Metacommunicative fragments as probes into the grammar of the speech act layer

Several authors have argued that illocutionary force is best analyzed in terms of speech act operators located in the high left periphery (Rizzi 1997, Speas & Tenny 2003, Krifka 2014). However, the fact that these operators are rarely overtly realized makes them hard to study. Here we argue that the largely neglected class of metacommunicative fragments, which query the goals underlying an interlocutor’s utterance, constitute a novel tool to probe the properties of the speech act layer. Focusing on why?, we show (i) that at least some speech act operators are inherently modal elements; and (ii) that they are associated to abstract SP(eaker) and AD(dressee) pronouns.

**Conversational backgrounds and utterance goals** — If speaker A doesn’t overtly spell out the conversational backgrounds of a regular overt modal, speaker B can query them with why?: in (1)/(2), A’s replies to B’s why? follow-ups amount to explicit declarations of the conversational backgrounds associated to the root and epistemic readings of must in A’s initial utterances.

(1) A: You must eat your veggies. B: Why? [≃ on what grounds do I have to eat them?]
   A: {The doctor says so / They are really yummy today / There are children starving}

(2) A: Jack must be at home. B: Why? [≃ on what grounds do you conclude that?]
   A: He’s not answering his office phone.

If A overtly declares the conversational backgrounds in her initial utterance, why-fragments either become infelicitous, or else (as shown here) challenge A’s choice of conversational backgrounds.

(3) A: Given what the doctor said, you must eat your veggies.
   B: Why? [≃ why do I have to accept the doctor’s authority?]

(4) A: Given that he’s not answering his office phone, Jack must be at home.
   B: Why? [≃ why do you think this is sufficient evidence?]

In an analogous manner, why-fragments can also be used metacommunicatively to query the goal that underlies A’s question (5); if A overtly declares her question’s goal, a metacommunicative why-fragment challenges the rationale connecting A’s question to her goals (6). This pattern is crosslinguistically robust. The parallelism with (3)/(4) can be captured if utterance goals are analyzed as conversational backgrounds of a modal speech act operator-scoping over the whole utterance.

(5) A: Is Sally here? B: Why? [≃ why do you need to know that?]
   A: I need my computer fixed.

(6) A: Given that my computer needs fixing, is Sally here?
   B: Why? [≃ why are Sally’s whereabouts relevant to your goals?]

Note that purely pragmatic aspects of meaning (e.g., conversational implicatures) fail to license fragmentary/elliptical replies (7). This suggests that the modal meaning of speech act operators, including their associated conversational backgrounds, needs to be explicitly declared in their syntax/semantics. This is line with recent observations that the encoding of utterance goals interacts with other aspects of syntax and semantics (Woods 2016, Witschko & Heim t.a.).

(7) A: Are you still busy cleaning? [implicature: can I help you?]
   B: {# Yes, please / # Yes, you can.}

**Semantics of speech act operators** — Why-fragments may only query the conversational backgrounds of utterances that require the addressee to utter a reply. As such, they are felicitous with information-seeking questions (examples above) and negative exclamatives in some varieties of Scots English (here, Shetland) that also require contentful replies (8). In contrast, they are infelicitous with rhetorical questions (9) and, contra Ginzburg (1997), declaratives (10).
Additionally, why-fragments cannot be uttered by any participant other than the addressee of the original question (11), including the original questioner (12). This type of speaker-addressee role reversal is parallel to the one observed in other ellipses (13), and suggests that speech act operators are associated to abstract, silent SP and AD pronouns (Speas & Tenny 2003).

Lawyer (to witness in stand): How long have you been acquainted with Mr. Harris?
Judge (to lawyer): Why? [intended: why are you asking the witness that?]

B: I j do too [= I j love you k too] [Chung 2000, Charnavel 2015]

We propose that why-fragment antecedents are associated to a REQREP (Request Reply) operator, with syntax as in Fig. 1 and semantics as in (14). Borrowing from Kaufmann’s (2012) modal analysis of imperativity, REQREP requires that, given an information-seeking utterance $Q$ from speaker $x$, the addressee $y$ provide a contentful reply $k$ to $Q$ in every world $w' \in W$, where $W$ is the set of worlds accessible from the current world $w$ given conversational backgrounds $f$ and $g$.

Further, we can tie (11)/(12) to (13) by extending the treatment of $I$ and you as bound E-type pronouns (properly, arguments of an idempotent function $F = \{ \langle a, s \rangle, \langle s, a \rangle \}$ encoding the dependency of interlocutors) to the SP and AD nodes of REQREP (15). This ensures that SP and AD are mapped, respectively, to the addressee and the speaker of the antecedent utterance (note the role reversal).

Extensions — Although metacommunicative why-fragments cannot query non-information-seeking utterances (9)/(10), fragments like and? and so (what)? can do so (16), with analogous properties (data not shown). By analogy, this class of fragments can be used to study the properties of the ASSERT operator; more generally, we contend that different classes of metacommunicative fragments are tied to different classes of speech act operators, and can be used as relevant probes.

A: Sally is here. B: # Why? [intended: why are you telling me that?]