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## CLEFT WH-QUESTIONS IN NORWEGIAN AND THEIR PRESUPPOSITIONS

In Norwegian wh-questions are very often cleft, especially in colloquial speech.

(1) Hvem er det som kommer?

"Who is it that comes?"

(2) Hva er det du vil?

"What is it you want?"

Very little has been said about these questions, but those who have commented them, claim that there is only a stylistic difference between cleft and non-cleft questions. (By cleft question I will in the following mean cleft wh-question.) This stands in contrast to declarative sentences, where it is by now an established fact that there is a semantic difference between clefts and non-clefts.

I will claim that there is a semantic difference between cleft and non-cleft questions, and that this difference can be explained in terms of presuppositions.

It has generally been thought that

(3) Who comes?

presupposes

(4) Somebody comes

and

(5) Why does Harry beat his wife?

presupposes

(6) Harry beats his wife for some reason. 2)

That would mean that a wh-question presupposes a corresponding declarative sentence where the interrogative word is replaced by a positive non-interrogative word.

Pope (1975) has maintained, however, that this is not always true. (7) is also a natural answer to (5).

(7) No reason

This might look like a denial of a presupposition, but it is not, according to Pope. If we object to a presupposition, we will do that more explicitly, as in the following dialogue:

(8) a. Is the present king of France bald?

b. What do you mean? The present king of France isn't bald, in fact there is no present king of France.

Since (7) is a natural answer to (5), the presupposition of (5) is not (6), but rather (9):

(9) Harry beats his wife.

But although (6) is not the presupposition of (5), it is still fair to say that whoever says (5) generally supposes (6) to be true, too. Pope therefore proposes that (6) should be called a supposition of (5).

A supposition is somehow weaker than a presupposition. Informally we can say that a supposition of a wh-question is the speaker's belief about the set the wh-word refers to, whether it is null or non-null.

That means that a question has two suppositions, one positive and one negative. The speaker may believe one of them to be true or he may have no opinion at all on the matter.

An example showing a negative supposition:

- (10) A. Who likes peanuts?  
B. I don't know anybody who does.  
A. Aha! See what I mean!

A's last utterance shows that what is supposed by the question is

- (11) Nobody likes peanuts  
rather than the other possible supposition  
(12) Somebody likes peanuts.

We will now turn back to questions in Norwegian.

- (13) Hva var det han sa om Hedda?  
"What was it he said about Hedda?"

The question (13) can only be said when the speaker knows (or thinks that he knows) that something has been said about Hedda. It is therefore true that (13) presupposes (14).

- (14) Han sa noe om Hedda  
"He said something about Hedda"

The non-cleft question

- (15) Hva sa han om Hedda?

on the other hand can be used when the speaker does not really know whether anything has in fact been said about Hedda. Therefore we cannot say that (15) presupposes (14), but we can say that it supposes it. And, since (15) can also be used when the speaker thinks that nothing has been said about Hedda, he only wants to be sure, (15) may also suppose

- (16) Han sa ingenting om Hedda  
"He said nothing about Hedda"

The difference between the cleft and the non-cleft question is perhaps still clearer in (17) and (18).

- (17) Hva sier du om Hedda?  
"What say you about Hedda?"

- (18) Hva er det du sier om Hedda?  
"What is it you say about Hedda?"

(17) will most naturally be used when the addressee has not said anything about Hedda, but now the speaker asks him to. He may do so, but he may also refuse. We cannot therefore possibly say that (17) presupposes (19).

- (19) Du sier noe om Hedda  
"You say something about Hedda"

but we can say that it supposes it. (18) on the other hand is used when the speaker knows that the addressee has in fact said something about Hedda, and now he wants this "something" to be identified. It is therefore safe to say that (18) presupposes (19).

Another example:

- (20) Hvorfor reiser du ikke bort ei tid?

"Why travel you not away (for) some time?"

may be said as a suggestion. The addressee may not have thought about this possibility and then there can be at the moment of utterance no real reason why he does not go away. But if the speaker repeats this suggestion a couple of times, he knows that there is some conscious reason why the other one does not go away. Then he may ask:

- (21) Hvorfor er det du ikke reiser bort ei tid?

"Why is it you not travel away some time?"

And (21) cannot be used as a suggestion, like (20).

Therefore, (21) presupposes (22)

- (22) Du reiser ikke bort av en (eller annen) grunn  
"You travel not away for some reason (or other)"

If I have been away for some time, I may say when I come back:

- (23) Nå, hva har skjedd her mens jeg var borte?

