

IS 'MAY I ASK YOU A QUESTION?' A QUESTION?¹

M.K.C. Uwajeh

Introduction

As a linguist, I have been fascinated for several years now by the pragmatics of questions. I became specially interested in questions during a linguistics seminar here in Nigeria more than seven years ago. A colleague had, it seemed to me, been having considerable difficulty distinguishing questions clearly from certain other pramalinguistic phenomena such as what he was calling 'summons'; so, since I found the intellectual challenge quite interesting, I decided then to clarify the issues involved, within the scientific paradigm in modern linguistics known as performative grammar.²

Now, my objective in this paper is to present an outline of my research results in this intellectual field of the study of questions. I shall make my presentation essentially through my review of and reaction to *Richard L. Derr's* (1987) "Questioning and information/library science".

1. Linguists are the experts on questions

In this section, I discuss the importance of *Derr's* (1987) article, but argue that *Derr* was very much mistaken not to have taken into consideration the contribution of linguistics to the subject of his study. I insist in effect that *Derr's* otherwise interesting article will benefit considerably from what linguistics could offer for the pragmatics of questions.

¹ This is a revised, updated version of a paper which was prepared and accepted for publication in *Questioning Exchange* (Taylor & Francis), but was unfortunately not published before the journal's sudden 'demise'. The article is being presented here for the readership of *Pragmatics* because of the continued fundamental relevance of the issues raised there about the nature of questions for pragmatic studies in particular and the crucial role of communication context specification for linguistic analysis and description in general.

² *Performative grammar* - no relation whatsoever of the so-called performative hypothesis - is a context-sensitive and *performance* approach to the scientific characterisation of language, that takes into account in the formulation of a model of language the specific (kinds of) communication contexts within which particular language textures are *bona fide* communicative constructs of language users.

Derr (1987) was clearly addressing information/library scientists. These, according to *Derr*, "generally have not attempted to clarify the concept of question"; they "use the term without offering an analysis or definition of it"; and their "practices suggest that information/library scientists appear not to recognise conceptual distinctions among the information-seeking expressions of users, and show no consistent usage in designating these expressions." In the light of the above indictment, *Derr* (1987) is in essence the report of *Derr's* study of 300 information-seeking expressions actually posed to intermediaries in information systems - a study guided by the following three objectives: (i) the clarification of the question notion; (ii) the differentiation of questions from other types of information-seeking expressions; and (iii) the systematic classification of questions. These three preoccupations of *Derr's* will also guide my discussion in this paper implicitly, except that I shall consider the second and third objectives of *Derr's* as peripheral and ancillary to the first, my real concern in this paper.

Notwithstanding the targeting of its readership in the information/library science discipline specifically, *Derr* (1987) should be compulsory reading for any other discipline, like pragmatics, seriously concerned in one way or other with questions. I personally consider the article a landmark for sentences description. Whatever the shortcomings of his study, which I examine in the several main sections of this paper, *Derr* has had the courage to tackle the definition of a question; and he is especially to be commended for his interesting scheme for subclassifying questions into eight distinct and apparently non-overlapping types:

I	<i>Existence</i>	Does X exist?
II	<i>Identity</i>	What is X? Who is X?
III	<i>Properties</i>	What are the features of X?
IV	<i>Relation</i>	How is X related to Y?
V	<i>Number</i>	How many Xs are there?
VI	<i>Location</i>	Where is X?
VII	<i>Time</i>	When is X?
VIII	<i>Action</i>	What is X doing?

Very importantly, it should be intellectually fruitful to test with other serious studies, in addition to the present, the validity of *Derr's* (1987) findings for language communities besides that of English, from which his examples are drawn exclusively. *Derr* (1987) himself is, unfortunately, silent about the scope of application of this theory of questions across language communities beyond that of English. However, everything considered, *Derr* (1987) as a contribution to the pragmatics of questions is decidedly important enough to merit some kind of useful rejoinder, such as this paper hopes to be.

To begin with, then, one thing that I categorically do not like about the article under discussion is that *Derr* is apparently no respecter of linguists. The entire article, including the list of references, eloquently ignores any contribution linguistics may have made towards the resolution of the issues that concern *Derr*. The least expected of him in the context, I think, is that he be explicit enough about his intentions like *Noica* (1987) and say that he has indeed seen what linguists have to offer on the subject, but that he is not particularly impressed.

It is, of course, quite arguable that the type of 'questions' *Derr* (1987) purports to be interested in could be a class of objects which only information/library scientists are experts in. But what *Derr* himself clearly says about questions in the paper under review here does not support that point. For example, according to him,

Questions are expressions which are designed to make particular determinations regarding objects in the world. [...] Questions are represented linguistically by interrogative sentences. Hence, questions can be contrasted with declarative sentences which report determinations that previously have been made about certain objects in the world. [...]

A fundamental property of questions is that they possess a distinct structure. [...]

Now, 'questions' like these - which *Derr* says are "expressions", that are "represented linguistically by interrogative sentences", which "can be contrasted with declarative sentences", and which "possess a distinct structure" - are precisely the kind of entities that we linguists specialise in the study of. *We* - not information/library scientists - *are*, as *language* scientists, *the* experts on these and other *language*-specific phenomena. As such, *Derr* certainly owes us linguists some explanation (if not an apology) regarding why he seems to imply, by his omission error, that what we linguists know about questions does not count (for information/library science).

One might wish to excuse *Derr*'s lapse on the grounds that his communication was after all clearly intended for the benefit of information/library scientists. Except that that contribution happens to be in an *interdisciplinary* journal (*Questioning Exchange* 1:2, 1987), where the goal is surely to educate all interested disciplines on the subject matter of questions. So, I maintain that *Derr*'s otherwise remarkable article needs a rejoinder like mine to supplement his contributions with what linguists could currently offer on the pragmatics of questions.

2. A sentence is a question because of its illocutionary force

Before taking up *Derr* (1987) on specific aspects of his study of questions, let me first in this section characterise questions generally. Accordingly, the term 'question' could in principle be said to refer to two main classes of phenomena in general: It may refer to (i) non-language entities, or to (ii) language entities.

Non-language entities referred to by 'question' include a type of *doing* of something, an activity or process of some sort - as expressed with sentence example (1) below.

- (1) You may not question the Head of State on the issue of June 12, 1993 annulled elections in Nigeria.

