

Why *Even* Ask?

On the Pragmatics of Questions and the Semantics of Answers

by

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Abstract

This work investigates the semantics-pragmatics and syntax-pragmatics interface of interrogatives, focusing on the effect of presupposition-triggering expressions like *even* and Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). In exploring these cases, I aim to contribute new empirical evidence and theoretical insight pertinent to the general issue of how presuppositions project in interrogative environments.

Although the phenomenon of presuppositions has received considerable attention in previous work, very little is understood about how precisely presuppositions project in the domain of questions. My main goal is to establish what processes generate presuppositions in questions, starting from what we know about the semantics of questions and about the contribution of expressions introducing presuppositions in declaratives.

The strategy I pursue in this investigation consists in looking at cases where presuppositional material affects the interpretation of a question in ways that go beyond the mere introduction of a presupposition. *Even* and certain NPIs (so called 'minimizers') provide a rich and constrained testing ground in this sense, as they can be exploited to signal that a questioning act is meant to be *biased* towards a negative answer. This thesis argues that this otherwise puzzling property of questions with minimizers and *even* can be understood as a product of (i) the way the presuppositions of *even* project in a question and affect the question denotation; and (ii) the way general pragmatic principles governing what it means to ask a question regulate how the resulting denotation can be used by speakers in a given context.

More specifically I show that the anomalous properties of biased questions with *even* are the product of the presuppositions *even* introduces in their possible answers and the felicity of these answers in a given context. The general conclusion this result allows me to draw is that a theory of projection in questions must reduce their presuppositions to answerability conditions of a question in a context.

The theory of bias and presuppositions of questions developed in this thesis leads to a number of interesting implications regarding on the one hand *even* and its variants across languages and, on the other hand, the semantics and syntax of constituent questions.

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