

ON QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH AND SWEDISH¹

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1. *Introduction*

Like any other major linguistic unit, questions can be used to exemplify the development in linguistics from formal syntax to semantics, pragmatics and text linguistics. Parallel with this widening view of language today there is an awareness of the difficulty of coping with the growing knowledge within any existing linguistic theory. This should not deter contrastive linguists from investigating this interesting field. In this paper we shall first deal with some general theoretical problems, such as (a) the concept of a 'question', (b) conduciveness, (c) the disjunctive approach, and (d) the performative approach. Second, we shall look more closely at some basic question types in English and Swedish.

1.1 *Theoretical preliminaries*

Questions arise in conversation because of the speaker's need for information (or confirmation, as the case may be) and his/her belief that the hearer can provide that information. Thus, in a Q/A-unit there is a knowledge part (actually representing degrees of ignorance) and a request part. The former is seen in the question in the form of various interrogative devices (wh-words

¹ The author's dialect is Finland-Swedish. For this paper I have not had access to the whole literature on questions in Swedish. A publication which came to my notice too late was Elisabeth Britt Engdahl, *The syntax and semantics of questions in Swedish*. Ph. D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1980.

question word order, particles), and in the semantic properties of the answer, which have to satisfy the conditions specified by the question. The request part is seen in the illocutionary force of the question and in the actual speaker-hearer interaction. Intonation patterns serve to combine the two parts into communicative units.

In order to be able to ask questions at all, the speaker must have some sort of common ground with the hearer. This *shared* knowledge, often referred to as presuppositions, is another aspect of the knowledge part. For instance, it would not be appropriate for anybody to approach an unknown man in the street and ask "When did you stop beating your wife?"

Answers consisting of a simple *yes* (S *ja*) or *no* (S *nej*) are rather rare in actual conversation because they do not make for communicative interaction on their own except in contexts where the question concerns facts. They are more common as responses to statements, ie in an entirely different function. Similarly answers to *wh*-Qs are not always what one expects them to be on the basis of the structure of the question. For instance, in

- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1Q Where's John? | Var är John? ² |
| A He's in the bathroom. | Han är i badrummet. |
| 2Q What's John doing? | Vad gör John? |
| A He's having a bath. | Han badar. |

one can easily imagine the answers interchanged in both languages. This is possible because of Grice's well known 'conversational implicatures' (1975 : 43), still another aspect of the knowledge part, but one which lies outside language itself.

The foreign learner of English must learn to distinguish questions from other speech acts, to ask and answer questions. This may involve considerable skills because of the many existing variations of the basic Q/A-patterns, because of politeness phenomena, ways of suggesting shared knowledge, and so on. Questioning-answering mechanisms are extremely important from the very start of language learning and therefore deserve a great deal of attention.

A well recognized property of Q/A-units is the semantic dependence of the question on the answer and vice versa. The analysis of the dependence of the answer on the question has very much focussed on what Bolinger (1957) has called 'conduciveness', the fact that the form of the question signals the speaker's expectations as to the answer, particularly in terms of yes-no-ness. Negative yes-no Qs and tag Qs are typical examples. Special attention has been paid to the role of polarity in questioning-answering systems in different languages (cp Pope 1976 : 118). Some examples adapted

² Swedish equivalents will be referred to as (1Q', 2A', etc.).

from Pope's book can be used to illustrate the difference between English and Swedish in this respect:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 3Q He went, didn't he? | Han gick (väl) {eller hur} ?
{inte sant} |
| A1 Yes. | Ja. |
| A2 No (not at all). | Nej (inte alls). |
| 4Q He didn't go, did he? | Han gick väl inte? Han gick inte,
eller hur? |
| A1 No. | Nej. |
| A2 Yes, he did. | Jo {han gjorde det}.
{det gjorde han} |
| 5Q Did he go? | Gick han? |
| A1 Yes (he did). | Ja (*han gjorde).
Ja (det gjorde han). |
| A2 No (he stayed). | Nej (han stannade) |
| 6Q Didn't he go? | Gick han inte? |
| A1 No (he didn't). | Nej (det gjorde han inte). |
| A2 Yes, he did. | Jo (det gjorde han). |