'Questioning' and 'to question' are then two alternative ways of identifying this basic activity which 'question' expresses here. Non-language entities which 'question' refers to also include a kind of *something done*: Here, a 'question' refers to a particular type of communicative *deed*, as identifiable with sentence (2) below.

- (2) Please ask Chief Abiola a sensible question.

Among other possible types of non-language entities which are represented by the term 'question', there is, for example, the common use of 'question' as a synonym for 'problem' or 'issue', as is made evident with sentence (3) below.

- (3) To be, or not to be, that is the question.

When the term 'question' does refer to language entities proper, then those entities are invariably units of language we call 'sentences' - an example of which may be:

- (4) How well did Socrates really defend himself?

These kinds of 'questions' are what *Derr* (1987) characterised and discussed. As language objects, they fall squarely within the purview of the preoccupations of linguistics. Henceforth in this paper, I am concerned with the study of this language-units brand of questions when I use the term 'question(s)'; and it is my objective in this article to present a sample of what linguistics currently has to offer on the matter of the elucidation of their nature, based on a number of findings of my research.

Given that a question is not only a language entity generally but also a sentence especially, any definition of the phenomenon purports automatically to characterise the peculiar kind of language elements that are necessarily members of the particular category of sentences. Specifically, then, a question sentence (i.e., a question, for short) is hereby defined as a sentence whereby the language communicator communicates his desire to be informed about something. According to this definition, a sentence construct is a question simply because the construct is recognised somehow to have a question illocutionary status, which is the status of expressing its producer's illocutive intent to be informed about something. Thus, in the usual parlance of contemporary Speech Act Theory,³ one is saying in effect by this definition that a question is a sentence construct which has the *illocutionary force* of seeking information about something - a question illocutionary force being thereby no more and no less than the language communicator's information-seeking intent which is communicated with the pertinent sentence construct.

The notion of 'information' here, which is central to my definition of questions, deserves further clarification immediately, for a better appreciation of my subsequent discussion about the nature of questions. Questions, as language entities that they are, are governed by the same overall conditions which govern language itself. Now, whatever else it may be, language is essentially a communication tool: We use language to communicate the realities of our consciousness to one another. Since the essence of communication is the transmission of information, the *realities* (i.e., *preoccupations*) communicated with questions as well as with other language

³ I prefer the (more) correct appellation "Language Acts" instead of "Speech Acts", since speech is (a kind of) language, but language is not necessarily speech. Yet I will use "Speech Act Theory" because it is the established name for the tradition I am referring to.

units constitute *information*. Thus, any reality communicated with a sentence construct is information. Consider sentence example (4) again, for illustration.

- (4) How well did Socrates really defend himself?

The communicator's purported *desire* here to know (from the communicatee) how well Socrates really defended himself, which is communicated with sentence (4) above, constitutes information. So, too, does the former communicatee's purported *claim*, in his new role as communicator, that Socrates virtually committed suicide with his so-called 'defence', which is communicated with sentence example (5) below.

- (5) Socrates virtually committed suicide with his so-called 'defence'.

As regards this latter illustration, *the state of affairs* expressed with sentence (5) above, that Socrates virtually committed suicide with his so-called 'defence', constitutes the kind of *information* earlier sought with the question construct sentence example (4) by its producer when he communicated, as information, his desire to know how well Socrates really defended himself.

Another notion that deserves further elaboration here for the proper understanding of the nature of questions as I see it is that of 'seeking' - when it is said, according to my definition of questions, that a question is an 'information-seeking' sentence construct. The question construct is said to be inherently 'information-seeking' here in the specific sense that its producer *does* communicate thereby the intent that he seeks information (from the communicatee) about something; a sentence construct is *not* information-seeking, and is therefore *not* a question, when its producer does *not* communicate thereby the intent that he seeks information (from the communicatee) about something. For a sentence construct to be information-seeking, and hence become a question, it is therefore *sufficient* that its producer *does communicate* thereby the intent that he seeks information about something; it is *not* necessary, for example, that the language communicator should also be *sincere* about seeking the information purportedly sought with his sentence construct, because such a definition load on 'questions' is *not* essential for determining whether the language communicator has indeed *communicated* an information-seeking intent with his sentence construct. Similarly, and in order to drive home the point just made about questions, for a sentence construct like sentence example (6) below to qualify as an assertion it is sufficient that the producer *communicates* an assertion with it; it is definitely *not* also necessary, for instance, that the sentence producer concerned should also believe the claim communicated with his sentence construct; in fact, it is *not* even necessary that the state of affairs being communicated to be the case be true at all.

- (6) It is raining cats and dogs right now at the University of Benin main campus

Thus, factors such as that of the language communicator's sincerity in seeking the information purportedly sought with his sentence construct should really concern

felicity conditions for the pragmatics of questions, but cannot reasonably be made essential characteristics for the nature of questions.

3. All questions are necessarily information-seeking

Although I have defined questions in this paper essentially by the information-seeking illocutionary force of the sentence constructs concerned, it is in fact *not* agreed by all scholars in the domain of study that all questions are fundamentally information-seeking expressions as I claim. *Derr's* (1987) article itself under review here is inexplicably silent about whether or not there are questions which are *not* information-seeking; and that is the issue I wish to address in this section. For *Derr* (1987), 'questions' are those sentences which traditional grammar calls 'interrogatives', and they are recognisable by what he calls their "distinct structure".⁴ *Derr* describes this their "distinct structure" in his 1987 article under review as follows:

Questions consist of two parts: (i) *subject*, a term or terms referring to an object about which some type of determination is being sought; and (ii) *query*, an expression that identifies the particular determination which is being sought.

I shall show in this section that, following *Derr's* insight presented above, and mine in particular as outlined in the preceding section, *every* question qua question is necessarily information-seeking. The point of emphasising here that all questions are necessarily information-seeking is that I wish to highlight how we should apply this definition criterion *rigorously* in order to distinguish clearly between genuine questions, which *do have* the inherent information-seeking characteristics of questions but may be sometimes erroneously considered to be non-information-seeking because of incidental features like the sincerity of the questioner, and

⁴ *Derr's* (1987) usage of 'structure' here deserves some comment immediately. *Derr* clearly believes that the bipartite componency (of '*subject*' and '*query*') he attributes to every 'question' (or 'interrogative') sentence is realised in an individual language like English (from which he draws all his examples) in some distinctive syntactic pattern. Although I criticise this structure-determined categorisation framework in some detail later in the fifth and sixth sections especially of this paper, it is worth mentioning here briefly that applying strictly the structural criterion of *Derr's* (1987) categorisation method, one cannot reasonably account for sentences ii and iii below being *requests* - rather than questions too like sentence i - according to his classification scheme, which I present later in detail in section 5 of this paper.

