

Since when? as a question about the common ground
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The talk addresses two properties of so-called Negative Wh-Constructions (NWHCs) with the wh-phrase *since when* that have not been observed yet. NWHCs express a denial to some previous utterance as in (1B), by which the Speaker conveys that John is not a vegetarian according to her, and her Addressee should know that, too.

- (1) A: John, who's a vegetarian, came over yesterday.
B: Since when is John a vegetarian?

Different languages use a different set of wh-phrases in the same construction: the equivalents of *where*, *when* and *how* are not uncommon. According to the existing analyses provided by Cheung (2008, 2009), such questions express descriptive negation, that is, they reject the propositional content of the latest move; and the wh-phrases in a NWHC do not quantify over their regular domains, they are “surrogates”, standing for possible worlds, and there is no crucial difference in meaning or function between NWHCs having different wh-phrases. Given the latter claim and the fact that NWHCs at the first glance are similar to Rhetorical Questions, my research questions are the following:

- (2) What makes *since when* different from other wh-words in NWHCs?
(3) Are NWHCs Rhetorical Questions?

I argue that *since when* is different from other wh-phrases participating in the NWHC: it can express a denial that does not necessarily reject the propositional content of the preceding utterance, but targets other aspects of it. Languages in which both *since when* and *where* is available in this construction (e.g. in Italian, Korean and Hungarian) can only use the former to target the register of the preceding utterance. In these languages, *since when* can more readily target propositions that follow from a previous utterance, unlike *where*. I argue that *since when*, following Büring's (2012) idea, expresses a question about the interlocutors' common ground. If the latest move expressed the proposition *p*, the question *Since when p* is paraphrased as follows:

- (4) Since when is it part of our common ground that *p*?

By this assumption, all uses of a NWHC with *since when* can be accounted for. Given that the Speaker conveys a negated proposition in the form of a wh-question, the question arises whether NWHCs are a special form of Rhetorical Questions: I argue that they are not. My analysis of NWHCs is based on a comparison with Rhetorical Questions. I assume with Caponigro and Sprouse (2007), that Rhetorical Questions and genuine questions are semantically equivalent, and they differ only pragmatically. The Speaker's negative bias about some relevant proposition *p* is the common trait; what sets them apart is the belief about *p* that Speaker attributes to the Addressee. In the case of Rhetorical Questions, the two beliefs should match, while in the case of NWHCs, the Speaker attributes an opposite belief on *p* to her Addressee.

References

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