
EXPANDING SEARLE'S ANALYSIS OF INTERROGATIVE SPEECH ACTS: A SYSTEMATIC CLASSIFICATION BASED ON PREPARATORY CONDITIONS

Niels Møller Nielsen
Roskilde University
E-mail: nmn@ruc.dk

Abstract: In John Searle's original taxonomy of types of illocutionary acts (Searle 1969) he points out that some kinds of illocutionary acts are special cases of other kinds, giving the example that questions are in fact special cases of requests. In that way, a 'real question' is a request for information that the sender does not already possess, whereas an 'exam question' is a request for information that the sender has already access to. This paper takes this rudimentary analysis some steps further and attempts a taxonomy of interrogative speech acts based on sets of more specific preparatory conditions such as *sender expects / does not expect reply* and *sender has access to / does not have access to the requested information*. The paper will show that a system of these sets of preparatory conditions can generate illocutionary definitions of a range of different types of interrogative speech acts.

Keywords: Interrogative speech acts, Illocutionary acts, Speech acts, Taxonomy, Preparatory conditions

1. Introduction

Any analytical attempt at categorizing questions is bound to challenge its own methodical boundaries at some point or other, since the category of questions, regardless of what terminological and methodical approaches are chosen, seems to be notoriously transcendent. Questions can hardly be reduced to a certain

feature of syntax, a form of conversational activity, or a particular sort of act. Acknowledging the considerable problems of constraining the category, this article explores a particular type of speech act analysis, proposing a specific set of preparatory conditions (following Searle's classification (Searle 1969)) as a framework for distinguishing between different distinct types of interrogative speech acts. The approach is quite narrow, and hence limited in its scope, but at the same time some real-life tokens are provided that appear to exemplify the illocutions in question whenever these illocutions and their contextual conditions are not self-evident. Such brief detours involve observations from conversation analysis, argumentation analysis, and functional grammar.

The article is based on, and takes as its theoretical starting point, a proposition based approach to speech acts following Searle's original theoretical framework. While it is recognized that a proposition based approach to speech acts is by no means uncontested – in the current issue this is most lucidly demonstrated in Borchmann 2020 – for now I regard that discussion as being beyond the scope of this presentation. The aim here is merely to explore how a system based on Searlean-style preparatory conditions can account for various distinct types of interrogative speech acts.

2. Expanding Searle's original distinctions

In speech act classifications such as Searle's (Searle 1969) it is common to classify types of acts on a general level, so that e.g. representatives, directives, etc. each include a number of more specific speech acts. These more specific act types are more useful for purposes of analyzing empirical language than the general categories they represent, yet the various specific speech acts are not described in much detail. Certainly, Searle's account of questions was only exemplary (see also Borchmann's discussion of this in the current issue (Borchmann 2020: section 3)). He discusses two different question types (both specific subtypes of the directive class) which differ from each other by virtue of whether or not the sender, as a preparatory condition, has initial access to the information that realises the speech act's propositional content (Searle 1969: 69). But following that analysis, there appears to be at least two more types of question. When considering an additional parameter, namely whether or not the sender in fact expects a reply from the recipient, four different types of question present themselves, systematically separated by two sets of preparatory conditions: *sender has access to the requested information (yes / no)* and *sender expects reply (yes / no)*.

These two sets of preparatory conditions are represented in table 1.

	Sender has access to requested information	Sender expects reply
Clarification	No	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes
Rhetorical	Yes	No
Therapeutic	No	No

Table 1. Simple combination of two sets of preparatory conditions for clarification questions (default in an unmarked context), control questions (e.g. at exams), rhetorical questions (mainly in argumentative contexts), and therapeutical questions (e.g. supervision, counselling, therapy sessions).

