Disjunctive questions and the syntax/semantics interface: evidence from Hungarian

Y/N questions are traditionally divided into polar questions (PQ) and alternative questions (ALTQ) (Collins 2006). When Y/N questions contain a disjunctive phrase, they often become ambiguous between the PQ and the ALTQ readings (Rooy & Šafarova 2003, Han & Romero 2004a, b, Romero & Han 2003a, b, Eckardt 2007):

(1) Did Peter buy tea or coffee? / PQ
(2) Did Peter buy TEA/ or COFFEE/ ? ALTQ

Recently a further subclass of Y/N questions, disjunctive questions (DISJQs) has been identified by authors like Haida (2011) and Biezma (2009). DISJQ differ from ALTQs in their (i) structure, (ii) interpretation, and (iii) syntactic derivation;

(i) Structure
(3a) Did Peter buy [CHEESE/ or BUTTER]\]? ALTQ
(3b) Did Peter buy [cheese or not]? DISJQ
(4a) [Did Peter buy cheese] or [did he buy butter]? ALTQ
(4b) [Did Peter buy cheese] or [did he not]? DISJQ

(ii) Interpretation
While in the case of ALTQs the speaker is committed to the truth of the propositions in either of the two conjuncts, DISJQs involve no similar commitment.

(iii) Syntactic derivation
- The Coordination+Ellipsis analysis does not give satisfactory results in the case of affirmative conjuncts (see Hudson 1976):
(5) John and Mary are twins. <> *John is a twin and Mary is a twin.
- The Coordination+Ellipsis analysis cannot explain the distributional differences of whether in ALTQs vs. DISJQs:
Susan wants to know ....
(6a) whether Peter drank the milkshake or (*whether) the coke. ALTQ
(6b) whether Peter drank the milkshake or (*whether) not.
(7a) whether Peter drank the milkshake or *(whether) he drank the coke. DISJQ
(7b) whether Peter drank the milkshake or *(whether) he did not.
- The Coordination+Ellipsis analysis does not explain the intervention effect imposed by the NEG operator, blocking the INT-QCL chain in the negative conjunct of Hungarian subordinate DISJQs and the absence of intervention effects in positive conjuncts:
(8) Zsuzsa szeretné tudni,……
Susan would like to know.INF
a. [CP hogy [ForceP vajon INT Péter el-jön-e ]] a buli-ba
that whether Peter PFX-comes-QCL the party-into

vagy \[\text{CP (hogy)} \ [\text{ForceP (vajon) INT nem jön-(-e) el pro}].\]
or that whether NOT comes-(QCL) PFX (he)

'Susan would like to know whether Peter is coming to the party or whether he is not coming.'

b. \[\text{CP hogy [ForceP vajon INT Péter el-jön-e] a buli-ba} \]
that whether Peter PFX-comes-QCL the party-into

vagy \[\text{CP (hogy)} \ [\text{ForceP (vajon) INT TV-t néz-e pro}].\]
or that whether TV-ACC watches-(QCL) (he)

'Susan would like to know whether Peter is coming to the party or whether he is watching TV.'

Beck & Kim (2006) report similar intervention effects in English, German, Korean and Hungarian ALTQs: association between the licensing INT operator and the disjunctive phrase is blocked by intervening operators such as NEG, ONLY and EVEN.

3 The facts listed in (i)-(iii) argue in favour of the Conjunction Reduction+Extraction analysis (over the Coordination+Ellipsis via OP-movement analysis (contra Han & Romero 2004a,b). Hungarian subordinate disjunctive questions show intervention effects, similar to those attested in wh-questions and alternative questions. This necessitates an extension of Beck & Kim’s (2006) local disjunction+alternative sets analysis to DISJQs, given that intervention effects are incompatible with OP-movement.

References


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