Main points & Assumptions

1. I argue against a purely syntactic approach to this puzzle [5, 7, 8, 13, 11]
2. Instead, I assume that the interpretational differences between the questions in (2) come directly from *focus marking* [2, 10]
3. I argue for a unified treatment of focus marking across different question types.
4. I show that this can be captured in terms of discourse congruence.
5. I assume that f-marking signals that there are parallel questions to the ones that is being asked [4].
6. F-marking in questions signals the presence of a higher level strategy, i.e. a set of questions.
7. Answers must be congruent to this strategy: they must address at least one subquestion in it.

A proposition P is a proper answer to a question Q iff
1. [P] resolves [Q], and
2. [P] is congruent to [Q], i.e. resolves at least one subquestion within the strategy signaled by Q (where [Q] resolves [V] iff [V] ⊆ α for some α ∈ [V]).

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**The PolQ-AltQ contrast**

Disjunctive questions like (1) are ambiguous: they can be interpreted as a polar question (PolQ), as an alternative question (AltQ) or as open disjunctive question (OpenQ).

(1) Did Mary drink mineral water or lemonade?

The availability of these readings depends on intonation [1, 12, 10].

- When individual disjuncts are pitch accented as in (2a) and (2b), it will be interpreted as a AltQ or OpenQ.
- The example in (2c) without pitch accents on each disjunct is interpreted as a polar question (PolQ):

(2) a. Did Mary drink coffee or tea? x PolQ, OpenQ ∨ AltQ
  b. Yes: B: no
  c. B: coffee
  d. B: both
  e. Did Mary drink coffee or tea? x PolQ, AltQ ∨ OpenQ
  f. Yes: B: no
  g. B: coffee
  h. B: both
  i. Did Mary drink coffee or tea? x AltQ, OpenQ ∨ PolQ
  j. Yes: B: no
  k. B: coffee
  l. B: both
  m. Neither

**The syntactic approach**

Many accounts of the PolQ-AltQ contrast assume that AltQs of the form in (2a) involve deletion while PolQs like (2c) do not [13, 8, 11].

(3) Did Mary drink coffee, or did she drink tea? ∨ AltQ ∨ PolQ

Pitch accents on the disjuncts in AltQs are then assumed to be a reflex of this specific underlying structure.

- Disjunction as union, so a full clausal disjunctive phrase will always denote a proposition with multiple alternatives.
- Alternatives percolate up using pointwise functional application.
- Default flattening at the clausal level by a flattening operator (Q).
- In PolQs, a question operator Q will add the complement alternative.

(4) a. [alternatives: Q ⊲ Aₚ, A₂ₚ, Qₚ] ⊲ Pₚ, Pₚ′ = 1
   b. [Q = AltQ: Aₚ Qₚ Pₚ ∨ Qₚ = ¬Pₚ]

The structural difference between PolQs and AltQs is therefore the following:

(5) a. Q [∀[QₚAP, XPₚ, XPₚ′]] ∨ AltQ
   b. [Q = AltQ: [∀(Qₚ)] ∨ ∀(Qₚ)] ∨ PolQ

**Problem: Deletion in AltQs is not always as plausible**

The AltQ in (6) would have the underlying structure in (6a) where material in the first disjunct is deleted:

(6) a. Did John or Mary drink coffee?
   b. Q [∀[Did John drink coffee] ∨ [Did Mary drink coffee]]

All AltQs with non-final disjunctions, like subject disjunctions, would have to involve backwards gapping, but this is generally impossible in English [9].

(7) a. I don’t like coffee and/or Bill likes coffee.
   b. *Ann likes coffee and/or Bill likes tea.

A possible workaround: Right node raising, i.e. (6) has the following structure:

(8) Q [∀[Did John drink coffee] ∨ [Did Mary drink coffee]]

However, AltQs do not have the typical prosody that RNR constructions usually exhibit (e.g. a pause after each disjunct)

- Usually, RNR constructions like (9a) allow for sloppy readings, but this is impossible for sentences like (9b) in which the disjuncts are too small to allow for an RNR reading:

(9) a. Bill won’t, and but Alice will, pass her math exam.
   b. John and/or Mary passed her math exam.
   c. (10) patterns with (9b) in this respect, suggesting that an RNR parse is out in these cases as well:

(10) *Will Bill, or Alice, pass her math exam?

Towards a focus approach

**F-marking in simple PolQs**

(11) Q [Did John drink coffee] ∨ [Did Mary drink coffee]?
   a. [[11]] = { [j drank coffee | [y drank coffee] ]
   b. [CPₚ] = [x drank coffee | x ∈ PEOPLE]

At the f-value, ∨ [x drank coffee | x ∈ PEOPLE]

- Presupposes: someone drank coffee
   Q will then apply pointwise and therefore yields a set of questions:
   
   b. [[11]] = { [j drank coffee | someone else drank coffee | x ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | m drank coffee | someone else drank coffee | |
   | c drank coffee | someone else drank coffee | ...}.

**F-marking in disjunctive PolQs**

(12) a. Did [John on Mary], drink the coffee?
   b. Did John or Mary drink coffee?
   c. [Did John or Mary drink coffee]?

(13) Q [Did John or Mary drink coffee]?
   a. [[13]] = { [j or m drank coffee | neither drank coffee] |
   | Narrow focus on disjunction: |
   | [j drank coffee | j ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | f-value: |
   | [j drank coffee | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | f-value: |
   | [j drank coffee | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |

- Presupposes: someone drank coffee
Q will apply pointwise and therefore yields a set of questions:

(14) a. [[14]] = { [j or m drank coffee | neither drank coffee] |
   | Narrow focus on disjunction: |
   | [j drank coffee | j ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | f-value: |
   | [j drank coffee | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |

- Presupposes: someone drank coffee
Q will apply pointwise and therefore yields a set of questions:

(15) a. [[15]] = { [j or m drank coffee | neither drank coffee] |
   | Narrow focus on disjunction: |
   | [j drank coffee | j ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | f-value: |
   | [j drank coffee | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |

- Presupposes: someone drank coffee
Q will apply pointwise and therefore yields a set of questions:

**F-marking in AltQs**

Final falling pitch accent signals list closure [3, 14]:

- List closure affects focus alternatives: closure intonation restricts focus alternatives to those generated in the ordinary value.
- I therefore assume that the falling final pitch accent signals the presence of a closure operator $\Box$

(16) Q [Did John, or Mary drink coffee]?
   a. [[16]] = { [j or m drank coffee | neither drank coffee] |
   | Narrow focus on disjunction: |
   | [j drank coffee | j ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |
   | f-value: |
   | [j drank coffee | m drank coffee | m ∈ PEOPLE] |}