

## EXCURSIVE QUESTIONS

**1. Observation** – Our empirical focus is a phenomenon which, to the best of our knowledge, has hitherto escaped attention: questions such as B’s in (1) (cf. Schmitt 2021). We call these “excursive questions” (EQ).

- (1) A: Did John use the car yesterday?  
B: When?  $\Leftarrow$  EQ  
A: In the evening.  
B: No. (He only used it in the morning.)

An EQ represents a digression, i.e. “excursus”. In the above exchange, B does not answer A’s question directly, but instead asks A another question. A’s answer to B’s question amounts to asking B a new question which B then answers at the end. Note that EQs can ask about not only yes/no questions but also wh-questions.

- (2) A: Who used the car yesterday? (3) A: When do people eat dinner?  
B: When? B: Where?  
A: In the evening. A: In Spain.  
B: John did. B: Late at night.

**1.1.** EQs exhibit syntactic “connectivity effects”. First, the position targeted by EQ must satisfy the lexical requirements of the relevant verb. Also, binding into EQ is possible.

- (4) a. They sank the ship with a torpedo b. #The ship sank with a torpedo  
(5) A: Which ship did they sink? (6) A: Which ship sank?  
B: With what? B: #With what?  
A: A torpedo. A: #A torpedo.  
B: The Japanese ship. B: #The Japanese ship.  
(7) A: Did every boy<sub>1</sub> write a letter? (8) A: What did every boy<sub>1</sub> write?  
B: To which of his<sub>1</sub> relatives? B: To which of his<sub>1</sub> relatives?  
A: To his<sub>1</sub> uncle. A: His<sub>1</sub> uncle.  
B: No. B: A letter.

**1.2.** EQs show  $\bar{A}$  properties. First, they seem to be unbounded.

- (9) A: Does Bill think John used the car?  
B: When?  
A: Yesterday.  
B: No. (But he does think John used the car last week.)

Second, EQs seem to be island sensitive.

- (10) A: Does John know the man who used the car ?  
B: #When?  
A: #In the evening.  
B: #No. (John only knows the man who used the car in the morning.)

**1.3.** When the EQ operator is not adverbial but argumental, its target is limited to definite noun phrases. Indefinite arguments cannot be targeted.

- (11) A: Did John read the book? (12) A: Did John read a book?  
B: Which book? B: #Which book?  
A: Barriers. A: #Barriers.  
B: No. B: #No.

**1.4.** EQs are neither “echo questions”, which are not island sensitive, nor “sluicing” constructions, which are not limited to definites.

- (13) a. Does John know the man who used the car WHEN?  
b. John read a book, but I don’t know which book.

**2. Analysis** – For the analysis of the facts presented above, we assume that speech acts are grammatically represented (cf. [Ross 1970](#), [Krifka 2001, 2015](#), [Sauerland and Yatsushiro 2017](#)). Specifically, the LFs of questions contain a “performative prefix” of the form X ASK Y. Below is the first two utterances of the exchange in [\(1\)](#) with their LFs.

- (14) A: Did John use the car yesterday?  
 $[_\beta \text{ A ASK B } [_\alpha \text{ WHETHER } [_{\text{TP}} \text{ John used the car yesterday}]]]$   
 B: When?  
 $[_\delta \text{ B ASK A } [_\gamma \text{ when}_1 [_\beta \text{ A ASK B } [_\alpha \text{ WHETHER } [_{\text{TP}} \text{ John used the car yesterday } t_1 ]]]]]]$

We assume that EQs are cases of elipsis, and full-fledged EQs are derived formally from the question immediately preceding them. Starting from the LF of A’s question ( $\beta$ ), the LF of B’s question ( $\delta$ ) is derived in the following steps: (i) late insertion of **when** into the lowest TP; (ii) wh-movement of **when** to the edge of  $\beta$ , forming  $\gamma$ ; (iii) merging of B ASK A to  $\gamma$ , forming  $\delta$ . We will call A’s question the “antecedent,” B’s question the EQ, and **when** the “EQ remnant”. The full meaning of B’s EQ can be paraphrased as in [\(15\)](#), which corresponds to our intuition.

(15) B is asking A which time t is such that A is asking B whether John used the car at t yesterday. Analyzing EQs as involving wh-movement explains the connectivity effects regarding verbal argument structure (cf. [\(4\)](#), [\(5\)](#), [\(6\)](#)) and, assuming the possibility of reconstruction, the connectivity effects regarding binding (cf. [\(7\)](#), [\(8\)](#)) as well. The unboundedness of EQs (cf. [\(9\)](#)) will also follow straightforwardly.

The island sensitivity facts (cf. [\(10\)](#)) follow from the standard locality condition that movement must not cross more than one bounding nodes, and that TPs are bounding nodes (cf. [Chomsky 1981, 1986](#)). Furthermore, we assume that performative prefixes do not introduce TPs. The wh-movement of **when** in [\(14\)](#) crosses exactly one TP, while the wh-movement of **when** in the derivation of the EQ in [\(10\)](#), for example, would have to cross two TPs, incurring a violation of Subjacency, as shown in [\(16\)](#).

- (16) B ASK A when<sub>2</sub> A ASK B WHETHER  $[_{\text{TP}} \text{ John saw the man who}_1 [_{\text{TP}} t_1 \text{ used the car } t_2]]]$

The fact that the EQ remnant can bind a definite noun phrase but cannot bind an indefinite one (cf. [\(11\)](#), [\(12\)](#)) follow from two assumptions. The first is that definites of the form **the NP**, but not indefinites of the form **a/some NP**, may be interpreted as the trace of **which NP** (cf. [Fox 2003](#), [Sauerland 2004](#)). Thus, [\(17a\)](#) is interpretable but [\(17b\)](#) is not.

- (17) a. ... [which book]<sub>1</sub> ... [the book]<sub>1</sub>...      b. \*... [which book]<sub>1</sub> ... [a book]<sub>1</sub>...

The second assumption is that the derivation of the EQ from the antecedent may involve insertion of new materials but may not involve replacement of old materials. Thus, [\(11\)](#)-B can be derived by inserting **which book** directly into the operator position and interpreting **the book** as its trace. However, this option is not available in the case of [\(12\)](#)-B, as **a book** cannot be interpreted as the trace of **which book**. The other alternative would be to replace **a book** with **which book** and then move the latter to the operator position, but this procedure violates the constraint against replacement mentioned above.

**3. Conclusion** – We describe excursive questions and provide an analysis for them which involves syntactically represented speech acts. We will present their semantics in more details, as well as discuss the similarities and differences between them and sluicing constructions, in the talk.

**Chomsky, N. 1981.** Lectures on Government and Binding. **Chomsky, N. 1986.** Barriers. **Fox, D. 2003.** On Logical Form. **Krifka, M. 2001.** Quantifying into question acts. **Krifka, M. 2015.** Bias in Commitment Space Semantics. **Lakoff, G. 1970.** Linguistics and natural logic. **Ross, J. R. 1970.** On declarative sentences. **Sauerland, U. 2004.** The interpretation of traces. **Sauerland, U. & Kazuko Y. 2017.** Remind-me presuppositions and speech-act decomposition. **Schmitt, M. 2021.** Towards a computational model of sequence organization: The adjacency pair.