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INSINCERE QUESTIONS: HOW TO DECEIVE WITH INTERROGATIVES

SUMMARY: This paper investigates how interrogative sentences, typically not regarded as a means of lying, can nonetheless be used to deceive and mislead. While most definitions of lying restrict it to assertions, questions can subtly lead listeners to adopt beliefs that the speaker does not endorse. By examining the semantic and pragmatic features that enable interrogatives to function as tools of deception, this paper explores non-canonical uses such as rhetorical and suggestive questions, as well as the lesser-known categories of *questions conveying questions* and *questions conveying propositions*, in misleading others. These uses demonstrate how interrogatives can operate deceptively, potentially challenging traditional conceptions of lying.

KEY WORDS: questions, interrogatives, conversational implicature, lying questions, non-standard use of interrogatives, indirect questions, Questions Conveying Questions, Questions Conveying Propositions.

1. Introduction

The exchanges of words in which we engage do not always align with conversational or epistemic ideals. At times, individuals fail to speak truthfully or omit essential, non-trivial information. While such practices may have limited cognitive value, they are, in some contexts, socially desirable. Wit, metaphor, irony, hyperbole, and compliments can establish or strengthen social bonds,

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diffuse tension, or aid in expressing and understanding complex ideas. By contrast, practices such as lying, so-called fake news, half-truths, bullshitting, humbug, and biased or one-sided articles are generally undesirable under normal circumstances.¹ These communicative malpractices obstruct understanding, hinder knowledge transmission, and undermine social cohesion. Instead of fostering unity, they often breed division (Lewandowsky et al., 2013), propagate falsehoods, disrupt trust, and may deliberately harm individuals or groups.²

This paper examines the role of interrogative sentences in such communicative malpractices. The problem of lying in the context of questions typically centers on whether questions themselves can be considered lies. I do not wish to engage in this debate. Instead, drawing inspiration from remarks made by Jerzy Pelc, I propose introducing the category of lying questions to cover contexts in which uttering interrogatives can be seen as sufficiently similar to lying, without resolving whether these situations involve genuine lies or merely pseudo-lies. Furthermore, I analyze how questions can be strategically employed to deceive and identify the mechanisms and practices that make such exploitation of interrogatives possible.

Widely accepted or frequently discussed definitions of lying generally exclude questions from being classified as lies (Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Feehan, 1988; Carson, 2006, 2012; Fallis, 2009, 2013; Saul, 2012; Lackey, 2013; Mahon, 2015; Stokke, 2017, pp. 144–145). For instance, Faulkner (2007, p. 535) defines a lie as “an assertion made with the intention to deceive an audience with regard to its content.” Pelc himself writes:

(DEF. Lying_{PELC}) Person X is lying whenever they utter a statement Z, to which they assign the logical value W1, and do so with the intention of misleading the recipient of that statement, namely to make them assign the logical value W2 to it, where W2 is different from W1.

Since questions are not bearers of logical values, Pelc’s definition appears to exclude interrogatives as possible tools for lying. But such an exclusion may seem contentious. Some questions are explicitly designed to lead the addressee to adopt a proposition the questioner believes to be false, based on what is typically conveyed in the act of asking. An empirical study also provides compelling evidence for categorizing certain questions as lies.³ In particular, Viebahn et al., (2018) demonstrated that ordinary language users often classify questions carrying a presupposition believed to be false by the speaker—and intended to be adopted by the hearer—as lies. Their findings suggest that these judgments are robust, even when participants are given the option of categorizing such utter-

¹ Such an assessment does not apply to white lies (Bryant, 2008; Erat & Gneezy, 2012).

² Fabricated content, for instance, has been shown to impact both personal lives and societal structures (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017; Jolley, Douglas, 2014; Kim, Tandoc, 2018).

³ Noteworthy, according to (Leonard, 1959) questions can be truth-bearers and hence used as lies.

ances as merely misleading or deceptive. Although Pelc's definition suggests that questions cannot be lies, some of his remarks concerning lies complicate this picture. For example, he writes (1990, p. 292) that "[w]e have come to the conclusion that both false sentences, true sentences and sentences that have no logical value can be used as lies" and (1990, p.294)

At other times, when an author writes or makes a statement to which he does not attribute any logical value, that is, he does not consider it to be true or false, he uses his statement in order to lead a reader or listener who uses criteria of truth other than those of the author to consider that statement to be true.

It is not the type of sentence or speech act that determines whether something is a lie, but rather whether a person's behavior (not necessarily verbal) can be *reduced* to an act of making a statement or a form of commitment:

(...) every lie can be reduced to a linguistic behaviour which consists in producing a certain sentence to which the sender attributes a different logical value than - in his intention - the receiver is supposed to attribute to that sentence.

In this sense, if asking a question can be reduced to making a statement or a commitment, it can function as a tool for lying.⁴ However, this paper does not argue that questions themselves can be lies. While ordinary language users may consider certain insincere questions—namely, those conveying false presuppositions intended to be accepted by the hearer—as lies, the goal here is not to engage in a definitional debate about lying. Rather than taking a stance on whether questions can be lies, I introduce the technical term “lying questions” to refer to cases where a question is used to deceive.

More importantly, I argue that there are other, less obvious ways in which questions can be employed to mislead or deceive. The primary objective of this paper is to examine the semantic and pragmatic mechanisms that enable interrogative sentences to serve this function.

