

HOW many topics has Hotze worked on? Echo questions, mumbling and incredulity*

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1 Background

In her 2017 article “On the analysis of echo questions”, Marga Reis discusses a number of phenomena that she collects under the umbrella of *echo questions*. Her work focuses on German, and here I attempt to take a closer look at two of her generalizations and compare them to the facts in Dutch and English. The first is the role of discourse particles in echo questions, and the second is word-internal stress in multimorphemic wh-words.

2 Discourse particles in echo questions

Discourse particles are particles that typically express something about how the speaker’s utterance fits into the previous discourse (Eckardt 2009) or what the speaker’s attitude is towards their own utterance. As one would expect, it makes a difference whether they occur in declaratives or interrogatives. Roughly following Farkas and Bruce (2010), I will assume that declaratives are attempts to establish material in the common ground between speaker and addressee, while interrogatives both create a disjunction on the common ground and are appeals to the addressee to provide an update that eliminates some of the disjuncts.

I will use the term *echo question* to refer to a question that directly follows another person’s utterance, either for the purpose of asking for clarification or for expressing disbelief.

* As we all know, the answer to the title question is *many*. Happy birthday, dear Hotze! Thank you for unknowingly contributing to the Dutch data presented below. I also thank Sander Nederveen, who knowingly provided the rest of the Dutch data.

- (1) A: Hotze bought a yacht.
B: Hotze bought WHAT?
B': WHAT did Hotze buy?

The utterances of both B and B' count as echo questions; they only differ in the position of the wh-word. Both can be used in two distinct contexts: either in a context where B could not hear what A said, and is thus asking for clarification, or one where B did in fact hear and finds it surprising or unbelievable that Hotze bought a yacht, so asks to double check.

I assume that B is not ready to take any responsibility for the content of the echo question, so if A's utterance contains emotive content, B's echo question would leave the emotive content with A. In both A and B's utterances, the person expressing the judgment that Hotze's yacht is awesome is A.¹

- (2) A: Hotze bought an awesome yacht.
B: Hotze bought an awesome WHAT?

Some German discourse particles (DiPs) are able to occur both in declaratives and in interrogatives, such as *doch* or *wohl*.

- (3) a. Hotze hat DOCH eine Yacht gekauft.
Hotze has DiP a yacht bought
'Hotze did buy a yacht after all.'
b. Hat Hotze DOCH eine Yacht gekauft?
has Hotze DiP a yacht bought
'Did Hotze buy a yacht after all?'

As (3a) and (3b) show, stressed *doch* can occur both in declaratives and in information-seeking questions. The attitude contributed by *doch* lies with the speaker in the case of (3a) and is shared between speaker and addressee in (3b).

¹ Normally, emotive content in questions is either attributed to the speaker, or is supposed to be shared between speaker and addressee. For example, when asking *Where is Hotze wintering his awesome yacht?*, it is the speaker who finds the yacht awesome.

Other discourse particles resist occurring in one sentence type, but not the other. For example, *ja* and *halt* resist occurring in interrogatives, while *denn* resists occurring in declaratives; see below. (The exact contribution of the discourse particles to the utterance meaning is irrelevant for our purposes here — *ja* has been described as marking the content of the utterance as already known or uncontroversial, e.g. Rapp (2018), while *halt* is said to provide some kind of conclusion, see Thurmair (1991). The meaning of *denn* is notoriously difficult to describe; see Csipak and Zobel (2016) for some discussion.)

- (4) a. Hotze ist ja/ halt/ *denn in Vancouver.
 Hotze is DiP DiP DiP in Vancouver
 ‘Hotze is in Vancouver.’
 b. Ist Hotze *ja/ *halt/ denn in Vancouver?
 is Hotze DiP DiP DiP in Vancouver
 ‘Is Hotze in Vancouver?’

In her paper, Reis (2017) shows that when speaker A makes an utterance that contains a discourse particle and speaker B echoes this utterance as a question, the discourse particle remains acceptable, since it is part of the utterance that is being mirrored. We first consider an example where speaker A uses a declarative sentence containing a (declarative) discourse particle, and we observe that speaker B’s echo question can felicitously contain the same, original declarative discourse particle(s), but not the question particle *denn*.

- (5) A: Hotze hat ja/ halt/ *denn zu Tempus gearbeitet.
 Hotze has DiP DiP DiP to tense worked
 ‘Hotze has worked on tense.’
 B: Hotze hat ja/ halt/ *denn zu WAS gearbeitet?
 Hotze has DiP DiP DiP to what worked
 ‘Hotze has worked on WHAT?’

