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A Study of WH Question–Answer Constructions: Evidence from *All Her Fault*

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ABSTRACT : *This paper investigates the structural and functional characteristics of English WH question–answer constructions within dialogue. Framed within Wang and Zeng's Event-domain Cognitive Model and the Schema-Instance model, this study examines subtitle data from All Her Fault (Season 1, Episode 1). The analysis employs LancsBox to identify and examine all WH interrogatives and their corresponding responses. The study applies the concept of semantic resonance, categorized into complete, redundant, partial, zero, and multiple types, to analyze how answers inherit and instantiate the semantic schemas projected by questions. The findings demonstrate that WH question–answer constructions function as dialogically emergent units. The study argues that WH question–answer constructions are best understood as intersubjectively co-constructed cognitive-pragmatic units rather than purely sentence-level grammatical structures.*

KEYWORDS - *cooperative principle, semantic resonance, WH question–answer construction*

I. Introduction

As one of the most fundamental and frequent linguistic phenomena in everyday communication, interrogative constructions have long attracted scholarly attention across diverse theoretical traditions. Among these, WH questions occupy a particularly significant position, as they serve to probe specific elements within an event domain, requesting information about participants, locations, times, manners, or reasons.

Traditional approaches to interrogatives have tended to focus on isolated sentence-level properties. Formal linguistics, for instance, has extensively examined the syntactic transformations involved in WH-movement and the logical forms of interrogative sentences [1]. Speech act theory, following Searle [2] and Austin [3], has classified questions as a type of directive speech act, emphasizing their illocutionary force in requesting information. Grice's[4] Cooperative Principle has provided valuable insights into the pragmatic expectations governing question–answer exchanges, particularly regarding relevance and informativeness. While these foundational contributions have significantly advanced our understanding of interrogatives, they have largely treated questions as isolated utterances produced by individual speakers.

More recent developments in discourse-functional linguistics have begun to address this limitation. Conversation analysts have demonstrated through meticulous empirical work that questions and answers are normatively organized as adjacency pairs, with the design of a question strongly constraining the form and content of the response [5-8]. This line of research has revealed that question–answer sequences are not merely sequences of two independent utterances but constitute a single, coherent interactional unit. Parallel developments in dialogic syntax, particularly the work of Du Bois [9], have shown that grammatical structure emerges through dialogic engagement, with speakers selectively reusing and adapting prior morphosyntactic resources across turns to create structural resonance and interactional cohesion.

Building on these foundations, cognitive linguistics has offered additional tools for understanding how questions structure meaning. Construction grammar [10] treats linguistic patterns as form–meaning pairings,

suggesting that WH interrogatives are constructions that profile schematic semantic structures requiring instantiation. Cognitive grammar [11] further illuminates how interrogatives reflect conceptualization processes such as figure–ground alignment and prominence, with the WH-word foregrounding a particular element within an event domain as epistemically inaccessible or interactionally salient. These cognitive approaches, however, have not been systematically integrated with insights from dialogic and interactional linguistics.

The present study applies this integrated theoretical framework to an empirical analysis of WH question–answer constructions. Specifically, it examines data drawn from the English subtitle file of All Her Fault (Season 1, Episode 1), a psychological thriller by Andrea Mara that depicts the emotional turmoil following a child's disappearance in a Dublin suburb. This narrative context is particularly rich for investigating WH questions.

The study addresses three interconnected research questions: (1) How do WH question–answer constructions exhibit structural projection–completion relations across turns? (2) In what ways do answers inherit and instantiate the semantic schemas projected by WH questions, and what patterns of semantic resonance emerge?

The paper is organized as follows. Section II reviews the theoretical foundations of the study, elaborating the three interrelated strands of dialogic syntax, semantic-constructional inheritance, and cognitive-pragmatic intersubjectivity. Section III presents the analytic framework, introducing the concept of semantic resonance and its five subtypes with illustrative examples. Section IV describes the data and methodology, including the corpus, analytical tools, and coding procedures. Section V presents the analysis of WH question–answer sequences organized by question word, examining how each type manifests different patterns of semantic resonance within the narrative context. Section VI concludes the study by summarizing key findings, discussing theoretical implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

II. Literature Review

Building on the dialogic-syntactic perspective, existing scholarship on WH interrogatives and question–answer constructions can be systematically organized into three interrelated strands: (1) dialogic-syntactic alignment, (2) semantic–constructional inheritance, and (3) cognitive-pragmatic intersubjectivity. Together, these strands demonstrate that WH constructions are not merely sentence-level interrogatives but interactionally emergent structures distributed across turns.

