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What is this, sarcastic syntax?

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This study considers sarcasm as a linguistic genre, and explores the use of constructions to capture conventions of sarcastic speech. It does so by examining the English Split Interrogative (SI), e.g., *What are you, a senior?*, *What is this, Spain?* We argue that lexical, syntactic and semantic idiosyncrasies of SI require us to recognize it as a distinct grammatical construction with two related conversational functions. In its basic, or sincere, function, SI is a collateral-track signal in terms of Clark & Fox Tree 2002: it comments on ongoing performance by (a) indexing the user's effort to attach the right value to a property variable in a contextually salient open proposition and (b) proposing the result of that effort. In its secondary, or sarcastic, function, SI expresses a dissociative *Doppelurteil*, or double judgment. Just as topic-comment utterances involve two communicative acts — acknowledging a particular entity as a locus of inquiry and attributing a property to that entity — sarcastic SI makes a judgment about the present situation — it's the inverse of the expected one — and offers an assessment of what makes it so: the value of the *wh*-variable (a variable over people, places, things, reasons, etc.) is extreme on some contextually available scale. We postulate that the sarcastic function is a conventionalized (or short-circuited) conversational implicature (in terms of Morgan 1978). Certain divergent syntactic properties support the view that SI is ambiguous with respect to sincere and sarcastic senses. We thus view SI as a case in which what started as a rhetorical gambit has become conventionalized into a rhetorical figure (Kay 1997).

Keywords: Construction Grammar, sarcasm, irony, interrogatives, corpus syntax, information structure, conversation, diglossia

1. Introduction

There is wit and there is also what one might call *preassembled wit* — linguistic routines that we deploy at specific junctures to express affective judgments in a

humorous — if also occasionally alienating — way. Examples of such routines are seen in (1–3):

- (1) Why don't you say what you *really* mean?
- (2) Don't spend it all in one place.
- (3) I do my best.

In each of these cases, the language user engages in a form of mimicry, using a speech act to mock the attitude of a hypothetical 'upright citizen' who would utter it as a sincere response in the situation at hand (Clark & Gerrig 1984; Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995). The user of (1) invokes the response of a naive interlocutor — one who can't recognize an overbearing opinion when she hears one. The user of (2), in offering a puny amount of money (say upon losing a bet), dissociates herself from the transaction by posing as the kind of abstemious person who might counsel fiscal restraint in this situation. The user of (3) rejects praise by pretending to be the sort of obtuse, self-satisfied person who concurs when praised. These formulas qualify as expressive devices because no one ever *has* to use one; it would have been sufficient for the user of (1) to say, by way of sanction, "You've expressed your opinions too bluntly", or the user of (2) to say nothing at all while repaying the money, or the user of (3) to deflect praise through an act of self-deprecation.

Such formulas belong to what Camp (2012) refers to as the "broad genus of verbal irony", which she characterizes, in line with 'expressivist' theories of irony, in particular that of Kumon-Nakamura et al. (1995), as having two core properties. First, ironic utterances are *allusive*: they convey something other than what they initially appear to. What they convey is that there is a disparity between the current situation and whatever circumstances would warrant the speech act. They also typically convey a negative assessment of current circumstances, whether or not the user holds the addressee responsible for those circumstances. Thus, for example, (2) could be used to ridicule the addressee for accepting the piddling sum of money or it could be used less pointedly to deplore the straitened financial circumstances of both parties in the transaction. Second, ironic utterances are a form of *pretense*: they are, in a sense, counterfeit speech acts. While taking the form of known conversational gambits (e.g., accepting praise, offering advice) they do not actually advance the conversation. Because ironic speech acts are not genuine, there is not much the addressee can say in response to an ironic speech act, even if the ironic act takes the form of a question or imperative or some other act that invites uptake. An ironic speech act does not propose an appropriate 'next move' because its function is disruptive. Such acts "reshap[e] the speech event" by "constructing distance from the tone of the activity in progress" (Goodwin 1996: 71).

The foregoing characterization of ironic speech — as involving pretense, indirection, negative assessment, dissociation and so on — may seem to apply equally

well to sarcasm. What makes an ironic speech act also sarcastic?¹ Is it merely an eye roll or a dripping tone? Or is a sarcastic speech act simply more hostile than an ironic one? As Camp points out, most speech acts that one would intuitively view as sarcastic do not fit the traditional conception of sarcasm as meaning the opposite of what one has said (2012: 597). According to the standard (implicature-based) view, in speaking sarcastically, a speaker *A* exploits a mutually shared assumption that s/he could not plausibly have meant what s/he said:

[U]nless *A*'s utterance is entirely pointless, *A* must be trying to get across some other proposition than the one he purports to be putting forward. This must be some obviously related proposition; the most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward. (Grice 1975/1989: 34)

However, as Camp and others (including Kumon-Nakamura et al. 1995) observe, the implicature-based model of sarcasm is restricted to assertions:

Most illocutionary acts don't have plausible 'opposites', let alone ones that can be analyzed as the same force directed at a logically related proposition. As a result, ironic [sc. sarcastic] speech acts other than assertion often cannot be analyzed in exclusively propositional terms. (Camp 2012: 598).

In fact, even some assertions defy a propositional analysis of the type described. This point is illustrated by the following scenario. A four-year-old girl rushes to her teen brother, tearfully directing his attention to a small cut on her finger. Her brother examines it briefly and says:

(4) You'll probably live.

Sentence (4), while intuitively sarcastic, could not be said to invoke the contradictory of the proposition it conveys, e.g., *You probably won't survive this injury*. If anything, (4) is an understatement: it conveys: 'You will most certainly survive this injury'. It is also a rebuke: the injury is trivial and children shouldn't trouble adults about minor injuries. The rebuke is indirect because it exploits the interpreter's ability to reconstruct both a scale and a presupposition. The scale is presumably a scale of severity for injuries and the presupposition is the set of circumstances under which reasonable people would express concern about the survival of an injured person. The little girl's injury ranks somewhere on the scale of severity for injuries but it is not life threatening, and this is obvious to both parties. The brother uses (4) both to establish the scale necessary for evaluating the situation

1. With Camp (2012), we assume that "sarcasm is a species of verbal irony" (fn. 9, p. 626). While ironic speech acts are instances of allusive pretense, sarcastic speech acts are those ironic speech acts in which the proposition representing the feigned commitment is the scalar antipode of that which represents the actual situation.

(in this case, the child's injury) and to signal that this situation is the diametrical opposite of that which would allow a sincere utterance of (4). Looked at this way, sarcasm is (conspicuous) scalar presupposition violation: it is meaning inversion, but the meaning being inverted is in the presupposition attached to the utterance used to convey sarcastic intent. As Camp puts it

Sarcasm [...] is speech which presupposes a normative scale; which pretends to undertake (or at least, evokes) a commitment with respect to this scale; and which thereby communicates an inversion of this pretended (evoked) commitment. (Camp 2012: 605)

If all sarcastic utterances are presupposition-based, in the sense of evoking a state of affairs (the context in which the speech act could be uttered sincerely) that is the scalar antipode of the actual state of affairs, then we can readily assimilate non-assertoric sarcastic acts, like (5), which we will refer to as *sanction questions*:

(5) How long have we known each other?

Imagine (5) as spoken by a wife to her husband of seven years. The husband has expressed uncertainty about his wife's wine preference at a party. The utterance is intuitively sarcastic but it is not a statement and therefore has no contradictory. Instead,

[such] examples [...] involve the speaker pretending to make a certain speech act in order to draw attention to some disparity between the actual circumstances and the circumstances in which that speech act would be appropriate, and thereby to disparage some aspect of the current situation. (Camp 2012: 598)

While it is common for recently formed couples to query one another about the duration of the relationship, it is far less common for couples of long standing to do so, and the addressee knows this. Herein lies the rebuke. In (5), the wife pretends to ask an information question that presupposes, as a condition of its sincere utterance, that the relationship is newly formed. The husband knows that it is not; he thus interprets (5) correctly as a sarcastic speech act that (a) reminds him that their relationship is in fact an established one (the antipodal situation) and (b) deplores his ignorance under these circumstances.² The point is that while sanction

2. An anonymous reviewer offers an alternative analysis of (5), in which the speaker's sarcastic rebuke arises from her pretended commitment to the proposition that she and the addressee are mere acquaintances, rather than intimates. The idea here is that (5) is simply not a typical question for a wife to ask a husband, whatever the duration of their relationship: the strength of the social bond between friends might well depend on length of acquaintanceship, but that between spouses does not. This is a plausible alternative analysis that, crucially, is compatible with the scalar model of sarcasm presumed in this paper. Since (mere) acquaintanceship and intimacy

questions are not declaratives, they are amenable to a scalar analysis of the kind given to declaratives like (4):

Examples like [the sanction question] function [...] to evoke or allude to a situation X in which their sincere utterance would be apt; and they thereby draw attention to a disparity between X and the actual circumstances Y. But that disparity always has a specific structure: the two situations occupy opposite extremes of an evoked scale, and the speaker's utterance draws attention to the fact that Y lies at the opposite or inverse end from X. (Camp 2012: 598)

As we will see in the course of this study, sanction questions can be combined with tag-position guesses to produce interrogative sentences that express sarcastic 'double judgments'.

