

# The Realm of Questions

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PhD. Ana-Maria DEMETRIAN<sup>1</sup>  
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## Abstract:

*The present article sheds light on the necessity of appropriately enquiring about a subject and adequately responding to a question. Questions must show precise knowledge and understanding of the language structures in interrogative sentences or in sentences with an interrogative meaning. Thus, in constructing questions, people must be able to interpret their context correctly and implicitly the function of the question type chosen. Regardless of discourses, speakers and writers have to activate their thinking skills in order to identify if the question must be information-oriented or analytical so that they can ask relevant questions, offer valuable information, or provide complete analysis depending on their role in the discourse and the situation they are in. Questions can be considered in terms of the expected answers or the given contexts.*

**Keywords:** *questions, answers, thinking skills, active listening, communication, efficiency, relevance, information, analysis*

It is essential that people should have the ability to use the right question and/or give the best answer according to what is needed and imposed. In addition, efficiency is equally important in communication instances and thus, asking irrelevant questions or too many questions and taking too much time to answer a question or providing wrong answers can lead to unsuccessful networking or results in general. Mastering the existing questioning techniques can open up pathways for dynamic and fruitful interaction, comprehension of the words read or heard, and implicitly for relevance in all follow-ups. Additionally, being capable of preventing disaster in an interaction with the help of questions is also a useful art.

Knowing how to ask questions correctly and/or to identify the exact purpose of a question helps people effectively pursue their interests, find solutions to intricate situations, fix issues, and comprehend print and audio content as well as media messages whether they appear in a physical environment or in the online environment. Syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and intonation must be considered together to grasp

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<sup>1</sup> Senior Lecturer, The Department of Applied Modern Languages, University of Craiova.



questions fully and render responses adequately. Moreover, it is important for people to be clear in formulating questions and address them to whom they matter and in cases where they are relevant. Nevertheless, sometimes explanations are helpful and even indicated, such as it happens when in a summit delegates have to vote, so they have to answer a closed question, but in the same time, they have to justify their answer shortly. Therefore, the methods of asking and answering questions must be studied thoroughly in English language classes, whether ESP or EFL classes.

The scope of this paper is to paint a picture of the role of questions and answers in people's discourses. The grammar aspect is not pointed out, but its function is clear from the contexts created. There are two main categories of questions based on the answers targeted – closed questions and open questions. Each one is meant to be used at a specific moment and in a certain place, requiring responses which must be well-defined and exact or responses which must prove thinking skills and analytical power or which must be addressed in order to correct or direct the course of a discourse.

Closed questions require a short answer and only rarely do interlocutors reuse the words in the question under a statement form or do they add an extra comment. The answers are limited and specific in the sense that the respondent cannot provide unique, personalised, and/ or unexpected answers. On the one hand, there is a clear need for somebody to know if something can be confirmed. On the other hand, the questions are charged with extra meaning when modal verbs are used since an interrogative question with a modal verb is more than anything else about asking for advice, or making suggestions, or introducing a request and so on. Closed questions are meant to check understanding, ask for information, or look for direction. It can be said that by using them, the initiator wants to achieve closure. The questioner has control over the dialogue and needs a focused answer. The closed questions and their possible answers can be seen below.

A "yes" or "no" type of answer can come with or without explanations which, if they exist, are meant to reinforce the idea expressed or stand for a polite justification. So, as John Eastwood points out, the full sentence following a short answer adds "emphasis to the answer" (Oxford Practice Grammar, p. 86) or exists because a polite reply containing reasons is natural.

e.g. 1. "Is there an internet problem at your end?"

"Yes." / "Yes, there is." / "Yes, there is an internet problem at my end." / "Yes. The internet connection is unstable and that's why I need to do something to reduce lag." // "No." / "No, there



isn't."/"No, there isn't an internet problem at my end."/"No. The problem could be at your end, or it could be a problem with the app. I can't see any changes in my internet reception."

2. "Is he likely to support us tomorrow?"

"Yes."/"Yes, he is."/"Yes, he is likely to support us tomorrow."/"Yes. I think he will definitely be on our side since his sister is on our team." // "No."/"No, he isn't."/"No, he isn't likely to support us tomorrow."/"No. I don't think he will be our supporter because his childhood friend is in the other team."

In addition to the simple "yes-no" focused questions, there are interrogative sentences with modal verbs. In such interrogative sentences, it is not about a mere "yes-no" response; it is about clarifying whether or not the advice, suggestion, request, offer, invitation, rule, or possibility, etc. is legitimate and/or leads to the desired action. However, in some cases, the questions are just polite questions with an affirmative answer expected, like in the questions about requests with "can or could." Moreover, explanations are necessary if the answer to a modal verb question is negative. It is worth pointing out that natives prefer answering with "Yes, of course" or "Yes, please" to modal verb questions when the answer is positive, as John Eastwood stressed in his *Oxford Practice Grammar*.

1. "Should we tell him that they're lying to him?"

"Yes."/"Yes, of course."/"Yes, we should."/"Yes, we should tell him that they're lying to him."/"Yes. It's important for anybody to know who his real friends are. The truth must never be kept a secret."// "No./ No, we shouldn't./ No, we shouldn't tell him that they're lying to him. We shouldn't interfere in someone else's business, especially if we don't have any proof in which case we might be caught in a war that is not ours."

2. "Shall we go out for dinner tonight and talk more?" // "Yes."/"Sorry, I can't. I have an appointment. Maybe, tomorrow."

