

Quality and Questions

Grice's maxim of Quality, stated in (1), is typically invoked to explain Moore's paradox, exemplified in (2):

- (1) Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack sufficient evidence.

- (2)
 - a. Jenna is back, but Max doesn't believe it.
 - b. Jenna is back, though you don't believe it.
 - c. Jenna is back, but/though #I don't believe it.

Appealing to Quality, a Gricean account can avoid the undesirable conclusion that the first and second clauses of (2c) are logically contradictory. Rather, the claim is that speakers observing Quality say what they believe to be true; (2c) is an infelicitous assertion because no speaker could rationally believe both clauses to be true.

This paper examines whether and how Quality figures in related patterns associated with questioning, in particular the prototypical "information question" attitudes of speaker ignorance and addressee knowledgeability.

First, note that when the speaker claims ignorance, as in (3)-(4), the classic Moore's paradox effect arises only when the claim of ignorance is paired with a statement; the effect is absent with the questions in (4).

- (3) I have no idea where Jenna is, but #she's in her office.
- (4) I have no idea where Jenna is. Where is she?/Is she in her office?

Attribution of ignorance to the addressee reverses the pattern, resulting in a paradox-like effect for questions but not statements:

- (5) I know you have no idea where Jenna is, but she's in her office.
- (6) I know you have no idea where Jenna is, but #where is she?/#is she in her office?

The explicit claim of speaker knowledgeability, on the other hand, combines well with statements, but is hard to reconcile with questions:

- (7) I know where Jenna is. She's in her office.
- (8) I know where Jenna is. #Where is she?/#Is she in her office?

The effect in (8) is defeasible: cancellation and/or suspension is possible in case it is stated or assumed that the speaker has some other reason for eliciting an answer from the addressee, as with exam and courtroom questions.

Addressee knowledgeability is perfectly compatible with questioning, as seen in (10). (As for the statement in (9), while the claim of addressee knowledgeability affects its interpretation – it seems to function as a reminder to the addressee – the result is not infelicity.)

- (9) You know where Jenna is. She's in her office.
- (10) You know where Jenna is. Where is she?/Is she in her office?

Can the above propositional attitudes associated with questioning, and the Moore's-paradox-like effects, be derived in a systematic way from general pragmatic principles? I will argue that while the patterns involving *speaker* ignorance/knowledgeability are amenable to treatment in terms of Quantity rather than Quality (the speaker, by making a weaker contribution than is relevant, i.e., asking rather than telling, implicates that she is not in a position to tell), the remaining patterns have more far-reaching consequences for the formulation of Quality and the division of labor between conventional content and pragmatic principles.

Crucially, the acceptability of (4) requires that questions *not* be understood as Quality violations, even though the speaker asking a question has failed to make his/her contribution 'one that is true'. Exempting questions from Quality is a natural idea, and is often implicitly or explicitly adopted in dialogue models that impose different rules or requirements for 'statements' vs. 'questions'. A fully explicit implementation of this idea, however, raises the fundamental issue of how the class of exemptions is to be defined:

- (11) functionally (utterances *asking* rather than *saying* are exempt, whatever their form)
- (12) formally (utterances of *syntactic interrogatives* are exempt, whatever their function)

(11) courts circularity, given that we expect pragmatic principles to help us determine how form relates to function in the first place and which utterances count as genuine statements/questions (given the notoriously inexact relationship between sentence type and speech act). Adopting (12) seems to require that our general principles make specific reference to linguistic form, a somewhat surprising development and one that leaves open the issue of how questions that are posed non-interrogatively (e.g., as declarative questions or imperative requests for information) fit into the picture.

The solution I propose has two components. First, I locate two basic distinctions between declaratives and interrogatives (concentrating on polar interrogatives) in their semantics, giving a context-update account. Declaratives (at least those with falling intonation) express *speaker commitment* (a property formally defined), while other forms (including but not limited to interrogatives) withhold such commitment. The second distinction is *dependency*: the use of an interrogative (but not a falling declarative) forecasts a discourse future in which the speaker will not contribute the propositional content on her own authority (although she may accept it from another source).

Neither speaker commitment nor dependency, however, refer directly to epistemic states of the participants. Rather they are defined in terms of discourse dispositions – a conventional expression of an intent to conduct the discourse in a particular way. The connection with attitudes is made by the second component of the analysis – a generalized implementation of Quality that encodes a preference for interpretation of discourse intentions in epistemic terms. That is, a listener will assume, unless given indications to the contrary, that the expressed conventional intent is to be interpreted by reference to the speaker's epistemic state: a speaker expressing commitment will be understood to do so because of an epistemic commitment, i.e., a belief; a speaker expressing dependency will be understood as epistemically dependent on another's information. If the circumstances warrant it, however, these default interpretations can be overridden. Furthermore, the system is flexible enough to handle the possibility of non-interrogative questions, given that inferences about epistemic states can arise through a variety of mechanisms.