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------|---|------------------------------|
| i. | <i>Question</i> | - | How does X compare with Y? |
| ii. | <i>Request</i> | - | May I have information on X? |
| iii. | <i>Request</i> | - | May I do X? |

In a structure-based approach to sentence description like that of *Derr* (1987) and those of all mainstream linguistic studies from Ancient Indian and Greek grammatical descriptions to Transformational generative grammar, a question-intent, and therefore a question category, is attributed to a sentence *because of its structure* (i.e., components construction pattern); in a context-based approach to sentence description like performative grammar's, the question-intent, and therefore the question category, attributed to a sentence is deducible from the *contextual indices* for the given language communication act, and the sentence's structure itself is *only one* possible but non-obligatory way for manifesting the communicator's question intent in the communication context.

pseudo-questions, which look very much like questions by their structure but on close scrutiny are in fact found to *lack* the information-seeking illocutionary force of questions.

For *Hans van der Meij* (1987) in his "Assumptions of information-seeking questions", *some* sentences of the structurally recognisable interrogative sentences *Derr* (1987) refers to exclusively as 'questions' are *not* information-seeking. Thus, *van der Meij* lists among such questions which he considers to be non-information-seeking the following: Leading questions, politeness questions, rhetorical questions, known-answer questions, and criticism or objection questions. All so-called non-information-seeking questions arguably have the following trait in common, that when the questioner poses his question, he, for one reason or the other, does *not* really need to have the information purportedly solicited by his question. And the different reasons for the questioner not needing to have the information ostensibly required by his question are presumably what also characterise respectively the different types of the so-called non-information-seeking questions. For example, an objection/criticism type of supposedly non-information-seeking question is ostensibly concerned essentially with seeking some counterpoint (in argument), rather than with having any information as such; a known-answer type of supposed non-information-seeking question is fundamentally preoccupied with, say, confirming that the answer to the question provided by the communicatee is the same as that already known to the communicator, not with gaining the information *per se* proffered by the communicatee's answer in his new role as communicator; and so on.

Take, for illustration of the above presentation, a known-answer question exemplar, such as sentence (7) below is interpretable to be if posed in an appropriate classroom situation by a competent teacher with the pertinent question illocutionary force to her English literature class students, say.

(7) Who is the author of *Hamlet*?

According to *van der Meij's* (1987) position on the matter under discussion, sentence (7) as presented above is *not* information-seeking.

But, as *Derr* (1987) has satisfactorily demonstrated, the sentence obviously has the structure typical of questions according to his hypothesis: The teacher in the communication context of our imagination has ostensibly designed it to comprise: (i) a *subject*, a particular object (*Hamlet*, here) about which some determination is being sought; and (ii) a *query*, an expression (here, 'Who is the author of (it)?'), which specifies the particular kind of determination being sought. We are dealing in effect with the second category type of questions, according to *Derr's* (1987) questions classification scheme I presented earlier in section 1 of this paper - that of *Identity* or the 'Who/What is X?' type. As the particular determination being sought with her sentence construct by the teacher in our illustration - namely, the identity of the author of *Hamlet* - does constitute (a piece of) *information*, it follows clearly that our sentence example here, even though a known-answer type since the competent teacher of the sentence example 7 in question knows the answer to her question (and therefore by implication of *van der Meij's* (1987) hypothesis is

supposedly a non-information-seeking type of question), *is* in actual fact *information-seeking*.

Furthermore, I myself would explain the matter under discussion here in my sentence classification scheme as follows. When the teacher-questioner produced sentence example (7), her communicated intent for the communication context I have described would be rightly said to be a desire to be informed about something (i.e., who the author of *Hamlet* is). The related datum that the teacher already knows what she is purportedly seeking to know (and therefore admittedly does not need to know *per se*) must be clearly distinguished here from the incontrovertible fact that *she has expressed her desire to be informed*. Whether her question-sentence is information-seeking is in effect determined by what she is up to with it (here, the expression of her desire to be informed about something) - i.e., by its communicator's communicated intent, or by the sentence's illocutionary force according to Austinian terminology - and *not* by her good faith or any other extraneous consideration relative to her language act. In short, the teacher's knowing the answer to her question is surely a felicity condition of her questioning language act that has here clearly *not* made it impossible for her to communicate at the same time that she desires to know the information she already knows - which is all that is needed for her question sentence construct to be recognised as 'information-seeking'.

Or, to flog the point a little more, using a mundane analogy this time, if a person holding a knife with the left hand is nonetheless at the same time found engaged in the activities aimed at discovering with the right hand that same knife, we may indeed make various inferences (some of them presumably not very charitable) about the character or mental state of that person; but we have to admit that *he is looking for the knife*, no matter what conclusions our inferences amount to regarding his personality. Thus, we see from this brief analogy that a known-answer question (a supposed example of non-information-seeking questions) does *not* lose its information-seeking character merely because it is the case that the questioner already knows the answer of the question purportedly sought by her/his question.⁵

Reasoning along the same lines as above, we can easily arrive at the general conclusion that the lack of any real need to have some information purportedly sought with one's sentence construct (which characterises all so-called non-information-seeking 'questions') does *not* by itself remove an information-seeking

⁵ It is, of course, obvious that the competent teacher of my sentence example (7) may be very accurately said to be (indirectly) seeking information with her sentence construct about *whether her students concerned do know* who the author of *Hamlet* is; but I do not use this obvious escape hatch (of attributing this particular information-seeking intention obligatorily to the teacher of the sentence example 7) for making my point. In line with my 'lost' knife illustration, I do claim in fact that even if the teacher of my sentence example 7 or any other similar communicator (who knowing the answer to the question yet poses it) had no other justification than that of *purporting* to seek information for producing a question-construct, then that language construct would surely still be information-seeking simply because the communicator had imposed an information-seeking illocutionary force on the language act.

illocutionary force (which characterises questions inherently).⁶ Therefore, we can draw the more general conclusion from the above discussion regarding the nature of questions - given *Derr's* (1987) and my insights in the matter - that every question qua question is necessarily an information-seeking expression.

