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On the status of declarative questions in English conversation

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ON THE STATUS OF DECLARATIVE
QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH CONVERSATION

1.0. The Notion of a Declarative Question

My present interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation draws on We-
ber (1993), Stenström (1984) and Karttunen (1977). A declarative sentence
structure may, under certain cicumstances given by the context, adopt the func-
tion of a question (either in the presence of a question marker or in its absence).
The question marker involved is represented by such features as intonation, the
occurrence of a question phrase, the use of a tag or prompter, or some lexical
item which shows a high degree of vagueness, hesitation and uncertainty. An
assertion thus becomes a tentative assertion to which a response on part of the
hearer is required.

In authentic face-to-face communication the need for confirmation is strongly
felt, depending largely on the degree of mutually shared knowledge, the rela-
tionship between the participants including involvement and mutual interest in
the exchange, as well as the observation of politeness and felicity conditions.

1.1. The Interpretation of an Utterance as a Declarative Question

In her most recent work on questions in English, Weber claims: "Intonation,
gesture, accessibility of information and sequential position in the talk along
with morphosyntactic form are relevant factors in the interpretation of any utter-
ance" (1993:57). Admittedly, in the hierarchy of factors mentioned above, it is
not the morphosyntactic form which plays the crucial role in deciphering the
message. Phonic features, body language, information gaps, as well as the linear
factors of communication enable the hearer an adequate perception of the
meaning with regard to stating or questioning. Thus question markers (or ques-
tion qualifiers) other than the question form are a typical means of the act of
inquiring in English.

1.2.Declarative Question as an Indirect Elicitation

My present conception of indirectness is based on Searle (1979:60), "Indirect speech acts are cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing other". Declarative questions fall into this category — by means of performing stating we indirectly perform the act of questioning.

2.0.Typology of Declarative Questions

My classification of declarative questions draws a line of demarcation between question phrases and declarative questions other than question phrases (those marked by intonation, a question tag, a prompter or the unmarked type of a declarative question in which there is no overt linguistic signal of a tentative assertion leading to a hypothetical meaning and the expression of an assumption).

In my classification question phrases rank higher with regard to their elicitative force than the other types of declarative questions.

2.1. Question Phrases

The label question phrase is used to indicate the type of lexical verb which fulfills the function of an embedded interrogative (Karttunen, 1977:165–210). The presence of a question embedding verb (e.g. *suppose, mean, get an impression, know, wonder, expect, think*) signals a lack of certainty and a high degree of indeterminacy on the part of the speaker and consequently implicates the necessity of confirmation or providing additional information on the part of the hearer. The occurrence of the question phrase is highly interactive, although the individual verbs show varying degrees of elicitative force in the process of interaction. Some verbs tend to have a high frequency of occurrence and there is a marked tendency to use them as pragmatic expressions in the role of question qualifiers.

Example 1:
I mean it gives you an outlet other than four walls (S.1.8.532)
I suppose by the time he was about forty it had become genuinely trivial (S.1.6.836–837)
I got the impression that he didn't recognize it (S.1.6.453–454) he would never admit he was wrong (S.1.6.429)
I am not quite sure what he was trying to prove with then when he'd finished (S.1.6. 945–946)

2.2.Declarative Questions with a Tag or Prompter

The presence of a tag or prompter makes the declarative question highly interactive in the sense that it explicitly addresses the hearer and asks him/her for confirmation. The degree of uncertainty on the part of the speaker, however,

seems to be lower compared with question phrases. Whereas the question phrase stresses the speaker's share in communication, the declarative question, with a tag or prompter, stresses the hearer's input.

Example 2:

this chap opposite you know that lives in Danny's house is an expert on these things (S.1.7. 894–897)

this one of mine goes right acros at its highest you know (S.1.7 753–754)

you know he likes Newcastle Brown (S.1.7. 1187)

you can you can quite get lost in that I think you see (S.1.8.645)

this has been a stable price it's not a price freeze thing or anything (S.1.7. 853)

2.3.Declarative Questions with Intonation Marker

Intonation patterns showing the necessity of confirmation are those of fall-rise and rise, sometimes, however, even a fall is connected with an indirect elicitation. As Weber puts it (1993:57), it is also the sequential position in the talk which plays a decisive role in the interpretation of the message.

Example 3:

elicitation: \   \

one can work Saturday mornings without sort of thinking twice about it (S.1.5. 301–302)

response: \

ah yes but if you worked Saturday mornings here you wouldn't
                         \
have Monday morning off

elicitation:
        V   \

like some Irish chaps are always sound like Berkshire men to
  /
me (S.1.7. 113–114)

elicitation: .
                V   V

so that it was really a matter of getting some along rather
                        V   \
than taking people individually over to the stacks which
                        \
would have taken everybody a lot of time

2.4. Special Lexical Markers of Declarative Questions

Certain lexical features of a declarative sentence add to its potential interpretation as a question. Among these features, it is especially an appendix to the the declarative sentence generally labelled as afterthought. The assertion expressed by the declarative sentence is made questionable by the afterthought following it.

Example 4:

it's quite bitter Guiness I think (S.1.7 311–312)

it was utterly trivial I don't know (S.1.6. 829–830)

they've now got a flat in Crouch End I think (S.1.6. 84–86)

Hart sees a lot of Professor Birdwood obviously (S.1.5. 867)

The existence of an afterthought can be explained as the occurrence of a pragmatic marker in the final position in an utterance conveying a feature of hesitation and uncertainty.It seems that both the initial and the final positions in an utterance serve the same purpose of mitigating the seriousnes of a remark by inserting hesitant and/or doubtful overtones.

