

Meta(-meta)-questions and *wh*-scope marking

Anonymized

Abstract: Trinh (2024) and Bassi, Fox, and Trinh (2024) present a generalization that meta-meta-questions are impossible. They derive it via a syntactic constraint on movement into specifiers of speech act operators and show that an apparent counterexample is derived via island voiding properties of ellipsis. A syntactic approach to the ban on meta-meta-questions predicts that *wh*-scope marking should allow meta-meta-questions, given that scope marking involves no movement to the periphery of the matrix clause, under an indirect dependency account (Dayal 1993). This note presents data from Russian that shows that the prediction is borne out, supporting a syntactic view of the ban on meta-meta-questions proposed by Bassi, Fox, and Trinh.

Keywords: speech acts, movement, scope marking, meta-questions

1 Introduction

Natural language (exemplified by English below) allows meta-questions: utterances that look like questions, but their pragmatic role is to inquire whether an interlocutor asked a certain preceding question (thus, it is a question about an act of asking a question). For example, the utterance (ii) in (1) does not inquire whether Curtis liked Scott's blogposts, but rather inquires

whether A's utterance (i) was inquiring whether Curtis liked Scott's blogposts.

- (1) A: Did Curtis like Scott's blogpost? (i)
 B: Did he like Scott's blogpost? (ii)
 A: Yeah. Did he? (iii)
 B: Yes, he did. (iv)

Bassi, Fox, and Trinh (2024), referred to as BFT henceforth, note that meta-meta-questions seem to be impossible (following and building on Trinh 2024). Utterance (iii) in (2) is infelicitous under the reading where A's utterance (iii) inquires whether B's utterance (ii) inquires whether A's utterance (i) inquires whether Curtis liked Scott's blogpost.

- (2) A: Did Curtis like Scott's blogpost? (i)
 B: Did he like Scott's blogpost? (ii)
 A: Did Curtis like Scott's blogpost? (iii)

At the first glance, the pattern holds cross-linguistically. For example, Russian behaves similarly. Example (3) presents a felicitous meta-question discourse: utterance (3a) inquires whether Petja liked Pasha's analysis while utterance (3b) inquires whether the preceding utterance inquired whether Petja liked Pasha's analysis. Then, utterance (3c) confirms that the initial utterance (3a) did indeed inquire that and, finally, utterance (3d) resolves the question raised by utterance (3a). Russian data has been collected through online elicitation of 5 speakers of Moscow Russian, all aged 20–30.

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|---|---|
| <p>(3) a. <i>Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz Paši?</i>
 liked=Q Petja analysis of.Pasha
 'Did Petja like Pasha's analysis?'</p> | <p>b. <i>Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz Paši?</i>
 liked=Q Petja analysis of.Pasha
 'Did Petja like Pasha's analysis?'</p> |
|---|---|

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| c. <i>Da. Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz</i> | d. <i>Da.</i> |
| yes liked=Q Petja analysis | yes |
| <i>Paši?</i> | ‘Yes.’ |
| of.Pasha | |
| ‘Yes. Did Petja like Pasha’s analysis?’ | |

Example (4) presents an infelicitous meta-meta-question discourse: utterances (4a) and (4b) play the same role as the utterances in (3a,b) but utterance (4c) is constructed to inquire whether utterance (4b) inquired what utterance (4a) inquired. The meta-meta-question in (4c), however, ends up infelicitous, parallel to the English data highlighted by BFT.

- (4) a. *Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz Paši?*
 liked=Q Petja analysis of.Pasha
 ‘Did Petja like Pasha’s analysis?’
- b. *Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz Paši?*
 liked=Q Petja analysis of.Pasha
 ‘Did Petja like Pasha’s analysis?’
- c. *#Ponravilsja=li Petje analiz Paši?*
 liked=Q Petja analysis of.Pasha
 ‘Did Petja like Pasha’s analysis?’

Example (5), however, presents a felicitous meta-meta-question discourse. The functional word *kak* is necessary for the meta-meta-question to be possible. The utterance (a) inquires whose analysis Petja liked. The utterance (b) inquires about the utterance (a), being a meta-question. The utterance (c) inquires about the utterance (b), being a meta-meta-question.

(5) a. *čej analiz ponravilsja Petje?*

whose analysis liked Petja

‘Whose analysis did Petja like?’

b. *Kak čej?*

how whose

Lit.: ‘How whose?’

Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

c. *Kak kak čej?*

how how whose

Lit.: ‘How how whose?’

Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

This is a counterexample to BFT’s generalization. However, as BFT themselves note, excursive questions (subquestions of the initial question) allow for meta-meta-readings.

