

“Can He Do That?”: How Questions and Non-Answers Put Possibilities on the Record*

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Abstract

Asking a question carries a presupposition that the answer is not yet known or mutually accepted, i.e. that the issue raised by the question is open and unsettled. The unsettledness presupposition can be exploited by canny interlocutors. Here I examine a case where the U.S. president turned this presupposition to his conversational advantage during a press conference, refusing to answer a reporter’s question in order to avoid a normative bind. I suggest that the question–answer dialogue here can be profitably analyzed within the framework for insinuation developed by Camp (2018), and consider some consequences for participants in public conversational settings.

1 Introduction

“We’re going to have to see what happens.” That was Donald Trump’s response, at a September 2020 White House press conference, to a reporter’s question about whether he would commit to a peaceful transfer of power should he lose his bid for reelection as U.S. president six weeks later.¹

The national reaction was full of alarm, with the ordinarily fractious U.S. Senate passing a unanimous resolution affirming its commitment to a peaceful transition.² This was partly due to the fact that Trump, in response to a follow-up question, railed against absentee balloting in particularly stark terms—“Get rid of the ballots!”—in an attempt to preemptively smear as fraud any result that might go against him. But Trump had by that point spent weeks lying about mail-in voting. Why did his remarks that day provoke such an outsize reaction?

To understand that, we need to think about questions and answers: their political function, their linguistic basis, and the ways they interact. Asking a question raises an issue to salience, and carries a presupposition that the issue is open and unsettled. This has immediate consequences for the common ground (the body of shared information that underlies the conversation; Stalnaker 2014) and the conversational record (the running public record of conversational moves, open issues, commitments

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¹https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-transfer-of-power/2020/09/23/be6954d0-fdf0-11ea-b555-4d71a9254f4b_story.html

²<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-resolution/718>

of particular interlocutors, and so forth; Lewis 1979, Camp 2018). It may have associated consequences for people's assumptions and expectations, insofar as the common ground may include inferences drawn from the content of accepted norms and rules.

My account here highlights the generative potential of question-asking, probing the gap between the conventional communicative function of asking a question and the ancillary conversational effects it may have in a particular context. In ostensibly seeking information, the question put to Trump above opened up imaginative space for transgressions that were not expressly on the table before, space that Trump was quick to take conversational advantage of. In what follows, I elucidate how and why this worked, what conclusions linguists and philosophers of language can draw about our formal semantic and pragmatic models, and what practical and ethical considerations journalists and others might take from cases like this.

2 Questions and the Common Ground

We begin by examining the structure of conversations and the role of questions in moving them forward. We will attend especially to the systematic interplay between the background knowledge of the conversational participants, latent assumptions made on the basis of that knowledge, and the felicity conditions that constrain the asking of questions. These interrelationships underpin cooperative communication, but their high conventionalization also makes them subject to exploitation. As we will see, certain conversational moves invite inferences that, if successfully seized upon, can be difficult or impossible to block. Within the bounds of a particular language game, a skilled conversational actor will use the game's rules and affordances to their advantage, generating results that might have been avoided had their interlocutor chosen a different setup move.

I adopt the model of the common ground developed over the course of many years by Robert Stalnaker (for a recent formulation, see Stalnaker 2014). The common ground is a body of information comprising facts and background knowledge of the interlocutors. Formally, it is a set of propositions; from it, we derive the context set, the set of worlds that are live possibilities for how the actual world is. The common ground may also include propositions that the interlocutors merely accept as true or assume to be true, a point to which we will soon return.

Within this model, an assertion of p amounts to a proposal to add p to the common ground, and thereby to narrow the context set to that subset where p is true. This is how assertions, once their content is accepted, add to our store of knowledge. A question, by contrast, induces a partition of the context set (Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984). It does not add to the store of knowledge directly; rather, it seeks to guide the hearer towards making such a contribution by instructing them to make an assertion corresponding to the appropriate (i.e. true) cell of the context set partition.

Just as an assertion of p will be uninformative if the context set already entails p , a question will be unable to carry out its conventional communicative function if the context set is contained entirely within a single cell of the associated partition. In this case, the context set already entails the (unique strongest true) answer to the question.

