

A tense question

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Sauerland and Yatsushiro (2017), henceforth S&Y, take the *remind-me* reading of such questions as (1a) to arise from a presupposition triggered by the adverb *again*: (1a) can be read as simply asking for the addressee's name, with the inference that the name was made known earlier.

- (1) a. $[s [Q \text{ what is your name}] \text{ again}]$?
b. $\llbracket S \rrbracket = \llbracket Q \rrbracket$ if there was an event preceding the utterance at which the complete answer to Q was made common ground, undefined otherwise

S&Y point out that the *remind-me* reading can also come about by way of past tense. Thus, (2a) allows the same reading as (1a). This observation is given a straightforward account by S&Y in terms of reference time effects: (2a) picks out a salient time interval C in the past which includes the communication of the name and excludes the utterance. We will represent this reading by subscripting the tensed verb with C .

- (2) a. $[Q_C \text{ what was}_C \text{ your name}]$?
b. $\llbracket Q_C \rrbracket = \text{'for which } x: \text{ your name is } x \text{ at } C'$

Past tense and *again* can co-occur: (3a) is acceptable under the same reading as (1a) and (2a). S&Y take this to be unsurprising: past tense and *again*, they claim, are “two independent mechanisms that work congruently [...].” Applying their analysis, the meaning of (3a) would be (3b).

- (3) a. $[s_C [Q_C \text{ what was}_A \text{ your name}] \text{ again}]$?
b. $\llbracket S_C \rrbracket = \llbracket Q_C \rrbracket$ if there was an event preceding the utterance at which the complete answer to Q_C was made common ground, undefined otherwise

Now consider the question below, where the subscript L is mnemonic for ‘life.’

- (4) $Q_L = \text{'for which } x: \text{ your name is } x \text{ throughout your life'}$

Let us note two facts about Q_L . The first is specific to English. In this language, Q_L can be expressed by the present tense sentence in (5).

- (5) $\text{what is}_L \text{ your name?}$

The second fact is logical: the complete answer to Q_L is stronger than that to Q_C . Obviously, the name you have throughout your life is the name you have at C . These two facts, together with S&Y's analysis of *remind-me* questions, mean that the presupposition of (6a) is stronger than that of (6b).

(6) a. $[s_L [Q_L \text{ what is}_L \text{ your name}] \text{ again}]$?
 presupposition: there was an event preceding the utterance at which the complete answer to Q_L was made common ground

b. $[s_C [Q_C \text{ what was}_C \text{ your name}] \text{ again}]$?
 presupposition: there was an event preceding the utterance at which the complete answer to Q_C was made common ground

The two questions (6a) and (6b), therefore, stand in the same relation as (7a) and (7b).

(7) a. who also_x went to Harvard?
 presupposition: x went to Harvard

b. who also_x went to Harvard or Yale?
 presupposition: x went to Harvard or Yale

We can observe that in a context where the presupposition of (7a) is satisfied, the question with the weaker presupposition, i.e. (7b), is deviant, as evidenced by the contrast between (8b) and (9b) as follow-ups to the assertion *John went to Harvard* (cf. Spector and Sudo 2017).

(8) a. John went to Harvard.
 b. Who also_j went to Harvard?

(9) a. John went to Harvard.
 b. #Who also_j went to Harvard or Yale?

In the context of this conversation, the presupposition of Q_L is satisfied, but Q_C , to my ear, is not deviant. To the extent that my intuition is reliable, then, we have a question to ponder: what distinguishes the difference between (6a) and (6b) from that between (7a) and (7b)?

References

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