

Bias in WH-Questions (Guerzoni 2003)

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1 Data

Bernhard showed that yes/no questions exhibit bias. It turns out that constituent questions do as well:

- (1) a. Who will lift a finger to help us?
b. Who will do anything to help us?
- (2) a. Who said a single word?
b. Who said anything?

The same effect obtains in constituent questions with *even*:

- (3) a. Who is advising even a single student?
b. Who is advising any students?

This effect, however, is dependent on associating *even* with an expression at the lower endpoint of a pragmatic scale. The context must entail that Q2 is the easiest, not the hardest, question if (4a) is to be interpreted as biased.

- (4) a. Who even answered [Question 2]_F? ambiguous
b. Does your truck even fit an [elephant]_F? neutral
c. Does your truck even fit a [fly]_F? biased

Because minimizers also occupy the lowest positions on their scales, Guerzoni subsumes an explanation of their effects on bias under one for that of the presuppositions of *even*+lower endpoint, just as we saw for the yes/no question case.

2 *Even* in WH-questions

First I show how Guerzoni derives the neutral case, and then how she gets the biased case.

2.1 Neutral questions

It is 'easy' to get the 'hard' presupposition in WH-questions; they fall out directly from the lexical meaning of *even* and the semantics Guerzoni assumes for question denotations, a set of propositions that each contain a witness for the WH-word.

- *Even*, in the absence of negation, presupposes that the focused element is at the top of some pragmatic scale.
- This presupposition of *even* holds for each proposition in the denotation, so that in (4a) each individual witness is presupposed to have found Q2 difficult.
- Note that this presupposition is *universal* in the sense that it must hold for each witness, not just one.

However, there is no negation in these questions, so there is no way to get the ‘easy’ presupposition on Guerzoni’s assumptions about Q-denotations. Remember that deriving the ‘easy’ presupposition was completely dependent on having a negation which *even* could scope over.

2.2 Biased questions 1—assumption

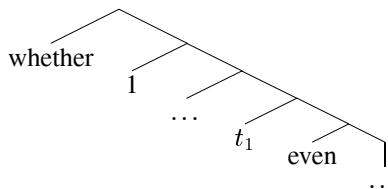
Guerzoni thus has to get negation into her question denotations somehow. She does this by assuming that WH-questions include a covert *whether* (following Higginbotham (1993)). On this assumption, the denotation of *Who called?* is (5)(I spare you the computation):

$$(5) \{p : \exists x[\text{person}(x) \text{ and } (p = \text{that } x \text{ called or } p = \text{that } x \text{ didn't call})]\}$$

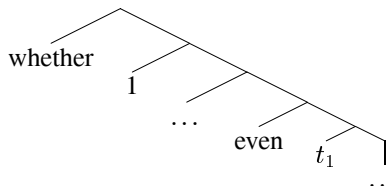
Because there is now a negation in the question denotation, it’s possible to do the same analysis based on scopal interactions with *even* that was provided earlier for yes/no questions.

2.3 Biased questions 2—analysis

Note first that this change turns out not to affect anything for the neutral question case, where $\text{trace}_{\text{whether}} > \text{even}$ (G. assumes that covert *whether* is fronted). The reason is that in this case the presupposition of *even* is computed before negation enters the picture, and so only the ‘hard’ presupposition is available.



Let’s now see what happens in the $\text{even} > \text{trace}_{\text{whether}}$ case.



- Here, since *whether* introduces the negation of the proposition p in its scope, *even* applies to both p and $\neg p$.
- Since *even* states that the proposition it applies to is the *least* likely one, applying it to a negated proposition means that proposition is the *most* likely.
- This effectively returns the ‘easy’ presupposition as one possibility.

Either scoping of t_{whether} and *even* thus makes the hard presupposition available, so if WH-q with *even* is uttered in a context supporting the ‘hard’ presupposition, the question is felicitous. However, since only the second reading makes the ‘easy’ presupposition available, a context supporting this presupposition requires $\text{even} > t_{\text{whether}}$, and filters out the ‘hard’ presupposition.

This proposal is attractive, but leads to some complications with other sorts of questions. For details, see Guerzoni (2003; section 3.4).

3 Other sorts of questions

Bias also shows up in other environments (w/o minimizers or *even*).

Case 1 (Romero & Han (2002,2003)): Positive bias in yes/no questions with preposed negation:

- (6) a. Does John not drink? neutral
b. Doesn't John drink? positive bias
- (7) a. Would you rather eat out tonight? neutral (ex. from Ladusaw 2003)
b. Wouldn't you rather eat out tonight? positive bias (Ladusaw 2003)

Cross-linguistically general; same found in e.g. Greek, Spanish, German, Korean (examples from R & H):

- (8) Spanish:
a. ¿ Juan no bebe? neutral
b. ¿ No bebe Juan? positive bias
- (9) Korean:
a. Suni-ka coffee-lul an masi-ess-ni?
Suni-nom coffee-acc neg drink-past-Q
'Did Suni not drink coffee?' neutral
b. Suni-ka coffee-lul masi-ess-ci anh-ni?
Suni-nom coffee-acc drink-past neg-Q
'Didn't Suni drink coffee?' positive bias

Case 2 (me): We also get negative bias in questions with modal *would* (11). Ignore habitual *would* as in (10):

- (10) John would always play the guitar sitting on the steps of the cellblock.
- (11) a. Who will give any money to this cause? neutral
b. Who would give any money to this cause? negative bias

Is it plausible that the subjunctive includes some kind of covert *even*, which then associates with some least likely possibility? Or should we look elsewhere for an explanation? Probably the latter.

Note that intonation is different in (11a) and (11b), at least when *this cause* does not receive contrastive focus.

Case 3 (pointed out by Bernhard): positive bias in questions with PPIs:

- (12) a. Who hasn't ever been in Paris? neutral
b. Who hasn't sometimes been in Paris? positive bias

4 References

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Higginbotham, James. 1993. Interrogatives. In *The View from Building 20*, Ken Hale and Morris Halle, editors. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Ladusaw, William. 2003. Paper presented at *Where Semantics Meets Pragmatics*.

Romero, Maribel and Chung-hye Han. 2003. On Negative Yes/No Questions. To appear in *Linguistics and Philosophy* (I think).