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Just asking questions

How the cloud of uncertainty precipitates conspiracy theories

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Utterance of an interrogative sentence which...

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(Searle 1969; Dayal 2016; Farkas 2022, a.m.o.)

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Coordination view: To open public coordination on (resolving) an issue (typically involving the above)

(Lewis 1969; Roberts 1996/2012; Ginzburg 1996; Farkas & Bruce 2010; Murray & Starr 2018; Rawlins 2024)

Questions and conspiracies

Non-canonical questions

Problem: 'functional heterogeneity of questions' (Lauer & Condoravdi 2012)

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(3) **Self-addressed/musing questions**
Will it rain tomorrow, I wonder?
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(Sadock 1971; Han 2002; Rohde 2006; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Farkas 2022, 2024, a.m.o.)

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Theoretical issue

Which aspects of question meaning are part and parcel of an interrogative utterance, and which are derived?

Controversy questions

One species of non-canonical questions: 'controversy' questions
(Roberts 2024)

(4) a. Can Barcelona survive mass tourism? (*New York Times*, 08/2024)
  b. Is your home security system really secure? (*Fox News*, 08/2024)
  c. Is dancing a sin? *(Washington Post*, 1894, by way of NPR)*

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Function $\approx$ Draw attention to unsettledness of issue (✗ Info-seeking, ✗ Knowledgeable Ad)

'Just asking questions'

Controversy questions can be *weaponized* in political discourse to sow doubt or spread rumors/misinformation:

(Keeley 1999; Fox Tree & Weldon 2007; Aaronovitch 2010; Oreskes & Conway 2010; Douglas et al. 2019; Pipper et al. 2025)

(6)   a.   Is it possible that Malta was once home to a race of extraterrestrial giants?   (*Ancient Aliens*, 'The Giants of Malta')

       b.   Could the moon landing be the biggest hoax in history?

                                          (YouTube, 'Griffin Tales')

       c.   Was 9/11 an inside job?

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Functionally: backdoor way of insinuating the truth of some *p*
Indirect strategy: why not just make a false claim outright?

Goals of this talk

- Formalize how 'just asking questions' can be used as a tool of spreading falsehoods/conspiracy theories, and why it is a viable strategy
- Bring these insights to bear on what kinds of context updates are performed by (polar) interrogative utterances more generally

Preview:

- Uttering interrogatives sets the QUD (and nothing else)
- Given assumption of speaker sincerity, question-asking implies speaker ignorance toward the true answer
- Under certain conditions, this pushes the addressee to reassign credence to possible answers to be more unifor
- These conditions are exactly those which characterize controversy questions
- 'Just asking questions' in conspiracy/misinfo contexts = controversy questions with taboo content

Bigger picture: 'Non-canonical' pragmatics of QUD-setting interacting with features of context

Features of CT questions

Low priors

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(7)   a.   Did Armstrong even take the photo [during the moon landing] at all?

         b.   [We don't know what's on the dark side...] Could there also be an entire species of creatures dwelling in the dark craters and recesses of the moon?

               ('MostAmazingTop10' on YouTube (7.77M subscribers))

(8)   What was the role of federal agents and informants in pressing the crowd toward the Capitol on Jan. 6?

               (Donald Trump, 01/2023)

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The cloud of unknowing

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- ✦ Presented as unclear, cryptic, and mysterious, often because of influence of powerful actors
- ✦ If I already think this is just conspiratorial nonsense, I'm unlikely to be swayed by the question alone
- ✦ Different story if I'm on the fence or 'merely' a bit skeptical

Persuasion with assertions and questions

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(10)   a.   *p*
            9/11 was an inside job.
       b.   *p*?
            Was 9/11 an inside job?

Background assumptions

The utility of an utterance is evaluated by weighing its **benefits** versus its **costs** (as in e.g. RSA; Frank & Goodman 2012)

$$\mathcal{U}(u) = b - c$$

Speakers select an u which maximizes $\mathcal{U}(u)$

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What counts as 'costs' and 'benefits'? In conspiratorial/political discourse:

❖ **Costs**: implications for being on the record as having made certain claims

❖ **Benefits**: Persuading the interlocutor of the truth of some claim

Goal: Understand why in conspiratorial situations questions could be utility-optimal

What utterances do

Pared-down version of scoreboard/Table+QUD-like frameworks for sentential utterance updates

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Utterances of declarative sentence *p*:

- ✦ Commit speaker to truth of *p*
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Utterance of polar interrogative sentence *p*?:

- Commit speaker to neither *p* nor $\neg p$
- Add resolving the issue $\{p, \neg p\}$ to the conversational agenda

Basic assumption: cost to making **commitments**

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- ✤ Declarative utterance: Negative cost associated with committing to something 'controversial'
    - ✤ Proxy for negative legal, social, etc. consequences
    - ✤ The more controversial p is ($\approx$ prior beliefs of addressee that p), the greater the cost of asserting p

Persuasiveness

Assumption: benefit of utterance is **persuasiveness** (in misinfo contexts).