The foregoing discussion has implied that the meanings of sarcastic utterances are calculable, whether through Gricean means or otherwise. That is, thus far we have presumed that the addressee of a sarcastic act determines the presupposition of the speech act (or at least a sincere utterance of it), recognizes the disparity between the situation in the presupposition and the actual one and thereby derives the negative assessment. On this view, sarcastic speech acts are conventions of usage, in the sense of Morgan 1978: they exist "exclusively at the semantic-pragmatic level, involving neither morphosyntax nor lexicon" (Kay 1997: 184). In other words, the sarcastic inference is a detachable implicature: it is not dependent on the use of a particular form or a particular set of words. For example, the user of (4) could have formulated his utterance differently and achieved the same effect:

- (6) Do you think she'll live?
- (7) You're going to pull through.
- (8) Call an ambulance!

Alongside such cases, however, there exist grammatical patterns to which sarcastic interpretations attach directly; such patterns qualify as pragmatically specialized constructions in the sense of Fillmore et al. 1988, Kay & Fillmore 1999, Kay 1997 and Michaelis & Lambrecht 1996. Examples are given in (9–11):

- (9) Like she's going to defend her thesis this spring. (Camp 2012)
- (10) Think ethanol is environmentally friendly?
- (11) Is it just me or is the world exploding? (Bai 2014)

can be considered antipodal states on a scale of affiliation, we can say that the utterance of (5) presupposes, as a condition of its sincere utterance, a social situation (mere acquaintanceship) that is the contrary of the actual one (intimacy).

Each of these patterns is used to perform sarcastic meaning inversion: (9) means that she is not going to defend her thesis this spring, (10) means that ethanol is not environmentally friendly and (11) means that the speaker is not alone in her perception that the world is exploding. The patterns in question are captured, respectively, by the templates in (12–14):

- (12) Matrix clause: *Like (or as if) S.*
- (13) Elided polar interrogative: *Think [declarative sentence]?*
- (14) Disjunctive polar interrogative: *Is it just me or [polar interrogative]?*

The existence of such patterns suggests that a construction-based approach to grammatical description can contribute to the study of sarcastic pretense. The remainder of this paper will amplify this point by focusing on one sarcastic construction, the Split Interrogative (SI). SI is illustrated by the following examples:³

- (15) You don't trust a man that won't drink with you? That doesn't even make sense. **What is this, the Wild West?** ('Maron', Season 1, Episode 6)
- (16) "I'm not dying," he says again. "I hope not," Clare says and shifts her weight to look at him more closely. "For the love of Jesus," David says, "he's limping, he's not dying. **Who are you, Dr. Kevorkian?**"
- (17) VINCE: Hey, hey, **what are you, claiming to be a Christian now or something?** MR. CLARY: Yes, I am.
- (18) I wanted to be able to tell my mom, call her on the phone one day and say, "Hey, Mom? Guess where I am?" She'd say, "**Where are you, in jail or something?**" And I could say, "No. I'm at the university of such and such."
- (19) UNIDENTIFIED MAN: I told you to get that money ready, that I was sending some agents down there to pick... MR. WASHINGTON: No, no, you said — you said to me... MAN: **What are you, a parrot, telling me what I said?** I know what I said.

Following Norrick (1992), we can describe SI as a bipartite conversational formula composed of a WH-interrogative, e.g., *What is this*, followed by tag-position 'guess' bearing polar-interrogative intonation, e.g., *the Wild West*. We will refer to WH-interrogative as the *body* and the interrogative tag as the *proffer*. The proffer can be

3. Unless otherwise noted, all SI examples in this paper were retrieved from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA; Davies 2008). COCA contains more than 450 million words of text and is equally divided among spoken language (e.g., news programs), fiction, popular magazines, newspapers and academic texts. It includes 20 million words each year from 1990–2012. COCA is also updated regularly (the most recent texts are from the summer of 2012).

a clause or a nominal, adjectival, prepositional or participial phrase (Norrick 1992; Arregi 2007; López-Cortina 2007). Examples of proffers from (15–19) are *claiming to be a Christian or something, in Jail or something, Dr. Kevorkian*. Norrick offers this description of the formal and functional properties of SI:

The guess does not sound like an afterthought. It comes without any noticeable pause following level, continuing intonation on [the last accentable word of the body], and with a rising contour of its own. A guess in tag position after a *wh*-question allows the listener to infer that the speaker seeks only confirmation, in effect reducing the initial *wh*-question to an implied yes-no question. (Norrick 1992: 85)⁴

In examples like (15–19), SI is used to express what Kay & Fillmore 1999 call an *incongruity judgment*, while the proffer expresses the basis for that judgment. We will use conventions of Sign-Based Construction Grammar (SBCG; Sag 2012; Michaelis 2012; Kay & Michaelis 2012) to represent syntactic, semantic and discourse-pragmatic properties of SI. While the construction-based analysis will highlight those properties of SI that make it a productive pattern of English, we will also suggest that SI, like many of the formulas used in the service of verbal irony, is an item-based pattern: certain subtypes (e.g., those containing the *wh*-word *what*) predominate in the corpus search conducted for this study.

SI raises two major questions for a theory of sarcastic syntax. The first concerns the basis on which we postulate a given pragmatically specialized construction, with a given pragmatic force. While SI is very frequently — perhaps most frequently in the COCA data — used in acts of sarcastic pretense, as in (15–19), it is also used for sincere queries, as in (20–23):

- (20) LAUER: OK. Everybody should have WD-40 around the house or a comparable brand. **What is this? A level?** MS. CHATSKY: This is a laser level. A lot of people are hanging their family photos now on their stairways. They want to get them at the angle. A laser level can help.
- (21) FLATOW: Are you — **where are you, New Jersey?** CALLER: I'm sorry. FLATOW: Are you in New Jersey? CALLER: Yes, I sure am.
- (22) Albert and I spent a dreadful year there. **When was it, darling? Eighty-three?**
- (23) STAMBERG: Lew Freedman [...] has just put together the new book, *Iditarod Classics: Tales of the Trail from the Men and Women who Race across Alaska*. Tell us about these people. **Who are they? Old, young, men, women, boys, girls?** FREEDMAN: That's exactly what they are: old and young, men and women both, competing on equal footing [...].

4. One can of course argue that only sincere instances of SI really seek confirmation; as discussed earlier, acts of ironic pretense make no proposal for an appropriate next move.

Borrowing a distinction from Morgan, we can frame the issue as follows: Does the sarcastic use of SI represent a convention of language — a construction — or is it rather a convention *about* language, i.e. one can ask a question in order to feign ignorance? In deciding this case, we will cite Kay's resolution of a similar issue in his 1997 analysis of a conditional sentence pattern used to imply a certain type of negative judgment. In brief, we will conclude that sarcastic and sincere uses of SI diverge syntactically in ways that suggest they are distinct constructions.

The second, related question concerns the form-function fit — in particular why SI has the form it does, and what that form offers the user that an unadorned interrogative would not. For example, the speaker of (15) might simply have used the (rhetorical) polar interrogative *Do you think this is the Wild West?* And the user of the sincere SI token in (20) might simply have asked *What is this?* or *Is this a level?* We will argue that in both its sarcastic and sincere functions, SI is a *collateral-track signal*, as described by Clark & Fox Tree 2002. SI comments on ongoing performance by (a) indexing the user's effort to attach the right value to a property variable in a contextually salient open proposition and (b) proposing the result of that effort. We will suggest that the bipartite form of SI makes it ideally suited to this function: the interrogative SI body performs function (a) while the proffer tag performs function (b). We will compare this analysis to those in which SI is a conversational strategy — either one that restricts the possible responses of the addressee or preempts the 'ignorance implicature' otherwise triggered by *wh*-interrogatives.

The remainder of this paper will be structured as follows. The following section, Section 2, will describe the manifestations of SI in the COCA data, comparing these to tokens retrieved from the Fisher telephone speech corpus. Section 3 will describe the idiosyncratic properties of form and meaning that suggest the suitability of a constructional analysis for SI, in which it serves as a collateral-track signal. At the end of this section, we will offer an SBCG analysis of SI that consolidates its syntactic, semantic and usage properties. Section 4 will examine the means by which SI conveys sarcastic meaning inversion when it does and ask how sarcastic and sincere functions of SI are related. In Section 5, the concluding section, we will argue that verbal irony constitutes a linguistic genre and discuss the contributions that construction-based syntax can make to the study of this genre.

