

Intro to polar questions?

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Day 1, Day 2: recap

Day 1: The Classical Baseline

- PQs have answerhood conditions represented as $\{p, \neg p\}$ (Hamblin 1973)
- Predicts positive PQ = low-negation PQ = high-negation PQ = $\{p, \neg p\}$ (Roelofsen 2019)

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Day 2: Unpacking Negation & Bias

- Inner vs. Outer Negation tested with *again* and *also*:
 - *Inner* ($?[\neg p]$): $\neg p$ presupposed
 - *Outer* ($?[\neg[p]]$): p presupposed
- Two Dimensions of Question Bias (Sudo 2013; Romero 2024):
 - **Speaker Bias**: Inquirer's prior belief/expectation about p
 - **Evidential Bias**: Expectation triggered by immediate context
- Theoretical Split (Goodhue 2024; Tabatowski 2022):
 - *Heavy vs. Light Semantics* (Pragmatic operators vs. Embeddable sets)
 - *Symmetrical vs. Asymmetrical* ($\{p, \neg p\}$ vs. Monopolar $\{p\}$)

PQs = Alternative Qs with *or not*?

- Today's story begins with disjunctive, aka ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS (ALTQs)

(1) Do you like cats or rabbits?

PQs = Alternative Qs with *or not*?

- Today's story begins with disjunctive, aka ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS (ALTQs)

(1) Do you like cats or rabbits?

- Long time ago, there was a claim that PQs are subspecies of ALTQs with *or not*

(2) a. Do you like cats?

$\{ p; \neg p \}$

b. Do you like cats or not?

also $\{ p; \neg p \}$?

Long time ago...

Bolinger (1978)

The idea that a YNQ is nothing but a bobtailed alQ is one of those with a kind of obvious appeal that makes them rediscoverable every few years when previous scholarship is overlooked. In the past ten years or so it has been revived again by Katz and Postal (1964), by Schachter in the Stockwell-Schachter-Partee materials (1968), by Zellig Harris (1968), and most recently by Ronald Langacker (1970).

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[... In 1957,] Coleman said, with the emphasis that I reproduce, ‘Here we find what I believe to be THE TRUE EXPLANATION OF THE RISING INTONATION IN QUESTIONS CAPABLE OF BEING ANSWERED BY “YES” OR “NO”. Such questions seem to me [to Coleman] to be simply ALTQs in which the second alternative has been suppressed. By its nature such a question expects one of two answers; it is therefore an ALTQ; the alternative “or not” is in such cases always present to the mind’.

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Bolinger (1978)

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- Do you realize that today is the tenth already? vs Do you realize that today is the tenth already or not?

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Do you realize that today is the tenth already? vs Do you realize that today is the tenth already or not?
- (4) **Surprise at a self-evident fact:** Adding the negative alternative cancels the expression of genuine surprise.
Are you still around? vs. Are you still around or not?

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Are you still around? vs. Are you still around or not?
 - (5) **Requests for specification:** The speaker wants a specific value, not a binary denial.
Is today the seventeenth? vs. Is today the seventeenth or not?

Bolinger's contexts

- (6) **Questions answered by the act of answering:** The negative alternative is logically redundant or pragmatically bizarre.
John, are you awake? vs. John, are you awake or not?
- (7) **Low likelihood of a negative answer:** Unnatural when the speaker fully expects a positive outcome.
OK, is everybody ready? [said by an exam proctor] vs. OK, is everybody ready or not?

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- (8) **Polarity-biased items (some/often vs. any/ever):** Affirmatively biased items expect positive answers and clash with *or not*.
Have you often been there? vs. Have you often been there or not?
- (9) **Suggested answers to constituent questions:** Proposing a likely explanation makes the negative alternative irrelevant.
What's the matter? Are you tired? vs. What's the matter? Are you tired or not?

Bolinger's contexts: *My favs*

- (10) **Invitations:** *Or not* turns a polite offer into a pushy demand.
Do you want some? vs. Do you want some or not?
- (11) **Presupposing no prior discussion:** Standard conversations starters do not license the binary contrast
Have you met my sister? vs. Have you met my sister or not?