(3-4) illustrate the fact that Swedish lacks a syntactic equivalent for the English tags. In (6) Swedish *jo* brings out the positive disagreement strongly enough to allow omission of the following pro-forms; in English, *he did* cannot be dispensed with so easily. Positive disagreement is undoubtedly a major difficulty for the foreign learner of languages where it is lexicalized (cp French *si*, German *doch*). However, when it comes to yes-no-ness generally, it "can have any shade of confirmation that lies across the spectrum from absolute plus to absolute minus" (Bolinger 1978 : 103). As far as the answers are concerned, (4A2'), (5A1'), (6A1') and (6A2') show that the Swedish pro-form *det* is required with the pro-verb *göra*. A detailed analysis of substitution and ellipsis in the two languages would no doubt reveal more contrasts.

In principle a question and its accompanying answer are grammatically separate units whereas they must at some stage be looked upon as one entity at discourse level. Schegloff and Sacks have used the term 'adjacency pair' (1973 : 295). In practice the delimitation of an answer is often quite difficult (Wikberg 1975; Conrad 1978). Thus answers to questions such as *What happened?*, *What did you do in the 1960's?*, *What did she say?*, *Why did you become a linguist?* are typically textual in the sense that they can range from a single word to an extensive text.³ From a contrastive point of view, however, this is mainly a problem of the verbs and possible differences in their selectional features.

³ The minimal answer to a *why*-question is a clause. Cp. Fries (1975).

2. Some descriptive problems

Two specific descriptive problems deserve some discussion: (i) the disjunctive approach to yes-no Qs, and (ii) the performative approach. Neither can be solved here, but anybody dealing with questions and answers will have to take a stand on these issues.

The problem with the disjunctive deep structure has been raised by Bolinger (1978), who discusses a number of instances where the disjunctive interpretation would be absurd on the grounds that (a) *or not?* is not always a likely continuation of a yes-no question, (b) *if* is a more likely embedder of questions than *whether*, and (c) *if*-clauses carry the rising intonation typical of yes-no Qs. Although Bolinger is to be commended for showing the wide range of uses to which yes-no interrogatives can be put, close examination of his examples shows that they can usually be accounted for in one of the following ways:

- A. There is usually something in the non-linguistic context that is conducive to one type of answer rather than another (mostly *yes*, which ensures S (the speaker) that L (the listener) is on an equal footing). (Examples No. 8, 9)
- B. The available alternatives are more than two and can be related to an explicit or implicit wh-Q. (Example No. 10)
- C. S's intention is primarily another than that of asking, such as inviting, requesting or exclaiming. (Examples No. 7, 11)

We shall here look at Bolinger's first argument only. As an invitation, the negative disjunction in (7) would no doubt be suppressed, but the listener is still free to respond either *Yes, please* or *No, thank you*:

7. Do you want some (fruit) (or not)? (context: in front of S's orange tree)

8. Are you still around (or not)? (context: S is surprised at seeing L)
(8) can be interpreted as an exclamation, or the answer expected is an explanation. In the next example, a serious answer cannot be in the negative:

9. Are you awake (or not)? (context: S shaking L)

Another type involves a suggested answer to a wh-Q:

10. What's the matter? Are you tired (or not)?

The primary question here is the wh-Q, the yes-no being added as a simple alternative which cannot be put in the negative. Finally, (11) does not seem to be meant as a proper question at all since neither *Yes* nor *No* is a very good answer:

11. Are you crazy? Är du tokig? Är du inte klok?

All the instances that Bolinger analyses can be translated into syntactically equivalent sentences in Swedish. That a disjunctive deep structure is a rather crude representation of (7-11) is not surprising in the light of the

contextual parameters, but with clearly open yes-no Qs like (5), it seems to work.