That a question sentence (i.e., a question) necessarily has an information-seeking illocutionary force should be quite obvious, I think. So, it is instructive for a better understanding of the character of questions to attempt to ascertain why scholars like *van der Meij* (1987) are tempted to deny this fairly obvious fact. I have identified so far *two* possible reasons for the error, apart from that of confusing defining with incidental characteristics of questions already discussed above.

One possible reason could be that the expressions such scholars are calling 'questions' are *not* really questions at all (in that they lack the characteristic illocutionary force of questions) but are confused with true questions because they do have the kind of *structure* the scholars generally associate with questions. The English greeting formula presented as sentence example (8) below clearly falls into this category of pseudo-questions - that is, the category of *non-questions*.

(8) How do you do?

There is with this expression as generally used in the English-speaking community I am familiar with no information-seeking intent as such communicated by the communicator; and its proper translation into another language would presumably need an (approximately) equivalent non-information-seeking expression of that target language, if the two corresponding cultures are largely isomorphic in this respect. My argument in this paragraph is thus that it is pragmatically perverse to even regard as questions sentence constructs like my sentence example 8 above which clearly do lack any questioning (i.e., information-seeking) illocutionary force to start with, no matter how well they might resemble genuine questions structurally.

Another possible reason why some scholars might erroneously deny the obvious fact that every question qua question must have a questioning (i.e., information-seeking) illocutionary force inherently is that a particular sentence construct might be '*illocutively ambiguous*' - that is, in spite of its having the kind of structure considered to be typical of questions, it may not be a question, or it may be a question, depending on what exactly the communicator's actually communicated illocutionary intent is correctly recognised to be in the communication situation. A good example of this illocutively ambiguous category of expressions is sentence example (9) below, addressed by a close friend, say, to a communicatee-hero who has just had an accident.

(9) Are you alright?

⁶ My statement here that the lack of any real need to have some information purportedly sought with one's sentence construct (which apparently characterises all so-called 'non-information-seeking questions') does not by itself remove an information-seeking intent (which characterises questions inherently) obviously cannot reasonably imply that any sentence which is labelled a 'non-information-seeking question' must automatically be information-seeking. As I argue in this section, *some* of these so-called 'questions' are *not* really questions, and therefore should understandably *not* be information-seeking.

The communicator could have actually communicated the intent that he seeks to know whether his friend has come out of the accident without any (serious) injury, in which case the sentence construct example (9) is a question; or he could in reality have communicated the intent that he is hoping his friend is not hurt (seriously) in the accident, in which case the sentence construct example (9) is *not* a question. Accordingly, my argument here is that a scholar like *van der Meij* (1987) who believes there are non-information-seeking questions could be mistaken and led to deny the inherent information-seeking character of questions because of the non-question (and therefore of course non-information-seeking) interpretation possible for an illocutively ambiguous construct like sentence example (9) above which does have the kind of structure traditionally associated with English interrogatives.

The main arguments in this section hopefully advance convincingly my principal thesis in this section about the importance of distinguishing clearly between genuine questions and pseudo-questions through a rigorous application of my proposed pragmatic definition for questions. Following this procedure, we note, for instance, that all so-called 'non-information-seeking questions' do *not* have the said pragmatic status: While the greeting formula sentence example 8 above (an exemplar of the so-called 'non-information-seeking questions') is *not* a question because on close scrutiny it is found to *lack* a questioning (i.e., information-seeking) illocutionary force, a rhetorical question (another exemplar of so-called 'non-information-seeking questions') *may be* a question indeed - when it is actually recognised correctly in communication context to have an information-seeking illocutionary force - even though its producer does not really expect/intend that the purported information-seeking desire communicated with his construct should be fulfilled by the communicatee. More importantly, we also see in this section how the information-seeking defining character of questions is *not* eroded/removed by a non-defining characteristic like the lack of need for the information purportedly sought with a sentence construct by a language communicator.

4. A question sentence can also be a request sentence

It is in the nature of language as a communication tool that sentence constructs may be '*illocutively double-barrelled*' - by which I mean that the communicator may sometimes impose two illocutionary forces simultaneously on the same sentence construct. When this happens, it is possible for the same sentence to be, simultaneously, *both* a question-sentence (or question) *and* a request-sentence (or request) - which is the primary concern of my discussion in this section.⁷

⁷ In restricting my discussion of illocution double-barrelling in this section to questions and requests only, I definitely do *not* thereby imply that only question and request illocutionary forces are double-barrelled. On the contrary, it is my hypothesis in performative grammar that illocution double-barrelling applies to all illocutionary categories of sentences. However, I am specifically concerned in this section of my discussion with demonstrating that *Derr's* (1987) study was *wrong* to posit that sentences correctly labelled as 'questions' cannot also at the same time be request sentences; and I make this demonstration accordingly, with my 'illocutionary double-barrelling' doctrine, by arguing that the language communicator may sometimes impose *two* illocutionary forces (here, of request and question specifically) simultaneously on the same sentence construct.

Derr (1987) describes requests like this:

(a) they are expressions in which something is being asked; and (b) the asking is *for* something or *to do* something.

He treats requests as quite a different sentence construct category from that of what he calls 'commands' (presumably traditional grammar's 'imperatives'), which his study illustrates⁸ but does not actually define. Apparently, *Derr* fails to see that his definition for requests quoted above also fits perfectly not only sentence example (10) below, which competent users of English would readily accept as a possible request exemplar, but also sentence (11), an example of what *Derr* (1987) refers to as 'commands'.

(10) Please tell me who killed Julius Caesar.

(11) Tell me who killed Julius Caesar.

Rather surprisingly, *Derr* (1987) seems to preclude the existence of the type of request exemplified by sentence (10) above - recognising only requests types that *could be* exemplified with sentence (12) below.

(12) Can you tell me who killed Julius Caesar?

