

The meaning of *what**

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1 Introduction

To initiate a conversation, we have to make sure we have the attention of our intended interlocutor — we have to summon them, as it were. There are various ways to achieve this goal, like for example calling them by their name, sometimes preceded by an attention getting particle (English *hey*). Within conversation analysis such initiating moves are referred to as SUMMONS, a term I adopt here (Schegloff 1968, 2007). In turn, the interlocutor has various ways to indicate that they are indeed paying attention and ready for interaction. For example, they could respond by uttering *what* (accompanied by falling intonation indicated by \Downarrow ¹). This is illustrated in (1), where \mathcal{I} stands for Initiator and \mathcal{R} stands for Responder.

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|-----|---------------|-------------------|---------|
| (1) | \mathcal{I} | Hey, Hotze! | SUMMONS |
| | \mathcal{R} | What \Downarrow | ANSWER |

The goal of this contribution is to explore the meaning of *what* when it functions as the answer to a summons move. I will show that it serves to indicate \mathcal{R} 's readiness for interaction by producing a response which simultaneously signals that \mathcal{R} is responding and that they want to know what \mathcal{I} wants. In this way, the utterance of a single wh-word *what* serves a complex function. Crucially, in Section 2, I demonstrate that this

* If I could have, I would have written a paper entitled “What is meaning?”. But I’m not there. So, I settled on a small case-study on the meaning of “what” (in context). And maybe that’s what you will appreciate more anyways, Hotze. I know you like to think about the details. So here is a little detail, with perhaps some larger big picture implications. And maybe on the occasion of your birthday, we can arrange for a meeting, to talk about this larger question of what meaning really is. And we can decide on the meaning of *what* we will talk about. The meaning of meaning ... the meaning of life ... the meaning of birthdays ... I hope the meaning of this particular one of yours is “Zufriedenheit”.

¹ Throughout this paper, I will mark punctuation in examples only when intonation is not marked via a downward or upward arrow. The presence of a question mark indicates the intended interpretation (i.e., question) but does not consistently correspond to rising intonation.

interpretation does not come about via ellipsis of a full-fledged wh-question (e.g., *what ~~do you want~~*). Instead, I argue that this complex meaning derives from its lexical meaning in combination with the grammatical structure that regulates linguistic interaction, namely the interactional spine (Wiltschko 2021), which I introduce in Section 3. In terms of its lexical meaning, *what* can be characterized as a variable restricted to inanimate individuals, which may include situations, propositions, or — as in the case of (1) — moves. In Section 4, I argue that *what* associates with a complex response structure which simultaneously marks the utterance as a response and requests a response from the interlocutor. This serves as a signal of \mathcal{R} 's readiness for interaction. Thus, I propose that the meaning of *what* is enriched with meaning that derives from the interactional spine. I conclude that this analysis makes for a more economic modelling of meaning than one that places the burden solely on the denotation of a lexical entry (Section 5).

2 Against an ellipsis analysis

When considering the question as to what *what* means when it functions to answer a summons, an obvious hypothesis to consider is that it stands in for a full wh-question via ellipsis. This is illustrated in (2), where *what* occupies the specifier of CP (as is typically the case for wh-words in English) and the remainder of the clause is elided (indicated by strike-through).

(2) An ellipsis analysis:

\mathcal{I} Hey, Hotze!
 \mathcal{R} [CP What [~~do you want~~]]

The ellipsis analysis in (2) is plausible for the following reasons. First, full wh-questions with initial *what* are possible as a response to a summon move, as shown in (3).

(3) \mathcal{I} Hey Hotze!
 \mathcal{R} a. **What** do you want?
b. **What** can I do for you?
c. **What**'s the matter?

Furthermore, ellipsis of this form is otherwise well-formed, as shown in (4) to (6). Here the initiation move is not a dedicated attention-getting

move (i.e., it may be uttered in the context of an ongoing conversation). The reaction move that follows can be either the single-word utterance *what* or a full-fledged question which repeats the question embedded in the initiating move.

- (4) \mathcal{I} You know what I want?
 \mathcal{R} a. **What** \Downarrow
 b. **What** do you want?
- (5) \mathcal{I} You know what you could do for me?
 \mathcal{R} a. **What** \Downarrow
 b. **What** can I do for you?
- (6) \mathcal{I} You know what's the matter?
 \mathcal{R} a. **What** \Downarrow
 b. **What's** the matter?

In these examples, the question in the initiating move serves as the antecedent for the elided string in the responses in (4) to (6). In contrast, it is not clear what might serve as the antecedent for the hypothetical ellipsis in (2): the initiating move consists of an attention getting particle combined with a vocative but there is no relevant propositional content.