3. "Would you like to come over for a coffee this evening?" // "Yes, please. I would love to." // "I'd love to, but my family and I are going to a theatre play. Let's get a raincheck!"

4. "Must we wear a helmet inside the plant?" // "Yes."/"Yes, you must."

5. "You've sent them a Christmas e-card ( )?" // "Yes, I have."

"You haven't sent them a Christmas e-card ( )?" // "No. I haven't."



To the “yes-no” simple questions, we must add the alternative questions, those questions which, according to the online Cambridge Dictionary, are in fact the interrogative form of different grammar structures and tenses and “can be answered as ‘yes-no’ questions depending on the context.” Alternative questions can simply use a positive interrogative form followed by “not” often to show “annoyance or impatience” or they can be ‘wh-questions’ to which the alternatives are added although sometimes only the alternatives appear accompanied by rising intonation. So, with alternative questions, the aim is asking the listener to choose between two or more options or even a drop-down menu inviting to a choice based on a list of given possible responses. However, in a verbal interaction, the respondent might feel the need to emphasise the answer or strengthen his choice by explaining or to clarify it by making a follow-up comment as part of a game or some set of rules. Attention is requested in these instances as extra words or statements are inappropriate, like those interviews with a focus on pre-established answers aimed at obtaining statistics, or those quick and general descriptions of somebody or something, or those multiple choice tests with definite answers, or certain surveys designed to obtain statistics.

e.g. 1. “Are there biscuits or candies in the cupboard? I can’t remember.”

“Yes. There are both biscuits and candies.” // “Yes, there are biscuits/candies.”

2. “Did the students find out about this Debate Club from you, from other persons or from our website?”

“From me.”/“From me. They found out from me.”/“From me. I was the one to inform them. I always make sure they are up to date with the new events in our city.”

3. “Would she like to eat omelette with meat and vegetables, milk and cereals, or jam and toast for breakfast?” // “Omelette with meat and vegetables, milk and cereals, or jam and toast for breakfast?”

“Omelette with meat and vegetables.”/ “She would like to order omelette with meat and vegetables for breakfast.”/ “Omelette with meat and vegetables. She should eat a hearty breakfast because Mondays are hard and busy days, so she isn’t going to have lunch.”

4. “Are you pro or con our green technology motion?”

“Pro.”/“I’m pro your green technology motion.”/ “I’m pro your green technology motion. I support it because we ought to do more to save the Earth and ourselves from destruction.”// “Con.”/ “I’m con your green technology



motion.”/ “I’m con your green technology motion. I’m against it, at least for the time being, because there aren’t any funds we can use for its development. Our current financial situation is really bleak.”

5. “How would you rate this application?”  
“Excellent \_\_\_”/ “Good \_\_\_”/ “Average \_\_\_”/ “Bad \_\_\_”
6. “Have you ever been interested in joining volunteering groups?”// “I have.”/ “I have never.”  
“I have.”/ I have. In my teenage years, I helped raise money for the poor families in my great-grandmother’s village.”//  
“I have never.”/ “I have never. I might seem selfish, but it’s not me. My parents don’t trust today’s volunteering organisations.”
1. “Would you rather rake the dead leaves or vacuum the carpets and mop the floors?”// “Vacuum the carpets and mop the floors.”/ “Rake the dead leaves.”
2. “Where are the learners waiting, inside or outside the building?”  
“Outside the building.”

In *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk R. compares alternative questions to yes-no ones. He writes that “the first type differs from a yes-no question only in intonation; instead of the final rising tone, it contains a separate nucleus for each alternative: a rise occurs on each item in the list, except the last, on which there is a fall, indicating that the list is complete.” (p. 823) Should this difference in intonation be disregarded, there can be some misunderstanding - as the contrast between these replies indicates:

- e.g.
1. “Do you want a new smartphone ↑ or an update of your desktop computer ↓?” // “An update.”
  2. “Did they travel by train or by car last weekend? ↑ // “No, they took the bus.”

Negative questions are also part of the “yes-no” questions as they target a “yes” or “no” answer suggesting agreement, showing surprise, checking information, obtaining information and even persuading or giving an opinion. Sometimes, they start with a “why” question word to make a complaint or express criticism or, as Hewings says, “to show that an action is wrong” (*Advanced Grammar in Use with Answers*, p. 54). Even if those based on the structure “Why don’t you + verb ...?” appear as suggestions, instructions or advice, there can be an irritable tone attached to them as the recommended activity is not being performed (Quirk, R, p. 821). Eastwood stresses, though, that only the structure with a past



tense “Why didn’t you + verb ...?” has a critical tone (*Oxford Practice Grammar with Answers*, p. 109). Negative questions can also start with other question words, but not precisely because there is a need for an answer. They imply something obvious or expect no answer being thus, similar to rhetorical questions in those cases when they are follow-up questions with the meaning of a rhetorical question stressing an obvious point. Sometimes the “wh-word” direct questions are used to “ask for information.” (Eastwood, J. p 109)

- e.g. 1. “Haven’t you heard of the latest news.”//“Yes, I have (heard it/the latest news).”//“No, I haven’t (heard it/the latest news)”.
2. “Won’t you take another piece of cake?”//“Yes. Thank you.”//“No. Thank you.”//“Yes, I will.”//“No, I won’t.”
3. “Isn’t this the greatest film?”//“Yes.”//“Yes, it is.”//“No.”//“No, it isn’t.”
4. “Why haven’t you, as their parents, helped them?” --- Meaning: “I strongly believe you should have done it and I am disappointed.”
5. “Why shouldn’t we hire a famous person to endorse our services? We have the money, so nothing holds us back.”//“Indeed. Let’s do it!”
6. “Why don’t you try to use another method?” (suggestion) //“Why didn’t you send an apology email?” (reproach)
7. “I’d love an iPhone 11.”  
“Who wouldn’t?!”
8. “What was our champion able to do for those poor people?”  
“What wasn’t she able to do? She was their moral support, their financial sponsor, their inspiration.”
9. “Who hasn’t understood?”//“John./I haven’t”//“What exercise haven’t you finished?”  
/ “Exercise 5.”