Consequently, the asking of a question conventionally carries with it a presupposition that the question's answer is not already in the common ground. In other words, a question presupposes that the issue it raises is open or unsettled in the context set. A speaker whose question violates this presupposition is either factually ignorant or linguistically incompetent. Other conversational participants will go to some length to avoid reaching such a conclusion about the question asker. If

possible, they will adjust their understanding of the common ground and the context set in order to accommodate the openness of the issue raised by the speaker's question.³

In the case of the September 2020 White House press conference, the reporter's question about whether Trump would commit to a peaceful transfer of power in the event of an election loss bore a presupposition that the matter was open and unsettled, its answer not yet known. This may strictly speaking have been true, insofar as Trump had not previously made any express statement to that effect. But this presupposition clearly conflicted with the assumptions and expectations of many people. The news wasn't merely alarming or upsetting; it was startling.

We can trace this effect to another feature of the common ground, mentioned earlier: its inclusion of propositions that individuals merely accept or assume to be true. In particular, I suggest that these include propositions calculated on the basis of (1) facts in the common ground and (2) the content of various normative or stereotypical modal ordering sources in the common ground. Ordering sources contain propositions expressing rules, norms, laws, normal courses of events, and the like (Kratzer 1991). If the common ground contains the fact that Trump is the president, the fact that there is a law requiring the sitting president to leave office on losing reelection, and the fact that there is a norm that the president obeys applicable laws, then a conversational participant may put the first fact together with the content of the law and the content of the norm to conclude that Trump will leave office on losing reelection.

Crucially, this conclusion may be accepted by the conversational participant, in Stalnaker's sense. In other words, the proposition calculated on the basis of facts, laws, and norms in the common ground may itself become part of what that participant takes the common ground to include. If a sufficient number of conversational participants draw and accept substantially similar conclusions and maintain them in the absence of overt challenge, then the associated proposition (or family of closely related propositions) may take on a status something like that of a mutually accepted piece of information.⁴

This, then, is the conversational background against which the White House reporter's question was asked. For many, the proposition that Trump would leave office peacefully upon losing reelection was already entailed by what they took the context set to be. For them, the reporter's question jarringly reopened an issue that had been settled. I suggest that this goes some way toward explaining the shock that many felt at Trump's response (on which more anon): beyond the distressing content of the reply itself, there was the semantic and pragmatic jolt of having one's state of information invalidated, a part of its structure knocked down, its progress unwound.

That the proposition now subject to revocation was added to the common ground on the basis of the content of laws and norms does little to mitigate the distress of its elimination; on the contrary. People know the difference between facts they have learned and assumptions they have calculated on the basis of those facts. There is no linguistic or epistemic difficulty in telling them apart and withdrawing an assumption when required to do so. But assumptions are accepted, in Stalnaker's sense, typically only when they are deemed relatively safe. The safety of the assumption, in this case, rests on the belief that norms and laws will be obeyed and enforced. And so, when enjoined by the rules of linguistic convention to abandon one's acceptance of such an assumption, the result is shocking and

³More precisely, conversational participants may do this in cases where they take the question asker to be suitably knowledgeable, competent, or authoritative.

⁴For present purposes, it does not matter greatly whether we take such assumptions and expectations to be part of the common ground proper, or instead part of a designated subset of the common ground or an ancillary set of derived propositions that are mutually accepted.

alarming.

This gap between fact and assumption, along with the normative basis for the assumption, likewise helps us understand the reporter's motivation in asking the question. Facts are better than assumptions. Moreover, the reporter was in a position to extract a commitment from Trump about precisely the issue at hand, to bring the corresponding fact into being by inviting the performative speech act of commitment. The reporter's conversational strategy here leaned heavily on the content of the norms and laws in the common ground: given the strong normative bias in favor of obeying the law and ensuring the continuation of bedrock democratic practices, the reporter's question was one that left Trump with only one normatively acceptable answer. But this is also to say that the reporter's question was only partially asked in the service of seeking information. Its conventional communicative function was also a vehicle for the extraction of a normative commitment from the president.

