questions) (Englert 2010: 2668). There are various discourse markers in Dutch that indicate that the use of a declarative sentence type is to be taken as a question and one such type is an epistemic clause or stance marker.

1. Sak: Zij is gescheiden denk ik?
She is divorced I think
She is divorced I think?
2. (.)
3. Tri: Nee nee nee.
no no no
No no no (Englert 2010: 2671).

Here the declarative sentence has “a tag” or an add on (*denk ik*), which states the speaker’s epistemic position towards the proposition expressed, and that functions as a way of indicating that the utterance is to be taken as a question. This is also how the other participants in the conversation perceive the utterance. One could furthermore imagine that the speaker instead said merely *Zij is gescheiden* and that the content of this sentence together with some fact about common ground (both speaker and hearer know, and know that the other knows, that the speaker is not in a position to know this, while the hearer is) function as an indication of interrogative force (see Green 2000). If a question is not syntactically, lexically or morphologically marked, then the received wisdom of linguistics has been that declarative

questions are interrogatively marked by rising intonation. This is quite different from the line offered by Searle when he writes that “[i]t is possible to perform the act without invoking an explicit illocutionary force indicating device where the context and the utterance make it clear that the essential condition is satisfied” (Searle 1969: 68). Must there be a coding or marking of interrogative force or could one just as well infer from context of utterance to interrogative force?

The empirical research supports Searle’s line. There is no simple correlation between interrogative form and interrogative function. A speaker can ask a question by using a declarative sentence and he can do so, as the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study shows, without any particular coding or marking of interrogative force (see also Sadock and Zwicky 1985). Federico Rossano notes that “[a]ccording to many researchers, Italian lacks any morphological or syntactic means of distinguishing polar questions from declaratives”, so the received wisdom among researchers is that “intonation carries the function of distinguishing the sentence types and indicating that a specific utterance is actually a question” (Rossano 2010: 2759). The latter claim, however, is false. Rossano recorded a northern variety of Italian and here “12.5 % of [polar] questions do not have any intonation contour distinguishable from a declarative” (Rossano 2010: 2762). There were similar results for American English and Yélf Dyne in the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study, and Levinson sums up the findings as follows:

For those raised on the standard assumption of rising intonation as a universal marker of questions, it may be sobering to find that, actually, corpora of spoken English show that at least 50 % of yes/no questions are in declarative form, and the great majority of these display falling intonation (Stenström 1984 found that 75 % of English questions in declarative form had falling intonation; see also Geluykens, 1988). Thus in most cases, English participants rely on pragmatic inference to detect a polar question (see also Stivers [2010]). If the pragmatic inference works well enough to detect more than half the English polar questions, it is powerful enough to be the main questioning strategy in a language, as it is Yélf Dnye (Levinson 2010: 2742).

This does not mean that rising intonation cannot be central for indicating that the utterance of a declarative sentence is to be taken as a question. Kyung-Eun Yoon reports that in Korean “[a]ll 98 polar questions with declarative sentence endings employ a rising intonation” (Yoon 2010: 2784). It does show, however, that no coding or marking is necessary for asking a question, and that a pragmatic inference from what is uttered in that specific context of utterance to an assumption of fulfillment of Searle’s felicity conditions for asking questions (as described in Section 2) is enough for asking a question.

While rising intonation or any other illocutionary force indicating device are not universal markers of questions, the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study suggests that the basic conversation analysis observation that a great deal of utterances comes in what are called “adjacency pairs” and that a question-answer sequence comprises such an adjacency pair, enjoys the status of being applicable to all lan-

guages (Sacks 1992; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). Questions are first pair parts, with answers being the corresponding second part; they initiate courses of action and provide a frame for the next potential conversational moves (Schegloff 1984, 2007; see also Koshik 2005). This orderliness of turns in a question-answer sequence is based in what Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson dubbed “the turn-constructive component” (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 702). At the end of each turn-constructive component, there is a transition relevance place, where another person can “take the floor”, i.e. start to speak; for each transition relevance place, there are rules governing the transition of speakers (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974: 704; Levinson 1983: 298). Brown argues (as is in keeping with the rest of the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study) that “Tzelta provides evidence for universal tendencies (or at least not limited to English and other European languages) [...] [and] support for a view of question-answer sequences as archetypal adjacency pairs with a strong propensity for questions to be immediately followed by answers” (Brown 2010: 2647). After a question, an answer can be expected and often, as the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study shows, the questioner will himself indicate or context makes it clear to whom the question is addressed.