2. SI data

SI is a spoken language construction. Virtually all of the 1160 SI tokens retrieved from COCA came from spoken language transcripts (e.g., transcripts of radio and television news interviews), film scripts and passages in fictional works that depict

conversation, rather than expository prose genres. In addition, the majority of SI tokens in COCA appear to be responses, although some represent self-directed speech occurring within a conversational turn, or inner dialog, as in (24):

- (24) And second-nonpayment? That wasn't possible. Wasn't it just a couple of weeks ago that she'd had a couple of really good tip nights and had come home and paid a bunch of bills? **When was that? Like mid-July? Early July?** It was definitely after the Fourth.

Table 1 gives examples of the various SI body types found in SI tokens retrieved from COCA. As shown, all *wh*-words yield potential SI body types.

Table 1. Examples of SI body types in COCA

Filler	Example
What	What are you, Miranda? <i>Sixteen again? You've regressed a few years now in maturity? Blaming everything on Lucy?</i>
Who	Zincara snapped her fingers in front of my face. "What? You get three wishes and you wish for the world to be peaceful and clean? Are you crazy?! Who are you, anyway? Al Gore?"
Where	Where were you when I needed you? <i>Off chasing butterflies?</i>
Why	Why are you so hateful about her? <i>Because she still loves you?</i>
How	<i>It's just like, how is it that we're alike? Because we're smart? Because we're blond? What is it?</i>
When	"You look smart and you take notes. Like the girl I sat beside in second grade." "When was that? Last year?" She smiled at her own joke.

SI, or at least sarcastic SI, is linked in the popular imagination with a certain kind of conversational interaction and a certain speech style — something that was brought to the first author's attention during a brief linguistic encounter in November 2009. After speaking on Construction Grammar to a student group in the Cambridge University linguistics department, the first author was approached by a participant, a British English speaker, who told of his attempts to use what he referred to as 'an American construction.' The construction in question was SI and the example he offered was *What are you, crazy?* His rendition missed the mark prosodically (the first intonation unit had primary accent on *are* rather than *what*), and when this was pointed out, he joked that one might need a Brooklyn 'tough guy' accent to perform the pattern authentically. The comment now seems astute, as many of the tokens of SI that we retrieved from COCA come from film scripts that depict American characters engaged in adversarial interactions. Examples are given in (25–31):

- (25) SIDONE: You don't want to do this? That's f — kin' rich. What did you think, you could just quit and walk away? You think this is a f — kin' civil service job? **What are you, crazy?** VITTI: Not anymore. (from the film 'Analyze This')⁵
- (26) RIPLEY: What's the code? I want a line out to the Network. AARON: What for? RIPLEY: I'm going to tell them that the whole place is toxic and to get a message to the rescue team to turn around. AARON: **What are you, f — king crazy?** RIPLEY: What's the code? AARON: I'm not giving you the code, Lieutenant. (from the film 'Alien 3')
- (27) CHIEF: This is your only I.D.? [He is looking at the Ralph's Shopper's Club card.] DUDE: I know my rights. CHIEF: You don't know shit, Lebowski. DUDE: I want a f — king lawyer, man. I want Bill Kunstler. CHIEF: **What are you, some kind of sad-assed refugee from the f — king sixties?** DUDE: Uh huh. (from the film 'The Big Lebowski')
- (28) NEIL McCAULEY: A man told me once: you want to make moves? Don't keep anything in your life you're not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner. So if you're chasing me and you gotta move when I move, how do you expect to keep a family? LT. VINCENT HANNA: That's an interesting point. **What are you, a monk?** NEIL: No. (pause) I got a woman. (from the film 'Heat')
- (29) JUDY: I gotta go home and get my hat. HENRY: Forget your f — king hat. **What are you, kidding me?** Just what I need now is a trip to Rockaway. Just because you want your hat. (from the film 'Goodfellas')
- (30) TROOPER: PULL OVER! Harry glances down at his sweater he's wearing, then back at the Trooper. HARRY (calling out): No, it's a Cardigan! But thanks for noticing! He rolls his window back up and turns to an equally baffled Lloyd. HARRY: **Jesus, what is this, the fashion police?** The Cop turns on his siren. (from the film 'Dumb and Dumber')
- (31) THE BRIDE: On that table is the home pregnancy kit. On the floor by the door is the strip that says I'm pregnant. I'm telling you the truth: I don't want to and I won't kill your sister. I just want to go home. KAREN: **What is this, bullshit story number twelve in the female assassin's handbook?** THE BRIDE: Any other time you'd be a hundred percent right. But this time you're a hundred percent wrong. I'm the deadliest woman in the world, but right now I'm scared shitless. (from the film 'Kill Bill')

5. The label *from the film x* or *from the TV series x* will be used to indicate that the source of the token is a dramatic script rather than spontaneous discourse. All of the dramatic script passages are from COCA.

These examples conform to a pattern that could be regarded as the SI prototype: the interrogative portion contains the *wh*-filler *what* and the finite verb *be*, which may be an instance of predicative *be*, as in (26), or the progressive auxiliary, as in (29). This pattern accounts for 83 percent of all SI tokens retrieved from COCA. As shown in Table 2, SI tokens containing the *wh*-word *what*, irrespective of matrix verb, account for the vast majority of all SI tokens in the COCA data (84 percent). There are few non-copular tokens in the data; about 99 percent of SI tokens retrieved from COCA contain an interrogative clause whose matrix verb is finite *be*.

Table 2. Percentages of SI body types in COCA (n=1160)

Filler	<i>What</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>Where</i>	<i>Why</i>	<i>How</i>	<i>When</i>
Portion	974/84%	96/8%	40/3%	25/2%	13/1%	12/1%
Salient exemplar	<i>are you: 25%; is/was this/that: 18%</i>	<i>are you: 52%</i>	<i>are you: 13%</i>	<i>are you: 25%</i>	<i>is that: 50%</i>	<i>is/was it/that: 100%</i>

Table 2 also shows ‘salient exemplar’ classes for each SI body type (defined according to the *wh*-filler); the salient exemplar is the pairing of finite-verb lexeme and subject headword that characterizes more instances of that body type than any other such pairing. In the case of the predominant *what*-filler body type, for example, a quarter of the tokens contain the copula and the (postverbal) subject *you*. An additional 18 percent contain the copula followed by the demonstrative pronominal subject *this* or *that*; an example of this pattern is given above in (30–31), and additional examples are given in (32–34):

- (32) GIFFORD: You don’t want to do the stuff you used to do late at night that you realize was really stupid. KOTB: Whenever anyone says to me, hey, let’s have — look, we’re going to have a dinner, it’s going to be at 9, 8:30, 8. GIFFORD: **What is this, Spain?**
- (33) NEAL CONAN: But there are also this whole range of scandals that seems to have erupted over the past several months, one after another. And you say, you know, ‘We’re waiting for the other shoe to drop.’ **What is this, a Wall Street centipede here?** MR. GLASSMAN: Well, in a way, maybe WorldCom is the other shoe dropping.
- (34) We made a tour of the capitol building and checked out the Civil War museum. From the circular balcony we gazed up at the painting in the dome; there was a scene of angels in flowing robes coming out of clouds. He joked, “**What’s that? The apotheosis of Wisconsin?**” I didn’t know what an apotheosis was, so I just shrugged, as if maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t.

As we have seen, COCA offers an abundance of SI tokens, and tokens of the *what are you/what is this* body type in particular. It also, perhaps not coincidentally, offers a rich variety of fiction genres that depict dialog, as well as news interview transcripts. Paradoxically, however, given that one might expect to find an even higher concentration of SI instances in an exclusively conversational corpus than in a multi-genre corpus like COCA, we found relatively few tokens of SI in the Fisher corpus (Cieri et al. 2004), a corpus of 16,000 English telephone conversations in which each caller has been pre-assigned a conversation partner and a topic to discuss. Examples of Fisher SI tokens are given in (35–41), where conversational context is supplied as necessary:

- (35) [The pre-set topic is the US minimum wage.]
 A: I thought it was like \$5.75 or something. But maybe I was just completely off
 B: Well, maybe that's part of the question to see whether or not we know. A: **What is this, a linguistics study?** So then they're studying how we interact and how —
 B: [laughter] (Fisher)
- (36) [The pre-set topic is sports on TV.]
 A: Do you — are you in school right now?
 B: Yeah, I go to Temple.
 A: Oh, you go to Temple. That's a good one. I thought about going there the — [...] Well, do you have much time to watch TV when you're at school? **What are you, a senior?**
 B: Well, this is my fourth year, so I I mean I'm on the five year plan. I got one more year. (Fisher)
- (37) A: Yeah have you ever been in uh in anything in uh in the acting world?
 B: Have I ever done any acting? Well, I do plenty actually I mean I um I'm a part of theater company that we do kind of this experimental theater work.
 A: Yeah. OK.
 B: So i- it's it's it's accepted a lot more internationally. So I go I travel all over the world all the time doing shows, and I do a lot of singing as well in the city. So like I have a show tomorrow at B.B. King's Blues club.
 A: Oh wow. That is great. **What are you, a tenor?**
 B: I am.
 A: Yeah yeah yeah. I'm in the uh I'm in the Music Man right now. Remember that movie — that play? (Fisher)