Trump, of course, was quick to recognize the rhetorical trap that had been laid for him and refused to be caught in it. Faced with one normatively impermissible answer ("no") and another that would signal submission to the reporter's conversational strategy ("yes"), he seized the opportunity presented by the reporter's having expressly opened the issue. In choosing a noncommittal response, Trump moved the context set to a state in which the matter of his commitment to a peaceful transition was undeniably an open issue. In response to an overt conversational challenge, he obliterated a widely shared assumption from the common ground, in a kind of formal pragmatic dominance display. He took advantage of the assumption that a sense of shame or duty might be exploited to constrain him, only too happy to hit that ball back across the proverbial net.⁵ The resulting state of play owed its character as much to the reporter's question as it did to Trump's relentless advantage-seeking. The question itself was generative here, opening an issue that many had taken to be settled, and allowing Trump to force its newfound unsettledness upon everyone.

In elucidating the formal pragmatic workings of this exchange, I do not mean to overstate their language-external consequences. The content of a speaker's commitment becomes a fact only through doing; and Trump's antidemocratic impulses were not the product of any reporter's choice of question (indeed, the common ground surely contained the information that Trump frequently flouts norms and ignores laws when it suits him). But insofar as the common ground and the context set reflect speakers' understandings and assumptions about the world, the outcome of a particular conversation—structured and constrained as it is by linguistic convention, and put on national display as it was in this case—may have far-reaching consequences for those understandings and assumptions.

3 Insinuation's Inverse

Enter the conversational record (Lewis 1979). This is a more properly linguistic apparatus comprising the question-under-discussion stack (Roberts 2012), the store of discourse referents (Heim 1982), the explicit commitments of interlocutors, and the like. Camp (2018) proposes that our theoretical notions of the common ground, the conversational record, and the gaps between them underwrite an enlightening account of insinuation.⁶ I suggest that the same framework helps us understand the generative nature of question-asking in our press conference scenario. Here the dynamic is roughly the

⁵Indeed, Trump sought to marshal other norms in his service, suggesting that his willingness to leave office after a loss would depend on the trustworthiness of the election itself.

⁶Camp also emphasizes the importance of a third notion, Gricean speaker meaning, for understanding insinuation. We can mostly set this notion aside for present purposes.

inverse of what Camp describes: where insinuation depends on communicating contents while keeping the associated assertions off the conversational record and out of the common ground, Trump's strategic noncommittalness makes essential use of the conversational record, weaponizing his interlocutor's discourse move so as to open an issue in the context set through sheer force of linguistic convention.

Insinuation, in Camp's telling, exploits a gap between semantic-pragmatic content and the linguistic devices employed to express or update it. The idea is to get certain contents across without entering an assertion of those contents into the conversational record and without adding them to the common ground. The account trades on Stalnaker's distinction between what is mutually believed (which now includes the insinuated content) and what is mutually accepted (the common ground, which does not include the insinuated content). In this way, a speaker may convey proscribed, taboo, or otherwise publicly disfavored or dangerous contents *sub rosa*, without taking conventional linguistic responsibility for them. The conversational record is what individual interlocutors must answer for; successful insinuation maintains plausible deniability.

In our press conference scenario, the conversational record is exploited in the opposite direction. Here, the reporter's question puts an issue on the question-under-discussion stack, and Trump moves immediately to lock it in place there. With the issue expressly opened and Trump foreclosing any possibility of resolving it, we must adjust the context set so that it entails neither a positive nor a negative answer. Unlike in the case of insinuation, the point here is not so much to convey a particular content as to make sure that it enters the record and affects the common ground. Where insinuation is driven by deniability, Trump's express non-answer is public or it is nothing. This result can only come about because of what goes on in the conversational record; had the reporter not asked the question, this opportunity, grounded as it is in the conventional linguistic devices of the conversational record, would not have arisen. The issue would have stayed settled in the common ground and context set (at least for many), the alarming possibility of its unsettling remaining unspoken, the national imagination retaining the associated bit of normative expectation.

