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Argument *wh*-questions and implications in Swedish*

Roberta Colonna Dahlman

1   Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the following questions:

- What kind of implication arises from an argument *wh*-question?

- What kind of implication arises from a clefted argument *wh*-question in Swedish?

- Is there any difference in Swedish between clefted and non-clefted argument *wh*-questions with regard to the implications of existence they give rise to?

I argue that both types of argument *wh*-questions in Swedish, clefted and non-clefted, give rise to the same kind of pragmatic implication and that the choice between clefted and non-clefted form does not depend on a difference in semantic content, but is, in most cases, determined by the kind of propositional attitude held by the speaker. In particular, I argue that every *wh*-question requires some way in

which the questioner, the one asking a *wh*-question, is cognitively related to the truth of some proposition. Moreover, I show that clefted argument *wh*-questions are preferred in Swedish when the speaker holds a very strong commitment to the truth of the proposition.

2   Are *wh*-questions presuppositional?

Following the categorization of *wh*-questions proposed by Brandtler (2010: 198),[1] argument *wh*-questions are those questions which request the identification of an unspecified syntactic argument. In Swedish, they are introduced by interrogative pronouns like *vem* 'who', *vad* 'what' and *vilken* 'which (one)':

(1)   Vem pratade du   med?
        who talked   you with
        'Who did you talked to?'

(2)   Vad åt du igår?
        what ate you yesterday
        'What did you eat yesterday?'

(3)   Vilka   kom till festen?
        which.PL came to   party.DEF
        'Who came to the party?'

It has been proposed (e.g. by Katz 1968, 1972; Keenan and Hull 1973; Comorovski 1996) that in asking an argument *wh*-question like (4a) the speaker semantically (i.e. truth-conditionally) presupposes a statement like (4b):

(4)   a.   Who came to the party?
        b.   Someone came to the party.

According to Katz (1968: 472–473),

> The presupposition of a question is a sentence, or, better, the statement it
> expresses, which must be true if the question is to express a genuine request
> for information. [..] The notion of the presupposition of a question is parallel

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[1]Brandtler (2010: 198) distinguishes three types of *wh*-questions: argument questions (*vem* 'who', *vad* 'what', *vilken* 'which'); framing questions (*när* 'when', *var/vart* 'where'); propositional questions (*varför* 'why', *hur* 'how').

> to the notion of a presupposition of a statement except that in the latter case
> the truth of the presupposition is a necessary condition for the sentence to
> express an assertion (rather than a request).

On the other hand, it has been argued that argument *wh*-questions cannot possibly
give rise to semantic implications, assuming that conditions for answerability are
something else than conditions for determinateness of truth value (Karttunen and
Peters 1976; Karttunen 1977; Fitzpatrick 2005; Brandtler 2010; Groenendijk and
Stokhof 2011). I totally agree with this second line of reasoning. Let us see why
the proposal which associates semantic presuppositions to *wh*-questions is on the
wrong track. In doing this, it can be useful to recall the standard definition of
semantic presupposition.

   In linguistic theory as well as in philosophy of language, it is traditionally stated
that propositions give rise to different kinds of implications. Presuppositions are
assumed to be truth-conditional, hence semantic implications. If the presupposing
proposition is true, then the presupposed proposition must also be true; if the
presupposed proposition is false, then it is meaningless to express the presupposing
proposition.[2] *S*[John's sister is blonde.] *presupposes P*[John has a sister]. That is, if
S is true, then *P must* also be true (= *P* is a truth condition of *S*); if *P* then it may
be the case that *S* (or ∼*S*); if ∼P then *S* has no truth-value (i.e. *S* is neither true
nor false); if ∼*S* then it must still be the case that *P* (or *P* has no truth-value);[3] if *S*?
then both 'yes' or 'no' imply that *P* is true (or 'yes' implies that *P* is true, while 'no'
does not imply that *P* is false, hence *P* has no truth-value). This well-established
definition of semantic presupposition refers to some relation between statements
that can be true or false, hence can express propositions. How can questions have
any presuppositions, given that questions are not statements?[4]

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[2]I am following here Strawson's account of presupposition as a relation of truth dependence
between two statements. Cf. Strawson (1952: 175 ff.). For an overview on the different theories
on presupposition, see Levinson (1983), Huang (2007), Delogu (2010), Simons (forthcoming).