An initial note is due on what the term ‘reply’ should be taken to mean in this context. Clearly, in any exchange of speech acts, there will be a general preparatory condition that the sender expects a response that is appropriate to the goal or direction of the talk exchange. Taken in that sense, where ‘reply’ means ‘any contextually appropriate response’, the category ‘sender expects reply’ would seem to invariantly be ‘yes’. This expectation is fundamental to the mechanism of conversational implicature, where an obvious disregard of the expected or preferred response initialises an inferential process for generating alternative meaning potential (Grice 1975), as illustrated in example (1).

(1)

(1.1) A: Did you notice how poorly dressed she is?

(1.2) B: It is a lovely party isn't it?

B's apparent flouting of A's expectation for an appropriate response will set the implicatural process in motion. In that theoretical context, most speech acts can be expected to warrant a reply in the general sense of adhering to the direction of the communicative exchange.

In this study the term ‘reply’ is used in a narrower sense that pertains specifically to interrogative speech acts. In the unmarked case of interrogative speech act, i.e. the clarification question, the unmarked reply is one that commits to the information being requested, that is a positive or negative answer, or an indication of ignorance or of non-committal. A reply in this sense is a reaction in which an epistemological stance is taken on the information which realises the propositional content of the speech act in question. In that sense, B's answer in (1.2), while being a response, does not constitute a reply. As we will address in the following, the types of speech acts in which a reply in this sense is not expected are also the types that are furthest removed from the clarification question, being essentially indirect types of speech acts.

On another terminological note, the term ‘to have access to’ is used pertaining to the information realised by the interrogative speech acts’ propositional content. The term avoids a variety of ambiguities connected to the otherwise more common expression ‘to know’. In the current context, the expression ‘to have access to’ is used to designate any ability to cognitively process the information in question, be that epistemological or normative, rational og irrational.

Table 1 lays out the initial, simple categorization using the abovementioned categorical distinctions:

Clarification questions are the default question type, i.e. the interpretation that participants can be expected to employ in an unmarked context: There are no special contextual factors indicating that the sender intends anything other than what is at the heart of the standard interpretation of what a question is: Sender expects an answer, since sender does not have access to the answer.

Control questions, the other type mentioned by Searle, occur in contexts where the situation prescribes that the sender has the special role of assessing or checking the recipient’s knowledge. Control questions are based on the assumption that the sender already knows the answer, but that some kind of need to test the recipient’s knowledge requires that he or she gives a reply. It usually occurs in institutionalized contexts such as tests and exams. Control questions are probably also found in certain types of interrogation (see also Mortensen 2020, this issue).

The rhetorical question famously does not require a reply since everyone involved (including the sender) knows the answer, and everyone involved is assumed to know that everyone knows the answer. It is used argumentatively / persuasively as a stylistic feature that can accentuate an argumentative context or point.

Finally, there is the therapeutic question, characterized by the condition that sender’s interest is not directed at obtaining a reply to the question, nor does sender have access to (or even want to have access to) the information in question. Characteristically, the purpose of the question is to initiate and facilitate a process of recognition and self-reflection within the recipient. It occurs typically in counselling situations, in supervision settings and in therapeutic conversations. Clearly, an actual reply may indeed be given, but the reply is not strictly necessary for the exchange to commence. A mere response that gives some indication that the speech act elicits the desired type of reflective process in the receiver, such as a nod or an acknowledgement of the relevance of the question, may suffice.

A word of caution with regard to the contexts given here for the different categories of questions. The approach here is to exemplify various types of illocutionary definitions, not to claim that such speech act types exhaust or entirely cover the dialogical registers of the contexts mentioned. A good example is the therapeutic question: it is not the intention to suggest that

this illocutionary definition adequately describes therapeutic practices and the dialogical dynamics associated with them (see Brink and Jensen 2020 in the current issue whose study of therapeutic contexts adequately proves this point). The approach here only suggests that speech act types like the ones generated by the combinations of preparatory conditions are plausible in real life, and that the mentioned contexts are examples of such real life environments.

The four categories of interrogative speech acts treated thus far constitute a first approximation of a definitory system, using a simple set of preparatory conditions. However, the classification is far from exhausted using this simple system, since it is not hard to find examples of questions that do not seem to be covered by it.

