

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Questions and their answers

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THE MEANING OF QUESTIONS

Statements denote propositions which have truth conditions; can be true or false:

(1) Dave is 40 years old.

↔ is true if and only if Dave is 40 years old

Questions do not have truth conditions; they express speaker's ignorance as to what the world is like. Questions are standardly understood as sets of propositions – their possible answers.

→ SEMANTICS

Besides this semantics, questions function as requests for information; B is cooperative and answers what she believes to be true.

→ SPEECH ACT/PRAGMATICS

(2) A Is Dave 40 years old?

↔ {Dave is 40 years old, Dave is not 40 years old}

B Yes.

↔ is true if and only if Dave is 40 years old

POLAR, ALTERNATIVE, AND WH-QUESTIONS

A **POLAR QUESTION**, repeated below, denotes a set of two propositions, corresponding to the affirmative (yes) and negative (no) answer.

(3) Is Dave 40 years old? \rightsquigarrow {Dave is 40 years old, Dave is not 40 years old}

An **ALTERNATIVE QUESTION** also denotes a set of two propositions:

(4) Does Dave want \uparrow TEA or \downarrow COFFEE? \rightsquigarrow {Dave wants tea, Dave wants coffee}

Compare with a polar question, which differs in prosody as well as semantics:

(5) Does Dave want tea or COFFEE \uparrow ? \rightsquigarrow {Dave wants tea or coffee, Dave does not want tea or coffee}

A **WH-QUESTION** denotes a set of any number of relevant propositions:

(6) What does Dave want? \rightsquigarrow {Dave wants tea, Dave wants coffee, Dave wants water, ...}

ANSWERS AND FOCUS: POLAR QUESTIONS

(7) A Is Dave 40 years old?
{Dave is 40 years old, Dave is not 40 years old}

B₁ YES_F.

B₂ He IS_F [40 years old]_G.

(i) Dave is 40.

ENTAILMENT

(ii) {Dave is 40, Dave is not 40}

ALTERNATIVES

(iii) It is not true that Dave is not 40.

LOGICAL ENTAILMENT

- The question denotes a set of alternative propositions;
- the answer denotes (entails) the asserted proposition (i) and
- by means of its focus raises the alternatives in (ii);
- the non-asserted alternative proposition is negated as a logical entailment (the law of excluded middle) (iii).

F = focus, G = given

ANSWERS AND FOCUS: ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS

(8) A Does Dave want \uparrow COFFEE or \downarrow TEA?
{Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea}

B [He wants]_G COFFEE_F.

(i) Dave wants coffee.

(ii) {Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea}

(iii) It is not true that Dave wants tea.

ENTAILMENT
ALTERNATIVES
IMPLICATURE

- The question denotes a set of alternative propositions;
- the answer denotes (entails) the asserted proposition (i) and
- by means of its focus raises the alternatives in (ii);
- the non-asserted alternative proposition is negated due to pragmatic reasoning (iii):
 - A sets up the question as an ‘either or (not both)’ choice;
 - B does not “protest” against this; so, by answering *coffee*, *tea* is excluded.
 - This exclusion has a pragmatic source, but is very strong the ‘either-or’ choice is set up explicitly by A.

ANSWERS AND FOCUS: WH-QUESTIONS

(9) A What does John want?

{Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea, Dave wants water, ...}

B [He wants]_G TEA_F.

(i) Dave wants tea.

ENTAILMENT

(ii) {Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea, Dave wants water, ...}

ALTERNATIVES

(iii) It is not true that Dave wants tea or water or ...

IMPLICATURE

- The question denotes an **open** set of alternative propositions;
- the answer denotes (entails) the asserted proposition (i) and
- by means of its focus raises the alternatives in (ii);
- the non-asserted alternative propositions are negated due to pragmatic reasoning (iii), but this time, the exclusive nature of the alternatives is not so prominent; it would be quite natural to follow up with *and he'd also like to have some wine*, thereby cancelling the exclusive implicature

ANSWERS AND FOCUS: WH-QUESTIONS

(10) A What does John want?

{Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea, Dave wants water, ...}

B [He wants]_G TEA_F.

(i) Dave wants tea.

ENTAILMENT

(ii) {Dave wants coffee, Dave wants tea, Dave wants water, ...}

ALTERNATIVES

(iii) It is not true that Dave wants tea or water or ...

IMPLICATURE

An aside on implicatures:

- In the second lecture, we learned about how implicatures arise.
- As an exercise, try to figure out an answer to these questions: How does the implicature in (iii) arise? Which maxim is violated? And what is the reasoning that gives rise to it?

READING TIP

Hagstrom, Paul. 2003. What questions mean. *Glott International* 7(7-8), 188-201.

REFERENCES

Hagstrom, Paul. 2003. What questions mean. *Glott International* 7(7-8). 188-201.