

Korean A-not-A Questions: Is it neutral or not?

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Background

ANAQs

A-not-A Questions (ANAQs) are Polar Alternative Questions (PAQs), featuring both a positive predicate and its negative counterpart within the question (see 1; Ceong 2011). Despite functioning like Yes-No Questions (YNQs), ANAQs disallow a simple “yes/no” answer. Instead, the answer must feature either the positive (affirmative) or negative (non-affirmative) predicate presented. This applies in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Korean (Law 2001; Li & Thompson 1981; Ceong 2011).

(1) 너 파리에 가 안가?
you Paris-LOC¹ go not-go
‘Are you going to Paris or not?’

ANAQs in Mandarin and Cantonese have neutral presuppositions, where the inquirer does not assume the truth value of the proposition asked (Law 2001; Li & Thompson 1981).

KANAQs

Through the native intuition of our first researcher, it was proposed that Korean ANAQs (KANAQs) may not be presuppositionally neutral, particularly in the past tense (see 2). This proposal is bolstered by the fact that a subset of Mandarin ANAQs, called BNBQs, allow for a preference towards an affirmative answer (Hagstrom 2006).

(2) 너 했어 안 했어?
you do-PST² not do-PST
‘Did you do it or not?’

Bias in KANAQs

Since we are questioning the neutrality of KANAQs, we first use the broader term ‘bias’ to refer to the posited non-neutrality of ANAQs in general.

A biased question “conveys an expectation, or bias, on the part of the [inquirer] toward a specific answer to the question” (Asher & Reese, 2007).

Preliminary elicitation with a native speaker of Korean points to a split in the biases present in KANAQs: (i) epistemic bias, and (ii) emotive bias, as defined below:

- i. Epistemic Bias:
The inquirer is basing their bias on non-tangible evidence, i.e., the inquirer believes within reason for one alternative to be true.
- ii. Emotive Bias:
The inquirer is basing their bias on emotion, i.e., the inquirer hopes/trusts one alternative to be true.

Classification of the assumptions in KANAQs

There are inconsistencies in the literature regarding the type of implicit assumptions present in ANAQs. While some use the term presupposition (Law 2001), others use the term implicature (Wu 1997).

We determined the identified biases in KANAQs are presuppositions or conversational implicatures, using the reinforcement without redundancy and cancellation tests (Birner 2012).

Table 1. Status of KANAQ biases as presuppositions and conversational implicatures

Biases	Tests	
	Reinforcement without Redundancy	Cancellation
Epistemic	X	N/A
Emotive	✓	N/A

Conclusion:

- Epistemic Bias → presupposition
- Emotive Bias → conversational implicature

Methodology

We elicited data from a native speaker of Korean (Korean-English bilingual). The consultant was presented with nine epistemic and emotive bias combinations and asked to judge the felicity of using an ANAQ in those contexts. Two regular verbs in their past tense form, 샀어 ‘bought’ and 먹었어 ‘ate’, were tested.

The three axes for creating these combinations were:

- I. Positive Bias:
The inquirer expects an affirmative answer from the addressee.
- II. Negative bias:
The inquirer expects a non-affirmative answer from the addressee.
- III. Neutral Bias:
The context does not set up expectations towards receiving either an affirmative or non-affirmative answer from the addressee.

Below is an example context and datum.

(3) Neutral Epistemic Bias with Positive Emotive Bias:

Context and ANAQ:
You live in an apartment with a new roommate named Alvin. It’s around 8:00 PM and you’re craving some ice cream from your favourite ice cream store. You don’t feel like going out alone and Alvin happens to be in his room. You don’t know whether Alvin has had dinner yet. Hoping that he has so you can go get dessert together, you head to his room and ask:

Alvin, 저녁 먹었어 안 먹었어?
Alvin dinner eat-PST not eat-PST
‘Alvin, did you or did you not eat dinner?’

Consultant’s Alternative:
혹시 저녁 먹었어?
perhaps dinner eat-PST
‘By chance, have you eaten dinner?’

Results and Discussion

Table 2. The felicity of KANAQs in epistemic and emotive bias combination contexts

NOTE: A question mark ‘?’ represents combinations where the results differed for the two contexts tested.

		Epistemic		
		Positive	Negative	Neutral
Emotive	Positive	X	✓	?
	Negative	?	X	✓
	Neutral	?	X	X

Discussion

First elicitation impressions: (not included)

- Certain contexts exhibit a preference for using the YNQ form when asking a question.
- The consultant stated the reasoning to be the “heavy-handedness” of ANAQ forms and may sound rude.

Results

- Dislike of ANAQs in contexts with the same emotive and epistemic biases.
- Any combination of epistemic bias with neutral emotive bias were judged to be infelicitous in the majority of contexts - five out of six.
- The combination of neutral epistemic and neutral emotive biases, represents the neutrality of Mandarin and Cantonese ANAQs, is judged infelicitous.
- The felicity of KANAQs in the neutral epistemic and neutral emotive bias combination supports our claim that past tense KANAQs are indeed biased.

Further Research

Further research may benefit from testing more verbs, the effects of speaker-hearer relationships, and the effects of prosodic changes to substantiate the above conclusions. The neutrality of Korean ANAQs both in different tenses and of different types should be tested.

References

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