Negative questions can be included in the closed questions category. They are introduced into the conversation expecting a clear answer and carrying two meanings according to the tone of voice: checking something – usually some surprising or shocking piece of information – or reproaching something to somebody. We can use them to stress that something is not true, in which case they resemble rhetorical questions, as well as to check that something is correct, in which case a follow-up question is immediately used and hence there is no confusion about the answer. Nevertheless, when we just need to check something, it is advisable that we should form a positive sentence requiring only a “yes”



or “no” answer in order to avoid ambiguity or even confusion if the intonation is wrong. There are situations, though, when a negative question is indicated. In their *Grammar for Business*, McCarthy M. et al. highlight the fact that it is the moment we want to convince somebody of something when interrogative-negative forms are indicated and the expected answer is “yes” (p. 111), a case in which the opinion of the questioner is implied.

e.g. 1. “Haven’t you informed them?” (1. “I’m sure you have said that you have done it, I’m just checking.”// 2. “I think you haven’t and you should have done it.”)

2. “Have you informed them?” (A positive question requiring a “yes” or “no” answer prevents you from sounding rude or critical.)

3. “Why don’t we/Can’t we choose activities that are both fun and educational?” (Let’s do it!)

It must be noted here that how we use ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ in answers to negative questions depends on the answer, not the question, as seen in the first examples of negative questions. Swan M. and Walter C. explain that “‘Yes’ goes with or suggests an affirmative verb; ‘No’ goes with or suggests a negative verb.” (Oxford English Grammar Course, p.6) and Eastwood, J. makes the same assertion “The answer ‘yes’ means that the positive is true, and ‘no’ means that the negative is true.” (Oxford Practice Grammar, p. 109) It could also be mentioned here that if the answer is ‘No’ in certain cases, an explanation should accompany the response, whereas in others, an explanation is not necessary as there is no need to continue the conversation.

e.g. 1. “Didn’t you tell us a few weeks ago that you are a vegetarian? I thought you might like a vegetarian meal. We are on a detox diet, so we’re having veggies.”//“Yes. I am a vegetarian.”/“No, I’m not a vegetarian. You misunderstood.”

2. “Haven’t you signed up to come on the exploration trip?”//“No. I haven’t.”

Question tags and their answers are also part of the “yes-no” category of questions. They are used to check information, ask for confirmation, have somebody do something, and encourage people to elaborate on their answers while keeping the conversation going. The meaning of the tag is given by the rising or falling intonation.

e.g. 1. “Andy hasn’t seen his friends this week, has he?” ↑ //“No, he hasn’t.”





2. "It was an emotional message, wasn't it?" ↑ //"Yes, it was heartwarming."
3. "Someone will be there for you, won't they?" ↑ //"Yes, they will."
4. "Nobody had told them, had they?" ↑ //"No, they hadn't."
5. "You have got your ID card, haven't you?" ↑ //"Yes, here it is."/"No, I haven't. Is this a problem?"
6. "Mum, you will pay for that course I was telling you about the other day, won't you?" ↓ We talked about it."/"Yes, I will."
7. "Kathy works hard, doesn't she?" ↑ //"Well, yes, but not always."  
"You didn't close the windows, did you?" ↑ //"Yes. Actually, I did close it."
8. "They will fork out 100 dollars for the concert, won't they?" ↑ // No. As a matter of fact, they won't do it this time."
9. "Stacy doesn't like quince, does he?" ↑ //"No, she doesn't and she is even allergic to them."
10. "You can add that to Santa's List, can't you?" ↑ //"It depends on whether or not you send your request within the time frame given for everybody."
11. "I'm wrong to be judging them for making those comments, aren't I? ↓ They just wanted to help."/"Yes, I'm afraid you are."
12. "You couldn't fetch me the file from the other office, could you?" ↓ //"Of course, I will do it. Don't worry!"

As shown above, the meaning of a question tag is strongly connected to intonation, which is why these questions are rarely used in writing except when extra explanations follow. If the voice goes down, the listener is merely invited to agree with what the statement before the tag suggests. The questioner is quite sure of the answer. Quirk R. sees these questions with a falling intonation as having "the force of an exclamation rather than a genuine question." (*A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, p. 811) And if the voice goes up, there is an actual question which needs clarification, i.e. the questioner is not sure of the answer, although its initiator may be hoping for an answer that matches his/her supposition. So, question tags are used to require information or to ask somebody to do something – the voice goes up at the end of the tag – and to confirm something the questioner thinks he/she already knows, the question tag being sometimes followed by a comment to prove understanding of the situation, as well as to make a request – the voice goes down in such cases.

