

Questions that are merely posed, not asked

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<http://kvf.me/mpq>

0. Introduction



- (1) What do you hear from Charlotte?
- (2) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

Picture by meta.ai

Sir John Lyons on asking vs. posing a question

Lyons 1977 articulates a notional distinction between two kinds of question acts:

[...] a distinction between asking a question of someone and simply posing the question (without necessarily addressing it to anyone).

When we pose a question, we merely give expression to, or externalize, our doubt; and we can pose questions which we do not merely expect to remain unanswered, but which we know, or believe, to be unanswerable.

To ask a question of someone is both to pose the question and, in doing so, to give some indication to one's addressee that he is expected to respond by answering the question that is posed.

Hat tip: Gärtner & Gyuris 2012

Lyons' distinction is realized cross-linguistically!

Many languages can mark interrogatives to signal that they are used to merely pose a question, without asking it of the addressee, without imposing a requirement for the addressee to provide an answer.

We propose the term “merely posed questions” (MPQs).

How is this distinction expressed?

This might have gone either way:

- unmarked interrogatives are used to merely pose a question and additional marking is needed to mark that an answer is required from the addressee
- unmarked interrogatives are used to ask a question of the addressee and additional marking is needed to mark that the question is merely posed

Possibly surprisingly, the second way is what we consistently find across languages. One exception seems to be a local dialect of German: Gärtner & Pankau 2024.

To us, it remains a mystery why language works the second way.

Merely posed questions

- **merely posed questions** (MPQs): not asked of someone, do not impose any obligation on the addressee to provide an answer
- We set out to understand how and why markers of merely posed questions (MPQ-markers) work.
- We explore the consequences of MPQ-marking for theories of speech act force.

Some cousins

Merely posed questions are to ordinary questions as

- weak imperatives (suggestions, advice) are to strong imperatives (commands)
- weak assertions (floating a possibility) are to strong assertions (full speaker commitment)

Outline

1. Merely posed questions and their properties
2. Steps towards a theoretical analysis
 - 2.1 How to **model** the act of merely posing a question
 - 2.2 How to **derive** the discourse effect of merely posed questions
 - 2.3 Speech act operators or conventions of use?

1. The properties of merely posed questions

What are merely posed questions?

Questions that are merely posed, not asked of someone, and therefore they do not impose any obligation on the addressee to provide an answer.

How to find merely posed questions

Set up the scenario: two old friends sitting on a beach, sipping some beer, looking out on the ocean, reminiscing about someone they've lost touch with.

(1) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

A question that is merely posed, without the expectation that the addressee will provide an answer.

A growing literature

MPQs are by now a fairly well-known phenomenon. Terms abound, so if you want to search for relevant literature, you might need a large set of search terms:

- conjectural questions
- nonintrusive questions
- deliberative questions
- (self-) reflective questions
- unasked questions (the term we used from 2019 until recently)

We do not assume that these are all the same. There may be a rich typology here, with subtle distinctions, some of which the literature is beginning to identify. But, we will assume a big umbrella most of the time. In fact, sometimes, to make the discussion easier to follow, we will use intuitions about the closest MPQ-analogue in English.

English

English may not have a dedicated way of marking merely posed questions, but most authors will translate MPQs into something like this:

(1) What's Charlotte up to these days, I wonder?

standard interrogative + slifted "I wonder"

(3) What might Charlotte be up to these days, I wonder?

optionally added possibility modal

Johanna Alstott at MIT now has work on slifted "I wonder" questions

MPQs via particles

Greek *araye* (von Fintel & Iatridou 2017):

(4) Ti kani i Miranda tora **araye**

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

Other languages with MPQ-particles: Romanian **oare** (Farkas & Bruce 2010, Farkas 2022), Turkish **acaba**, Hungarian **vajon** (Gärtner & Gyuris 2012, 2023, Farkas 2023), Albanian **vallë** (Rushiti 2023), West Flemish **kwestje** (Woods & Haegeman 2023), Russian **interesno**, Japanese *ka-na*, ...

MPQs via evidentials

St'át'imcets (Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010):

- (5) swát=as= k'a ku=lhwál-ci-ts-as ti=ts'úqwaz'=a
who=SBJN= INFER DET=leave-APPL-1sg.OBJ-3ERG DET=fish=EXIS

‘I wonder who left me this fish.’

