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A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Starting from the fact that sentences are part and parcel of human communication, irrespective of the language under discussion, and that their form and meaning may vary to a great extent depending on the speaker's intentions of communication, the present paper aims at approaching the multifaceted nature of interrogative sentences (also questions) in English by taking into discussion possible definitions and classifications of such sentences, their morphologic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic features and the ways in which (some of) these features favour a series of (common) mistakes on the part of non-native speakers of English, in general, and of Romanian speakers, in particular. The ultimate aim of such an approach is, on the one hand, to raise the learners' awareness with respect to the complex nature of questions in English, and to suggest a linguistically integrative approach to teaching questions in English to upper-intermediate and advanced learners, on the other.

Keywords: direct questions; disjunctive questions; indirect questions; indirect speech acts; intonation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sentences are generally agreed to be the basic syntactic unit used by people in communication. Depending on the messages to be conveyed, people may choose to express their thoughts and feelings by creatively combining a wide range of formally and semantically diverse sentences.

The complex and multifaceted nature of sentences is illustrated by the fact that specialists in various fields such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics or Neuro Linguistic Programming, among others, approach the possible relationships existing between the speakers' linguistic choices in the process of communication and their specific behaviour or personal and professional development. Sentences are also taken into discussion by researchers operating in various branches of linguistics such as: phonetics, morphology, semantics, pragmatics and stylistics, but the fact remains that sentences are traditionally an inherent part of syntax. The specialists' constant interest in the formal and semantic characteristics of sentences has favoured a series of interesting definitions and classifications, illustrative for the gradual move from traditional approaches to modern (structuralist and generative transformational) ones.



2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Traditional syntax defines the **sentence** as “an expression of a thought or feeling by means of a word or words used in such a form and manner as to convey the meaning intended” (Curme 1931: 1, qtd. in Croitoru 2002: 6). Reference is also made to the fact that a **sentence** may be represented by “a group of words which makes complete sense” (Eckersley 1963, qtd. in id. *ibid*), or by a unit “which contains a complete utterance formed according to a definite pattern” (Zandvort 1961 qtd. in id. *ibid*).

Different from the specialists embracing the traditional approach to sentences, the structuralist ones, who consider that **sentences** represent “the largest unit of grammatical description” (Lyons 1985, qtd. in id. *ibid*.) focus on their formal independence and on the distributional properties and dependences which may be established within them. For instance, Bloomfield (1933, qtd in id.: 7), defines the **sentence** as “a grammatical unit between the constituent parts of which there exist distributional limitations and dependences, but which can itself be put into no distributional class”. The same view is made explicit by Palmer (1986 qtd. in id. *ibid*.) who states that a **sentence** is “the largest unit to which we can assign a grammatical structure”.

Last, but not least, the generative transformational view that grammar “specifies the infinite set of well-formed sentences and assigns to each of these one or more structural descriptions” (Chomsky 1965, qtd. in id.: 7-8) brings to the fore a new approach to **sentences**, which are regarded as the basic units of syntax, a linguistic level placed between morphology and semantics. In fact, generative transformational models integrate the morphological level into the syntactic one. The boundaries existing between these two levels may be easily effaced since they both operate with units of form, i.e. with words and sentences, respectively.

2.2. As regards the possible classification of **sentences**, reference is most often made to sentence typologies conditioned by their **form/structure**, by their **semantic content**/the speakers’ **purpose of communication** and by their **status** or **grammatical dependence** (Bantaş 1996: 81). Although the **structure** of a question may vary from simple to complex and the **subordination** relationship is relevant when approaching **indirect** questions, special attention will be devoted to the semantic classification of sentences in English which clarifies the linguistic and communicative function of **interrogative** sentences in contrast with the declarative, imperative and exclamatory ones.

