A condition on the distribution of discourse particles across types of questions

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1. The Puzzle: "denn", "etwa", "leicht", and "eh" across question types

▸ All four German particles may occur in polarity questions, see (1). But: Only *denn* and *leicht* may occur in constituent questions, see (2). **Why?**

(1) a. *Hast du **denn** die Seife gefunden?*
    b. *Hast du **leicht** die Seife gefunden?*
    c. *Hast du **etwa** die Seife gefunden?*
    d. *Hast du **eh** die Seife gefunden?*
    'Did you find the soap?' + particle contribution

(2) a. *Was hast du **denn** gefunden?*
    b. *Was hast du **leicht** gefunden?*
    c. **Was hast du **etwa** gefunden?*
    d. **Was hast du **eh** gefunden?*
    'What did you find?' + particle contribution

2. The contribution of denn, etwa, leicht, and eh

▸ **Following previous work on discourse particles:** The particles' contribution is only to the *not-at-issue content* (cf. Simons et al. 2010; Zimmermann 2011). The *at-issue content* remains unchanged.

▸ **Notation:** p symbolizes the question's sentence radical, ? is the sentence mood indicator for the question act (cf. Stenius 1976), and c_S is the speaker in the utterance context c (cf. Kaplan 1978).

▸ **Contribution of German "denn":**

(3) $\llbracket denn \rrbracket^c(?, p)$: c_S has heightened interest in the answer to $?p$

(4)   *Hast du denn Schuhe gekauft? #Na, eigentlich interessiert es mich nicht.*
      'Did you buy shoes? #Actually, I don't care.'

▸ **Contribution of Austrian German "leicht":**

(5) $\llbracket leicht \rrbracket^c(?, p)$: c_S believes that settling the question $?p$ may provide an explanation for another piece of information in the utterance context

(6)   A: *Die Iris hat immer irgendwelche Männer um sich.*
      B: *Ist sie leicht hübsch?*
      A: 'Iris always has men around her.'   B: 'Is she pretty?'

(7)   A: *Der Peter war gestern auf meiner Party.*
      B: *Ist er (#leicht) gut nach Hause gekommen?*
      A: 'Peter came to my party yesterday.'   B: 'Did he get home okay?'

▸ **Contribution of German "etwa":**

(8) $\llbracket etwa \rrbracket^c(?, p)$: c_S realized that he mistakenly believed the negative answer to $?p$ to be more likely than the positive answer

(9)   (A sees open door) A: *Wurde etwa eingebrochen?*
                          A: 'Did someone break in?'

(10) (A drops a pencil) A: *#Ist der Stift etwa runtergefallen?*
                          A: 'Did the pencil fall?'

▸ **Contribution of Austrian German "eh":**

(11) $\llbracket eh \rrbracket^c(?, p)$: c_S's beliefs contain evidence for the positive answer to $?p$, but are still compatible with the negative answer to $?p$

(12) (A can't see B's kitten anywhere) A: *Ist dein Kätzchen eh im Haus?*
                                         A: 'Is your kitten inside?'

(13) (A is inside; sees B's kitten) A: *#Ist dein Kätzchen eh im Haus?*
                                      A: 'Is your kitten inside?'

▸ For previous accounts of *denn*, *etwa* and *eh* cf. Weydt (1969), Thurmair (1989) and later works.

3. Why partition structure is a dead end

▸ Polarity questions partition the common ground into two cells, i.e. the positive and the negative answer (cf. Hamblin 1973, Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984).

▸ Constituent questions partition the common ground into a number of cells correlating to the number of possible answers (possibly larger than two).

▸ **Is this difference in partition structure the reason why "etwa" and "eh" cannot occur in constituent questions?**

▸ **No.** Assuming there are two teams, red and blue, a speaker can use both a polarity question and a constituent question to ask about the winner:

(14) a. *Hat das blaue Team gewonnen?*
          'Did the blue team win?'
      b. *Welches Team hat gewonnen?*
          'Which team won?'

▸ Both questions partition the common ground into the same two cells: *blue won* and *red won*.

▸ **But:** Only the polarity question allows all four particles to occur.

4. Capturing the distribution

▸ Based on their not-at-issue content, the particles fall into **two classes**:
  ▸ *etwa* and *eh* convey the speaker's attitude towards a particular answer
  ▸ *denn* and *leicht* comment on the question as a whole

▸ Particles whose not-at-issue meaning singles out *one particular answer* can only do so if the sentence radical **explicitly identifies one answer** (cf. *highlighting* in Inquisitive Semantics, Farkas and Roelofsen to appear).
  ▸ The sentence radical of polarity questions explicitly gives the positive answer.
  ▸ The sentence radical of constituent questions can be seen as a partly unspecified proposition which does not specify one single answer (cf. Krifka 2011).

▸ **Core of the proposal:** particles occurring in questions are sensitive to the number of answers that are explicitly identified, depending on the requirements of their contributed content

5. Predictions

▸ We predict that *etwa* and *eh* should not be able to occur in **alternative questions**, since the sentence radical does not identify a single answer. This is borne out.

(15) a. *Hast du denn Deutsch oder Englisch studiert?*
      b. *Hast du leicht Deutsch oder Englisch studiert?*
      c. **Hast du etwa Deutsch oder Englisch studiert?*
      d. **Hast du eh Deutsch oder Englisch studiert?*
          'Did you study German or English?'

Note: *etwa* and *eh* are fine in the polarity question reading of (15-c) and (15-d).

▸ We predict the behavior of the four particles to be the same in **embedded interrogatives** as in matrix questions, as long as the embedded interrogatives express a question. This is borne out.

(16) a. *Peter fragt sich, ob Maria denn kommt.*
      b. *Peter fragt sich, ob Maria leicht kommt.*
      c. *Peter fragt sich, ob Maria etwa kommt.*
      d. *Peter fragt sich, ob Maria eh kommt.*
          'Peter wonders whether Maria is coming.'

(17) a. *Peter fragt sich, wer denn kommt.*
      b. *Peter fragt sich, wer leicht kommt.*
      c. **Peter fragt sich, wer etwa kommt.*
      d. **Peter fragt sich, wer eh kommt.*
          'Peter wonders who is coming.'

The attitude holder or reported speaker, e.g. Peter in (16) and (17), takes the place of the actual speaker c_S in the description of the particle contributions.

6. Conclusions

▸ Discourse particles occurring in questions seem to be **sensitive to the number of answers that are explicitly identified**, depending on their contributed not-at-issue content.

▸ If they comment on the question as a whole (*denn*; *leicht*), they can occur both in polarity and in constituent questions.

▸ If they comment on the speaker's attitude towards a particular answer (*etwa*; *eh*), they can only occur in those questions that **explicitly identify a particular answer** – polarity questions, but not constituent questions.

References

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