

UC Merced

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

Direct Wh-Questions: Language and Cognition

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1b57v6nb>

Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 19(0)

Author

Pascual, Esther

Publication Date

1997

Peer reviewed

Direct Wh-Questions: Language and Cognition

Esther Pascual

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Department of English - Edifici B
08193-Bellaterra (Barcelona) Spain
jpasqual@volcano.uab.es

The main goal of this work is to explore whether the *mental space* theory (Fauconnier 1985) can satisfactorily be extended to an account of wh-questions, one of the great neglected subjects in cognitive linguistics. Fauconnier's framework assumes that sense effects arise from the mental configurations that structures permit, rather than reflect. Moreover, the view relied on here accepts that communication involves the creation of hierarchically related and interconnected cognitive domains. These do not represent objective worlds. They are abstract mental constructs of potential worlds, which are generally set up on the basis of general scenarios or Idealized Cognitive Models (Lakoff 1987) like the world defined by a picture, a world of fiction, time slices, hypotheticals or a person's beliefs and desires. Alternatively, mental spaces may also be introduced by purely grammatical notions like quantification (Fauconnier 1986) or tense (Cutrer 1995). Grammatical notions are generally used attached to some mental reality, as they are interpreted relative to it. Nevertheless, they do not exist inherently in conceived situations, since they are introduced vis-à-vis linguistic constraints. Thus, grammatical structures simultaneously set up two domains which are linked but distinct: (i) a grammatical space, and (ii) the origin space to which that space is relevant.

It is suggested here that wh-questions involve a two-space configuration: (i) an abstract grammatical space and (ii) an origin space. The former is inhabited by a role, which is linked to its potential value(s) in the latter. The question role is understood in terms of direct reference, rather than in terms of functions (as a floating role). This role is a description defined by particular properties (e.g. 'thing(s) that you did' in 'What did you do?'), which extend to the corresponding specific -albeit unassigned- value(s) in the origin space (e.g. 'the very thing(s) that you did'). The role element is thus what we could call a 'photofit' of its correspondent mysterious value(s), as it is introduced as a guideline to get the relevant value(s) identified. These space elements represent the two different mental versions evoked by wh-questions: (i) the questioned referent as the questioner -as questioner of wh-question WH- construes it; and (ii) the questioned referent as the questioner -as questioner of wh-question WH- wishes to construe it. These two mental versions of a single linguistic referent are automatically evoked by wh-questions, regardless of the actual mental state

of questioner and potential answerer(s). They are mental representations triggered by a particular linguistic structure, which may or may not reflect a true state of mind. This notwithstanding, their occurrence is usually motivated by background knowledge and the preceding text-internal and external world. Hence, this kind of information aids to elaborate the conceptual structure of the overall mental configuration, and thereby models its elements.

The classical role-value connection is claimed to equally apply to the conceptualisations of agent, patient, manner, means, time, location and reason. They are all treated as discrete objects of thought, although some may refer to abstract untangible concepts. They are argued to be conceivable in terms of roles and values by virtue of an *ontological metaphor* (Johnson & Lakoff 1980) which allows one to construe unbounded concepts as bounded entities.

The cognitive existence of question roles and values shows the basic presuppositions evoked by wh-questions: (i) a given aspect of some proposition; and (ii) the idea that this aspect can be further specified. The connector linking the two spaces in wh-questions should reflect their communicative function: the speaker's asserted request to get the value instantiating the role identified.

Under this analysis, semantically and syntactically different kinds of wh-questions appear unified under a basic space configuration. Mutatis mutandis, this configuration can also be satisfactorily extended to other wh-constructions like what-a exclamatives, free-relatives and relative clauses.

References

- Cutrer, L. M. 1985. *Time and tense in narrative and everyday language*. Doctoral diss., UCSD.
Fauconnier, G. 1985. *Mental spaces*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Fauconnier, G. 1986. Quantification, roles, and domains. *Versus* 44/45, 61-80.
Johnson, M. & Lakoff, G. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, fire and dangerous things*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
Pascual, E. 1996. *Direct wh-questions: abstract roles, values and domains*, MA. diss., Universiteit van Amsterdam.