There are a few other cases of question tags. Foley M. and Hall D. in *Advanced Learners' Grammar* (p. 97-98), Murphy, R. in *English Grammar in Use* (p. 104), and Quirk R. in *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (p. 812-814) enumerate the following:





- after “Let’s go for a stroll,” the question tag is “shall we” and the voice goes up as an answer is expected, hopefully a positive one since the hearer is invited to agreement.

- after “Don’t say that again,” the question tag is “will you” and the voice goes down since the answer should be in accordance with the statement before the tag, a tag meant to build a polite question.

- with imperatives when the tag is a modal expressing a request, an invitation, an urge, a polite command.

e.g. “Show me again your proposal, could you?”//“Join us, will you?”//“Enhance your security system, would you?”//“Wait outside until we ask you in, will you?”

- for expressing sympathy (positive sentence + positive tag)

e.g. “You are tired after working all day in the garden, are you?”

- for expressing irony (positive sentence + positive tag or negative sentence + negative tag – the context should make the meaning clear)

e.g. “This is a tasty dessert, is it? That’s what happens when you are cheap and buy only when things come with a massive discount.”

“You can’t say a nice word, can’t you? It is as if you paid every kind word in gold coins or something.”

- after statements and exclamations tags may be appended to invite the listener’s response having the same form whether the statement is positive or negative, and take a rising tone:

e.g. “They liked the speech, am I right/isn’t that so/wouldn’t you say?” ↑

It is also necessary to emphasise that sometimes in business a positive sentence is followed by a positive tag when people need to find out or to check information. However, this can be misleading as this structure is also used to show irony. Yet if they are accompanied by a matching tone of voice, a rising tone like in any case of information research, then there is no doubt about the purpose of the questions as it appears in the *Business Talk* unit about tag questions of McCarthy et al.. (p. 115)

e.g. “They rely on sponsorship for the implementation of the new app, do they?” ↑

“Yes, they do.” / “No, they don’t.”

Question tags are necessary to help advance the conversation, especially in business meetings, and to keep the conversation going in small talk situations. By using them, people can prove that they are paying attention to what is being said and listening actively. In informal situations, these questions can also make the dialogue friendlier. They should not be used in writing, especially in formal writing, e-mails included.



Although not part of the “yes-no” question stem, questions targeting a specific answer are closed questions, which are occasionally followed by an explanation that can take the form of rhetorical questions.

e.g. 1. “What do you do in that company?” // “I’m a security expert in technology”.

2. “Why has Mark been texting you continuously for the past hour?” // “He is trying to come up with the perfect marketing poster for the holidays, and he keeps sending me pictures of his work for me to rate them on a scale from one to five.”

3. “Do you think (that) laptops are better than desktop computers, or on the contrary?” // “There are advantages to using laptops, such as their lightweight and thus the possibility to move them around. Yet, they can’t be customised easily or entirely, and they can’t always be repaired because some of their components, like the graphic card or the built-in speakers, can’t be replaced once they become obsolete or they break.”

4. “From whom are you receiving these promo gifts?” // “They are being sent by a local business person (who cares about sustainable choices and desires to encourage other companies to join him in his desire to do something for our children’s future).”

5. “Which university has the highest ranking in Romania? On what grounds?” // “The university from Cluj (has the highest ranking). You have to look into this yourself as I haven’t listened to the whole news report.” // “The university from Cluj (has the highest ranking). Aren’t the reasons well-known?”

6. “Would you mind giving us some details about your presentation?” // “Well, 1st of all ...”

7. “What time and where did they meet?” // “They met at 5 p.m. opposite the university building at a café.”

Two other types of closed questions are used to request further information and stress that in a dialogue, our interlocutor is actively listening to us. These are the follow-up questions and the reply questions. They are usually “wh-” questions targeting specific but additional information.

e.g. Nick: “I have finally managed to make peace with myself.”

Gina: “Have you? How have you done that?”

Nick: “I have understood that it is only natural to make mistakes, and I should focus more on what I do well than on my failures. What is more, I try to be the best version of myself each day and always be grateful for what I achieve, for what I have.”



Rhetorical questions “do not require an answer (and they do not require a non-verbal response either) because they are uttered in soliloquy or because the speaker himself gives the answer.” (Kiefer, F., p. 98). They have the form of questions directed towards oneself for argumentation or directed at the listeners. However, they do not need an answer or are answered by their initiators – who could include themselves in the question to lessen the load of the lesson embedded. There are cases when “a course of action is worthless” (Foley, M and Hall, D., p. 97) and we suggest it by using a rhetorical question with the help of the grammar structure “What’s the point in/the use of + vbING/noun/pronoun ...?”

All rhetorical questions are thus used to make an assertion about someone or oneself/ something, to draw attention to something – often negative, and to introduce a new topic or a challenging idea appearing thus in articles, literature, oral presentations, business situations, or in marketing whether they stand as titles or as content material. It is natural that the purpose of these questions should be to impact the listeners or the readers and not to elicit an answer from them. Moreover, given these traits, they entail critical thinking and/or emotion, making it probable that they are included in conversations. Sometimes they might contain metaphors, comparisons, repetitions, hyperboles, or light-hearted words for stylistic reasons or fun – depending on the context - and thus, the impact is more significant. The rhetorical question emphasises the direct call to action, the strong motivator, the instilled pathos, and the clear opportunity. Suddenly the correct and logical way of action is evident in the mind of the interlocutor.

e.g. 1. “Why is your desk always cluttered? Please make sure you tidy your desk after a day’s work!”

