

LCRC GLOBAL WORKSHOP 2020 – QUESTIONS

Points to Address

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Our aim is to contribute to the investigation of questions and their functions in well-spoken languages, with materials based on fieldwork in vibrant language communities.

I. Please introduce the language — where spoken and by how many people; typological profile; open and closed word classes; transitivity classes; phonological system, etc.

II. Perhaps the easiest place to begin is with the identification of **interrogative words**. As discussed in §27.6.3 in the Position paper, we can recognize eight canonical forms:

who what why where
which how many/how much how when

Not every language has exactly this set. For example, 'why' may be rendered by 'for what'. In English 'how many' involves *how* plus the number adjective *many*, parallel to *how big* and *how clever*. Not infrequently, one form combines 'what' and 'which'; and in a few languages 'who' and 'what' are two senses of a single interrogative word.

Some languages also have interrogative verb(s) 'do what (to)' and 'do how (to)'.

MATTERS TO STUDY INCLUDE:

(a) Do some or all interrogative words also have an **indefinite sense**, If, so is it **specific indefinite** (for example, 'someone') or **general indefinite** ('anyone', 'everyone'), or both. Can reasons be given for the interrogative sense being primacy, or the indefinite sense being primary, or the two senses being of equal significance.

(b) What **word class** does each interrogative word relate to, in terms of its system of inflection or other grammatical properties. For instance 'how many' is typically linked to the set of lexical numbers, and may form an ordinal in the same way as them ('the how-many-th', parallel to 'the fifth', and so on). 'What' is generally associated with the class of nouns. 'Who' patterns like a pronoun in some languages but like a noun in others.

(c) In addition to their association with regular word classes, all interrogative words will **share certain features**, establishing them as a pan-basic-word-classes word class, Attention should be paid to identifying these features.

(d) What are the **syntactic possibilities** for interrogative words? In many languages an interrogative word occupies the position in surface structure appropriate to its function. In a smaller number of languages, it must be moved to the front of the sentence (as a kind of topicalization). In a few cases there is a special (often, copula-type) construction (for example, 'The people who voted are who?').

Can a constituent within a non-main clause be questioned? Can more than one constituent in a sentence be questioned (without the sentence sounding contrived)?

(e) Only rather seldom does each interrogative word have a totally distinct **form**. There are typically one or more recurrent elements (such as *wh-* in English), although these may not be susceptible to morphological analysis. A number of languages have some interrogative words in a **paradigm** with demonstratives ('this one' and 'that one' patterning like 'which one', an interrogative verb 'do what?' patterning with a demonstrative verb 'do thus', and so on). These possibilities should be investigated.

(f) Investigate what **other functions** (if any) interrogative words have in the grammar. For example, in a few languages some interrogative words (or their look-alikes) may introduce relative clauses.

Interrogative words may be used as fillers (e.g. if a person is trying to remember something, or is hesitating).

III. A polar question lacks anything like an interrogative word and must thus have some distinctive marking. Investigate the possibilities, which may include one or more of:

- a special phonological or morphological feature (may be accompanied by an eye-gaze)
- a polar question particle
- a tag
- distinctive constituent order
- special intonation or pitch pattern

Note that it is not sufficient just to describe the intonation tunes of questions. These must be always contrasted with the intonational possibilities for statements and commands.

One of the devices for marking polar questions may also apply for content questions, or the two varieties of question may employ a similar means with different form. This matter should be carefully examined. If an interrogative word also has an indefinite sense, then employment of a question-marking stratagem should assist in disambiguation.

Just a few languages have an inflectional system for mood marking — declarative, imperative, interrogative (and there may be further terms in the system). Study whether interrogative mood inflection applies just for polar questions, or for both polar and content varieties, or whether there are two interrogative mood inflections, one for each type of question.

IV. Study the **sub-types of polar question**. First, there should be some way of focussing on one constituent, and this must be looked into. It may involve a special marker, or just stress (an example from English is *Did McTavish eat the haggis yesterday?*).

Some languages have a range of polar question markers, relating to such things as whether confirmation or denial is expected, whether there is an element of surprise or disbelief, and so on. Alternative questions are a favourite construction type in some languages — either of the type 'Are you going or staying?' or 'Are you going or not going?' If these can be identified, their structure and conditions for use require careful examination.

V. If anything can be stated about the **historical origin** of interrogative elements, this is of course useful information. Very little has been said on it in the present chapter. We did note, in §27.5.4, that 'or' from an alternative question may develop into a straightforward polar question marker.

It is also relevant to study the areal distribution of types of interrogative patternings, to investigate what is likely to diffuse as a consequence of language contact.

VI. As a natural aspect of writing a comprehensive and integrated grammar, the **interrelations** between questions and all manner of other grammatical categories should be studied. In §27.7 we briefly surveyed: negation; person; number; tense and aspect; evidentiality; gender, noun class and classifiers; case; and imperatives. There may be more besides.

VII. The manner in which people in a particular speech community provide **answers** to questions is something else to be investigated.

The **pragmatic effect** of a question, or of an answer, depends on the way it is delivered — construction type chosen, timbre of voice, and also associated facial and bodily gestures. This is a matter to which few grammars have paid any attention. It will provide a fertile domain for study.

VIII. A number of other topics are suitable for study. These include: sentences in interrogative form which do not expect an answer (so-called 'rhetorical questions'), interrogative sentences used as a type of command (with or without a question intonation, sometimes called 'whimperatives'), and 'echo questions'. In some languages, more than one constituent can be questioned (e.g. *who gave what to whom?*). In rare instances, a constituent within a dependent clause can be questioned. Exclamations may have similarities with questions, e.g. English *What a fool he is!*

VIII. In some cultures, asking direct questions is 'face-threatening' and is not fully acceptable. Comment on cultural restrictions in how questions are used in the language.