First, from a dialogic-syntactic perspective, grammar is treated as fundamentally interactional. John W. Du Bois [9] argues that syntax extends beyond the clause and emerges through dialogic engagement. His notion of syntactic resonance captures how speakers selectively reuse and adapt prior morphosyntactic structures across turns, thereby creating structural alignment and interactional cohesion. In question–answer sequences, WH interrogatives project a structural template that constrains the grammatical design of the response. The answer turn often mirrors, elaborates, or modifies the syntactic frame introduced by the question, demonstrating varying degrees of resonance. Within conversation analysis, this projection–completion organization is consistent with findings that responses are normatively shaped by the design of the initiating action. For instance, Tanya Stivers [7] shows that question design strongly influences response format and that "fitted" responses are interactionally preferred. Similarly, John Heritage [8] emphasizes how turn design, including prefacing and structural formatting, indexes stance and shapes subsequent uptake. These studies collectively support the view that WH interrogatives function as projecting devices that establish syntactic expectations for the next turn. Building on this dialogic foundation, Wang Wei [12] integrates the Event-domain Cognitive Model (ECM), the prominence principle, and the schema–instance view to explain how WH interrogatives construct a schematic frame within an event domain. In this account, the interrogative introduces a structural schema with an open slot, while the answer instantiates slot with a specific value. The degree of syntactic resonance, ranging from full structural parallelism to partial reformulation, reflects different levels of interactional cooperation. This model therefore bridges conversation analysis and cognitive linguistics by conceptualizing question–answer pairs as structurally coupled units.

Second, from a semantic–constructional perspective, WH interrogatives are analyzed as constructions requiring value assignment. Drawing on Adele Goldberg's [10] construction grammar, Wang [13] proposes the concept of semantic resonance to capture how answers inherit and instantiate the semantic components encoded in the interrogative frame. Under this view, a WH question profiles a schematic semantic structure in which one

participant role or event element is left unspecified. The response provides semantic filling through instantiation, and the degree of inheritance may be complete, partial, redundant, or absent. These patterns correspond to different levels of dialogic cooperation. Full semantic inheritance reflects alignment, whereas divergence or non-inheritance may signal resistance, irony, or conflict. While H. Paul Grice's [4] cooperative principles account for expectations of relevance and informativeness in such exchanges, Wang [13] argues that Grice's framework primarily addresses pragmatic inference and overlooks the structural dimension of resonance at the syntactic and constructional levels. Thus, semantic resonance supplements classical pragmatics.

Third, from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, WH constructions are understood as intersubjective resources that encode stance and interpersonal positioning. Within Ronald Langacker's [11] cognitive grammar, linguistic structures reflect conceptualization processes such as figure–ground alignment and prominence. A WH interrogative does not merely request information; it profiles a particular element within an event domain as epistemically inaccessible or interactionally salient. In naturally occurring discourse, WH forms frequently function as challenges, accusations, or expressions of disbelief rather than neutral information-seeking devices. Developing this insight, Wang [14] formulates an Event Domain–based Schema–Instance (ESI) model, arguing that pragmatic meaning emerges from the coupling of interlocutors' cognitive event domains. Degrees of interpersonal cooperation correspond to degrees of information resonance, revealing that WH question–answer constructions are inherently intersubjective and dynamically negotiated.

Taken together, these three strands form a coherent analytical progression. The dialogic-syntactic approach foregrounds structural projection and alignment across turns. The semantic–constructional approach explains how meaning is inherited within schematic frames. And the cognitive-pragmatic approach situates these mechanisms within broader processes of conceptualization and intersubjective negotiation. This integrated perspective demonstrates that WH interrogatives are multifunctional constructions operating simultaneously at structural, semantic, and interpersonal levels, thereby providing a comprehensive theoretical foundation for analyzing WH question–answer sequences in authentic discourse.

III. Analytic Framework

Semantic resonance refers to the phenomenon where the answerer (A) responds to the questioner (Q) by inheriting and instantiating the semantic schema provided in the WH-question, forming a schema-instance relationship between the two utterances [12-14]. Based on memory principles in psychology and inheritance views in Cognitive Construction Grammar, semantic resonance captures how A remembers and transmits the semantic content of Q's question, ranging from complete correspondence to various forms of non-correspondence.

3.1 Complete Resonance

Complete resonance occurs when the answerer fully inherits and responds to every part of the questioner's utterance, creating a one-to-one correspondence in both words and information [12-14]. In this type, A remembers and transmits all components of Q's question, including the WH-focus and background semantic domain, without any omission or addition. For example, in the exchange, "What are you going to drink at the party?", "I am going to drink wine at the party," every element from the question finds its counterpart in the answer. This type of resonance also extends to temporal aspects, where the tense used in the question is consistently maintained in the answer. Complete resonance represents the ideal of Grice's Cooperative Principle, demonstrating full collaboration between interlocutors at the semantic level.