Thus, specialists consider that speakers use **declarative sentences** (affirmative or negative) when conveying information, **interrogative sentences** when requesting information, **imperative sentences** when trying to determine somebody to do something by issuing commands, by making requests or by giving advice and **exclamatory sentences** when expressing feelings and emotions which denote either positive attitudes (e.g. admiration, enthusiasm, joy, surprise, happiness, satisfaction, etc.) or negative ones (e.g. horror, terror, disgust, dissatisfaction, disappointment, regret, sadness, grief, etc.) (Croitoru 2002: 13-21). Referring to the same typology, Bantaş (1996) states that **declarative sentences** (also called statements) are used to affirm, state or declare something (positive or negative) usually without any emotional implications, **interrogative sentences** are expressions of the speaker’s/writer’s curiosity, **imperative sentences** include commands proper, requests or invitations and **exclamatory** sentences denote positive or negative attitudes. (Bantaş 1996: 82, 83, 86)

2.3. Focussing on **interrogative** sentences, mention should be made that such sentences may be further classified into categories which combine relevant semantic aspects and formal restrictions. Moreover, there are instances in which linguistic variation in one and the same type of interrogative sentence allows for a different contextual interpretation on the part of the speaker or implies relevant differences in terms of register or variety of English. For instance, the speakers’ pragmatic interpretation of **tag questions** is agreed to change considerably when switching from **rising** to **falling** intonation. If the former type of intonation expresses the speakers’ uncertainty regarding the truth of their statement, the latter will point to the speakers’ need to have a confirmation on the part of their interlocutors. Moreover, deviation from the standard word order in questions may be favoured by the speakers’ need to use American English (*You know him?*), rather than British English (e.g. *Do you know him?*), or by their need to adapt the structure of their questions to an informal rather than to a formal context.

Interrogative sentences or **questions** are “expressions of the speaker’s curiosity” (Bantaş 1996: 83) and such sentences are commonly selected in order to request information, generally implying that an answer is expected. Considering the formal and semantic specificity of interrogative sentences in

English, specialists (Bantas 1996, Croitoru 2002) refer to the following types of questions: **general/yes-no questions, special/ particular/ wh-questions, alternative questions, tag/ disjunctive questions** and **declarative questions**.

2.3.1. Yes-no questions (also **general questions**) are interrogative sentences to which an affirmative (yes) or negative (no) answer is expected. Such questions require a subject - operator inversion, the do-periphrasis being used in the case of present and past tense verb forms. As regards yes - no questions in which other tenses are used, inversion needs to be operated between the (modal) auxiliary verb, which is visible in the surface structure of the sentence, and the subject.

When asking yes-no questions, certain choices (e.g. the use of assertive forms rather than non - assertive ones) highlight the speakers' preference for the positive or negative orientation of the interrogative sentence:

- e.g. *Did you buy something for Mary?* (Is it true that you bought something for Mary?)
Didn't you buy her a present? (Is it really true that you did not buy her a present?)

Moreover, relevant pragmatic differences may be noted when speakers make specific morphologic choices in yes-no questions. For example, the use of **any** and its derivatives in such questions, rather than of **some** and its corresponding derivatives is contextually relevant because the former will be selected in instances in which speakers require information from their interlocutors, whereas the latter will be used when speakers need a confirmation regarding something they assert to be true:

- e.g. *Did anyone tell her the news?* (I do not know if anyone told her the news and I expect you to tell me – the speaker requires information)
Did someone tell her the news? (I assert somebody told her the news – the speaker requires confirmation)

Some and its derivatives are also used in yes-no questions to express **offers**, e.g. *Would you like some biscuits?* or **requests**: e.g. *Can you lend me some money?* These are examples of indirect speech acts because speakers use questions not in order to obtain information from the interlocutors, but in order to offer something to or request something from somebody.