[3]This alternative depends on different scopes (a narrow scope and a wide scope) of negation in
a complex assertion: if negating *S* means that 'John's sister is not blonde', then *P* must still be the
case; otherwise, if negating *S* means that 'It is not the case that John's sister is blonde', then *P* can
be said to be neither true nor false, hence to have no truth-value. On the truth-value gap theory,
see Strawson (1971); Quine (1996); Austin (1976).

[4]I am following here Hamblin's proposal (Hamblin 1958, 1963) against the reductionist view,
which has tried to reduce questions to statements (see, for instance, Leonard 1959) and against the
performative analysis of questions (as proposed, for instance, by Katz and Postal 1964).

If questions are not statements, what are they? What is their semantic content if they cannot be associated to any truth-conditions? Following Hamblin, we can define a question as "a sentence which requires an answer" (Hamblin 1968: 161) that is a statement. Every question has at least one possible answer. In Hamblin's words (1968: 162, 166):

> Knowing what counts as an answer is equivalent to knowing the question. [...] A question is equivalent to a decomposition (or section, or division) of the possible universes. The set of possible universes is split up into a number of subsets, each subset representing an answer to the question, i.e. consisting of exactly those universes consistent with the answer.

As suggested by Groenendijk & Stokhof (2011: 1070), whereas statements are associated with truth conditions, questions are linked to answerhood conditions.

The set of all possible answers to a question is the set of statements we can refer to in considering the hypothesis of a truth-conditional relation of presupposition. In this sense, we can call *semantic presupposition of a question* what is *entailed*[5] by its all possible answers (Keenan and Hull 1973; Fitzpatrick 2005). Now, looking at argument *wh*-questions, we can easily see that they are not presuppositional in a semantic sense. Assuming that the *wh*-phrase denotes a non-empty set of possible answers and a negative answer is one of the possibilities,[6] we cannot possibly claim that a *wh*-question gives rise to a semantic presupposition; in fact, the several possible positive answers and the negative answer cannot have a common entailment

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[5]I am referring here to the standard notion of entailment: S[John killed Bill.] *entails* P[Bill is dead.] iff: if P then it may be the case that S (or $\sim S$); if S then it must be the case that P (meaning that P is a truth condition of S); if $\sim P$ then it must be the case that $\sim S$; if $\sim S$ then it may still be the case that P (or $\sim P$); if S? then 'yes' implies that P is necessarily true, while 'no' does not imply that P is necessarily false (hence P has no truth-value).

[6]Following Karttunen and Peters (1976: 354), Fitzpatrick (2005: 144) and Groenendijk and Stokhof (2011: 1126), I do not agree with the view offered by Keenan and Hull (1973: 447-448) that a negative response to a *wh*-question would not supply the requisite information, merely being "a way of saying that the question cannot be answered."; nor do I agree with the proposal sketched by Katz (1968: 476–477, 1972: 213–214) that a negative answer would be a rejection of the question. The only way to reject the question [Who came to the party?] and to say that the question cannot be answered would be to reply "Actually, there was no party". In fact, this reply would cancel the presupposition that there was a party, meaning that the question whether someone came to the party does not arise at all. This solution was suggested by Strawson (1971: 96).

(There is someone/something that p^7):

(5)　a.　John (came to the party).

　　　b.　Mary (came to the party).

　　　c.　John and Mary (came to the party).

　　　d.　Some friends from Italy (came to the party).

　　　e.　A lot of people (came to the party).

　　　f.　No one (came to the party).

As we can see, (5a–f) are all possible answers to the question [Who came to the party?] (and not in an exhaustive way). (5a–e) have a common entailment:

(6)　　　Someone came to the party. (The party had at least one participant.)

If (6) is true, then (5a–e) may be true. If (5a–e) are true, then (6) is necessarily true. If (6) is false, then (5a–e) are necessarily false. If (5a–e) are false, then (6) may still be true. If we ask "Did John/Mary/John and Mary/some friends from Italy/a lot of people come to the party?", then answering "yes" implies that (6) is true, while answering "no" does not imply that (6) is false.