This brings us to the second problem, that of speech acts. Asking is not considered a specific speech act by all linguists. Edmondson (1981: 195), for instance, classes it as a sort of request. This tallies well with what was said above about questions having a request part. A plausible performative representation of ordinary yes-no Qs would look like this:

12. I request of you (you tell me (whether or not it is the case that S))
It follows that answering is a sort of telling. However, like the disjunctive analysis, (12) is a formula which has to be modified to explain questions which involve an element of expectation. Owing to the difficulty of finding suitable performatives for different types of questions, it seems that both degrees of illocutionary force and degrees of yes-no-ness can be best handled by combined linguistic and pragmatic devices. For contrastive purposes, the *tertium comparationis* will obviously be conditions on the use of interrogative structures (Searle 1969). Such conditions would vary slightly depending on the syntactic structure of the question, but it is likely that they are language universal (cp James 1980: 124). Indirect speech acts, too, appear to be universal, although there are idiomatic uses in any given language or dialect (Brown and Levinson (1978: 141 ff.); Riley (1981)).

Although I am here basically concerned with direct speech acts, I feel entitled to present an instance of a difference in the use of indirect speech acts in English and Swedish:

13Q Do you lock the door?	Låser du dörren?
A1 *OK.	OK. (Det kan jag väl.) (REQUEST)
A2 Yes, every time,	Ja, varje gång. (QUESTION)

According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 32),

"An interrogative clause is to be interpreted as a *command to do* if it fulfills all the following conditions: (i) it contains one of the modals *can*, *could*, *will* (and sometimes *going to*); (ii) if the subject of the clause is also an addressee; (iii) the predicate describes an action which is physically possible at the time of utterance".

The English example (13Q) does not fulfil condition (i), and, indeed, its interpretation as a command is impossible. In Swedish, however, *Låser du dörren?* can be considered a request or command. In Finland-Swedish it would have a falling intonation and not be particularly polite.

3. A comparison between English and Swedish

Not surprisingly, descriptions of questions in English within TGG are generally to Swedish as well fairly close to surface structure (cp. Elle 1971). In the following we shall illustrate both basic similarities and cont

in the major types of questions. If we divide questions into yes-no Qs, echo Qs and direct Qs and assign each of these \pm -values, we get the following theoretical combinations:

Table 1

	yes-no	echo	direct	Examples:
1	+	-	+	Are you coming? Kommer du?
2	+	-	-	I asked her if she was coming. Jag frågade henne om hon tänkte komma.
3	+	+	+	Am I coming? (in response to (1)) Om jag kommer? (=Frågar du om jag kommer?)
4	+	+	-	You asked her if she was coming? Du frågade henne om hon tänkte komma?
5	-	-	+	Who is coming? Vem kommer?
6	-	-	-	I asked her who was coming. Jag frågade henne vem som kom (skulle komma).
7	-	+	+	You asked her what? (in response to (6)) Du frågade henne vad?
8	-	+	-	(hardly occurs)

We shall first look at wh-Qs (types 5-6) and then yes-no Qs (types 1-2). Echo Qs will be ignored in this paper although type 3 shows an interesting contrast between English and Swedish.

3.1 Wh-questions

For obvious reasons neither the term 'wh-question' nor 'yes-no question' fits Swedish, but these terms will be used here for convenience. Both languages signal direct wh-Qs by putting the questioned constituent immediately before the finite verb. To achieve this, English requires do-Insertion when the wh-phrase does not function as subject, and when the finite verb is not an Aux, be or have. In Swedish Subject-Verb-Inversion is obligatory in direct Qs after wh-Movement (14', 15'), but in indirect Qs the inversion rule does not apply (16'):

14Q	Who(m) did you meet?	Vem (vilka) träffade du?
A	John (and Jane).	John (och Jane).
15Q	When do you get up?	När stiger du upp?
A	At six.	Klockan sex.
16	I asked you who(m) you met.	Jag frågade dig vem du träffade.
17	I asked you who helped you.	Jag frågade dig vem som hjälpte dig. *Jag frågade dig vem - hjälpte dig.