2.3.2. Wh-questions (also **special/particular**) are sentences introduced by such interrogative words (pronouns, adjectives, adverbs) as: **who, whose, whom, what, which, when, where, how, why**. Speakers use **wh- questions** when they need to obtain specific information regarding the doer of the action, the possessor of one or more objects, the place or time of the action, the manner in which the action is performed, or the reason why an action takes place, among others. To put it differently, question words are used with reference to different parts of the sentence or clause elements, thus having different syntactic functions:

- e.g. *Who told you that?* (subject)
Which dictionary did you buy? (direct object)
Who(m) did you send the parcel to? (indirect object)
How wide did they make the cupboard? (objective complement)
When will they come back? (adverbial modifier of time)
Where do they live? (adverbial modifier of place)
How much does she know about this? (adverbial modifier of intensification)
How often does she go there? (adverbial modifier of frequency)

Similarly to **yes-no questions**, **wh-questions** used to obtain specific information regarding the predicate, the objects (direct, indirect and prepositional) and the adverbial modifiers (manner, place, time, reason, etc.) require subject -operator inversion. This is not the case of **wh-questions** used to inquire about the subject or the attributes describing it.

Regarding questions introduced by **what** or **who**, they may prove problematic and difficult to approach because the two **interrogative pronouns** may be used to require specific information about both the subject (*What happened there?/ Who knows the truth?*) and the object in a sentence. In the former situation there is no inversion between the subject and the corresponding auxiliary verb, whereas in the latter (*What did they expect to find there? /Who(m) were they talking about?*) subject - operator inversion is compulsory.

When the **question word** is part of a prepositional phrase, the preposition may be placed either at the beginning, or at the end of the question, the two grammatically correct variants being different only in terms of register:

e.g. *About whom were they talking?* (formal English)

Whom were they talking about? (informal/ colloquial English)

Wh-questions may be intensified for stylistic effects and may thus acquire an emotive value when combined with such emphatic structures as: *on earth, the hell, for god's/ heaven's sake, ever* or, as Stannard (1977: 198 qtd. in Croitoru 2002: 18) suggests, with “stronger expressions” such as: “*the dickens, the devil, the blazes*”:

e.g. *Who on earth did this?*

Why on earth are they looking at me like that?

Who the hell do you think you are?

When for god's sake did he go there?

Ever is commonly used in colloquial interrogations to emphasize the speakers' surprise, consternation, or annoyance, in such cases stress being laid on both the question word and on **ever**:

e.g. *'Who 'ever was she looking for?*

'What 'ever are they trying to do?

However, such examples are not to be confused with or mistaken for those in which **whoever** and **whatever** are relative pronouns:

e.g. *Whoever they may be, I cannot accept their offer.*

Whatever she may say, nothing can be changed now.

Last but not least, mention should be made that speakers often prefer using abbreviated **wh-questions** made up of a question word and a final preposition (e.g. *Where from?*) or of the question word only (e.g. *What?*) in colloquial contexts as such questions greatly simplify their oral communication.

Referring to abbreviated questions as automatic question responses to statements, Stannard (1977, qtd in id.: 19) groups them into two main categories:

1. Where the agent or prepositional part of the command is missing, and the response asks for further clarification. Such questions are uttered with a falling tone, the preposition taking end position, and emphasis falling on it as the active agent:

e.g. *Go quickly → Where to?*

Open it → What with?

2: Responses of surprise, consternation or mere misunderstanding of the complete sense in which the whole idea is questioned and repeated with the accent on the question word which takes final position. Such questions are uttered with a rising tone:

e.g. *Open the bottle with this pin.*

With what?

Yes-no questions and wh-questions function sometimes as **rhetorical questions**, being associated with contexts in which speakers do not expect any answer from their interlocutor(s). In such cases the corresponding interrogative sentences represent merely an inner thought or troubling issue to which speakers hope to find an answer themselves:

e.g. *Have I done something wrong?*

What have I done to deserve this?

Who might have stolen my wallet?