3. Taking the analysis further

In an introduction to the field of Conversation Analysis, Hutchby & Wooffitt treats the example

(2)

(2.1) Mother: Do you know who's going to that meeting?

(example treated by Hutchby and Wooffitt 1988: 15f.)

The speech act may indeed apply as a clarification question in an unmarked context, but on the assumption that the context involves the shared knowledge that the sender is in fact aware of the information in question, it can be reinterpreted as a 'pre-announcement', i.e, a sequential initiation that, given that a following turn expresses a negative reply, leads the sender to proceed with actually providing the information in question.

In conversation analysis, the determination of a token of conversational activity can only be accomplished in sequential context – i. e. the analyst may be able to categorize an act as a pre-announcement question only when the sequence seems to indicate that it has that function, as in (3):

(3)

(3.1) D: Didju hear the terrible news?

(3.2) R: No, what.

(example treated in Terasaki: 184)

Clearly, it is only the reply by the recipient (R) and the (assumed) subsequent approval of the sender (D) that this reply is indeed the preferred one, that indicates that this is in fact a genuine pre-announcement question. To clarify, once we apply the sequential context to our first example, it is evident that the function of the activity is subject to sequential negotiation:

- (2)
 (2.1) Mother: Do you know who's going to that meeting?
 (2.2) Russ: Who?
 (2.3) Mother: I don't know!
 (2.4) Russ: Oh, probably Mr. Murphy and Dad (...)

(example treated by Hutchby and Wooffitt 1988: 15f.)

In (2.2) Russ clearly treats Mother's activity in (2.1) as a pre-announcement question, after which it turns out (in (2.3)) that it was not intended as such after all. Russ then goes on to repair the situation in (2.4), acknowledging that the question was in fact intended to be of the clarification type.

Pre-announcement sequences are well known and documented as interaction devices, and their existence requires us to introduce a new set of preparatory conditions: namely, *sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information (yes / no)*. The parameter *sender intends to supply (literally or by implication) the requested information (yes / no)*, is also introduced.

	Sender has access to requested information	Sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information	Sender expects reply	Sender intends to supply (or imply) the requested information
Clarification	No	Yes	Yes	No
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Rhetorical	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Therapeutic	No	Yes	No	No
Pre-announcement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Expansion with pre-announcement.

As discussed above, the term 'reply' is used to represent a situation where the recipient at a minimum reacts in a way that is appropriate to the question, i.e. *yes* or *no*, indicating doubt, or, in the case of *wh*-type questions, providing the requested information or indicating ignorance or non-committal. So giving a mere reply (in the sense stipulated in this article) does not imply that a positive, 'correct' answer is given. There is a consequential difference between the category *sender expects recipient to have access to the requested information* and *sender expects a reply*. You can expect a reply without expecting the recipient to know the answer, since a reply may be negative.

Thus, in the pre-announcement question, a reply is expected because the adjacency pair 'pre-announcement / no' is a prerequisite for the sequence to

continue on to the sender eventually providing the information. As stated in the third preparatory condition, the sender does not expect the recipient to have access to the information, and hence the reply is required to be negative. The adjacency pair is locked to a no-reply as the preferred response, which is another way of saying that the recipient's ignorance is a prerequisite for the interaction to proceed appropriately. This is where the pre-announcement question differs from the other four.

On a side note, it seems that only questions that condition *yes / no* answers are able to appear as pre-announcement questions, while the *wh*-types may only be found in the other four variants that we have discussed so far.