2.5. If-Clauses as Declarative Questions

If-clauses are similar to questions in the sense that they carry hypothetical meanings and express assumptions which may come true under certain circumstances. In spite of the fact that subordinate clauses are very infrequent in authentic conversation, the occurrence of if-clauses is not negligible.

Example 5:

yeah I suppose if you got experience in American university administration you could still come back here

response:

oh yes certainly well they are desperate for people to work in universities cos the money's not good

Certain phrases of the if-type such as *if you like, if necessary, if you remember, if you see what I mean, correct me if I am wrong, if any. if need be* etc., have been pragmaticalized in the sense that they are used in authentic conversation for the sake of questioning the content of the message mentioned previously. In this respect they have been conventionalized and can be compared with the formulae of the type *I am wondering, I rather doubt it, I am not sure* and the like.

2.6. Chains of Questions in Authentic Conversation

Questions sometimes occur in clusters and in this case the hearer uses a question for a response (very frequently the elicitation is of a clarification type). Another very common and characteristic type of elicitation is represented by what I have labelled as chains produced by the same speaker. The structure of these chains tends to be very complex. There is a tendency to start with a very broad general question and add questions which specify the details.

Example 6:

I think what I like really you know probably just / / something I can get lost inside of you know a landscape or something I used to have a large mountainscape in my room which was / m / useful for that you could / / drift away out of the

environment whereas I think with a portrait or a very positive picture like a stukes I think you bounce back don't you at yourself really (S.1.8. 458–473)

3.0. Negotiating Meaning in Authentic Conversation

There is a distinct tendency in English conversation to "dissolve" the clear-cut differences between the acts of stating, inquiring and directing, resulting in a "merger". A pure assertion easily becomes a tentative assertion approximating an inquiry, an inquiry may pass for a directive, a directive proper can be taken as a piece of advice, etc. The interactive meaning is not determinate, it becomes "to some degree negotiable" (see Leech,1980:127).

In authentic English conversation, a noticeably high degree of vagueness, un-certainty, impreciseness, ambiguity, tentativeness and negotiability of the meaning expressed by the speaker's message can be observed — this phenome-non can be explained in cultural, functional, semantic and syntactic terms.

The cultural aspect is based on weak uncertainty avoidance. The speaker avoids statements which would sound authoritarian and rather allows the hearer to express his/her standpoints.

The functional aspect is closely related to the basic function of conversation, namely the interactive function. In agreement with Leech (1980) and Lakoff (1982) it can be assumed that the main function of informal, authentic conver-sation is determined by "the general principle of maintaining a social equilib-rium" (Leech, 1980:94). This state is best achieved by elicitations which estab-lish "rapport", i.e. close agreement and understanding (in Brazil's terms "social mutuality" (Brazil, 1984:34).

The semantic aspect is based on the distinction between declarative and non-declarative sentences (Wilson–Sperber 1988). According to this interpretation, declarative sentences express thoughts related to states of affairs, non-declarative sentences represent "desirable thoughts". Since desirability of inter-action in verbal and non-verbal communication is crucial (Grice's cooperative principle and Leech's politeness principle are based on desirable language be-haviour), the expression of desirable thoughts tends to prevail in authentic con-versation (rather than the rendering of states of affairs).

The syntactic aspect is reflected in the lack of correspondence between the syntactic class and the semantic class. A declarative sentence does not neces-sarily express a statement, it can, depending on the context, express a question (a declarative question characterized in detail above), a directive, a wish or an exclamation.

3.1. Indirectness as a Discourse Tactic

My interpretation of the dichotomy direct versus indirect is based on the follow-ing criteria:

Elicitative force (i.e. the force with which the answer is required) — strong in direct elicitations, weaker in indirect elicitations

Conduciveness (i.e. the probability of getting the response desired) — low in direct elicitations, high in indirect elicitations

Assumptions (i.e. the degree of shared knowledge in elicitations) — weak assumptions in direct elicitations, strong assumptions in indirect elicitations

All the three above-mentioned criteria are closely interrelated and tend to be determined by discourse factors such as the communicative intention, together with the topic under discussion, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, the overall context of the communicative situation as well as the degree of cooperation and politeness in discourse. According to Tsui (1989:550) "Discourse is an interactive process during which the meaning and illocutionary force of an utterance are negotiable between the speaker and the addressee, not an interchange of utterances with speaker-determined illocutionary forces".

3.2. Indirectness as a Phenomenon Typical of English Authentic Informal Conversation

Stenström (1984:152) classifies questions into the following categories:
wh/questions
alternative questions
yes/no questions
tag questions
declarative questions
declarative questions + tag
declarative questions + prompter
My classification of declarative questions is more subtle, within the category of declarative questions the following subtypes are distinguished:
question phrases
declarative questions with a tag or prompter
declarative questions with an intonation marker
declarative questions with a special lexical marker
if-clauses as declarative questions

It has been proven in my investigation that indirect questions (elicitations) prevail in English authentic informal conversation. The texts analyzed are taken from *A Corpus of English Conversation* (C W K Gleerup Lund, 1980) which is a collection of spoken texts from the Survey of English Usage and Survey of Spoken English.Thus Crystal's finding: "Some speech acts directly address the listener, but the majority of acts in everyday conversation are indirect" (1987:121) fully corresponds with my findings based on the analysis of 4 subtexts (S.1.5., S.1.6., S.1.7.,S.1.8).

3.3.Indirectness as a Manifestation of the Need for Confirmation

The dominant elicitative function in informal authentic English conversation is a reflection of the need for CONFIRMATION which is omnipresent and is closely connected with social mutuality. In linguistic terms, this need is aptly expressed by means of indirect elicitations, mainly declarative questions which reinforce the interactive character of conversation.

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