If inversion is operated in **rhetorical questions** observing the corresponding grammatical principles, the subject – operator inversion is never visible in the so-called **indirect (embedded) questions** which observe the standard word order used in declarative sentences:

e.g. *He asked me why I had left so early.*

The grammatically wrong sentence **He asked me why had I left so early* where inversion is operated is commonly encountered with speakers unaware of the morphologic changes undertaken by the words introducing **indirect questions**. They are no longer **interrogative** pronouns, adjectives or adverbs, but **relative** ones, as they establish a syntactic (dependency) relationship between the main (also regent) clause and the subordinate clause they introduce.

2.3.3. Alternative questions are sentences by means of which speakers imply the idea of choice to one of the two or more alternatives mentioned in the question: e.g. *Would you like milk or tea?* Reference is usually made to two types of alternative questions, one resembling yes-no questions (see the example above) and the other resembling **wh-questions**: e.g. *Which would you like: coffee, tea, or water?* However, different from **yes/no questions**, which have a final rising tone, **alternative questions** imply a

rising tone on each item and a falling tone on the last one so as to show that the enumeration is complete:

e.g. **Yes-no:** *Shall I bring you some beer or wine (↘ ↗)?*

Alternative: *Shall I bring you some beer, (↘ ↗) wine (↘ ↗) or water (↘ ↗)?*

Referring to **alternative questions**, Bantaş (1996: 84) groups them into "limited/ finite questions which have the nature of a closed list, of a limitative enumeration and unlimited/open questions, which have the nature of an illustrative/exemplifying enumeration".

Alternative questions may be formed, as well, by adding a matching negative clause or the structure **or not?** to the positive **yes-no questions:** *Are you coming (or aren't you)?/ Are you coming (or not)?*

2.3.4. Tag questions (also disjunctive/ tail questions) are used when speakers expect a confirmation of the truth of their statement. Negative tag questions are appended to affirmative statements, whereas negative statements are followed by affirmative tag questions. A falling tone is used for both parts of the sentence when the statement expresses an assumption and the tag question expresses an expectation. On the other hand, a falling tone in the statement sentence followed by a rising tone in the tag question will imply the speakers' uncertainty about the truth of the statement:

e.g. *He likes pizza (↘), doesn't he (↗)?* (I know he likes pizza and I need confirmation)

He likes pizza (↘), doesn't he (↘)? (I do not know if he likes pizza. I need you to tell me)

Since the affirmative or negative form of the verb in the tag question is conditioned by the affirmative or negative meaning of the statement, special attention should be paid to the various means of expressing negation in English.

The use of **negative adverbs** such as: *hardly, scarcely, seldom, rarely, never* will always require an affirmative tag question:

e.g. *He has never talked to her, has he?*

He is hardly a reliable friend, is he?

The noun determiners **little** and **few**, which are semantically negative, meaning 'not enough', are used with positive tags, whereas their semantically positive corresponding forms **a little** and **a few** are followed by negative tag questions:

e.g. *Few people take such risks, do they?*

He has a few friends, doesn't he?

In examples such as: *I don't think (that) she is your best friend, is she?* the absence of negation in the tag is explained with reference to the negative particle used in the independent clause, which applies semantically to the that-clause. In such cases of transferred negation, the subject of the tag question is taken from the subordinate clause, not from the main one.

Last, but not least, statements including the adverb **only** may be followed by either positive or negative tags, but the positive ones are usually preferred, given the restrictive meaning implied in this adverb:

e.g. *He was the only person found guilty, was he?*

He was the only person found guilty, wasn't he?

Considering the simple present (affirmative or negative) the verb **to be** for the first person singular, the aspect should be pointed out that this form is hardly ever used in tag questions, because it is considered too formal. Consequently, the form **are** will be preferred when the personal pronoun I is combined with the simple present of the verb **to be** in the statement preceding the tag question (Thomson and Martinet 1986: 113):

e.g. *I am rather short to play basketball, aren't I?*

I am not playing tennis too well, are I?

