Egocentric Questions in Bangla

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses a class of questions in Bangla (Bengali; Indo-Aryan) in which the proximal demonstrative marker *e* 'this' appears together with an otherwise complete question.

(1)   *e*   *tumi ki*   *korcho?*
      this you what do.PROG.PRS.2
      'What is this that you are doing?'

(2)   *e*   *ami kothay elam?*
      this I   where come.PST.1
      'What is the place where I came?'

It is noteworthy that the *e* in these question contexts in (1) and (2) are not assigned to any theta-role. It is not obvious what its contribution to the meaning of the overall question is. Such questions are distinct from questions where the demonstrative functions as an argument or a part of an argument. See (3) and (4) below, where the demonstrative *e* is argumental in nature.

(3)   *e*   (*lok*)   *kothay thake?*
      this person where stay.PRS.3
      'Where does this person stay?'
      Uttered in a context where the speaker met Riya's friend Ravi, and the speaker is asking Riya where Ravi stays (pointing towards Ravi).

(4)   *e*   (*meye*) (*ki*) *bhalo?*
      this girl   PQP good
      'Is this (girl) good?'
      Uttered in a context where Riya is showing a picture of her school group to the speaker, and (s)he points towards a girl in that picture asking if that girl is good.

The contrast between the demonstrative-like *e* in (1)-(2) and demonstrative *e* in (3)-(4) is quite clear in the following data, where the argumental usage of demonstrative *e* is blocked (5)-(6).

(5)   *e*   (**kaj*) *tumi ki*   *korcho?*
      this work you what do.PROG.PRS.2
      Int: 'What is this work that you are doing?'

(6)   *e*   (**jaygay*) *ami kothay elam?*
      this place   I   where come.PST.1
      Int: 'What is this place where I came?'

It is evident that in (5) and (6), whenever the demonstrative *e* is used in an argumental position we get no grammatical structures. The question, therefore, is – what is the role of this demonstrative-like *e* marker in such question contexts? In this paper, we analyse these question types, their meaning interpretations, and the role of *e* in such questions, which henceforth we will refer to as *e*-questions. The *e* that appears in such questions, will be referred to as egocentric *e* in this paper.

The paper is organised as follows: The following section discusses the characteristic features of *e*-questions in Bangla. It also looks into the basic syntactic structure of these questions. §3 marks a

difference between plain questions and *e*-questions, and also between the contexts in which they appear. In §4 we provide our initial intuition about the semantics of *e*-questions. And, finally §5 concludes the paper with a discussion of why egocentric *e* is limited to questions.

2. Some aspects of *e*-questions

We start by examining certain aspects that concern the form of *e*-questions. In this section, we mainly discuss the clause types that these *e*-questions are sensitive to.

2.1. The link with questions

Prior to identifying and analysing the role of egocentric *e* in the structures like (1) and (2), it is important that we delimit its distribution.

2.1.1. All kinds of questions

As we have noted earlier, this *e* occurs in constituent questions as in (1)-(2). Besides, it also occurs in questions with reduplicated *wh* (7) and multiple *wh* (8).

(7) ***e*** *tui kake kake merechish?*
this you whom whom hit.PROG.PRS.2
'Who are the people that you have hit?'
(REDUPLICATED WH)

(8) ***e*** *tui kake ki bol-e boshli?*
this you whom what say-CNV sit.PST.2
'Who is x and what is y s.t. you said y to x?'
(MULTIPLE WH)

Egocentric *e* can also occur in polar (9) and alternative questions (10).

(9) ***e*** *tui (ki) Rishi-ke boi-ta dili?*
this you PQP Rishi-DAT book-CL give.PST.2
'Is it Rishi that you gave the book to?'
(POLAR)

(10) ***e*** *tui mach kheli na mangsho?*
this you fish ate NA meat
'What is it between fish and meat you ate?'
(ALTERNATIVE)

2.1.2. All kinds of wh-*phrases*

Apart from occurring in different types of questions, egocentric *e* is compatible with a range of *wh*-words. We have already shown that *e* occurs with the *wh*-words like *ki* 'what' (1), *kothay* 'where' (2), and *kake* 'whom' (7)-(8). It also occurs with *koto* 'how', *kokhon* 'when', *kano* 'why', *ke* 'who'.

