

## Pragmatics for Questions

In a prototypical “information question” of the yes/no variety:

- (i) The speaker does not know whether the proposition is true;
- (ii) The speaker assumes that the addressee does know;
- (iii) The question itself counts as an attempt to elicit the desired information from the addressee (Searle’s ‘essential condition’)

The canonical way to ask such a question is to use a syntactic interrogative. But the correspondence between sentence form and function is notoriously inexact: interrogatives may be used in a variety of circumstances where (i)-(iii) above do not all hold, while on the other hand, the conditions in (i)-(iii) may arise with the use of non-interrogative forms.

Against this backdrop I call attention to two central problems:

- What principles connect the semantic value of an interrogative to its canonical function as information question, with attendant inferences about speaker and addressee attitudes?
- What factors enter into the interpretation of an utterance as a question (and is there a unified category of ‘question’)?

These problems are not new, but they are not always considered in conjunction. I argue that doing so constrains the shape of the solution, and in particular that Gricean reasoning involving trade-offs between Quality and Quantity cannot be extended straightforwardly to interrogatives/questions.

My approach involves an extended representation of the discourse context that allows for modeling aspects of questions – such as the mutual understanding that one party is more knowledgeable than the other with respect to a certain issue – in terms of contextual configurations, independently of sentence meaning. This allows for the possibility that different forms can achieve the same contextual effect, while still having distinct meanings and imposing different requirements on the preceding context.