As far as possible **subject** restrictions in tag questions are concerned, more or less complex noun phrases used to denote the subject of the proposition in the statement, must be replaced by the corresponding pronoun which is co-referential¹ with the subject: e.g. *My sister's best friend from secondary school got married, didn't she?*

Existential statements built with the introductory **there** must preserve this impersonal subject in

¹ Co-reference is a semantic property which establishes the relation between the noun phrases from the two sentences on a basis of equivalence.

the tag question: e.g. *There is something intriguing about that boy, isn't there?*

Instead of a conclusion, there is also a less common type of tag question in which both the statement and the question are positive, the tag always having a rising intonation: e.g. *You have had many financial problems, have you? / So she is your best friend, is she? / These are his ways, are they?* Such tag questions are used when speakers want to express their sarcasm, suspicion or irony regarding the statement made.

2.3.5. Declarative questions, included by some specialists in the classification of declarative sentences, and by others in the classification of interrogative ones, are formally identical with a statement, but have a final rising intonation which is specific to interrogative sentences:

e.g. *You passed the exam ?* (↗)

Such questions are not used in formal British or American English, but they are quite frequent in informal or colloquial contexts and in American English, in particular.

Declarative questions logically resemble statements because the corresponding auxiliary/ main verbs which take front position in standard questions are omitted by speakers for the sake of communicating efficiently and the subject – operator inversion is no longer visible in the surface structure of the sentence.

Let us consider a few examples from the famous film *Taxi Driver* directed by the Martin Scorsese and released in 1976:

PERSONNEL OFFICER (O.S.): *No trouble with the Hack Bureau?*

TRAVIS (O.S.): No Sir.

PERSONNEL OFFICER (O.S.): *Got your license?*

TRAVIS (O.S.): Yes. (Schrader: 2) [...]

[...] TRAVIS: *You kiddin?* Who else would hack through South Bronx or Harlem at night?

PERSONNEL OFFICER: *You want to work uptown nights?* (Schrader: 3) [...]

[...] TRAVIS: *What is your name?* My name is Travis.

CONCESSION GIRL: Awh, come off it, Pal.

TRAVIS: No, I'm serious, really...

CONCESSION GIRL: *Ya want me to call da boss?* Huh? *That what you want?* (Schrader: 9)

Given the very informal context and the variety of English used by the characters, i.e. American English, the number of standard interrogative sentences in which subject-operator inversion is operated (*What is your name*) is significantly smaller than that of declarative questions in which the clause elements observe the word order specific to statements (*Got your license?*; *You kiddin?*; *You want to work uptown nights?*; *Ya want me to call da boss?*; *That what you want?*)

The examples in the latter category seem to be the simplified versions of the formally and grammatically correct questions:

(Have you) Got your license?

(Are) You kiddin?

(Do) You want to work uptown nights?

(Do) Ya want me to call da boss?

(Is) That what you want?

Whether such examples should be called **declarative questions** or **elliptical questions** is debatable and it is not an aspect to be clarified by the present paper. Nevertheless, different from **yes-no** and **wh- questions**, which most often favour mistakes regarding the subject operator inversion, **declarative questions** may prove very useful and accessible to certain non-native speakers of English such as Romanian, French, Italian and Spanish, among others, who may find relevant similarities between the structure of **interrogative** sentences in their native language and that of **declarative questions** in English. The sentences included in these two categories are marked by rising intonation, and by specific punctuation (question mark) these being the only elements to distinguish a **statement** proper from an **interrogative sentence** and a **declarative question**, respectively.

Questions in Chinese also observe the word order used in **declarative questions** the word “ma” being added at the end of a statement so as to indicate that it is a question:

e.g. *Nǐ shì Lǐ Xiānshēng.* → *You are Mr Lee.* VS.