To this end, Section 2 introduces key concepts from semiotic erotetic theory, grounded in the foundational principles outlined in Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz's seminal work (1974). Although other influential theories of interrogatives exist, I prefer to build on this one, as it is the framework within which Pelc worked (Pelc, 2015). However, I hope that the observations made in this paper can also be accounted for within other erotetic theories. In Section 3, building on recently presented taxonomy of non-canonical uses of interrogatives (Puczyłowski 2022), I examine the semantic and pragmatic mechanisms through which interrogative sentences can be employed to deceive. Finally, in Section 4, I investigate how interrogatives can be used to mislead, deceive, or even constitute instances of lying. To this end, I analyze several cases of deceptive questioning.

⁴ More on Pelc's approach to the concept of lying in (Puczyłowski, 2018).

Before I begin, however, one point to note. I do not aim to address the issue of defining lying in precise terms here, leaving it to linguists to determine the meaning of the term in English. For the purposes of this discussion, however, a definition recently proposed by Neri Marsili (2021) appears particularly suitable for accommodating questions as lies⁵. According to Marsili, *S* lies that *p* if and only if: (a) *S* utters a sentence with content *p*; (b) by doing so, *S* is accountable and discursively responsible for *p*; and (c) *S*'s utterance is insincere. The only modification I suggest is to replace (a) with: by uttering a sentence, *S* intends to inform that *p*. One might object that this alteration broadens the scope of the definition excessively, submitting that it describes misleading rather than lying. If so, I find this an acceptable trade-off, as I am willing to sacrifice some semantic or terminological precision to illuminate the intriguing mechanisms through which questions—like assertions—can be used insincerely to deceive and mislead others.

And a final remark – the types of questions discussed below may, but need not, serve manipulative purposes; the mechanisms described later can be employed in perfectly honest communication, yet also enable the sender to influence or mislead the recipient if she chooses.

2. Questions and Their Cognitive Content

To explore the mechanisms through which interrogative sentences can be used to mislead, deceive, or lie—regardless of whether they function in their standard role as questions—it is essential to introduce key concepts, particularly the notion of cognitive content, firstly introduced by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz and developed by Pelc. Propositions comprising cognitive content are central to what a questioner conveys when employing interrogative sentences in their canonical or standard function.

According to Ajdukiewicz, the cognitive content of an interrogative sentence is the set of all its assumptions. However, Pelc proposed expanding this category to include all its presuppositions as well (Brożek, 2011, pp. 193–206; Jadacki, 2018, p. 68; Pelc, 1984). Pelc (1991, p. 291) informally described the presuppositions of a question as “information hidden in the question.” I prefer to adopt the view that *P* is a presupposition of *Q* if and only if *P* is entailed by every proper answer to *Q*. Each question has exactly two assumptions (Ajdukiewicz 1974, p. 88). The positive assumption of an interrogative sentence is the statement (or the proposition expressed by it) which is logically equivalent to the disjunction of all proper answers to that question. Thus, the positive assumption of

Who was on Mars?

is

⁵ A similar approach is presented in (Wiegmann et al., 2021).

Someone was on Mars.

The negative assumption corresponds to the disjunction of the negations of the proper answers. Thus, the negative assumption of

What planet has an atmosphere?

is that there is a planet without an atmosphere. In the case of “Who wants to see me jump?” the positive assumption is that at least one person wants to see it, while the negative assumption is that not everyone does.

As for the notion of a proper answer, it can be defined in accordance with Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz’s classic framework (1974, pp. 85–87):

(Def. Proper answer) D is a proper answer to Q iff D is a result of proper substitution in the *datum questionis* of Q.

The *datum questionis* of a question refers to the propositional function associated with each interrogative sentence, serving as the schema for potential answers. This propositional function (or *datum questionis*) is determined partly by the segment of the logical sentence within the question (e.g., “wants to see me jump”) and partly by the interrogative particle, which indicates the position where a variable must complete the sentence. Thus, considering three different interrogatives:

- (Q1) *Who has killed JFK?*
- (Q2) *Whom has JFK killed?*
- (Q3) *Who has been to America?*

one can point out components of logical sentences contained in them (respectively, “has killed JFK”, “has JFK killed” and “has been to America”), and due to their interrogative particles (*who*, *whom*) one can determine which argument is to be determined by a proper answer:

... killed JFK
JFK killed ...
... has been to America,

and thus formulate their respective *datum questionis*:

- (DQ1) *x killed JFK*
- (DQ2) *JFK killed x*
- (DQ3) *x has been to America*

Therefore, the sentence

John killed JFK

qualifies as a proper answer to Q1, but not to Q2 or Q3. One of the presuppositions of Q1 is that someone has killed someone—the same is presupposed by Q2, for it is entailed by any proper answer to Q2.

There is a tacitly adopted convention according to which the standard (or canonical) use of an interrogative sentence Q by a sender A can count, among other things, as *expressing p*, if *p* is one of the assumptions or presuppositions of Q (a fact already emphasized in Ajdukiewicz, 1974, p. 88–89). In more modern terms, one could say that by using an interrogative in its canonical mode, a speaker commits themselves to its assumptions and presuppositions. It would sound very odd if one said either of the following:

Though I'm not saying that JFK was killed by anyone, who killed JFK?

