

A LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO QUESTIONS

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The term 'question' has frequently been used by linguists as though a clear idea existed of what a question is. Nevertheless, there is no established consensus as to how to define this word. It has been treated as a formal-semantic category (cf. Quirk et al. 1985), as a type of illocutionary act (Lyons 1977, 1981; Huddleston 1984), as expressive of a 'request' or 'directive' (Gordon and Lakoff 1975, Katz 1977) and as a discourse category comprised of all utterances whose goal it is to elicit an obligatory verbal response (Tsui 1992). The early transformational literature on interrogatives simply took the category for granted and debated whether it was better to assume that the starting structure from which a question was derived is essentially the same as that of an indicative sentence representing one of the possible answers to the question or to read into the abstract structure an abstract interrogative element (cf. Hiz 1978: XV). Subsequent treatments have also glossed over the fundamental issue of what a question is. The main dividing-line, if there is one, lies between approaches which treat questions as a syntactic category with certain formal characteristics (Quirk et al., Lyons) and those which deal with them as a discourse category, i.e. purely in terms of their communicative function in an act of speech. Although I shall be siding with the latter view, I am nevertheless of the opinion that a discourse analysis approach fails to address the properly linguistic problem posed by questions, namely why it is that the speaker has recourse to certain linguistic means and not to others when he wishes to perform the type of discourse function which corresponds to questions. Before I get into that, however, I must first justify the analysis of questions as a discourse category, which means briefly summarizing the other definitions proposed so as to show the adequacy of the discourse-functional one.

QUESTIONS AS A FORMAL-SEMANTIC CATEGORY

Quirk et al. (1985) define questions as a "discourse function" or "semantic class" – they are "primarily used to seek information on a specific point" (p. 803) – for which direct association with the "syntactic class" of interrogatives is the norm (p. 804). Interrogatives are sentences which are "formally marked" in one of two ways: in *yes-no* interrogatives the operator is placed in front of the subject (*Did Pauline give Tom a digital watch for his birthday?*); in *wh-* interrogatives the *wh-* element is positioned initially (*What*

did Pauline give Tom for his birthday?). Quirk et al. hasten to indicate however that the two classes do not always match, as illustrated by sentences such as:

- (1) Pauline gave Tom a digital watch?
- (2) What do I care?
- (3) Isn't Christine clever!

(1) is "syntactically declarative but semantically a question"; the rhetorical question in (2) is "syntactically an interrogative but semantically a statement"; and (3) is "syntactically interrogative but semantically an exclamation" (p. 804). Add to this the fact that subject-operator inversion is found outside of interrogatives (*Never again did Pauline give Tom a digital watch for his birthday*), and one can only conclude the impossibility of establishing any match between formal and semantic criteria as the basis for defining the category of questions. This had already been intimated by Jespersen when he observed, regarding the formal devices for indicating that a sentence is meant as a question (namely special interrogative words, intonation, and word order), that "none of them is an absolutely certain sign of a question, as they may be used for other purposes" (1940: 500).

QUESTIONS AS A TYPE OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACT

Lyons (1977) characterizes questions as utterances which contain the feature of 'doubt' and which are only felicitous if the speaker does not know the answer which would dissipate his doubt. He claims furthermore that although questions are normally associated with the expectation of an answer from the addressee, this association is conventional and is independent of the illocutionary force of a question. This analysis is able, he argues, to cover various types of rhetorical questions without having to treat them as derived from information-seeking questions or as non-questions.

As Tsui (1992: 100) shows, however, it is precisely on the point of rhetorical questions that Lyons' definition encounters difficulties, as according to it they should not be included in the category of questions at all. Commenting on the rhetorical use of *Who cares?*, she argues quite convincingly that this question neither expresses doubt nor implies that the speaker does not know the answer to it. This is supported by the fact that in the conversation in which Tsui observed its occurrence the listener did not supply an answer but rather continued to express his opinion on the topic under discussion.

QUESTIONS AS REQUESTS OR DIRECTIVES

Among the definitions purely in terms of discourse function, questions have been characterized by some as 'requests' which are aimed at eliciting information. Katz and Postal (1964) and Gordon and Lakoff (1975) have proposed that the logical form of questions should be REQUEST (a, b, TELL (b, a, s)) rather than ASK (a, b, s).¹ Questions have been described by others as a sub-type of 'directive' since questions are instructions to perform a verbal act of responding (cf. Willis 1981).