Nǐ shì Lǐ Xiānshēng ma? → *Are you Mr. Li?*

An interesting aspect worth mentioning is the fact that the question particle **ma** is used only in **yes-no questions**, the wh-questions requiring the use of another particle: i.e. **ne**. In both cases, word order is identical to that used in declarative sentences.

Considering the **semantic content** and the **pragmatic function** of interrogative sentences, reference may be made to other typologies, which may be relevant in both oral and written communication. For instance, speakers may use **hypothetical** questions (e.g. *What would you do if you won the lottery?*) when they want their interlocutors to consider imaginary or hypothetical situations and **leading** questions when they want to obtain the answer they desire or when they want to induce a certain idea on their interlocutors: *What do you think of the terrible side effects of drugs?* (the speaker induces the idea that drugs have terrible side effects); *Were you with your family at the time of the crime?* (the speaker wants the interlocutor to confirm that he/she was with his/her family at the time of the crime). Such further typologies are an indicator of the wide variety of interpretations and functions that questions may have in different contexts and of their complex and multifaceted character.

3. ARGUMENT OF THE PAPER & ARGUMENTS TO SUPPORT THE THESIS

The theoretical aspects regarding the types of sentences discussed in the present paper have been approached by various specialists who have focussed on a series of relevant morphologic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and/or stylistic aspects from a traditional, structuralist or generative transformational point of view. Most of the relevant morpho-syntactic aspects regarding sentences in English have been briefly explained in a series of accessible practical grammars, as well, which provide further extensive material for practicing sentence structure from a traditional point of view, in particular.

Practical grammars are mostly used by teachers working with primary, secondary and high school students, whereas theoretical studies are mostly used by university teachers working with undergraduate students, in particular. This may be a problematic aspect, since pre-university students have extensive practice without too much reference to the theoretical background supporting certain grammatical choices and university undergraduate students are mostly exposed to theoretical studies divided according to the common branches of linguistics (phonetics and phonology, lexicology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and/or stylistics) without being always helped to make connections and without having the chance to extensively practice, for instance, syntax notions from various perspectives, i.e. traditional, structuralist and generative transformational.

Under the circumstances, the present paper suggests that teachers should use a multi-faceted theoretical and practical approach to sentences in English which may prove very useful with both pre- and university students.

Pre-university students should be taught English grammar by comparing and contrasting the new notions in English with the corresponding grammar notions in Romanian and the approach should combine all the relevant phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and stylistic aspects. As regards university students, they should be required to possess fundamental traditional grammar knowledge in both English and Romanian when considering specialising in philology studies, so as to focus on other new (structuralist and generative transformational) multifaceted approaches to sentences from both a theoretical and a practical point of view.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is more to questions than meets the eye. Children are fascinated by questions and they discover the world around them by asking lots of questions. This may be regarded as a sign of intellectual progress and as a very important step in the evolution of human beings who are likely to become independent and aware of all the realities surrounding them if all their questions are rightly answered at the right time.

Moreover, questions, themselves, are a fascinating world, the human history being filled with questions of utmost importance, from general interrogations such as *Where do we come from? What was*

there before the Big-Bang? Is there life after death? to questions which have changed destinies, such as *Quo Vadis?*, or which have led to long lasting controversies: *Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani?*

Many questions have not been answered yet, but this should not make people lose hope. If a picture may be worth a thousand words, a question may be worth a thousand pages. A seemingly simple sentence such as: *To be or not to be?* may be and has been the starting point of greatly inspiring philosophical answers possibly covering hundreds of pages. This means that asking the right question is an aspect of utmost importance in communication and people should be familiar with all the relevant aspects which need to be taken into account when using interrogative sentences in their oral and written communication.

Given the great variety of theoretical and practical aspects to be considered in relation to the form and meaning of sentences, initially in one's native language, in our case Romanian, and subsequently in English as a foreign language, the extensive practice with pre-university students needs to be doubled by an appropriate and adequate theoretical background and the dominantly theoretical approach used with university students needs to be doubled by specific practice.

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