A question makes an answer relevant as the next sequential part of the conversation. A question creates an answer’s conditional relevance; an answer is, so to speak, expected, such that the absence of an answer will be noticeable (among other things, in the way the questioner handles his next conversational contribution; Schegloff 1972: 363–365). That a question has been asked, however, does not necessitate an answer.

[Q]uestions can be happily followed by partial answers, rejections of presuppositions of the question, statements of ignorance, denials of the relevance of the question, and so on, as illustrated below:

A: What does John do for a living?

B: a. Oh this and that

b. He doesn’t

c. I’ve no idea

d. What’s that got to do with it? (Levinson 1983: 293).

A question need not be followed by an answer, even though this is to be expected in the normal course of conversation. Hence, conversation analysts talk of “preferred” and “dispreferred” sequences in the case of second parts of adjacency pairs. Originally in conversation analysis “[t]he notion of preference [...] is not intended as a psychological claim about speaker’s or hearer’s desires, but as a label for a structural phenomenon” and as such it does not include the type of considerations about speakers, which is prominent in the speech act literature (Levinson 1983: 332–333, see also Mey 2001: 161). However, if one looks at the Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study then there is no indication there that the researchers regard conversation analysis and speech act theory as incompatible perspectives. From a

speech act perspective it is not a surprising claim that the question-answer sequence is a universal feature or tendency of languages.⁵ After all, according to speech act theory, to ask a question is minimally to aim at getting an answer and also, in the case of information questions, to get an answer that provides the information that the questioner asked about. The Enfield, Stivers and Levinson study shows that the illocutionary point of question asking tends to be satisfied (and is in accordance with the cooperative model of language use described in Section 3).

5. Unwarranted questions

A basic insight of speech act theory is the observation that not all language use functions as a way to describe some state of affairs. Still, just because the speech act of asking questions does not fit the true or false schema, it does not mean that questions cannot be insincere. If a speaker asks an information question, but does not care about the information asked for (he does not want the information *qua* information), then the speaker violates the sincerity rule for asking questions. One familiar instance of insincere questions is interrogative flattery, where the questioner flatters the addressee by asking information questions about topics, which the speaker assumes are near to the addressee's heart, but which are indifferent to the questioner. The questioner shows interest in these topics and asks about them, not because he wants the information (as a way to relieve himself of ignorance), but rather because he wants the addressee to believe that this is what he wants. The speaker asks questions, but the questions are insincere, because the act of asking an information question expresses a psychological state (that of wanting the information asked about), which the speaker is not in.

Question asking, however, is also a social and structural phenomenon (as shown by politeness theory and conversation analysis), and there are other ways by which an act of asking a question can be infelicitous than that of failing to occupy specific psychological states expressed by that speech act. I have argued elsewhere that Searle's analysis of question asking is incomplete. Besides fulfilling Searle's three clauses, the questioner must also be in a position to ask that question and believe himself to be in that position. If this latter condition is not fulfilled, then the question is unwarranted (Borge 2007).

Though a neglected category in the speech act literature, unwarranted questions are a familiar phenomenon. If a stranger suddenly asks you a question of a very personal nature or if someone in a job interview inquires about your political views, sexual preferences and the like, you would *prima facie* judge such questions as unwarranted. Often, unwarranted questions are not relevant for the general direction of the conversation in which they occur. However, irrelevance is not a defining feature of unwarranted questions; for instance, a student who asks an irrelevant but otherwise harmless question does not thereby ask an unwarranted

question (except maybe in an exam situation). A question is unwarranted if the person asking the question is not in a position, formally or informally, to rightfully inquire into whatever is the subject matter of the question. In such cases the questioner is not entitled to expect an honest answer or even an answer at all. The subject matter of the question is, so to speak, none of the questioner's business. If, in the case of an unwarranted question, the lack of warrant has something to do with the questioner's not standing in the right relation to the addressee, then the lack of warrant is a property that questions share with other speech acts, such as orders and commands – a feature which, however, has gone unnoticed by most speech act theorists.⁶

Consequently, Searle's account should be qualified in light of the property of warrant (or lack of it). A fourth clause should be added to his analysis:

4. *S* stands in and *S* believes *S* stands in a relation *R* to *H* such that *S* can demand or expect *H* to sincerely answer *S*'s question (Borge 2007: 1691).