According to my own hypothesis in this domain of Speech Act studies, the language communicator targets with his communication during a language performance different kinds of his relationship with the communicatee; one of such relationships is that of *power status*; and Traditional Grammar's 'imperatives', which I call 'commands' like *Derr* (1987), provide a good illustration of this power status factor. I define a command as a sentence construct whereby the language communicator communicates to the communicatee the intent that something be done. Thus, *Derr's* (1987) definition of 'requests' I quoted earlier is roughly suitable for all commands, according to my understanding. Now, the power status factor mentioned in this paragraph applies to commands as follows. Relative to the communicatee, the language communicator finds himself obligatorily in a kind of power play with respect to the command sentences (i.e., commands) - such that when he communicates to the communicatee with his sentence construct that something be done he has to specify also somehow his power status with regard to the asking. Power status degrees of relationship in language performance between communicator and communicatee probably constitute something of a continuum, ranging possibly from abject subordination at one extreme to autocratic domination at the other extreme; however, with specific reference to commands, it is correct, I think, and convenient for our purpose here, to classify all the power status shades imaginable into *two* principal command types: (i) *orders* and (ii) *requests*. An 'order', as I define it, is in effect a *demand* of some sort: The communicator communicates somehow that he *compels* the communicatee to do something he is asking to be

⁸ *Derr's* (1987) own exemplars of the different kinds of sentences in his sentences classification scheme is presented in hte next section of this paper.

done. A 'request', as I define it, *lacks* this compulsion factor in the asking, and, in this specific sense, may be said to be '*soft* command' - in opposition to an order (i.e., a demand) as earlier defined, which is correspondingly a '*hard* command'. To illustrate the above, sentence example 10 earlier presented would be a good example of a request as I define it *if* by the use of 'please' in the sentence⁹ the language communicator's communicated illocutive intent with the construct is precisely that his asking for something to be done (i.e., to be told who killed Julius Caesar) lacks compulsion. Similarly, sentence example (11) would be a good exemplar of orders as I define them if by the absence of 'please' (or of some other similar dominance-reducing device) in the sentence the language communicator's communicated illocutive intent with the construct is precisely that in his asking for something to be done he is making a demand - i.e., that he is compelling the communicatee to do the thing.

(10) Please tell me who killed Julius Caesar.

(11) Tell me who killed Julius Caesar.

Complaining about the theoretic confusion concerning questions found within the ranks of his peers in information/library science, *Derr* (1987) says:

Perhaps as a result of the lack of systematic classification of the concept of question, authors sometimes use 'questions' and 'requests' interchangeably to refer presumably to a homogeneous class of information-seeking expressions [...].

The fact of the matter, as I shall argue first of all in this section, is that requests may sometimes be couched in the structural pattern associated traditionally with questions; and that when they are so couched it seems reasonable to refer to such sentences either as questions (constructs used for requests), or as requests (presented in the structural pattern traditionally associated with questions) - which would explain, even if it does not fully justify,¹⁰ the use of 'questions' and 'requests'

⁹ As I shall emphasise later in the last section of this paper, structural criteria, such as the presence or absence of the language unit 'please' in sentence examples (10) and (11) or the syntactic pattern of sentence (12), constitute only *marginal* (i.e., *insufficient*) and corroborative help for ascertaining the requisite illocutive intent of the language communicator underlying his sentence construct: Contextual indices are the ultimate criteria for establishing that intent. What this last point implies in specific terms with respect to the sentence examples of my illustration in this section is, for example, that is quite possible for a sentence of English in which 'please' as a language unit occurs to be an *order* (i.e., a *hard* command), while a sentence construct that lacks 'please' or any other explicit dominance-reducing language unit could yet constitute a *request* (i.e., a *soft* command) - depending on what contextual indices do reveal the communicator's exact communicated illocutive intent to be, irrespective of what his language units *per se* seem to show that intent to be. This same reasoning about the overriding role of context vis-à-vis language texture applies of course also to syntactic pattern: Thus, depending on the context, sentence example 12 may in fact *not* be a request but an order, irrespective of its structure.

¹⁰ The usage is not fully justified because it is imprecise: Communication context, not sentence structure, is the ultimate basis for determining a communicator's communicated illocutionary force, and therefore for establishing the illocution category of that sentence - as I explain in some detail in the last section of this paper. The precise usage for the two sentence illocution categories of

interchangeably by information/library scientists or by any other scholars for the same sentences or types of sentence constructs. Thus, the non-compulsion command illocutionary intent expressible with sentence (10) below for example could equally well be expressed with sentence (12), which is the only type of request sentence recognised by *Derr* (1987) in his study.

- (10) Please tell me who killed Julius Caesar?
- (12) Can you tell me who killed Julius Caesar?

So presented, sentence (12) could (loosely speaking) be said to have been designed like a question construct but then used as a request sentence, given the appropriate request illocutionary force imposed on it by the communicator. The constructionn pattern here for sentence 12, associated ordinarily with English interrogatives, is apparently a device with exactly the same objective as the 'please' in sentence example (10) - that of signalling a request (i.e., non-compulsion) type of command illocutionary force. From this discussion especially, we can now see clearly how the information/library scientists whose usage *Derr* (1987) indicts would be quite correct (although somewhat imprecise in their usage) to call sentence example (12) above, for instance, either a question (construct used as a request) or a request (constructed like a question).

Among the sentence examples he studied, *Derr* (1987) listed the following, which I number (13) and (14).

- (13) May I have material on steam fitting and boiler work?
- (14) May I renew *Intercom* magazine for another week?

Derr classifies them, and all other identical construction types presumably, as *requests*. But this classification of *Derr's* is only partially correct, in that it reflects *only one* of the possible interpretations of the constructs' illocutionary force. The communicatee concerned in the above examples of *Derr's* could well reply (in his new role as communicator) "Yes" (i.e., "Yes, *I inform you that* you may have material on steam fitting and boiler work"/"Yes, *I inform you that* you may renew *Intercom* magazine for another week") in response to the communicator's sentence (13) or (14) as the case may be; and then, also in response, proceed to *give the material* required according to sentence example (13) assuming thereby from contextual indices that the communicator of sentence (13) was not only seeking to know whether he might have the material concerned but also requesting to actually have it if the answer was 'Yes') or to *process the renewal* of the magazine mentioned in sentence example (14) (assuming thereby from contextual indices available that the communicator of sentence (14) was not only seeking to know whether he might renew the *Intercom* magazine in question but also requesting to actually renew it if the answer was 'Yes'). According to the *plausible* illocutionary forces interpretation above *attributable* to sentence constructs (13) and (14), given the affirmative reply

'questions' and 'requests' under discussion here should designate a given sentence, irrespective of its structure, categorically as 'question' or/and 'request' depending strictly on the communicator's communicated illocutionary intent(s), as deducible from its communication context.

and respective action in response to those constructs, it is clear that by this particular interpretation (which I certainly do *not* claim to be the only alternative besides *Derr's* own in such circumstances) those two given sentences must be regarded here as *both* questions *and* requests *at the same time*. And I suggest that it is especially such *illocutively double-barrelled expressions* which may quite *correctly* be designated interchangeably as 'questions' or 'requests' - by the information/library scientists whose usage *Derr* (1987) indicts, or by anybody else for that matter.

