

## Speech Acts Are Epiphenomenal: Deconstructing Questions and Statements

**Introduction:** There are four logical possibilities to characterize the relationship between clause type (syntactic form) and speech act (pragmatic function): (i) a direct relationship (e.g. Saddock 1974, Levinson 1983), an indirect relationship (e.g. Beyssade & Marandin 2006, Farkas & Roelofson 2017), or no relationship at all. In this paper, we explore the advantages of the third possibility for our understanding of primary speech acts (Allan 2001), such as questions and statements, in light of numerous problems of the other two. We propose that we gain a better understanding of the notions of questions and statements by abandoning any direct or indirect link to their clause type. Instead we rely on two variables that are independent from both speech acts and clause types. These variables encode propositional attitudes. One variable captures the speaker's COMMITMENT to an utterance, another their expectation on the hearer's ENGAGEMENT. We couch this proposal in a syntactic framework that relies on two projections dedicated to discourse management Support comes from the conversational properties of sentence-final intonation (SFI) and sentence-peripheral particles (SPP) in a range of unrelated languages.

**Problem:** Any account that relies on an (in)direct link of clause type and speech acts is susceptible to two problems: clause types cannot be encoded unambiguously (1); and they map onto more than one speech act (2).

- |     |                                 |     |                        |
|-----|---------------------------------|-----|------------------------|
| (1) | a. Who scored?                  | (2) | a. He scored↓.         |
|     | b. I know who scored.           |     | b. He scored↑          |
|     | c. He scored what?              |     | c. Did he score↑       |
|     | d. Had he known who scored, ... |     | d. Did he score again↓ |

The examples in (1) show that there isn't any (overt) cue reliably encoding questions. Rather there are two factors that contribute to the interpretation of these utterances: word order (determining sentence mood) and prosody. (1a) includes a clause-initial wh-pronoun, but no subject-auxiliary-inversion (SAI), and is interpreted as a question. (1b) contains a wh-pronoun, but no SAI, and is used as a statement. (1c) contains a clause-internal wh-pronoun, no SAI, and is used as a question. (1d) includes SAI and a variable, but is used as a statement. In brief, a direct link of mood and speech act is impossible. For an indirect link, we can turn to speaker intentions. Although (2b) and (2d) may have declarative and interrogative mood, they are used as question and assertion, respectively. In traditional terms, the locution has no correspondence to the illocution. The hearer derives the latter from knowledge about the context (e.g. from the fact that the speaker in (2b) had his eyes closed during a penalty shoot-out and now wants to interpret the cheering and that in (2d) he knows the opposing player never misses). Hence, morpho-syntactic form is not responsible for the interpretation of questions and assertions. Turning now to SFI we observe that in (2a) prosody and mood jointly contribute to the fact that this utterance can be used as a statement: declarative mood combines with falling SFI. In (2c), the use of the utterance as a question is based on the interrogative mood in combination with a rising SFI. In (2b) and (2d), however, SFI contributes to the fact that sentence mood is no longer interpreted canonically: a declarative can be used as a question when combined with rising SFI; an interrogative can be used as a statement when used with falling SFI. Because even the interpretation of (2a) and (2c) can be derived independent of mood (the former is a statement based on falling SFI; the latter a question based on rising SFI), even an indirect linking of speech act and clause type seems a dissatisfying solution.

**Proposal:** We propose that the conversational use of questions and assertions is best understood as the result of two interacting variables. These variables include i) speaker COMMITMENT to the truth of a proposition and ii) the projection of the hearer's ENGAGEMENT with it. Questions and statements are better understood if we conceive of them as conventionalized manifestations of propositional attitudes. Instead of relying on a projection that encodes the illocutionary force of an

utterance, we decompose speech acts into separate components, which are hosted in dedicated layers of the syntactic spine: a Grounding Phrase and a Response Phrase (Wiltschko & Heim 2016). Commitment, which is hosted in the Grounding Phrase, encodes how the speaker relates to the propositional content of the utterance; Engagement, hosted in the Response Phrase, encodes how the hearer is projected to respond to the proposed change in the Common Ground. Consequently, we can recategorize speech acts as deriving from different combinations of commitment and engagement.

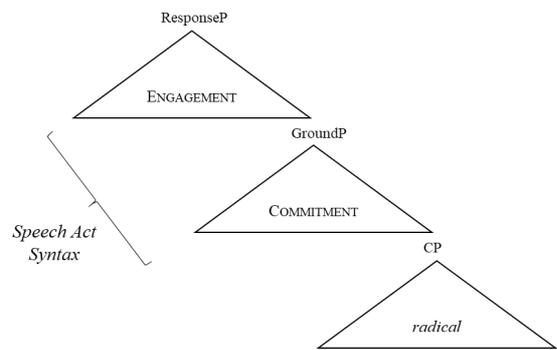


Figure 1: Syntax of Commitment and Engagement

Let's see how this plays out with the following subset of utterances from above:

- (3) a. Who scored?                      b. He scored what?                      c.                      b. He scored?

The examples in (3) are all used as questions: there is a lack of some information that the speaker expects the hearer to supply. The speaker inquires about the identity of the agent (3a), the identity of the patient (3b), or about the truth-value (3c). Hence, in all three utterances, the speaker cannot commit to the truth of the proposition. All of them have features that engage the hearer to supply the missing ingredients: (3a) has a variable that needs to be resolved, (3b) contains a variable and sentence final rise where the latter encodes a call on the addressee (Beysade & Marandin 2006), (3c) contains a rise alone. At the same time, all of them exhibit at least one property not typically associated with questions: (3a) ends in a falling SFI, (3b) contains a variable in the 'wrong' place, and (3c) lacks both, the variable and SAI. Our proposal can account for these properties by relying on the degree to which the speaker commits to the truth of the proposition and the degree to which they engage the hearer for a resolution of the truth value.

**Consequences:** We can extend the analysis to tag-questions and other speech act modifiers without increasing the complexity of the analysis. Previous models (refs.) categorize utterances, such as (4), as combinations of two speech acts to account for the formal properties of such utterances.

- (4) a. He scored, eh?                      b. He scored, didn't he?

Our model derives the conversational effects of (4a) and (4b) with the same ingredients as in (3). Instead of combining two speech acts, these utterances encode propositional attitudes similar to those found in (3). The rise on each modifier expresses the engagement of the hearer for resolution; the modifier itself the speaker's commitment. While *eh* marks full commitment because the speaker believes that the proposition is true, the tag question *didn't he* marks the inability of the speaker to fully commit to the truth of proposition. As before, these conversational effects can be captured by reference to the grounding and response properties.

**References:**

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