While there is no such place as America, who has been there?

The defectiveness of these sentences can be explained by pointing out a contradiction between the propositions expressed by the first part of the utterances and what is expressed (presupposed) by its interrogative part.

When someone uses an interrogative sentence—at least in typical circumstances and its standard mode—it is generally assumed that they agree with its cognitive content (of course, there are some trivial deviations, for example, when a teacher asks her students “Who has done the homework?” In such cases, it would likely be incorrect to attribute to the teacher the belief that at least one student has not completed it). By asking a question in such a manner, one clearly commits themselves to its cognitive content in the sense Marsili describes. For by asking questions, the speakers become accountable and discursively responsible for their cognitive contents. For instance, when someone asks, “In which town was John baptized?” they commit to the proposition that there exists a town in which John was baptized (the positive assumption of the question). Consequently, it is perfectly acceptable for the addressee to challenge the speaker’s knowledge of this assumption, demanding justification for the proposition that John was baptized in a town (as opposed to, for instance, a village or on a ship). Thus, the following exchange seems reasonable:

A: *In which town was John baptized?*

B: *Why do you assume he was baptized in a town?*

In such circumstances, A’s further response, offered as an attempt to dismiss B’s challenge—“I didn’t mean that; I don’t know where he was baptized—he

could have been baptized in a village or not been baptized at all”—would likely seem awkward, if not entirely untenable. Consequently, it is unsurprising that uttering interrogatives in a manner which enable the addressee to hold the speaker accountable for the truth of their cognitive content may be classified as lies when made insincerely (Viebahn et al., 2018).

The mutual assumption that the speaker believes propositions constituting the cognitive content of their question can be exploited to deceive the hearer by asking them a question. If I wanted my colleagues to think falsely that I had a bag, I could say the following

My bag was somewhere around here

as well as

Where is my bag?

Have you seen my bag?

If my colleagues assumed that I asked a question believing all its presuppositions true, they may come to a false conclusion that I had a bag. However, using assumptions and presuppositions of interrogative sentences does not exhaust the ways in which questions can be used to mislead or lie to someone. In order to expose them, let us turn to the other roles and modes that questions can play in communicative practices and mechanisms beyond them.

3. Ways of Using Interrogatives

Interrogative sentences, like declaratives, can serve various communicative functions, including performing indirect speech acts. This versatility allows for different practices that may be exploited to deceive others. To illuminate these mechanisms, let me first introduce the concept of *semantic content of interrogative sentences* (cf. Hannah, 2002, pp. 5 – 8)

To define the semantic content of a question Q , $\text{Cnt}(Q)$, or simply Q , let “ $A_i(Q)$ ” represent the proposition expressed by a direct answer A_i to Q . If a question Q has exactly n different direct answers, then its semantic content is the set of all the propositions expressed by its direct answers, that is,

$$\text{Cnt}(Q) = \{A_1(Q), \dots, A_n(Q)\}.$$

Typically, an interrogative sentence is used in its primary, or canonical, role. This means the following (cf. Puczyłowski, 2022, p. 510):

An interrogative sentence Q with the content $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ is used canonically in a context C iff Q is used in C to learn whether A_1 or \dots or A_n in the first place.

By using an interrogative sentence in this manner, the speaker not only commits herself to its cognitive content but also expresses a lack of knowledge about which of its proper answers is true and a willingness to learn this from the addressee.

3.1 Rhetorical Questions

However, interrogatives may also be employed in non-canonical ways. While the term "non-canonical use" broadly captures these variations, it can obscure the diversity inherent in these uses (see Wilson & Sperber, 2012, pp. 222–227; Puczyłowski, 2022). To clarify this diversity, I will apply Puczyłowski's (2022) categorization framework but will keep technical terminology to a minimum, focusing on the principal mechanisms through which questions can be used deceptively. Among the notable non-canonical uses of interrogatives are: (1) rhetorical questions, (2) cases where the speaker asks one question but intends the listener to answer a different one, and (3) cases where the speaker conveys information outside the cognitive content of the question. To clarify these uses, I adopt the following definitions:

(DEF. Rhetorical question)⁶ A question Q (that is, an interrogative sentence) with the content $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ is used rhetorically in C iff Q is used in C mainly to inform or remind someone about A_k , $k = 1, \dots, n$: either that the proposition is true or that it is false.

That is to say, a rhetorical question is asked not to elicit an answer but to make a point, emphasize something, or provoke thought. For an illustration, suppose that one emotionally utters "Who could blame John?" by which she tries to convey that no one should or could blame him (let us note at once that this utterance would be deceptive if the speaker believed that John should be unequivocally condemned). This example illustrates negative rhetorical questions, for it aims at conveying which proper answer is taken to be false.⁷ A positive

⁶ One may wonder what the difference is between leading questions and rhetorical ones. The difference is that leading questions are intended to get a particular proper answer as a response. They resemble one another in the sense that both are intended to guide the interlocutor to a specific conclusion.

⁷ During an argument, I once claimed that a bookshelf was securely attached to a wall. In response, with dramatic intonation, I was asked, "How do you know that? Are you a carpenter?" I replied, evidently falsely, "Yes," to which my interlocutor retorted, "No, you are not!" The initial question implicitly conveyed that I was not a carpenter, but my deliberate disregard of this implication only served to further irritate my colleague.

