

# A Taxonomy of Question Signals in Modern American English

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## Introduction

The sketch below represents, insofar as I can trust the use of myself as an informant, a classification of the signals through which a standard speaker of north central American English recognizes that he is being asked a question. No attempt other than intuitional is made to define just what a question is.

My procedure is basically to set up a series of statement sentences, then to describe the differences between these base sentences and related questions by citing the contrasts and combinations of contrasts through which the questions are signaled.

There appear to be four such signals which are used either as the sole contrast between the base sentence and a semantically related question or as one of several signals employed in the same question. It will be noted in passing that not one of these is found in the language *only* as a question signal. Illustrations of this curious fact will be provided after they are introduced.

## The basic signals

The four primary contrastive signals are :

1. A rising intonation contour as contrasted with a falling intonation in the base sentence.
2. The use of a form of *do* in the question as contrasted with its absence in the base sentence.
3. A reversal of the subject and the verb from the positions they occupy in the base sentence.<sup>1</sup>
4. The use of a certain number of question words contrasted with their absence in the base sentence.

## The non-uniqueness of the four basic signals

It is important to point out here that the signals are to be conceived of as contrasts with particular base sentences. The same features may be used in

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<sup>1</sup> Two clarifications ought to be made to this statement. First, "reversal" is herein to be defined as removing a verb from its post-subject position and placing it before the subject when a question is formed. Second "verb" includes modals like *can*, *should*, etc., in this context.

English in other circumstances, but then do not contrast with statements to tell us a question is being asked. Four examples will suffice :

1. Rising intonation contours also signal the non-final members of a series : *One, ↑ two, ↑ three, ↑ four, ↑ ...*

2. *Do* is used after certain introductory adverbs : *Rarely do we see him at a loss for words.* It may also be used introductorily for sentences expressing emotion : *Does he ever smoke a lot!*

3. Reversal likewise is used after certain introductory adverbs and in sentences expressing emotion : *Never is he at a loss for words; Is he ever a smoker!* In neither of these cases does the use of reversal signal a question.

4. And finally, *who, what, where, when,* and their like do not always signal questions : *The man who came..., Give me what money you have..., Put it where it was..., I was here when he came...,* illustrate the point.

### Single signal questions.

Each of the four basic signals cited, however, can serve as the only difference between a base sentence and the related question :

1. A rising intonation contour :<sup>2</sup>

Base sentence : *He's gone already.*

Question : *He's gone already? ↑*

2. The use of *do* :

Base sentence : *They smoke too much.*

Question : *Do they smoke too much?*

3. Reversal :

Base sentence : *He is gone already.*

Question : *Is he gone already?*

4. Question word :

Base sentence : *He's going to China.*

Question : *Who's going to China?*

### Multiple signal questions

Combinations of these signals occur. Hypothetically there could be six combinations of two signal contrasts each, four with three signals each, and one with all four, i.e. : 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 2-3, 2-4, 3-4; 1-2-3, 1-2-4, 1-3-4, 2-3-4 and 1-2-3-4. In actual fact, of course, the investigator soon discovers that the use of *do* and reversal, since they are used with different sets of verbs, are not used together. Indeed, one might get a simpler taxonomy by combining *do* and reversal into one signal with two sub-groups. I have not done so for several reasons, the

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted at this point that final intonation contours are in this paper intended to be read as falling unless a rising contour is specifically indicated by the symbol ↑.

most persuasive of which is that this taxonomy should be useful for language teachers, and it seems to me more useful in that regard if the distinction is retained.

If one eliminates the self-contradictory categories, one is left with seven types of multiple signal questions: 1-2, 1-3, 1-4, 2-4, 3-4; 1-2-4, 1-3-4. These are exemplified below.

### Questions which differ from the base sentence in two respects

1. Those which add a rising intonation contour *and* employ *do* (1-2)  
 Base sentence : *John arrived already.*  
 Question : *Did John arrive already?* ↑
2. Those which add a rising intonation contour *and* use reversal (1-3)  
 Base sentence : *John is here already.*  
 Question : *Is John here already?* ↑
3. Those which add a rising intonation contour *and* a question word (1-4)  
 Base sentence : *John is here already.*  
 Question : *Who is here already?* ↑
4. Those which employ *do* *and* a question word (2-4)  
 Base sentence : *They arrive tomorrow.*  
 Question : *When do they arrive?*
5. Those which use reversal *and* a question word (3-4)  
 Base sentence : *They are arriving soon.*  
 Question : *When are they arriving?*

### Questions which differ from the base sentence in three respects.

6. Those which add a rising intonation contour, employ *do*, *and* a question word (1-2-4)  
 Base sentence : *They arrive tomorrow.*  
 Question : *When do they arrive?* ↑
7. Those which add a rising intonation contour, use reversal *and* a question word (1-3-4)  
 Base sentence : *They are arriving soon.*  
 Question : *When are they arriving?* ↑

### Conclusion

This has been an attempt on my part to outline comprehensively all the signals whereby a speaker of my dialect of American English recognizes that he is being asked a question rather than being given an order or provided with information, or the like. I would hope that this taxonomy could serve as a kind of check list for those who compose language teaching materials to determine whether they

have included all they wish. A next step might well center on the intricacies of meaning differences between questions which rise at the end and those which fall. Here we have some notions, but they are incomplete, and not fully satisfying. We know, for example, that most single word questions like when? where? require repetitions when they rise and new information when they fall, as illustrated below :

John : *I'm going to Hong Kong.*

Jane : *When?*

John : *In spring.*

Jane : *When?* ↑

John : *In spring.*

Jane : *When?*

John : *In June.*

Jane : *When?* ↑

John : *In June.*

But we do have a bit of trouble trying to describe the difference in meaning between *Who came?* and *Who came?* ↑ ; *Is he going?* and *Is he going?* ↑ ; and *Do you smoke?* and *Do you smoke?* ↑ ; where the only difference is, not sentence stress, but an intonation contour.