Engaging Questions

wohl in German $V_{\text{end}}$-questions

Regine Eckardt
regine.eckardt@uni-konstanz.de

1. Verb-end questions
2. *wohl*: nonmonotonic inferences by me, by you, by us
3. Conversational themes and the table
4. Conversational themes of $wh-V_e$-questions
5. Conversational themes of $ob$-questions
1. Verb-end questions

German allows matrix questions in subordinate clause syntax.

(1) main clause syntax
    *Wo ist der Bahnhof?* (‘where is the train station?’)

(2) subordinate clause syntax
    *Wo wohl der Bahnhof ist?*

Verb-end (V_e) questions:

“deliberative” question, do not request an answer, do not aim at an addressee invitations to enter conversation on a certain topic (Grohne, p.c.)\(^1\)

---

\(^1\) Verb-end questions can also be used as „repeat questions“ to ask back on the speaker. We'll leave this use aside.
A puzzle:

Polar $V_e$ questions **can** host *wohl*

(3) *Ob Karl (wohl) immer noch diese schwarzen Zigarren raucht?*
whether Karl (wohl) still these black cigars smokes
‘I wonder whether Karl still smokes these black cigars’

Constituent $V_e$ questions **must** host *wohl* or modal *mag*

(4) *Wo es *(wohl)* zum Bahnhof geht?*
where it (wohl) to-the station goes
‘In which direction might be the train station, I wonder.’

- Does *wohl* contribute to the pragmatics of $V_e$ questions?
- Constituent $V_e$ questions: Why can *wohl* alternate with *mag*, but one of them has to appear?
- Polar $V_e$ questions: Does verb-end syntax suffice to convey “deliberation”?
2. *wohl*

2.1 Zimmermann (2011, 2006)

In assertions: *wohl S*

- the speaker (sp) asserts S
- non-at-issue: \( \text{ASSUME}(x, S) \) (ASSUME less certain than KNOW)

In questions: *wohl Q?*

- the addressee (ad) must provide answer \( p \in Q \)
- \( \text{ASSUME}(ad, p) \) suffices for ad to answer \( p \)

Uniform epistemic content of *wohl* in assertions and questions.

*wohl* is blocked/marked in contexts where the respective speaker knows proposition \( p \) for sure (Maxim of Quantity).

(5) Policeman at the border control:
    
    \# *Wie heißen Sie wohl?*
    
    \( \approx \) \# ‘Can you give a guess as to what’s your name?’
2.2 Make ASSUME more precise

Intuition: In assertions, *wohl* indicates that sp has unreliable evidence in favour of *p*. (Eckardt 2012, 2015)

(6) *Wo ist eigentlich die Oma jetzt?* (Where is Granny?)
   *Die ist wohl einkaufen.* (She’s gone shopping I guess)

Evidence:
(a) it is Friday afternoon and she usually goes shopping on Friday afternoon
(b) her slippers are in the hall
(c) the shopping bag is missing.

**Statistic likelihood** can not be expressed by *wohl*.

(7) Granny is on a bus trip with 60 people. I know that 50 of them will be accommodated in *Hotel Viktoria*, 8 will stay in *Pension Erika* and 2 in some other little pension.

My sister asks: *Where will Granny stay?*

√ *Sie ist wahrscheinlich im Hotel Viktoria.*

√ *Sie ist höchstwahrscheinlich im Hotel Viktoria.*

# *Sie ist wohl im Hotel Viktoria.*

‘she is probably / highly likely / #wohl in hotel Viktoria’
Likelihood:

- chances are 5:1 for Granny to be in Hotel Viktoria
- sp should have sufficient evidence to ASSUME that Granny is in HV

=> Zimmermann: *wohl* licensed?

**Problem:** sp lacks *specific* clues that she is staying there

Gaining evidence:

(8) Granny is still on her bus trip. I am phoning places to find out where she’ll stay. I first reach the owner of *Pension Erika* who has never heard her name. Next I call the other little place, where Granny is neither. I can now tell my sister:

*Die Oma ist wohl im Hotel Viktoria.*

Evidence: *Granny is not in Erika.*

*Granny is not in little place.*

Unreliable: people on the phone, in particular in small places, may not know all guests. I have not positively spotted Granny.
(9) Alternative search scenario. In search of Granny, I reach Hotel Viktoria and am told that Ms. Eckardt senior has indeed checked in.

