

Week 8 (March 28-April 3)

Questions 1, Presuppositions

Introduction

This week and next week will focus on *not-knowing questions* (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992), that is, on requests for information that the questioner does not have (e.g., "How did you make the decision to come here today?"). We distinguish these from other kinds of questions where the questioner probably knows the answer; for example, exam questions (e.g., "What is the name of this course? ") and polite requests ("Would you mind passing me the salt?").

Another important distinction is between not-knowing questions and formulations. As you learned in the last two weeks, the difference is in the *function* of the utterance in a dialogue: The function of a not-knowing question is to elicit new information. The function of a formulation is to comment on what has already been said. A formulation is often phrased similarly to a question, but the questioner is referring to information already in the dialogue, *not* asking for new information. This example illustrates the difference:

1. Client: "I want to be able just to say, 'Well I can handle it,' and don't need no drugs no more."
2. Therapist: "That's what you want to be able to say?"
3. Client: "Yeah" [slight nod]
4. Therapist: "How do you know you can do this?"

#2 is a formulation; the client has told her that he wants to be able to say these things; the therapist is just restating it. #4 is a not-knowing question; the therapist does not know how the client knows he can do this; the therapist is seeking this information.

We will explore a model (McGee, 1999; McGee, Del Vento, & Bavelas, 2005) that challenges the widely held belief that not-knowing questions are just a neutral way of seeking information. The readings and exercises show how questions influence the content and direction of the conversation, that is, they contribute to co-constructing the therapy dialogue.

Not-knowing questions are influential because they operate on two levels. They make an *explicit request* for information, but they also introduce *embedded presuppositions*. Presuppositions are assumptions that, logically, must be accepted in order to answer the explicit request. Embedded presuppositions are implied rather than stated. Consider the question in #4 above:

1. "How do you know you can do this?"
 - The *explicit request* is for the client to tell her *how he knows* he can do what he said he wanted to do.

- The question also includes two *embedded presuppositions*: (a) that the client does know that he can do what he said he wanted to do and (b) that the client also knows *how* he knows he can do this.
 - Answering the explicit request means that the client accepts the embedded presupposition. That is, if he tells her how he knows, he has accepted that he does know.
2. An alternative question could be "Do you think you can do this?"
- The *explicit request* is for *whether or not the client thinks* he can do what he said he wanted to do.
 - The *embedded presuppositions* are (a) that it is possible that he might think he can do this and (b) that it is also possible that he might not think he can do this.
 - Again, answering the explicit means the client accepts the embedded presuppositions.

Learning Objectives

- ✓ To understand the difference between not-knowing questions and other kinds of questions (e.g., a formulation that sounds like a question).
- ✓ To understand that not-knowing questions have both an explicit request and one or more embedded presuppositions.
- ✓ To practice identifying a not-knowing question, its explicit request, and its embedded presuppositions in a therapy dialogue.
- ✓ To become familiar with a research study that shows the effects of presuppositions.

Readings

McGee, D. R., Del Vento, A., & Bavelas, J. B. (2005). An interactional model of questions as therapeutic interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 31*, 371-384. [Simultaneous publication in Spanish: *Sistemas Familiares, 2004, 20*, 51-66]

Read pp. 371-375 (up to "The Model"). This is a short section, but it is quite dense.

Then choose *one* of the following three research articles and be able to answer the questions about it in the "Posting" section:

- Loftus, E. F. & Palmer, J. C. (1974). Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and member. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior, 13*, 585-589.
This is the classic experiment that first showed the effects of different presuppositions on what people recall.
- Heritage, J., Robinson, J. D., Elliott, M. N., Beckett, M., & Wilkes, M. (2007). Reducing patients' unmet concerns in primary care: the difference one word can make. *Journal of General Internal Medicine, 22*, 1429-1433.
These authors showed the effect of different presuppositions on patients' responses in actual medical consultations.

- Healing, S., & Bavelas, J. (2011). Can questions lead to change? An analogue experiment. *Journal of Systemic Therapies, 30*, 30-47.)
This experiment that showed the effects of two different presuppositions that are typical in therapeutic questions.

Of interest, but not assigned:

Anderson, H. & Goolishian, H. (1992) The client is the expert: A not-knowing approach to therapy. In S. McNamee & K. Gergen (Eds.). *Social Construction and the Therapeutic Process*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

McGee, D.R. (1999). *Constructive questions: How do therapeutic questions work?*
Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. Canada.

Exercise

1. Read pages 371-375 of McGee et al. (2005).
2. Download "Week 8 assignment - 2 examples and 2 excerpts for analysis," and the video "Glad to be Alive 7.05-18.10" (available at "Downloads, IMA Online Course>Week 8"). Make your own copy of the .eaf file with your initials as usual. This .eaf already has the four tiers you will need:
 - "Excerpts"
 - "Not-knowing question"
 - "Explicit request"
 - "Embedded presupposition(s)"
3. Watch the entire video (about 11 minutes), using the transcript (also available at "Downloads, IMA Online Course>Week 8") when needed, so that you know the context of any questions.
4. Find the two examples already analyzed for you on the "Excerpts" tier. (A tip: Go to the Grid tab and click on the box to the right of the downward facing arrow (under the "Grid" label). Then select the "Excerpts" tier from the list. You will then be able to locate the two examples and the two excerpts for analysis.)
5. As you study each example, focus on why this is a not-knowing question and on how to use the tiers:
 - The second tier is for locating a not-knowing question and annotating the exact wording of the question.
 - The third tier is for creating a duplicate selection directly below the question, then annotating the explicit request in this question. That is, what information is the client

being asked to provide? *Stay very close to the wording of the question.* You may need to include some specific context (e.g., who is "she" and what does "it" refer to), but don't add inferences such as why the therapist asked this question. Put yourself in the client's place: What would be a responsive answer?

- The fourth tier also starts with a duplicate selection in the same place on the next tier (directly below the not-knowing question). This annotation describes the embedded presupposition(s) in the question. Often there is more than one presupposition. *Again, stay very close to the wording that was actually used in the question.* Focus on what has the client accepted by answering the question. Don't add other inferences.

6. After studying the examples, use the "Excerpts" Grid again to find the two excerpts to analyze for this exercise (they will show up as "First excerpt to analyze in the Exercise" and "Second excerpt for the exercise").

- In each excerpt, locate every not-knowing question and annotate it exactly on the second tier. You can cut and paste from the transcript provided. (Hint: There is more than one not-knowing question in each excerpt.)
- Next, analyze each question for its "Explicit request" and its "Embedded presupposition(s)," and enter these on the appropriate tier, as shown in the two examples.

7. Upload your completed ELAN file, with your initials, to "Uploads, IMA Online Course."

8. Now read the research article you have chosen. Don't worry about the statistical or other methodological details. Questions b and c in the "Postings" will focus you on the main point for our purposes.

Postings

1. Questions

- a. What helped you to identify and articulate the embedded presuppositions in your analysis?
- b. In the research article you chose to read, the experiment compared at least two different questions (or kinds of questions), which had different embedded presupposition(s). How did the embedded presuppositions differ in the article you chose?
- c. In your research article, did the different presuppositions affect the answers? How? (Questions post is due by midnight Saturday evening, April 1)

2. Comparison

- a. Look over at least two ELAN files by other class members.
- b. Then post a comparison of your analysis with one other person's analysis. Did you identify the same not-knowing questions, explicit requests, and presuppositions? Discuss any similarities and differences you notice. (Comparisons post is due by midnight Monday evening, April 3)