Another type of question is the echo question, which is characterized by the fact that the sender is not responsible for the speech act of asking, but rather for the speech act of reproducing an already stated question. This type of question belongs to a meta-linguistic register in that it restates or paraphrases another person's question. I have suggested elsewhere that questions like these are especially prominent in argumentative interaction, where reconstructions of the opponent's position are frequently seen (Nielsen 2005). Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992 employ the argumentative roles *protagonist* and *antagonist* to represent the argumentative roles of defending a claim, and of contesting or criticising the claim, respectively (for further discussion of these concepts of argumentation theory see Nielsen 2016: chapter 9). The special case of the echo question is characterized by being employed by the protagonist when in a rhetorical move anticipating a question from the antagonist, as in example (4). A columnist uses the echo question to establish a situation where an imagined antagonist poses a question that he then sets off to answer:

(4)

In general, the new Russia is getting a worse reputation than the old Sovjet Union, even with us, and that's a paradox. What the reason is? The reason is that we have been insulted by the attitude of Russia (...)

Quoted in Therkelsen 2006: 221. (Transl. NMN)

As demonstrated by Therkelsen (Therkelsen 2006), an indicator of the echo question is the inverted word order compared to the other types of question discussed here. In the echo question the unmarked form "what is the reason?" is inverted as "what the reason is?". This syntactic shift is polyphonically coded as it echoes the voice of the recipient. Thus it codifies an external voice taking responsibility for the speech act conditions, a voice that cannot be identical to the sender (regarding the analysis of linguistic polyphony see Therkelsen et al 2007). Finkbeiner (2020, current issue) treats verb-final *wh*-clauses in German and suggests that in their function as news headlines they have non-interrogative illocutions. When not acting in that particular, genre-specific

role, however, they retain an unmarked function as embedded interrogative wh-clauses – often allowing for the ‘echo’-interpretation suggested here.

We can now expand the chart with yet another category that actually turns out to be distinctive from the other five types by virtue of the particular preparatory conditions involved. While the echo question is quite similar to the rhetorical question, it crucially differs in the fact that the successful utterance of an echo question is conditional on the recipient not being expected to have advance access to the requested information.

	Sender has access to the requested information	Sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information	Sender expects reply	Sender intends to supply (or imply) the requested information
Clarification	No	Yes	Yes	No
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Rhetorical	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Therapeutic	No	Yes	No	No
Pre-announcement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Echo	Yes	No	No	Yes

Table 3. Expansion with echo question.

Like the pre-announcement question, the echo question can be understood as a dialogue-structuring device. It has the basic function of committing or engaging the recipient, but in its rather more strategic/rhetorical function, it also works by staging an imagined recipient asking for more information, effectively serving to retain the conversational turn while concurrently simulating interaction.

Are there yet other types of questions that may be described by the proposed sets of preparatory conditions? We shall now proceed by taking a look at some of the combinations that have not yet been treated. One such combination is the *no, no, no, no* constellation. This type of question could be called a monologue question, since it mostly appears in theatrical or otherwise artistic contexts where an inner monologue is externalized for dramatic reasons:

(5)
 Why do the birds go on singing?
 Why does the sea rush to shore?
 Don't they know it's the end of the world?
 (Brenda Lee (1963): *The End of the World*)

No reply is expected here, while neither the sender nor the recipient are aware of the answer, nor does the question suggest that the sender is obliged or inclined to actually afford an answer. This seems to follow from the assumption that the recipient in an internal monologue coincides with the sender. The monological question is also well known in types of self-reproach such as *why did I not go home earlier?*

Moreover, tokens can likely be found of a question featuring the combination *no, no, yes, no*, i.e. a speech act where the only preparatory condition in our system that is positively redeemed is a reply, a reply which, since the recipient is not expected to have access to the requested information, is bound to be negative. Concurrently, the sender is in a similar ignorance (and therefore cannot intend to supply the requested information). One can imagine that this type of question can be found in contexts where it merely serves to consolidate the awareness of a common ignorance between sender and recipient. I propose to call this type the dialogical question. It represents a dialogization of the monological question - since a reply is required. *How can it continue to rain?, What is the point that she should be taken away so young?*, and so forth. In practice, drawing a distinction between monological and dialogical question tokens may prove to be highly dependent on context.

