The Specific vs. Generic Duality of Wh-words

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Existential inference of simplex wh-questions

(1)   a.   ME: Who cheated at Maria's exam ?

          ⤳ Someone cheated.   (existential inference : EI)

Existential inference of simplex wh-questions

(1)   a.   ME: Who cheated at Maria's exam ?
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    b.   TOM: Nobody cheated.

Existential inference of simplex wh-questions

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(2)   a.   ME: Which student cheated?
      ⤳ Some student cheated.   (existential presupposition)
   b.   TOM: Wait a minute, nobody cheated.

Existential inference of simplex wh-questions

(1)   a.   ME: Who cheated at Maria's exam ?
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             ⤳ Some student cheated.   (existential presupposition)
    b.   TOM: Wait a minute, nobody cheated.

Questions :

- **What is the status of the EI of *who*-questions**
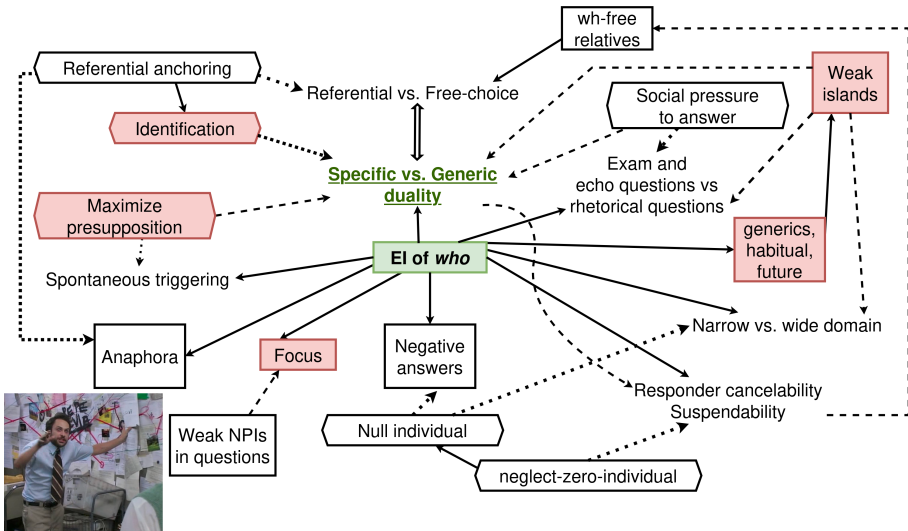- **When is it triggered ? / What triggers it ?**

The Specific vs. Generic theory

<u>Specific vs. Generic duality</u>

↑

EI of *who*

The Specific vs. Generic theory

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Properties of the EI

A weak and volatile EI

Arguments in favor of an existential presupposition :

- The EI is **spontaneously triggered**

(3)   Who cheated at Maria's exam ? ⤳ Somebody cheated.

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(4) Who cheated at Maria's exam ? #I know that nobody cheated at Maria's exam.

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Arguments against an existential presupposition :

- The **responder can cancel** the EI (without background disagreement)

(5)   ME: Who cheated at Maria's exam ?
      TOM: Nobody cheated at Maria's exam.

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(6)   Who cheated at Maria's exam ? Maybe nobody.

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(6) Who cheated at Maria's exam ? Maybe nobody.

- **Negative** responses are **truth-conditional answers**

(7) Sonia and Marco believe that nobody cheated at Maria's exam, and so agree on
    who cheated.   (FITZPATRICK 2005)

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Dependence on semantic and pragmatic contexts

Dependent on semantic environments

Some environments **license free-choice** items, e.g. *any* :

(8) a. *Mary read any book yesterday.
   b. When she was young, Mary used to read any comic book.   (habitual)
   c. Tomorrow, we'll take advantage of any situation.   (future)
   d. Any student knows that.   (generic)

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In these environments, the **EI seems weaker** :

(9) a. What do you usually read when you relax ?   (habitual)
     b. What will you read during that meditation retreat ?   (future)
     c. What did you read when you were relaxing yesterday ?

(10) a. What do Dutch people eat for dessert ?   (generic)
     b. What did Guido eat for dessert yesterday ?

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Dependence on semantic and pragmatic contexts

Weak islands

Some wh-words cannot escape **weak islands** :

(11)   a.   [Which car]$_i$ are you wondering [how to fix t_i] ?
        b.   *How$_i$ are you wondering [whether to fix my car t_i] ?

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       b.   *How$_i$ are you wondering [whether to fix my car t_i] ?

(12)   Who$_i$ were you wondering [whether to visit t_i on your vacation] ?

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(12)   Who$_i$ were you wondering [whether to visit t_i on your vacation] ?