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- (12) **Requests:** Seeking cooperation looks on the positive side; *or not* sounds like an aggressive demand.
Will you help me? vs. Will you help me or not?
- (13) **Assumptions of the absurd:** Designed to highlight an absurdity rather than solicit a genuine choice.
Are you crazy? vs. Are you crazy or not?

Summary: Bolinger (1978)

Bolinger (1978)

- PQs are not syntactically or semantically derived from ALTQs with an elided negative disjunct ($p \vee \neg p$).
- **Pragmatic Non-Equivalence:** Adding *or not* drastically changes meaning. It turns polite invitations into pushy demands, and clashes with instances of speaker surprise or factive presuppositions.
- Other insightful ideas, feel free to check them out (conditional link, *whether* vs. *if*).

Cornering effect

Biezma (2009)

- And now, behold the name of this pragmatic effect!

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- a. Will you marry me?
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- The inquirer uses p and $\neg p$ options to force an answer and bring the open issue to an immediate conclusion.
- A cooperative addressee has no maneuvering room left and must select one of the provided choices.

One more thing

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Final rise = ??

b. Are you making [pasta]_{L*H} or [fish]_{H*L-L%}?

Final fall = ??

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(i) Is it the case that you are making pasta or fish?
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(i) Which of these things are you doing: making pasta or making fish?

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(i) Which of these things are you doing: making pasta or making fish?
- (16) a. Would you like [tea or coffee]_{L*H-H%}? Final rise = PQ
b. Would you like [tea]_{L*H} or [coffee]_{H*L-L%}? Final fall = Alternative

Questions as lists of alternatives

Biezma (2009), Biezma and Rawlins (2012, 2015)

- (17) a. Do you like cats $L^*H-H\%$? [PQ]
 b. Do you like [cats or rabbits] $L^*H-H\%$? [Disjunctive PQ]

]

- (17a) mentions only one alternative with final rising intonation → the list is open
- (17b) mentions only one alternative with final rising intonation → the list is open

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 b. Do you like [cats or rabbits] $L^*H-H\%$? [Disjunctive PQ]
 c. Do you like [cats] L^*H or [rabbits] $H^*L-L\%$? [ALTQ]
 d. Do you like [cats] L^*H or [not] $H^*L-L\%$? [or not ALTQ]

- (17a) mentions only one alternative with final rising intonation → the list is open
- (17b) mentions only one alternative with final rising intonation → the list is open
- (17c) mentions two alternatives with final falling intonation → the list is closed
- (17d) mentions two alternatives with final falling intonation → the list is closed

Question Under Discussion (QUD)

What is a QUD? (Roberts 2012)

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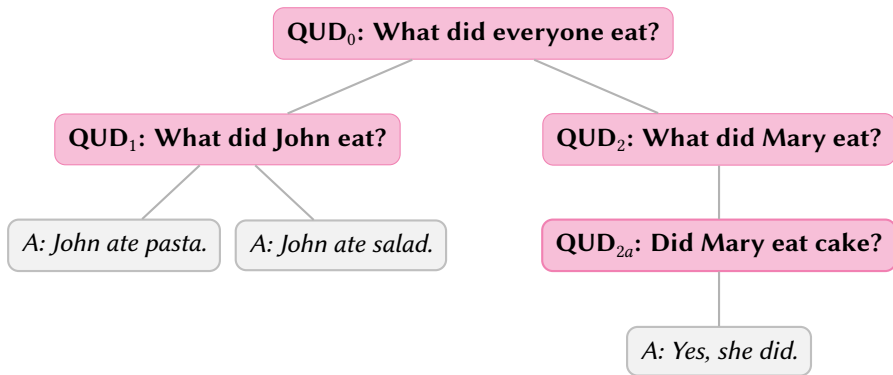
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QUD



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- Open Lists → Sub-strategies for a Broad QUD

(18) Super-QUD: *What kind of animals/things do you like?*

a. Do you like cats _{$L^*H-H\%$} ?

[PQ]

b. Do you like [cats or rabbits] _{$L^*H-H\%$} ?