"Now, what has happened here while I was away?"

I can say so even if I do not know that anything extraordinary has happened. But if I find the house quite out of order, it is more natural to say:

- (24) Hva er det som har skjedd her mens jeg var borte?

"What is it that has happened here while I was away?"

Sometimes only the cleft sentence can be used.

- (25) ??Hva bråker?

"What noises?" (= What is making noise?)

- (26) Hva er det som bråker?

In spoken Norwegian (25) is almost unacceptable. When I hear some noise, I know that there must be "something" making the noise, and therefore I choose the sentence which presupposes so, namely (26).

Lyons (1977:597) mentions that

- (27) What didn't John do?

presupposes that there is something that John did not do.

Therefore, as we might expect, the cleft version is the most natural one in Norwegian.

- (28) Hva var det John ikke gjorde?

"What was it John not did?" 4)

- (29) ??Hva gjorde ikke John?

Some questions do not seem to fit completely into the pattern.

- (30) Hva er det jeg kan gjøre da?

"What is it I can do then?"

According to our rules this sentence is expected to presuppose "I can do something", but what it in fact presupposes is

"I can do nothing". And

- (31) Hva kan jeg gjøre da?

is expected to suppose "I can do something" and "I can do nothing". But (30) and (31) belong to a special class of questions, namely rhetorical questions (a question for which there is an obvious answer, given by the question itself).

Pope claims that the suppositions of rhetorical questions are raised to the level of presuppositions. This is in accordance with our facts. One of the suppositions of (31) is raised to the level of presupposition, and therefore we can use an equivalent cleft sentence. 9)

What we have seen so far can be summed up in the following way:

Cleft questions can be used only when the speaker presupposes the corresponding sentence that is formed when the wh-word is replaced by a corresponding positive (in rhetorical questions also negative) pro-word.

This means that cleft wh-questions and cleft declarative sentences have the same presuppositions. Both

- (32) Hvem var det de inviterte?

"Who was it they invited?" and

- (33) Det var Ola og Kari de inviterte

presupposes

- (34) De inviterte noen

"They invited somebody"

But there are also other similarities between cleft questions and declarative sentences. In cleft declarative sentences the focused constituent gives an exhaustive listing of the members (in the domain of discourse) that fit the requirement of the presupposition. In (35) that means that Ola and Kari are the only ones that are invited (among those that we are talking about).

The same holds for questions. If somebody has parked a car, I can ask

(35) Hvor er det du har parkert da?

"Where is it you have parked then?"

because the car is parked in only one place, and therefore I want an exhaustive listing of that place. But if I drive in an unknown city, I would rather ask

(36) Hvor kan jeg parkere?

"Where can I park?"

and not

(37) ?Hvor er det jeg kan parkere?

since I am not interested in an exhaustive listing of all the parking lots in the city.

We can now sum up what we have found about the use of cleft wh-questions in Norwegian:

Cleft wh-questions can be used only when the question presupposes the corresponding sentence that is formed when the wh-word is replaced by a corresponding positive (in rhetorical questions also negative) pro-word, and when the speaker wants an exhaustive listing of the members of the class that the wh-word refers to.

-----qqqqq?????????qqqqq-----

## APPENDIX

This paper deals primarily with Norwegian. But cleft wh-questions are found in other languages, too. In Danish and Swedish they are used largely in the same way as in Norwegian, and the frequency is probably the same. English has cleft wh-questions, too,

(38) Who was it who interviewed you? (Quirk et al. 1972:954)

but they seem to be much less frequent than in Scandinavian. In Italian such questions are limited to colloquial speech in Northern Italy (Böhnstedt 1975).

(39) Quant'è che costa?

"How much is (it) that costs?"

In French, however, cleft wh-questions are very frequent, especially when the wh-word is que (what).

(40) Qu'est-ce que tu vois?

"What is it that you see?"

Langacker (1972:53) claims that clefts and non-clefts have the same presuppositions. But it may be, however, that the presuppositions once were as they are in Norwegian, but that the semantic distinction between clefts and non-clefts was later lost. Today Qu'est-ce que may be considered as a fixed lexical pattern, that cannot even be used in the preterite:

(41) \*Qu'était-ce qu'il voulait?

"What was it that he would?" (Langacker 1972:53)

It has generally been thought that Slavic languages have no cleft construction at all. But there are some questions that seem to have the same semantic properties as Norwegian clefts:

(42) Russian: Kto eto prišel?