- (38) [The pre-set topic is marriage.]
 A: I think there's it's important for your, you know, your f- mental and physical health. I think I mean it's great being alone I mean I spent a lot of time on the road. Have all my life but ah
 B: Well-being. Right. **What are you, a truck driver?**
 A: Ah ah no. [laughter] No I'd love to be because that's one of my — that would be a great job. No, I I travel for my ah business. (Fisher)
- (39) What am I gonna do? I'm pretty clos- not that far away from Three Mile Island. I kind of figure if I get hit, I get hit. [laughter] **What am I gonna do, go hide in the basement?** (Fisher)
- (40) I don't know. I guess I'm just going to attack the question one more time [laugh] because I mean: wh- **what am I supposed to do, like go back and not not ever have met my ex or?** (Fisher)
- (41) And then uh about three months later I got a a contact from a place and I thought, "**What is this, another one of them scams?**" (Fisher)

Of course, the paucity of SI tokens may be attributable to the fact that Fisher is a smaller corpus than COCA (25 million words versus 450 million). But it may also be due to the nature of Fisher conversations — short conversations on preset topics between previously unacquainted adults. The Fisher conversations are often lively, but they are also relatively restrained and polite, and do not feature the kind of rapid fire interchanges that occur during radio and television news interviews, or the kind of colorful adversarial talk one encounters in works of fiction, or films like those excerpted in (25–31). In this connection, it is also worth noting that SI tokens in Fisher tend to be sincere — used in the service of informed guesses. In (35), for example, the speaker uses SI in an effort to recall the purpose of the study in which she's participating. In (36), the speaker uses SI to evoke prior knowledge that the addressee is seeking a career internship (and thus nearing graduation). And in (37), the speaker uses SI to diagnose the addressee's singing range (as it turns out, correctly). When SI tokens in Fisher are sarcastic, they express mildly negative assessments rather than rebukes. For example the speaker of (39), a resident of Pennsylvania living near the Three Mile Island nuclear facility, uses SI to suggest the pointlessness of following safety measures during a reactor meltdown; this effect arises when she proffers a particularly ineffectual measure (hiding in the basement).

Whether sincere or sarcastic, however, instances of the *what are you/what is this* pattern predominate in Fisher as they do in COCA, and their prevalence defies a straightforward functional explanation. We cannot plausibly connect it to the use of such tokens as expressions of sarcastic intent, because these tokens are

not uniformly sarcastic in COCA, and in Fisher they are rarely so. Further, of course, a sarcastic SI utterance need not conform to this pattern. One can note, for example, that in (25) Sidone's canonical SI utterance *What are you, crazy?* is preceded by a non-copular instance: *What did you think, you could just quit and walk away?* Thus, perhaps the copular SI patterns *what are you/what is this* prevail simply because language users tend to inquire about and assess the properties and ongoing activities of people, things and situations (Thompson & Hopper 2001). Copulas subserve such routines; as Michaelis & Francis (2007) observe, copular predications account for about 45 percent of all main-clause predications in the Switchboard conversational corpus. As we will see in Section 3, however, the canonical SI pattern is also special: the *wh*-filler *what* has interpretive affordances within SI that it does not have outside SI.

SI *what*-tokens like those in (25–31), (32–34) and (35–39) are prototypical SI exemplars in another respect: the body is a non-subject *wh*-interrogative; the vast majority of SI tokens retrieved from COCA contain a non-subject interrogative, and the SBCG analysis in the following section will target that interrogative subtype. It is worth noting, however, that about 1 percent of SI tokens in COCA have subject *wh*-fillers and are non-copular:

- (42) President Habyarimana dead. **Who killed him? Tutsi? Hutu? Tutsi?** Perhaps we Tutsi would be blamed for the death of a Hutu president.
- (43) Who sent you? Someone from the Council of Churches, right?
- (44) What took you so long, your mother?

Thus, SI is both a highly general and highly specific construction. It is general in the sense that body types represent the full range of *wh*-question types and prefers the full range of XPs. It is specific in the sense that the *wh*-filler, the matrix verb and the postverbal subject are largely invariant. SI thus resembles partially fixed and partially open sarcastic constructions, including *like/as if*-prefixed sarcasm and other patterns mentioned in (9–11) above.

3. SI as construction

SI has several idiosyncratic properties that suggest it is more than the sum of its parts; that is, it is not simply an *wh*-interrogative combined with a suggested response in the form of a tag. In this section, we discuss those properties and then use them to reflect on the appropriate semantic analysis of the SI construction (3.1). This analysis will be described in Section 3.2, and will in turn provide the basis for a formal representation of the SI construction in Section 3.3.

3.1 Idiosyncratic properties of SI and their potential motivations

In this section, we review two idiosyncratic properties of SI — the first referential and the second prosodic — and explore semantic and discourse-pragmatic motivations for these properties.

First, the variable *what* has a far wider range of potential values than it does outside SI. Outside of SI, a *what*-question with an animate subject-denotatum can elicit an ethnic or religious designation as response:

- (45) A: What are you?
B: Buddhist.

- (46) A: What are you?
B: Half Slovakian, half German.

But such a question cannot generally elicit any other type of property predicate as response. This is shown by the examples in (47–49), where # indicates inappropriateness as a response:

- (47) A: What are you?
B: #Stuck in the 1970s. (cf. *What are you, stuck in the 1970s?*)

- (48) A: What are you?
B: #Sixteen again. (cf. *What are you, sixteen again?*)

- (49) A: What are you?
B: #Claiming to be Christian. (cf. *What are you, claiming to be Christian?*)

However, all such sequences make well-formed SI utterances, e.g., *What are you, sixteen again? What are you, claiming to be Christian now?* Similarly, an SI token containing a *what*-question body with inanimate subject-denotatum can elicit a wider range of properties than can the corresponding *what*-question in isolation:

- (50) A: What is it?
B: #Three in the morning. (cf. *What is it, three in the morning?*)

- (51) A: I had you on the radio show — what was it?
B: #Last week. (cf. *What was it, last week?*)

What could account for the fact that the *what*-filler is a less restricted property variable within SI than outside of it? The explanation we offer draws on Clark and Fox Tree's 2002 theory of performance, in which speakers proceed along two communicative tracks simultaneously:

They use signals in the primary track to refer to the official business, or topics, of the discourse. They use signals in the collateral track to refer to the performance

itself — to timing, delays, rephrasings, mistakes, repairs, intentions to speak, and the like. (Clark & Fox Tree 2002: 74)

We propose that SI utterances, including *what*-questions, serve as collateral-track signals. Viewed this way, an SI utterance is not so much an inquiry into the value of a variable as a trouble signal, much like the pause fillers *um* and *uh*. An SI utterance conveys, ‘I should probably know the value of this variable right now, but I don’t’. The variable typically ranges over properties within a presupposed open proposition like *you are x* or *this (situation) is x*. The value of the variable matters to the user because she or he is concerned with the proper characterization of an entity or situation. The entity or situation is either under discussion or highly recoverable from the discourse context (the vast majority of subject NPs in SI utterances are pronominal). By indexing her own retrieval effort, the language user projects the forthcoming resolution. Of course, as we will discuss in Section 4, such trouble signals can be used insincerely, as sanction questions.

A second idiosyncratic property of SI concerns primary-accent placement. In ‘short’ SI tokens containing the predicative copula and a postverbal pronominal subject⁶, primary accent falls on the *wh*-word filler. (Because the proffer is a distinct intonation unit in SI utterances, it has its own primary accent.) To illustrate this, let us return to an SI utterance from a film script, given above as (28) and repeated here, in abbreviated form, as (52):

- (52) NEIL McCAULEY: [...] So if you’re chasing me and you gotta move when I move, how do you expect to keep a family? LT. VINCENT HANNA: That’s an interesting point. **What are you, a monk?**

If one listens to this exchange, which occurs during the famous diner scene in the movie ‘Heat’, one hears two distinct peaks on Hanna’s SI utterance — the first on *what* and the second on *monk*. This *wh*-filler accentual pattern exists in spontaneous SI productions, as we confirmed by listening to the audio files corresponding to SI tokens retrieved from the Fisher corpus. Fisher examples (35–37) are repeated here with the observed accentual peaks marked by small caps:

- (53) **WHAT** is this, a LINGUISTICS study? (Fisher)
 (54) **WHAT** are you, a SENIOR? (Fisher)
 (55) **WHAT** are you, a TENOR? (Fisher)

6. This restrictive description is warranted because, for example, contracted copular SI tokens like (34) and non-copular SI tokens like (44) have the prosodic properties of *wh*-interrogatives in general. For example, the prosodic peak in (34) presumably falls on the demonstrative post-verbal subject: *What’s THAT?*

Prosodic peaks do not tend to fall on *wh*-words in English information questions, despite the fact that the *wh*-filler is the apparent focus of a *wh*-question: the *wh*-word represents the variable in a presupposed open proposition (e.g., *you are x*). Lambrecht & Michaelis 1998 argue that focus is not accentually marked in information questions. For example, if the interrogative portions of (53–54) were not embedded in SI, they would presumably have the following prosodic properties:

(56) What is THIS?