In contrast, the possible answer in (5f) does not entail (6); hence (6) cannot be a semantic presupposition triggered by the question [Who came to the party?]. This observation has led several scholars to the conclusion that what is called the presupposition of a *wh*-question has nothing to do with the standard notion of semantic presupposition, being instead some kind of pragmatic implication (Karttunen and Peters 1976; Karttunen 1977; Fitzpatrick 2005; Brandtler 2010; Groenendijk and Stokhof 2011).

3　Are clefted argument *wh*-questions presuppositional?

Clefted argument *wh*-questions are the clefted variant of standard argument *wh*-questions:

(7)　　Vem var det (som) du pratade med?
　　　who was it   (that) you talked with
　　　'Who was it you talked to?'

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[7]I call *p* the proposition that the *wh*-question is about.

(8)   Vad   var det (som) du   åt   igår?
        what was it   (that) you ate yesterday
        'What was it you ate yesterday?'

(9)   Vilka   var det som kom till festen?
        which.PL was it   that came to party.DEF
        'Who was it that came to the party?'

So far we have seen that standard argument *wh*-questions do not give rise to semantic implications. Our next step is to ask whether clefted argument *wh*-questions behave differently with regard to the implications they trigger, i.e. whether they semantically presuppose the existence of the unspecified argument whose identity the question seeks to uncover.

According to Brandtler (2010: 200), Swedish clefted argument *wh*-questions *semantically presuppose*[8] rather than pragmatically implicate existence:

> Interestingly, there is a distinct difference in Swedish between clefted and non-clefted *wh*-questions with regards to the implications of existence they give rise to. (…) [W]e may suggest that the implication of existence in clefted *wh*-questions is semantic in nature (i.e. a presupposition), whereas the implication of existence in non-clefted *wh*-questions is pragmatic (i.e. a generalized conversational implicature).

This claim is based on the observation that clefted argument *wh*-questions in Swedish cannot be felicitously answered in the negative:[9]

(10)   a.   Vem var det som du åt lunch med igår?
              who was it   that you ate lunch with yesterday
              'Who was it you had lunch with yesterday?'

        b. # Ingen.
              nobody
              'Nobody.'

However, in this paper, I take a different view. To begin with, in order to establish whether a question gives rise to semantic presupposition, a distinction

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[8]Brandtler (2010: 102, 160) explicitly refers to "the standard definition of semantic presupposition" that "A presupposes B if and only if ¬A also presupposes B."

[9]Example (10) is Brandtler's own (2010: 200).

has to be made between the felicity conditions of an answer and the answerhood conditions of the question. The asserted infelicity of the answer in (10b) does not depend on the semantic content of the question, but on other pragmatic factors. Furthermore, Brandtler (2010: 208) argues that the *wh*-word of a clefted argument question must refer to a non-empty set because of the presuppositional status of this kind of questions, whereas non clefted questions can refer both to a non-empty and to an empty set (e.g. *no-one/nobody/nothing*): "Since the presuppositional status gives that the *wh*-word necessarily points to a non-empty set, clefted *wh*-questions always imply affirmative responses."

 I do not agree with this argument. My view is based on the distinction between the set of possible answers which constitutes what a question (and a *wh*-word) denotes and the set of referents which is what the possible answers denote. Every question (and every *wh*-word), clefted and non-clefted, necessarily refers to a non-empty set of propositions (the set of all possible answers).[10] Every possible answer is a set-member which refers to a set of things (or referents). The set of things that every member of the set of answers refers to can be non-empty or empty. When a *wh*-question is answered negatively (e.g. *nobody/nothing*), the set of things that this member of the set of answers refers to is empty. This analysis holds for both clefted and non-clefted argument questions: both kinds of questions are equivalent to a set of possible answers. Among these possible answers, we find a negative answer that refers to an empty set of things.[11]

 As previously claimed, the fact that clefted argument *wh*-questions, in most cases, cannot receive a negative response depends on pragmatic factors, more precisely on the attitudes involved in a certain situation.[12] Following this line of

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[10]It can be the case that the set of answers contains just one member referring to an empty set of referents (i.e. only a negative answer, which is the case with rhetorical questions). Note, however, that, even then, the set of answers is non-empty.