2. “What can people do to minimise pollution? They can start by introducing environmentally friendly actions into their daily life. For instance, ...”

3. “I’m so proud of you and the way you have taken control of your life. Aren’t you like a fish in the water when it comes to family life?”

4. “What’s the point in/use of asking employees to work long hours? Tired people are not productive.”

5. “There are companies which hire children from underdeveloped countries and pay them very little for a full day of work. How is it possible that we condone the exploitation of children?”

6. “Will you be able to work the rest of your life in such an oppressive environment? Can fish ever survive out of water? Don’t we all need an appropriate, i.e. a healthy, environment like we need air?”

7. “Did you know about their security software program?”



“This soft is the best regarding security issues and it won an award at the IT autumn fair.”

8. “What went well? Everything! So, pat yourselves on the shoulder.”

9. “We ought to be kind all year round, not just on Christmas time. Do you see/know what I mean? Kindness is by no means seasonal.”

10. “This is exactly like Shakespeare once said: ‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.’ Was he right or was he right?”

11. “Do I want to keep being seen as the underachiever? No, it’s high time I started being the best version of myself every day without undermining myself.”

Other closed questions that can’t be used in writing are statement questions because they have the form of declarative sentences and it is the intonation which turns them into questions. They are never used to ask about a new topic that has not been touched upon in the conversation because the purpose of such questions is only to check understanding by repeating a complete statement as a question or by rephrasing the statement somehow. Statements can also have the value of questions in comprehension exercises requiring *True* and *False* or *Given* and *Not Given* type of choices to exam requirements and no other additions or explanations and statements voiced with a rising tone “to check something we think we know or to express surprise” (Foley, M and Hall D., p. 96) with a “yes-no” answer, a short answer, a full sentence answer for emphasis, implied answer and sometimes followed by extra comments made by the questioner like in rhetorical questions while others resemble a tag question inviting the hearer’s verification (Quirk, R., p. 814) and having a rising tone, but the form must be assertive as the orientation is positive. Moreover, Quirk also mentions two other types: the positive question with assertive form and positive orientation but a comment clause and a fall in intonation and negative questions with negative orientation and nonassertive forms (p. 814)

e.g. 1. “They are refusing to collaborate.”

“They are refusing to collaborate?”

“Yes. Our team has done everything possible to get them on board, but nothing.”

2. “The writer is in favour of the new government proposals for education in schools”// „True.”/ „False.”// „Given” / „Not Given.”

3. “You have finished filling in the form and sent it?”// “Yes.”/“No, not yet.”

4. “Mimi does all the tasks herself? This is unbelievable.”



5. "The team has agreed?" ↑
6. "So, they are confident about the way they made the speech, I believe? ↓ The way it was delivered and the impact it had."
7. "You didn't receive any feedback to use in your future work?"

There are statements that use grammar structures considered polite to make requests in business e-mails and letters. *Grammar for Business* offers the structures used in formal situations to ask somebody something politely: "I/We would be grateful for/if you could ...," "I/We would appreciate it if you could ...," "I/We would welcome any advice ...," "Please let me/us know if/when/where ...," "Please inform us/me about/if/when ..." (p. 123)

eg. 1. "We would be grateful for your feedback/if you could send us your feedback."

2. "I would appreciate it if you could write a letter of recommendation for me."

3. "We would welcome the advice of an expert like you."

4. "Please let me know/inform me when and where we can count on his presence."

Other types of sentences, that are not interrogative and yet they have the meaning of questions, are certain exclamatory sentences. On the one hand, we have the imperative "Let's + verb ...!" and on the other hand, we can encounter positive and negative exclamatory sentences with a falling intonation just like that of a tag question in which the one speaking is not waiting for a response as it is obvious. Quirk R. differentiates between positive and negative exclamatory sentences claiming that the positive one has "a positive response [that is] self-evident" and the negative one has "an appeal for the listener's confirmation" as the speaker clearly has "strong feelings" and although the wording is negative the meaning is "vigorously positive" (*A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, p. 825).

eg. 1. "Let's go for a walk!" (Would you like to go for a walk?/ Shall we go for a walk?)

2. "Isn't she beautiful!"

3. "What a great performance this is!"

It is interesting to note at this point that Quirk R. puts forward the idea that some closed, yes-no, questions, have the verb in the interrogative form, but they are exclamatory sentences (*A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, p. 825), thus we can say similar to those rhetorical questions with an implied answer:

eg. 1. "Oh, my God! Have they done a wonderful job!"



## 2. "Am I tired! It's been a hectic day."

Closed questions – especially those for which the respondents have to choose from the given answers appearing as a multiple-choice enumeration of A, B, C points written under the question, a drop-down menu, or as checkboxes – rank and are conclusive in nature, and thus they can be used when working on a survey as the answers can be categorised according to the respondents' options. The researcher must have a clear understanding of the topic before creating the questions; otherwise, he/she will not provide sufficient options, and the survey result will be limited and even wrong. Moreover, closed questions – which have different answers offered for the respondent to choose from – could influence his/her judgement, and then the answers cannot be real proof that the question has been understood.