5. Any information-seeking sentence may be a question

In this section and the next of this paper, I am concerned with targetting, in different ways, the fundamental weakness of *Derr's* (1987) classification principle for questions - that it is *structure-based*. While the next section will emphasise that several different contextually deducible illocutionary forces can be expressed by the same language structure, this section shows how several different sentence structures may convey the same contextually deducible illocutionary force; and argues that it is, pragmatically speaking, unreasonable to refuse that such illocutively identical sentences be designated with a common name in recognition of their common illocution category.

Another result of the supposed theoretic confusion regarding the status of questions, which *Derr* (1987) was complaining about, is "the practice" among information/library scientists "of assuming that one term applies to all information-seeking expressions of users". The substance of *Derr's* contention may be conveniently illustrated with *Derr's* own exemplars for the different kinds of expressions in his sentences classification scheme, as presented below (where 'X' in all the expressions designates any object about which information is being sought):

i.	<i>Question</i>	-	How does X compare with Y?
ii.	<i>Request</i>	-	May I have information on X?
iii.	<i>Request</i>	-	May I do X?
iv.	<i>Statement</i>	-	I need information on X.
v.	<i>Statement</i>	-	I want information on X.
vi.	<i>Command</i>	-	Find information on X.
vii.	<i>Truncated expression</i>	-	X.

According to *Derr*, only his first expression exemplar above constitutes a question; and, for him, it is *incorrect* therefore to use the term 'question' for any other expression token on the list. The basis for his position is that he believes only the first expression exemplar has the "distinct structure" he defines questions by.¹¹ My own position is that *Derr's* usage of the term 'question' is *unnecessarily restrictive*, as I argue hereafter.

¹¹ See the first and third sections of this paper for my presentation of *Derr's* (1987) definition of 'question'.

Irrespective of purely structural considerations, what exactly is designated by 'questions' may depend essentially on *who* is using the term, *when*. For example, *teachers* would normally, and we would all think quite correctly, designate as 'questions' *during an examination* the following *command*-type sentences by *Derr's* categorisation or *imperatives* by more popular traditional typification.

- (15) Discuss the merits or otherwise of the assertion that African citizenry may only respect dictatorial regimes.
- (16) Outline the historically significant facts about the invention and subsequent development of the kana syllabary.
- (17) Study the data below carefully; then, present the relevant principle(s) highlighted therein with a suitable annotated diagram, or diagrams.

From *Derr's* own disclosures on the matter, it is obvious that information/library scientists on their part do, like teachers, frequently use the term 'questions' *technically* in their line of work to refer to any information-seeking expressions - whether they happen to be of the restricted group of sentences *Derr* recognises as questions or those others he would call requests, commands, statements, and truncated expressions. As we can see from this discussion, then, the context of usage itself may render the term 'questions' perfectly acceptable for *any* information-seeking expression.

Secondly, *Derr* (1987) himself is rather confusing in his usage of the term 'structure'; and once this confusion in his usage is straightened out, one can easily see how it is reasonable for the information/library scientists *Derr* (1987) is complaining about to designate any information-seeking sentence of users as a 'question'. By one interpretation, *Derr* (1987) uses 'structure' to refer to two related parts of the kind of sentence wherein those parts designate two related, specific types of realities as explained hereafter: The '*subject*' part of the sentence designates "an object about which some type of determination is being sought", and the related '*query*' part designates "the particular determination which is being sought".¹² Following strictly this interpretation of 'structure', *Derr's* (1987) examples of 'question', 'request', 'command', and 'statement' presented in this section should *all* actually be *questions* because each of them has a 'subject' part ('X', in the examples, designating an object about which some type of determination is being sought), and the related 'query' part (an accompanying expression in each of the examples, designating the particular determination that is being sought, specifically in each case information about 'X'). By this first interpretation of *Derr's* 'structure' the information/library scientists whose usage *Derr* (1987) indicts are in fact right, by *Derr's* own definition of 'questions' in terms of their "distinct structure", to call the several information-seeking expressions just mentioned 'questions'.

But, since *Derr* (1987) *does* classify these expressions *differently* (i.e., with only one of the examples as a question type), it must follow that he is using some other interpretation of 'structure' besides the one just discussed in the last paragraph. By this interpretation number two of 'structure', the term appears to refer to a

¹² See *Derr's* (1987) definition of the "distinct structure" of questions as quoted in section 3 of this paper.

particular kind of *pattern of sentence organisation*: Here, 'questions' expressions for *Derr* are "designed" such that they are "interrogative sentences".¹³ Following this second interpretation, only sentences with the construction pattern traditionally associated with so-called 'interrogatives' can be questions according to *Derr*. Aligning this second interpretation with the first (i.e., giving *Derr* benefit of the doubt by assuming, charitably, that the two possible interpretations are not mutually exclusive), an interrogative sentence is a question or has the status of a question (by designating "an object about which some type of determination is being sought" and also designating "the particular determination which is being sought") *because of* its construction pattern; in other words, a sentence's underlying illocutive intent, and therefore illocution category, is determined by the sentence's construction pattern; or still, a sentence's construction pattern brings about that it conveys such an illocutionary intent of the communicator, and is therefore classified as such an illocution category - according to *Derr*. But the reasoning just outlined is easily shown to be false, using the following two sentence examples of *Derr*'s:

(18) How does X compare with Y?

(19) May I have information on X?

In spite of the fact that the second sentence above, sentence (19), has the construction pattern we would normally associate with English interrogatives traditionally, just like sentence (18), *Derr* nevertheless classifies it (i.e., sentence 19 above) as a *request*, not a question, ostensibly because of its presumed kind of communicative function; which logically implies that *illocutive intent does take precedence over sentence structure for the determining a sentence's illocution category, not vice versa*. And if this conclusion is right, then information/library scientists who name 'questions' several sentences differing in construction pattern but having the same information-seeking illocutionary force must be correct in their usage, contrary to *Derr*'s position on the issue.