Since questions count as attempts to elicit an answer from one's conversational partner, they are unwarranted if the preparatory rule of clause (4) is not satisfied. Searle is not the only speech act theorist that ignored this aspect of asking questions, and in a neighbouring discipline like politeness theory it has only recently surfaced in the literature (Levinson 2012: 20, see Section 3). If one looks at Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish's analysis of questions, one sees that that model also suffers from the same incompleteness (Bach and Harnish 1979: 47).

Most often, the condition of clause (4) is trivially met, as when someone inquires about the time, asks for directions, or other mundane matters. There are, of course, times when even mundane questions cannot rightfully be asked. An obvious example would be if the addressee was preoccupied or busy with something of importance (like providing first aid). This kind of case has a parallel in conversation analysis and the notion of floor-passing, which is what happens at the so-called transition relevance-places, where a person starts talking after another has finished. Someone who interferes in a conversation between two people performing first aid, and asks about the time, asks an unwarranted question and another way of putting that is that the questioner had no right to the floor (he spoke out of turn). Brown reports one such case in her study of Tzeltal where "there is no response to a question" and where that absence is "explainable by virtue of the fact that the questioner has no rights to the floor (e.g., a child)" (Brown 2010: 2639).

In cases where clause (4) is trivially satisfied one could say that that is so because *S* and *H* share a language, belong to the same cultural circle, or have the same social status. Sometimes rank is enough. A police investigator does not, perhaps, expect a sincere answer from a recidivist, but he can certainly demand it due to his position of authority. The cases where we most likely find violations of clause (4) are those in which the questions concern the more personal aspects of our lives or episodes connected with them. Clause (4) is, in such cases, usually satisfied by *S*

having the right sort of acquaintance with *H*. My wife is certainly in a position to inquire about my whereabouts last night, while my students are not. I can legitimately refuse to answer my students, but not my wife; it feels both natural and appropriate for me to opt out of such a conversation with my students.

A question is unwarranted when *S* does not stand in the right relation *R* to *H*, irrespective of *S* being insensitive, unaware, or ignorant of this fact. But what about a situation where Searle's clauses (1)-(3) are satisfied and *S* indeed stands in the right relation *R* to *H*, but does not believe that he does, or believes he does not? *S* must believe that the question is appropriate, or minimally, not believe that the question is inappropriate. In the same way that there is something wrong with asserting an answer based on a lucky guess (that is a lucky guess presented or posing as an assertion), even if it happens to be true, there is something wrong about a question that one does not believe one is entitled to ask. The speaker-related element of clause (4) makes it clear what is amiss in this situation. In this case, the speaker's *modus operandi*, including his reason for asking the question, is not one of eliciting information or an answer, even though he may want that. A speaker that believes he is not entitled to an answer when asking a question has some other reason for asking the question than that of getting an answer (see Borge 2007 for a further elucidation of why a speaker might ask a question that he does not expect will be answered). If asking an information question is to count as an attempt to elicit information, then not believing that one is in a position to expect or demand a sincere answer (or an answer at all), or believing that one is not in such a position, makes that speech act infelicitous or defective.

If questions can be unwarranted (as reflected in clause 4) and this feature of the speech act of asking questions gives rise to the sort of face concerns that Levinson described (see Section 3), then one ought to expect that there are conversational devices to mitigate such potential face threats. Are there ways to ensure that one asks a warranted question, and thus to lessen and mitigate the face threat of unwittingly asking an unwarranted question? There are. Again, we can complement the speech act tradition and make use of the conversation analysis notion of pre-sequence. Here is how Schegloff defines pre-sequence:

[P]re-sequences are sequences produced to be specifically preliminarys to determinate actions, projecting their occurrence, contingent on the response to the pre-sequence initiator. The most familiar exemplar is the pre-invitation. In appropriate contexts, "Are you doing anything?" is understood not as a simple request for information, but as a pre-invitation (Schegloff 1988: 58).