Now, consider an alternative scenario: suppose I actually were a carpenter, and my interlocutor, unbeknownst to me, knew this but intended to feign ignorance. In such a case, it seems plausible that she could have misled me—or any eavesdropper—into believing that she was unaware of my profession.

rhetorical question would deliver which proper answer is to be taken as true. The positive rhetorical question

Isn't it obvious that honesty is the best policy?

is not intended to elicit an answer. Instead, it serves to communicate the speaker's belief that honesty is indeed the best policy. Asking such a question without holding this belief, however, would be deceptive. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1974, p. 89) already observed—albeit in reference to suggestive questions—that they “may be asked *mala fide* if the intention of the person who asks it is to suggest a false answer”.

3.2 Questions Conveying Questions⁸

The second noncanonical use of interrogatives, particularly relevant to our purposes, can be defined as follows:

(DEF. Question Conveying Question) A question Q with the content $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ is used as a question conveying question (QCQ) in C iff Q is used in C mainly to obtain information from the addressee about whether A_k , but $k \neq 1, \dots, n$.

That is to say that one can ask one question while wishing to obtain an answer to some other question; that is, a question with the content $AQ = \{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ is asked (henceforth, question asked, AQ) to learn from the hearer which of $IQ = \{B_1, \dots, B_m\}$ is true (hereafter, intended question, IQ), but $AQ \not\sqsubseteq IQ$. For example, I can ask you “Do you have a watch?” expecting you to tell me what the time is (that is, to answer $IQ =$ “What time is it?”).

Interestingly, one can differentiate several subtypes of that mode.⁹ As I will demonstrate in the next section (Section 4), the types of questions outlined below can serve as instruments of deception. The following distinction thus enables a

⁸ David Braun (2011, p. 584) uses the term “Questions Indirectly Asked” to refer to similar speech acts. However, I prefer the term “Questions Conveying Questions,” because declarative sentences can also function to indirectly pose questions, whereas my focus is exclusively on interrogatives.

⁹ The examples I am going to present do not exhaust all logically possible cases. One clear case is omitted due to its limited relevance to deception by means of questions—namely, when the semantic content of the question asked (AQ) and the intended question (IQ) partially overlap. In such a case, at least one proposition belongs to both contents, while others appear in only one. For instance, if I ask the students *Who among you solved the problem?*, and the group actually present (A, B, C, D) overlaps with the group I mistakenly have in mind (B, C, D, E), then $QA = \{A, B, C, D \text{ solved the problem}\}$ and $QI = \{B, C, D, E \text{ solved the problem}\}$.

more precise analysis of the subtle differences between various forms of deceiving questions. So, let me enumerate a few.

(Case 1) In some circumstances, the content of the intended question is a subset of the question asked (the content of the intended question is included in the content of the question asked; one can represent it formally: $IQ \subseteq AQ$).

For example, I may ask two students (Peter and Mary) a very general question which semantic content is $\{A_i \text{ has reached the summit of Triglav: } A_i \text{ is a name of a person}\}$ (e.g., *Who has reached the summit of Triglav?*) but with the clear intention to learn the true answer to the question which content is $\{\text{Peter has reached the summit of Triglav, Mary has reached the summit of Triglav}\}$ (e.g., *Who of you two has reached the summit of Triglav?*).

However, there are uses of interrogatives in the QCQ mode that do not fall within this narrow category, since the question asked and the intended question are genuinely distinct. Formally, this can be expressed by the condition:

for all x , if $x \in IQ$, then $x \notin AQ$.

This condition defines the next category of QCQ, within which at least three further subclasses (Cases 2–4) can be distinguished on the basis of additional criteria. The first of these can be stated as follows:

(Case 2) There exist propositions p , q , and r such that: $p \in IQ$, $q \in AQ$, r is a proposition believed by the speaker, and p is a logical consequence of q and r (with p not logically equivalent to either).

Informally, the speaker asks AQ but really cares about IQ. An answer to AQ, together with what the speaker already believes, yields an answer to IQ. For example, if I want to learn from my receiver (IQ) whether whales are warm-blooded, and I know that all mammals are warm-blooded, I may ask – (AQ) *Are whales mammals?* A positive answer will suffice to adopt the belief that they are warm-blooded.

The next subclass is defined by the opposite condition:

(Case 3) There exist propositions p , q , and r such that: $p \in AQ$, $q \in IQ$, r is a proposition believed by the speaker, and p is a logical consequence of q and r (with p not logically equivalent to either).

Informally, the speaker asks AQ but is really interested in obtaining an answer to IQ. In this case, however, an answer to IQ, together with what the speaker already believes, yields an answer to AQ.

For example, on some occasions I may want to know (IQ) who exactly is hungry among a group of my friends (Mark, Mary, and Sue), but instead ask them (AQ): *Is anyone hungry?*—possibly hoping that they can work out what my intention is. A positive proper answer to the question asked (i.e., *Yes, someone is hungry*) follows from any direct answer to the question intended (e.g., *Mary is hungry*, provided the intended question was *Who is hungry?*).

The last subtype worth differentiating, and probably one of the most philosophically exciting noncanonical uses of interrogatives, can be specified as follows:

(Case 4) No proposition belonging to the content of AQ is a logical consequence of nor entails any proposition from the content of IQ (even in conjunction with what the speaker believes); i.e., IQ and AQ are truly logically independent questions.

