

Speech Acts in Grammar

Arguments from meta-questions

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1 Introduction

2 Interpretation of meta-questions

3 Distribution of meta-questions

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

Wittgenstein (1921); Searle (1969)

An old idea

(3) The Performative Hypothesis (PH)

There are (silent) speech act operators in grammar

Stenius (1967); Ross (1970); Lakoff (1970); Gazdar (1979)

Implementing PH: performative prefixes

Logical forms under PH contain ‘performative prefixes’

(4) A: Is it raining?

- (i) [whether [it is raining]]
- (ii) [A ASK [whether [it is raining]]] → PH-analysis

B: It is raining.

- (i) [it is raining]
- (ii) [A ASSERT [it is raining]] → PH-analysis

Stenius (1967); Ross (1970); Lakoff (1970); Gazdar (1979); Chomsky (1981, 1986, 2001); Krifka (2001b); Miyagawa (2012); Krifka (2015); Sauerland and Yatsushiro (2017); Trinh and Truckenbrodt (2018); Krifka (2019, forthcoming); Trinh (2022); Wiltschko (2021); Miyagawa (2022); Trinh and Bassi (2023); Trinh (2024); Fox (2024); Fox et al. (2024)

Goal

To present some new evidence in support of PH

Empirical focus

We will discuss 'meta-questions'

- (i) Excursive questions
- (ii) Repetitive questions
- (iii) Declarative questions
- (iv) Echo-questions

Excuse questions

An excusus is made for clarification

(5) A: Did John use the car?
B: **When?**
A: Yesterday.
B: No.

Schmitt (2021); Trinh and Bassi (2023)

Repetitive questions

A question is repeated

(6) A: Are you married?
B: Am I married?
A: Yes. Are you?
B: No.

Trinh (2024)

Declarative questions

A question exhibits declarative word order

(7) A: I have to go pick up my sister.
B: **You have a sister?**
A: Yes.

Gunlogson (2003); Safarova (2005); Trinh and Crnic (2011)

Echo questions

A question imitates another utterance

(8) A: John talked to Mary.
B: John talked to who?
A: Mary.

Blakemore (1994); Noh (1998); Iwata (2003); Reis (2012); Beck and Reis (2018)

Roadmap

- We show how meta questions receive a straightforward analysis under PH
- We discuss a restriction on meta question recursion. We propose to derive the restriction based on auxiliary assumptions, most of which independently motivated
- We show that the proposal make a striking and correct prediction about obviation of the restriction

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Excuse questions

(9) A: Did you use the car?

B: **When?**

(i) *for which time x : B used the car at x

(ii) for which time x : A asks whether B used the car at x

A: Yesterday.

B: No.

(10) [when₁ [A ASK [whether [John used the car t_1]]]]]

Trinh and Bassi (2023)

Repetitive questions

(11) A: Are you married?

B: Am I married?

(i) *whether B is married

(ii) whether A asks whether B is married

A: Yes. Are you?

B: No.

(12) [whether [A ASK [whether [B is married]]]]

Trinh (2024)

Declarative questions

(13) A: I have to go pick up my sister.
B: You have a sister?
 (i) *whether A has a sister
 (ii) whether A asserts A has a sister
A: Yes.

(14) [whether [A ASSERT [A has a sister]]]

Trinh (2024)

Echo questions

(15) A: John talked to Mary.

B: John talked to who?

(i) *for which person x : John talked to x

(ii) for which person x : A asserts John talked to x

A: Mary.

(16) [who₁ [A ASSERT [John talked to t_1]]] (eventual analysis: in-situ)

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Generalization

There can be no meta-meta-questions

Repetitive questions

(17) A: Are you married to Andrea?
B: Am I married to Andreas?
A: No. Are you married to Andrea?
B: I'm married to Anna.

(18) A: Are you married to Andrea?
B: Am I married to Andreas?
A: #Are you married to Andreas?
B: Yes.
A: No. Are you married to Andrea?
B: I'm married to Anna.

Declarative questions

(19) A: I feel guilty.
B: Are you having an affair?
A: Am I having an affair?
B: Yes.
A: No. I'm not.

(20) A: I feel guilty.
B: You're having an affair?
A: #I'm having an affair?
B: Yes.
A: No. I'm not.

Echo questions

A: I sent a letter to Andrea.

B: You sent what to Andrea?

A: I sent a letter to Andrea.

B: You sent what to Andreas?

A: #I sent what to who?

B: You sent what to Andreas?