(57) What ARE you?

Why are SI tokens like (53–55) accented as they are? Lambrecht and Michaelis provide a clue: they observe conditions under which the *wh*-filler of an information question may receive accent. One such condition is the follow-up question, as in (58), where one must imagine that an announcement has just been made at an airport departure gate:

(58) I didn't hear. WHAT did the gate agent just say?

In this context, the speaker is entitled to presume that his addressee knows that the gate agent just said something. Although it hasn't been under discussion, the open proposition *The gate agent said x* can then be considered a ratified topic at the time that the *wh*-interrogative is uttered. According to the accentuation principles proposed by Lambrecht and Michaelis, this ensures that neither of the two content words (*gate agent*, *say*) can receive a primary accent. Accent then falls by deflection on the otherwise unaccentable *wh*-filler. A similar analysis can be applied to an SI token like that in (15), repeated below with primary accent indicated:

(59) You don't trust a man that won't drink with you? That doesn't even make sense. WHAT is this, the Wild West? ('Maron', Season 1, Episode 6)

At the time of the SI utterance, the open proposition, *This (situation) is x*, can be viewed as highly topical, inasmuch as the speaker is assessing his surroundings (he is in an unfamiliar setting) and the interactions he's witnessing there. As mentioned, not all SI utterances feature *wh*-accentuation, but those adhering to the pattern *what is this* generally do, perhaps demonstrating that the more mundane the presupposition triggered by a given form, the more readily the conversational context can be extended to include it. That is, interlocutors are ready to presume categorizing judgments like *This is x* to be part of shared background and the accentual pattern in (59) exploits this willingness.

The moral of our story thus far is that while we cannot avoid stipulating properties of SI, we can make sense of them through discourse-pragmatic explanation.

3.2 The meaning, use and form of SI

We can now address the second of the two major questions raised in the introduction: why does SI have the form it does? Posed differently, why might the speaker in (59) have used SI rather than the polar interrogative *Is this the Wild West?* The untagged polar interrogative *What is this?* is a less desirable option because the user has a value in mind. Like an appositive utterance (e.g., *This is what I think...*), SI presents the result of reflection. Unlike an appositive utterance, SI refers to the act of reflection. We have proposed that in both its sarcastic and sincere functions, SI is a conventional solution to the problem of merging primary and collateral message tracks in a single linguistic stream. While the body refers to the linguistic performance in which the user is or has been engaged (pondering an unknown value of a variable in a contextually available open proposition like *This situation is x*), the proffer is a secondary move, which conveys the primary message, the likely value. The bipartite form of SI makes it ideally suited to this function: the interrogative SI body indicates that the user is engaged in determining the value of a variable (typically a property variable) in a contextually salient open proposition, while the proffered expression offers a resolution. As an application of this analysis, consider (38), repeated below:

- (60) [The pre-set topic is marriage.]
 A: I think there's it's important for your, you know, your f- mental and physical health. I think I mean it's great being alone I mean I spent a lot of time on the road. Have all my life but ah
 B: Well-being. Right. **What are you, a truck driver?**
 A: Ah ah no. [laughter] No I'd love to be because that's one of my — that would be a great job. No, I I travel for my ah business. (Fisher)

B might have begun pondering the nature of A's profession prior to posing the SI query. Certainly, he has received some clues about it — A has asserted that he spends a lot of time “on the road” and enjoys solitude. A might simply have asserted *I think you're a truck driver*, or posed the question *Are you a truck driver?* But SI is the only option that allows him to demonstrate that he has been engaged in a retrieval procedure and that he has derived an open proposition (*You are x*) as part of this procedure. While the proffered value is invalid (amusingly so, for A), the SI option offers B the prospect of receiving credit for reflection.

Viewing SI as indexing the speaker's retrieval effort means abandoning the view, adopted by Norrick (1992), that SI functions to restrict the range of appropriate hearer responses. Norrick (1992: 85) proposes that “[a] guess in tag position after a *wh*-question allows the listener to infer that the speaker seeks only confirmation, in effect reducing the initial *wh*-question to an implied *yes-no* question”,

while sarcastic SI utterances “seem preordained to receive a *no* answer” (ibid). This approach seems sensible, as far as it goes, but it becomes problematic when one considers, as Norrick himself does, the range of possible responses to SI utterances, both sincere and sarcastic. Examples (61–63) illustrate this range for sincere SI utterances and examples (64–66) do so for sarcastic ones:

- (61) LAUER: OK. Everybody should have WD-40 around the house or a comparable brand. **What is this? A level?** MS. CHATSKY: This is a laser level. A lot of people are hanging their family photos now on their stairways. They want to get them at the angle. A laser level can help. (= (20))
- (62) SONYA: **How are you today, Stuart? Feeling pretty good?** STUART SMALLEY (aka comedian AL FRANKEN): I’m a little nervous, which is OK, cause I’m owning my nervousness.
- (63) ROYCE (V.O.): Got a situation here. **Where are you, stuck in traffic?** JORDAN (checking dive watch): Not due in for 22 minutes, sir. Watcha got? (from the film ‘GI Jane’)
- (64) “Nice costume,” says Trent to Romy, rubbing some of the fur of the worn Renaissance tunic between her fingers **“who are you, Michelangelo’s lover?”** “Nice getup yourself. Czar?” asks Romy. “Cossak,” says Trent.
- (65) HANNA: So you never wanted a regular type life? MCCAULEY: **What the f — k is that, barbeques and ballgames?** Hanna: Yeah. (from the film ‘Heat’)
- (66) Harry is doing his best to steer while now holding five full bottles and Lloyd is still going at it in the passenger seat. HARRY: **What are you, a goddamn camel?** LLOYD: Hey, I haven’t gone all day. (from the film ‘Dumb and Dumber’)

None of the sincere SI utterances in (61–63) yields either confirmation or denial: Chatsky’s response in (61) provides a more precise description than that in the SI proffer; Stuart Smalley’s response in (62) acknowledges that the proffer *feeling pretty good* is both a valid and invalid descriptor of his state and Jordan’s response in (63) implies that the SI query (*What are you, stuck in traffic?*) is not relevant because she is not in fact late. Along the same lines, we can note that none of the sarcastic SI tokens in (64–66) triggers a denial. In (64), the sarcastic SI utterance *Who are you, Michelangelo’s lover?* is met with a reciprocal insult. In (65), the sarcastic SI proffer is confirmed; Hanna’s *yeah* response appears to confirm that the ‘regular type life’ is as vapid as McCaulay implies it is. And Harry’s sarcastic rebuke in (66) triggers an explanation rather than a denial from Lloyd. One cannot say that these SI utterances are misfires because they do not yield the predicted response types.

It seems more likely that SI is not in fact, as Norrick (1992:87) claims, “associated with an implicature that the speaker seeks only confirmation of the guess”.

Self-directed talk provides another reason for rejecting the characterization of SI as a confirmation-seeking device. Examples of self-directed SI are given in (67–70):

- (67) He has three brothers. One’s dead. One’s in Texas. One’s in jail. He explained why but I couldn’t follow. When he grows up he wants to work in a big hotel where rich Americans stay. His mother was hurt in the earthquake, **when was it, two years ago?**
- (68) Could I take you back in the Glenn Beck time tunnel, tunnel, tunnel — back to **what was it, June or July?**
- (69) The phone rings once, twice, and when I hear someone picking up, I almost slam down the receiver. But then I don’t. Why should I? **Who would wish to hurt me? My best friend? My husband?** Of course not.
- (70) The sun was low, orange flame in a puddle of dirty water on the cobblestones. **What was it, Friday?** Maybe. September — he was sure of that, anyhow.

While the SI tokens in (67–70) cannot be said to seek confirmation, they can be said to represent the act of pondering the value of a variable.

