IQQs at the syntax-pragmatics interface

Alfredo García-Pardo
SUNY Purchase
alfredo.garciapardo@purchase.edu

Javier Fernández-Sánchez
Uniwersytet Gdański
javier.fernandez-sanchez@ug.edu.pl

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In this paper we focus on a non-standard type of interrogative clause attested (at least) in European Spanish, which consists of an invariable operator que which is immediately followed by the main verb. After the V, there is an intonational break (optionally manifested by a prosodic break) and a phrase (which we call the tag), which can be of any category, and which is interpreted as an argument/adjunct of the V. Throughout, we provide neutral-prose translations, as it is hard to find an English equivalent:

(1) a. Qué estamos, en 1998?  
   what are.1PL in 1998  
   ‘Are we in 1998?’  
   (Paquita Salas, Netflix)
   b. Qué queréis pasaros, toda la vida repartiendo propaganda en los buzones?  
   what want.pres.2PL to spend.cl.2PL all the life delivering publicity in the mailboxes  
   ‘Do you want to spend all your life delivering publicity?’  
   (Aquí no hay quien viva, A3S)

Following Fernández-Sánchez and García-Pardo (2019) we refer to these questions with the theory-neutral term Invariable Qué-Questions (IQQs). IQQs are radically distinct from split questions (Arregi 2010), a superficially (and prosodically) similar structure headed by a wh-operator which matches the relevant features of the tag. In this respect, compare (1-a) with the following example:

(2) En qué año estamos, en 1998?  
   in what year are.1PL in 1998  
   ‘Are we in 1998?’

Among the many existing differences, note, importantly, that without the tag, the question in (2) is grammatically correct, whereas the tag in (1-a) mandatory.

Whereas the syntax of IQQs has been fairly discussed in the literature (REFS), their pragmatic properties remain largely unaddressed. This paper intends to fill this gap. In particular, we contend that IQQs require for confirmation from the hearer of a proposition for which the speaker has indirect evidence. In turn, we argue that IQQs differ from SQs not only syntactically, but also pragmatically.

- **IQQs banned in unbiased contexts.** Juan is filling out an application, and among other things, he is required to introduce the time. Juan doesn’t know, and looks at the clerk and asks:

  (3) a. #Qué son, las 7?  
      what are the 7
  b. Qué hora es, las 7?  
      what time is the 7  
      ‘Is it 7?’

- **IQQs appear in contexts where the speaker has indirect evidence for the proposition.** Juan knows that Pedro is planning to take the 9am train. Juan calls Pedro at 9.30am and asks:

  (4) a. Qué estás, en el tren?  
      what are.2SG in the train
b. ¿Dónde estás, en el tren?
   where are.2SG in the train
   ‘Are you on the train?’

The speaker does not know for a fact that Pedro actually got on the train, but rather that, based on the evidence that (s)he has, it is likely that Pedro is on the train. If the speaker actually ran into Pedro on the 9am train, the IQQ would be infelicitous. Instead, a different structure with an omitted auxiliary would be used (we suggest it is a direct evidentiality structure, but we will not discuss it further).

(5) ¿Qué, en el tren?
   what in the train
   ‘On the train, huh?’

- **IQQs are not hearsay** Let us assume that the speaker has heard that the hearer Paquita is writing a novel. If the speaker sees Paquita in a coffee shop reading a book, the following would be infelicitous:

(6) #¿Qué estás, trabajando en una novela nueva?
   what are.2SG working on your novel new
   ‘Are you working on a new novel?’

Paquita would be puzzled, as she would not know what in the scenario has led the speaker to believe that it is likely that she is working on a new novel.

**Theoretical implementation** Building on Cinque (1999) and Speas (2004), we propose that IQQs involve the projection of an Evaluative Phrase (EvalP). This projection encodes indirect evidentiality, i.e. the speaker asserts that, according to the evidence (s)he has at hand, the embedded proposition is likely to be true. We follow Speas (2004) in that (Spec, EvalP) is filled by an implicit argument pro that has the speaker as its referent. Our invariable qué, we argue, is the morphological realization of the Eval head.

(7) a. ¿Qué estás, en el tren?
   what are.2SG in the train
   b. [EvalP proi [ Eval’ qué [ TP proj [ T’ estás [FocP en el tren [ VP t en el tren ]]]]]]

This analysis captures the pragmatic constraints that we have observed for IQQs. Importantly, this analysis preserves the syntactic findings presented in Fernández-Sánchez & García-Pardo (2019), namely:

- **Qué** is not a wh-word, but rather, a complementizer of sorts
- **Qué** and the tag are not derivationally linked
- IQQs are not biclausal
- **Qué** must be strictly adjacent to the verb (EvalP and TP are adjacent in the structure)

**References:**