Weak island constraint stronger with free-choice environments :

(13)   a.   ?What do you usually wonder whether to visit ?   (habitual)
       b.   ?What will you wonder whether to visit ?   (future)
       c.   ?What do Dutch people wonder whether to eat ?   (generic)

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Dependence on semantic and pragmatic contexts

Dependent on the asker's goal

(14)   a.   CONTEXT : *John went in the cellar two days ago. There was no socks on the floor and no weird smell. Today, he went back in the cellar.*

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　　　b.　SITUATION A : *A sock was on the floor.*
　　　　　JOHN : Who went in the cellar yesterday ?　　　　　　　　　　　(specific)

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b. SITUATION A : *A sock was on the floor.*
    JOHN : Who went in the cellar yesterday ?   (specific)

c. SITUATION B : *The cellar smelled weirdly. John suspects that it might be a gaz leakage. He wants to know when it started.*
    JOHN : Who went in the cellar yesterday ?   (generic : MA or MS)

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Specificity test : rephrasing with an existential

- Somebody was in the cellar yesterday. Who was it ?
- SITUATION A
- #SITUATION B

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Specificity test : rephrasing with an existential

- Somebody was in the cellar yesterday. Who was it ?
- SITUATION A
- #SITUATION B

Pragmatics of responder cancellation :

- How would the negative response *"Nobody"* be taken ?
- SITUATION A : as non-cooperative, the asker need to revise their sentence
- SITUATION B : as cooperative, helps the asker to achieve his goal

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Dependence on semantic and pragmatic contexts

Interim summary

The EI :

- neither a presupposition
- nor an implicature

Weaker / suspended :

- in free-choice-licensing environments
- in general questions
- when not talking about a specific individual

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Idea : **two readings**

- a specific reading who_S : with an existential presupposition
- a generic reading who_G : with no existential presupposition

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   - Focus movement and specificity
   - Non-interrogative wh-items
   - Anaphoric properties

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Focus movement and specificity

Focus movement in Mongolian

Mongolian SOV with **in situ questions** :   (ONEA et GUNTSETSEG 2011)

(15)   Tuya who-COM marry be-PST Q ?
       '*Who did Tuya marry ?*'

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A focused object moves before the object : **ex situ question** :

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- responding *"Tuya married nobody."* to (16) is taken as hiding the truth

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- (15) acceptable as a **general question** with no salient event
- (16) only felicitous with a **specific individual in mind**, e.g.

(17)   a.   I just saw that Tuya married a boy, but I didn't recognize him.
        b.   I'm sure Tuya married some boy or another in her life.

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Similar focus movement in Ngamo (West Chadic)   (GRUBIC 2015)
⇒ **S/G ambiguity grammatically mediated in some languages**

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Non-interrogative wh-items

Referential vs. attributive

Some attributive readings of (in)definites **don't trigger an EI** :

(18)   a.   A golden coin was given to the sailors who captured a pirate.   (referential)
            ⤳ Some sailors captured a pirate.
       b.   A golden coin will be given to the sailors who capture a pirate.   (attributive)
            ⇸ Some sailors will capture a pirate.

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          ⤳̸ Some sailors will capture a pirate.

Same for free-relatives based on wh-items :

(19) a. I ordered what John ordered for dessert.   (referential)
          ⤳ John ordered something for dessert.
      b. John will read whatever Bill assigns.   (attributive : free-choice)
          ⤳̸ Bill will assign something.

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VON HEUSINGER 2002 : specific vs. non-specific readings
⇒ **S/G ambiguity in non-interrogative wh-items**

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Anaphoric properties

Generic anaphora to a wh-word

Wh-words introduce discourse referents :

(20) a. A : Who^u went to the party ? And what did they$_u$ bring as a present ?
      (van Rooij 1998)
   b. A : Who^u knows how to model free choice effects in questions ?
   c. B : I don't know, but that$_u$ person would probably work at ILLC.

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     d. #I don't know, but that$_u$ person works at ILLC.

Default modal subordination

(21) a. A^u wolf might come in.
     b. #It$_u$ is grey.
     c. It$_u$ would eat you first.

   ■ Probably linked to the *modal behavior* of free-choice / generic items   (DAYAL 1998)

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Anaphoric properties

Specific reference to wh-words

Specific questions make the wh-referent accessible :

(22) a. Who^u was sitting here ? She$_u$ forgot her$_u$ bag.
      b. Which^u writer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969 ? To give you a
          hint, he$_u$ is Irish.   (HAIDA 2007)

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Some wh-word used as deictic :

(23) What$_u$ were you talking about ?

