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Exploiting polar questions for expressive purposes: ''Queclaratives'' and ''whimperatives'' in Modern Greek

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Abstract

Interrogative sentences that are typically used for the expression of polar questions are also cross-linguistically engaged in the expression of emphatic assertions or of kind requests. Rather than taking this fact for granted, the present paper attempts an explanation for this engagement. Assuming that 'eliciting a yes/no answer on the part of the addressee' is the ''basic story stuff'' of polar questions, it argues that question-like utterances that have the force of an emphatic assertion or of a kind request, ''recount'' this basic story in their own ways. In particular, it maintains that Traugott's and Langacker's competing treatments of 'subjectification' may complementarily shed light, from their own distinct perspectives, on the contextually-induced rearrangements of the inner ''events'' of this yes/no polarity – in fact, metonymic rearrangements that result in two expressive ''narratives'' of the initial story.

Keywords: Subjectification; Metonymy; Inference; Polar question; Indirect speech act; Image schema

Les fonctions affectives du langage sont aussi fondamentales que ses fonctions intellectuelles
Ullmann (1952:146)[1]

1. Introduction

'Queclaratives' and 'whimperatives' are two neologisms coined almost half a century ago by Sadock (1970, 1971). According to his syntactic, deep-structural analysis, queclaratives are interrogative sentences ''with the semantic value and some of the syntactic properties of declaratives'' (Sadock, 1971:223). Consider, for example, the formally interrogative sentence *Is syntax easy?* (Sadock's example [5]): under certain circumstances, it behaves ''like a declarative'', as he puts it, having ''the value of the corresponding assertion of opposite polarity'', i.e. the value of 'syntax isn't easy'.[2]

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[1] As quoted in Foolen (1997:26).

[2] Of course, there are cases in which ''the uttering of this sentence can have the effect of the corresponding assertion of matching polarity, i.e. 'syntax is easy'''. Under this interpretation though, Sadock (1971:223–224) suggests, it cannot qualify as a queclarative, because it does not meet the appropriate grammatical standards.

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On the other hand, whimperatives are ''closely allied syntactically as well as semantically'' with true interrogative sentences (Sadock, 1970:224); that is to say, they are sentences which can have a directive effect ''for syntactic reasons only'' (Sadock, 1971:223). Consider, for example, the formally interrogative sentence *Will you give me a drink?* (Sadock's example [70]): it qualifies as a whimperative to the extent that it ''arise[s] from deep structure of *conjunction* of imperative and interrogative hypersentences'' (1970:235).

In what follows, I abstract away from the grammatical restrictions or dependencies of this syntactic account, retaining however Sadock's intuition that the members of the triad 'questions-queclaratives-whimperatives' are entangled and inextricably associated. In fact, by altering the content of Sadock's neologisms, I attempt to revisit this deep association in purely semantic terms: queclaratives and whimperatives are interpreted as *question-like utterances* which, by virtue of metonymic inferencing, have acquired the force of emphatic assertions and kind requests (henceforth, simply 'assertions' and 'requests', respectively).

It must be noted at this point that a metonymic account of requests has already been widely adopted in the realm of cognitive linguistics. In particular, these illocutions are commonly dealt with in terms of Gibbs' (1994) influential suggestion that indirect speech acts generally involve PART FOR WHOLE metonymic inferencing – cf. Thornburg and Panther (1997), Panther and Thornburg (1998, 2005, 2007), Barcelona (2011), Baicchi (2017), to mention just a few. ''For example'', as Gibbs explains, ''understanding *Can you lend me ten dollars?* as a request requires that listeners see the question about their ability as referring to a series of actions that ends with a transaction of goods. In this way, speaking and understanding indirect speech acts involves a kind of metonymic reasoning, where people infer wholes (a series of actions) from a part'' (1994:352). ''By means of an abductive process grounded in conceptual metonymy, the hearer unveils the speaker's real intention that is masqueraded behind the uttered words'' is Baicchi's (2017:97) remark on ''the shaping role that conceptual metonymy plays in the construction of illocutionary meaning''. Thus, ''a precondition for the actual performance of the requested action (the precondition being the hearer's ability to perform the action)'', being the salient PART, activates the WHOLE scenario of requesting, ''with the result that this question is understood pragmatically as a request'' (Barcelona, 2011:24). In a similar vein, Panther and Thornburg (2007:247) claim that ''a metonymic analysis of an indirect request such as *Can you lend me your sweater?* links a BEFORE component of the requested scenario (i.e., the speaker's ability to perform the requested action) to the CORE of the speech act (i.e., the attempt to impose a more or less strong obligation on the hearer).''

This metonymic approach is vastly based on, if not entirely inspired by, cases in which the addressee's ability or willingness[3] to perform the requested action is considered. (It is not coincidental that 'can' and 'will' have the lion's share in the examples provided in the relevant cognitive linguistics literature.) And to a large extent, this is also the case in subsequent elaborations of Thornburg and Panther's (1997) original notion of illocutionary scenarios – cf. Pérez Hernández and Ruiz de Mendoza (2002, 2011), Panther and Thornburg (2005), Ruiz de Mendoza and Baicchi (2007), Pérez Hernández (2013) and Ruiz de Mendoza (2015), among others. To quote the latter, ''[w]hat these elaborations have in common is the postulation that illocutionary meaning derivation is based on the activation of *selected conceptual structure* stored in the form of cognitive models in the speakers' minds'' (2015:269; emphasis mine).

One may wonder, of course, why it is the case that statements like *You can/could pass me the salt*, *You will/would pass me the salt*, etc. are not in parallel employed as kind requests, despite the fact that they can equally be said to give prominence to the activation of a BEFORE component of the requested scenario or, more generally, of selected conceptual structure stored in the form of cognitive models in the speaker's minds. Recently, though, Vassilaki (2017) has put forward a different proposal in the same cognitive framework. Drawing on data from Modern Greek, she confers particular significance on OPTIONALITY and its metaphoric preservation. More specifically, she argues that ''[i]f we accept the crucial role played by the optionality attribute in the conceptual make-up of requests, we can hypothesize that this attribute has to be linguistically codified in relevant constructions, in fact we expect it to be the common core of 'base constructions' (Pérez Hernández, 2013) employed in the realization of requests'' (2017:109). It is true that the OPTIONALITY attribute is conclusively present in the portrayal of requesting crafted by other cognitive scholars as well (see, for example, Ruiz de Mendoza, 2015; Baicchi, 2017). However, Vassilaki goes a step further. She claims that ''optionality must be *explicitly* codified in the case of requests, since the linguistic preservation of optionality is exactly what distinguishes a request from an order or a suggestion'' (2017:109). In particular, adopting Langacker's (1991) 'dynamic evolutionary model', she examines the grounding specifications of entrenched Modern Greek request patterns like the ones below

[3] Cf. Baicchi (2017:78): ''As in the case of ability, willingness is a pre-requisite condition for the performance of the required action and it therefore activates the BEFORE component of the scenario''.

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