Interrogative clauses that don't interrogate: the interpretation and the syntax of the West Flemish discourse particle *kwestje*

This paper contributes to recent formal work on non-canonical questions, i.e. interrogative clauses which are not interpreted as information-seeking questions. The core empirical issue is the distribution and interpretation of the West Flemish verb-based (cf. Haegeman 2014) discourse particle *kwestje,* a root particle which combines exclusively with interrogative clauses and encodes that they do not require an answer, contrary to expectations raised by typical information-seeking questions. We present the core empirical data first, summarize the interpretive role of *kwestje* and offer a tentative cartographic syntactic analysis of *kwestje*.

      1. Distribution. *Kwestje* may introduce a typical root *wh*-question with fronted finite verb as in (1a), a *wh*-question with what would be embedded word order (finite verb in final position) and the *wh*-phrase to the left of the mandatory (agreeing) complementizer *dat*, leading to a so called doubly filled comp effect (1b), or a root *yes-no* question with fronted finite verb (1c). The fourth conceivable pattern in which *kwestje* introduces a *yes-no* question with verb-final order and *of* ('if') with mandatory *dat* to its left is ungrammatical (1d).

(1) a. Kwestje wanneer goat Joan kommen?   b. Kwestje wanneer dat Joan goa kommen
          KWESTJE when goes Joan come   KWESTJE when that Joan goes come
      c. Kwestje goat Joan kommen?   d. *Kwestje of dat Joan goa kommen
          KWESTJE goes Joan come   KWESTJE *if* that Joan goes come

Kwestje is strictly restricted to interrogative clauses and is not compatible with non-canonical, non-interrogatively typed questions such as rising declaratives. However, it is compatible with other discourse particles that typically resist appearing in interrogative clauses, such as the particle wè, which marks a speaker's authority to make a certain claim or command (Haegeman 2014):

(2) a. *Goat Joan kommen, wè?   (Contrast: ✓Joan goat kommen, wè.)
      b. Kwestje goat Joan kommen, wè.
        "(I do wonder:) Is Joan going to come (not that we can know)."

Kwestje therefore differs from similar particles like Hungarian *vajon* (Gaertner & Gyuris 2022, p.c.) as it preserves interrogative form while removing other clause-type restrictions.

      2. Interpretation. On the basis of a range of contextualized examples we will show that *kwestje*-marked interrogatives exhibit only one of the four characteristics of canonical questions as framed by Farkas (2022: 3), namely speaker ignorance (i.e, the speaker does not know the true answer to the question expressed by the interrogative). Of the remaining three characteristics, *kwestje*-marked interrogatives may optionally be used in situations of addressee competence (when the speaker assumes the addressee knows the answer), but they do not exhibit addressee compliance (when the speaker assumes the addressee will promptly give the answer) or communicate an issue resolution goal (when the speaker's main aim is to settle on an answer promptly in the discourse situation). Woods and Haegeman's (2022) formal pragmatic analysis of *kwestje*-marked interrogatives using Farkas and Bruce's (2010) Table model, as updated by Farkas (2022), concludes that *kwestje* marks a non-inquisitive question; that is, a question that is 'floated' by the speaker without expectation of resolution and is accepted by all interlocutors to be unresolved in the discourse. Formally, *kwestje*-marked interrogatives (a) constitute a proposal by the speaker to add to the discourse common ground a set of propositions, of which only an unspecified subset are anticipated by speaker and addressee to be true, and (b) encode that neither speaker nor addressee will seek to add any proposition in that set to the common ground by publicly committing to its truth.