  ■ Pointing signs for interrogative words

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⇒ **Specific and Generic readings have different dynamic effects**

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   - Specific vs. Generic : identification
   - Null answers
   - Explaining spontaneous triggering

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Specific vs. Generic : identification

Epistemic determiners

Determiners and pronouns sensitive to the knowledge of the speaker : (HASPELMATH 1997)

(24) a. Gianni walked into the classroom and addressed a certain boy.
      b. Gianni è entrato in classe e si è rivolto ad un ragazzo qualunque.
          '*Gianni walked into the classroom and addressed a (random) boy*'

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          '*Gianni walked into the classroom and addressed a (random) boy*'

Speaker identification :   (JAYEZ et TOVENA 2005)

- ⟦(24-a)⟧ = there exists an individual *d* identified in some way (e.g. by his name)
  such that Gianni addressed *d*
- ⟦(24-b)⟧ = Gianni addresses a boy that is not / cannot be identified by the speaker

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Specific vs. Generic : identification

Wh-words are epistemic pronouns

Same duality for *who/what* :

(25) a. Who^u was sitting here ?
      b. Someone was sitting here. I request to know her name.

Identification :

- (25-a) asks about the name of *u*

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Identification :

- (25-a) asks about the name of *u*
- *who$_S$* comes equipped with an extra identification method for *u* :
- the person who was sitting here
- Possible model with conceptual covers

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Identification :

- (25-a) asks about the name of *u*
- *who$_S$* comes equipped with an extra identification method for *u* :
- the person who was sitting here
- Possible model with conceptual covers

(26) a. What do you usually do in the weekend ?
       (i) #You usually do things during your weekend. I request to know these things.
      (ii) If you usually do things in the weekend, **whatever it is**, could you share with me examples of these things ?

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Null answers

Negative answers with null individuals

Negative responses are truth-conditional answers
What negative answers ?

- Duží et al. 2015 : as the negation of positive answers / the EI

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Issue with quantified questions :

(27)   a.   A : What did every student read ?
       b.   B : John read Ulysses, Anne read Moby Dick, and Tijn read Madame
            Bovary.
       c.   EI : *Every student read something.*

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      b. B: John read Ulysses, Anne read Moby Dick, and Tijn read Madame Bovary.
      c. EI : *Every student read something.*
      d. B: #Some student read nothing.
      e. B: John read Ulysses, Anne read Moby Dick, and Tijn read nothing.
      f. Every student read nothing.

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       f.   Every student read nothing.

Better model :

- Any negative answer allows for the **null individual $\star$ in the domain of the wh-word**
- f : **student** $\rightarrow$ **book** $\cup \{\star\}$ such that $f(a) = \star$ for at least one $a \in$ **student**

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Null answers

Domain effects

An additional property :

- Free-choice items : **domain widening**
    - in particular : includes $\star$
- **Domain narrowing** : wide-scope of specific NPs   (SCHWARZSCHILD 2002)

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Null answers

Domain effects

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  - in particular : includes $\star$
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Consistent with observations :

(28) a.   What do Dutch people eat for dessert ?
      b.   What did you do during your weekend ?

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Explaining spontaneous triggering

Consequence of the semantic ambiguity

The two readings who_S and who_G are homophonic :

- same semantic content
- who_S has a presupposition
- $\rightarrow$ who_S is a strong scalar item

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By **Maximize Presupposition** :

- the interlocutor assumes that the asker is as informative as possible
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But who_G can always be reinterpreted :

- Responder cancelability
- Speaker suspendability (with who_G only)

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- Responder cancelability
- Speaker suspendability (with who_G only)

(29)   **Ignorance Principle**
        A speaker can only ask an information-seeking question if he or she does not
        know the answer(s).   (FITZPATRICK 2005)

- No speaker cancelability

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Weak NPIs in questions

NPIs in questions : the common picture

Weak NPIs are licensed in downward-entailing environments :

(30) a. *John bought any books. *John ever bought books.
      b. John didn't buy any books. It is false that John ever bought books.

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Weak NPIs are licensed in wh-questions :

(31) a. Who has ever been to Paris ?
      b. John wonders who has ever been to Paris.

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        b.   John wonders who has ever been to Paris.

Scope effects :

(32)   a.   What$_i$ did anybody say t_i at the semantics seminar ?   (rhetorical only)
        b.   *Who read the book which has any missing pages ?

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      b. *Who read the book which has any missing pages ?

HAN et SIEGEL 1996 : NPI licensed iff the negative answer licenses it

(33) a. Nobody has ever been to Paris.
      b. *Anybody said nothing at the semantics seminar.

