
The functional heterogeneity of interrogatives: An optimistic approach.

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On its stereotypical information-requesting use, an interrogative like *Is John an only child?* conveys that (i) the speaker does not know whether John is an only child, (ii) the addressee might know, and (iii) the speaker wants the addressee to make it so that the speaker knows.

At the same time, interrogative sentences are *functionally heterogeneous*: They can be used with various illocutionary forces, as in exam questions, Socratic questions, combative questions, discussion questions or rhetorical questions. Crucially, none of the implications (i–iii) arises for all uses.

We defend an ‘optimistic’ approach to the functional heterogeneity problem (à la Truckenbrodt 2004), which assumes that *all* the varied uses of interrogatives are ‘literal’ uses, and that a very general, underspecified force interacts with contextual conditions to produce observed interpretations. The crucial challenge for such approaches (Plunze & Zimmermann 2006) is to account for the fact, that, in many contexts, an interrogative will reliably signal the implications (i–iii), even in contexts where this was not established before. We argue that this challenge can be met by paying attention to the Gricean reasoning triggered by interrogative utterances, as well as their pragmatic competition with sentences of other clause types.

By pursuing an ‘optimistic’ approach, this talk advertises an emerging trend in the theoretical literature (Kaufmann 2012; Condoravdi & Lauer 2012): Human language users are not taken to be assigning illocutionary labels to utterances. Instead they are taken to derive particular implications like the ones in (i–iii), depending on knowledge of the context, as well as various linguistic cues in the interpreted utterance. We conjecture that NLP systems can benefit from adopting a similar approach.

References: • Truckenbrodt, H. (2004): Zur Strukturbedeutung von Interrogativsätzen. *Linguistische Berichte* 199, 313–350. • Plunze, C. & Zimmermann, E. (2006): On Truckenbrodt on interrogatives. *Theoretical Linguistics* 32(3), 321–333. • Kaufmann, M. (2012): Interpreting imperatives. Dordrecht: Springer. • Condoravdi, C. & Lauer, S. (2012) Imperatives: Meaning and illocutionary force. *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics* 9, 37–58.