For Norwegian, which in this respect behaves in the same way as Swedish, Taraldsen postulates the existence of the relative particle *som*, which he says "cooccurs with *hv*-words (N *hvem*=S *vem*) at some stage in the derivation regardless of the original position of the *hv*-phrase". Then "*som* undergoes the following obligatory rule:

$$18 \quad \text{som} \rightarrow \emptyset / [\text{COMP} \text{X} \text{---}] \text{NP} \quad \text{X} \neq \emptyset$$

This rule deletes *som* when the following two conditions are satisfied: (a) *som* precedes NP immediately, and (b) there is some other terminal symbol in COMP". (1978 : 634) The difference between (16') and (17') can be accounted for by condition (a).

Inevitably there are morphological and semantic differences between question words in the two languages. Thus the Swedish adjectival interrogative pronoun *hurudan* can be rendered into English in various ways:

19Q1	How is your job?	Hurudant är ditt jobb?
Q2	What is your job like?	
A	It is interesting.	Det är intressant.
20Q	What kind of car has he got?	Hurudan bil har han? Vad har han för (en) bil?
A	An old Volvo.	En gammal Volvo.

Questioned prepositional phrases are treated in a similar way in English and Swedish (except where there are lexical differences), i.e. the prepositions can be left at the end of the interrogative clause, which is their normal position in the spoken language:

21Q1	What were you talking about?	Vad pratade ni om?
Q2	About what ... talking?	Om vad ... ni?
A	About all sorts of things.	Om ditt och datt.
22Q1	Where do you come from?	Var kommer du ifrån?
Q2	From where do you come?	Varifrån kommer du?
A	(From) Finland.	(Från) Finland.

When it comes to the placing of the prepositional phrase initially, the English version sounds more awkward than the Swedish one (cp James 1980 : 49, who has observed a similar difference between English and German).

In spoken Swedish there is a more complex alternative to examples like (14') and (20'):

23	Vem var det (som) du träffade? (Who was it that you met?)
24	Vad är det för (en) bil (som)(What sort of car is it that he has got?)

Syntactically these constructions are identical to questioned cleft sentences, but according to Thorell they are not necessarily used for emphasis (1977 : §888):

25	Det var X som du träffade → (wh-Movement)
	X det var som du träffade → (Subject-Verb-Inversion)
	X var det som du träffade → (23)

The effect may actually be the opposite, i.e. one of softening the abrupt question. If the focus is on *det* in (23–24), the questions refer to situations in which the speaker is or was a participant.⁴

3.2 Yes-no questions

The relationship between the basic rules for question formation in English and Swedish can be represented as follows:

<i>Wh</i> -Qs	English	Swedish	
(1) wh-Movement		(1) wh-Movement	
(2) Subj-Aux-Inversion		(2) Subj-Verb-Inversion	} <i>yes-no</i> Qs
(3) do-Insertion		(3) —	

Examples of yes-no Qs have been given in (3–6) and for English in (7–11). The contrast which is displayed above corresponds to a major difficulty for the Swedish learner, i.e. learning to use *do*.

As far as negative yes-no Qs are concerned, the fundamental conditions on their use in English and Swedish seem to be the same (cp Duškova 1981). Genuine affirmative and negative yes-no Qs have different distributions (Wikberg 1975 : 124–127), and elicit slightly different answers (Szwedek 1982), which applies to both languages.

A dialectal variant which is particularly common in Finland-Swedish is *wh*-Qs and yes-no Qs with *månne*:⁵

26Q1 Vad *månne* de visar på TV? (I wonder what they are showing on TV?)

Q2 Vad visar de på TV *månne*?

27Q1 Varar det länge *månne*? (I wonder if it will be long?)

Q2 *Månne* det varar länge?

Putting *månne* in clause-initial position is sufficient to make a yes-no Q, whereas if it comes last, Subj-Verb-Inversion must apply.