If, by asking a question, a speaker may conversationally implicate some other question (as was argued by Puczyłowski, 2022), these cases of implicating questions would probably fall within this subclass. If, while looking at a menu in a Slovenian restaurant, I were to ask my colleagues,

Who can check what the word 'mačka' means in Slovenian?

I could conversationally implicate another question, namely:

What does the word 'mačka' mean in Slovenian?

Generally speaking, by using an interrogative sentence in the manner described in this sub-section, the questioner seems to commit herself to the cognitive content of the intended question. Furthermore, she expresses both a lack of knowledge about which of its proper answers is true and a willingness to learn this from the addressee.

Therefore, if this observation holds, I could not dismiss a challenge to my question “Who can check what the word ‘mačka’ means in Slovenian?”, such as a request to justify why I believe that the word “mačka” means something in Slovenian. Responding to such a challenge with statements like, “But I don’t know if it means anything in Slovenian!”, “I didn’t mean that!” or “I don’t know if such a word exists in Slovenian!” would be inconsistent with the proposition implicitly yet clearly expressed by posing the question in the described context. Instead, I would be expected to point to a specific place in the menu and demonstrate that the word appears there, for example. Similarly, if I were asked why I want to know what the word means, I could not coherently and honestly retract what I have expressed implicitly by saying, “But I don’t want to know what this word means in this language.” Such response would seem confusing and incon-

sistent in the described context. If I were in such cognitive and volitional states, denying that I held them would be an outright lie.

3.3 Suggestive Questions

The final mode of interrogative usage I will describe is when such sentences are employed not to obtain information from the addressee, but rather to convey information. In these cases, the term suggestive questions is applicable:

(Def. Suggestive question) A question Q with the content $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ is used suggestively in C iff Q is used in C mainly to inform someone that A_k , but $k \neq 1, \dots, n$.

The clearest kind of suggestive questions are those which convey other propositions by their cognitive content. This is to say that a question with the semantic content $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ can be used to convey that A_k , yet $k \neq 1, \dots, n$, but A_k is logically dependent on at least one member of $\{A_1, \dots, A_n\}$ or A_k is a negative or positive assumption of the question. I can say to someone

What month did Peter marry Mary?

just to inform my receiver that they got married (because, for example, I was afraid to say it directly). It should be clear how I can fool my listener in this case – it would suffice that I did not believe that they were married while not signaling that in the broader context. However, exploiting the cognitive content of interrogatives does not exhaust the ways of deceiving others with questions.¹⁰

For a more intriguing example, please note that if one asks

Don't you think p ?

one usually conveys that one believes p (Puczyłowski & Ziembicki 2019).¹¹ This particular type of interrogative is used to convey information about something

¹⁰ It is true that when I ask a question, I may also wish to convey that I take a presupposition of the question to be true—but this does not make the question suggestive in the proposed sense, as long as that is not my primary communicative aim. For instance, when I ask, *In which city was Jan born?*, I thereby indicate that I believe Jan was born in some city. However, if my principal aim in asking the question is to truly find out whether he was born in Berlin, Warsaw, Madrid, etc.—rather than to convey that he was born in a city—then the question is not, in this sense, a suggestive one. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing attention to this issue.

¹¹ Sometimes, such type of interrogative can be employed as a remainder question. However, at least in Polish, when one wants to gently remind someone of their belief or confirm that what they once believed is still their conviction, a similar sentence is used, but in the past tense: "Didn't you use to think that p ?"

different (that is, the sender's attitude towards the proposition p) from the investigated matter (that is, what the receiver's attitude toward that proposition is). In this case, the speaker belief that p does not belong to the semantic content of that question (which is {the receiver of the question thinks p , the receiver of the question doesn't think p }), nor is it a proposition entailed by any subset of its cognitive content; the proposition is logically independent of that content.

Furthermore, David Braun (2011) argued that, in some circumstances, by asking a question, one can conversationally imply some proposition and that conveying that proposition is the main reason for posing it. However, the propositions implied by uttering an interrogative clearly do not constitute any part of its semantic or cognitive content. For example, imagine that you have been asked about the whereabouts of a mutual friend, Peter. By your response

Well, and where is Mary?

you could imply that she knows how to answer the question about his whereabouts or that Peter and Mary are in the same place.

Finally, let us notice that what is suggested in some cases could be a request or demand or favor, i.e., not a proposition alone. For example, in episode 3 of the first season of the TV series *Veep*, the main character, Selina Mayer, Vice President of the United States, disappointedly utters to her casually dressed daughter:

Are you wearing this?

to inform her that she should change her outfit. What must be emphasized here is that in the presented cases propositions that are suggested or conveyed by a question are not part of the cognitive content of that question!

Since conversational implicatures are admissibly cancellable (Grice, 1989, p. 39), the speaker can always attempt to deny having conveyed them.¹² However, in certain situations, such a denial may reasonably appear as insincere communicative behavior.¹³ This suggests that, at least in some circumstances, we hold the speakers accountable for what they conversationally implicated. We consider them committed or obliged to defend what they have clearly and unmistakably conversationally implicated within the given context. While being in such cognitive and volitional states, denying that I held or expressed them by posing such questions would constitute a lie.