[11]I rule out the hypothesis that, in case of clefted argument *wh*-questions, the negative answer would be what cancels the existential presupposition: I do not see how this argument could explain why the possibility of a negative answer has to be seen as cancellation of a semantic presupposition in the case of clefted *wh*-questions, and as argument for excluding that non-clefted *wh*-questions give rise to semantic presuppositions. We cannot argue for the cancellability of a presupposition before having demonstrated that we actually are dealing with a presupposition.

[12]These attitudes, i.e. the background of beliefs of the speaker in a certain situation, are what Hutchinson (1971) and Stalnaker (1973, 1974) describe as (pragmatic) presuppositions. According to this idea, the relation of presupposition, which semantically is a relation between propositions or sentences, pragmatically is a relation between a person and a proposition.

reasoning, I propose that every *wh*-question requires some attitude of belief and that clefted and non-clefted *wh*-questions may differ with respect to the strength of the belief involved. Consider the following questions.

(11)   Vilka   kom till festen   igår?
         which.PL came to party.DEF yesterday
         'Who came to the party yesterday?'

(12)   Vilka   var det som kom till festen   igår?
         which.PL was it   that came to party.DEF yesterday
         'Who was it that came to the party yesterday?'

If I ask (11) or (12), I do not presuppose that *p*[Someone came to the party] in a semantic sense. It is, therefore, not the case that my question truth-conditionally presupposes the existence of someone who came to the party, but I presuppose that *p* pragmatically. This pragmatic presupposition is nothing but my own attitude towards the truth of *p*: I believe that *p* (i.e. I commit myself to the truth of *p*), believing that whoever I question is aware of it:

(13)   I *believe* that *p* [Someone came to the party] (and I want to know who).
         And I believe that whom I am asking is aware of my attitude towards *p*.

This attitude of the questioner, this commitment to the truth of *p*, the very fact that the questioner is taking *p* for granted and that he/she is convinced that *p* is the only presupposition connected to the question (clefted or non-clefted). This commitment has a gradable intensity (very weak, weak, strong, very strong, etc.), depending on which reasons and kind of evidence justify it. Thus, the questioner may guess that someone came to the party since this is what usually happens (reason: world knowledge); or he/she may believe that someone came to the party, since he/she may have talked with someone else who also was there (reason: hearsay); or he/she may assume that someone came to the party, since he/she lives next door and has seen guests arriving and heard them talking loudly all night long (reason: direct perception). The attitude of the questioner is entirely context dependent.

My claim is that clefted argument *wh*-questions in Swedish in most cases seem to require a propositional attitude of very strong belief, hence a stronger commitment to the truth of *p* than that required by a non-clefted form. This would explain why a Swedish speaker chooses the clefted form of a question rather than the non-clefted, when direct perception is involved: in these cases, the speaker believes that

he/she knows that p.[13] If Lisa sees her colleague Peter talking to someone during their lunch break and wonders who he is talking to, she will most probably ask him "Vem var det du pratade med?" 'Who was it you talked to?', and not (the non-clefted variety) "Vem pratade du med?" 'Who did you talk to?'. Or imagine that Peter and Lisa are playing cards at Lisa's place; suddenly, Peter hears someone knocking on the door and he wonders who that may be. In this case, assuming that Lisa is expecting someone, he will most probably ask her "Vem var det som knack-ade?" 'Who was it that knocked?' instead of the non-clefted "Vem knackade?" 'Who knocked?'.[14]

As pointed out by Brandtler (2010: 200), clefted *wh*-questions are more natural in Swedish in any situation in which the identity, but not the existence of the argument denoted by the *wh*-word is unspecified and unknown to the speaker. I would rather suggest that clefted *wh*-questions are preferred in Swedish in any situation in which the questioner has very strong reasons for believing that there is someone/something that p. In these cases it is quite obvious that the speaker will not take a negative response (*ingen/ingenting* 'no one/nothing') for an answer. In fact, the negative answer, in order to be accepted by the questioner, must be adjusted by rejecting the question and by canceling the attitudinal presupposition required by the question. For instance, in the first case, Peter could tell Lisa that he was not talking to anyone: as a matter of fact, at that time, he was somewhere else, so she must have mistaken him for someone else. In the second case, Lisa could answer that nobody knocked: actually, there was no knocking at all, and it must have been the wind. Note that it is not the negative answer to the question that cancels the attitudinal presupposition, but the sentence which essentially states that the questioner has been mistaken in his/her belief. This sentence indirectly states that there is no reason for the questioner to believe that p and will cause him/her to accommodate his/her attitudes. This same need of adjusting a negative answer can occur with standard argument *wh*-questions: if I see my son playing with some new trading cards, I would ask him "Vem fick du dem ifrån?" 'From whom did you get them?', and he could answer "Ingen" 'Nobody'; and then he would probably feel the need to cause me to change my belief by saying "Jag hittade dem i soptunnan" 'I found them in the trash.'