Schegloff argues that speech act theory does not have resources to allow for pre-sequences (Schegloff 1988), but Agnes van Rees has shown that there is no incompatibility between speech act theory and the phenomenon of pre-sequence (van Rees 1992). Van Rees writes:

Schegloff does not recognize that these utterances function *at the same time*, communicatively, as a request for information and, thereby, interactionally, as a means for paving the way for a potential subsequent speech act by investigating possible objections to it (van Rees 1992: 40).

According to Searle's multiple speech acts model of conversational contributions we could say that the speaker in the Schegloff quote above both asks an information question and performs a pre-invitation. The addressee could respond to the information-question by answering *Yes* or *No*, or else latch directly onto the pre-invitation by saying *Why?* It is also possible for the addressee to respond to both speech acts by saying *No, why?* (See, among others, Atkinson and Drew 1979: 143, 253).

Often information questions function as pre-sequences to requests, as when someone asks whether the addressee has an ability (*Do you drive?*), where the ability is needed for the fulfilment of a request (*Could you pick up my kid brother from school today?*). A preparatory rule for issuing a request is that the speaker believes that the addressee is able to do that which is requested and so a question about whether the addressee has that ability functions as a pre-sequence to the speech act of requesting (see Mey 1993: 117, 247–248). A pre-request by way of an information question, so to speak, clears the ground for a request (see, among others, Merritt 1979: 324, 337). The most general way to clear the ground for a particular question would be to ask the question; *Can I ask you a question?* This sort of question is according to Schegloff often followed by further pre-questioning steps like explaining the background for the proceeding question, so he suggests that this sort of phrase is rather a pre-pre-sequence (Schegloff 2007: 44–45). From a speech act perspective a pre-pre-question functions in the same way as a pre-question, namely to clear the ground for a particular instance of the speech act of asking a question.

Not all pre-questioning has an interrogative form as shown in a study by Elizabeth Stokoe and Derek Edwards on silly questions (Stokoe and Edwards 2008). A question is silly, according to Stokoe and Edwards, if the question's answer should be obvious to both the questioner and addressee. From a speech act perspective it is clear that the so-called silliness stems from the fact that such a question seemingly violates the preparatory rule of the questioner not knowing the answer to his question (clause 1 in Searle's original analysis). Here is the simplified version of an example of pre-questioning from a police interview, where the suspect being asked a question has already been arrested for smashing his neighbour's window and admitted to the act.

P [Police]: Um, may sound a bit silly but do you know whose window it is?
(pause)

S [Suspect]: Yes! (smiling) (Stokoe and Edwards 2008: 90).

Stokoe and Edwards explain that the “preface [the pre-questioning sequence ‘Um, may sound a bit silly’] works in part to frame the question as one with an institutional

mandate: P is not asking this question because he wants to know the answer, but because procedure requires it" (Stokoe and Edwards 2008: 92–93). This analysis seems right, but the pre-questioning is also a way to ensure that the addressee treats the question as a straightforward information question (for, perhaps, procedural reasons). Without the pre-questioning an addressee might reason that since the speaker already knows the answer to his question (clause 1 of Searle's analysis is not satisfied), he must be trying to communicate something else with his question. The pre-questioning in this case addresses that worry. With the pre-questioning the questioner communicates to the addressee that even though a preparatory rule for asking an information question is violated, the addressee should reply to the question as if it was not.

Similarly, a speaker that is concerned that he might be perceived as asking an unwarranted question, and thus violating a preparatory rule for question asking, can address this issue by a pre-question. In this manner a questioner attempts to clear the ground for the question he has in mind, and also to mitigate any face concerns regarding not having the right to ask for certain information. Consider the following scenario. Person A has seen his brother-in-law B at a bar in company of a woman he does not know. A wants to know what is going on, but also worries that B might feel that he is prying. The following conversation takes place.

A: Andrea, she's my sister, you know

B: Yeah

A: So who was that woman I saw you with the other day?

A's first utterance should be seen as a pre-question, which addresses the issue of asking an unwarranted question. The pre-question functions as a way to remind the addressee why A sees himself in the position to ask that particular question.