Die Oma ist im Hotel Viktoria.

#Die Oma ist wohl im Hotel Viktoria.

Unless I have reason to distrust the receptionist, it is hard to think about a reason why Granny should not be in HV.

A disclaimer: different speakers may consider different types of information “unreliable”.
Hypothesis: *wohl* marks non-monotonic inference

For individual $a$, let $Bel_w(a)$ be the beliefs of $a$ in index $w$.

For sets of propositions $A$ and proposition $p$, let $A \models p \iff p$ follows from $A$ as a non-monotonic inference. (See Gabbay et al. 1987 for the basics of non-monotonic logic).

(10) Speaker $sp$ utters: *wohl* $p \iff$

  assertion: $p$

  non-at-issue information: $Bel_w(sp) \models p$

Possible paraphrase: “As far as I know, $p$ holds true. But further evidence may entail that $p$ is still false.” (evidence may be weak, inconclusive, incomplete)

Non-monotonic entailment extends classical entailment.

If $A \models p$ then $A \models p$.

Prediction: Assertions *wohl* $S$ are subject to scalar implicatures.

$sp$ utters: “*wohl* $p$” $\Rightarrow$ $sp$ conveys that $Bel(sp) \models p$

$sp$ utters: “$p$” $\Rightarrow$ $sp$ conveys that $Bel(sp) \models p$. This would be more informative

“*wohl* $p$” implicates $Bel(sp) \not\models p$.

Justified: see (9)
2.3  *wohl* in questions

(11) Speaker sp asks: *wohl* Q? ⇔
    Addressee ad is requested to provide proposition p
    with \( p \in Q \) and \( \text{Bel}_{w}(ad) \models p \)

\[ \text{= Zimmermann’s analysis of *wohl* in questions.} \]

- Addressee is not obliged to utter “*wohl* p” in the answer
- \( \text{Bel}_{w}(ad) \models p \) entails \( \text{Bel}_{w}(ad) \models p \)
- If ad utters “p”, he follows the request

Prediction: addressee can provide certain answers as well as weak answers. √
2.4 *wohl-V*-questions are engaging questions

Inference is additive: When two people A and B pool their information, they can possibly draw more or better inferences than A alone or B alone.

Let $\text{Joint-Bel}(A,B) := \{ T \mid T \subseteq \text{Bel}_w(A) \cup \text{Bel}_w(B) \text{ and } T \text{ maximally consistent}\}$

If $\text{Bel}_w(A) \models p$, there can be

\[ T \in \text{Joint-Bel}(A,B) \text{ such that } T \models \neg p \]

If $\text{Bel}_w(A) \models/\models p$, there can be

\[ T \in \text{Joint-Bel}(A,B) \text{ such that } T \models p \]

Likelihoods are not additive

Certain information is not additive. If A believes that he knows $p$ for sure, B can only change this belief by proving A wrong. Which, A thinks, can not happen.
(12) **wohl in V_e-questions, first analysis**

If speaker sp utters “wohl + V_e-Question Q” she raises Q as a QuD and proposes to resolve Q by finding $T \in \text{Joint-Bel}_w(sp, ad)$ and $a \in Q$ such that $T \models a$.

A QuD together with a plan to find an answer will be called a CONVERSATIONAL THEME.

Earlier CONVERSATIONAL THEMES:
- Question plus request to answer.
- QuD plus strategy (by sp or ad) (Roberts 1996, Büring 2003 a.o.)

**“Deliberation”**: *Let us pool our private beliefs as far as they can lead to answers to Q.*
(13) Granny on the road again. I have called Pension Erika and learned that she doesn’t stay there. My sister has called the other little place where Granny is neither. Together we can conclude:

Oma wohnt wohl im Hotel Viktoria.
‘Granny is staying wohl in Hotel Viktoria’
Together = we pool our information. As soon as we share T, either of us could utter (13).

(14) Granny on the road (last variant).