Other languages with evidential MPQ-markers: Gitksan and NeìePkepmxcín (Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010), Cheyenne (Murray 2010), Cuzco Quechua (Faller 2023), Japanese *daroo* (Uegaki & Roelofsen 2018, Hara 2024), ... [for some general discussion of evidentials and questions, see Korotkova 2016, San Roque, Floyd & Norcliffe 2017, Bhadra 2020]

MPQs via (epistemic) modality

German verb-final Q + *wohl* (Truckenbrodt 2006, Eckardt 2020):

- (6) Ob der Peter **wohl** immer noch kubanische Zigarren mag?
whether the Peter WOHL always still Cuban cigars likes

“Might Peter still like Cuban cigars, I wonder?”

MPQs via (epistemic) modality

Italian epistemic future (Eckardt & Beltrama 2019):

(7) Dove **sarà** la chiave?

where be:FUT:3SG the key

‘Where is the key, I wonder?’

The common core: no answer required

For all the constructions we consider to be part of the MPQ-umbrella, the descriptions agree on this: the MPQ-marked interrogative does not impose a requirement on the addressee to provide an/the answer.

What *can* the addressee do?

- ~~remain silent~~
- minimally acknowledge the question
- engage in joint speculation
- volunteer an/the answer

Silence is not actually an option

Some authors state that the addressee of an MPQ can remain silent:

- Eckardt 2020: p.4: “the addressee can remain silent”
- Eckardt & Beltrama 2019: p.125: “remaining silent is an unmarked reaction for the addressee”
- also: Woods & Haegeman 2023: p.832

This is not true.

MPQs need to be acknowledged

- Stony silence is not a canonical response.
- But it is perfectly fine to just acknowledge that the question has been posed (maybe just a nod) or accept it as a good question (*indeed*, German *tja*, Greek *ondos*).
- NB: You **can't** answer a canonical question with *ondos* or the like.

Much can be learned about types of responses in general from Goffman 1976, 1978.

The addressee can engage in (joint) speculation

(8) A: Ti kani i Miranda tora araye

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

B: Isos spudhazi iatriki. Oli i siggenis tis ine iatri.

Maybe studies medicine. all the relatives her are doctors

‘Maybe she’s studying medicine. All her relatives are doctors.’

The addressee can volunteer the answer

(9) A: Ti kani i Miranda tora **araye**

What does the Miranda now ARAYE

‘What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?’

B: Spudhazi iatriki.

Studies medicine.

‘She’s studying medicine.’

But of course volunteering an answer doesn’t even need a question at all:

(10) A: I don’t know what the best kind of vodka is.

B: Well, it’s horse-radish vodka, of course!

MPQs are not (per se) self-addressed

Any question can be self-addressed or addressed to someone other than the speaker.

- (11) a. Where the hell are the keys(, Kai)?
b. Hmm, (Kai,) where are the keys, I wonder?

MPQs are not asked of the addressee

We conducted an experiment where we present the beach scenario and ask whether someone who overheard the conversation that included the MPQ could report it as follows:

- “A wanted to know/wondered what Charlotte is up to these days.”
- “A asked what Charlotte is up to these days.”
- “A asked B what Charlotte is up to these days.”

Our informants preferred the first option, sometimes allowed the second option, but consistently rejected the third option.

MPQs are not asked of the addressee

- (12) A: Istanbul-da hava nasıl acaba? [Turkish]
Istanbul-loc weather how ACABA
‘What is the weather in Istanbul, ACABA’
- B: #Neden bana sor-uyor-sun?
Why to.me ask-impf-2sg
#‘Why are you asking me?’

Farkas 2022 reports a different judgment for Romanian. We were not able to replicate her judgment with our Romanian informants. As we will see, this might be an important dialect split.

The speaker is not **stating** that they are wondering

Murray 2010: “a statement of uncertainty”

(13) Tósa'é e-hoo'e-séstse Andy [Cheyenne]
where 3-live-RPT.3SG Andy

‘Andy lives somewhere, I wonder where.’

We don't think this is correct for the MPQs we have been able to gather data on.

(14) A: Why are you going through these old books?

B: I'm wondering whether there is hidden evidence that Henry VIII had a seventh wife.