What is even more striking is that the summons need not even be a verbal utterance, yet *what* is a possible response, as in (7).

- (7) \mathcal{I} stares at Hotze / taps Hotze on the shoulder / waves at Hotze
 \mathcal{R} **What** \Downarrow

In the summons in (7), there is no antecedent that would license an ellipsis in the answer. One might hypothesize that in these cases the antecedent is somehow implicit, in a way to be made precise. If so, the use of *what* when used as an answer to a summons would be akin to the cases in (4) to (6) where it precedes an elided clause.

There are, however, two problems which rule out the ellipsis analysis. First, consider the fact that *what* appears to be the only wh-word that can be used as a response to a summons. For example, *why* is not possible as a reaction to a vocative (8a) even though full *why* questions are, as shown in (8b,c).

- (8) \mathcal{S} Hey, Hotze!
 \mathcal{R} a. ***Why** \Downarrow
b. **Why** are you calling me?
c. **Why** do you need my attention?

Note that in the presence of a full antecedent, ellipsis is possible even following *why*, as shown in (9) and (10).

- (9) \mathcal{S} You know why I'm calling you?
 \mathcal{R} a. **Why** \Downarrow
b. **Why** are you calling me?
- (10) \mathcal{S} You know why I need your attention?
 \mathcal{R} a. **Why** \Downarrow
b. **Why** do you need my attention?

Given that both *what* and *why* questions are possible as answers to summons and given that both *what* and *why* questions license ellipsis, it is not clear why only *what* but not *why* can be used after a summons. This invites the conclusion that *what* in (1) is not an instance of an elided question.

This conclusion is supported by a further problem the ellipsis analysis faces: *what* is not possible in all situations even when *what* questions are. This is shown in (11), where there is no initiation move (and thus no summons). In this context bare *what* is ill-formed whereas a full *what* question is possible.

- (11) Upon entering a room where two people are fighting:
 \mathcal{S} a. ***What** \Downarrow
b. **What** is going on?

Note that there is nothing wrong with this particular wh-question such that it would not license ellipsis. It does when there is an appropriate antecedent in the initiating move, as in (12).

- (12) \mathcal{S} You know what's going on?
 \mathcal{R} a. **What** \Downarrow
b. **What** is going on?

A final piece of evidence against the ellipsis analysis of *what* in (1) is that it is necessarily associated with falling intonation. In this context, rising intonation is infelicitous, as shown in (13). This contrasts with full-fledged wh-questions, which can be realized with either falling or rising intonation, as in (13c,d).²

- (13) *S* Hey, Hotze!
R a. **What** ↘
 b. ***What** ↗
 c. **What** do you want ↘
 d. **What** do you want ↗

For completeness note that when *what* is clearly used with an elided clause, both rising and falling intonation are possible, as shown in (14).

- (14) *S* You know what's going on?
R a. **What** ↘
 b. **What** ↗
 c. **What** is going on ↘
 d. **What** is going on ↗

I conclude that when *what* is used as an answer to a summons it cannot simply be a wh-word followed by an elided clause. In the following sections I develop an alternative analysis. I argue that as an answer to a summons, *what* functions as a purely interactional unit of language. It is used to further the conversational interaction, without conveying propositional content.

3 Interactional structure as a source of interactional meaning

The main idea I wish to introduce here is that the interactional meaning of *what* can be understood as involving the working of an abstract system: the grammar of interactional language in the sense of Wiltschko (2021). That conversations are regulated by a system which is part of our competence is the hallmark of conversation analysis (Sacks et al. 1974). Wiltschko (2021) combines this insight of conversation analysis with those of generative grammar. With an in-depth investigation of units of language (UoLs) that contribute to the interaction itself, rather than to its

² See Hedberg et al. (2011) for an overview of the felicity conditions on rising and falling intonation in wh-questions.

content, Wiltschko (2021) concludes that the same system which configures the content of interaction also configures the logic of the interaction itself. The UoLs she explores are confirmational and response markers. The former define initiating moves and include utterance-final particles like *eh* and *huh*. The latter define reaction moves and include response markers such as utterance-initial *yeah* and *no*.