Even though B is asking a question, this question cannot contain *denn*, a particle that is acceptable in almost all information-seeking questions. The attitude contributed by the discourse particles *ja* and *halt* remain A’s attitude; they cannot be interpreted to be B’s.

Furthermore, when speaker A utters an interrogative sentence containing a question particle, speaker B's echo question can felicitously contain the same discourse particle, but not any declarative discourse particles.

- (6) A: Ob Hotze *ja/ *halt/ denn zu NPIs gearbeitet hat?
if Hotze DiP DiP DiP to NPIs worked has
'I wonder whether Hotze has worked on NPIs.'
- B: Ob Hotze *ja/ *halt/ denn zu WAS gearbeitet hat?
if Hotze DiP DiP DiP to WHAT worked has
'(You) wonder whether Hotze has worked on WHAT?'

As before, the available interpretations for B's utterance in (6) are that B either did not understand the term *NPI* in A's utterance, or B is incredulous and wants to double check. The attitude contributed by the discourse particle again remains with A in (6).

To complete the picture, let us briefly discuss a case where A did not use any discourse particles (not discussed by Reis). In this case, B cannot felicitously add any discourse particles.

- (7) A: Hotze hat zu Tempus gearbeitet.
Hotze has to tense worked
'Hotze has worked on tense.'
- B: Hotze hat *ja/ *halt/ *denn zu WAS gearbeitet?
Hotze has DiP DiP DiP to what worked
(intended) 'Hotze has worked on WHAT?'

A's (declarative) utterance contains no discourse particles, and B can add neither the question particle *denn* nor the declarative particles *ja* or *halt*. The same holds if A's preceding utterance was an interrogative, as (8) illustrates.

- (8) A: Ob Hotze zu NPIs gearbeitet hat?
if Hotze to NPIs worked has
'I wonder whether Hotze has worked on NPIs.'
- B: Ob Hotze *ja/ *halt/ *denn zu WAS gearbeitet hat?
if Hotze DiP DiP DiP to WHAT worked has
'(You) wonder whether Hotze has worked on WHAT?'

Given what we said above about the role of discourse particles, this is of course not unexpected. The original utterance and its echo belong to A, so any markers that express an attitude towards the utterance can only be licitly added by A.

We observe that the same pattern holds for Dutch: first, if A's utterance contains a discourse particle, it is possible to keep that particular discourse particle in the echo question, as in (9). Second, it is not possible to add any discourse particles that were not part of the echoed utterance, as illustrated in (10).

(9) DUTCH:

A: Hotze heeft toch/ eigenlijk/ wel/ maar een jacht gekocht.
 Hotze has DiP/ DiP/ DiP/ DiP a yacht bought
 'Hotze bought a yacht.'

B: Hotze heeft (toch/ eigenlijk/ wel/ maar) een WAT
 Hotze has (DiP/ DiP/ DiP/ DiP) a WHAT
 gekocht?
 bought
 'Hotze bought a WHAT?'

(10) DUTCH:

A: Hotze heeft een jacht gekocht.
 Hotze has a yacht bought
 'Hotze bought a yacht.'

B: Hotze heeft (*toch/ *eigenlijk/ *wel/ *maar) WAT
 Hotze has (DiP/ DiP/ DiP/ DiP) WHAT
 gekocht?
 bought
 'Hotze bought WHAT?'

Thus, Dutch works like German in this respect. Discourse particles remain with the speaker whose utterance is echoed, and thus only those particles that are part of the original utterance are acceptable.

3 Stress on wh-words with multiple syllables

In regular information-seeking questions in German, the default word stress is on the non-wh element(s) of the wh-word.

- (11) a. WaRUM hat Hotze gelacht?
why has Hotze laughed
'Why did Hotze laugh?'
b. WieVIEL hat Hotze gelacht?
how-much has Hotze laughed
'How much did Hotze laugh?'

In echo questions, this pattern is not only reversed — it is in fact *required* to stress the *wh*-element of the question word. To remind readers that these are echo questions, I have included an English sentence as a preceding utterance; this is for brevity's sake.

- (12) A: Hotze laughed *mumble* amount./ Hotze laughed [an atypically large amount].
B: Hotze hat WIEviel/*wieVIEL gelacht?
Hotze has how-much/how-much laughed
'Hotze laughed HOW much?'
(13) A: Hotze went to *mumble*. /Hotze went to a yacht sales place.
B: Hotze ist WOhin gegangen?
Hotze is where gone
'Hotze went WHERE?'

