

Asking about asking (about asking): Revisiting the Performative Hypothesis

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- 1 The Performative Hypothesis
- 2 Iterated questions
- 3 A constraint on performative prefixes
- 4 Declarative questions
- 5 Recap

Sentences and speech acts

- Speech acts are the minimal units of linguistic communication
 - (1) Sentences
 - A: Is it raining?
 - B: It's not (raining).
 - (2) Speech acts
 - A asks whether it's raining
 - B asserts that it's not raining

cf. Searle (1969)

An idea with long history

- (3) The Performative Hypothesis (PH)
Speech acts are part of literal meaning

cf. Frege (1879); Stenius (1967); Ross (1970); Lakoff (1970); Sadock (1974); Gazdar (1979); Sauerland and Yatsushiro (2017); Krifka (2001, 2014); Trinh and Truckenbrodt (2018); Trinh (2019); Krifka (2020); Trinh (2022)

Implementing PH: performative prefixes

- Logical forms under PH contain performative prefixes

(4) A: Is it raining?

- (i) WHETHER is it t_{is} raining *standard analysis*
- (ii) A ASK WHETHER is it t_{is} raining *PH-analysis*

B: It is raining.

- (i) It is raining *standard analysis*
- (ii) B ASSERT it is raining *PH-analysis*

Goal of talk

- discuss cases of question interpretation which
 - requires the presence of performative prefixes
 - requires a constraint on performative prefixes

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Observation

(5) A₁ Are you married?
B₁ **Am I married?** → iterated question
A₂ **Yes.** Are you married?
B₂ No. I'm single.

→ B₁ is not asking whether B is married, but is asking whether A is asking whether B is married.

Analysis

- Given PH it is straightforward to capture the intuitive meaning of iterated questions

(6) A₁ Are you married?

A ASK [WHETHER are [you_B t_{are} married]]]

B₁ Am I married?

B ASK [WHETHER [A ASK [WHETHER am [I_B t_{am} married]]]]

A₂ Yes that's what I asked.

cf. Ross (1970); Lakoff (1970); Sadock (1974); Krifka (1995, 2001);
Trinh and Truckenbrodt (2018); Trinh (2022)

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Observation

- A₂ is deviant under the intended reading

(7) A₁ Are you married?

B₁ Am I married?

A₂#Are you married?

Intended meaning: are you asking whether I am asking whether you're married?

B₂ Yes. Am I married?

Intended meaning: I am asking whether you are asking whether I am married.

A₃ Yes. That's what I asked.

B₃ No. I'm single.

Puzzle

Iterated questions cannot be iterated

SARC

- Speech act recursion is subject to the following constraint

(8) Speech Act Recursion Constraint

Recursion of speech acts is limited to **at most two levels**

(9)

- a. p-prefix ...
- b. p-prefix ... p-prefix ...
- c. #p-prefix ... p-prefix ... p-prefix ...

Resolving the puzzle

- The deviant readings require the LF in (11) which violate SARC

(10) A₁ Are you married?

B₁ Am I married?

A₂ #Are you married?

Intended meaning: are you asking whether I am asking whether you're married?

(11) A ASK [WHETHER [B ASK [WHETHER [A ASK [WHETHER are [you_B _{t_{are}} married]]]]]]

- Iteration of an iterated question is not possible, because it would require **three** levels of speech act recursion, which is ruled out by SARC

Does SARC explain facts beyond those just considered?

Answer to be defended: **Yes!**

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Two kinds of polar questions

- Polar questions in English may or may not exhibit subject aux inversion

(12) A₁ John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.

B₁ Is John vegetarian?

A₂ He is not, but his wife is.

(13) A₁ John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.

B₁ John is vegetarian? → declarative questions

A₂ He is not, but his wife is.

Puzzle: declarative questions cannot be iterated

(14) A₁ John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.

B₁ Is John vegetarian?

A₂ Is he vegetarian?

Intended meaning: are you asking whether I am asking whether John is vegetarian?

B₂ Yes, that's what I asked.

A₃ No he's not, but his wife is.

(15) A₁ John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.

B₁ John is vegetarian?

A₂#He is vegetarian?

Intended meaning: are you asking whether I am asking whether John is vegetarian?

B₂ Yes, that's what I asked.

A₃ No he's not, but his wife is.

Why does declarative word order prevent iteration?

Analysis of declarative questions

- An intuition underlying many analyses of declarative questions is that they ask whether the addressee is committed to the proposition expressed by the prejacent

(16) A: John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.
B: John is vegetarian?
≈ 'are you saying John is vegetarian?'

- Given PH it is straightforward to generate an LF which captures this intuition

(17) B ASK [WHETHER [A ASSERT [John is vegetarian]]]

- The embedded ASSERT results in declarative word order

cf. Gunlogson (2002, 2003); Trinh and Crnic (2011); Krifka (2017)

Resolving the puzzle about declarative questions

- Because declarative questions already contain two levels of speech acts, iterating them would result in a violation of SARC

(18) A₁ John is looking for a vegetarian restaurant.

B₁ John is vegetarian?

A₂#He is vegetarian?

Intended meaning: are you asking whether I am asking whether John is vegetarian?

(19) A ASK [WHETHER [B ASK [WHETHER [A ASSERT [he is vegetarian]]]]]

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- The “iterated reading” of questions occur quite frequently and naturally in conversations, and has an intricate distribution: if the question exhibits subject-auxiliary inversion, it can be iterated once but not twice, and if the question exhibits declarative word order, it cannot be iterated at all. I proposed an account of these facts which assumes that speech acts are represented in the syntax, and that this representation is subject to a formal constraint. The account is thus an argument for the Performative Hypothesis.

Other issues for future research

- the obligatory silence of performative prefixes
- the semantic/pragmatic distinction between (20a) and (20b)

(20) a. S ASSERT it is raining
b. S ASSERT I_S assert it is raining

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