A: I said 'Andrea', not 'Andreas'. I sent a book to Andrea.

Trinh (2024)

Account

- (A) No wh-phrase can move to the specifier of a performative head
- (B) In-situ questions cannot be embedded

Bošković (2000); Cheng and Rooryck (2000); Stepanov et al. (2001); Fox (2024)

Notation

(21) a. $[\textcolor{blue}{Q_i} \text{ wh}_i C_{[+wh]} \dots t_i \dots]$ → ex-situ question
b. $[\textcolor{red}{Q_j} f_j \dots \text{wh}_j \dots]$ → in-situ question

Repetitive questions

(22) A: Are you married to Andrea?
[A ASK [Q_1 whether₁ C_[+wh] [t₁ B is married to Andrea]]]
B: Am I married to Andreas?
[Q_2 f₂ whether₂ [A ASK [Q_1 , whether₁ C_[+wh] [t₁ ... Andreas]]]
A: #Are you married to Andreas?
[Q_3 f₃ whether₃ [B ASK Q_2]] → embedded in-situ Q

Bennett (1977); Higginbotham (1993); Krifka (2001a); Guerzoni (2004)

Declarative questions

(23) A: I feel guilty.
B: Are you having an affair?
[B ASK [Q_1 whether₁ $C_{[+wh]}$ [t_1 A is having an affair]]]
A: Am I having an affair?
[Q_2 f_2 whether₂ [B ASK Q_1]]

(24) A: I feel guilty.
B: You're having an affair?
[Q_1 f_1 whether₁ [A ASSERT [A is having an affair]]]
A: #I'm having an affair?
[Q_2 f_2 whether₁ [B ASK Q_1]]

Gunlogson (2002, 2003); Trinh and Crnic (2011); Krifka (2017); Trinh (2024)

Echo questions

A: I sent a letter to Andrea.

B: You sent what to Andreas?

[Q_1 f_1 [A ASSERT [A sent what₁ to Andreas]]]

A: #I sent what to who?

[Q_2 f_2 [B ASK [Q_1 , f_1 [A ASSERT [A sent what₁ to who₂]]]]]

Fox (2024)

Apparent counter-example: excursive questions

(25) A: Did you use the car?
B: When?
A: **When?**
B: Yes, when?
A: Yesterday.
B: No he didn't use the car yesterday.

Trinh (2024)

Account (revised & final)

- (A) No wh-phrase can move to the specifier of a performative head
except when followed by ellipsis
- (B) In-situ questions cannot be embedded

Lasnik (1999)

Ellipsis & overt movement

(26) a. A boy talked to a girl, but I don't know which boy to which girl.
b. Which boy₁ to which girl₂ C_[+wh] ~~[t₁ talked to t₂]~~

(27) a. *A boy talked to a girl, but I don't know which boy to which girl talked.
b. *A girl talked to John, but I don't know which girl to John.

Excuse questions explained

(28) A: Did John use the car?

[Q_1 whether₁ C_[+wh] [t₁ John used the car]]

B: When?

[Q_2 when₂ [A ASK [Q_1 whether₁ C_[+wh] [t₁ John used ... t₂]]]]]

A: When?

[Q_3 f₃ whether₃ [B ASK Q_2]]

Fox (2024)

Prediction: island effects

(29) A: Did John talk to the man who used the car?
B: #When?

(30) a. John ate, but I don't know what
b. #John met the man who ate, but I don't know what

Chung et al. (1995); Trinh and Bassi (2023)

Prediction: non-elliptical excursive questions

(31) A: Did you use the car?
B: Did I use the car when?
A: #Did you use the car when?

Fox (2024)

Pronunciation

(32) A: Is John married?
[A ASK [WHETHER₁ is₂ [t₁ [John t₂ married]]]]]
B: Is he married?
[f₃ WHETHER₃ [A ASK [WHETHER₁ is₂ [t₁ he t₂ married]]]]]

(33) A: John's married?
[A ASSERT [John is married]]
B: He's married?
[f₃ WHETHER₃ [A ASSERT [he is married]]]]

(34) A: John talked to Mary.
[A ASSERT [John talked to Mary]]
B: John talked to who?
[f₃ [A ASSERT [John talked to who₃]]]]

Hypothesis

Pronunciation of α requires α to be the complement of a (phase) head

Chomsky (2001)

Consequence for analysis

(35) a. It's raining
S ASSERT [it's raining]
b. I assert it's raining
S ASSERT [I assert [it's raining]]

Spears and Tenny (2003); Trinh and Bassi (2023)

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