(11) ***e*** *Ram **kokhon** elo?*
this Ram when come.PST.3
'When is it that Ram came?'

(12) ***e** **ke** esheche bari-te?*
this who come.PRF.PRS.3 home.LOC
'Who is it that came home?'

(13) ***e*** *tui **kano** korli?*
this you why do.PST.2
'Why is it that you did it?'

(14) ***e*** *tui **koto** khacchish?*
this you how-much eat.PROG.PRS.2
'How much food is it that you are eating?'

2.1.3. Both information seeking and rhetorical

e-questions can be information seeking (15), but they do not need to be. They can also be uttered in a rhetorical context (Caponigro & Sprouse 2007, Biezma & Rawlins 2017). See the context in (16):

(15) *Situation:* I am watching you talk to Mahesh using strange sounds and gestures. So I ask:

e *tui kibhabe kotha bolchish Mahesh-er shathe?*
this you how.manner talk.PROG.PRS.2 Mahesh-GEN with

'How are you talking to Mahesh?'
Response: ✓Ah! It's this new code we've been trying out!

(16)   *Situation:* You and I can see and hear Mina talking to someone. We know who she is talking to.

e *Mina kar shathe kotha bolche?*
this Mina who with talk.PROG.PRS.3
'Who is it that Mina is talking to?'

The latter conveys a rhetorical meaning and it implies that Mina is talking to someone inappropriate. Note that ordinary questions can also be used in a rhetorical context. What is special about *e*-questions is that they lend themselves very readily to being used in rhetorical contexts. At this point, we present this merely as an intuition but in §4.2, we will attempt to derive this intuition from our semantic proposal.

2.1.4. But only in questions!

We have seen that egocentric *e* can appear in rhetorical contexts. This raises the question of whether it might also appear in declaratives. It turns out that egocentric *e* is limited to question contexts regardless of whether they are information seeking or not. It either occurs in question contexts, as shown above, or in *wh*-exclamatives (17), but neither with declaratives (18) nor with *propositional exclamations*[1] (19).

(17)   *Situation*: I am surprised to see what a beautiful picture you have drawn.

(***e***) *tui ki darun ekta chobi enkechis!*
this you what marvellous one.CL painting draw.PRF.PRS.3
'What a marvellous painting you have drawn!'

(18)   ****e*** tui Mina-r sathe kotha bolchish.*
this you Mina-GEN with talk.PROG.PRS.2
Lit.: '*This you are talking to Mina'.

(19)   *Situation:* I am surprised at the taste of the food today.

(****e***) *ajke darun ranna hoyeche!*
this today marvelous cooking happen.PRF.PRS.3
Lit. '*This today marvellous cooking happened.'

For completeness, we also note that egocentric *e* is also not possible in imperatives. See the following:

(20)   *Situation:* I am ordering all to exit through the back door.

(****e***) *apnara shobai pichon-er dorja diye bero-ben.*
this you   all   back-GEN door through exit-FUT.IMP.HON
'*This exit through the back door!'

Thus, the takeaway of this above discussion is that the demonstrative-like *e* is very much sensitive to clause types. It is licensed only in question contexts or in those contexts that are derived from questions (e.g. exclamatives), and nowhere else.

2.2. Ordering effects

Along with the restrictions on its distribution (only in question-(like) contexts), there are also restrictions on where egocentric *e* can appear in a clause: egocentric *e* can only appear before the *wh*-phrase. Therefore, a structure like (21) in Bangla is ungrammatical.

(21)   **tumi ki *e* korcho?*
you   what this do.PROG.PRS.2

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[1] See Rett (2008a,b, 2011) for discussion in *propositional exclamation*.

Int: 'What is this that you are doing?'

We observe that *e* can appear sentence-initially and medially but not sentence-finally. It always needs to precede the wh. See (22) in support of it.

(22) {✓*e*} *tumi* {✓*e*} *ki*   {✗*e*} *korcho*   {✗*e*}?
      this you this what this do.PROG.PRS.2 this
      'What is this that you are doing?'