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- $\Rightarrow$ Persuasiveness: degree to which addressee shifts their beliefs vis-a-vis some intended propositional meaning
- ✤ Cashed out with credence function c, relativized to agent a
- ✤ For set of propositions $\{p_1, p_2, p_3, ..., p_n\}$ which partitions W,
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(11)   An utterance u communicates proposition p to agent a with **persuasiveness**
$\mathcal{P}(m, p, a) := c_{a,o}(p) - c_{a,i}(p)$

What matters for persuasiveness

Three ingredients:

- The form of *Sp*'s message, declarative or interrogative
- *Ad*'s estimation of *Sp*'s authority on the matter of whether *p* (how reliable are they as a source?)
    - Here $Auth_{Sp}(p)$: 0 = no authority, 1 = maximal
- How likely *Ad* is to be persuaded wrt whether-*p* in general
    - Notated here as weight *w*; 0 = impossible to persuade, 1 = incredibly easy

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(12)   a.   Where is the nearest ATM? (high *w*)
         b.   Does God exist? (low *w*)

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- *Ad* assumes *Sp* represents their beliefs in good faith, i.e., is not asking questions they know the answer to
  - More generally: assumption that utterance is *viable*, i.e. all propositions in the set they put up for discussion are live possibilities (see Rudin 2022)
  - For declaratives: only one proposition; for polar interrogatives: two

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    - For declaratives: only one proposition; for polar interrogatives: two
- If *Ad* believes *Sp* to be at least as authoritative as they are on *p*?, the act of asking raises doubt vis-a-vis *p*?
- Thus, *Ad* is encouraged to assign more credence to unlikelier answers to that question than before *Sp*'s utterance

Declarative persuasion

For declarative utterance *u* of proposition *p*,

$$c_{a,o}(p) = c_{a,i}(p) + (1 - c_{a,i}(p)) * w * Auth_{Sp}(p)$$
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- ❖ Add credence to *p* relative to *w* (ease of persuasiveness) and $Auth_{Sp}(p)$
- ❖ If $w = Auth_{Sp}(p) = 1, c_{a,o} = 1$
- ❖ If $w = 0$ or $Auth_{Sp}(p) = 0, c_{a,o} = c_{a,i}$
- ❖ $c_{a,o}(\neg p) = 1 - c_{a,o}(p)$, updated accordingly

Interrogative persuasion

Push all credences towards the mean, scaled by w (importance of authority) and $Auth_{sp}(p?)$:

$$\forall p \in Q, c_{ad,o}(p) = (\frac{1}{|Q|} - c_{a,i}(p)) * w * Auth_{Sp}(p)$$

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  - ✛ Persuasiveness can be negative for some possible answers to *Q*
- ✛ À maximally 'persuasive' question is one which causes the addressee to believe all possible answers are equally likely
- ✛ Uttering a declarative *p* will always be at least at persuasive wrt *p* as uttering interrogative *p*?

Example

Parameters: $w = 0.1$

$Auth_{Sp}(p) = 0.2$

Prior credence $c_{Ad,i}(p) = 0.01$

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For $p? =$ *Was 9/11 an inside job?*:

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⋆ **But, uttering** $p?$ **is preferable if cost of committing to** p **exceeds 0.1!** ⋆

Revisiting other question types

Note that some question species don't seem to shift addressee credence in the same way:

(13)   Is it raining today?   (*Info-seeking q*)

(14)   Am I your maid?   (*Rhetorical q*)

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This can be understood under the current account:

✛ Info-seeking q's: *Sp* authority is 0, so no update to *Ad* credence

✛ Rhetorical/exam q's: *Sp* abandons the pretense of *viability* in a way the addressee is meant to recover (utility $\neq$ persuasion)

Wrapping up

Conclusion

Questions can be weaponized to communicate doubt:

- ✤ Uttering interrogatives implies the answer to be unknown to the speaker, given assumption of *viability*
- ✤ If the speaker is presumed at all knowledgeable, this leads addressees to re-evaluate their own beliefs in possible answers

Side effects for CTs:

- ✤ Makes addressee believe the issue is unsettled → boosts their priors for unlikely events–**a kind of informativity**
- ✤ Asking questions gets speakers off the hook for making commitments—a 'safe' strategy for spreading {m/d}isinfo
- ✤ Perhaps a more effective strategy than outright assertion, which addressee might reject if it's too outlandish?

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We can discover a lot by examining situations with do not meet typical assumptions about cooperativity and information exchange!

References

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