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Weak NPIs in questions

Puzzle with NPIs

Correct prediction for *be surprised* :

- *be surprised* blocks negative answers

  (34) *It surprises John who, if anybody, went to Paris this year.

- *be surprised* does not license NPIs

(35) *It surprised John who has ever been to Paris.

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But :

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Weak NPIs in questions

Explaning *be surprised + weak NPIs*

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- *who$_S$* is / can be focused
- *who$_G$* is not focused
- *be surprised* is focus-sensitive

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- **The trace t_i of *which$_G$ movies* licenses weak NPIs**

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Hypothesis :

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Prediction : NPIs bad in specific questions

(38) a. SITUATION: *John cooked 20 cookies. Now there are only 19 cookies left.*

b. JOHN #Who took any cookie(s) ?

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Question types and likelihood gradient

Question types

Existential presupposition with exam and echo questions :

(39)   a.   PROF. A: When did the Belgian monarchy end ?
       b.   STUDENT B: I don't know.
       c.   PROF. A: Never. Belgium is still a monarchy.
       d.   STUDENT B: Wait a minute, that was a trick question !

(40)   I didn't hear well, WHO cheated ?

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Bias towards negative answer in rhetorical and reflexive questions :

(41) a. Which sane human being would ever vote for Prof. Jones ?
    b. Dove sarà Anna ? Non la vedo.   (MARI 2024)
       '*Where might Ann be ? I do not see her.*'
    c. Qui a bien pu ouvrir la porte ?
       '*Who (the hell) might have opened the door ?*'

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Observation :

- Correlated with answer expectation

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          '*Who (the hell) might have opened the door ?*'

Observation :

- Correlated with answer expectation

Hypothesis :

- *who$_S$* puts a (higher) social pressure to answer than *who$_G$*

Prediction :

- *who$_S$/who$_G$* likelihood gradient correlated with answer expectation

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Weak islands

Back on weak islands

(42)   a.   Who were you wondering whether to visit on your vacation ?

       b.   ?What do Dutch people wonder whether to eat ?   (generic)

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Weak islands

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(42) a. Who were you wondering whether to visit on your vacation ?

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Weak islands :

- Specific wh-words can escape   (CINQUE 1990 ; RIZZI 1990)
- Wide, not well-behaved domains have a harder time escaping weak islands
  (SZABOLCSI et ZWARTS 1993)

Consequence :

- **Only *who$_G$* is affected by weak islands** : bad at taking wide scope

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Consequence :

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Redeeming (42-b) :

(43) a. What is it that Dutch people wonder whether to eat at breakfast ?   (cleft)

   b. According to a Dutch study conducted in 2025, what do Dutch people
       wonder whether to eat at breakfast ?   (exam question)

   c. Sorry, WHAT do Dutch people wonder whether to eat at breakfast ?   (echo)

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A pragmatic ambiguity ?

A pragmatic ambiguity ?

Instead of a semantic ambiguity : maybe a pragmatic effect

- DEKKER 1998 : any attributive description can get a referential reading
- *who$_G$* as default, and possible **referential anchoring**   (VON HEUSINGER 2002)

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A pragmatic ambiguity ?

A pragmatic ambiguity ?

Instead of a semantic ambiguity : maybe a pragmatic effect

- DEKKER 1998 : any attributive description can get a referential reading
- *who$_G$* as default, and possible **referential anchoring**   (VON HEUSINGER 2002)

What about spontaneous triggering ?

- Pragmatic tendency to avoid null individuals   (LANDMAN 2011)
- Maybe some kind of **neglect-zero-individual**
- Assuming that the asker has a referent in mind

(44)   SITUATION: *There are no lemons on this table.*
       #Less than three lemons on this table are ripe.

Conclusion

The existential inference of simplex wh-question is :

- weak and unstable
- weaker in free-choice-licensing environments
- depends on pragmatic factors

Motivations for a **specific vs. generic semantic ambiguity** :

- Focus movement in Mongolian and Ngamo
- Referential vs. attributive readings of non-interrogative wh-items
- Anaphoric properties of wh-words

This duality explains :

- Weak NPIs in questions
- Variation of answer expectation to different kinds of questions
- Weak islands

Summary of the duality properties

Property	who_S	who_G
Referent Identification	specific	generic
Presuppositional	yes (existential)	no
Open to negative answers	no	yes
Anaphoric relation	matrix	modal subordination
Domain	narrow	wide
Favoring environments	/	habitual, future, generic
Sensitivity to interveners	no	yes (weak islands at least)
Can be focused	yes	no
Trace licensing weak NPIs	no	yes
Associated question types	exam, echo	rhetorical, reflexive

Thank you !

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