With the monologue and dialogue questions we are beginning to move towards forms of expression that are not ‘real questions’ in so far as they show some indirectness. While they don’t seem to have the ‘real question’ characteristic of being aimed at eliciting or producing some form of information, they both seem to be able to count as forms of regret and to possess an inherent emotive function.

	Sender has access to the requested information	Sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information	Sender expects reply	Sender intends to supply (or imply) the requested information
Clarification	No	Yes	Yes	No
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Rhetorical	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Therapeutic	No	Yes	No	No
Pre-announcement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Echo	Yes	No	No	Yes
Monological	No	No	No	No
Dialogical	No	No	Yes	No

Table 4. Expansion with monologue and dialogue questions.

On a more speculative level, I suggest that two additional types of questions, in the following referred to as the ‘phatic’ question and the ‘offensive’ question, should be considered, while acknowledging that these final analyses are quite tentative. One potential problem is that while the monologue and dialogue questions discussed above have aspects of indirectness, these two suggested question types are clearly indirect speech acts in the sense of Searle 1979 (Searle 1979: 30–57) or alternatively, utterances that could be understood as forms of particular conversational implicature, following Grice 1975. For the present purpose we adopt Searle’s rather crude analysis of indirectness, since its distinction between primary and secondary illocutions is a more accessible way to approach these question types, than is the concise, yet also complicated, framework of Grice. The determination of these indirect question types is considerably more complex than direct questions since the analysis needs to operate at two different levels simultaneously, i.e. the ‘secondary illocution’ (the literal meaning) and the ‘primary illocution’ (the implied meaning). While these speech act types do exhibit superficial features of being questions (e.g. they are written with question marks etc), they are clearly not interrogative in terms of their primary illocutions, where they carry the forces of greetings and charges, respectively.

In Roman Jakobson’s account of language functions, the phatic function is the function that opens, maintains and closes down linguistic contact (Jakobson 1960), prototypes being greetings and salutations. Phatic questions comprise utterances such as *How do you do?* and *What’s up?* They are indirect speech acts in that their primary illocutionary function is to start or maintain communicative contact. Therefore, a reply that literally addresses the requested information is normally not appropriate (Garfinkel’s 1967 experiments show how breaching properties of common discourse is socially stressful (Garfinkel 1967: 42–44.)), while it will obviously also be inappropriate for the sender to supply the information, as the speech act is not really a question at all. So the phatic question seems to realise the *yes-yes-no-no* constellation in the system.

Offensive questions, with the constellation *yes-yes-yes-yes*, are also indirect speech acts, as they will normally function as accusations or reproaches such as: *What was that for?*, *What do you think you’re doing?* or *Do you think that was particularly clever?* I suggest that a negative reply is the preferred response, counting as an acceptance of the reproach. While such a reply is desired, the question, by virtue of its indirect status, counts as the sender in fact conveying an act of reproach or accusation. In a sense, the sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information, which explains why it is not entirely appropriate to answer *I don’t know* to *what do you think you are doing?* simply because this reply reflects a confusion of the secondary with the primary illocution.

	Sender has access to requested information	Sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information	Sender expects reply	Sender intends to supply (or imply) the requested information
Clarification	No	Yes	Yes	No
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Rhetorical	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Therapeutic	No	Yes	No	No
Pre-announcement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Echo	Yes	No	No	Yes
Monological	No	No	No	No
Dialogical	No	No	Yes	No
Phatic	Yes	Yes	No	No
Offensive	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 5. Expansion with phatic and offensive questions.

As already noted, these last types of question challenge the system's descriptive force, mainly because they are clearly indirect and consequently harder to disambiguate as speech act types in terms of primary illocution. An example that may be hard to place is *Do you take me for a fool?* which, although at first glance it seems to belong to the offensive category, is ambiguous with regard to categories 3 and 4, yielding something like the constellation *yes-yes-?-?*.