The core argument that there is a grammar of interactional language stems from the fact that the class of confirmational and the class of response markers display the same patterns of multi-functionality, and they do so across unrelated languages. For example, response markers like *yeah* can be used to answer questions, indicate agreement, acknowledge the move of an interlocutor, or simply mark a response as such. Wiltschko (2021) argues that this multi-functionality indicates the presence of an underlying abstract system, the so-called interactional spine, which enriches the interpretation of the UoLs themselves. That is, multi-functionality does not come about because of a series of homophonous UoLs, but instead because a given UoL associates with the spine in different positions and hence is enriched with different components of meaning as provided by the spine (see also Wiltschko 2014). The interactional spine consists of a grounding layer, responsible for the construction of common ground, and a response layer, responsible for the regulation of the interaction. Like all layers of structure on the spine, the response layer consists of a head position, which relates two arguments by asserting whether they coincide or not. The coincidence feature is an intrinsic property of every syntactic head and is valued by the UoLs that associate with it. The argument introduced by the response layer is the so-called *response set*, a set of elements that the interlocutors tend to (roughly corresponding to the *table* in the framework of Farkas and Bruce 2010). It can be indexed to the speaker or to the addressee, thus defining different move types. Initiating moves are defined by an addressee-oriented response set, as in (15a), while reaction moves are defined by a speaker-oriented response set, as in (15b).

- (15) a. INITIATION: [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Adr} [+/-coin] ...]
b. REACTION: [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Spkr} [+/-coin] ...]

In an initiating move, the content of the utterance is asserted to be or not to be in the addressee's response set. Thus, RespP allows a speaker to explicitly mark an utterance as requiring a response. Conversely, a reacting move can be marked as such by asserting whether or not the utterance is in the speaker's response set.

Furthermore, Wiltschko (2021) argues that RespP can be stacked, but only in a limited way. Specifically, a speaker-oriented RespP (i.e., a reaction move) can be embedded inside an addressee-oriented RespP (i.e., an initiation move). This configuration defines complex moves that simultaneously serve as a reaction and an initiation move, as shown in (16).

- (16) \mathcal{S} I got a new dog.
 $\mathcal{R}+\mathcal{S}$ Yeah ↗
 \mathcal{R} Yeah. I just got him last week. His name is Yoshi.

In (16), the response marker *yeah* is realized with rising intonation and it simultaneously serves as a reaction and an initiation. Specifically, with the use of *yeah*, the responder indicates that they are accepting the proposition but with the rising intonation, they indicate that further confirmation is required. This turns the reaction into an initiation (see Allwood et al. 1992). According to Wiltschko (2021), the complexity of the move correlates with the complexity of the interactional structure, as illustrated in (17): *yeah* associates with the speaker-indexed RespP marking a reaction while the rising intonation associates with the addressee-oriented RespP marking an initiation.³

- (17) [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Adr} [_{Resp} ↗ [+coin] [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Spkr} *yeah* [+coin] ...]]]

In what follows, I argue that these ingredients of the interactional spine allow for an analysis of the interactional use of *what* in (1).

4 *What is interactional*

I propose that the use of *what* in (1) is purely interactional. By this I mean that it is not used to inquire about any type of propositional content as is the case in typical content questions (e.g., *What do you want?*). Instead, it is used to inquire about the nature of the interaction. I argue that this is a result of associating *what* with the interactional structure. Specifically, I propose that *what* associates with a complex RespP of the type illustrated in (17): it simultaneously functions as a reaction and an initiation move. Specifically, *what* is intrinsically pronominal and is interpreted as an indefinite variable, restricted to inanimate entities,

³An addressee-oriented RespP cannot further be dominated: once the utterance is put into the interlocutor's response-set, the current speaker has to end their turn.

including propositions and the like. Due to its syntactic position within the specifier position of RespP, it is interpreted as an interactional variable. This aspect of the analysis is in line with Krifka's (2013) analysis of propositional anaphors. Specifically, Krifka argues that *that* can be used to anaphorically relate to propositions or speech acts, as shown in (18).

- (18) \mathcal{I} Ede stole the cookie.
 \mathcal{R}_1 I didn't know **that**. (antecedent = proposition)
 \mathcal{R}_2 **That's** a lie! (antecedent = speech act)
 (adapted from Krifka 2013:4, ex. 19)

Note that *that* and *what* differ in terms of definiteness: *that* functions as a (definite) pronominal whereas *what* functions as an indefinite variable and hence can serve as a question word. In fact, in many languages wh-words are interpreted as indefinite pronouns when they remain in situ. This is shown in (19) for Dutch.

- (19) a. **Wat** heb je gedaan? b. Jan heeft **wat** gedaan.
 what have you done John has what done
 'What have you done?' 'John has done something.'
 (Postma 1994:187, ex. 2)

I hypothesize that the interpretation of *what* in the interactional structure proceeds as follows. In the speaker-oriented RespP, the use of the indefinite indicates that there is an initiation move which serves as the trigger for the current reaction move. However, the content of this initiation is unknown. In the addressee-oriented RespP, the use of the indefinite indicates that the speaker requests a response. This is schematized in (20).

