A constraint on performative prefixes

Overall summary – We present novel observations on repetitive, excursive, and declarative questions which follow from a constraint on the speech act level of the sentence. Our account relies on an updated version of the performative hypothesis.

Repetitive questions – Questions such as (1)-B_1 occur quite naturally in conversations. We will call them "repetitive questions". (A_1 is the first utterance by A, B_2 the second by B, etc).

(1) A_1 Are you married? A_2 Yes. That's what I asked.
       B_1 Am I married? B_2 No. I'm single.

Descriptively, (1)-B_1 is not asking whether B, the speaker, is married, but is asking whether A is asking whether B is married. Assuming that speech acts are syntactically represented, i.e. that "performative prefixes" are part of logical form, (1)-A_1 and (1)-B_1 can be analyzed as having the LFs in (2) (cf. Ross 1970, Lakoff 1970, Sadock 1974, Krifka 1995, 2001, Sauerland and Yatsushiro 2017, Trinh and Truckenbrodt 2018).

(2) A_1 Are you married?
          LF: $\underbrace{\text{A ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER are [you$_\text{B}$ t_are married]]

      B_1 Am I married?
          LF: $\underbrace{\text{B ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER [$\underbrace{\text{A ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER am [I$_\text{B}$ t_am married]]]]

A constraint on performative prefixes – Note that the LF in (2)-B_1 contains <u>two</u> subjacent (i.e. immediately embedding) performative prefixes. We will argue that that is the maximum. Consider the exchange in (3).

(3) A_1 Are you married?
      B_1 Am I married? (Intended meaning: 'Are you asking whether I am married?')
      A_2 #Are you married? (Intended meaning: 'Are you asking whether I am asking whether you're married?')
      B_2 Yes. Am I married? (Intended meaning: 'Yes. I am asking whether you are asking whether I am married.')
      A_3 Yes. That's what I asked.
      B_3 No. I'm single.

Under the intended meaning, (3)-A_2 is deviant, and thus it is not possible to continue the conversation with (3)-B_2, (3)-A_3, and (3)-B_3 (the gray part). This suggests that LFs such as (4), where there are more than two subjacent performative prefixes, are ill-formed.

(4)   *$\underbrace{\text{A ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER [$\underbrace{\text{B ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER [$\underbrace{\text{A ASK}}_{\text{performative prefix}}$ [WHETHER are [you$_\text{B}$ t_are married]]]]]]

We state the generalization in (5).

(5)   Constraint on Subjacent Performatives (CSP)
      The number of subjacent performative prefixes cannot exceed two

Excursive questions – The CSP makes predictions beyond the facts just discussed. Consider the conversation in (6), specifically (6)-B_2.

(6) A_1 Did John drink? A_2 Last night.
      B_2 When? B_2 No.

Intuitively, (6)-B_2 is asking which time x is such that A is asking whether John drank the time x. Following Trinh and Bassi (2022), we call questions such as (6)-B_2 "excursive questions". The LF in (7) represents the intuitively correct meaning of (6)-B_2 (cf. Trinh and Bassi 2022).

(7)   B ASK [when$_x$ [A ASK [WHETHER did [John t_did drink t_x]]]]

The LF of excursive questions contain two subjacent performative prefixes. Given the CSP, we predict excursive questions about excursive questions to be impossible. This expectation is borne out. Consider (8).

(8) A_1 Did John drink?
      B_2 When? (Intended meaning: which time x is such that you are asking me whether John drank at the time x?)

A₂ #Where? (Intended meaning: which place y is such that you are asking which time x is such that I am asking whether John drank at time x at place y?)
B₂ At Mary's place.
A₃ Last night.
B₃ No. He didn't drink last night at Mary's place. (But he did at Sue's place.)

Under the intended meaning, (8)A₂ is deviant, and thus it is not possible to continue the conversation with (8)-B₂, (8)-A₃, and (8)-B₃ (the gray part). This suggests that the LF in (9) is ill-formed, as as predicted by CSP.

