Just-asking questions

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Abstract

While the 'canonical' function of questions—utterances of interrogative clauses—is to solicit *answers*, this is not a definitive property of questions, since some varieties have an interrogative form but a non-inquisitive function, such as rhetorical questions. I examine a new type of such questions in English which I dub *controversy questions*, whose answer is unknown to conversational participants but nevertheless steers the discourse towards answering them. I propose that such questions motivated a bleached pragmatics for question-asking: they set a conversational agenda of exploring a Question Under Discussion (Roberts 1996/2012) and nothing further. I show that this view can derive a range of attested possible discourse effects of questions given independent features of contexts of utterance. Moreover, I argue that this perspective also explains how question-asking can be weaponized as a rhetorical strategy to sow doubt under the guise of 'just asking questions' in contexts like newspaper headlines.

1 What does it mean to ask a question?

Asking a question—that is, uttering a sentence with interrogative form—is canonically equivocated with requesting *information*: an ignorant asker seeks an answer from a possibly knowledgeable addressee (Searle 1969; Dayal 2016, a.m.o.). While intuitive, the notion that information-seeking is part and parcel of question-asking has long been challenged by the existence of 'noncanonical' species of questions, which seem to generate very different discourse effects despite having the (morphosyntactic and prosodic) appearance of typical questions. Two famous cases are rhetorical questions, whose answer is obvious and are used to highlight the obviousness of some other proposition (1), and exam questions (2) which assess the addressee's knowledge for some discourse-external goal rather than rectify the speaker's ignorance (Sadock 1971; Han 2002; Caponigro and Sprouse 2007; Biezma and Rawlins 2017; Farkas 2022; Farkas 2024, a.m.o.).

(1) A: Did you go to Gertrude's party?
B: Is the Pope Catholic?
⇝ B went to the party and A should have known that

(2) (On a geography quiz)
Is Bratislava the capital of Slovakia?

These exceptional types of questions present an apparent classic mismatch of form and function. By appearances, the questions in (1)-(2) are instantiated by ordinary interrogatives, but they neither request information nor necessitate speaker ignorance. These observations indicate that neither of these functions are inherent to question-asking itself, motivating an alternative view of questions not as *intrinsic* requests for information, but as setting an immediate goal for the discourse of mutually resolving the issue raised by the question, e.g. in Question Under Discussion- or Table-based frameworks (Roberts 1996/2012; Ginzburg 1996; Farkas and Bruce 2010). Uttering an interrogative sentence, then, which might serve different functions depending on features of the context. However, such theories typically also assume that information-seeking

questions are the default flavor, which is descriptively plausible if theoretically arbitrary, and often stipulate in the requirement that the addressee answer the question into the conventional discourse effects of uttering interrogative clauses.

In this paper, I examine a variety of question I dub **controversy questions** (ConQs) in English, which have received little previous attention: questions which do not necessarily impose a requirement of answering, but rather communicate that the issue raised is somehow up for debate or worthy of asking. I propose that these questions support a bare-bones dynamics for question-asking inspired by Rawlins (2024): asking a question updates the QUD—opening an issue for eventual resolution—but in and of itself makes no demands on the addressee. Rather, the default obligation of question answering on the addressee comes from assumptions about how QUDs should be handled given different configurations of *authority* of discourse participants, which do not hold in the case of ConQs. I further show how this open-endedness of ConQs can serve as a rhetorical tool to sow doubt and misinformation, particularly in headlines.

2 What controversy questions are

Controversy questions are questions which aim to set a topic for discussion, but with no expectation of obtaining a full answer or even placing a demand on the addressee to provide one While ConQs can in principle be either polar or constituent questions, I restrict my attention to polar ConQs in this paper for reasons of space. ConQs are commonly used in headlines (3) to introduce articles which explore the possible answers to a question, often without settling on a particular answer (in the sense of Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984). In monologic contexts, such as giving presentations (4), and in open-ended dialogues (5), ConQs can be used to start a sincere conversation about the issue, with the tacet acknowledgment that a full resolution may not be reached.

(3) a. Can Barcelona survive mass tourism? (*New York Times*, 08/2024)
b. Is your home security system really secure? (*Fox News*, 08/2024)

(4) *First slide of astrobiology talk:*
Could humans survive on Mars?

(5) A: Is Kamala Harris going to win the election(, do you think)?
B: I don't know. It's a toss-up.