This kind of restriction on the probable positioning of *e* in questions leads us to follow Simpson & Bhattacharya (2003) in assuming that *wh*-phrases target a dedicated position in the left periphery while the subject gets topicalized, and *e* is located higher than this position. This is the reason it cannot follow a *wh*-phrase. Non-*wh* material can undergo further topicalization past this *e*. The following represents our proposed syntactic schema for (22) where the *e* appears sentence-initially:

(23) [$_{TopP}$ *e* . . . [$_{CP}$ Subj$_i$... Wh-Obj$_j$... [$_{TP}$ ...t$_i$..t$_j$.]]]

Now that we are mostly familiar with *e*'s distributional and structural features, we move on to check if there can be found any meaning differences between *e*-questions and their *e*-less counterparts.

3. Meaning differences between *e*-questions and plain questions

To identify the role of egocentric *e*, we must understand the restriction on where *e*-questions can be used. We do this by comparing plain questions with the corresponding *e*-questions. Consider the following:

(24) *Situation:* Riya came home late at night. Riya's boyfriend believes that Riya is cheating on him and she was with Ravi. So Riya's boyfriend asks her:

      (#*e*) *tui kar   shathe chili?*
      this you who.GEN with   were
      'Who is it that you were with?'

(25) *Situation:* I have the information that every evening you go out somewhere. But, I do not have the actual evidence that you went somewhere yesterday. The following day I ask you:

      (#*e*) *tui gotokal   kothay giyechili?*
      this you yesterday where go.PRF.PST.2
      Where have you gone to yesterday?'

(26) *Situation:* I have the knowledge or information that every evening you go out somewhere, and yesterday I saw you going out as well. Hence the following day I ask you:

      (*e*) *tui gotokal   kothay giyechili?*
      this you yesterday where go.PRF.PST.2
      'Where have you gone to yesterday?'

We see that *e*-questions are acceptable in a proper subset of the contexts where plain questions are acceptable. The above set of data will draw our attention to the fact that we cannot utter *e*-questions unless we have some kind of evidence about a particular event that the question is about. A mere belief situation cannot make the use of *e* felicitous in a question. Consider (24) where Riya's boyfriend may well entertain the existence of events where Riya is out with Ravi. But there is no particular event that he has in mind. In other words, these *e*-questions restrict the question to an event picked out by the demonstrative and when such an event cannot be picked out, they are infelicitous. This is why, in (24) and (25) where such an event cannot be referred to, the *e*-question becomes unacceptable. However, a simple question is ok in the contexts in (24), (25), and (26). An *e*-question in (24) would be felicitous if we tweak the situation a bit and say that the speaker, Riya's boyfriend, just checked Ravi's status on WhatsApp, which shows their hang-out pictures from that night.

From the above scenario, it is clear that uttering an *e*-question requires the speaker to have evidence of the event that the question is about. *e*-questions are infelicitous in cases of mere belief or knowledge where the speaker has no direct or indirect access to the question situation, as seen in (24)-(25). In (26), the evidence is direct (witness). Now, consider the situation in (27) where the speaker does not have direct evidence, but having a piece of indirect evidence of the question situation also makes the *e*-question acceptable.

(27)   *Situation:* Mina behaved badly with his employee Ram at the meeting. The speaker heard about Mina's behaviour at the meeting and asks her the following:

        (***e***) *tui kemon byabohar korli   Ram-er   shathe?*
        this you how   behaviour do.PST.2 Ram-GEN with
        Int: 'How did you behave with Ram?'

Apart from confirming the speaker's access to the evidence about the question situation, we also see that an *e*-question is only acceptable when both the speaker and the hearer have direct or indirect access to the same event or question situation. Only the speaker's access to the question situation is not enough. See the following:

(28)   *Situation:* Mina behaved badly with his employee Ram at the meeting. The speaker witnessed Mina's behaviour and wanted to discuss the matter with Ravi. Ravi was not present at the meeting, and he didn't hear anything about what happened at the meeting as well. The speaker asks Ravi:

        #***e*** *Mina kemon byabohar korlo   Ram-er   shathe?*
        this Mina how   behaviour do.PST.3 Ram-GEN with
        Int: 'How did Mina behave with Ram?'

To see the role of the hearer, we need to consider situations where the hearer (i.e., the person who the question is posed to) is not themselves a part of the question situation. We did this in (28). When the hearer is part of the question situation, they automatically have access to the question situation as in (27). Only when the hearer is not a participant does the issue arise (see (28)).