3.2 Redundant Resonance

Redundant resonance describes situations where the answerer provides more information than minimally required by the question, thereby violating Grice's quantity maxim but often serving specific communicative purposes [12-14]. While A successfully instantiates the WH-focus, they continue to elaborate with additional details. This type of resonance frequently manifests as sentence groups, as seen in examples like, "When did you first see the place?" "In April of 97, I asked Marco the cheese man if he knew of a house in the area. He said this was for sale. I came..." Although technically violating the quantity maxim, redundant resonance often functions as a conversational strategy to help justify answers or preempt follow-up questions.

3.3 Partial Resonance

Partial resonance occurs when the answerer inherits only part of the questioner's information, selectively responding to either the WH-focus or the background semantic domain, but not both [12-14]. This type can be further divided into focus resonance, where A responds directly to the WH-word while omitting repetition of background information, and domain resonance, where A responds only to the background domain while ignoring the WH-focus. Examples of focus resonance include concise answers like "Where do you keep your Oscars?" "In the bathroom," which efficiently provides the requested information without repeating the question's background. Domain resonance, conversely, appears in exchanges like "What are you going to be doing?" "We're going..." where A responds only to the background domain while leaving the WH-focus uninstantiated. Partial resonance reflects varying degrees of cooperation between interlocutors.

3.4 Zero Resonance

Zero resonance, also called implicit resonance, describes situations where the inheritance relationship between constructions is severed, and the answerer adopts an uncooperative stance by failing to provide the information sought by the questioner [12-14]. This category encompasses several subtypes: mood resonance, where A responds only with exclamatory sounds like "Yeah" or "Hmm" without providing semantic content; negation of question itself, where A challenges the legitimacy of the question as in "That's not a good question"; negation of answerer himself, where A admits inability to answer, such as "I don't have any idea"; repetitive resonance, where A merely repeats the question or parts of it without adding information; fuzzy resonance, where A provides only vague or approximate information; and transfer resonance, where A shifts focus to evaluating the question itself or redirects to different semantic domains. Zero resonance represents various degrees of non-cooperation.

3.5 Multiple Resonance

Multiple resonance refers to situations where the answerer integrates several resonance types simultaneously in response to a single question, creating a complex semantic relationship between question and answer [12-14]. Based on the multiple inheritance principle in Construction Grammar, A may combine complete, redundant, partial, and zero resonance strategies within one response. For instance, in dialogue "Whom do you want to meet?" "No, I have not thought over this, and I will be misleading you if I said I had one person I would like to meet. What is immediately my first priority is to meet with the national representative of the ANC in Lusaka," the answer begins with mood resonance, employs negation of self, partially resonates with the background domain, provides redundant information, and finally achieves focus resonance. Multiple resonance demonstrates the complexity and diversity of answerers' cognitive strategies in responding to WH-questions and highlighting the rich interplay between different resonance types in natural conversation.

IV. Analytic Method

LancsBox is an integrated corpus analysis software suite developed at Lancaster University to facilitate the exploration of large-scale language data. Designed to support both quantitative and qualitative linguistic research, LancsBox incorporates multiple tools, such as KWIC concordance, collocation analysis, frequency profiling, and dispersion visualization. Its modules GraphColl for collocation networks and KWIC for concordance retrieval, enable researchers to examine lexical patterns, phraseological structures, and discourse features across corpora. By combining statistical measures with dynamic visualizations, LancsBox enhances the interpretability of corpus findings.

All Her Fault is a psychological thriller by Andrea Mara that delves into the chaos following a child's disappearance in a Dublin suburb. The story kicks off with a mother's worst fear realized, but quickly unravels into a complex web of half-truths and hidden lives. As the narrative shifts between the parents, the last person to see the child, and the residents of the neighborhood, the reader is left guessing who can be trusted. It's a compulsive page-turner about the secrets we keep from our spouses, our neighbors, and ourselves.

The data analyzed in this study are drawn from the English subtitle file of All Her Fault (Season 1, Episode 1). Subtitles approximate spontaneous spoken interaction while retaining clarity and completeness. Seven words initiate WH interrogative are searched and checked in the subtitle of All Her Fault Episode 1 with the assistance of Lancsbox. Besides, all WH interrogatives appearing in the episode were identified and paired with their immediate responses. The analysis proceeds by examining structural alignment between WH interrogative and

response, identifying semantic variable–value relations, and interpreting pragmatic functions within contextual interaction.