ConQs resemble rhetorical questions, whose primary function is to make a 'statement' by posing a question whose answer is obvious or unknowable (Rohde 2006; Biezma and Rawlins 2017; Farkas 2024). Like their rhetorical cousins, ConQs have the appearance of standard information-seeking questions, but functionally impose no obligation to resolve an issue on the addressee (and in the case of headlines, an answer from the reader is not even possible), though they do require a follow-up which is nevertheless *relevant* to the question (cf. (3)). But unlike rhetorical questions, ConQs do not have the 'feel' of an assertion: they seem to sincerely express a desire for answers, even if the addressee can't immediately provide one.

One additional key difference is that rhetorical questions seem to be infelicitous out of the blue–asking *Is the Pope Catholic?* with no prior discourse context can only be a genuine inquiry from a very uninformed person. ConQs, by contrast, are not only fine discourse-initially, but fit there most naturally. In this sense, they resemble the 'non-intrusive questions' of Farkas (2022). However, ConQs crucially lack the explicit grammatical marking which Farkas argues is a hallmark of NIQs, suggesting we should interrogate what contextual and pragmatic factors lead to ConQs having the interpretation they do. In short, ConQs are apparently grammatical unmarked questions whose answer is assumed to be not known to any participants in the discourse, but contribute a function of setting a topic for downstream exploration.

3 Asking questions in the Table model

I adopt the common assumption that polar questions denote the set containing a proposition p and its complement $\neg p$, à la Hamblin (1973) and Karttunen (1977), and couch my analysis in a slightly simplified version of the Table model of discourse contexts (Farkas and Bruce 2010; Farkas and Roelofsen 2017), which is well suited to describe the relationship between the denotation of a sentence and how uttering that sentence updates a discourse context.

In the basic version of this framework, a discourse context c consists of three components: (a) the *Table*, a stack of issues (sets of propositions) to be resolved in the current discourse, (b) a set of discourse commitments DC_x for each participant in the discourse, consisting of propositions to which that participant is committed, from which a common ground CG can be derived, and (c) a projected set of possible future common grounds as a result of the most recent discourse move. Moment-to-moment, discourse participants are primarily driven by the desire to remove issues from the Table by resolving them (or, in rarer cases, rejecting them); the overarching goal of a conversation is to shrink the context set cs ($= \bigcap CG$), or the set of worlds compatible with joint commitments of all participants.

I assume, as is standard in this framework, that the basic function of uttering an unmarked polar interrogative is to set the conversational agenda of resolving the issue that utterance places atop the Table. I follow Farkas and Bruce (2010) in assuming this element of the Table corresponds to the QUD when it is a non-singleton issue, but I crucially diverge from them in that I assume that this is **all** uttering an interrogative clause does, whereas F&B (and many subsequent authors) assume that uttering p? adds two elements to the projected set: one of CG enhanced with p, and one enhanced with $\neg p$.

Removing this step might seem like a pure technicality, since the ps can be derived from the Table, but it is frequently interpreted as a "menu" of licit follow-up discourse moves (see Rudin 2022 for a formalization of this idea). What I am proposing is that asking a question merely establishes a QUD, presenting it to the addressee and nothing further. What they do with that QUD depends squarely on key aspects of the the context of utterance.

3.1 What we can do with questions and why

Rather than being guided by the projected set, I treat discourse participants as having as their lodestar *addressing* the QUD, if not ultimately resolving it. In this section, I show how the act of introducing a QUD is interpreted depends on the addressee's beliefs about the discourse context, particularly with respect to the notion of AUTHORITY on an issue I. Drawing inspiration from Northrup (2014) and Heritage and Raymond (2005) for authority on propositions, I conceive here of authority with respect to a question as 'how good' a particular agent is as a source of information with respect to settling that question. Formally, I define authority with respect to an issue I in terms of an agent's probability of knowing the true answer to I:

(6) AUTHORITY: Given an information state s, the authority of agent x with respect to issue I in s is $p_s(K_x(I))$.

The way the addressee reasons about the speaker's utterance of question q depends on their beliefs about the speaker's beliefs. The speaker, in turn, must make some assumptions about these beliefs of the addressee in order for their question to have the desired effect. I will refer to the information state corresponding to what the speaker takes the addressee's doxastic state to be as s. What is crucial is that the interlocutors' relative authority in s can lead the very some utterance to have dramatically different interpretation. For example, if the addressee takes the speaker to already believe that the true answer to q is common ground, the utterance of q is unlikely to be a sincere information-seeking question.