We have seen that if both the speaker and the hearer cannot identify the event that the *e*-question targets, it is infelicitous to utter the *e*-question. The following table simplifies the favourable situations to utter *e*-questions in Bangla:

Situations	Status	Sp/Addr
DIRECT EVIDENCE:	✓	Both
INDIRECT EVIDENCE:	✓	Both
ONLY BELIEF:	✗	Sp but not Addr
KNOWLEDGE W/O EVIDENCE:	✗	Sp but not Addr

Table 1: Situations where *e*-questions are acceptable

In this paper, these *e*-questions are called 'egocentric' questions. Our argument for calling these questions 'egocentric' comes to the fore as these questions are strongly speaker-oriented or uttered from the perspective of the speaker i.e., these questions can only be uttered if the speaker has some evidence (direct or indirect) concerning the question situation. The hearer also has a role though this is not easy to determine when the hearer is a participant in the question situation.

4. An initial semantics

Our initial intuition for building up the semantic contribution of these egocentric questions is that the *e* in an egocentric question is a pronominal element and its referent should be identified by both the speaker and the hearer successfully. The following section outlines an informal intuition about the semantics of these *e*-questions.

4.1. Informal intuition

We propose that in egocentric questions, *e* picks out an event. Let us call it `QEvent`. We assume that the contribution of the egocentric question is to restrict the question to `QEvent`. Unlike ordinary questions, which do not directly restrict the event variables of their answers, egocentric questions are questions about a particular event. See the following contrast:

(29) Egocentric Question:
⟦e_i Who is Mina talking to?⟧ =
{[Mina is talking to x in `QEvent`]: x is a person}, where $g(i)$= `QEvent`

(30) Plain Question:
⟦Who is Mina talking to?⟧ =
{∃*e* [Mina is talking to x in e]: x is a person}

One prediction of this implementation is that the event that *e* picks out has to match the question event. Suppose *e* picks out an event of Mina dancing, then this event cannot be an event in which Mina is talking to someone, assuming the events to be minimal.

4.2. Applying this analysis
4.2.1. e-*questions are about a particular event*

The contrast between (25) and (26), repeated below as (31) and (32), follows from the above semantics.

(31) *Situation:* I have the information that every evening you go out somewhere. But, I do not have the actual evidence that you went somewhere yesterday. The following day I ask you:

(#*e*) *tui gotokal   kothay giyechili?*
this you yesterday where go.PRF.PST.2
Where have you gone to yesterday?'

(32) *Situation:* I have the knowledge or information that every evening you go out somewhere, and yesterday I saw you going out as well. Hence the following day I ask you:

(*e*) *tui gotokal   kothay giyechili?*
this you yesterday where go.PRF.PST.2
'Where have you gone to yesterday?'

In the situation in (31), the speaker might believe that there is an event in which the addressee went somewhere yesterday but this is different from having a belief about a particular event that the addressee went somewhere in it. Consequently *e* lacks a referent. In (32), in contrast, the speaker is asking the addressee about a particular event where the speaker saw the addressee going out. Since the addressee was a participant in this event, they can also identify this event and respond accordingly.

4.2.2. Speaker-hearer asymmetry

Our analysis suggests that the speaker uses *e* to point the hearer to a particular event. However, the situation is not symmetrical. If the hearer makes an event salient, an egocentric question from the speaker is infelicitous. Consider a situation where Mina talks about an event and the speaker asks the *e*-question:

(33) *Situation:* Mina says that she talked to someone on the phone yesterday evening. The speaker then asks her:

(#*e*) *tui kal   kar   shathe kotha bolechish?*
this you yesterday whom with   talk   say.PRF.PRS.2
#'Who was it that you talked to yesterday?'

✓'Who did you talk to yesterday?'

In the above scenario, however, a plain question is ok where the speaker asks Mina who she talked to yesterday. To explain the infelicitousness of the *e*-question in the above situation, we believe that this is because the hearer has already made the event salient and due to this it would be redundant for the speaker to use *e*, a demonstrative, to direct attention to it.