      3. A cartography for *kwestje*. The paper analyses the distributional restriction on *kwestje* illustrated in (1) using the cartographic approach to the left periphery as introduced by Rizzi (1997) with further additions from Rizzi (2001). Given that it is invariant, and cannot be modified, we assume that *kwestje* is a particle, which either occupies a head position or a specifier position. Moreover, given its linear position on the left of the utterance

and its crucial role in determining speech act properties of utterances, we assume *kwestje* is located in the left peripheral domain of the clause, i.e. the domain that is the interface between the proposition and the discourse context. The contrast illustrated in (1) between *wh*-questions and *yes-no* questions associated with *kwestje* shows that, unlike English *whether,* Flemish *of* cannot be viewed as a full fledged *wh*-constituent, by analogy with other *wh*-constituents, as represented for English in (3a), where FP is used to represent a left-peripheral maximal projection (possibly FocP). In Flemish it is not plausible that *wh*-phrases and *of* have the same position (3b-c).

(3)   a.   [FP   when/whether [F   ]   [TP   subject finite verb]]
          b.   [FP   wanneer   [F dat] [TP   subject… finite verb]]
          c.   *[FP   of   [F dat] [TP   subject… finite verb]]

That *of* is not analogous to *whether* is further confirmed by the fact that, unlike English *whether* (4a), Flemish *of* resists coordination with a *wh*-constituent (4b).

(4)   a.   I wonder whether and when Monique will be visiting us again.
          b.   *K weten niet of en wanneer dat Monique ons nog een keer komt bezoeken
                 I know not of and when that Monique us once again comes visit

We start from the hypothesis that in regular embedded questions the fronted *wh*-constituent targets a specifier of a functional projection ('FP', tentatively), and that the Flemish agreeing complementizer *dat* occupies either the head F or possibly a lower functional head (say Rizzi's 1997 Fin). Let us also assume that the corresponding root *wh*-questions with the verb fronted to a left-peripheral position are closely analogous, in particular that the fronted *wh*-constituent occupies the same position in SpecFP, and that the fronted finite verb has reached at most the head F associated with the *wh*-phrase or, alternatively, that it too may remain in a lower position, say Fin. If *of*, which precedes the embedded complementizer is analyzed as a head, then it must target a higher head in the left periphery. We identify that head as Int, the position which also hosts *if* according to Rizzi (2001) and later work.

(5)   a.   [FP *wh*-constituent   [F *dat*] …   [TP
          b.   [FP *wh*-constituent   [F finite verb] …   [TP…
          c.   [IntP   [Int *of*] [FP…   [F *dat*] …   [TP…

The asymmetry in the distribution of *yes-no* patterns in (1c) and (1d) suggests that the head *kwestje* can select (5a) and (5b) but not (5c), i.e. it selects FP but not IntP.

       In line with the distributional data in (1) and given its tight link with interrogative clauses, we hypothesise that *kwestje* is also associated with the projection IntP: if *kwestje* is a head, its incompatibility with *of* (also in Int) follows. In the course of the presentation we will present evidence drawn from coordination to support this hypothesis

(6)   a.   [kwestje   [FP   *wh*-phrase   [F *dat*] [TP…
          b.   *[Kwestje   [IntP   [Int *of*] [FP   [F *dat*] [TP…
          c.   [IntP kwestje   [FP   [F finite verb] … [TP…

To account for *kwestje*'s discourse function, we will argue that it is associated - overtly (by movement) or covertly (*in situ*) - with a higher Speech Act-related head (along the lines of Bayer and Obernauer 2011's analysis of German Mittelfeld discourse particles, and in terms of Giorgi & Pianesi's (2005) analysis of the grammaticalization of *credo*) to satisfy a [+speaker] feature spelt out by the formative [k]. In terms of the Rizzian cartography, this head may be identified as Force. The need for the association with speech act related material results in the unembeddability of *kwestje* utterances (7).

(7)   a.   Je vroeg (*kwestje) hoe lange goat het deuren/dat da goat deuren.
                 He asked *kwestje* how long goes it take/that goes take
          b.   *Je vroeg kwestje schenken ze daar wijn.
                 He asked *kwestje* serve they there wine

This work contributes to ongoing investigations of the syntax and pragmatics of discourse particles, in particular those that affect how interrogative clauses are interpreted (cf. Eckardt 2020, Farkas 2022, Gaertner and Gyuris to appear).