To see how this works, I will sketch how a few possible configurations of authority relative to s can explain why adding q to the QUD can have the effects it does.

(7) **Sincere question**: $p_s(K_{Sp}(q)) < p_s(K_{Ad}(q))$

With sincere information-seeking questions, the addressee believes that they are taken to be a greater authority on q than the speaker. Since the utterance of q sets resolving q as the immediate goal of the conversation, the addressee can reason that they are being invited to provide that resolution thanks to their greater authority.

(8) **Exam question**: $p_s(K_{sp}(q)) = 1 \wedge p_s(K_{Ad}(q)) < 1$

In situations in which the speaker is assumed to know the true answer to q and the addressee may or may not, we need to reason about why the speaker is raising the QUD of q if not for their own information. Given the relative authority of the speaker over the addressee, it is natural to interpret such moves as a test of the addressee's knowledge. The addressee is still expected to provide an answer, but to different ends then informing the speaker.

(9) **Rhetorical question**: $p_s(K_{Sp}(q)) = p_s(K_{Ad}(q)) \wedge p_s(K_{Sp}(q)) \in \{0, 1\}$

Rhetorical questions are, as Farkas (2024) puts it, 'closed': they can't be resolved in the current discourse context, either because they are already answered by the common ground, or couldn't possibly be. The apparent futility of such a move indicates the speaker's goal is not to seek an answer to q per se, but rather to draw a parallel between the obviousness/uselessness of q and the analogous obviousness/uselessness of a preceding discourse move. For a more fleshed-out version of this idea, see Farkas (2024).

(10) **Controversy question**: $p_s(K_{Sp}(q)) = \text{low} \wedge p_s(K_{Ad}(q)) = \text{low}$

Turning at last to controversy questions, they are born of in contexts where the speaker is taken to believe that both they and the addressee have relatively low authority on q, where 'low' is contextually specific. Since both speaker and addressee have more than 0 authority on q, the sincere goal of addressing the QUD can still be the guiding hand of the discourse. However, the acknowledgment that neither speaker nor addressee are any great authority on p lifts the burden of providing a full answer on the addressee. If the addressee thinks they aren't assumed to be an authority on q, they should still respond something relevant to it since the speaker wants to know the answer, but the addressee cannot be reasonably expected to fully provide that answer.

3.2 Summary

When the utterance of a question q has less then full authority on q, it has an inquisitive function: since uttering q establishes it as the QUD, putting it on top of the conversational agenda, the addressee should answer it directly if they can. On the other hand, asking a question whose answer is known to the speaker, as in the case of rhetorical or exam questions, indicates that the speaker's goal cannot possibly be to gain information about whether q for themselves.

Note that this raising of 'insincere' QUDs is not a special feature of questions; for instance, sarcastic declarative sentences involve making utterances that obviously don't intend to inform addressees of the truth of their content:

(11) A: I just passed my geography test about Slovakia!
B: And I'm the Queen of Canada.
$\rightsquigarrow$ B doesn't believe that A passed[1]

[1]Example modified from a conversation with Donka Farkas, p.c.

The addressee's plausible follow-ups are dictated by reasoning about how the QUD should be addressed. the addressee is best equipped to address the QUD raised by a sincere question by answering it straightforwardly, since they are the local authority. On the other hand, ConQs don't put the addressee on the hook for an answer because they (definitionally) occur in contexts in which it is mutually understood that neither the speaker nor addressee know the answer, but they still set an unanswerable QUD as a topic of discussion, inviting exploration of possibilities. I leave a full-fledged explanation of how the precise inferences associated with different question types and exploration of the possible typology of question interpretations for future work.

4 Betteridge's law and questions as tools of misinformation

I've proposed that questions don't inherently require answers, but rather that making utterances with the kinds of semantic content that questions have can prompt an addressee for answers given the right contexts. The general pragmatic rules at play can also shed light on how questions can be used to all kinds of non-inquisitive rhetorical ends. I focus here on a single case study: The tongue-in-cheek journalistic adage Betteridge's Law, named for tech journalist Ian Betteridge, which describes an intuition about questions as headlines:

(12) **Betteridge's Law of Headlines** (Betteridge 2009)
Any headline that ends in a question mark can be answered by the word *no*.

Of course, this is not true of all headline questions (see (3)). But the intuition behind this 'law' is that a headline of polar question p? is a backdoor technique to put forward weak-evidenced claim that p–or establish p as a controversy–without explicitly committing to it. As Betteridge puts it, 'The reason why journalists use that style of headline is that they know the story is probably bullshit, and don't actually have the sources and facts to back it up, but still want to run it.' Because newspapers are supposed to be knowledgeable, opting for an interrogative headline as opposed to an assertive one generates the inference that p is up for debate.