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[13]On the distinction between what one knows and what one believes that he/she knows, see Stalnaker (2006).

[14]Notice that the clefted *wh*-question is what Lisa and Peter most probably, not necessarily, would choose in the situations described above.

Now, the crucial question is whether a native speaker of Swedish would choose to use a clefted *wh*-question in cases in which a negative answer would surprise him/her but would not be taken as infelicitous. My claim is that clefted *wh*-questions in Swedish do usually presuppose a strong commitment to the truth of the proposition, but how strong this commitment is depends on the context. Besides, even non-clefted *wh*-questions can presuppose an equally strong commitment. When the speaker's assumption is very strong (i.e. when he/she believes to know), a negative answer to the *wh*-question will sound infelicitous; otherwise, when the speaker's assumption is not so strong, the same negative answer will be perfectly felicitous albeit surprising.

I illustrate my claim by means of an example. Let us take two situations.

Situation 1: I know that my friend Carla is very lucky. She has won several times at the lottery. Today, I meet her and she tells me that last Sunday she went to a fabulous Christmas market. There was a lucky dip and she bought a ticket. Now, assuming that she won something, I ask her "Vad var det du vann?" 'What was it you won?' Carla answers "Ingenting!" 'Nothing!'

Situation 2: My friend Carla (the same lucky friend) and I go together to a fabulous Christmas market. There is a lucky dip and Carla buys a ticket. While we sit at our table, someone calls the lucky numbers, and among them Carla's ticket number. Carla goes to pick up her prize. When she returns to our table, I ask her "Vad var det du vann?" 'What was it you won?' Carla answers "Ingenting!" 'Nothing!'

In both these situations, a clefted *wh*-question in Swedish has been answered negatively. In the first situation, the negative answer is a perfectly proper answer; in the second situation, the same negative answer sounds infelicitous: the questioner will not accept it and the answerer will be forced to adjust her answer, giving an explanation that will cancel the questioner's attitudinal presupposition.[15] This difference mirrors a difference in the attitudes held by the questioner in these different situations. In both cases, the questioner assumes that p [Carla has won something]. In the first situation, however, the questioner assumes that p because p is what usually happens (Carla has always won in the past), but she also knows that something else than p can happen. In the second situation, on the other hand,

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[15]For instance, Carla could say that we heard wrong when we thought that her number had been called or that her number had been wrongly called, and that she had in fact got some unlucky number.

her assumption is clearly stronger since she believes that she knows that *p*. It is the kind of attitude held by the questioner – not the type of interrogative sentence – that the felicity/infelicity of the answer depends on.

4   Conclusion

Turning back to the questions formulated at the beginning of this paper, the results of my analysis offer the following answers: after having shown why argument *wh*-questions cannot give rise to semantic presuppositions, we have concluded that these interrogative sentences are associated to some kind of pragmatic implication.

I have argued that clefted argument *wh*-questions in Swedish do not differ from standard argument *wh*-questions with regard to the kind of existential implication they trigger; my claim is that both types of argument questions give rise to pragmatic implications. In particular, I propose that what these questions presuppose is some propositional attitude held by the speaker, i.e. the way in which the speaker is cognitively related to the truth of the proposition (*p*) which the question is about.

Finally, it is true that, in Swedish, clefted argument *wh*-questions appear to be preferred to their standard variants in cases where the commitment of the speaker to the truth of *p* is particularly strong (e.g. when the speaker believes to know that *p*), and where a negative answer would be infelicitous. It is equally true, however, that this type of question can even occur when the speaker holds a less strong belief, and a negative answer would be perfectly felicitous albeit surprising.

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