The pragmatics of single wh-in situ questions in English

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Objectives

• Do single wh-in situ questions serve a discourse function?
• Examine data from legal depositions showing broader set of contexts than ‘echo-questions’
• Unify these data under a pragmatic formalism

Wh-in situ in English

• Single wh-in situ historically associated with echo-questions
• Pesetsky (1987) utilized ‘D-linking’ showing context can license underlying structural representations
• Focused on in situ status of wh-elements in questions with multiple wh-words
• Some have noted that English single wh-in situ questions can be grammatical in certain contexts (Bayer 2007).
• Pires and Taylor (2007) extend the ‘D-linking’ proposal to a larger set of disjoint wh-in situ phenomena

Wh-in situ in legal questioning

• Legal questioning provides a consistent source of empirical examples, data below are taken from O.J. Simpson’s 1996 depositions

  (3) a. Q: Was it a glass about that size?  
      b. A: I don’t recall.  
      c. Q: And the glass was sitting where?

  (4) a. Q: And where was the car?  
      b. A: In the front yard.  
      c. Q: And you were arguing with Nicole where?

  (5) a. Q: Mr. Simpson, I would like to talk a little bit about your background. You grew up where?  
      b. A: San Francisco.  
      c. Q: And you left San Francisco when?

With overt discourse relations

  (6) a. A: The table is 3 feet by 5 feet.  
      b. B: Consequently what is the area of the table.  
      c. B’: Consequently the area of the table is what?

  (7) a. A: I don’t like girls.  
      b. ??B: Except who do you like?  
      c. B’: Except you do like who?

Descriptive Generalizations

• Often begins with a discourse connective, highlighted in green 
• Presupposes the speaker has a specific set of answers in mind 
• Addressee has knowledge of this presupposed set of answers

Preliminary formal analysis

Syntax:
• Following an analysis of French wh-in situ questions, movement of a wh-element is blocked by a morpheme (Cheng & Rooryck 2000)
  • Q feature of C* is satisfied for wh-in situ questions by a discourse feature realized as a lexical marker of a discourse relation (highlighted in green)

Semantics:
• Denotation of wh-in situ questions is a set of alternatives corresponding to the answers, which is constrained by the discourse relation introduced by the question (similar to focus semantic value in Rooth 1985)
• Any felicitous answer to the question is a member of this set
• Denotation of (7c) is the set constrained by the discourse relation Contrast, e.g. {A likes Annie, A likes Holly, ...}

Conclusion

• Wh-in situ question introduces a constraint on the form and discourse relation of the answer
• Restriction leads to our intuition that a speaker has a specific set of propositions in mind

References


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