It was pointed out in Section 4 that even though the question-answer sequence comprises an adjacency pair, the fact that a question has been asked does not necessitate an answer. Similarly, that a questioner has used a pre-question to address a face concern about having the right to the information asked about, does not automatically mean that the addressee complies and accepts that the questioner was within his rights to ask that question. Consider possible answers to A's question in the example above:

A: So who was that woman I saw you with the other day?

B: a. She's a business associate.

b. That's none of your business.

c. What do you think I was doing?

If B responds in a cooperative manner and tells A that the woman is a business associate, he will, most likely, fill out his answer by telling A why they were meeting. While answer b, where B deems A's question to be unwarranted, is possible, I suspect that few would answer in this manner (in real life), since it is probable that

A (due to B being un-cooperative) will conclude that his brother-in-law is having an affair (see Borge 2007: 1694–1696 for a further elucidation of why this is so). If the addressee instead answers *What do you think I was doing?* he is not being cooperative (as with answer a) or un-cooperative (as with answer b), but he is rather rejecting the basis upon which the question builds. The addressee is rejecting what he takes to be the question's presupposition; the presupposition that he might be cheating on his wife, the presupposition that he is the sort of person that might be cheating on his wife, etc. B could have been more explicit in rejecting this presupposition by, for example, saying *I resent the implications of your question*, but answer c will suffice. The unwarranted question is in the case of answer c treated as an unaskable question.

This shows that our analysis of the speech act of asking questions is still incomplete. A questioner might fulfil the four clauses for asking questions, which have been identified so far, but still ask an infelicitous question. The askability of a question also requires that the background presupposition(s) for the question is true (that he might be cheating on his wife) and that the addressee has (some) reasons for believing that the presupposition is true or, at least, no reasons to believe that the presupposition is false (see Sacks 1987). A speaker that asks the question *Have you stopped beating your wife?*, when he has no reason to believe that the addressee has ever beaten his wife, abuses the procedure of asking questions.

6. Presupposition and askability

The phenomenon of presupposition was first noticed by Frege (Frege 1892), and was brought to further prominence in the philosophical literature by Strawson. He famously argued (against Russell 1905) that sentences or statements like *The King of France is bald* fail to have a truth-value, since the presupposition that there is a present King of France fails (Strawson 1950, see Neale 1990 for a defence of Russell's position). If one instead has the interrogative *Is the King of France bald?*, the referential presupposition of this descriptive name remains the same. The same holds for other presupposition-triggering words like *the*, *also*, *even*, etc. The sentence *The dog ate the sausages* presupposes that there is a unique dog which ate the sausages, and likewise the question *Did the dog eat the sausages?* presupposes that there is a unique dog that might be the sausage-eater.

Both Frege and Strawson took presupposition to be a semantic phenomenon. It is a relation between sentences (Frege 1892, though see Atlas 1975) or statements (Strawson 1950), and propositions. Strawson argued that a statement presupposes another, whenever the truth or falsehood of the statement means that the presupposed statement is true (Strawson 1952: 175). This is semantic presupposition. Strawson's truth-value gap theory, however, gives up bivalence and with it standard logic. Few today follow Strawson in thinking that presupposition failure leads

to a truth-value gap. Another challenge for semanticists about presuppositions is the so-called projection problem. A presupposition that is triggered by a word, phrase or name, remains when embedded in sentences or statements with non-veridical operators (see Karttunen 1973). Complex sentences and statements inherit the presuppositions of their parts. Various attempts have been made to deal with this (Karttunen and Peters 1979; Heim 1983; Schlenker 2008, among others). Furthermore, a presupposition of a sentence or statement can change, if the context of utterance changes, and then the phenomenon of presupposition can hardly be a mere semantic phenomenon.

There is an immense amount of literature on presupposition and, though this serves as a brief indication of the landscape, it is impossible in the present paper to do justice to all of the various positions (but see Simons, this volume). One strand, though, deserves mentioning. Gerald Gazdar argues for an interesting hybrid view of presuppositions, which acknowledges both a semantic and a pragmatic side to the phenomenon. On Gazdar's view potential presuppositions belong to the meaning of a sentence, while actual presuppositions belong to utterances (Gazdar 1979, see also, among others, Wilson 1975 and Kempson 1975). Gazdar's line makes it possible to acknowledge the semantic side of presuppositions, while also exploring the pragmatic side of presuppositions and how they connect with question asking.