We can find open questions at the other end of the realm of questions. These questions are usually the "wh-/ how questions." They begin with "wh-" words or "how": who, whom, what, which, whose, when, where, why, or with how. These questions require a more extended, i.e. a more explicit answer, as they often ask the respondent to think, reflect and then offer opinions and feelings, allowing him/ her to control the answer he/ she provides. Open questions are used to discover new and/ or more information as well as to develop conversation.

- e.g. 1. "Who ought to get involved in this project to ensure its success on the IT market?"
2. "To whom would you give your vote if you were to choose the least of all evils?"
3. "What is your take on climate change? What worries you the most?"
4. "Which plan is the better one, George's or Ana's?"
5. "How does the author choose to emphasise the evil arising from belittling?"
6. "Whose advice did you take to score so highly?" // But first, on whose side are you?"
7. "When can we come to visit your country and fully enjoy its beauty?"
8. "Where will you be travelling next summer, given the existing perils? What kind of a trip are you looking for as a way to recharge your batteries?"
9. "Why have you chosen us under the circumstances? Why not them?"
10. "How can I help you with your transition?"
11. "What could I do to support the newcomers?"



12. "If the Romanian state were to introduce Death Penalty, what would be the implications for the people and for the Justice Ministry?"
13. "What might happen if guns were legalised in Romania?"
14. "How can we better apply the principles of democracy in our educational system?"
15. "What would you be ready to start doing for a sustainable future?"
16. "How do you feel about climate change?"

Open questions are meant to prompt the listener to figure out answers rather than memorise them from a certain source. There is no specific response expected; the response can arise from a wide range of possibilities and is based on abstract thinking. Such questions are complex, and the responses build bridges between knowledge – old as well as new – and issues in order to analyse, diagnose, reinterpret, raise awareness, and even judge. They entail reflection and are original since the person responding has to infer, predict, summarise, exemplify, and clarify while offering opinions and elaborating.

Given the fact that open questions invite the respondent to express his/ her thoughts, ideas, and feelings about a particular subject, they are ideal when wanting to obtain additional information from specialists or mere people who would be free to share their knowledge with the questioner or when looking for answers from a small group of people like a team working on a project. Nevertheless, sometimes the amount of data provided can be overwhelming and difficult to digest, and thus a good process of selection and critical thinking must also come from the questioner, who could as well insert some closed questions to make sure he/ she understands the answers or to lead the respondent into a direction he/ she is interested in.

When describing the realm of questions, one must also refer to questions within an exchange of ideas, within a dialogue. Knowing how to combine closed and open questions is hard to acquire in such complex situations without understanding this realm. Take for example, the questions that lead the presenter, preview the topic or buy time to think. These questions are sometimes similar to rhetorical questions when used to influence somebody, announce a subject, or stall for thinking time. Sometimes the answer is either implicit or provided shortly by the speaker and other times, these questions need merely yes-no answers or an alternative; often the choice offered is biased, preventing the listener from providing accurate and qualitative details by suggesting the possible





answers. However, there are also questions that suggest some analytical process as well and that encourage creative answers.

- e.g. 1. "If your kids keep skipping classes and you won't do anything about this, then how good will their results be at the end of the year?" (leading)
2. "Did you see the suspect walking down the street at 5 p.m.?" (leading)
3. "How dark was it outside? Would you say dark enough or pitch-dark? Could you distinguish a figure at least? Take your time." (leading)
4. "Martha, you haven't mentioned anything about the changes introduced?" (leading/ previewing)
5. "Are you ready to find out the most efficient strategies in social media marketing? Let's dig in!" (previewing)
6. "It's probably best if I just start by showing you a short video on augmented reality, don't you agree?" (previewing)
7. "It is not clear to me how proficient you are in the subject? Could you give me your angle on things?" (stalling)
8. "Now, how can I explain this in a nutshell to save some time?// Now, what could I say more?// "Now, how could I make this easier for you?// "So, you might be wondering what the aim of this is." (stalling)

Within the same idea, it is worth mentioning here that people can check information in other ways, including through echo questions – words or whole sentences with a question word at the end used to check one key piece of information that we might not have heard or found surprising. Positive echo questions can be used "to show interest and make a conversation flow (... using) a rising intonation" while negative echo questions show "emphatic agreement with the speaker (... using) a falling intonation" (Foley, M and Hall D., p 99)

- e.g. Billy: "Some of my students have decided to study in the U.K."  
 Andy: "Study where?"  
 Billy: "In the U.K.."  
 Andy: "Study in the U.K.? What a great choice for them! They deserve the best in life!"  
 Billy: "They do! They were your star students, weren't they?"  
 Billy: "Yes, they were! They each have a different reason for going abroad."  
 Andy: "A different what? A different reason?"  
 Billy: Well, yes, like money – one has got a scholarship, a place to live – another one has relatives there, opportunities –



the third one has chosen the university where he has been guaranteed a job after graduation.”

Echo questions stand on their own, but they are more often found in clusters. Clustered questions are also two-step questions, which are part of a two-stage process of asking for something, usually used as a preface for another question which would sound rather impolite if asked directly. In other cases, the questioner might choose to use a hedging expression or other politeness signals to avoid sounding impolite through his/ her question.