(6) A: Did you use the car? B: When?

A: When? B: Yeah, when?

A: Yesterday. B: No, I did not use the car yesterday.

This note’s contribution is that the syntactic machinery used by BFT to derive the licit status of excursive meta-meta-questions can be extended to Russian *kak* meta-meta-questions as well. If correct, this conclusion shows that the licit status of excursive meta-meta-questions concerns their syntactic derivation rather than the pragmatics of excursive meta-meta-questions (since the *kak* meta-meta-question in (5) is not obviously excursive and rather seems to be repetitive), supporting the ideas put forth by BFT.

The note is structured as follows. Section 2 recaps BFT’s proposal, focusing on its syntactic mechanisms. Section 3 shows how it can be applied to Russian *kak* meta-meta-questions, with the core intuition behind the proposal being that the felicitous meta-meta-question in (5) in-

volves *wh*-scope marking (see Stepanov 2000). Section 4 concludes and poses an open question whether the pattern is replicated in other *wh*-scope marking languages, finishing with some preliminary data that suggests that Hindi allows such meta-meta-questions too (also using *wh*-scope marking).

2 BFT's proposal

BFT suggest that ban on meta-meta-questions follows from: (i) (Neo-)Performative Hypothesis (speech act operators present in the syntactic structure; see Ross 1970; Krifka 2001; Speas and Tenny 2003; Sauerland and Yatsushiro 2017; Wiltschko 2021 among many others); (ii) ban on movement into specifiers of speech act heads (a novel proposal of BFT's); (iii) ban on embedding in-situ questions (in languages with an ex-situ option, see Lai-Shen Cheng and Rooryck 2000). Let's unpack the ingredients of their proposal.

Neo-Performative Hypothesis states that every assertion comes with a silent operator *AS-
SERT*, every question comes with a silent operator *ASK*, and so on (such elements are referred to by BFT as 'performative prefixes'). For example, the declarative sentence in (7a) has the logical form in (7b) whereas the interrogative sentence in (8a) has the logical form in (8b).

(7) Declarative LF in a Neo-Performative system

- a. Curtis reads Scott's blogposts
- b. [*ASSERT* [*Curtis reads Scott's blogposts*]]

(8) Interrogative LF in a Neo-Performative system

- a. Does Curtis read Scott's blogposts?
- b. [*ASK* [*whether*₁ *C*_[+wh]] [*t*₁ *Curtis read Scott's blogposts*]]]

While the declarative LF is rather straightforward, the details of the interrogative LF require unpacking. BFT assume that polar questions come with a silent *wh*-word like *whether* that moves into the specifier of the CP that acts as a complement to the silent *ASK* operator present

on the left periphery of the interrogative sentence.

It is time to introduce LFs of meta-questions. Consider a discourse in (9). The interpretation of B's utterance is not one of a polar question, it is rather a question about whether A made the statement that B heard. While one might be drawn to represent this reading via a nested [ASK [ASSERT P]] structure, it is important to note that B's utterance is no simple polar question but rather a rising declarative (indicated, for example, by lack of T-to-C movement and *do*-support).

(9) A: Curtis reads Scott's blogposts.

B: Curtis reads Scott's blogposts?

BFT represent rising declaratives as *in situ* polar questions where the silent *whether* present in (8b) does not undergo movement, as shown in (10). Note also that *in situ* questions do not involve a ASK operator.

(10) LF of B's utterance in (9):

$[f_1 \text{ whether}_1 [A \text{ ASSERT } [Curtis \text{ reads Scott's blogposts}]]]$

Representing meta-questions as *in situ* questions allows to understand the ban on meta-meta-questions. A meta-meta-question in (11) would have the logical form in (12) where the silent operator ASK embeds an *in situ* question.

(11) A: Curtis reads Scott's blogposts.

B: Curtis reads Scott's blogposts?

#A: Curtis reads Scott's blogposts?

(12) LF of a meta-meta-question

$[f_1 \text{ whether}_1 [B \text{ ASK } [f_2 \text{ whether}_2 [A \text{ ASSERT } [P]]]]]$

However, it is independently known that *in-situ* questions cannot be embedded, as shown below in (13).

(13) a. *John wonders Curtis reads Scott's blogposts.

b. *John wonders Curtis reads whose blogposts.

Since meta-questions are *in situ* questions they cannot be embedded under a silent speech operator and thus there is no licit LF to represent a meta-meta-question. This is how BFT's proposal goes. However, I am yet to present why meta-questions are necessarily *in situ*: why is it that a proper interrogative LF is absent for meta-questions? This is dealt with by BFT with a stipulation that bans movement into specifiers of speech act operators (essentially, the claim is that a complement of a speech act operator is an island).