B's responses in both (12) and (13) are only acceptable if the *wh*-part of the *wh*-word is stressed. Stressing anything else is not acceptable. Reis points out that requiring stress on the *wh*-element is not tied to their in-situ position. When B utters an echo question using regular interrogative word order as in (14a) and (14b) below, the stress still needs to be on the *wh*-element.

- (14) a. WIEviel/*wieVIEL hat Hotze gelacht?
how-much/how-much has Hotze laughed
'HOW much did Hotze laugh?'
b. WOhin/*woHIN ist Hotze gegangen?
where-to/where-to is Hotze gone
'WHERE did Hotze go?'

This pattern also holds for English and Dutch. We first look at examples from English. In (15), we observe that in B's echo question, only

stress on the *wh*-word is possible. Stressing any other word is odd. Without A's preceding utterance, we can imagine a context where B wants to find out where Hotze is and would thus ask a regular, information-seeking question. In that case, a stress pattern as in B'' seems most appropriate.

- (15) A: Hotze went *mumble*.
 B: WHERE did Hotze go?
 B': *Where did HOTZE go?
 B'': *Where did Hotze GO?

(16) illustrates that for a multi-morphemic *wh*-expression, the stress needs to be on the *wh*-element and cannot be anywhere else.

- (16) A: Hotze has written *mumble* papers.
 B: HOW many papers has he written?
 B': *How MANY papers has he written?
 B'': *How many papers has he WRITten?

When we turn to Dutch, we find the same picture again. Consider the exchange in (17) — only B's utterance with stress on the *wh*-element is acceptable.

- (17) A: Hotze heeft een jacht gekocht *mumble*.
 B: WAARom heeft Hotze een jacht gekocht?
 why has Hotze a yacht bought
 'WHY did Hotze buy a yacht?'
 B': * waaROM heeft Hotze een jacht gekocht?
 why has Hotze a yacht bought
 (intended) 'Why did Hotze buy a yacht?'

Thus we have seen that English and Dutch pattern like German. Where does this pattern come from? While Reis does not propose a worked out semantic analysis of echo questions, she does propose that the stress on the *wh*-element is focus. She argues that this focus gives rise to a special kind of focus alternatives that are not normally activated. For an echo question such as *WHERE is Hotze going*, the alternatives are:

- (18) {Hotze goes where; Hotze goes there}

That is, she suggests that what is at stake is the very existence of the question *where is Hotze going* in the conversational context. Reis does not really explain what this means, so I will speculate. For echo questions with an aim to repeat information that speaker A provided but speaker B missed, by uttering the question {Hotze goes where; Hotze goes there}, speaker B is perhaps acknowledging that A and B are entertaining different context sets — while A's belief worlds contain *Hotze is there*, B's contain *Hotze is where*. In order to reach a shared Common Ground, B needs the missing information.

In the case where B did understand where Hotze is, but is asking the echo question incredulously, B might be suggesting that while technically both speakers agree that *Hotze is there*, the actual location is so unusual that it might still warrant raising the question of *Hotze is where*.

Returning to Reis' observations, one interesting consequence of this is that any wh-words which do not have a demonstrative counterpart are predicted to be bad in echo questions, since they cannot participate in forming these focus alternatives. This is indeed what Reis finds: in German, almost all wh-words have a demonstrative counterpart and can occur in echo questions. The only exception is *wieso*, which does not have a counterpart *daso* or *soso*. And indeed *wieso* cannot occur in echo questions.

- (19) A: Hotze bought a yacht because *mumble*.
B: * WIEso hat Hotze eine Yacht gekauft?
 why has Hotze a yacht bought
 (intended) 'Why did Hotze buy a yacht?'

The same is true for Dutch *hoezo* — like German, it is the only wh-word that does not have a demonstrative equivalent, and it cannot appear in echo questions.

- (20) A: Hotze bought a yacht because *mumble*.
B: * HOEzo heeft Hotze een jacht gekocht?
 why has Hotze a yacht bought
 (intended) 'Why did Hotze buy a yacht?'

Again, B cannot use *hoezo* to ask an echo question, and it is odd to try to stress the first syllable (its wh-element). Recent work by Rullmann

and Nederveen (2024) seems to support this, since they analyze *hoezo* as a metalinguistic marker. It signals that the speaker is asking about the reason for the previous speaker's utterance, not about any reasons regarding the content of that preceding utterance.

Thus, while our understanding of the semantics of echo questions is still limited, it is reassuring that three closely related languages have similar patterns with respect to how they are formed.

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