- (20) [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Adr} *what* [_{RespP} Resp-set_{Spkr} ~~*what*~~ ...]]

Thus, I hypothesize that by using *what* as an interactional but indefinite variable the speaker signals that they are ready for interaction, i.e., that they accept the summons. Note that the interactional spine plays a key role in this analysis: the fact that *what* in this context is interpreted as an interactional variable is syntactically, rather than lexically, conditioned.

In what follows, I show how the analysis in (20) accounts for the properties of interactional *what*, which pose a problem for the ellipsis

analysis. First, we have seen that interactional *what* is well-formed even if there is no propositional antecedent, such as after a bare vocative or even a non-verbal event like a stare or a shoulder tap. While ellipsis requires a verbal antecedent, pronominal forms do not, as shown in (21).

(21) Upon hearing an unexpected noise:

ℳ What was **that**?

A second property of interactional *what*, which cannot be accounted for with an ellipsis analysis, has to do with the fact that it requires an explicit initiation move to be well-formed (as illustrated in (11)). The analysis in (20) captures this: *what* in RespP is interpreted as a pro-form for a RespP, which by definition must be an interactional move.

The third property of interactional *what* is that it has to be realized with falling intonation while rising intonation is ill-formed. This differs from regular wh-questions including those that contain elided material (see the contrast between (13) and (14)). I propose that this restriction is also syntactically conditioned. Specifically, according to Wiltschko (2021) rising intonation is associated with RespP_{Adr} and indicates the request for a response. Hence interactional *what* in (20) is in complementary distribution with rising intonation. In contrast, in the context of a regular wh-question, rising *what* does not associate with RespP (but instead is located in SpecCP). Thus, rising intonation can associate with RespP. As for falling intonation, I assume that it is not interpreted as a (meaningful) intonational tune and hence is not associated with the interactional spine (Wiltschko 2022). Instead, falling intonation derives from the absence of a marked intonation. Since pitch declines automatically with the decrease in subglottal air pressure (Cohen et al. 1982), absence of a marked intonational tune is realized as falling intonation.

Finally, the last property of interactional *what*, which sets it apart from propositional *what* and hence cannot be accounted for with an ellipsis analysis, has to do with the fact that it is restricted to *what*. As we have seen, *why* is not possible even though full propositional *why* questions are perfectly sensible in similar contexts (see (8) to (10)). The analytical challenge for the interactional analysis of *what* boils down to the question as to why *why* cannot be associated with the interactional spine to react to a summons. I tentatively propose that this has to do with the presuppositions associated with *why*. To see this, consider regular content questions. A *what*-question can be responded to by denying that

there is something that corresponds to the variable introduced by *what*. This is shown in (22) and (23).

(22) *S* **What** did you eat?
R **Nothing.**

(23) *S* **What** do you want?
R **Nothing.**

A *why* question on the other hand presupposes that the event whose reason is being questioned has happened. This is shown in (24) and (25).

(24) *S* **Why** did you eat?
R #I didn't eat.

(25) *S* **Why** are you calling me?
R #I'm not calling you.

Crucially, an attention getting move is a special kind of initiation, which may occur simply to attract the attention of the interlocutor but without conveying content (Filipi 2009). Since *what* does not presuppose content, it is compatible with this use. In contrast, when using *why* the responder has to be sure that there is in fact an initiation and that this is shared knowledge.

5 Conclusion

The goal of this contribution was to explore the meaning of *what* when it is used to react to a summons. We have seen that despite the apparent simplicity of the move its function is complex: it serves as a reaction to the summons as well as a request for a response. As such it indicates readiness for interaction. I have demonstrated that this cannot be derived from an ellipsis analysis which would attribute this complexity to an elided clause. Rather, I proposed that *what* in this context associates with the interactional spine. Its intrinsic meaning (an indefinite variable) is enriched with the meaning that comes with the interactional spine. Specifically, it associates with both the speaker-oriented and the addressee-oriented RespP and thus simultaneously marks a reaction and initiation move. I submit that this analysis is more economical than one that would postulate a dedicated lexical entry for this specific use as the

interactional spine has been motivated on independent grounds (Wiltschko 2021). More generally, the exploration of interactional *what* speaks to the importance of combining insights from conversation analysis and formal grammatical analysis. While expressive and use-conditional aspects of meaning play an increasing role within semantic theory (Potts 2007; Gutzmann 2013, 2015), which was traditionally concerned with truth-conditional meaning, the contribution of conversational interaction has, to date, received less attention (but see Ginzburg 2012). I hope to have shown that interactional meaning should be integrated into our notion of meaning. It provides a rich empirical domain and presents novel challenges regarding its integration into formal theories of semantics and pragmatics.

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