Wo Oma wohlt untergekommen ist?
= ‘Can we guess where Granny is staying if we pool our knowledge?’

The question “Where is Granny” has been raised.
You and me should pool information to find T such that $T|\approx “Granny$ is in …” for some place.
3. What’s the purpose of raising a question that doesn’t need an answer?

Truckenbrodt (2006):

- Empty Co in questions ⇔ do not request an answer.

Too unspecific.

sp asserts interest — for what purpose?

(15) I would like to know the way to the train station.
Entschuldigung, ich müsste wissen, wo der Bahnhof ist.

=> Indirect question acts: Assert interest, trigger answer.

(16) Ich frage mich, wann der Zug kommt.
I wonder when the train will arrive.

=> Ich-frage-mich constructions (I wonder constructions): Assert interest, invitation to speculation is missing, can have other points (e.g., to express impatience). Not equivalent to Ve-questions.
Ve questions in a table model (Farkas & Bruce, 2010)

After Ve-question is uttered,
  the interest of sp has been asserted,
=> the QuD is up
  but the table is in a stable state.

wohl Q ⇔ sp proposes to resolve Q by finding T ∈ \text{Joint-Bel}_w(sp, ad) and a ∈ Q such that T |≈ a.

The CONVERSATIONAL THEME suggests how the ongoing dialogue could continue.

Ad can react in all ways permitted by table: take up question, comment on interest, change topic altogether, etc.

(17) \textit{Wo Oma wohlt ist?} (I wonder where Granny might be)

a. \textit{I heard that she called from Mallorca}. (speculation)

b. \textit{Yeah, I’d like to know, too}. (shared interest)

c. \textit{No idea}.

d. \textit{Have you done the shopping?} (‘I don’t care’)
4. More about Conversational themes: \textit{wh-}V_e\textit{-questions}

(18) \textit{Wo Oma wohl ist?} where Granny wohl is

(19) \textit{Wo Oma sein mag?} where Granny be might

A tentative analysis of \textit{mag} in serious and \textit{V_e} questions

(19') \textit{Wo mag Oma sein?}

\textit{Mag} depends on the doxastic background of some individual $x$.

\[
[[ \text{Mag}_x ( \text{Wo ist Oma?} ) ]] = 
\{ q | q \in [[ \text{Wo ist Oma?} ]] \text{ and } q \cap \text{Bel}_w(x) \neq \emptyset \} 
\]

In questions, the relevant individual must be the addressee (again):

\[
[[ (19') ]] \text{, uttered by } sp \text{ to } ad = [[ \text{Mag}_d ( \text{Wo ist Oma?} ) ]] = 
\{ q | q \in [[ \text{Wo ist Oma?} ]] \text{ and } q \cap \text{Bel}_w(ad) \neq \emptyset \}
\]

“What, do you think, is the range of possible answers to Q?”
(20) **The meaning of mag in $V_e$-questions Q**

(i.) $V_e$-questions do not request an answer:

   After $V_e$-question is uttered,
   the interest of sp becomes part of CG
   => the QuD is open.
   the table is in a stable state.

(ii.) $V_e$-questions need a CONVERSATIONAL THEME:

   $[[ \text{Mag}_{sp, \text{ad}}(Q) ]] = \{ q \mid q \in Q \text{ and } q \cap T \neq \emptyset \}$ for $T \in \text{Joint-Bel}(sp, \text{ad})$

   sp proposes a discourse with the aim of spelling out $[[ \text{Mag}_{sp, \text{ad}}(Q) ]]$.

   “Let us see which answers to Q we both hold possible”.

Ideally, Q is reduced to singleton => answer has been found.
Constituent $V_e$-questions
require one of the two ways to indicate a conversational theme.

=> CONVERSATIONAL THEMES are obligatory.
Questions can’t simply not request answers and have no further purpose.
There are at least two conversational themes for “non-questioning” questions.²

Which leaves us with the mystery of polar $V_e$-questions.
Why can speakers make sense of polar $V_e$-questions without any signal?
Do $V_e$-questions also have more than one possible CONVERSATIONAL THEME?