B': #Is there hidden evidence that Henry VIII had a seventh wife, I wonder?

(15) A: I'm wondering what Miranda is doing now.

B: Why are you telling me that? I don't need to know that.

(16) A: What is Miranda doing now, I wonder?

B: #Why are you telling me that? I don't need to know that.

You'd be right to wonder what the deal is with English "I wonder" vs. "I'm wondering", and slifting versus the non-slifting. Ask Johanna Alstott.

MPQs when answer is not available

MPQs are perhaps most typical in scenarios where an answer is not available: the speaker knows that neither she nor the addressee knows the answer.

See again the idle questions while hanging out at the beach.

MPQs when answer is in principle available

But MPQs are also possible when the addressee is known to have the answer but the speaker chooses to not constrain the conversational future by asking a canonical question.

(17) Oli pistevun oti ime enoxi. To pistevis ke esi araye
all believe that am guilty. it believe and you ARAYE

Everybody thinks I'm guilty ...do you believe it too -MPQ?

(I can go on and say, don't tell me now please — I'm not ready to hear it ... — but I can also say nothing, hoping you'll say, "Of course not!!")

Thanks to Despina Oikonomou for this observation

MPQs for politeness

Some languages can use their MPQs for purposes of politeness, for example Turkish:

- (18) Annenizin evlenmeden önceki soyadını öğren-ebilir mi-yim acaba?
your.mother's pre-marriage last.name learn-abil Q-1sg ACABA

‘Can I learn your mother’s maiden name-ACABA?’

Possible also in German, among others, but not possible, for example, with Greek *araye* or Hungarian *vajon!*

The extension of use to polite questions where one pretends to not expect an answer seems unsurprising, but it is clearly not automatic.

Interim summary

Many languages can mark interrogatives to signal that they are used to merely pose a question, without asking it of the addressee, without imposing a requirement for the addressee to provide an answer. We use the term “merely posed questions”.

2. Steps towards a theoretical analysis of MPQs

What we need

- a model of the context of a conversation that includes the obligations that the participants have at any point
- a model of the context changes induced by canonical questions and MPQs
- an analysis of how canonical questions induce the context changes that they induce [we'll see two families of approaches]
- an analysis of how MPQs differ from canonical questions in the way that they change the context

A popular framework for modeling contexts

Structured context models: Hamblin 1971, Lewis 1979, etc. → Farkas & Bruce 2010's "Table Model" (see Portner 2018 for an overview)

Components:

- Common ground
- Discourse commitments *DC* of the individual participants
- To-Do Lists *TDL* of the individual participants
- Table (of issues to be resolved)
- Projected Set *ps* (of expected options for next DC of the addressee)

Example of the context effect of a canonical question ($p?$)

DC_{Sp}	Table	DC_{Ad}
$\text{info}(I)=W$	$\{p, \bar{p}\}$	
	ps: $\{DC_{Ad} \cup \{p\}, DC_{Ad} \cup \{\bar{p}\}\}$	

Some things we could talk about

- how can a list model obligations?
- how are the components of the structured context coordinated?
- is all this machinery necessary? (cf. a debate between Stalnaker and Kamp: Stalnaker 1988, Kamp 1988, Stalnaker 1998, Kamp 2008)

Now, how can we capture what MPQs do to a context?

Here are two options:

1. add the option not to answer to the Projected Set (Farkas 2022)

$$\text{ps}(\text{MPQ}-(p?)) = \{\text{DC}_{\text{Ad}} \cup \{p\}, \text{DC}_{\text{Ad}} \cup \{\neg p\}, \text{DC}_{\text{Ad}}\}$$

2. no commitment on the part of the addressee is expected

(Gärtner & Gyuris 2023, Woods & Haegeman 2023)

$$\text{ps}(\text{MPQ}-(p?)) = \{\text{DC}_{\text{Ad}}\}$$

It could be that some MPQs work the first way, and some the second way.

In fact, the conflicting results of the “why ask me?” test for *oare* might show that some Romanian speakers have the first grammar, while others have the second.

What about the Table?

How do MPQs affect the Table? We need some way to model that the speaker is posing the question, after all.