Consider the question, *Your cousin is not a boy anymore?* (Langendoen 1971: 343). In most contexts, this (confirmation) question would be about whether the addressee's cousin has come to age (is an adult), but one can easily envisage a scenario where gender was the topic and then the question does not carry that presupposition any longer (see also Levinson 1983: 201; Talbot 1987: 183, among others). In other words, the presupposition is defeasible and the defeasibility of presuppositions pushes one towards regarding them as a pragmatic phenomenon (Levinson 1983: 188–191).

Robert Stalnaker introduced the notion of pragmatic presupposition, and for him pragmatic presupposition is a relation between speakers and propositions. Stalnaker, like Gazdar, saw semantic and pragmatic presupposition as compatible concepts of presupposition, which are “explications of related but different ideas” (Stalnaker 1970: 279).

A proposition P is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that P, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that P, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs (Stalnaker [1974] 1991: 473).

This suggestion has two main prongs. The first states that a proposition P is a pragmatic presupposition just in case the speaker assumes or believes that P, which is the one that is relevant for the speech act analysis of questions. The other emphasises pragmatic presuppositions as “what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation, what is treated as their common

knowledge or mutual knowledge" (Stalnaker 1978: 321). The latter is too strong. Consider the following scenario. I am at my department and I have misplaced my hat. While I am searching for it, I run into a colleague and ask her; *Have you seen my hat?* One presupposition of this speech act is that I brought my hat with me to the department and that it should be somewhere in the vicinity of where the speech act takes place. This is not necessarily common or mutual knowledge, when I ask the question – the addressee may never have seen me with a hat (this seems to be acknowledged in Stalnaker 1973: 449). One could argue that given that the addressee accommodates my question and thus accepts the presupposition, then the presupposition becomes common or mutual knowledge (Lewis 1979). However, presuppositions of questions can be challenged. An example would be the addressee who responds to the question at the end of Section 5 by saying *What do you mean, stopped beating my wife?* Here, the presupposition is not accommodated and thus does not become common or mutual knowledge. Still, the presupposition of the original question remains (for other examples, see Mey 1993: 299–300; Tsui 1991: 120–121). Indeed, it is only because the presupposition sticks to the speech act, even if it is not accommodated, that it can be challenged.

Whereas a speech act like asserting is directly connected or committed to the truth of whatever is asserted, asking questions is (sometimes) indirectly connected or committed to the truth of the propositions that are presupposed by a question. Often questions and assertions of the same form will have the same presuppositions.

1. Andrea knows that her husband cheats on her.
2. Andrea doesn't know that her husband cheats on her.
3. Does Andrea know that her husband cheats on her?

These all have the same presupposition – that Andrea's husband cheats on her. Furthermore, as Levinson has pointed out, question asking introduces further presuppositions that do not have assertive counterparts:

Yes/no questions [polar questions] will generally have vacuous presuppositions, being the disjunction of their possible answers [...] Alternative questions [...] presuppose the disjunction of their answers, but in this case non-vacuously. WH-questions [content questions] introduce the presuppositions obtained by replacing the WH-word by the appropriate existentially quantified variable, e.g. *who* by *someone*, *where* by *somewhere*, *how* by *somehow*, etc. (Levinson 1983: 184).

To flat-out assert that Andrea's husband cheats on her demands that the speaker knows or has good reasons to believe that it is true. The same epistemic norm pertains to question 3 above, since the askability of that question presupposes that Andrea's husband cheats on her.

I argued in Section 2 that the minimal illocutionary point of question asking is to aim at getting an answer. Presupposition failure can invalidate that goal. An