¹² Simplifying Grice's definition, one could say: the conversational implicature of an utterance is a proposition that the speaker must be committed to if their utterance aligns with the Cooperative Principle and the maxims governing rational conversation.

¹³ The importance of not denying suggested content is emphasized, for instance, in Pragma-dialectics, where one of the rules of a critical discussion, the Unexpressed Premise Rule, explicitly prohibits denying suggested premises. Violating this rule may result in the fallacy of denying an unexpressed premise (van Eemeren et al., 2014, pp. 543–551).

4. Deceiving or Lying Questions

Interrogative sentences can be used insincerely, thus facilitating lying or deception, not only by committing the speaker to propositions within the cognitive content of the question asked but also through implicit commitments that extend beyond this content. In certain circumstances, as discussed earlier, speakers may use interrogatives to convey propositions beyond its cognitive content. Specific indicators may signal to recipients that a question is being used in a non-canonical manner, conveying something other than a simple request for information about which of its proper answer is true. Recognizing the mode in which an interrogative is used enables accurate interpretation of the speaker's intent—what they seek to communicate, what they may or may not know, what they wish to find out, and what they assume or believe. These features enables one to deceive the other.

In typical situations—that is, when interrogative is not used as a suggestive, rhetorical or exam question etc.—asking a question entails a commitment to specific cognitive and volitional states. By posing a question, the speaker signals both a lack of knowledge and a desire for information; specifically, that she does not know which of the proper answers is true but wishes to find out. Deception arises when the speaker asks a question without genuinely occupying the cognitive and volitional states dictated by the structure of the question. I take a question to be a lying question when someone utters an interrogative sentence in such a way that it is to be recognized as being asked with a specific intention—whether to inquire about something, to communicate (e.g., through its presuppositions or assumptions), or to express ignorance, belief, or an intention to acquire information—while in fact lacking this intention. That is, the speaker does not genuinely aim to elicit the relevant belief or possess the appropriate knowledge.

In QCQ scenarios, the cognitive and volitional states being expressed are defined in a more indirect manner. The hearer must work it out what question is intended by the speaker and hence what the speaker wants to learn from her. Deception occurs here when the speaker fails to embody the cognitive and volitional states associated with the intended question, even if she holds those dictated by the question actually posed. But when the hearer is supposed to begin working out what is being conveyed beyond what is a true answer to the question actually asked?

Let us briefly outline signs that indicate a question may not be intended literally, followed by several examples for further exploration. In each instance, the speaker uses an interrogative in a non-canonical way, anticipating that the listener will recognize her intended communicative purpose and thereby adopt a certain proposition—one that the speaker, in their insincerity, does not endorse. Such cases, even if not outright lies, constitute deception or deliberate misdirection of the listener.

A question may be used non-canonically if any proper answer would be:

(i) Contextually irrelevant. *Example*: “Is he cheating on his wife?”—“Would you like some cake?” Any proper answer to the second question is irrelevant in the context, suggesting the speaker is trying to imply something, e.g., that the topic should be changed.

(ii) Blatantly false or trivial answer. *Example*: “Am I the Emperor of China?” The question presupposes an obvious or trivial answer, suggesting that the speaker has an ulterior motive, such as expressing disapproval or rejecting the prior statement.

(iii) Generates a conversational implicature. *Example*: Imagine someone asks Peter, “How long has Jon been interested in ballet?” to which he replies, “How long has he been in love with Mary?” Here, a proper answer to the second question would conversationally imply an underlying message, if Peter were to use it instead of the interrogative. By his interrogative reply Peter prompts his hearer to infer more than what is conveyed by the cognitive content of his question.

(iv) Unnecessarily complex phrasing. *Example*: “Don’t you think that *p*?” instead of “Do you think that *p*?” (or “Isn’t it obvious that *p*?” instead of “is it obvious that *p*?”) The question is more lexically complex than needed, indicating additional communication.

(v) Grammatically irregular. *Example*: “Why am I even listening to you?” Any proper answer satisfying *datum questionis*, “I am even listening to you because *p*”, is not fully grammatical, suggesting the question is not meant to be taken literally.

(vi) Provides an answer to a more significant yet unspoken question. To illustrate with a personal example: In my family, it is common knowledge that I visit a nearby bakery only when I feel like having Turkish coffee. When a family member asked me, “Are you going to have Turkish coffee today?” it was clear to me that the actual intent behind the question was to ask me to buy something from the bakery (as it turned out, I was correct). From any proper answer to that question, combined with our mutual knowledge, the proper response to the intended question naturally follows.

(vii) It narrows the class of possible answers to a preceding question (posed by the same speaker or another participant in the conversation). In such instances—especially when the second question is neither a clarification of the first nor a rhetorical question, and when their topics appear unrelated but the second question is not an evasion (like in (i))—one might wonder about the purpose of the second question. Specifically, one might search for a proposition that, when combined with the proper answer to the second question, helps address the first question, even if only partially, perhaps by eliminating certain possibilities. For

instance, if someone asks, “How old is Peter?” and receives the reply, “What year were the Olympic Games in Moscow held? Learn history and do your math, for God’s sake!” the implication is that Peter was born in 1980, the year of the Moscow Olympics.

