

## On the Multifunctional Character of Questions (with special reference to verifying and identifying questions)



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Our language would be rather uninteresting and quite similar to scientific prose if the words and expressions we use possessed only literal meanings. In that case language would lack the possibilities of playful interplay between meanings. There are different ways of communicating the same message; the same string of words can convey different messages. Thus sender's meaning is a fundamental element in human communication. In other words, it is a necessary fiction that linguists doing semantics and pragmatics have to work together (Griffiths 2006).

Semantics and pragmatics, being closely correlated, are the two main branches of the linguistic study of meaning. Griffiths defines semantics as the study of the "toolkit" for meaning: knowledge encoded in the vocabulary of the language and in its patterns for building more elaborate meanings, up to the level of sentence meanings. And pragmatics is concerned with the use of those tools in meaningful communication (Griffiths 2006:1). Language is for communicating about the world outside of language. Pragmatics is about the interaction of semantic knowledge with our knowledge of the world, taking into account contexts of use.

The present article focuses on the multifunctional character of questions with special reference to both the semantic and pragmatic study of **verifying** and **identifying** questions traditionally termed as **general** and **special** (Chakhoyan 1979).

The interrogative sentence in English has structural peculiarities of its own (interrogative word order, use of interrogative words, special question intonation (in oral speech) and question mark (in written style)). From the semantic point of view questions are sentences by which the speaker asks the hearer to provide the information that he needs in order to fill in the information gap existing between them. Due to their specific semantic function in the process of communication, both verifying and identifying questions are of particular interest.

In the case of verifying questions the speaker's intention is to verify whether the utterance is true or not. The answer expected is *yes* or *no* or their functional equivalents such as: *of course, sure, certainly, I don't think so, certainly not*, etc. According to the type of verification there are various subtypes within **verifying** questions:

a) **logical-verifying** (to verify the logical meaning of truth)

*“Did you go straight home? Dorian glanced at him hurriedly and frowned. “No, Harry”, he said at last.* (Wilde)

b) **verifying-identifying**

*Johnny: Pa. How are you?*

*Johnny’s Father: Fine, Johnny. Is that all you woke me up for?*

(Saroyan)

Johnny’s father realizes that Johnny woke him up simply to say *How are you?* and he asks him whether he (Johnny’s Father) is right in the *identification* of his suppositions.

c) **verifying-specifying**

*Young Man: Is that (“Wheeling”- G.H. )where I was?*

(Saroyan)

The speaker asks the hearer whether his identification of the element (concerning the place “Wheeling”) is true.

d) **referentially-verifying**

*I didn’t know whether he was still alive or only preoccupied with a new conquest. And was he?* (Aldington)

In the question *And was he?* reference is made to the whole situation. The speaker asks for confirmation of the truth of the fact that is explicitly expressed in the previous utterance.

e) **appellative-verifying**

*Johnny: Do you think (that) he gets homesick sometimes?*

*Johnny’s Father: Sure. He does.*

(Saroyan)

In appellative-verifying questions the speaker asks for his interlocutor’s opinion about the information that is conveyed in the form of the subordinate clause.

f) **intensifying-verifying**

*Lord Illingworth: So you really refuse to marry me?* (Wilde)

The word *really* intensifies the meaning of the appellative question.

g) **confirming-appellative**

*“Amazing woman, that Mrs.Danvers,” said Giles, turning to me. “Don’t you think so?”*

*“Oh, yes,” I said.*

(Maurier)

The conforming-appellative question consists of two separate parts: in the first part the speaker gives the evaluation of the person and in the second part he asks the hearer to confirm the truth of his utterance by expressing his opinion (*don't you think so?*).

Thus, from the semantic point of view verifying questions have a specific function in the process of communication; all the elements of the utterance are named and the speaker's intention is to verify whether the statement is true or not.

In the case of **identifying** questions there is an unknown quantity X linguistically expressed by interrogative words which introduce various types of identifying questions. The hearer has to supply a value for the variable (or unknown quantity). Unlike verifying questions, that contain a two-valued variable and can produce only two answers, identifying questions are unlimited as they contain a many-valued variable. Any linguistic form can be given as an answer.

Of particular interest is the *what*-question with its subtypes:

**a) appellative- identifying**

*What did you think of Fanny?*

*I think she has most marvelous eyes.*

(Aldington)

In this type of *what*-questions the speaker asks for the hearer's opinion about this or that event.

**b) situation-identifying**

*What's the matter, father? You seem very tired.*

*I am tired but I have no right to be.*

(Hemingway)

The so called situation-identifying *what*-questions include the interrogative word *what* used as predicative and the noun *matter*, which expresses the meaning of *event*, *accident*.

**c) classifying-identifying**

These questions include the additional meaning of classification expressed by the words *kind*, *sort*, *colour*, etc.

*The Girl: What kind of cigarettes do you want?*

*Young Man: Oh, any kind...*

(Saroyan)

Of particular interest is a special type of an identifying question containing more than one interrogative word. One of the interrogative words, as a rule, is moved to the front of the sentence.

*The Girl: Who insulted who?*

*The Young Capitalist: You said he insulted you.*

(Saroyan)

In the process of communication we often come across so-called *emotional questions* classified into two groups:

a. Emotional questions containing the phrases: *the devil, on earth, in heaven's name*, etc. They generally express surprise (sometimes mixed with admiration, anger, etc).