Finally, it should be noted that many instances of SI are not sequentially positioned to elicit responses, instead continuing the speaker’s turn through subsequent commentary:

- (71) SOUP-NAZI: **What is this, you’re kissing in my line?** Nobody kisses in my line! SHEILA: I can kiss anywhere I want to. SOUP-NAZI: You just cost yourself a soup. (from the TV series ‘Seinfeld’)
- (72) BANKY: Hold on (starts rifling through one bag). HOLDEN: What are you doing? BANKY: I just have to get something (pulls out a huge stack of porno books). HOLDEN: **Who are you, Larry f — king Flynt?** What are you going to do with all of those? BANKY: Read the articles. What do you think I’m going to do with them?
- (73) BEN: It’s not your nature! You have a choice. VITTI: **What are you, f — king Jimmy Cricket?** I don’t know what planet you live on, but here on Earth it’s ‘might makes right’. Read the papers. The guys with the guns make the rules. BEN (holding up the pistol): So I guess.

These SI tokens are not turn-final. For this reason we can infer, for example, that Holden in (72) does not intend to receive a denial of the Larry Flynt

characterization; he follows it up with an apparently sincere question (*What are you going to do with all of those?*) and this is the query that Banky responds to. The SI tokens in (71–73) cannot be said to project ‘no’ responses, because they do not give the hearer the opportunity to respond. Instead, we propose, these SI tokens are performance signals, referencing (albeit insincerely) the speaker’s own attempt to assign a value to variable, whether that variable ranges over situations, as in (71), or properties/identities as in (72–73).

Of course, the objections we have raised to the Norrick account do not show that SI cannot be conceived as a conversational strategy. There is another plausible account in which it can. According to this second account, SI functions to suspend a quantity-based implicature associated with *wh*-interrogatives in general: the user does not know the value of the variable expressed by the *wh*-word (otherwise, the reasoning goes, the question would violate the second quantity maxim’s proscription of unnecessary speech). Such an account could motivate the speaker’s decision to use SI in the following news-interview segment:

- (74) MR. RICHTER: And we pulled this car over. [...] We waited until we got him in the village under the lights, and in that area they do deer jacking occasionally. So we thought they might have been involved in deer jacking because... RIVERA: Deer jacking? **What’s that? Shooting deer out of season?** RICHTER: Deer jack — no. Deer jacking is shooting deer at night with lights. RIVERA: Oh, right.

During this interview segment, Geraldo Rivera, the program’s host, uses a question to solicit the definition of a term that is likely to be unfamiliar to his audience (*deer jacking*). He does so not by posing a bare *wh*-interrogative (*What’s deer jacking?*) but by using SI, with a proffered definition in the tag (*shooting deer out of season*). Why SI? After all, asking clarification questions is what the interviewer is supposed to do. But an interviewer is also expected to be knowledgeable about the subject matter of the interview. Thus, SI allows the interviewer to perform a balancing act. The interrogative body enables the interviewer to pose an interrogative, the proffer allows him a brief foray into the expert’s territory. When the interviewer is wrong, as in (74), the stakes are low, as he has only guessed at the value. This account might also illuminate Speaker A’s decision to use SI in the Fisher conversation in (37), repeated here as (75):

- (75) A: Yeah have you ever been in uh in anything in uh in the acting world?
 B: Have I ever done any acting? Well, I do plenty actually I mean I um I’m a part of theater company that we do kind of this experimental theater work.
 A: Yeah. OK.

B: So i- it's it's it's accepted a lot more internationally. So I go I travel all over the world all the time doing shows, and I do a lot of singing as well in the city. So like I have a show tomorrow at B.B. King's Blues club.

A: Oh wow. That is great. **What are you, a tenor?**

B: I am.

A: Yeah yeah yeah. I'm in the uh I'm in the Music Man right now. Remember that movie — that play? (Fisher)

A, like B, is a singer and actor. It makes sense that he should choose SI, rather than an untagged *wh*-interrogative, or polar-interrogative, to ask a question relevant to their shared avocation (*What are you, a tenor?*). Taking a guess at B's musical range allows A to display expertise, and in particular his ability to diagnose his interlocutor's singing range from his interlocutor's speaking voice. An untagged *wh*-interrogative would not allow him to do this, and a polar interrogative implies a greater degree of certitude regarding the diagnosis than he might wish to display. SI is an effective compromise — a way to express uncertainty without displaying ignorance.

Outside of such interview contexts, however, it is not clear how this account would apply. It does not apply to sarcastic contexts in which ignorance of a value is merely a pretense. In addition, it does not apply to the self-directed SI tokens in (67–70).

The foregoing observations bear on the semantic and discourse-pragmatic representation of the SI construction. Our representation will make reference to the use of SI as a collateral-track signal but not to its use as a response initiator or implicature-suspension device, which appear to represent ancillary functions.

3.3 SBCG representation of SI

Figure 1 represents SI as a phrasal construction, using conventions of SBCG (Sag 2012; Michaelis 2012).

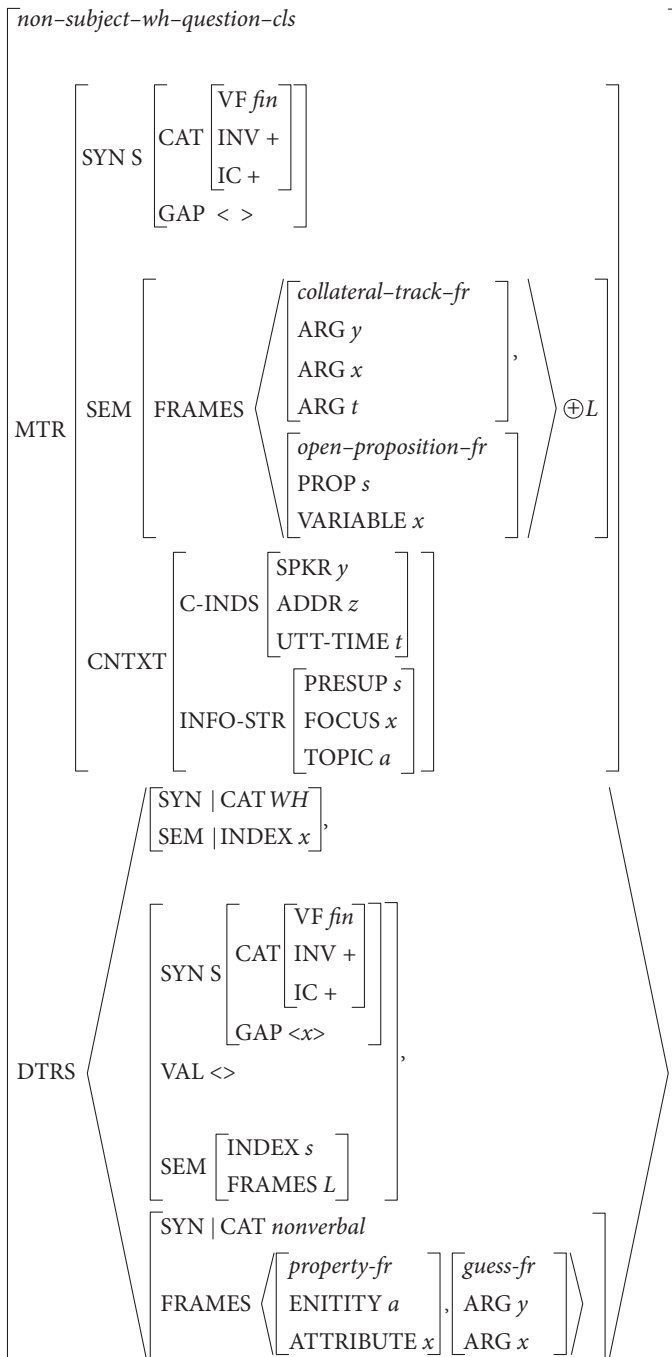


Figure 1. The SI construction

In SBCG, a construction is description of construct. A construct is a local tree with a feature structure at each node. The construct is represented as a feature structure that specifies values for the MOTHER (MTR) feature and the DAUGHTERS (DTRS) feature. The value of MTR is a sign and the value of DTRS is a list of signs. As feature structures, constructs participate in a type hierarchy. The type of the feature structure is indicated by its label. For example, semantic frames used to represent meaning components of constructions are represented by feature structures, and bear labels like *attribute-fr(ame)*. The label *non-subject-wh-question-clc* is used to indicate that the SI construct is a type of non-subject interrogative clause (e.g., *What is it*). This typing entails that it counts as both a gapless finite clause (i.e., a clause with an empty GAP list) and a *wh*-initial clause (one containing an initial *wh*-expression). This phrasal construct contains three daughters: a *wh*-interrogative expression (word or phrase), a non-subject interrogative (a clause type licensed by the Auxiliary-Initial construction and thus bearing the feature INV+), and a daughter of the type *nonverbal* (a nominal, adjectival, adverbial, gerundial or prepositional expression). The non-subject interrogative daughter contains an element on its GAP list that corresponds to the *wh*-filler daughter.