"Who it came?"

Polish: Kto to przyszedł?

Czech: Kdo to přišel?

Serbo-Croatian: Ko je to došao?

"Who is it come?" (Mønnesland 1977) 7)

The word eto or to (normally a neuter pronoun) is in such questions said to emphasize the preceding word (e.g. Slovar' russkogo jazyka IV p. 1066). However, the difference between (42) and the more frequent

(43) Kto prišel? etc.

should perhaps be explained in terms of presupposition (and supposition). Like cleft questions (42) presupposes that somebody came, and therefore (44) is not a well-formed dialogue:

(44) A. Kto eto prišel?

B. ?Nikto ne prišel.

"Nobody not came"

But (45) is well-formed since it is only supposed that somebody came.

(45) A. Kto prišel?

B. Nikto ne prišel.

Since these questions seem to have the same semantic properties as cleft questions, it is tempting to think that there is a genetic connection. It has been thought that cleft sentences do not exist in Slavic, but Mønnesland (1977) has found some constructions in Serbo-Croatian that formally correspond to our clefts, e.g.

(46) Koji su to što ga traže? (Lalić)

"Who are it that him seek?"

And Volek (1977:173) gives the following example from Czech:

(47) Ted jsi to ty, kdo nechce pochopit

"Now are it you who not-want understand"

Gundel (1976) claims that (48) is possible in Russian:

(48) Eto byl Ivan kotoryj zvonil

"It was Ivan who called"

This means that cleft sentences are not completely unknown in Slavic, and questions with eto/to might therefore be reduced clefts.

-----wwwwhhhh?????hhhhwww-----

## FOOTNOTES

- 1) Fretheim (1970:56)
- 2) Katz & Postal (1964:117), Rohrer (1971:111), Katz (1972:210), Lyons (1977:597)
- 3) The term supposition seems to denote the same as Kiefer's (1977:47) background assumption. It is further related to notions like allegation (Sgall et al. 1973:108) and expectation (Leech 1974:323).
- 4) In positive questions like What did John do? also non-clefts can be used in Norwegian: Hva gjorde John? Lyons (1977:597) claims that this question presupposes that John did something. But he also suggests that Nothing is an appropriate response.
- 5) This property of cleft wh-questions has been discussed by Dahl (1974:45).
- 6) In many dialects in Northern and Central Norwegian cleft wh-questions have been reduced in the following way:  
 (a) Hva er det du sier? --> Hva du sier?  
 (b) Hvem er det som kommer? --> Hvem som kommer?  
 In the dialects where this development is rather new the reduced clefts seem to have the same semantic properties as full clefts. In dialects where this sentence type is firmly established, the difference between reduced clefts and ordinary questions has more or less disappeared. Cf. Lie (1976).  
 A similar reduction of cleft questions can be found in French:  
 (c) Où qu'il est? (Northern and Central France)  
 "Where that he is?"  
 According to Bohnstedt (1973) this type has developed from  
 (d) Où est-ce qu'il est?  
 In Southern France another type is found:  
 (e) Où il est?  
 which may be a further reduction of (c), but which also may be due to a simple reordering of the constituents.
- 7) This construction is not found in Macedonian and Bulgarian but these languages have another construction that is similar but not equivalent, e.g. Macedonian (Browne 1970):  
 (a) Kogo go barate?  
 "Whom him (you) seek?" (= Whom are you looking for?)  
 This question presupposes not only that you look for somebody, but that he is a specific person and single and male. (That the person is presupposed to be male, is not mentioned by Browne.) Cf. Lyons (1977:763).
- 8) Gundel (1976) writes (48) in the following way:  
 (a) Eto (byl) Ivan (kotoryj) zvonil  
 thereby suggesting that the construction  
 (b) Eto Ivan zvonil  
 and, I would add,  
 (c) Kto eto zvonil?  
 are derived from cleft sentences. Her paper was not known to me when I made the first version of this paper.

- 9) Rhetorical questions are often emotively marked. Emotiveness is not a necessary condition for cleft questions, but it favours cleftedness, especially in written language. Cleft questions are used mostly in spoken language, and when they show up in written language, they are very often emotively marked. In Ibsen's "Et dukkehjem" ("A Doll's House") of 10 clefted wh-questions at least 6 are clearly emotively marked, e.g.  
 (a) Hva er det du sier!  
 "What is it you say!"

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