This line of reasoning can be described more formally as a result of two independently-motivated general pragmatic considerations. The first is AUTHORITY. The second is Rudin's (2022) pragmatic maxim of VIABILITY, which militates against making utterances that raise issues containing alternatives that will never enter the common ground, such as questions to which the addressee has already committed to an answer. The idea here is that all else being equal, speakers aim to avoid asking questions with potential answers that are useless because someone in the conversation already thinks they are false. (Note that Rudin's version is specified in terms of the projected set, which I have altered here to align with the proposal that uttering interrogatives adds nothing to the projected set.)

(13) VIABILITY: Only raise issues for which all alternatives are compatible with what you believe are each interlocutor's commitments and private beliefs. (adapted from Rudin 2022: ex. 50)

Betteridge's law can be understood as an interaction between AUTHORITY and VIABILITY. Uttering a question p? (denoting $\{p, \neg p\}$) only avoids violating VIABILITY if the speaker takes both p and $\neg p$ to be possible given what they know about their own and the addressee's beliefs: that is, they don't know p and they don't know $\neg p$; if the speaker was committed to one or the other, they could avoid violating VIABILITY by uttering that proposition outright.

But news sources are also very special kinds of discourse participants. They are meant to be reliable informers, in the sense that they should give as much information as is (publicly) known as possible about the topics they cover. I refer to an agent that is supposed to be maximally authoritative about an issues as an ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY (14):

(14) An ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY on issue I relative to information state s is an agent y s.t. $\forall z \neq y : p_s(K_y(I)) \geq p_s(K_z(I))$.

If a speaker is an ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY on p? relative to the addressee's doxastic state, the addressee should infer that a speaker who utters p? indicates that *no one* knows whether p or $\neg p$. This is the crucial element for headline questions: news sources are assumed to be reliable information sources. I assume readers, who function as addressees in the sort of one-sided dialogue with a news source, treat news sources as absolute authorities. It follows that a headline p? appearing in a news source suggests that no one knows whether or not p.

Getting readers to draw the inference that the true answer to p? is currently unknown can be weaponized for questions for which one alternative is outlandish or inflammatory. For example, ConQs in highly partisan or controversial publications (15) can serve two purposes: making readers believe the issue is up for debate *and* raising the possibility of a dubious claim which otherwise saying outright might result in negative consequences:

(15) a. Is Amazon sabotaging first book about Trump assassination attempt? (*Infowars*, 09/2024)
b. Are abortion funds running out of money now? (*WorldNetDaily*, 09/2024).
c. Will Trump turbocharge your finances? (*Daily Mail*, 11/2024)

This tactic provides an author with the plausible deniability of 'just asking questions'; they can plant the seed of controversy while evading responsibility for its flowering, no matter how outlandish. The intentional use of implicature to communicate ideas without being on the hook for committing to them is nothing new (see Grice 1975, among many others), but what sets the inference generated by headline ConQs apart from more familiar implicatures is that their discourse effects do not involve making commitments at all.

Finally, there are other reasons why an author (or publisher) might opt for questions in headlines other than sowing doubt or propagating misinformation. In the current online news media ecosystem, revenue is generally proportional to volume of web traffic, which incentivizes headlines that drive clicks. While a potential reader could learn the main point of an article like *President X wins re-election* without actually reading the body, *Did President X win re-election?* suggests uncertainty, inviting the reader to click through to learn more. Subsequent research may reveal how exactly questions are leveraged in headlines, and to what ends.

5 Conclusion

Conversations are more than a back-and-forth volley of information; often they can just be the exploration of an idea without any particular resolution. Uttering a question, in virtue of simply setting the QUD, directs our attention to a particular topic and delineate the boundaries of said conversation, but doesn't always demand an answer, in ways that flow from how we understand the context of a conversation.

Much work remains to be done in this domain. One interesting direction, particularly in reasoning about inferences derived from the very fact of speakers making a particular utterance, could be connecting the pragmatics of questioning with logics of attention (e.g. Jager 2009; Westera 2017). Empirically, documenting the range of non-canonical questions cross-linguistically is also essential. Here I have explored only one corner of English, but it's not at all obvious that the story I have sketched here should apply to any other language, let alone all of them. Are ConQs a linguistic universal?

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