The asking of the question here thus functioned as an unwitting "probe of perspectival alignment," to borrow another term from Camp (2018: 57). Camp employs the term to describe how insinuation can be used as a surreptitious signal seeking sympathy in an illicit point of view, a pulse of proscribed Gricean speaker meaning borne by innocuous conventional forms in order to avoid culpability in the conversational record and the common ground. In our press conference scenario, Trump seized upon precisely those latter conventional linguistic features, recognizing the latent possibility of perspectival alignment in the question and exploiting its affordances in contravention of the reporter's likely intended meaning. As before, we have essentially a photonegative of insinuation, the framework once again helping us to discern the shape of things.

4 Ethical Implications

What practical lessons can we draw from this discussion? Obviously we cannot propose that journalists avoid asking questions. Journalists have a professional and ethical duty to ask questions of political leaders; indeed, extracting assertions and commitments from the powerful is one of their core tasks and one of their most important democratic functions. Rather, I think the episode above and others like it emphasize the need for journalists to exercise care in their role as designated conversational participants, a role that the formal pragmatic frameworks discussed here help to illuminate.

The real-world consequences of the news media's linguistic choices are wide-ranging. Terminology

and framing crafted by interested parties can be disseminated and entrenched via repetition (Lakoff 1996, Wehling 2017). Media narratives can not only reflect public concerns and moods, but also help to bring them about (Nimmo 1978, Blumler & Gurevitch 1995, Grusin 2010). Here I wish to focus on the much narrower and more basic linguistic issue of conversational dynamics: what happens when you are talking to someone, and what consequences it can have for everyone else in the conversation.

The press conference is a highly regimented genre of linguistic interaction. Reporters take turns asking questions of a common respondent, but typically do not interact conversationally with each other (except indirectly, e.g. by building their own questions for the respondent upon those asked earlier by others). The respondent may begin the conversation by making remarks and thereby attempting to guide or set boundaries for the ensuing conversation, but reporters may go on to ask any question they like. Reporters may make assertions or recite presupposed contents in order to establish an explicit background, but ultimately according to the rules of the genre they are only allowed to pose questions, not to make statements. All of these features make the press conference rather unlike an ordinary conversation.

Despite these constraints, press conferences run on conventional conversational material: questions and answers. The formal pragmatic apparatus that attends ordinary conversation—in particular, the conversational record and the common ground—is thus also in play here. Moreover, while the cast of interlocutors present in the room is limited, the press conference is an essentially public genre. The point of a press conference is to put a (regimented, stylized) conversation on display for the benefit of the general public. The resulting conversation is thus one in which every spectator is also a de facto participant: one who is not permitted to contribute to the conversation, but who is nonetheless affected by its outcome.

From this perspective, the reporters in the room are the public's designated conversational participants or proxies.⁷ They bear the relevant authority to ask questions, and they thereby contribute to shaping a common ground that will apply to everyone. The potential rewards of this situation are great: forcing a powerful person into a making a particular statement or commitment can be beneficial for the public at large. But the public will also suffer the damage of a conversational gambit that goes awry, as it did in this case. When Trump exploited the unsettledness presupposition of the reporter's question, he did so knowing that his response would not just conversationally constrain those in the room with him, but would coerce the acceptance (in Stalnaker's sense) of everyone around the world.

The foregoing can thus be read as a plea for reporters to exercise their duty of conversational care. In an era marked by worries about norm erosion, it is particularly important for designated public conversational participants to be alert to the presuppositional status of questions, and to the pitfalls of attempting to back respondents into a rhetorical corner. If all that forces the respondent's hand is a social or professional or legal norm, then they may prefer instead to seize upon the unsettledness implicit in the question. When this happens, the question itself will have opened the door to further norm erosion. The *Washington Post* rather perfectly (and, one imagines, unwittingly) exemplifies this dynamic in a podcast series begun during Trump's term, entitled "Can He Do That?"⁸ Ask the question often enough, and people will start to wonder.

⁷ At least, this is their prescriptive role. Members of the general public may choose instead to identify with the respondent, or with none of the interlocutors.

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/podcasts/can-he-do-that/>

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