INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES
TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

Question–answer congruence

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PROBLEM

Why is Ben's response infelicitous? How can alternatives help us capture the infelicity?

(1) A What did Dave write?
    B #DAVE wrote a letter.

Question–answer congruence

The set of alternatives denoted by a question must be identical to the set of focus alternatives of its answer.

How to compute the meaning of wh-questions?

(2) What did Dave write?

    a. *Place the wh-word into its non-wh canonical position:*
       Dave wrote what

    b. *Replace the wh-word by a variable:*
       Dave wrote x

    c. *Replace the variable by entities of the appropriate type and collect the resulting propositions in a set:*
       {Dave wrote a letter, Dave wrote a note, Dave wrote an article, …}

Question–answer congruence
Paul 1880; Krifka 2008

The set of alternatives denoted by a question must be identical to the set of focus alternatives of its answer.

How to compute focus alternatives?

(3) Dave wrote [a LETTER]$_F$.

    a. *Replace the focus by a variable:*
       Dave wrote *x*

    b. *Replace the variable by entities of the appropriate type and collect the resulting propositions in a set:*
       {Dave wrote a letter, Dave wrote a note, Dave wrote an article, …}

OBJECT QUESTIONS

Denotation of wh-question = focus alternatives; **object question**:

(4) a. What did Dave write?
   (i) {Dave wrote a letter, Dave wrote a note, Dave wrote an article, Dave wrote a thesis, …}

   b. Dave wrote [a LETTER]$_F$.
   (ii) {Dave wrote a letter, Dave wrote a note, Dave wrote an article, Dave wrote a thesis, …}

- (i) = (ii)
- Ergo, the question–answer congruence is satisfied.

SUBJECT QUESTIONS

Denotation of wh-question = focus alternatives; **subject question**:

(5) a. Who wrote a letter?

   (i) {Dave wrote a letter, Sue wrote a letter, Mary wrote a letter, Claire wrote a letter, …}

   b. DAVE$_F$ wrote a letter.

   (ii) {Dave wrote a letter, Sue wrote a letter, Mary wrote a letter, Claire wrote a letter, …}

- (i) = (ii)
- Ergo, the question–answer congruence is satisfied.

INCONGRUENCE

Denotation of wh-question $\neq$ focus alternatives:

(6) a. What did Dave write?
  - (i) {Dave wrote a letter, Dave wrote a note, Dave wrote an article, Dave wrote a thesis, ...}

  b. DAVE$_F$ wrote a letter.
  - (ii) {Dave wrote a letter, Sue wrote a letter, Mary wrote a letter, Claire wrote a letter, ...}

- (i) $\neq$ (ii)
- Ergo, the question–answer congruence is violated
- The answer is irrelevant (maxim of relevance violated), despite being semantically correct
  - → **infelicity of the answer**
  - → **implicatures?**

INTERIM SUMMARY

- A question denotes a set of propositions, its possible answers.

- An answer denotes a proposition, but indicates – by means of prosodic focus marking – a set of propositions, so called FOCUS ALTERNATIVES.

- The meaning of a question and the focus alternatives of its answer are **identical**.

- This QUESTION–ANSWER CONGRUENCE contributes to discourse coherence, helps the discourse participants navigate the discourse.

READING TIP

Krifka, Manfred. 2004. The semantics of questions and the focusation of answers. In Chungmin Lee, Matthew Gordon, and Daniel Büring (eds.), *Topic and focus: A cross-linguistic perspective,* 139–151. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

References

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Krifka, Manfred. 2008. Basic notions of information structure. *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 55(3-4). 243–276. https://doi.org/10.1556/ALing.55.2008.3-4.2.

Paul, Hermann. 1880. *Principien der Sprachgeschichte*. Halle: Niemeyer.