² We leave aside the exasperated use with wieder: Wo Oma wieder bleibt? ≈ ‘where the heck is Granny? (She always is late…)’}
5. Conversational themes of ob-questions

…or: why can wohl be left out in polar Ve-questions?

Observation: To some informants, some ob-Ve-questions without ‘wohl’ sometimes sound marked. (Gutzmann 2011). — Speakers usually agree on acceptability of standard examples.

(21) Ich hab schon lang nichts mehr von Karl gehört. — Ob er immer noch diese schwarzen kubanischen Zigarren raucht?
‘I haven’t heard from Karl in a long time’ — ‘I wonder whether he still smokes these black Cuban cigars.’

A difference: anchored vs. non-anchored polar Ve-questions.

anchored = has an aboutness topic (introduced in discourse or by situation)
non-anchored = if it does not refer to referential topic (was mentioned)
Non-anchored utterances:
Testing: ‘out of the blue’ questions preceded by Dúhuu, <name>?

\[ Dúhuu, \text{<name>}\]?
H LH*, LH%
can precede any utterance,
provided that sp and ad were not engaged in conversation before.
Marks the utterance as discourse-initial.

Fact: Dúhuu? polar V_e-questions require wohl.

(22) Couple, sitting on the sofa reading. Anton to Bertha:
a. Dúhuu, Bertha? Ob es morgen wohl regnet?
b. #Dúhuu, Bertha? Ob es morgen regnet?
You, Bertha? whether it (wohl) rains tomorrow?

(23) Couple in a café, silently looking out of the window.
a. Dúhuu, Anton? Ob der VFB wohl am Samstag gewinnt?
b. #Dúhuu, Anton? Ob der VFB am Samstag gewinnt?
You, Anton? whether the VFB (wohl) will win on Saturday?

Non-anchored polar V_e-quesitons need wohl to have a conversational theme.
A question is **anchored** if it is about an entity/person that is topical.

Example (21) “*Cuban cigars*”, topic = Karl

Non-monotonic inferences again: One subtype of anchored Q are **Cat-Questions**

(24) A and B watch a cat, eagerly sniffing at the bag of its owner

*A to B: Ob ein Würstchen in der Tasche ist*

‘Is there sausage in the bag I wonder’

Present observation \( \Phi \): ‘the cat takes great interest in the bag’

Non-monotonic inference \( q \): ‘there is sausage in the bag’.
Examples can be multiplied:

- A and B watch a pale person. *Ob er krank ist?* ‘whether he’s ill I wonder’
- A and B see a crowd of people in front of a shop. *Ob es da was umsonst gibt?* ‘whether you get something for free there I wonder’

**Structure of cat-question:**

\[ V_e: \text{The question Q has been raised. No answer is requested.} \]

sp and ad share \( \Phi \) (‘the cat is sniffing at the bag’)

\( \Phi \models ‘\text{there is a sausage in the bag}’ = p \)

sp wants to invite a discussion of this non-monotonic inference (?)

**Cat-questions corroborate the importance of defeasible inference**

as a means to answer (joint) questions.
Summary

- $V_e$ questions raise QuD but don not request answers: They lead to a stable state of the table.
- $V_e$ questions have to define a conversational theme (CTH).
- *wohl*
  - marks an assertion as non-monotonic inference
  - questions invite answers that can be nm inferences from ad belief
  - in $V_e$-questions, it conveys the CTH ‘joint speculation’
- *wh*- $V_e$-questions can not by themselves define a CTH.
  - marked with *mag*: CTH ‘let us pool the answers that we both hold possible’.
  - marked with *wohl*: CTH ‘let us find a weak answer to Q by pooling beliefs’.
- polar $V_e$-questions can be
  - marked with *mag*: CTH ‘let us pool the answers that we both hold possible’.
  - marked with *wohl*: CTH ‘let us find a weak answer to Q by pooling beliefs’.
  - if anchored: CTH ‘comment on a referential topic.’ In this use *wohl* can be left out.
To be continued …

(cat expressed strong interest in more research on *wohl* in $V_e$-questions)
Non-At-Issue meaning and information structure
Oslo, May 8-10, 2017

References


