

The derivation and interpretation of polar questions with a fronted focus[☆]



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Abstract

In this paper we discuss a kind of polar questions featuring the fronting of a focal constituent to a left-peripheral position. We argue that this ‘focus fronting’ does not affect the question denotation, but rather contributes some non-at-issue meaning, i.e. either a conventional implicature or a presupposition, whose interpretation is based on the set of alternative propositions provided by the focus structure. We also show that the syntactic well-formedness of focus fronting and the generation of alternative propositions are hardly compatible with the hypothesis that the ‘open polarity’ of the question obtains via movement of a polarity operator from within the sentence radical. We therefore conclude that the Polar Question operator is directly inserted on top of the compositional structure.

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1. Introduction

Two types of question are usually distinguished in the literature, namely, polar yes/no questions (henceforth, PQs) and *wh*-questions. It is generally assumed that in a *wh*-question the focus – that is, the new information required from the interlocutor – narrows down to one constituent,¹ whereas in PQs (also known as ‘total questions’) the whole proposition is questioned, and the interlocutor must answer by either confirming or denying it.

From the perspective of this neat distinction, it is somewhat puzzling to observe that in a variety of languages PQs can host the fronting of a constituent which is marked as focussed by syntactic (and often also prosodic) criteria. We will henceforth refer to this narrow focus structure as *focus fronting* (FF). FF in PQs is found, for example, in Sicilian, Sardinian, Italian (Jones, 1993; Cruschina, 2006, 2012; Remberger, 2010; Giurgea and Remberger, 2012, 2014; Bianchi et al., 2015a) and in English (in the examples, the focussed constituent is indicated in italics):

- (1) a. Chi *viglianti* si? (Sicilian)
PTC awake be.PRS.2SG
'Are you awake?'

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¹ We leave aside multiple *wh*-questions, as this more complex case is irrelevant to our argument.

- b. Chi a Maria salutasti?
PTC ACC Maria greet.PST.2SG
'Did you say hello to Maria?'
(Cruschina, 2012: 205, (79))
- (2) a. Mandicatu as?
eaten have.PRS.2SG
'Have you eaten?'
b. Istraccu ses?
tired be.PRS.2SG
'Are you tired?'
(Jones, 1993: 339)
- (3) Ma domani al mare andate?
but tomorrow to-the seaside go.2.PL
'Are you going to the seaside tomorrow?'
(Italian)
(Bianchi et al., 2015a)
- (4) [CONTEXT: Speaker is looking over someone's shoulder while they are cooking]
Soup are you making? Wow, lovely!
(English)²

PQs containing a narrowly focussed constituent will be referred to as *nuclear PQs*.

Moreover, other languages like Bulgarian (Dukova-Zheleva, 2010, a.o.), Russian (King, 1994, 1995) and Finnish (Holmberg, 2001, 2014), resorting to interrogative particles, disambiguate between total and nuclear PQs by placing the interrogative particle in different positions (Bencini, 2003, 2004; Dryer, 2005a,b): when the whole proposition is being questioned, the question particle appears in a definite linear position with respect to the whole sentence – at the beginning, at the end, or attached to the verb: cf. (5a-b, 6a, 7a); in nuclear PQs, instead, the particle is found adjacent to the focussed constituent, cf. (5c, 6b, 7b).³

- (5) a. Ivan risuva vseki den li?
Ivan draws every day PTC
'Does Ivan draw every day?'
b. Risuva li Ivan vseki den?
draws PTC Ivan every day
'Does Ivan draw every day?'
(Dukova-Zheleva, 2010: 178, (14a-b))
c. Vseki den li risuva Ivan?
Every day PTC draws Ivan
'Is it every day that Ivan draws?'
(Dukova-Zheleva, 2010: 248, (83c))
- (6) a. Pročitala li Anna knigu?
read.PST.F.SG PTC Anna book
'Did Anna read a book?'
b. Knigu li Anna pročitala?
book PTC Anna read.PST.3SG
'Was it a book that Anna read?'
(King, 1995:137)

² This example is from Carter and McCarthy (2006:780). The authors write: "Object fronting can also occur in interrogatives in informal speech, but this is not very common". (Thanks to Alison Duguid for pointing out this example to us).

³ The Sicilian particle *chi* (cf. (1)) exhibits a different behaviour from the particles illustrated in (5)–(7), in that its syntactic distribution does not depend on the extension of the focus and, thus, does not play any role in the disambiguation between total and nuclear PQs (cf. Section 4.3). Note also that, for Russian, it is generally believed that the particle *li* occupies a fixed position within the CP, and that either the verb or a phrasal constituent moves to its left. When the verb hosts the particle, the sentence is a neutral polar question, where the entire clause is questioned; whereas when a phrasal constituent precedes *li*, that constituent is interpreted as the focus of the question (cf. King, 1994, 1995). Interestingly, in other languages the 'interrogative particle' is homophonous with the focus particle of declarative clauses, which equally signals the extent of focus (cf. Haida, 2011: §6.3, a.o.).

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