(9) *A ASK [where$_y$ [B ASK [when$_x$ [A ASK [WHETHER did [John t_{did} drink t_x t_y]]]]]]

Declarative questions – A curious fact about yes/no questions without subject auxiliary inversion is that they cannot be the target of a repetitive question. We follow (Gunlogson 2002, 2003) and call these "declarative questions". Consider (10).

(10) A₁ John is married?
B₁ #He is married? (Intended meaning: 'Are you asking me whether John is married?')
A₂ Yes. That's what I asked.
B₂ No. He's single.

Under the intended reading, (11)-B₁ is deviant. The conversation cannot be continued with (10)-A₂ and (10)-B₂ (the gray part). This fact follows from the CSP given the assumption that declarative questions have the logical form [S ASK [WHETHER [H ASSERT p]]], where S is the speaker and H the hearer (Gunlogson 2002, 2003, Trinh and Crnic 2011, Krifka 2017). Thus, the LFs of (10)-A₁ and (10)-B₁ would be (11a) and (11b), respectively.

(11) a. [A ASK [WHETHER [B ASSERT [John is married]]]]
b. *[B ASK [WHETHER [A ASK [WHETHER [B ASSERT [he$_{\text{John}}$ is married]]]]]]]

Given CSP, (11b) is predicted to be ill-formed.

Syntactic assumptions – We assume that a C head governed by ASK triggers T-to-C movement, while a C head governed by ASSERT does not. In addition, we assume that performative prefixes do not introduce TPs, and movement may cross at most one TP/NP (Chomsky 1986). This will account for the word orders in declarative and non-declarative questions, as well as the distribution of the wh-phrase in excursive questions.

The Performative Hypothesis – We have been assuming the Performative Hypothesis (PH): speech acts are represented in grammar. Several criticisms have been raised against PH (Gazdar 1979, Levinson 1983), among which the most serious and, we believe, the only potentially conclusive one is this: if PH is correct, (12a) and (12b) should be semantically equivalent, but they are not, as (12a) obviously describes the weather and (12b) the speaker.

(12) a. It is raining   b. I assert it is raining

Our response to this criticism is that it has the wrong target: it attacks the old version of PH, call it PH-1, according to which (12a) is derived from (12b) by a deletion transformation which is "meaning preserving" (Ross 1970, Lakoff 1970, Sadock 1974). In our updated version of PH, call it PH-2, (12a) and (12b) will in fact have different LFs, namely (13a) and (13b), where S denotes the speaker.

(13) a. S ASSERT [it is raining]   b. S ASSERT [I$_S$ assert it is raining]

Thus, PH-2 predicts (12a) and (12b) to have different meanings. The first says S asserts something about the weather. The second says S asserts something about S. In PH-2, performative prefixes are never phonologically realized. We take this fact and the interpretive differences between overt *assert* and silent ASSERT to be due to the former belonging to the at-issue and the latter to the non-at-issue meaning component. We will elaborate on these points in the talk.

References – Chomsky, N. 1986. *Barriers*. Gazdar, G. 1979. *Pragmatics: Implicature, Presupposition and Logical Form*. Gunlogson, C. 2002. *Declarative questions*. Gunlogson, C. 2003. *True to Form: Rising and Falling Declaratives as Questions in English*. Krifka, M. 1995. *The semantics and pragmatics of polarity items*. Krifka, M. 2001. *Quantifying into question acts*. Krifka, M. 2017. *Negated polarity questions as denegations of assertions*. Lakoff, G. 1970. *Linguistics and natural logic*. Levinson, S. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Ross, J. 1970. *On declarative sentences*. Sadock, J. 1974 *Toward a Linguistic Theory of Speech Acts*. Sauerland, U. and K. Yatsushiro. 2017. *Remind-me presuppositions and speech-act decomposition: Evidence from particles in questions*. Trinh, T. & I. Bassi. 2022. *Excursive questions*. Trinh, T. & L. Crnic. 2011. *The rise and fall of declaratives*. Trinh, T. & H. Truckenbrodt. 2018. *The Participant-Pronoun Restriction: English and Vietnamese*.