*What on earth are you talking about?* (Maurier)

b. The structure of the second type of emotional questions is divided into two parts and the emotional element is expressed by the second part.

*Young Woman: It's not yours, do you hear?*  
*Young Man: Oh, this is wonderful. I almost believe you.* (Saroyan)

So far we have been mainly concerned with the semantic types of verifying and identifying questions. But the structure of the sentence represents the unity of its nominative and communicative aspects, the distinction between which matches the difference between "sentence" and "utterance", "locution" and "illocution" (in terms of speech act theory), "interrogative sentence" and "question". The illocutionary force traditionally associated with the interrogative sentence is that of "asking a question". Interrogative sentences used with this force introduce questions proper viewed as direct speech acts. For an interrogative sentence to be an indirect speech act, there must be an inference trigger, i.e. some indication that the literal force (i.e. asking a question) is blocked by the context (or is conversationally inadequate) and must be "repaired" by additional illocutionary force or indirect force (Levinson 1983).

In the process of communication "verifying" and "identifying" questions are used with various illocutionary forces to perform such distinct indirect speech acts as: requests, offers, invitations, suggestions, advice, etc.

- 1) *Can I have the other key to the flat? (request).*  
 I'm afraid it's lost. (Aldington)
- 2) *Will you have a drink, Dr. Valentini? (offer)*  
 A drink? Certainly. I will have ten drinks. Where are they? (Hemingway)
- 3) *Will you stop to dinner with me? (invitation)*  
 Thanks, but I was going to see Signora Bolla home. (Voynich)
- 4) Johnny's Father (To Mac Gregor)  
*How about the little music? (suggestion)* (Maurier)
- 5) *Won't you take your coat off? (advice)* (Mortimer)

These are the main usage types of **verifying** and **identifying** questions, but not the only ones. There are a number of things one can mean through inquiring something. Why do we prefer the indirectness of, say, *Will you get me a quite plain parasol, please?* to the simplicity and directness of *Get me a quite plain parasol, please!* The main reason (though not only the one) for using these indirect forms is tentativeness (politeness). As W. Labov and D. Fanshel point out, “the indirect forms are the same direct forms only with a bundle of mitigation in front” (Levinson 1983:274). According to Brown and Levinson politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer’s face. Brown and Levinson propose that “all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) face” (Brown and Levinson 1987:61). They define “face” as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson 1987:61). On a very basic level, politeness refers to the most appropriate pragmatic strategies for a given context. Whether consciously or not, in all our daily conversations we have different ways of achieving various goals. For instance, when we are surrounded by our friends our tones and manners are more direct and casual as compared to when we are with adults or our relatives at a formal function. In short, we feel obliged to adjust our use of words to suit the social situations we find ourselves in. It would be socially unacceptable if we made use of the same expressions and phrases during talks with our friends, strangers, elders and parents. For instance, being surrounded by a group of adults at a formal function, instead of saying *Go, get me that book!*, we must say *Could you give me that book, if you don’t mind?* Thus, in order to determine what is pragmatically appropriate, it is important to evaluate many of the contextual factors surrounding the situation in which we are.

One of the most common factors affecting the politeness or indirectness of an utterance is **gender**. For example, women very often turn to indirectness in their speech. Often, in order to get someone else to do something for them, i.e. to express a wish, a command or a request, women make use of an interrogative form or an interrogative negative form. The latter is considered to be a more polite, weaker, more self-affecting form of expressing directives.

There are also other social factors affecting the politeness of people’s expressions among which the most common ones are **social distance**, **power**, **rank of imposition** and so on.

**Social distance** refers to the relationship between the interlocutors. If two people are very close, they would have a low degree of social distance. Two strangers would typically have a high degree of social distance. In most cases higher degrees of social distance result in the use of more formal language typical to which is the use of indirect expressions.

*“Will you register, please?” the clerk says.  
He looked at the names. “Number 238, Mister Brennan”. (Hemingway)*

As we can see from the example there exists a high degree of social distance between the interlocutors and that’s the reason why the speaker uses more formal language when addressing to the hearer.

**Power** refers to the power relationship between two interlocutors. You can have equal power with the person you are talking to (e.g. a friend or colleague) or more power (e.g., as a boss, instructor) or less power (e.g. employee, student) than the person you are talking to. More formal and indirect language is typically used in situations where the other person has more power than we do.

*Yes, sir. May I go to my room, sir?  
You may.*

(Steinbeck)

The speaker, as is obviously seen from the indirect way she makes her request for permission, has less power than the hearer she is addressing to.

**Rank of imposition** refers to the importance or degree of difficulty in the situation. For example in requests a large rank of imposition would occur if we were asking for a big favour, whereas a small rank of imposition would exist when the request was small. Usually high ranks of imposition tend to require more complex and indirect language structures.

*Would you, please, go and find Hogan and tell him we want to see him in  
about half an hour?  
"Sure", I said.*

(Hemingway)

It is obvious that the speaker asks the hearer for a big favour and that's why he turns to a more indirect and complex way of expressing his request.

Thus, each of these factors interacts and relates differently to the politeness of a communicative act. When learning to be pragmatically appropriate, it is important to learn which social factors are most applicable and important to the context in which we are interacting. All this accounts for the multifunctional character of questions as such. One thing is clear, we, humans, like to play with words and our communicative intentions make it possible to use any kind of literal meaning in order to convey what we want and the way we want.

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