Some options:

- the issue is put on the Table
- the issue is not put on the Table, but instead added to a component of “possible future tables” (Bellingham, Beck & Hatcher 2020)
- the issue is not put on the Table, but the speaker commits, in a not-at-issue way, to being interested in the issue (something like this is proposed by Uegaki & Roelofsen 2018)

We are, for now, agnostic on the choices here. Much depends on assumptions about how the Table and the Project Set are interconnected.

For concreteness

A canonical question, $p?$, changes the context so as to

- put $\{p, \neg p\}$ on the Table
- project that the addressee will either commit to p or to $\neg p$

a merely posed question, $MPQ-(p?)$, changes the context so as to

- put $\{p, \neg p\}$ on the Table
- project no change in the addressee's commitments

Possibly two types of MPQs, corresponding to the two dialects of Romanian.

How do MPQ-markers achieve the merely posing effect?

Having a model of what effect MPQs have on the (model of) the context, we now ask how do they do that? Here are two options:

- their contribution is at the level of truth-conditions and gives rise to a special kind of interrogative set that can only be posed as a question rather than being asked
(many people in the evidential/modal literature)
- they just do: their semantics is stated as being about what the output context is like
(this is what Farkas 2022 does, for example)

Of course it might be that some MPQ-markers work one way and some the other.

We suspect, however, that there's always an element of conventionalization or grammaticalization.

The evidential/modal route

- Let's start with what we expect when we add an evidential/modal to a question: INFER-p? or MIGHT-p?.
- We'll assume that the anchor of the evidential/modal “flips” to the addressee.
- So, the meaning we get is a question roughly about what follows or is compatible with the addressee's epistemic state.
- Now, this is a reasonable thing to ask, in fact something that is easier to answer since the addressee just needs to consult their epistemic state, rather than determine what the external world is like.
- So, we don't expect any MPQ-ness from such questions.
- Therefore, people who have explored this route argue that more is going on.

The evidential/modal route

- Accounts differ on what more is going on, but the common idea is that something is making the evidential/modal question hard or impossible to answer.
 - Littell, Matthewson & Peterson 2010: evidential gives rise to conflicting presuppositions, making the question impossible to answer
 - Giannakidou & Mari 2019: at the level of meta-evaluation the domain of possibilities is widened to an extent that makes the question impossible to answer
 - Eckardt 2020: the combination of V-finalness + *wohl* means that the question is about the pooled knowledge of the participants, making the addressee incompetent to answer the question
- The next step then is to say that the MPQ-use is the natural consequence of the content of the question.

The evidential/modal route

- But hard/impossible questions aren't automatically MPQs:
What is the name of the dog of my mother's second cousin?
- Eckardt has a response: "This should not be mistaken to predict that unanswerable questions never require answers. [An MPQ] is not unanswerable by content, but by form : The speaker chose a particularly complex form instead of simply asking a standard question."
- However, this is in tension with much work on logical triviality (see for example Gajewski 2002, Chierchia 2021), which would predict that an expression that is defective "by form" would be ungrammatical.

The evidential/modal route

In the end, Eckardt actually acknowledges that the MPQ-signal arises via conventionalization/grammaticalization:

- “joint speculation and silence are the possible (conventionalized) reactions to verb-final *wohl* questions in German”
- “B’s option to remain silent has turned into a conventionalized reaction”
- “The analysis [...] motivates the conventionalized reactions to verb-final *wohl* questions by their pragmatic properties in typical situations of use (i.e., where A believes B is unable to answer).”

Our conclusion

While the evidential/modal route to MPQ-marking is a real and productive phenomenon, we think that there's a final leap of conventionalization or grammaticalization from a truth-conditional modal meaning to the kind of speech act level meaning we identified earlier.

What do MPQs teach us about the determination of speech act force?

Where we are:

- MPQ-markers have the effect that the output context of an unasked question has the relevant issue on the Table but the Projected Set does not encode an expectation of the addressee to provide an answer.
- So, clearly we have elements whose meaning pertains to the speech act performed by the sentences they are part of.

What does this teach us about how speech act force comes about or is determined?

