

A Pragmatic Source for the Existence Presupposition of Simplex *Wh*-Questions

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Do questions with “who” incur an existential presupposition? While speakers’ judgments don’t strongly support such a presupposition in matrix questions, [Dayal \(1996\)](#) points out that in embedded questions the presupposition is clearly present. Consider example (1) which clearly suggests that someone got a red card in the match.

(1) Before the match, she knew who would get a red card in the match.

[Dayal \(1996\)](#) and others therefore propose an account where the lexical meaning of “who” combined with the semantics of questions predicts an existential presupposition. But we observe that the presupposition in (2) is weaker than [Dayal](#) account predicts. Specifically, [Dayal](#)’s account predicts that (2) ought to presuppose that in each of the 20 matches at least one red card was handed out.

(2) Before each of the 20 matches, she knew who would get a red card in the match.

In our judgment, the presupposition of (2) is weaker – it only suggests that in some of the 20 matches a red card was assigned. Consider also the contrast between (2) and the “which”-question in (3): With the singular phrase “which player”. (3) presupposes that exactly one player received a red card in each of the matches. And with the plural phrase “which players”, the presupposition is that in each of the 20 matches at least one player received a red card, and that furthermore in at least one of the matches more than one player got one.

(3) Before each of the 20 matches, she knew which player(s) would get a red card in the match.

The contrast between (2) and (3) argues that, contra [Dayal \(1996\)](#), the presupposition observed in (1) cannot be due a lexical property of “who”-questions in the same way as it is for “which”-questions. The contrast between (1) and (2) is parallel to the implicated presuppositions in the sense of [Sauerland \(2008\)](#). To derive the presupposition of (1) as an implicated presupposition requires though an alternative with a complementary non-existence presupposition. We propose that (4) is the alternative of (1) that derives [Dayal](#)’s presupposition.

(4) Before the match, she knew no one would get a red card in the match.

Our proposal entails that (4) must be a structural alternative to (1) in the sense of [Katzir \(2008\)](#). Since declaratives are structurally simpler than questions, the novel aspect of our claim is only that “no one” must be an alternative to “who”. We leave a complete theoretical explanation for this consequence for future work.

References

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