- e.g. 1. Rania: “Are you going to take the car to the teambuilding?”  
Raul: “No. We are all taking the train.”  
Rania: “Do you mind if I drive your car at the weekend? Mine is at the repair shop.”  
Rania: “No, I don’t. Just be very careful and keep it tidy.”
2. Kandy: “Can I ask you/ Could you tell me why they have to pay from their own pockets?”  
Mark: “Their medical insurance does not cover that procedure.”
3. Mihai: I was wondering if you could/ might/ would ever volunteer at an NGO.”  
Sandy: “Yes, why would you ask me this? Do you need help with anything?”
4. Tiffany: “I just want/wanted to ask you something.” / “I have a question.”  
Vera: “Yes, what is it?”
- Tiffany: “I would like to enrol on your communication skills class. Is it still possible?”  
Vivian: Yes, but you must apply online officially. I can’t just put you on a list.”

Consequently, politeness and sensitivity are other aspects to be considered when asking questions. For instance, indirect questions are used “to make questions more polite and more tentative” (Foley, M and Hall, D, p. 99) and these can be formed with the help of closed or open questions. The words used and the situations are important in the construction of the appropriate approach. There is a need for being cautious since an irritated tone combined with negative and strong words can be seen as a reproach.

- e.g. 1. “Can you let me know whether or not you will be able to attend our volunteering meeting?” (a polite enquiry)



2. "Could you explain to us how this endorsement works?" (an indirect approach through a polite request)
3. "I'd like to ask you if you can join us on the school trip tomorrow." (an invitation and possibly a polite request)
4. "Do you know where the post office is?" (a polite question)
5. "Do you mind if I leave earlier today?" (asking for permission)  
// "No. It's ok." / "I'm afraid it's not possible because of the visit the ministry of education is to pay us this afternoon."
6. "I wonder whether or not they have returned from their business trip."
7. "Do you realise what you have lost/done?" (a reproach)
8. "Can you explain how on earth you managed to destroy everything in a matter of minutes?" (a reproach)

Polite questions often take the form of indirect questions introduced by "Can/Could you ...?" or "I'd like to know ..." or "Do you know ...?" or "Do you mind if ...?" or "I wonder whether or not ...". Sometimes these indirect questions are in the past simple ("I was wondering if + subject + could/might/would + verb...", "Subject + was hoping/thinking that + subject + could/might," "I wanted ...") and other times we use the past tense interrogative or a declarative with a past tense verb and an interrogative meaning ("Subject + thought ..."). These sentences are usually requests or favours or simply a respectful way of asking for something in a particular situation. Below there are a few sentences that illustrate the use of these forms:

- eg. 1. "I was wondering if you could/might/would endorse and sponsor our cause." ("Could you do it?/Is it likely that you will do it?/Would you do it?") – a request
2. "We were hoping/thinking Gina might grant us free access to her Christmas event." ("Is it possible?") – a request
  3. "Your grandparents were hoping you could give them a helping hand to prepare for Easter." ("Can you help them?") – a request
  4. "We were thinking that the teacher could explain the differences between past tense and present perfect again." ("Could she do it?") – a request
  5. "We, girls, thought you, boys, might like the day off since it's the 9th of March." ("Would you like that?") – a favour
  6. "Did you have a discount code?" ("Do you have a discount code?") --- a more polite and less direct way to ask the customer or client for something in a shop or a restaurant, according to McCarthy, M. et al. (p.31) – a respectful way of asking something



7. "What was your name again?" (What is your name?") --- another example of past tense with present meaning to ask a customer or a client something in a polite way. – a respectful way of asking something
8. "I just wanted to talk to you about yesterday's meeting because I kind of need a little bit of help understanding the report discussed." ("Could we possibly talk?") – a favour

Interrogative forms used to avoid offending someone or being too inquisitive are quite common in English. It is not only a modal verb in the interrogative that can represent a polite form; the future continuous is preferred when asking about somebody's plans "to soften questions (...) and make them more polite." (McCarthy, M et al. 1, p. 59).

- eg. 1. "Will you be working as a freelancer next year as well?"
2. "What will you be doing on your sightseeing trip?"
  3. "How will they be repaying their neighbours for the support provided during COVID-19?"
  4. "When and where will they be helping our NGO?"
  5. "Will your friends be travelling business class or economy class?"
  6. "Could/Would you show them how to do it?" (polite requests in formal contexts, the former based on mutual benefit, the latter based on willingness)
  7. "Could you tell me what the best strategies are?" (asking somebody to do something in a polite way using a modal verb and an indirect question)
  8. "Could/Might we take a comfort break?" (asking for permission politely in a formal context) //"Yes, you can/ may."
  9. "Could/May I have an aisle seat?" (asking somebody for something politely in a formal context) //"Yes, you can/may." / "I'm afraid not. They are all taken."
  10. "Would you consider investing in our new security app?" (a polite request)
  11. "Would you be willing to offer some of your services free of charge for the benefit of some homeless families?" (a polite request)

Being able to engage in a conversation and stay part of the conversation while creating solid questions is also part of the art of asking questions politely and sensitively. From being ice-breakers to being engaging and entertaining, questions must show cultural awareness and wit. In the book *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures*, we are told



that reactive cultures can be an example in interactions because they “listen before they leap” since they “are the world’s best listeners in as much as they concentrate on what the speaker is saying, do not let their minds wander (...) and rarely, if ever, interrupt” (p. 58) While this is difficult for Latins, surprisingly Finns and Chinese try to avoid confrontation and discord. The same book points out that reactive cultures prefer silence and thinking time to immediate follow-up responses, unlike the linear-active and multi-active cultures keen on engaging in a dialogue and making frequent comments. So if, in America an open question like “What do you think?” is seen as appropriate and receives a response, in Finland such a question will be followed by a silent moment, and then Finns will probably express “their thoughts in half-utterances indicating that the listener can fill in the rest” (p.59) as a compliment to the interlocutor. Therefore, it is compulsory that everybody should have such a book as a reference book to check before starting to interact with a person from another culture because knowledge of the question types may be insufficient and entail failure in communication or misunderstandings without such a reference book. It’s easy to realise this if we think of the simple English courtesy question “How are you?” requiring a polite and short response like “Fine. Thank you! And you?” or “So and so, but ready to start work.”. This question can be interpreted as an invitation to dialogue and socialising in Romania. Thus, there are situations when such an approach can be problematic, like in the business context where personal interaction can be considered inappropriate or at least time-consuming.

