

Nonstandard interrogatives: sentence types, split CP, and simplicity in syntax

Wh-interrogatives, as is well known, are not exclusively interpreted as “requests for information”, that is, as requests to specify the value(s) of the variable bound by the *wh*-quantifier. It is generally acknowledged that besides their interpretation as “standard questions”, they can convey other meanings, although it remains largely unclear what nonstandard question interpretations there are and where they have their sources. I argue that the syntactic structure, and particularly the left sentence periphery (LeftP), play a crucial part.

Such an approach contrasts with largely shared views concerning interrogatives; thus, a common view is expressed by Siemund (2001) who views rhetorical questions (like *Who cares?*) as (true) “interrogatives uttered in a context in which the answer to them is given”, a “non-canonical use”. While it is plausible that context and situation may affect the interpretation of standard questions in certain cases, I want to demonstrate that the recourse to (indirect) speech acts is inappropriate in other cases which are more adequately analyzed as *bona fide* pairings of syntactic/grammatical form and functional meaning - i.e., sentence types, as (traditionally understood and) defined by Sadock and Zwicky (1985), among others.

Contrary to many well-studied languages, the Northeastern Italian dialect (NEID) Bellunese overtly distinguishes standard questions (with bare *wh*-phrases in noninitial position) and nonstandard questions (with bare *wh*-phrases in initial position). Obenauer (2004) (also see Munaro and Obenauer 2002) argued that there exist (at least) three types of nonstandard questions and that they activate higher layers of the left periphery: surprise/disapproval questions, rhetorical questions and Can't-find-the-value-of-x questions.

Adopting this general context, I want to refine on Obenauer's analysis and tackle the particular case of surprise/disapproval questions (SDQs), analyzing their syntactic properties and the theoretical issues they shed light on. Two major reasons suggest this choice: first, SDQs would seem a priori to make a plausible candidate for a (non-syntactic) analysis in terms of indirect speech acts, and it is useful to establish them as sentence type; second, certain properties of nonst Qs can be demonstrated particularly clearly in SDQs.

Let us start with standard questions (StQs) in Bellunese. Typical examples are:

(1) À-tu invidà chi? have you invited who ‘Who did you invite?’

(2) À-lo magnà che? has he eaten what ‘What did he eat?’

and the alternative to (2), with a different type of *wh*-item.

(3) Cossa à-lo magnà? what has he eaten ‘What did he eat?’

Comparing the phenomena of *wh-in-situ* and *wh*-doubling (as, e.g., in *Ndo é-lo ndat endoe?* where has he gone where ‘Where did he go?’; dialect of Illasi/Verona) in the NEIDs, Benincà and Poletto (in press) bring to light a very close connection between these two phenomena and *wh*-clitics; the core of this connection is expressed in Poletto and Pollock (in press) by the hypothesis that the *wh*-phrase of these dialects is a complex Cl(itic)P(hrase) of the form [nonclitic $\bar{w}h$ [clitic *wh*]] whose two components move to the LeftP independently of each other and are parameterized for [\pm phon. realization] (the Bellunese values being ‘+’ for noncl, ‘-’ for cl; cf. (1)-(2); the visible *wh* appears to be sentence final because of Remnant IP Mvt to its left).

SDQs are distinguished syntactically from StQs like (1), (2) by properties A. - D.:

A. - the bare *wh*-phrase appears in initial position:

(4) Chi à-tu invidà?! ‘Whom did you invite?!’

((4) expresses surprise and disapproval on the part of the speaker wrt. the choice of the invited person; it is interpretively and formally different from the exclamative *Chi che te à invidà!*).

Evidence will be given that the *wh* raises to the specifier of a dedicated functional projection (FP) higher than the FPs involved in StQs.

B. - *che* is excluded in initial position, in contrast with the other bare *wh*s:

(5) *Che à-lo magnà?! ‘What did he eat?!’

because its morphological weakness is incompatible with the required raising.

C. - instead of *che*, *cossa* appears in initial position:

(6) Cossa à-lo magnà?!

D. - *che* can appear optionally in addition to *cossa*, in internal position:

(7) Cossa à-lo magnà che?!

(no contrast in meaning with (6)); this visible doubling is unique in Bellunese syntax and must be explained, as well as the optional status of *che*.

To begin with (7), distributional identity of SDQ *cossa ... che* and StQ *che* in different syntactic functions strongly motivates the hypothesis that in the “doubling case”, *che* (i.e., the Cl(itic)P(hrase) [_{CIP} *che* [_{CI} Ø]]) is the argument, and *cossa* an item added specifically to check the high FP. In other words, *cossa* is *not* the argumental *wh* seen in (3), which is distributionally different. Since the “lonely” *cossa* of (6) shares the distribution of its “doubled” counterpart in (7), the natural extension of the hypothesis is that this *cossa* is again a pure checker of the high FP, *che* being again the argument, structurally present, but phonetically unrealized in this case.

If so, as a corollary of the analysis, SDQ *cossa* does not move (it is first merged in its FP) and is nonargumental. These two properties are independently confirmed by the contrast in (8):

(8) *Cossa sta-lo là a far * (che) ?!* COSSA is he there to do (what)

Here, in the absence of *che*, an argumental, movable *cossa* should be able to raise to the initial position of the matrix clause, just as present *che* moves to a lower peripheral position there (followed by Remnant IP mvt). Since *cossa* can't, as shown by the *, it must indeed be a simple checker of the high FP, and the presence of *che* is always necessary (a locality requirement accounts for the contrast between (6) and (8) without *che*).

The following results obtain:

1. SDQs (and NonstQs generally) add functional structure “on top of” the structure derived in standard questions. The different NonstQ types involve different (= dedicated) FPs.
2. “Optional” *che* is not optional, but required and present in numeration/computation. Its apparent absence (silent status) is a fact of PF.
3. The particular syntactic properties of SDQs (A.-D. above) can all be traced back to the simple need to activate the high FP. Its activation resorts to the two a priori available options, Merge (for *cossa ... (che)*) and Move (for the other bare *whs*), respectively. Given the notion of split CP, the SDQ paradigm (in fact, all nonstandard question paradigms) thus involve maximal economy and derivational simplicity.
4. Visible *wh*-doubling in Bellunese obtains where it can be expected, given the weakness of *che*; it is in fact “*wh*-tripling” (recall the silent clitic) and what seems to be maximal decomposition of the *wh*-element, vs. lesser decomposition in the case of Bell. *chi* and no decomposition in a language like Italian.

The general conclusion is that nonstandard questions do not simply represent “noncanonical uses” of standard questions, with varying interpretations somehow determined by linguistic context and/or extralinguistic situation. Rather, Universal Grammar makes structural means available for the syntactic encoding of semantic/pragmatic values characterizing nonstandard questions, in the case at hand, in the LeftP.

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