There are important differences between questions and requests however. Lyons (1977) argues that questions cannot be treated as a subcategory of requests because a negative response does not have the same illocutionary force in both cases. A "No" in response to a *yes / no* question such as *Is it snowing?* is an answer to the question, while "No" in reply to a request such as *Pass me the sugar please* is a refusal to do what was requested. This shows that the illocutionary forces of the utterances corresponding to these responses are also distinct.

Another significant distinction has to do with the type of response elicited by these two types of speech act (cf. Tsui 1992). A question calls for a verbal response, the interaction between the speaker and the addressee being completed entirely on the verbal level. A request, on the other hand, elicits a non-verbal response, the interaction being completed at the non-verbal level. This entails that questions have a different discourse function from requests – they are used to obtain different kinds of results by the speaker – and so should not be categorized as a sub-type of the latter.

QUESTIONS AS ELICITATIONS

Following on Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), Tsui prefers to replace the category 'questions' by that of 'elicitations'. The latter is a pure discourse category comprised by utterances whose function it is "to elicit an obligatory verbal response or its non-verbal surrogate" (p. 101). (Examples of non-verbal surrogates of verbal responses are gestures such as a nod or raising one's hand in class.) Sub-types of elicitations can be distinguished on the basis of the different responses sought by the speaker: *elicit: inform*, which invites the addressee to supply a missing piece of information, *elicit: confirm*, which invites the addressee to confirm the speaker's assumption, *elicit: agree*, which invites the addressee to agree with the speaker's assumption that the expressed proposition is self-evidently true, etc.

¹ a corresponds to the speaker, b to the addressee.

QUESTIONS AS A DISCOURSE CATEGORY AND NOT A FORMAL CATEGORY

Due to the fact that utterances which would unhesitatingly be classified as questions are not associated with any particular formal linguistic device signalling this category in English, it seems preferable to treat questions as a pure discourse category. As seen from the discussion of Quirk et al.'s approach, a description which attempts to correlate syntactic form and discourse function leads to the utilization of different and inconsistent criteria in the definition of questions, thus making this category a half-way house between a syntactic and a discourse category. The most consistent way of defining questions, then, is in terms of the function which the speaker intends to fulfil by means of these utterances.

Although it clarifies matters considerably, this approach is not without problems either. On the one hand, it leads to the exclusion from the category 'questions' of certain utterances which have all the formal characteristics normally associated with this category. Thus *Could you pass the sugar?* would have to be placed in the discourse category 'requests' in this analysis. On the other hand, utterances which have none of the formal characteristics found with classical questions can be used to elicit confirmation of the speaker's assumptions, as in the dialogue below reported by Tsui (p. 94):

- (4) H: I...I don't know, see, he has a son at, was in the school last year ah does he have to re-apply?
 X: Ah yes, I think so.
 → H: So we'll have to fill out one of those forms again.
 X: Yes.

Even though the arrowed sentence is spoken with the falling intonation characteristic of declarative utterances, it is not just a case of the speaker stating a fact but a way of asking the hearer to respond to the tentative assertion (i.e. *elicit: confirm*). The elicitation function of the statement in (4) can be explained quite adequately by the situation in which it occurs, where drawing a conclusion from what X has just said and stating it as such (cf. *so*) can be used as a means of eliciting confirmation that one's deduction is correct.

A QUESTION OF METHODOLOGY

Confusing as it may appear, the confrontation of various points of view with respect to questions shows at least one thing clearly: this type of utterance is not associated univocally with any one linguistic sign in English and consequently is not a language-specific semantic or syntactic category in the language. On the other hand, it is associated non-univocally with certain linguistic elements of the English tongue, namely the following four linguistic

signs: (1) *wh-* words, (2) *do* auxiliary, (3) subject-verb inversion, (4) intonation.

