Conjectural questions in Navajo: The case of daats’i

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This paper explores the semantics of the modifier daats’i in Navajo (Athabaskan). Both written sources (Young and Morgan 1987) and consultants translate sentences like (1) as shown below:

(1) Deigo daats’i stíą upright daats’i it-sits
‘Is it upright?’ or ‘I wonder if it’s upright.’ or ‘Maybe it’s upright, or maybe not.’ (Young and Morgan (YM) 1987: 753; fieldwork (FW))

Utterances of the form daats’i p have similarities to both modal statements and questions. On the basis of primary fieldwork, I demonstrate that neither approach alone adequately captures the semantics of daats’i. I argue for an account that will handle all of the translations of daats’i p in (1), proposing that daats’i introduces Conjectural Questions (CQs). CQs are a class of construction attested in unrelated languages of the Americas. I take as a starting point Littell et al.’s (2009) theory that CQs have the semantic shape, but not pragmatic force, of questions. I ask whether CQs as found in Navajo and other languages are a single phenomenon or are best treated as semantically disparate constructions.

**Daats’i vs. Questions:** A first approach is to analyze daats’i as a question morpheme. I assume that questions denote sets of propositions that count as possible answers: \([\text{it is raining?}]\) = \{it is raining, it is not raining\} (Hamblin 1973). In addition, questions carry two additional pragmatic requirements: (i) the Speaker thinks that the Addressee may know the answer and (ii) an answer from the Addressee is necessary (Caponigro and Sprouse 2007). I compare daats’i to the question morpheme –ish and show that they pattern distinctly. First, daats’i is felicitous in contexts of mutual ignorance while –ish is not (2).

(2) **Context:** You don’t know if it is raining or not. Your coworker has been inside your windowless office with you all morning so you know she doesn’t know if it is raining.

a. Nahaltin daats’i it.is.raining daats’i it.is.raining-Q
   ‘I wonder if it’s raining.’ ‘Is it raining?’ (FW)

**Second,** daats’i p utterances do not require the Addressee to answer before conversation continues. If –ish instead of daats’i appeared in (3), the Speaker’s utterance would be infelicitous.

(3) Yiskáágo nahodooltítí daats’i. Bee chaha’ohí diiyítítíí.
   tomorrow it.will.rain daats’i umbrella you.bring.it
   ‘It might (or might not) rain tomorrow. You should bring an umbrella.’ (FW)

**Daats’i vs. Modals:** Given that daats’i patterns distinctly from -ish in several key ways, we could follow Willie (1996) and analyze daats’i as a modal. I compare daats’i to shiįį, another adverb which I analyze as an epistemic modal. Shiįį p is true where the Speaker has inferential evidence that p holds in all worlds most consistent with the Speaker’s beliefs about the actual world.

On one hand, both daats’i and shiįį can be syntactically embedded beneath an attitude verb (4), suggesting a syntactic position consistent with both being modal expressions (Matthewson et al. 2007). However, daats’i exhibits semantic behavior distinct from shiįį. First, sentences with shiįį are not translated as questions, either in matrix or embedded contexts:

(4) a. [Lééchąą tázhí na’al’kóó’ daats’i yééhósín ] nisíngó, taah yílt’e’ puppy it.swims daats’i it.knows.how I.thinking water.into I.threw.it
   ‘Wondering if the puppy knew how to swim, I threw it in the water.’ (YM 1987: 775)

b. [Lééchąą tázhí na’al’kóó’ shiįį yééhósín ] nisíngó, taah yílt’e’
   ‘Thinking the puppy must know how to swim, I threw it in the water.’ (FW)

Second, shiįį presupposes that the Speaker has inferential evidence favoring p (e.g., ‘the beans’) while daats’i can only be used if the Speaker lacks such evidence:

(5) **Context:** You feel queasy. You ate a lot of different things yesterday (beans, ice cream, mutton…).

*You say:* Naa’olí daats’i shiįįsíool
   beans daats’i they.bloated.me.up
   ‘Maybe it was the beans that made me bloat up.’ (YM 1987: 243)
Comment: “Daats’í is better because you’re not sure. With shįį you’re blaming it on the beans.”

Daats’í can also be used if the context biases ¬p as the most likely outcome. Shįį cannot be:

(6) **Context**: You left for school before your sister Mary. Mary had a stomachache when you left. **You say:**

a. Mary bibid diniih. ‘Ólta’góó daats’í doogááл.

Mary her.stomach it.hurts school-to daats’í she.will.go

‘Mary has a stomachache. I wonder if she’ll go to school / Maybe she’ll go to school, or not.’

b. # Mary bibid diniih. ‘Ólta’góó shįį doogááł.

**Conjectural Questions**: The Navajo data bear a strong resemblance to a family of constructions referred to as Conjectural Questions (CQs). CQs (also called Deliberative Questions by Truckenbrodt 2006) are characterized by being felicitously uttered (i) in contexts where there does not exist sufficient evidence for the Speaker to express possibility using an inferential modal, and (ii) express a notion of interrogativity on the part of the Speaker while still being felicitous in contexts of mutual ignorance. CQ-like constructions are reported for a substantial number of languages of the Americas, including Tseltal (Shklovsky 2011), Cheyenne (Murray 2010), and Quechua (Fasola 2007). German verb-final questions are also licensed under similar discourse conditions (Truckenbrodt 2006). I add Navajo to the set of languages with a construction exhibiting CQ-like properties. CQs have not previously been described for an Athabaskan language.

Littell et al. (2009) posit an analysis of CQs in Salish and Tsimshianic languages. In these languages, the combination of question morphemes with inferential morphemes results in translations similar to Navajo daats’íp utterances. Utterances like (8) are felicitous in contexts of mutual ignorance.

(8) Nee=ima=hl sdin=hl xbiist=a

YNQ=INFER be.heavy box=INTERROG

‘I wonder if the box is heavy.’

(Littell et al. 2009: 91)

Littell et al.’s analysis of CQs hinges on the presence of both interrogative and modal morphology. The extension of (8) is the set of possible answers to the question *is the box heavy?*, while the inferential modal contributes presuppositions conjoined to each possible answer that there is inferential evidence for the answer. Since there is potentially conflicting inferential evidence for each possible answer, the Addressee is believed not to be capable of resolving the question.

While CQs in a number of languages make use of a combination of interrogative and modal/evidential morphology (Salish and Tsimshianic languages; Cheyenne (Murray 2010)), other languages utilize a single morpheme. For instance, German verb-final questions are licensed under discourse conditions very similar to CQs in other languages (Truckenbrodt 2006). In this construction, the *wh*-complementizer ob ‘whether’ seems to be the critical element. No overt modal element is present.

(7) **Context**: Neither the Speaker nor the Addressee has seen Peter for years.

Mary: Ob Peter immer noch kubanische Zigarren mag?

whether Peter always still Cuban cigars likes

‘I wonder whether he still likes Cuban cigars?’

(Truckenbrodt 2006)

In other languages, including Quechua (Fasola 2007) and Navajo, the single morpheme appears to pattern more closely with modals in the language (syntactically, if not semantically). The disparity in the shape of CQs raises the broader question of whether CQs constitute a single class of constructions that make use of the same grammatical resources.