4.1

How can interrogative sentences be used as noncanonical questions (as defined) to deceive? In what circumstances are they lying questions? At times, a speaker may create the impression that their intended question differs from the one they are genuinely asking, employing this technique to mislead their audience. For example, imagine a philosophical gathering where all attendees can reasonably be assumed to be familiar with Wittgenstein’s works. Imagine I ask someone, “Have you read the *Tractatus*?” thereby implying that I am interested in her opinion of the book. This is plausible, as questions such as “Have you used x ?”, “Who has been using x ?”, “Have you done x ?”, “Have you been to x ?”, or “Have you read x ?” are often asked not merely to obtain factual information provided by an proper answer, but to invite the respondent’s perspective or opinion. However, if I have no interest in her opinion in this context, I am giving a false impression that I care about her view. Thus, my question is insincere, and by asking it, I am misleading her in this regard.

4.2

As mentioned earlier, interrogatives can sometimes be used to ask a question different from the one explicitly posed (QCQ cases). This mode of using interrogatives can be exploited for intentional deception. Consider a scenario where I ask you to buy a cake from a bakery. You have promised to do so on your way to the florist. Later, I realize you have not bought the cake, even though you went to the florist. Knowing you well, I understand that you likely forgot about the promise. However, for some malicious reason, I want to evoke guilt without directly accusing you of failing to fulfill your commitment. To achieve this, I might ask,

Have you been to the florist?

In this context, you might interpret my question as indirectly inquiring whether you bought the cake. If I were genuinely asking this, it would count as conveying that I don’t know whether you’ve purchased it and wish to find out. By framing the question in this indirect way, I not only place you in an uncomfortable position but also mislead you into believing that I am unaware of whether you went to the bakery. This approach seems dishonest because, if I had explicitly asked the implied question, I would have committed myself to cognitive

states (e.g., uncertainty about whether you bought the cake) and volitional states (e.g., a desire to learn this information) that I did not actually hold.

4.3

For another example of deception by non-canonical use of questions, imagine that the question asked is

Who thinks that they know what the word “mička” means in Slovenian?

while conversationally implying a different question:

What does the word “mička” mean in Slovenian?

Suppose, however, that the word has no meaning in Slovenian, a fact the speaker is fully aware of, yet she intends for her audience to think otherwise. In such circumstances, the speaker is actively deceiving her listeners, as they may conclude that the word holds meaning in the language, which was her intention. Importantly, the false proposition that “‘mička’ means something in Slovenian” does not belong to the cognitive content of the question but is nevertheless implied. The speaker is insincere for by asking it she is pretending that the word means something in this language.

4.4

To illustrate how one can exploit suggestive use of questions, consider a case in which I wish to convey that I regard Prof. X as a great scholar, although I do not genuinely hold this belief. I might ask, “Don’t you think Prof. X is a great scholar?” This question implies that I personally endorse this opinion, thereby misleading you. By posing this question, I deceive you into believing I hold this particular view, even though I have not directly stated it. In this instance, the act of asking “Don’t you think that p ?” conventionally commits the speaker to p , making my commitment insincere and my question a lying one.

4.5

Now consider the especially interesting case when not just one but two consecutive questions implicate some proposition. Imagine that I ask two questions:

Are you interested in Anna's whereabouts? Have you asked Peter about this?

The second question may seem somehow implied by the first and the following proposition:

If you are interested in Anna's whereabouts, you should ask Peter (because he may know where she is).

This proposition would have probably been implicated had these questions been asked in this order, since believing the proposition makes the second question rational when it is preceded by the first.¹⁴ Therefore, if I actively believed the proposition to be false (namely, if I believe Peter does not know her whereabouts), my utterance would be deceptive and the second question in particular could be insincere and hence a deceiving question.

4.6

Consider another candidate for a lying or deceiving question. Imagine that I aim to mislead someone who informs me:

I just ran out of gas.

To achieve this, I could ask:

Is not there a gas station just around the corner?

By asking this question I can conversationally imply that there is indeed a gas station nearby. Clearly, if I actively believe that this implicature is false, I am trying to deceive or even lie to my listener (provided that one can lie with false conversational implicature as argued by some scholars (see, Meibauer, 2014 or Reins & Wiegmann, 2021). It is important to note, however, that the proposition "There is a gas station nearby" is not a presupposition of the question. Instead, the implicature arises from my choice to frame the question in an unnecessarily complex manner, rather than asking the simpler and more direct:

Is there a gas station just around the corner?

This visible complexity signals my intent to imply information rather than straightforwardly inquire, thereby facilitating deception by asking this question.

4.7

Consider another example: imagine I wish to create the false impression among my students that they should already have completed their exams, or to pressure them into hurrying because their time is almost up (which is untrue). I could achieve this manipulative goal by asking:

¹⁴ Notably, Andrzej Wiśniewski (1994, 1995) formally investigated what one can mean by "a question is implied by some other and a proposition".

Have you finished?

This question, posed in a context where it is clear that I can see the students are still writing and am fully aware of this fact, would likely prompt them to reason as follows: "Since the teacher can see that we have not finished, the question must be intended to signal something other than a direct answer." Consequently, they might infer that I am trying to convey that they are running out of time. If, in reality, there was no time constraint and I knew this to be the case, my question would be deceptive. By creating a false sense of urgency, I would be misleading them, despite not explicitly stating any untrue proposition.