addressee can correct/reject or challenge a mistaken presupposition, but cannot felicitously answer a question that builds on a failed presupposition. Someone who denies the presupposition of a question is not answering the question. If the presupposition of the loaded question *Have you stopped beating your wife?* is mistaken, then answering *No* on its own would be irrelevant or misleading (merely answering *Yes* is equally bad). Also, the addressee cannot say, *No, I've never beaten her* as an answer to that question (nor *Yes, I've never beaten her*). In this context, the utterance *No, I've never beaten her* will, most likely, be interpreted as a rejection of the appropriateness of the question, not as a confirmation of the assumption that the beating has not ceased (the emphatic *No, no, no. I've never beaten her* makes that even clearer). This question has a presupposition triggering word (*stopped*, which is a factive predicate) that would have functioned in the same way had it been embedded in an assertion. Alternative questions and content questions, on the other hand, have presuppositions that are unique to the question form. Consider a speaker who is notoriously absent-minded and who often misplaces things without realizing this himself. When this person asks, *Who has stolen my wallet?*, then given the failure of the presupposition that someone stole his wallet, the question cannot be felicitously answered, only corrected or challenged. To answer this question by saying *no one* is, of course, not to answer this whodunit question, but to challenge the presupposition that someone stole the wallet. Similar considerations hold for alternative questions, since such questions presuppose that one of the conjuncts hold true as when “in his Brūno persona, Sacha Baron Cohen [...] 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?’” (de Ruiter 2012: 3).

Levinson suggested that polar questions in general have vacuous presuppositions, but a recent study by Stivers suggests otherwise. The focus of Stivers’ study is the marked interjection “Of course”, when answering questions. Here is an excerpt of a conversation between Nancy and Hyla about the latter’s boyfriend, whose name is Freedland. Nancy requests confirmation that this is a Jewish man.

- 16 NAN: =Nice Jewish bo:y?
 17 HYL: → O:f cou:rese,= (Stivers 2011: 86).

Stivers argues that even though Hyla confirms Nancy’s question, the usage of “Of course” also challenges the presupposition upon which the question’s askability rests. Stivers writes:

The askability of the question hinges on its insinuation that Hyla might be the sort of Jewish girl who would be willing to date non-Jewish boys. By conforming with “Of course”, Hyla takes the moral high ground, asserting that such a possibility is unthinkable (Stivers 2011: 87).

Stivers’ study draws on “twenty-five instances of “Of course” in American and British” and also “similar tokens in data in other languages, in particular *natuurlijk*

in Dutch, *mochiron* in Japanese and *certo* in Italian”, which “all [...] seem to function in the same way” (Stivers 2011: 88). According to Stivers, the speakers “contest the presupposition of the question that both confirmation and disconfirmation are possible and thus treat the question as unaskable” (Stivers 2011: 87).

In Section 2 I argued that the minimal illocutionary point of the speech act of asking a question is to get the addressee to provide an answer. If a presupposition failure of a question makes it impossible to answer that question, then this is an infelicity of the question since it blocks the fulfilment of the minimal illocutionary point of question asking. Stivers’ study shows that we hold questioners responsible for presupposition failure and our analysis of question asking should reflect this. Searle’s account should also be qualified in light of the property of askability (or lack of it). A fifth clause should be added to his analysis:

5. There are no and *S* believes that there are no presupposition failures that block answers to *S*’s question.

Since questions count as attempts to elicit an answer from one’s conversational partner, they are unaskable if the preparatory rule of clause (5) is not fulfilled.

A question is unaskable if a presupposition failure blocks any answer to that particular question, irrespective of *S* being insensitive, unaware, or ignorant of this fact. The question of whether the present King of France is bald is no less unanswerable, though it is challengeable, even if the questioner believes there is a present King of France. Similarly for questions containing certain presupposition triggering words like *stopped*, and *again*, etc. An addressee cannot answer the question *Have you stopped beating your wife?* if the addressee has never beaten his wife, and the question *Are you allowed to date other members of the team, or do you have to wait till the season is over?* cannot be addressed head on, if neither option is a real possibility for the addressee. Furthermore, a content question like *When did you get to the party?* is unanswerable, if the addressee never made it to the party.

On the speaker relative side, *S* must believe the question is askable, or minimally, not believe that it is unaskable. A speaker’s *modus operandi* for asking a question he knows or believes to be unaskable – like asking someone whether he has stopped beating his wife, while having no evidence that the addressee has ever beaten his wife – is not one of eliciting information or an answer. The same holds in the case where the presupposition is true, while the questioner believes it is not. This is reflected in the speaker relative part of clause 5. If asking an information question is to count as an attempt to elicit information, then not believing that the question can receive an answer, or believing that it cannot receive an answer, makes that speech act infelicitous or defective.