Faced with this situation, proper linguistic methodology would require that one first examine these linguistic means in and for themselves, trying to infer what they signify from the observation of the complete range of their uses and not just those in interrogative function. Only once this has been done can any real explanation be offered as to why the speaker has recourse to these linguistic means when he wishes to elicit an obligatory verbal response from the hearer. Thus while agreeing with Tsui that consistency requires the adopting of purely discourse-functional criteria to define what a question is, a linguistic approach to questions has to deal with the problem of explaining why certain linguistic devices are normally used by speakers when they want to elicit verbal responses.

Before we address this problem, the preliminary point should be made that the context of utterance may sometimes render superfluous the recourse to any of the means normally used to elicit verbal responses. This, we have argued, is the case in uses such as (4) above where the simple statement of a fact which the speaker has deduced from what the hearer has just said can be utilized as a means of eliciting confirmation that this deduction is correct. Most frequently, however, the speaker has to use some explicit sign that he is eliciting information, confirmation, etc. from the hearer, so that the latter feel obliged to respond.

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A linguistic approach to questions has to deal therefore not merely with *what* the speaker does but with *how* he does it. Speakers of all languages are able to elicit obligatory verbal responses from hearers, but what is of interest to the linguist is the analysis of the linguistic means used to perform this communicative function. An approach which stays on the level of discourse functions will necessarily be classificatory and universalistic: this entails however that it can never claim to be explanatory, as it does not even ask the question of why certain linguistic means must be used in order to elicit a verbal response from the hearer in a given language. In order to attain the level of explanation, one must realize that linguistic signs and communicative functions stand in a means-end relationship to one another and that to explain why certain means are used to achieve certain communicative goals, one must not only examine the nature of the goals but also, and even more importantly, the nature of the means used to attain them. Only in this way can one demonstrate the aptitude of the latter for the ends to which they are put and thereby explain why they were utilized. This is what we shall attempt to do in the remainder of this paper by examining one of the four linguistic devices

referred to above in order to see how it contributes to the achieving of the elicitation of a verbal response from the hearer.

WH- WORDS

Wh- words are often mistakenly identified as interrogatives (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 803, 817; Harris 1978: 7; Karttunen 1978: 166). This overlooks the fact that they are also used as heads of relative clauses, as in:

(5) I took what they were offering me.

It also leads to serious inconsistencies in the analysis of subordinate *wh-* clauses, with the sentence above being treated as a "nominal relative clause" (Quirk et al., p. 1056), while (6) below is categorized as a "*wh-* interrogative clause" (Ibid., p. 1050), despite the fact that they are identical on all levels.

(6) I asked what they were offering me.

On the level of word order, they both lack the subject-verb inversion often characteristic of questions. On the level of intonational patterns, they both have what Labov and Fanshel (1977) call "declarative intonation". And, semantically, *what* can be paraphrased by the nominal phrase 'the thing(s)' in both cases.

The interrogative and relative uses of the *wh-* words are just that — uses, of something which is in itself more general than either of the particular functions to which it can be put. A far more satisfactory definition is obtained by following Le Goffic's approach to the cognate *qu-* words in French and characterizing the *wh-* words as "indefinites." Thus in (5) *what* evokes the things which were being offered to the speaker without specifying in any way their identity.

In questions, the *wh-* word is combined with a number of other factors which work together to produce the overall effect of eliciting information about the identity of the *wh-* word's referent. Let us take (7) below as an example:

(7) What were they offering you?

First of all, there is the clause-initial position of the *wh-* word, whose value can be tentatively defined as having to do with topic status (cf. Langacker 1991: 506). Also involved is subject-operator inversion, the exact import of which cannot be examined here, but which is obviously responsible for the overall interrogative force of the utterance, as the latter would disappear if

there were no inversion (cf. *what they were offering you*). Thirdly, there is the presence of stress on *what* and the intonational pattern, which must also be studied more closely, but which can already be related to the topic status of the *wh*- word. It is not too hard to see how the use of a word order indicating that the speaker is eliciting information, together with the fronting and stressing of a word which represents its referent as non-specified, produces the effect of eliciting information about the identity of the non-specified entity which is the topic of the question. This constitutes the framework of a real explanation of why certain linguistic devices are used in questions and why they produce the particular effect which they do when used in this type of discourse function. Such an explanation is a necessary complement to the discourse-functional analysis and represents a truly linguistic approach to the category of questions.

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