Politeness is hence vital in communication, but this does not mean allowing people to get away with any answer: a contradictory answer, an ambiguous one, or even an incorrect one. It is advisable that the questioner should synthesise information sometimes for a less direct confrontation or to allow the other person to repair things or dissipate confusion. This is regardless of the culture of the participants in the dialogue. Take for example, interviews where interviewees happen to provide unsatisfactory or inconsistent answers to the interviewers’ questions, usually open questions, in which case they must synthesise information instead of choosing a direct confrontation or letting things glide or dismiss the candidate. So, asking appropriate follow-up questions allows somebody to understand the other better and gain meaningful information. Such follow-up questions can be polar questions of a high complexity inviting the interlocutor to a detailed explanation and clarifications or leading questions being used to discover the implications of a certain response.

eg. “What are your greatest strengths?”



“ ... ”

“Is that what you meant earlier when you said that you prefer direct interaction with the client?”

“Yes. I strongly believe that ... .” / “No. Actually, what I meant was that ....”

“How do you think such an approach works in our work environment?”

Atypical questions are also questions that need attention in conversation. There are interrogative sentences which “function more as an exclamation than a question (Jackson, p. 145) and are followed either by no answer and some silence or by a full sentence reply under the form of an explanation. Foley and Hall, in their *Advanced Learners' Grammar*, mention ‘Wh-questions’ introduced by “wh-words” – with the exception of “whose” – to which “-ever” is added or after which phrases like “on earth, the hell, or in heaven” follow to express surprise or annoyance (p. 97). There are also those questions aimed at discovering people’s reasons for doing something and these questions contain only “Why?” or “Why not?” being used instead of a whole interrogative question as a follow-up question to a positive statement or a negative statement, respectively. Furthermore, there are times when for brevity, we use only questions without “Are you” or “Do you” or “Have you” (McCarthy, p. 84) in informal conversation contexts or friendly e-mails. Last but not least, there are situations when forms like “... have you?,” “... isn’t she?,” or “... do they?” follow a positive or negative question to show interest or surprise regarding somebody’s statement (Murphy, p. 102.)

- eg. 1. “How could we show our faces there again after all this embarrassment?”
2. “What an earth/Whatever have you done to this room?”
3. “However did they manage such a narrow escape?”
4. “I’m into eating outdoors.”//“Why?”
5. “She isn’t keen on partying.”//“Why not?”
6. “Working late this week?”//“Yes.”/“Yes. I’m afraid I am.” / “No.” / “No. I’m not. Not this week.”
7. “Need some money for your night out with your friends?”//“Yes, I do.”/ Yes. That would be great!” / “No, I don’t.” / “No. We’re just going for a walk.”
8. “Been to her new place yet?”//“Yes, I have.”/ Yes. I was there with my husband yesterday.” / “No, I haven’t.” / “No. She hasn’t even invited me.”
9. “I have just finished all my reports.”//“Oh, have you? So, quickly!”



10. "Mark isn't on board."// "Isn't he? I wonder what has happened."
11. "They lost yesterday's game."// "Did they? What a shame after so much training!"

Clearly, asking appropriate questions and providing smart answers is based not only on somebody's knowledge of language structures but also on their understanding of the context they are in. Consequently, there are situations when knowledge of grammar structures and their uses is a must so that we can avoid misunderstandings which can lead to failure in communication or to impolite or inappropriate approaches, which implicitly entail a loss in interactions, possibly with irreparable consequences. For instance, when doing business with the Germans people must expect to be asked the most difficult questions from the beginning (*When Cultures Collide*, p. 205) not as an intimidation strategy but as a way of seeking whether or not there is "efficiency, quality of goods and promptness of service" (206) and if they want to do business with the Japanese they must not be shocked if the Japanese ask the same tough questions but many times to ensure a good result. (206)

The realm of questions is complex, and cross-cultural factors will affect the choice of closed and open questions used in interactions. Springing from the need to keep a conversation going, avoid misunderstandings, and show active listening skills so necessary in fruitful communication, listeners must pay attention to the syntax of the question, to their context and to the body language of the questioners while considering cultural aspects as well.

Differentiating between certain questions can be the key to a successful discourse. There is a place and time for each question; therefore, awareness of pragmatics can be crucial in good interactions. Categorising questions in accordance with the existing context is mandatory. There is formality, politeness and desired outcome to be taken into account within the context of the interaction. Both closed questions and open questions have their role in communication instances, their value being given by the environment in which the interlocutors are. Closed-ended questions can quickly check comprehension, verify knowledge, and identify specific data.

Open-ended questions probe and elicit expanded thinking and processing of information, which can lead to various perspectives encouraging reasoning, opening up discussions, and developing ideas.





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