[Disjunctive PQ]

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[Disjunctive PQ]

- Closed Lists → Restrictive / Forced QUDs, i.e., not the broadest one

(19) a. Restricted QUD: *Which of two do you prefer: cats or rabbits?*

b. Do you like [cats] _{L^*H} or [rabbits] _{$H^*L-L\%$} ?

[ALTQ]

(20) a. Forced QUD: *Do you like cats? (Immediate resolution forced)*

b. Do you like [cats] _{L^*H} or [not] _{$H^*L-L\%$} ?

[or not ALTQ]

Interim summary

- PQs $\neq$ Alternative Qs, but the theory predicts they might be equal
- Intonation drives the distinction
- Questions build lists of alternatives
- How does this connect to the monopolar/bipolar story?

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Core Mechanism (Biezma 2009; Biezma and Rawlins 2012, 2015)

Only what is overtly uttered enters the semantic list:

- **Monopolar PQs (Open List):** Utter p + Rising Intonation ($L^*H-H\%$) $\rightarrow$ Highlights p , keeping background options open.
- **Bipolar ALTQs (Closed List):** Utter $p \vee \neg p$ + Falling Closure (Γ) $\rightarrow$ Exhausts the option set, forcing resolution.

Meow

Biezma (2009); Biezma and Rawlins (2012, 2015)

Feature	Assertion <i>You like cats.</i>	Standard PQ <i>Do you like cats?</i>	Or Not Question <i>Do you like cats or not?</i>
Type		Monopolar	Bipolar (Exhaustive)
Denotation	Proposition: p	Singleton: $\{p\}$	Opposites: $\{p, \neg p\}$
Final Pitch	Final Fall: $H^*L-L\%$	Final Rise: $L^*H-H\%$	Final Fall: $H^*L-L\%$
Accents	Focal accent on p	Single focal accent	Accents on p and <i>not</i>
List Status	Closed (Committed)	Open List	Closed List (Γ)
Discourse Role	Proposes to eliminate non- p worlds	Raises p ; leaves sister QUD options open	Cornering effect; forces resolution

Closure operator Γ

Biezma (2009); Biezma and Rawlins (2012, 2015)

- Γ (Gamma) is a semantic closure operator that translates list-closure intonation into formal semantics in ALTQs
- When a speaker utters a question or list with a final falling intonation contour ($H^*L-L\%$), it phonologically triggers the insertion of the Γ operator at the top of the phrase structure (the CP domain)

Closure operator Γ

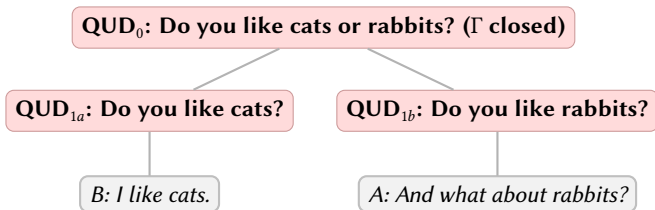
Biezma (2009); Biezma and Rawlins (2012, 2015)

(21) Do you like [cats] or [rabbits] ?

Regular ALTQ

- Introduces two specific options $G = \{\text{cats, rabbits}\}$, the final falling intonation triggers Γ
- Effect of Γ : It introduces the presupposition that those two are the only epistemically available choices
- Discourse Status: It closes off options like capybaras, but it is not yet a total cornering effect (because the questioner can still ask sub-questions about those specific disjuncts as a strategy, e.g., following up with *Do you like cats?*)

QUD Structure: Closed ALTQ



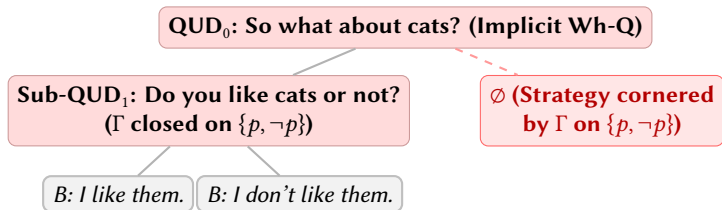
Closure operator Γ

(22) Do you like [cats] or [not] ?