6. Every question is only determinable as such in context

I propose in this section that assuredly the most serious technical lapse, by my estimation, in *Derr*'s (1987) article under discussion is the lack of any implicit or explicit reference to the overriding role of *context*¹⁴ in the determination of what constitutes or does not constitute a question. This lapse should be of special interest to pragmatists, because the greatest flaw in current Pragmatics according to my

¹³ See *Derr*'s general definition for questions as quoted in section 1 of this paper.

¹⁴ By '(communication) context' throughout this paper I am referring of course to the particular *circumstances* (of which the location for the communication is only one factor) that govern how a given sentence construct is produced by a language communicator to transmit information to a communicatee. My model of communication context (comprising *seven* principal factors, called 'variables') is presented in *Uwajeh* (1993, 1994a, 1994b).

understanding is the general culture of silence regarding the crucial role of context in the analysis and description of sentence constructs.¹⁵

Consider, for illustration, sentence example (20) below.

(20) May I ask you a question?

Is 'May I ask you a question?' a question? That depends on the communication context of the sentence's actual construction, I would reply. *Derr* (1987), using his structure-based approach, would say categorically that it is *not* a question - judging by his explicit statements about the illocution status of sentence examples (13) and (14) already presented in this paper.

(13) May I have material on steam fitting and boiler work?

(14) May I renew *Intercom* magazine for another week?

Derr (1987) would call these two and other similar constructions *requests* - which, as we have seen in this paper, he considers to be different not only from questions but also even from commands. But, as we saw in the fourth section of this paper, any of these two sentences could in fact be *both* a question *and* a request, depending on the communicator's communicated illocutive intent(s) deducible in the context of communication. Much more obviously, and it is simply amazing that *Derr* (1987) did not seem to consider this possibility at all, each of the sentences could be exclusively a question, and not in any way a request. Or, thirdly, each of the sentences might be only a request, and not in any way a question - in line with *Derr's* preferred analysis they are not. Which exactly is the case is determinable ultimately only with reference to the actual context of communication, and not by an appeal to the overall structure of the construct in question. These same, above-mentioned illocutionary force possibilities in context for sentence constructs (13) and (14) are also applicable to sentence construct (20) as I shall now proceed to demonstrate.

Consider, then, for instance, a situation whereby the communicatee's response to sentence example (20) is to produce in turn sentence example (21) as communicator.

(20) May I ask you a question?

(21) 'No' is my answer.

Clearly, *one plausible* reason (i.e., arguably not the only one imaginable) for the production of sentence (21) above would be that the communicated illocutionary intent of sentence (20), as deducible from its communication context, was in fact purely a desire to be informed about something (i.e., as a desire to know whether he, the communicator of sentence (20), is allowed to ask the communicatee a

¹⁵ For a striking and telling illustration of this in pragmatics-oriented studies, see *Berckmans'* (1988) review of the descriptive adequacy of the Speech Acts Theory-based so-called Performative Hypothesis component of Generative Grammar. The overwhelming evaluation handicap here, as I see it, is precisely that of addressing the *wrong issues* by appealing to so-called 'syntactic' criteria (of sentence pattern or verb type, etc.), instead of devising proper *context-sensitive* tests.

question), *not* as a request to do something (i.e., *not* as a request for the communicatee to allow him the communicator of sentence (20) to ask a question); and sentence (20) would in that case accordingly be a *question*. However, the same sentence (20) would be classifiable differently with respect to illocutionary intent, depending again on the particular communication context involved. Thus, consider a situation whereby the response of the communicatee to sentence (20) happened instead to be something like sentence example (22), in his new role as communicator himself.

- (20) May I ask you a question?
 (22) Yes, go ahead.

Here, a plausible (hence again, not the only imaginable) contextually deducible illocutive intent of the communicator of sentence (20), which gave rise to the bipartite sentence (22), would in fact be that he is not only seeking thereby to know whether he may ask the communicatee a question but also requesting to be allowed to do so (i.e., to be allowed to actually do the asking of the said question) in the case that the communicatee's answer to his question should be in the affirmative. In this given possible communication situation, sentence (20) would be correctly classified as an illocutively double-barrelled construct - here, both question and request. And the same sentence (20) would be classified as *only* a request given a communication situation whereby the communicatee's response of sentence example (23) (now as communicator himself in turn) was produced because the contextually deducible communicated illocutive intent of the communicator of sentence (20) was in fact recognised to be simply a desire to be allowed to ask a question.

- (20) May I ask you a question?
 (23) Go ahead, please.

My primary argument being made with the illustrations and discussion above in this section is *not* the obviously spurious claim that this or that illocutive intent interpretation for sentence (20) must follow necessarily because of this or that sentence-construct-response of the communicatee's, but rather to demonstrate that the several *different* illocutive intent interpretations I have suggested are indeed *plausible* explanations for the communicatee's *different* sentences-responses (21), (22), and (23) to *the same* sentence example (20) - irrespective of this sentence's structure. As to which exactly of these several illocutionary intents is correct for sentence construct (20) that depends on what the particular communication context of sentence (20)'s production reveals the communicator's specific communicated illocutive intent to be. According to my position here, then, *Derr's* (1987) structure-based approach to the characterisation of questions is lamentably faulty precisely because it would designate sentence (20) above unconditionally as a 'question', because of its structure - for the different communication contexts possible noted above, and notwithstanding the different possible illocutionary forces involved according to those contexts. In fact, contrary to what his analyses and classifications would seem to suggest, *Derr's* (1987) so-called 'truncated expression' which I number (24) below would not rate as a sentence at all without an appropriate context to match, and hence would not qualify as a possible candidate for categorisation as a

statement, a command, a question, a request, or whatever other type of sentence one's categorisation framework permits.

- (24) The use of ultrasonography in the measurement of the axial length of the eye.