4.2.3. Rhetorical and exclamatives uses

In §2, it is mentioned that *e*-questions can be used rhetorically, i.e., they might not demand an answer. Recall the example in (16) where both speaker and hearer are aware of the fact that Mina is on the phone and who she is talking to. We note that an *e*-question is perfect in this rhetorical situation. We argue that this kind of rhetorical reading emerges if the speaker has full access to the situation that *e* refers to, viz. the QEvent, perhaps by witnessing the event directly or by hearing of it from someone else. If the hearer deduces that the speaker is not expecting an answer because they have access to the relevant information, we have a rhetorical reading. The same will be applied to the cases like (17) where amazement comes to the fore. On the other hand, where these *e*-questions are information seeking, as in (15), the access to the QEvent is not full, instead, it is partial. Thus, the nature of the access to the QEvent is the deciding factor here. If it is full, a rhetorical of amazement/reproach reading emerges, otherwise it is more of an information seeking one. One might wonder why these *e*-questions are so easy to use as rhetorical questions. We argue that it happens because their very forms indicate that the speaker has information about the question's situation and in many cases, the hearer can determine that given this information they cannot be asking an information seeking question.

4.2.4. Restrictions on the speaker and hearer

In Table 1, we observe a speaker/hearer sensitivity to utter egocentric questions. This kind of sensitivity to the speaker/hearer also explains why egocentric questions do not make good exam/classroom questions. Consider the following:

(34)   *e*   *kotogulo*   *number ache*   *99 ar 100-r*   *moddhe?*
this how many number be.PROG.PRS.2 99 and 100-GEN in between
'What is the number of digits, that lie between 99 and 100?'
EXAM SETTING: infelicitous; EXPRESSION OF SURPRISE: felicitous

The egocentric use makes reference to the speaker/hearer to identify the topic situation (= QEvent). This would be very odd in an exam setting which is aimed at a generic speaker/hearer. They are slightly odd even in a classroom setting unless the teacher (the person asking the question) and the hearer (the person answering the question) have a salient situation in mind which is relevant to the answer. But in that case, the teacher has to have forgotten the exact answer, which Bhadra (2022) calls a RECALL QUESTION as below.

(35)   *e*   *New Zealand-er*   *rajdhani ki*   *(jyano)?*
this New Zealand-GEN capital   what JYANO
'What is the capital of New Zealand, (remind me)?'

This is felicitous because the teacher is trying to target the situation where she knew the answer. Relative to this target situation, the semantics of *e* becomes felicitous.

4.2.5. Yes/No and alternative questions

The semantics that we have outlined is for *wh*-questions. However *e*-questions can also be polar questions or alternative questions ((9) and (10) repeated below as (36) and (37)).

(36) *e   tui (ki) Rishi-ke boi-ta   dili?*
    this you PQP Risi-DAT book-CL give.PST.2
    Ìs it Rishi that you gave the book to?'
    (POLAR)

(37) *e   tui mach kheli na mangsho?*
    this you fish   ate   NA meat
    'What is it between fish and meat you ate?'
    (ALTERNATIVE)

Handling polar and alternative questions requires only a minor generalization of our semantics. The core intuition in our semantics is that the answers are restricted to an event. For a *wh*-question, the answers are of the form $\{p_1, p_2, \ldots p_n\}$ and each of the propositions is limited to the question event. We can apply exactly the same move to polar questions and alternative questions. If the denotation of a polar question is of the form $\{p, \neg p\}$ and that of an alternative question of the form $\{p, q\}$, then the denotation of the corresponding questions will be these sets of propositions restricted to the question event.

5. A clause-typing restriction

We have noted that egocentric *e* is limited to clauses that are formally questions. The questions themselves can be information seeking, rhetorical, or exclamative but they must be questions. Egocentric *e* cannot appear in propositional exclamations, declaratives or in imperatives. Why might this be? Our semantics for *e*-questions involves restricting a question to a particular event that is identifiable by the speaker and the hearer. It is not obvious to us why we could not similarly restrict an assertion to be about a particular event. So for now we see this restriction as a syntactic one. We have assumed the following syntax for *e*-questions:

(38) $[_{\text{TopP}}\ \boldsymbol{e} \ldots [_{\text{CP}}\ \text{Subj}_i \ldots \text{Wh-Obj}_j \ldots [_{\text{TP}}\ \ldots t_i \ldots t_j. \,]]]$

We speculate that egocentric *e* appears only in the specifier of a Topic Phrase that is itself limited to appearing in questions. This is more of a description than an explanation and we hope to return to it in future work.

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