The Stivers’ study also indicates some of the complexity of speech situations. Recall my example in Section 5 of the conversation between the two brothers-in-law. We can change our imagined scenario so that the question posed is not merely

unwarranted but also perceived by the addressee as unaskable. Imagine this time that *A* runs into *B* in the bar, and the following conversation takes place:

A: So who're you out with? A business associate?

B: Of course.

In his answer, *B* treats the question as unaskable. This imagined case sits well with Stivers' line that "'Of course' is used primarily when the questioners suggest, through their question, that something morally problematic may be the case" (Stivers 2011: 88). Other cases, however, have more of a the-questioner-should-have-known-better-than-to-ask-this-question flavour to them. Some of Stivers' own reported examples show this very clearly:

- 5 MON: ^We can bill your ins[^]urance,
 6 (1.0)
 7 DAN: Can ya?
 8 MON: → 'v course we can.
 9 MON: (.)
 10 MON: Why couldn't we (Stivers 2011: 96).

The dialogue shows that a presupposition of a question is that the issue asked about is a live issue. The answer to the question should not be a foregone conclusion in the context of the on-going conversation. Whereas clause 2 of our analysis states that a speaker *S* should not ask about that which the addressee will provide without being asked, a consequence of clause 5 and our askability considerations is that *S* should not ask questions about that which he should already know the answer to. When an addressee answers "Of course" to a question, then that indicates that the addressee thinks the answer should already be known by the questioner.

Epistemic, not moral considerations are at the centre of this and others of Stivers' reported examples (though sometimes what the questioner should know better than to ask about is something morally problematic). Similarly, consider the silly question case reported by Stokoe and Edwards, but without the pre-questioning sequence. If the addressee treats the question literally, then the natural answer to the question of whether the addressee knew whose window he was smashing would be "Of course". Certain uses of "Of course" when answering questions deny that the topic of the question is a live issue and thus contests the option of answering yes or no. The latter point, though not a moral issue, is normative, given that epistemology and epistemic questions are about justification of what we believe (see Kim 1988).

7. Concluding remarks

I have presented the speech act analysis of questions and with it the basic speech act insight that people do things with questions. I have argued that in light of cor-

pus studies of questions in talk exchange we should think of question asking as minimally aiming at getting an answer – this being the speech act’s minimal illocutionary point – and that the further illocutionary point of information questions is to elicit information and relieve the questioner of ignorance. The latter type of question can still be granted the status of being prototypic of questionhood. Furthermore, as shown, question asking does not take place in isolation from other social concerns. To consider asking questions in light of studies provided by politeness theory and conversation analysis puts us in a better position to understand the role of the speech act of asking questions in the full speech situation or communicative context. I have shown how to understand the speech act of asking questions in light of the empirical data provided by these disciplines. Also, an important upshot of placing the speech act of asking questions in a wider theoretical and empirical context is that it helps us see that we should amend our initial speech act analysis in order to accommodate the fact that some questions are unwarranted, while others are unaskable.⁷

Notes

1. Sbisà has recently argued that speech act theory, when “understanding speech in terms of action requires dispensing with propositions” (Sbisà 2006: 155). There is no room in this paper to go into Sbisà’s argumentation.
2. For an early formulation of the view that rhetorical questions are statements, see Charles Hamblin (1958: 159).
3. Due to this glitch in speech act theory, Sbisà has argued for an alternative model of speech acts and illocutionary force. There is no room in this paper to elaborate on Sbisà’s alternative model (Sbisà 2001).
4. The Enfield, Stivers and Levinson group also operated with an “other” category in their coding scheme (“[i]f the action did not fit into other categories well, then contributors were asked to code “Other””, Stivers and Enfield 2010: 2623), together with rhetorical and out-loud questions. There is no room in this entry to discuss the various cases, which were coded as “Other”.
5. Notice that there is some debate as to whether some languages in southern Africa of hunter gather societies like $\pm\bar{A}$ khoe Hai||om contradict the universality of the turn-taking system. Hoymann argues that they do not (Hoymann 2010: 2737–2738).
6. One notable exception is Sbisà (2001). In Sbisà’s paper questions are considered as speech acts that assign obligations to their addressees in much the same way as do other exercitives, like orders and commands. Notice that the speech act category of exercitives is taken from Austin’s taxonomy (Austin 1975: 155–157) and that Searle does not recognize it in his taxonomy.
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