The feature SEM is used to represent the meaning elements in the construct and the feature. The relevant semantic values are the features INDEX, used to identify the referent of an expression, and FRAMES, the list of predications that jointly determine the meaning of each sign in the construct, including the mother sign. Frames are connected by identity relations among their arguments. As we see in Figure 1, the INDEX value of the *wh*-expression, *x*, is shared by the second argument of the Property frame, the *attribute* argument. It is also shared by the second argument of the Guess frame (the *guess* argument). These two frames are jointly used to represent the meaning of the daughter that corresponds to the proffer in SI. The *wh*-expression is also co-indexed with arguments in the FRAMES list of the mother: the *variable* argument of the Open Proposition frame and the *answer* argument of the Collateral Track frame, the latter of which represents the information unit that the speaker is attempting to retrieve at encoding time.

The feature CNTXT is used to represent the conditions governing appropriate use of the construction. Values of the CNTXT feature include INFO-STR (discourse-pragmatic constraints) and C-INDS, which specifies values for the features SPEAKER (SPKR), ADDRESSEE (ADDR), and UTTERANCE-TIME (UTT-TIME). As indicated, the *wh*-filler represents the focus of an SI construct, while the gapped finite-clause daughter represents the presupposition. In addition, as shown, the INDEX value of the TOPIC feature is equated with the INDEX value of the ENTITY within the Property frame, thereby representing the fact that the entity (or situation) whose appropriate categorization is at issue is either under discussion or contextually recoverable (e.g., that entity is the addressee). Crucially, the UTT-TIME value, the

index t , is also the index of an argument in the Collateral Track frame. This coindexation indicates that the time of the utterance is also the time of the speaker's effort to retrieve the variable x . That is, an SI utterance refers to a linguistic performance in which the speaker is engaged at utterance time.

The SI construction as depicted here says nothing about the use of this construction in acts of sarcastic pretense; we postulate that sarcastic SI is a (minimally) distinct subtype of the SI construct depicted in Figure 1. This subtype will differ only by the addition of frames representing the divergence between actual and ideal values of the variable. In the following section we will return to the scalar model of sarcastic meaning outlined in Section 1, apply it to examples of sarcastic SI and address the first of the two questions mentioned in Section 1: is SI one construction or two?

4. Sarcastic SI as construction

Sarcastic SI can be viewed as a kind of *Doppelurteil* or double judgment, as described by 19th century philosopher Anton Marty. In much the same way that topic-comment utterances involve two communicative acts — recognizing a particular entity as a locus of inquiry and attributing something to that entity (Lambrecht 1994: 139) — sarcastic SI makes a judgment about the present situation — it's the inverse of the expected situation — and offers an assessment of what makes it so: the value of the *wh*-variable (a variable over people, places, things, reasons, etc.) is extreme on some contextually available scale.

But of course SI does not take the canonical form of a judgment, sarcastic or otherwise. SI is not a declarative sentence pattern but instead, as we have seen, a species of *wh*-interrogative. As it happens, however, there is a sarcastic judgment type that SI resembles fairly closely: the sanction question, discussed in Section 1. Example (5), used there to illustrate this type of sarcastic speech act, is repeated here as (76):

(76) How long have we known each other?

The sarcastic context is that in which the speaker is deploring her husband's failure to recall her personal tastes. As discussed in Section 1, sanction questions cannot easily be accommodated by a theory of sarcasm based on false assertion, because questions, like other non-assertoric illocutionary acts, lack truth values. Recall that we adopt Camp's (2012) solution to this problem. According to Camp's model of sarcastic meaning inversion, examples like (76) evoke a situation in which they could sincerely be uttered, and thereby highlight a disparity between the ideal circumstances and the actual circumstances — two situations that “occupy opposite

extremes of an evoked scale” (Camp 2012: 598). Sarcastic utterances like (76) suggest that sarcasm is a form of presupposition violation: a felicitous utterance of (76) canonically presupposes a relationship of short duration, whereas the relationship is in fact a long-standing one.

How does SI fit this model of sarcasm? We propose that the interrogative body in SI is a sanction question akin to (76). The body and the proffer make distinct but related contributions to the sarcastic speech act. The interrogative body creates the sarcastic pretense: ‘I question who you are, what this is’, etc. In uttering the *wh*-interrogative portion, the speaker pretends to perform a search for the value of the variable in the open proposition presupposed by that interrogative, e.g., *you are x* in the case of the interrogative *What are you?* There is only one situation in which this interrogative could be uttered sincerely: that in which it is genuinely difficult to assign a value to the variable. The actual situation is one in which the value of the variable is patently obvious. For its part, the proffer not only conveys the presumed value of the variable but also provides the scalar structure within which the evoked and actual situations are diametrically opposed. The value of the variable is an extreme point on the evoked scale. The respective contributions of body and proffer to the sarcastic act are summarized in (77):

- (77) Body: Sanction question, e.g., *What are you?*
 Situation evoked by body: The appropriate categorization of situation/entity is unclear.
 Actual situation: The appropriate categorization of the situation/entity is patently obvious.
 Proffer: The proposed value of the variable in the actual situation, e.g., *Crazy?*

Crucially, this model is not one in which the proffer is a patently false diagnosis; the proffer is a valid, though extreme, assessment of the actual situation, so far as the speaker is concerned. The property in the proffer is, however, presented as incongruous, inasmuch as it is sufficiently extreme on the evoked scale to conflict with cultural, behavioral or other norms. Let us illustrate this model using two of the sarcastic SI examples introduced above:

- (78) NEIL McCAULEY: A man told me once: you want to make moves? Don't keep anything in your life you're not willing to walk out on in 30 seconds flat if you feel the heat around the corner. So if you're chasing me and you gotta move when I move, how do you expect to keep a family? LT. VINCENT HANNA: That's an interesting point. **What are you, a monk?** NEIL: No. (pause) I got a woman. (=28))

- (79) GIFFORD: You don't want to do the stuff you used to do late at night that you realize was really stupid. KOTB: Whenever anyone says to me, hey, let's have — look, we're going to have a dinner, it's going to be at 9, 8:30, 8.
GIFFORD: **What is this, Spain?** (= (32))

In (78), McCauley, a career criminal, asserts to Hanna, the detective pursuing him, that each of their avocations precludes family life. Hanna then engages in two forms of pretense: he pretends to consider McCauley's line of reasoning, and then pretends to ponder, by means of the SI utterance, what it implies about McCauley. The body, *what are you*, is a sanction question: it highlights a disparity between the evoked situation (that in which Hanna would be required to ponder the value of x in the open proposition *you are x*) and the actual one (in which that value is immediately obvious). The proffer, *a monk*, represents the value of the variable in the actual situation. It is an extreme value but, critically, not an absurd one: in this context, *monk* means 'celibate male' rather than 'cenobite'. From the extreme value denoted by the proffer, the interpreter can reconstruct the scale on which actual and evoked situations are antipodes. Let us say that the scale is a scale of male asceticism. The actual situation is one in which McCauley's extreme asceticism is self-evident to his interlocutor.

We can provide a similar analysis for (79). By uttering the interrogative body (*What is this?*), Gifford plays the role of a naïve interlocutor — one who could sincerely utter this question in the situation at hand, whose appropriate characterization is actually obvious. The proffer (*Spain?*) allows the interpreter to impose a scalar structure on the disparity between the evoked and actual situations. The actual situation, as represented by the dinner invitations being issued, is like that in Spain, where Spain is understood to represent an extreme with regard to the contextually evoked scale (say, lateness of the dinner hour or licentiousness of dining habits). As in the case of (78), the actual situation is that in which the variable's value is extreme enough to be self-evident. And again the proffer is sensible rather than absurd: it is not that Gifford misunderstands her geographic setting; instead a geographic region is used to describe the antipode of the evoked situation on the relevant scale.

In sum, sincere SI indexes linguistic performance (an ongoing retrieval effort aimed at resolving the value of a variable) while sarcastic SI pretends to do so. This account requires us to see the proffer of the SI utterance in a new light: the proffer is figurative, in the sense that it is either hyperbolic or metaphorical or both, but it is not in itself sarcastic. The proffer is intended as a valid diagnosis — of that state of affairs that the speaker finds deplorable.

In light of what we know about sarcastic pretense, it seems entirely predictable that the SI pattern can be used to point out a disparity between the actual

circumstances and the circumstances that would render a query (of whatever form) appropriate. After all, any question pattern is presumably usable as a sanction question. Thus, we must address the first question mentioned in the introduction: is the sarcastic use the product of a sarcastic SI construction or a general rhetorical strategy involving interrogative sentences? Our answer is that it may be both.