Two families of approaches to canonical speech act force

1. speech act operators (the “heavy” approach) [terminology: Goodhue 2023]
 - a covert performative prefix operator creates the speech act meaning
 - sentence types go with specific operators
2. conventions of use (the “light” approach)
 - propositions are conventionally used to make assertions
 - sets of propositions are conventionally used to ask questions

A rather sophisticated version (Lauer & Condoravdi 2012): If a speaker S utters an interrogative sentence i in context c towards an addressee A , he incurs the following commitment: S is committed to (act as though) he effectively prefers that there be a proposition p in the set of congruent answers to i in context c such that A publicly commits to the belief that p .

Do MPQs help us choose between these two approaches?

Monotonicity

The approach in Farkas 2022, 2023 makes the contribution of the Romanian marker *oare* monotonic in the following sense:

- the canonical discourse effect of a question is fully applied: the issue is put on the Table and the Projected Set contains the possible answers
- if nothing else happened, the addressee would be expected to assert one of the possible answers
- *oare* can operate on the output context of the underlying question and add the additional possibility of not answering to the Projected Set
- so, *oare* is not undoing or overriding the effect of the question
- the account is compatible with either having speech act operators or conventions of use

One issue we could talk about: Farkas' monotonic addition account might have a problem with German where MPQs are not constructed by monotonically adding an element to a canonical question (since we don't just add *wohl* but also leave the verb in its final position).

Weakening is harder

If MPQ-markers produce a trivial Projected Set that contains no informative contribution by the Addressee, which is what we have been arguing, things get less straightforward.

In fact, we find disagreement in the literature:

- Giannakidou & Mari 2019: weakening cannot not be done with speech act operators
- Lauer 2015: weakening can only be done with speech act operators

Both are wrong.

Our take

Non-monotonic/non-additive illocutionary modification

- can be analyzed in a speech act operator system (pace Giannakidou & Mari),
- but also can be analyzed in a conventions of use system (pace Lauer).

And we *should* at least try to develop an analysis without speech act operators, just like Giannakidou & Mari advocated.

A sketch

How can we reconcile the following?

- Unembedded interrogatives trigger a convention of use that puts the issue on the Table and produces a Projected Set that expects an answer from the addressee.
- MPQ-markers require that the Projected Set is trivial, contains no informative contribution by the Addressee.

First approximation

There are multiple conventions that can apply to interrogatives.

1. A speaker who utters an interrogative I is signalling that I should be added to The Table.
2. A speaker who utters an interrogative I is signalling that the addressee is expected to provide an answer $p \in I$.
3. A speaker who utters an interrogative I +MPQ is signalling that the addressee is not expected to provide an answer.

If two conventions conflict, the one with the more specific trigger wins.

Drawback: no compositional semantics for MPQ-markers.

Second approximation

There are multiple conventions that can apply to interrogatives.

1. A speaker who utters an interrogative I is signalling that I should be added to The Table.
2. A speaker who utters an interrogative I is signalling that the addressee is expected to provide an answer $p \in I$.

If a convention conflicts with the meaning of an uttered sentence, it does not apply.

MPQ combines with an interrogative set and adds an extra-dimensional requirement that in the context resulting from the speech act performed with the utterance that MPQ and the interrogative are part of, the addressee is not expected to provide an answer.

What will be needed to spell this out

- A non-monotonic system for determining illocutionary force.
- Conventions can have defaults and special cases/exceptions.
- We think we see this idea in some of the MPQ-literature, but we don't know of a formal implementation.
- Prior art, in general on non-monotonicity in illocutionary force assignment, includes Perrault 1990, Asher & Lascarides 2001.
- Our sketch includes crucial token-reflexivity and a postsuppositional meaning.

A related principle

- (19) **Default Strength of Speech Acts** (von Fintel & Iatridou 2017: p.314)

When a speaker utters a sentence, this is understood with the highest level of speaker endorsement compatible with the context and any strength/weakness markers in the sentence.

This principle is modeled after the principle called “Contextually Determined Speech Act Force”, proposed in von Fintel 2003 for the special case of possibly epistemically weakened assertions.

Summary

- Languages find ways to signal that a question is merely posed, rather than asked of someone. We call such constructions “unasked questions” (MPQs).
- MPQ-markers often, but not always, evolve from evidential/modal markers. If so, there is a final leap of conventionalization/grammaticalization.
- The semantics of MPQ-markers needs to be stated at the level of discourse effects/speech acts.
- We are optimistic about a formal implementation that captures MPQ-marking without assuming that there are covert speech act operators.

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