(14) Ban on movement into the performative zone:

No movement to Spec,XP may occur if X is a speech act operator

Island nature of a complement of a speech act operator raises the following question: it is known that islands violations can be circumvented with ellipsis. The prediction is then that a meta-question with ellipsis allows for a subsequent meta-meta-question. This prediction is borne out in excursive questions, repeated below in (15) where A's final utterance is a meta-meta-question.

(15) A: Did you take my car?

B: When?

A: When?

Without ellipsis, a meta-meta-question becomes infelicitous (as shown in 16), suggesting that it is ellipsis that is responsible for the availability of an excursive meta-meta-question.

(16) A: Did you take my car?

B: Did I take your car when?

#A: Did you take my car when?

Taking stock, the ban on meta-meta-questions follows from the claim that meta-questions are usually in-situ questions (outside of ellipsis contexts) and the ban on embedded in-situ ques-

tions. However, it is necessary to point out that the crucial part of the analysis is that nothing can *move* into a specifier of a speech act operator. There is no ban on being externally merged into the specifier: so, should the language have a way to build indirect *wh*-dependencies (also known as ‘*wh*-scope marking’; see Dayal 1993 for an indirect dependency characterization of *wh*-scope marking.), meta-meta-questions should be possible. Next section argues that Russian exemplifies this prediction.

3 Meta-meta-questions via scope marking

Example (17) presents Russian *wh*-scope marking (Stepanov 2000; although see Korotkova 2012 for a dissenting view): despite the *wh*-item being low in the structure (but not *in situ*), its scope is ‘marked’ by the *wh*-item *kak* ‘how’ in the left periphery of the matrix clause.

- (17) *Kak ty sčitaeš čej blog on čitaet?*
 how you think whose blog he reads
 ‘Whose blog do you think that he reads?’

Now, consider the following meta-meta-question discourse in (18) which is only possible with *kak*. A crucial observation is that ellipsis is non-essential for these sentences (although the lack of ellipsis does lead to a degraded level of acceptability).

- (18) a. *čej analiz ponravilsja Petje?*
 whose analysis liked Petja
 ‘Whose analysis did Petja like?’
 b. *Kak čej (analiz ponravilsja Petje)?*
 how whose analysis liked petja
 Lit.: ‘How whose?’
 Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

c. *Kak kak čej (analiz ponravilsja Petje)?*

how how whose analysis liked petja

Lit.: ‘How how whose?’

Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

I suggest that the role of *kak* in these sentences is to be the interrogative operator externally merged in the specifier of the ASK speech act operator that establishes an indirect dependency with the *wh*-item (see Dayal 1993).

(19) LFs of the *kak* questions

a. LF for the meta-question:

[B ASK [*kak*₁ [A ASK [*whose*₁ P]]]]

b. LF for the meta-meta-question:

[A ASK [*kak*₁ [B ASK [*kak*₁ [A ASK [*whose*₁ P]]]]]]]

Such a derivation does not violate the ban on moving into specifiers of speech act operators that BFT employ to derive the ban on meta-meta-questions because no movement occurs: the scope-marker is externally merged in the specifier and the interrogative interpretation is derived via an indirect dependency (see Stepanov 2000 for a proposal).

4 Conclusion and outlook

BFT argue that there is a wide ban on meta-meta-questions which is derived syntactically using the neo-performative hypothesis. Their syntactic proposal relies on prohibiting movement into specifiers of speech act operators. BFT themselves show that ellipsis (as it is known to do) may circumvent restrictions on movement, allowing meta-meta-question readings of excursive questions. A prediction of BFT’s system is that ex-situ questions that do not rely on movement should be able to get meta-meta-question readings. Based on data from Russian, I have argued that this is borne out. Crucially, preliminary exploration of other *wh*-scope marking languages

(namely, Hindi) suggests that the pattern highlighted for Russian is general.

(20) Hindi (Malhaar Shah, p.c.)

a. *tum kis-se mil rahe-ho*

you who-INSTR meet stay-be

‘Whom are you meeting with?’

b. *kyaa kis-se?*

what who-INSTR

Lit.: ‘What whom?’ / Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

c. *kyaa kyaa kis-se?*

what what who-INSTR

Lit.: ‘What what whom?’ / Non-lit.: ‘How are you asking that?’

I therefore conclude that the syntactic analysis of the restriction on meta-meta-questions proposed by BFT makes correct predictions for meta-meta-questions in at least two languages that have been argued to exhibit *wh*-scope marking (Russian, Hindi).

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