

Interrogative clauses in English and the social economics of questions

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Abstract

Communicative interaction may be conceived of as a give and take of information that partners in conversation assign a value to and track carefully. The social value of information gives rise to a complicated microeconomic system in the sense of Levinson (2012) in which asking for information is associated with social costs that speakers try to minimize. Such a social economic model of communication makes two predictions, namely that asking questions should be generally avoided in conversation and that content questions are less likely to be used than yes–no questions, since the former ask for more substantial information. These predictions are tested based on a sample of 4108 tokens of interrogative clauses taken from the *International Corpus of English, British Component*, that encode various direct and indirect questions. The data offer support for Levinson's model, as polar interrogatives outnumber constituent interrogatives in both direct and indirect uses, especially in the spoken registers. I offer an explanation for the high number of polar interrogatives in indirect uses and also try to motivate the highly skewed distribution of interrogative words using the social economics of questions. There remain problems, though, since the predicted large proportion of tag questions is not supported by the data.

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1. Introduction²

In a recent article, Levinson (2012) introduces a fascinating and far-reaching theory on the social economics of questions. All conversation, according to him, is governed by a complicated microeconomics in which speakers and hearers keep extensive – and mostly subconscious – records of who said what to whom. In this model, information has an intrinsic social value and hence communicative partners can be expected to handle it carefully, like money in our macroeconomic systems. One important consequence of this model is that asking questions is associated with social costs, since questions ask for information and information – as stated before – has a social value. Moreover, different types of questions carry different social costs. For example, content questions, by virtue of asking for individuals, things, places, times, reasons, and the like, are considered more expensive than yes–no questions, in which only a truth value is at issue.

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Levinson's (2012) model makes far-reaching predictions. For example, if content questions are more expensive than yes–no questions, we expect the latter to be used in higher proportions than the former, at least in conversation, especially face-threatening conversation. In addition, interlocutors should generally avoid dedicated means for asking questions (polar and constituent interrogatives) altogether in favor of more covert means of procuring information, such as declarative clauses with rising intonation ('rising declaratives', 'declarative questions') or those followed by question tags. There is some evidence that these predictions are indeed borne out (see Freed, 1994 as well as the contributions to Enfield et al., 2010), especially if we look at questions as functional entities and not their underlying morphosyntactic carriers (e.g. interrogative clauses).

In this paper, I explore Levinson's (2012) hypothesis from a strictly form-based and corpus-based perspective, testing the prediction that the use of polar interrogative clauses is preferred over that of constituent interrogatives. I focus on English, as both polar and constituent interrogative clauses are morphosyntactically distinct from declarative clauses (unlike in Italian or Spanish; see König and Siemund, 2007: 292–293). The study is based on a large sample of interrogative clauses, namely 4108 tokens drawn from the *International Corpus of English, British Component* (ICE-GB). As predicted, I find a quantitative difference between polar and constituent interrogatives that is attributable to the social economics of questions. There is a strong delta in the spoken registers that is reversed in some written registers.

The study also shows that polar interrogatives are significantly more frequently used for indirect speech acts than constituent interrogatives. This delta is mainly due to requestive uses of polar interrogatives, though also higher shares of confirmatory uses, offers, permissions, and suggestions. I argue that these differences can only be partly explained by Levinson's (2012) hypothesis.

Much in line with previous studies (Stivers, 2010), the present corpus analysis reveals highly skewed distributions of interrogative words, even though the findings here differ in detail. The form *what* vastly outnumbers all other forms. Inquiries about people using *who* are rather marginal. I propose that at least some of the observable differences can be made sense of within a social economics of questions, as long as the social value of questions is not restricted to information *per se* (i.e. quantity), but includes the type of information sought (quality).

The study is organized as follows. Section 2 provides more detailed background information on the social economics of questions and the predictions that Levinson's (2012) model makes. In Section 3, the distinction between interrogative clauses and questions is taken up for discussion, including a brief survey of the morphosyntactic properties of interrogative clauses in English. Section 4 lays out the methodology regarding the corpus analysis, while Section 5 presents its results. I discuss the findings and their consequences for Levinson's (2012) model in Section 6.

2. The social economics of questions

Asking questions is essential to human communication, since each individual can only hold a small fraction of the information available and human societies generate new knowledge at a very rapid pace. While there are many alternative information sources (books, newspapers, television, the web, etc.), talking to fellow humans remains the most practical way of procuring information, especially regarding matters of our everyday lives and our social networks: How much does John earn? Who is Caitlyn currently dating? Who did she spread this nasty rumor to? Why did she quit her job? What is my competitor currently working on? Such questions are immensely relevant to our social and professional survival, but blatantly posing them is potentially face threatening and even dangerous, as they reveal the gaps in our knowledge base and provide crucial hints to our current interests and endeavors. Moreover, there is always this suspicion that obtaining information means we have to give something back.

Building on such considerations, Levinson (2012: 20) argues that asking questions may incur considerable social costs for the speaker, introducing the list of "potential social costs of asking a question" given below.

1. He does not know the information requested, while the addressee presumably does. (Potential danger: face loss due to ignorance.)
2. He wants the information, and cares about the matter questioned. (Potential danger: clues to speaker's current interests and concerns.)
3. He thinks he has a right to know the information, and the addressee the rights to give it. (Potential danger: speaker can be mistaken, with loss of face all round.)
4. He judges that the addressee will give him at least some truthful information. (Potential danger: speaker may need to act as if he believes the information provided.)
5. He will owe the addressee something for the information, to whom it can be attributed. (Potential danger: the addressee may want parallel information from the speaker.)

If the above reasoning is correct, asking explicit questions – i.e. using grammatically marked interrogative clauses – should be avoided as much as possible, resulting in a substantial information-gathering problem. Instead of using on-

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