4.8

For a final illustration, suppose I wanted to provoke unnecessary worry or suspicion in your partner by making them think you might be having an affair. I could achieve this malicious goal by asking, in their presence:

Is that lipstick on your cheek again?

By posing this question, I would provide enough reason to incite concern, implicitly suggesting that I might believe you are being unfaithful (cf. Braun 2011). If I had no real grounds to suspect infidelity, this question could be judged as especially harmful and deceitful.

Other uses of interrogative sentences can be distinguished where the speaker is insincere to her recipients and intends to mislead or deceive them. Sometimes, a question serves as a disguised request, such as demanding for an explanation of a fact. For example, in certain contexts, the question "Is that lipstick on your cheek?" might not aim to convey the question, "Are you having an affair?" but instead to request clarification about how lipstick got on the addressee's cheek. When the speaker has no genuine interest in the requested explanation, the utterance misleads the recipient about their intentions.

Similarly, other types of questions can be insincere in other subtle ways. For instance, what Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber (2012, p. 223) call speculative questions—which invite collaborative inquiry—might be posed without any actual intention of investigating the matter. A speaker might also feign surprise through what Wilson and Sperber term surprise questions (2012, pp. 222). Another example is asking an exam question while pretending to know the correct answer, concealing own ignorance or incompetence. While these forms of insincerity are plausible candidates for deceptive or lying questions, they appear to be more controversial than the cases discussed earlier. As such, I leave them without further analysis.

5. Concluding Remarks

The primary aim of this paper was not to establish the obvious fact that questions can be used deceptively. Rather, it sought to elucidate the mechanisms through which interrogatives function as tools for deception. It has long been recognized—at least since Ajdukiewicz’s (1974) work—that questions possess cognitive content, and by posing a question, a speaker implicitly commits to this content. Such commitments can be strategically leveraged to deceive or lie. Beyond this, nuanced features of interrogatives enable even further deceptive practices.

Although deception in the form of lying is traditionally associated with assertions, it can also plausibly be achieved through rhetorical or non-canonical uses of interrogatives, such as QCQ (Question Conveying Question) and QCP (Question Conveying Proposition). These modes of usage merit further theoretical exploration, particularly with respect to how QCP can be employed to mislead. Such inquiries raise broader philosophical questions about the distinction between canonical and non-canonical uses of interrogatives—an intricate issue addressed in this paper but deserving of deeper investigation.

The paradigmatic cases examined reveal different mechanisms of “lying questions”:

- Rhetorical questions (e.g., “Who could blame John?”) may deceptively convey the speaker’s endorsement or rejection of a proposition.
- “Questions Conveying Questions (QCQ) (e.g., asking “Do you have a watch?” to really ask “What time is it?”) can mislead when the speaker does not occupy the cognitive and volitional states implied by the intended question.
- Questions Conveying Propositions (QCP) (e.g., “Don’t you think Prof. X is a great scholar?”) convey beliefs or attitudes beyond the semantic content of the question, which can be insincere.
- Suggestive questions (e.g., “What month did Peter marry Mary?”) may imply false background propositions, such as that Peter and Mary are married.

These examples illustrate how, by asking a question, the speaker can commit to propositions in ways that create opportunities for deception. Sometimes this deception arises from presuppositions, sometimes from conversational or conventional implicatures, and sometimes from the exploitation of pragmatic expectations tied to the canonical or non-canonical use of questions.

While some of these cases may not qualify as lies under narrow, assertion-based definitions, they nevertheless highlight how interrogatives can be insincere, misleading, and in certain contexts plausibly counted as lies. The category of “lying questions,” then, extends our understanding of how linguistic behavior

may deceive, and it calls for further inquiry into the boundaries between canonical and non-canonical uses of interrogatives, as well as into the varying strengths of commitment involved.

The examples discussed here may be debatable as cases of lying, given that contemporary approaches to lying often restrict its application to assertions. Scholars such as Igor Primoratz (1984), Jennifer Lackey (2013), and, to some extent, Jerzy Pelc (2015), argue that a necessary condition for lying is the assertion of a subjectively false proposition, rather than the mere implication of falsehood. Some may dismiss these examples, contending that the false content conveyed constitutes, at most, a conversational implicature of the posed question. And whether an utterance can qualify as a lie solely by transmitting a false implicature remains a contested issue (Meibauer, 2005, 2014; Faulkner, 2007; Dynel, 2011, 2015; Saul, 2012; Weissman et al., 2019; Reins & Wiegmann, 2021). The variation in how these examples are perceived—as more or less deceptive or akin to lying—may stem from differences in the degree of commitment to a proposition conveyed by a question (cf. Wiegmann et al., 2016; Mazarella et al., 2018). This commitment may vary depending on how the proposition is expressed: (1) as a presupposition or assumption of the question asked, (2) as a proposition conversationally implied by it, (3) as a proposition merely conventionally implied (as is often the case with *p* conveyed by the question “Don’t you think *p*?”), or (4) as an assumption or presupposition of an implied question. Investigating the strength of such commitments in relation to these categories offers an interesting avenue for further research.

In conclusion, this paper has demonstrated that interrogative sentences, despite their seemingly neutral and innocent nature, can serve as powerful tools for deception. By examining the semantic and pragmatic mechanisms underlying these deceptive uses, this study sheds light on the complex ways interrogatives can be used to mislead, deceive, or even constitute instances of lying.

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