While the incongruity judgment associated with sarcastic instances of SI is calculable, it may not in fact require any inferential processing. It may instead represent what Morgan (1978) refers to as a *short-circuited conversational implicature*. While Morgan illustrates such implicatures with reference to fixed formulas like *Is the Pope Catholic?*, conventionalized conversational implicatures may also attach to open patterns. One such case, analyzed by Kay (1997), is that of a *why*-conditional sentence pattern that evokes a *modus tollens* inference pattern:

(80) If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? (= Kay 1997, (1))

By using the *why*-conditional, as in (80), the speaker rejects the truth of the proposition in the protasis (e.g., you're smart) by presupposing both the truth of the apodosis (e.g., you aren't rich) and an implicational stereotype (e.g., smart people get rich). In such cases, we can say, a rhetorical strategy (in this case, use of a *modus tollens* syllogism in order to cast doubt on the truth of a proposition in the common ground) has become part of the semiotic pole of a stipulated form. In a construction-based approach to grammar such a situation is not exotic; it merely represents the conventional association of a particular pragmatic force with a complex of syntactic, lexical and semantic conditions — a complex that might appear elsewhere in the grammar without this particular pragmatic force.

In this approach, distinct pragmatic forces or distinct interpretive conditions entail distinct constructions, even when the patterns in question share a form. Accordingly, Kay differentiates between the construction in (80) and a formally identical one, which he refers to as a performative conditional. On a performative-conditional reading, (80) means something like 'Accepting as fact that you are smart, I'm compelled to ask why you're not rich as well (and implicitly questioning whether smartness leads to being rich)'. He concludes that "a sentence of the *why*-conditional form either may convey a protasis-rejecting, *modus tollens*, interpretation via the *why*-conditional construction or may express a stereotype-questioning reading via the performative-conditional construction" (1997: 185). An SI utterance like *Where are you from, New York City?* may be ambiguous in a similar way: it can convey either an informed hunch about the addressee's provenance or a normative judgment that does not commit the speaker to the belief that the addressee is a New Yorker. If we apply Kay's reasoning to our own case, it would lead us to posit both a sincere SI construction and a sarcastic one. At the same time, we should be reluctant to propose 'constructional homonymy' unless we can show

that the two patterns exhibit divergent syntactic behaviors, just as we might use distinct combinatoric potentials to make the case that a given lexical form represents two or more distinct lexemes. As it happens, Kay demonstrates such a divergence in the case of the conditional patterns exemplified in (80). Kay observes that if we take a *why*-conditional sentence and embed the apodosis as the complement of *think* or *reason*, only the performative reading is possible (1997: 186):

(81) Why do you think you're not rich if you're so smart? (= Kay 1997, (37a))

(82) If you're so smart, what is the reason (why) you're not rich? (= Kay 1997, (37a))

Neither (81) nor (82) has the *modus tollens* interpretation, although the performative conditional reading (in which the protasis provides a "rhetorical justification" for the query) remains intact. Can we find a similar divergence in the case of the two readings of SI? The embedding test is problematic, in that sarcastic SI tokens can contain bridging verbs with second-person subjects:

(83) "Olivia! I said, 'No jumping!' **Who do you think you are — Queen of the Trampoline?**" (Ian Falconer, *Olivia Saves the Circus*)

But otherwise a bridging verb does appear to suppress a sarcastic reading of SI, leaving only a sincere one intact:

(84) What is this? A pop quiz? (both sincere and sarcastic readings available)

(85) What did they say this is? A pop quiz? (sincere reading only)

Another divergence concerns possible permutations of a nominal proffer. Only a sarcastic reading appears possible in (86–87):

(86) What are you, a New Yorker or something?

(87) What are you, some kind of New Yorker?

In these examples, the relevant nominal constructions (*some kind of NP*, *NP* or *something*) seem to invite metonymic readings of the relevant nominal (such that, e.g., *some kind of New Yorker* comes to stand for the bundle of properties associated with a resident of New York). Such a nominal expression may be read as denoting an antipode in a sarcastic SI utterance, but it has no apparent place within a sincere SI query.

In sum, it appears that although a sarcastic judgment can be inferred from the homologous pattern used for sincere utterances, divergent syntactic behaviors, as well as the principle 'different functions, different constructions' require us to

stipulate two SI constructions — one to which sarcastic meaning is conventionally attached.

We leave open the question of whether sarcastic and sincere uses of SI diverge prosodically. Intuition suggests that sarcastic SI productions feature a shorter pause between body and proffer than do sincere ones. This difference, if confirmed, might be attributable to speech-rate differences, as intuition also suggests that sarcastic SI productions have a faster overall tempo than sincere SI productions. At the same time, we note, based on qualitative analysis of Fisher audio files, that phonetic properties alone do not reliably distinguish sincere from sarcastic productions. For example, the sincere SI token in (37) above (*What are you, a tenor?*) sounds much like a sarcastic one; only conversational context makes clear that the utterance is not intended ironically.

5. Conclusion: Sarcasm as genre

In this paper, we have offered a model of what it means to speak sarcastically, based on Camp's 2012 proposal, in which a sarcastic utterance evokes a commitment with respect to a scale and thereby communicates an inversion of the evoked commitment. We have suggested that this sarcastic judgment is not merely a contextual computation but an encoded function — one that is readily captured by “a grammar in which pragmatic dedications participate in [the] repertoire of constructions” (Kay 1997: 188). We have focused on a single exemplar-based construction, SI, that appears to express the sarcastic judgment as a matter of linguistic convention. We have argued that while SI is an interactive resource, its primary function is not to restrict the hearer's response repertoire but rather to comment on ongoing performance by (a) indexing the user's effort to retrieve the value of a property variable in a contextually salient open proposition and (b) proposing the result of that effort. We provided an SBCG analysis of SI that captures its properties of form, meaning and use in a unified, single-format representation in which a construction is a description of a type of feature structure, a construct.

In concluding, let us turn to the broader question of whether sarcastic speech constitutes a genre. Sarcasm shares major features with a canonical literary genre, satire. Like satire, sarcasm is a comment on a disparity between things as they are and things as they should be. Like satire, sarcasm is allusive (it conveys something other than what it initially appears to) and a form of pretense: it evokes conditions that the current world does not meet. But while we can characterize a text as satirical, we would not generally characterize a text as sarcastic. Satire is a form of social criticism while sarcasm is typically *ad hoc* — an assessment of a situation that one happens to be monitoring at the moment. A sarcastic utterance is

typically unanswerable, inasmuch as it does not add to the conversational common ground, but it always answers to something. Sarcasm is not a text type, at least if a text type is taken as a label for a cluster of linguistic properties (Biber 1995; Biber et al. 2007). But, of course, genre is not simply the coalescence of certain contextual and linguistic features; it is also a socially relevant, and readily identifiable, linguistic routine. For Bakhtin (1986), such routines arise from the practice of *heteroglossia* or double voicing — incorporating and appropriating the speech of others. To paraphrase Bakhtin's famous dictum (1986: 143), we live in a world of others' words. On this understanding, to use language according to a genre is to quote someone engaged in the associated activity — whether it is writing a diary entry, giving directions or telling a joke. Genre is not a text type but a practice — the practice of implementing a style, a set of presuppositions and a set of referring practices that are in part alien to the language user. According to this conception, the words and constructions that we select when enacting a speech style are not taken from a neutral linguistic repository but rather from prior utterances. This suggests that genres do not appear to users as catalogs of text features. Rather, genres emerge from practice: a genre is the label given to linguistic strategies that we enact when evoking communicative routines that others have performed in similar situations.

How do irony and its congener, sarcasm, fit into this picture? Acts of linguistic pretense appear to be archetypal instances of double voicing: to speak ironically or sarcastically is to strike a pose — to act like someone for whom this utterance is the right choice at this moment. As Bakhtin noticed (1986: 189), however, one need not perform double voicing with a straight face: a speaker can “go along with the momentum of the second voice” or dissociate from it in some way (Rampton 1995: 223). In the latter case, the addressee may divine subversive intent, and recognize the act as ironic or sarcastic (Coupland 2007: 102). Acts of ironic pretense, as it has been suggested, are attempts to mock the attitude of someone who would use the relevant utterance sincerely — or the assumptions of an addressee who might receive the act as sincere. In this respect, an ironic utterance appears to evoke a genre rather than instantiate a genre. But in the realm of genre, sincerity does not count for all that much. A genre performance like proposing a toast or writing a sympathy note counts as such whether it is sincere or not. What matters is that the performance constitutes a recognizable instantiation of the routine. Language users can spot genre performances when they witness them. It takes more skill to detect polarity shifts — cases in which the genre performance is laden with a negative evaluation — and perhaps even more skill to successfully signal a polarity shift while also engaged in a genre performance. It is perhaps because polarity shifts are hard that users have come to rely on constructions that signal, as a matter of linguistic convention, ironic or sarcastic dissociation.

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