Discourse Functions of Question Words

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Butt (2012) presents an analysis of echo questions in Urdu/Hindi which makes crucial reference to the Information Structure status of the 'wh' question word involved. Such a question word occupies the post-verbal position reserved for Background Information in Urdu/Hindi, which is characterised as [−NEW, −PROM(INENT)] according to the information feature system proposed by Butt & King (1997; henceforth B&K). This contrasts with the information-feature values usually associated with a question phrase, namely those identified with Focus: [+NEW, +PROM(INENT)]. One consequence of Butt's (2012) analysis is that is opens up an intriguing possibility: if a question phrase can belong to either the Information Structure (I.S.) category Focus or the I.S. category Background Information, can it also belong to the other two major categories in B&K's system, i.e. Topic and Completive Information? And if so, how is this to be captured? I argue that question phrases can indeed belong to these two I.S. categories and, drawing on recent work concerning the place within the grammatical architecture of information structure (Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011) and prosodic structure (Dalrymple & Mycock 2011, with modifications based on ongoing work by the author), I present an analysis which captures the different I.S. statuses that question words may have and how these can be encoded (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

I take the feature [NEW] used in B&K's information feature system to refer to relational rather than referential givenness–newness (Lambrecht 1994). This is a key distinction to make because in an echo question it is the denotatum which represents the information gap expressed by the question word that is at issue and not the relational status of the questioned element to the presupposition because this is, after all, expressed in the preceding utterance. This is consistent with Butt's (2012) analysis and with the 'secondary' nature of an echo question, which refers back to an immediately preceding utterance. What distinguishes an echo-question phrase from a 'regular' Completive Information constituent is that the former indicates a gap in the speakers' knowledge. I analyze this in terms of a feature [+Q], which is part of any question word's lexical entry. This feature value specification is included in the 'interface structures' associated with the relevant syntactic/phonological unit of the string, in accordance with the model outlined in Dalrymple & Mycock (2011), because [+Q] represents information that may be relevant at multiple levels of the grammar. It is clear that cross-linguistically [+Q] status can be encoded in the syntax and/or prosody in a way that distinguishes a question word from its non-interrogative counterpart, e.g. in English Questioning Focus occupies SpecCP, but there is no such requirement on New Information Focus, as the data in Table 1 illustrate.

Under B&K's information-feature system, the two other logical possibilities are that question phrases can be [−NEW, +PROM], i.e. can belong to the category Topic, or [+NEW, −PROM], i.e. can belong to the category Completive Information. With respect to the first of these classifications, the Topic-like status of a certain question phrase in a multiple 'wh'-question has long been observed in the literature (e.g. Bolinger 1978). Kuno & Takami refer to this as the Sorting Key (1993). A Sorting Key has properties that distinguish it from other question phrases not only in terms of its I.S. status but also with respect to its morphosyntactic and/or prosodic encoding, e.g. in English a Sorting Key is syntactically prominent (appearing in clause-initial position) while non-Sorting Key question phrases, which are the [+Q] counterpart of Completive Information, appear 'in situ', with their relational newness marked prosodically (Ginzburg & Sag 2001: 249); see Figure 1. A Sorting Key must however be distinguished from a non-interrogative that is [−NEW, +PROM] because the two can differ significantly in terms of encoding, e.g. in Hungarian question words do not occur in the Topic field. By permitting question words to belong to the categories that B&K define in terms of information features, we can account for the distinct properties of question phrases while simultaneously acknowledging the features they share with their non-interrogative counterparts.

This approach better covers the relevant data than two previous LFG treatments of the I.S. status of question words. Mycock (2006) proposed that non-echoic question words inherently have Focus status, thus [+NEW, +PROM] in B&K's system, while Gazdik (2011) analyzed question words as having a positive value for the feature [+PROM]. Both approaches are inconsistent with Butt's (2012) analysis of Urdu/Hindi echo questions as [−NEW, −PROM]. By integrating question words fully into B&K's analysis of Discourse Functions and adding [+Q] to the inventory of semantic/pragmatic information to be included in Dalrymple & Mycock's (2011) 'interface structures', this work further increases our understanding of interface phenomena and their analysis within the LFG framework.

Selected References: Butt, M. (2012). *Questions in Urdu/Hindi*. Presented at the LFG12 Conference. ⬥ Butt, M. & T. H. King (1997). 'Structural Topic and Focus without movement'. *Proceedings of LFG96*. ⬥ Dalrymple, M. & L. Mycock (2011). 'The Prosody-Semantics Interface'. *Proceedings of LFG11*. ⬥ Kuno, S. & K.-I. Takami (1993). *Grammar and Discourse Principles*. University of Chicago Press. ⬥ Mycock, L. (2006). *The Typology of Constituent Questions*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester.

Table 1: Discourse Functions defined in terms of information features [±NEW], [±PROM] and question phrase [+Q] status; relevant constituent underlined in each example

Focus [+NEW, +PROM]		Completive Information [+NEW, −PROM]	
New Information Focus		**Completive Information**	
A: What did Lily buy at the market?		A: Where has Lily been shopping?	
B: She bought <u>flowers</u> at the market.		B: She's just bought <u>flowers</u> at the market.	
[+Q] Questioning Focus		**[+Q] non-Sorting Key**	
A: <u>What</u> did Lily buy at the market?		A: Who bought <u>what</u>?	
B: She bought flowers at the market.		B: Lily bought flowers, Charlie bought cakes and Alice bought balloons.	
Topic [−NEW, +PROM]		**Background Information [−NEW, −PROM]**	
Topic		**Background Information**	
A: What did Lily do?		A: Who did Lily buy flowers for?	
B: <u>She</u> bought flowers at the market.		B: She bought <u>them</u> for her mother.	
[+Q] Sorting Key		**[+Q] Echo Question**	
A: <u>Who</u> bought what?		A: Lily bought flowers yesterday.	
B: Lily bought flowers, Charlie bought cakes and Alice bought balloons.		B: Lily bought <u>WHAT</u> yesterday?	
		A: Flowers.	

Figure 1: Analysis of *What did Lily put where?*