4. Concluding remarks

The proposed system can describe differences between a range of speech acts, based on different preparatory conditions, speech acts which appear on the surface to be questions. In terms of combinatorics, a chart featuring four conditions, each of which realises a binary value, will generate a total of 16 possible combinations. However, four of these can already be excluded, namely any case of 'no' to the sender having access to the requested information, and 'yes' to the sender intending to supply the information, as this would be logically incoherent. To be specific, it can be observed that some of the four categories are logically interdependent, so conditions one and four are locked into a set of reciprocal entailment relations: if the sender intends to supply the requested information, then the sender must have access to the requested information. It follows that 'no' to condition one entails 'no' to condition four, while 'yes' to condition four entails 'yes' to condition one.

In consequence, there are twelve distinct options in this system, presented below in a systematic outline of the possible combinations:

	Sender has access to requested information	Sender expects the recipient to have access to the requested information	Sender expects reply	Sender intends to supply (or imply) the requested information
Offensive	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Control	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Rhetorical	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Phatic	Yes	Yes	No	No
Pre-announcement	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
?	Yes	No	Yes	No
Echo	Yes	No	No	Yes
?	Yes	No	No	No
*	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clarification	No	Yes	Yes	No
*	No	Yes	No	Yes
Therapeutic	No	Yes	No	No
*	No	No	Yes	Yes
Dialogical	No	No	Yes	No
*	No	No	No	Yes
Monological	No	No	No	No

Table 6. A systematic overview of the available combinations.

* indicates that the question is logically impossible because the sender's intention to communicate the requested information presupposes his having access to it.

? indicates a question type that is logically possible within the system but has not been accounted for.

As mentioned, four combinations seem to be logically impossible, which leaves us with two types of questions that have not been accounted for in this study, constellations *yes-no-yes-no*, and *yes-no-no-no*.

Thus, the system has described ten distinct types of speech acts, all of which seem to be able to function interrogatively, at least in their superficial secondary illocutions.

References

- Borchmann, Simon. 2020. The intentionality of questions – a critique of Searle's analysis of speech acts. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 11(1), 20-55.
- Van Eemeren, Frans H. and Rob Grootendorst. 1992. *Argumentation, Communication, and Fallacies: A Pragma-Dialectical Perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Finkbeiner, Rita. 2020. Wh-headlines in German. What they communicate and whether they optimize relevance. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 11(1), 146-169.
- Garfinkel, Harold (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Grice, H. P. 1975. Logic and Conversation. *Syntax and Semantics, vol. 3, Speech Acts*, Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (eds.), Academic Press.
- Hutchby, Ian and Robin Wooffitt. 1998. *Conversation Analysis: Principles, Practices and Applications*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1960. Linguistics and Poetics. Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed.). 1960. *Style in Language*. Cambridge Mass.: The M.I.T. Press.
- Mortensen, Sune Sønderberg. 2020. A question of control? Forms and functions of courtroom questioning in two different adversarial trial systems. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 11(1), 239-278.
- Nielsen, Niels Møller. 2005. *Counter Argument: In Defence of Common Sense*. Roskilde: Roskilde University Press.
- Nielsen, Niels Møller. 2016. *Argumenter i kontekst: Introduktion til pragmatisk argumentationsanalyse. 2. udgave*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.
- Searle, John. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, John. 1979. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Terasaki, Alene Kiku. 2004. Pre-announcement sequences in conversation. Lerner, Gene H. (ed.). 2004. *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation*. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Therkelsen, Rita. 2006. Kodning af spørgsmålgentagelse på dansk. P. Durst-Andersen, L. Falster Jakobsen, H. Jansen, J. Pedersen & E. Strudsholm (red.). 2006. *Ny Forskning i Grammatik* 13, 2006, 215–228.
- Therkelsen, Rita, Nina Møller Andersen and Henning Nølle (ed.). 2007. *Sproglig polyfoni: Tekster om Bachtin og ScaPoLine*. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Worsøe, Line Brink and Thomas Wiben Jensen. 2020. Questioning questions in psychotherapeutic practice: The dialogical dynamics of change in therapy through clients questioning therapists. *Scandinavian Studies in Language*, 11(1), 279-317.