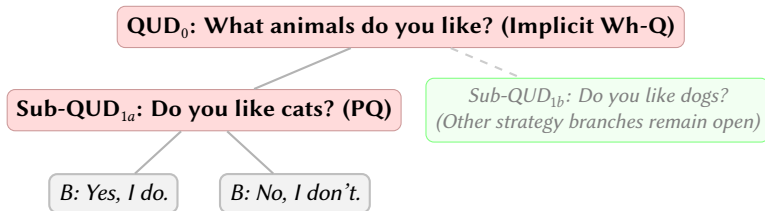
Or Not ALTQ

- Introduces two logically opposite options: $G = \{\text{cat}, \neg\text{cats}\}$
- Intonation: The final falling intonation triggers Γ
- Effect of Γ : It introduces the presupposition that p and $\neg p$ are the only available choices
- Discourse Status: This creates the cornering effect. Because p and $\neg p$ exhaust all logical possibilities, closing this list leaves zero sister nodes and zero sub-questions left to ask. It acts as a conversational cul-de-sac/dead end

QUD Structure: Cornering Strategy



QUD Structure: Polar Question



Back to PQs: monopolar vs. bipolar approaches

- Answerhood conditions: possible/true answers $\rightarrow$ bipolar $\{ p; \neg p \}$
- Biezma and Rawlins: only uttered proposition goes to the set $\rightarrow$ positive PQs $\{p\}$, negative PQs $\{\neg p\}$

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Goodhue (2024); Tabatowski (2022)

(23) *Symmetry* – bipolar/monopolar

- a. A *symmetrical* semantics is one in which all questions have identical denotations, e.g. $PPQ = NPQ = \{p; \neg p\}$
- b. In an *asymmetrical* semantics, they have different denotations, e.g. $PPQs = \{p\}$, $NPQs = \{\neg p\}$

(24) *Weight* not important for now

Consequences of monopolar approach for all PQs

Tabatowski (2022: 11), Biezma and Rawlins (2012: 402)

- **Non-uniform Question Semantics:**

- A singleton set $\{p\}$ for PQs diverges from constituent questions and ALTQs, i.e., sets of multiple alternatives
- Loss of the classical partition/exhaustive semantics ($\bigcup Q \neq W$)

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- **Trade-off / Empirical Gain:**

- Naturally models contextual bias (highlighting p vs. $\neg p$)
- Explains semantic/pragmatic differences between PQs and *or not* ALTQs

Monopolar and bipolar: PQ in Ntɛʔkepmxcín

Matthewson (2025)

- It is not just monopolar or bipolar, it is both

Three-Way Semantic Distinction:

- Monopolar ($\{p\}$): Tables a single proposition without adding it to speaker commitments.
- Bipolar, Non-Exhaustive ($\{p, \neg p\}$): Tables positive and negative alternatives without presupposing they are the only options.
- Bipolar, Exhaustive ($\{p, \neg p\} + \text{Closure}$): Offers exactly two answer choices, creating a “cornering” effect.

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- English plain PQs collapse monopolar and non-exhaustive bipolar strategies, whereas Nłeʔkepmxcín (Salish) morphosyntactically isolates all three

Monopolar and bipolar: PQ in Ntɛʔkepmxcín

Matthewson (2025)

Question Type	Semantics	Marker	Pragmatic Context
Monopolar	$\{p\}$ (<i>singleton set</i>)	Clitic = <i>n</i>	Contextual evidence, incredulity, non- <i>p</i> alts allowed
Bipolar, Non-Exh.	$\{p, \neg p\}$ (<i>unbiased set</i>)	Predicate <i>ké</i>	Neutral/out-of-the-blue, exams, debate, offers/requests
Bipolar, Exh.	$\{p, \neg p\} + \text{Closure}$ (<i>only 2 options</i>)	Explicit <i>e tém=us</i> ('or not')	Cornering contexts; forces strict binary choice

Check out *or what* and *or something*

Biezma and Rawlins (2017)

- (25)
- a. Do you like cats, rabbits or what?
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- “intuitively, an ‘or something’ indicates that there may be alternatives to its first disjunct, but also signals that the speaker doesn’t care about those fine-grained distinctions; a ‘yes’ answer would collapse these extra alternatives together”

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