

“What's this fly doing in my soup?": A special *construction* or a *special question*?

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In a famous article, Fillmore and Kay (1999) (F&K) argue that English structures as those in (1) in their non-literal meaning cannot but be explained by assuming a construction:

- (1) a. What's this fly doing in my soup?
b. What was she doing under the bed?
c. What's this scratch doing on the table?
d. What are you doing eating cold pizza?

As pointed out by F&K, the meaning of sentences belonging to this construction can usually be paraphrased by “How come?” and state that “[i]n addition to a request or demand for an explanation, the pragmatic force of attributing what we call INCONGRUITY to the scene or proposition for which the explanation is required”. Syntactically, these sentences also show some idiosyncratic properties: 1) they must contain the verb DO; 2) the verb DO in such sentences always appears in the present participle form; 3) *doing* must appear as a complement of copula BE; 4) the encoding of progressive aspect is not a necessary part of these sentences; 5) the interrogative pronoun does not accept *else*; 6) they do not permit negation of either DO or BE. As a consequence, the authors assume the “WXDY-construction”, which encodes both its special semantics and pragmatics and its specific syntactic properties.

The aim of my paper is to show some first ideas of how the construction might be tackled within a (mainstream/compositional) generative approach if we take into account Obenauer's (2004, 2006) theory on so called *special* (or: *non-standard*) questions. In the case of special *wh* questions, these are taken to be questions which are not interpreted “as requests to specify the value(s) of the variable bound by the *wh*-quantifier” (Obenauer 2006). As Obenauer has shown, there are at least three types of special *wh* questions that must be considered as clause types in some languages, since they not only show semantic and pragmatic differences from standard questions but also diverge in their syntactic properties. In Obenauer's theoretical approach, these clause types are modelled in a cartographic framework, in which there are special functional heads in the left periphery that trigger both the semantics/pragmatics and the syntax of such sentences.

One of the types identified by Obenauer is the surprise-disapproval question (SDQ): “This question type can be characterized intuitively as (obligatorily) expressing an attitude of the speaker towards the propositional content, an attitude of surprise with a negative orientation, i.e., combined with disapproval.” (Obenauer 2006). This definition bears a striking resemblance to the meaning established by F&K for the WXDY construction. More strikingly still, the fact that WHAT takes a WHY-interpretation in SDQs is a typologically widespread phenomenon; cf. the examples in (2) from Garzonio & Obenauer (2010):

- (2) a. O que estás para aí a rir?! (Portuguese)
‘Why are you laughing?!’
b. Was lachst du (denn)?! (German)
‘Why are you laughing (prt)?!’
c. Čto bežiš?! (Russian)
‘Why are you running?!’
d. Mjít ulsz itt?! (Hungarian)
‘Why are you sitting here?!’
e. John-wa nani-o awateteiru no?! (Japanese)
‘Why is John panicking?!’
f. What sit we then projecting Peace and Warr?
(Early Modern English)

These examples contain instances of the so-called *why-like what* (WLW). Now, crucially, the bad news is that Modern English does not license WLW in sentences such as (2). But the good news is that

Obenauer's theory predicts that WLW may trigger special syntactic properties. I will thus try arguing along the following lines:

1. English does have WLW, which shows up in the WXDY construction.
2. English WLW is inserted into a dedicated FP in the CP domain. The properties of this FP determine the strange syntactic behaviour observed by F&K.

An important point with respect to the second assumption is an observation made by Fitzpatrick (2005; also cf. Conroy 2006) with respect to *how-come* questions, namely that they are factive. Since the WDX construction mostly corresponds in meaning and pragmatic properties to *how-come* questions, we conclude that they are factive as well. We will tentatively assume (similar to Fitzpatrick 2005 for *how-come*) that the FP hosting WLW in English c-selects a FactP that requires its complement to be presupposed. I will argue that – differently from *how-come* – the Fact° head is "strong" in two senses: It is overtly realized by DO and it has an [EPP] feature that is checked by movement of the subject to its specifier. In addition, the head of F° in WDX triggers T°-to-F°-movement, similar to standard questions but also differently from *how-come* questions:

(3) [FP What_{wlw} [F° [T°BE]] [FactP you [Fact° DO_{factive}] [TP ~~you~~ BE [vP ~~you~~ EAT cold pizza]]]]

I will assume that DO is a valid candidate for bearing a factivity feature: this feature can also be supposed for emphatic DO (an instance of verum focus). Since it appears in the present participle form, it must either be interpreted as fossilized or Fact° cannot be its base position and it should rather be externally merged in the TP domain. Let us assume the latter, so as to have a structure along the lines of (4), where DO scopes over vP, marking it as factive:

(4) [TP you [T° ???] [XP DO_{factive} [vP ~~you~~ EAT cold pizza]]]

Following the logic of English interrogative syntax, the T° slot should be filled by dummy DO, and not by BE (thus deriving **What do you do eating cold pizza*). While this is one of the things that have still to be explained, it can be noted that the analysis proposed so far would make the right prediction for the joke with the fly in (1a):

(5) [TP this fly [T°BE_{expl}] [XP DO_{factive} [SC ~~this fly~~ in my soup]]]

Since the predicate is a small clause here, expletive BE is predicted.

Some other pros and contras of such an analysis will be discussed in the talk. Among the pros are:

- If FactP is situated above FocP (cf. Ono 2006, among others) and FocP is the locus of *wh* elements in standard questions, then the analysis can be taken as independent evidence for Obenauer's claim that the functional projections that license special questions are situated higher than those of standard questions.
- We can explain the negation facts observed by F&K: **What aren't my brushes doing soaking in water?* / **What are my brushes not doing soaking in water?* vs. the grammatical *What are my brushes doing not soaking in water?*
- The fact that the progressive aspect is not necessarily encoded in WXDY follows from the fact that BE seems to be an expletive and not an auxiliary.

And some of the contras (or at least open issues) in addition to what has already been said:

- The morphology of DO and V has still to be explained.
- The nature of the XP that hosts DO_{factive} is unclear.
- Why can the “strong” FactP not appear in how come questions and exclamatives?
- BE-over-DO movement seems to violate the HMC.

Possible solutions will be presented for some of the latter points.

References

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