3.2.1 Statement questions

A subtype of yes-no Qs which has been somewhat neglected is the 'declarative' or 'statement' question, as in

28	He went then?	Han gick alltså?
29	He didn't go then?	Han gick alltså inte?

⁴ A minor type of Q-type mentioned by Svartvik and Sager (1978 : 422) is *wh*-Qs without a finite verb, which seem to be more acceptable in English than in Swedish (E *What to do?* S *Vad göra?* E *Where to go?* S *Vart gå?*).

⁵ Cp. Diderichsen (1979 : 69), who refers to the use of *mon* (S *månne*) as a regular feature of Danish.

It occurs in both languages, and its distinctive characteristic has often been thought to be rising intonation. Thus Thorell (§ 917) points out that without rising intonation, Swedish statement questions "could not be interpreted as questions" (which is not true of the writer's dialect), whereas Hudson mentions in a footnote that statement questions take rising intonation "normally, but not always" (1975 : 13).

As to the other properties of statement questions, Quirk et al. (1972 : 393) mention the non-admissibility of *any*-forms and point out that statement questions resemble tag questions with a rising intonation in interrogative force "except for the rather casual tone, which suggests that the speaker takes the answer *yes* (or *no*) as a foregone conclusion". This sort of expectation is confirmed by data on answer types following statement questions (Wikberg 1975 : 132). According to Akmajian et al. (1979 : 190), a statement question seems to occur "in a conversation only if the situation referred to by the question is not a new topic of conversation for either the speaker or hearer: either it has already been mentioned or the overall *context* of the conversation makes it an obvious topic to bring up." Joos also maintains that a statement question "is always anaphoric" (1964 : 59).

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to go into the problem of intonation in any depth. We shall here simply assume that some statement questions overlap with statements in terms of grammatical structure and intonation patterns, and that they can be followed by identical responses. Analysis of the use of statement questions in some English novels (Fowles, *Daniel Martin* (DM); Bradbury, *The History Man* (HM)) suggests that there are contextual and pragmatic factors which may be responsible for the choice of statement questions rather than ordinary yes-no questions. Such factors could be:

A. Reference to knowledge and opinions which S already has and which S wants L to confirm (cp Oleksy's interpretation of tag Qs (1977 : 108)):

31 *And you've got a lovely hide-out now? Where you were born? Caro's told us about it.* (DM 183–184)

An inverted yes-no question would be inappropriate here.

B. S wants to have his inference from the immediate linguistic or non-linguistic context confirmed (the question often opens with *you mean, you think, etc.*):

32 someone must have acted over the summer, while we were all safely out of sight. *You mean Marvin?* asks Moira. I suppose, says Howard. (HM 59)

C. The utterance is what Labov has called a B-event, i.e. one concerning L rather than S (Labov 1971 : 208).

This is a matter of preference. Bolinger's examples (7–11) sound even more strange if they are turned into declarative questions with first-person singular subjects.

D. The question echoes a previous utterance:

33 I can help you ... *You can help me, Felicity?* he asks. (HM 124)

Statement questions in Swedish seem to have similar contextual properties, but syntactically they are more varied because they can be combined with Topicalization:

34Q1 Du känner honom?	You know him?
Q2 Honom känner du?	?Him you know?
35Q1 Du känner inte honom?	You don't know him?
Q2 Honom känner du inte?	?Him you don't know?
Q3 Inte känner du honom?	*Not you know him?

4. Conclusions

This exploratory analysis will have demonstrated some of the basic similarities and differences between question formation in English and Swedish. A more coherent linguistic model would however be needed to account for both the linguistic and the pragmatic facts.

If contrastive analysis is to become something more than a sport for the initiated, it may be worth considering applications of contrastive analysis in this area to language teaching. Questioning and answering are traditionally part and parcel of language teaching, but the communicative approach gives the learners opportunities to take on more varied roles in conversational interaction. Once the initial difficulties with question formation and answering have been overcome, there remain to learn and practice the complications due to modal verbs, expressions of politeness, and accompanying intonation patterns. For syllabus design and the grading of communicative tasks more contrastive analysis would be valuable in the field of modality in particular, since it is so closely tied up with indirect speech acts.

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