



QuBisM

Questions | Bias | Multimodality

Negotiating Meaning in Interactions

Research project 2025-2027

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QuBisM - Questions, Bias, Multimodality: Negotiating Meaning in Interaction

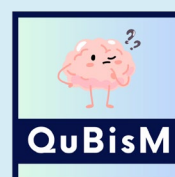
Questions are used to gather information (*Do you have a bike?*). They can also request confirmation of a belief (*Don't you have a bike?*). The latter question is a 'biased' question because the speaker is leaning toward the possibility that the addressee owns a bike whilst asking whether this is true. The **meaning layers** expressed by biased questions have been the issue of intense research in the past two decades. Yet, their exact **use conditions in various communicative situations**, the **interplay of linguistic cues** signalling different bias types, and the issue of how **children acquire** the intricate form-meaning relations of such multi-layered functionality are poorly understood.

In this project, we seek to fill this gap in order to arrive at a more nuanced account of biased questions. They are an ideal way to study how people negotiate complex layers of meaning through diverse linguistic cues, which will further our understanding of communication in general. While previous research has focused on the word order and meaning of 'classic' biased questions, i.e. negative yes-no questions (*Don't you have a bike?*), our project will unravel the nuanced meanings such questions can express in comparison to constructions that also express a bias but have not been treated under this term, like tag questions (*You have a bike, don't you?*) and formulaic suggestions (*Why don't you get a bike?*).

We aim to disentangle the roles of **sentence structure, meaning, context, sentence melody and gesture** (head, hands, torso, face) in all these biased questions in conversation. With new tools and frameworks for multimodal research emerging, we are now able to study the interaction of these linguistic cues in detail. Indeed, there is initial evidence that speakers use different gestural means in different question types in English, and crosslinguistic research shows that gesture marks many different meaning aspects in conversation. We will conduct our research for **English and German**, which use similar morphosyntactic means to mark different biases but seem to differ in the interplay of prosody and morphosyntax. In our cross-linguistic comparison we will also examine how biased questions can be learned in the early years. Complementing our **empirical and analytical contributions** on the expression and learnability of biased questions, we contribute a **theoretical account of the division of labour across linguistic modules** in identifying bias types. This will feed our understanding of how different linguistic means contribute to interpretation in human language more generally. If theories are to reflect cognitive reality, the assumed structures must be learnable and their development traceable first language acquisition. These considerations make biased questions an ideal **springboard for interdisciplinary engagement**, for instance with psychologists for studying the development of the Theory of Mind or with computer scientists seeking to improve human-machine-interaction.



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