It is also definitely *not* my intention in this paper to defend the thesis that sentence structure is completely irrelevant for the illocutionary theory of sentences constructs. No, my position within the performative grammar paradigm in the matter is that sentential constructs *by themselves* (i.e., by their structure) are, generally speaking, *an insufficient guide* for discovering the communicator's communicated illocutive intent; that, instead of sentence structure, *communication context is the absolute guide as to the communicator's communicated illocutive intent*. Thus, a sentence's make-up *per se* is, in my estimation, only a *rough index* towards a specific type of illocutive intent; the construct is *necessarily* supplemented with, *even overridden by*, contextual indices - such as body posture, a telling cough, the topic of conversation, ambient events like handshakes or toasts, an accompanying frown or smile or blush or sneer, the size of spatial gap between the communicator and communicatee, etc. - which invariably go to direct and focalise the *intelligent guesses* (that all the communicatee's decodings of the communicator's language performance ultimately are, anyway) regarding the language communicator's exact communicated illocutive intent.¹⁶ Ultimately, the case for a context-based approach to the illocutionary categorisation of sentences rests on this basic fact, that whereas a language communicator does not necessarily intend the illocutionary force which his sentence construct alone would have us believe he intends, the contextual indices of that language act necessarily do stipulate what illocutive intent he has imposed on his communication, whatever the structure of his sentence construct.

Given the central thesis above highlighted and discussed in this paper, it seems to me, at this point in time of my understanding of the issues involved, that the correct approach for the illocution-level categorisation of sentences is *not* to assert dogmatically that such or such types of sentence patterns are such or such illocution types, but that with such or such an illocutive intent, as deducible from the actual contextual indices of the language communication act, then such or such structures are *likely* to *reflect* it for this or that given language. In short, the language communicator's illocutive intent communicated is *the* criterion for the illocutionary classification of his sentence construct; and the actual particular communication context of that sentence construct, *not* its structure by itself, is *the* ultimate basis for ascertaining the language communicator's communicated illocutive intent for his sentence construct.

¹⁶ Since the communicatee's decodings of the communicator's language performance are *guesses* (howbeit intelligent) of the communicator's communicated intent, it goes without saying that the communicatee could still be *mistaken* about the communicator's exact illocutive intent despite all the available contextual clues of a given communication.

7. Conclusion

As indicated at the beginning of this exposition, this paper has been concerned with presenting the results of my research findings in the domain of the pragmatics of questions, through a review of and reaction to *Derr's* (1987) article on questions. The findings I have discussed in this paper may be summarised as follows, in line with the heading for each of the six major sections of the paper.

First, when questions are taken to be language entities, as *Derr* (1987) considers them, then they fall squarely within the purview of linguistics' preoccupations; and any other discipline that examines their nature cannot reasonably afford to ignore the contributions of linguists' investigations in the domain. Second, the illocutive intent which characterises questions is that of seeking to be informed about something; it should be of immense interest for subsequent work on the pragmatics of questions to elucidate the relation between (at least some) non-language entities also called 'questions' and these information-seeking language entities under scrutiny here. Third, there are, applying my definition concerned rigorously, no questions qua questions which are not information-seeking: When apparent questions do prove to be non-information-seeking, it is either because (i) non-defining, *incidental* characteristics of questions (like the language communicator's lack of sincerity in seeking information) are being erroneously used to argue that genuine questions (which are otherwise in fact information-seeking) are supposedly non-information-seeking; or because (ii) the *structure* traditionally associated with questions, *not* any question illocutionary force at all, is being used erroneously to parade *non*-question sentences - of illocutively ambiguous constructs or otherwise - as 'questions' (that are supposedly non-information-seeking). Fourth, sentences may be illocutively double-barrelled, when the language communicator imposes two illocutionary forces simultaneously on the same sentence; and, in that case, a sentence correctly designated a 'question' may sometimes also quite correctly be called a 'request'. Fifth, the second postulate above that the illocutionary character of questions sentences is that of seeking information takes precedence over purely structural considerations for defining or determining questions - such that several structurally dissimilar sentences are all necessarily questions if they are all information-seeking. Sixth, contrary to *Derr's* (1987) and the traditional position in the matter, communication *context*, not sentence structure, is the ultimate basis for determining a sentence's communicated illocutive intent, and therefore for its possible classification as a question.

My overall objective in this paper has been to demonstrate with the study of questions the importance of performative grammar's fundamental postulate about the crucial role of communication context in linguistic analysis and description. I would be pleased to receive reactions which provide other insights about questions.

References

- Alston, W.P. (1991) Searle on illocutionary acts. In E. Lepore and R. Van Gulick (eds.), *John Searle and his Critics*. Oxford: Basic Blackwell.

- Athanasiadou, A. (1994) The pragmatics of answers. *Pragmatics* 4(4):561-574.
- Austin, J.L. (1962) *How to do things with words*. J.O. Urmson (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berckmans, R.P. (1988) Recent work on the performative hypothesis. *Communication and Cognition* 21(1).
- Derr, R.L. (1987) Questioning and information/library science. *Questioning Exchange* 1(2).
- Edwards, M. & J.J. Katz (1985) Sentence meaning and speech acts. *Metaphilosophy* 16(1).
- Lee-Wong, S.M. (1994) Imperatives in requests: Direct or impolite - observations from Chinese. *Pragmatics* 4(4):491-515.
- Leilich, J. (1993) Intentionality, speech acts and communicative action: A defense of J. Habermas and K.O. Apel's criticism of Searle. *Pragmatics* 3(2):155-170.
- van der Meij, H. (1987) Assumptions of information-seeking questions. *Questioning Exchange* 1(2).
- Meyer, M. (ed.) (1988) *Questions and Questioning*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- De Mulder, W. (1993) Intentionality and meaning: A reaction to Leilich's "Intentionality, speech acts and communicative action". *Pragmatics* 3(2):171-180.
- Noica, C. (1987) Questioning and being. *Questioning Exchange* 1(2).
- Rosenberg, J.F. & C. Travis (eds.) (1971) *Readings in the Philosophy of Language*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Searle, J.R. (1969) *Speech Acts: A Study in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J.R. (1975) Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press, 59-82.
- Searle, J.R. (1989) How performatives work. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12: 535-558.
- Uwajeh, M.K.C. (1979) Structures syntaxiques du deuxième registre. Thèse de Doctorat; Département de Linguistique, Université de Montréal.
- Uwajeh, M.K.C. (1993) Communication context in translation. *Turjuman* 2(1).
- Uwajeh, M.K.C. (1994a) Translatoion context. *Turjuman* 3(1).
- Uwajeh, M.K.C. (1994b) The case for a performative translatology. *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology* 1994: 2.