Table 1 Basic Description about the Corpus

Category	Description
Token	5369
Type	992

V. Discussion

Building on the quantitative distribution presented in Table 2, this section offers an analysis of WH question–answer constructions in All Her Fault, organized by question word. Each subsection examines how a particular WH-question type functions within the framework of the Event-domain Cognitive Model (ECM), with particular attention to the patterns of semantic resonance. Drawing on the resonance typology, the analysis traces how answerers inherit and instantiate the semantic schemas projected by questions, revealing the varying degrees of cognitive cooperation and interpersonal alignment across different interactional contexts.

Table 2 Frequency of Wh-question with Different Question Words

Question word	Frequency
What	41
Who	9
Where	7
How	7
Why	5
When	1
Which	1

5.1 What-Questions

In the framework of the Event-Domain Cognitive Model (ECM), what-questions serve as the primary linguistic tool for probing the participant (B) element of an event. When a speaker asks a what-question, they are typically seeking to identify an object, a concept, or the substance of an action, thereby activating a semantic schema that the answerer (A) is expected to instantiate. For example, in the dialogue, “What’s the name of the school?” the questioner provides a schematic frame, an event involving the identity of an educational institution, and the answerer fills the what-slot with a specific instance, “Bishop’s Academy.” This creates complete semantic resonance, where the question’s focus is directly instantiated by the answer. In another instance, when a parent anxiously asks, “What happened? What’s going on?” the expected response would be a specific account of the event. However, in cases of redundant resonance, the answerer provides more information than strictly required. For example, when asked “What can you tell us about your nanny?” the response, “She’s 21, she’s been with us about three months. She’s quiet, shy, sweet.” not only answers the question but elaborates with descriptive details, thereby exceeding the maxim of quantity in Grice’s Cooperative Principle but enriching the dialogue with contextual depth. In a moment of crisis, the question “What do you mean, he’s not with you?” expresses confusion and urgency, seeking clarification of a troubling situation. Thus, what-questions are not merely requests for labels but are enrichment for an event-domain with specific content.

5.2 Who-Questions

Who-questions target the human participant (B) in an event, often focusing on identity, responsibility, or agency. The question “Who picked up my son from school?” is perhaps the most critical question in the entire narrative, as the answerer failure to provide results in zero resonance, heightening the emotional tension of the missing child scenario. According to Wang and Zeng [12], who-questions are less frequent but are pragmatically

powerful, as they often involve issues of blame, trust, and social roles. When a mother asks, "Who sent you the text?" the answerer provides full resonance: "A mom from the school, Jenny." This response fills the who-slot with a specific individual, creating a complete coupling of event domains. Later, when the same question is repeated in confusion, "Who sent me that text?", it reflects the realization that the original text may have been fraudulent. In another instance, when asked "So, who do you work for?" the answer "Jenny Kaminski." provides direct identification. However, when the question "For who?" is asked about nostalgia, it receives an evasive response: "I don't quite know what you're trying to say." This constitutes negative resonance, a subtype of zero resonance where the answerer avoids direct engagement. Thus, who-questions reveal the social architecture of dialogue, where identity and accountability are constantly negotiated.

5.3 Where-Questions

Where-questions target the spatial location of an event or participant, forming a crucial part of the background domain of ECM. The question "Where is he?" is repeated with urgency throughout the missing child crisis. When a mother asks, "Brian! Where's Milo? Is he here? Is he with you?" the rapid succession of questions reveals her desperate hope that the child might be found. The answerer's failure to provide a location results in zero resonance, as seen in the fragmented responses: "I don't know where my son is." Later, when the question becomes more aggressive, "Where the fuck is the detective?", it reflects frustration with the institutional response to the crisis. According to Wang and Zeng [13], where-questions often elicit full resonance when the location is known, but in the context of crisis, they frequently meet with zero or partial resonance, reflecting the breakdown of cooperative communication. In a lighter moment, the question "Where are you?" addressed to a child seeks spatial grounding for a routine parental task. This contrast illustrates how spatial grounding is not merely a factual matter but is deeply embedded in the emotional and relational dynamics of the dialogue.

5.4 How-Questions

How questions seek information about the manner, method, or circumstances under which an event unfolds. In the dialogue "How are you?" the questioner initiates a social encounter, and the answerer responds with a reciprocal greeting: "Hi, Sarah! Hi." This exchange exemplifies social resonance. In a more content-focused interaction, when asked "How did you meet Ms. Garcia?" the answerer provides a full semantic resonance: "Through a website. A nanny service. All the moms use it." Here, the answer directly instantiates the how-slot with the manner of meeting. Similarly, when the questioner asks "How was that playdate arranged?" the answerer provides a detailed narrative: "I received a text from one of the moms. Jenny Kaminski. She was wondering if Milo wanted to play with her son Jacob..." This response demonstrates redundant resonance. In some cases, how-questions may trigger zero resonance, such as when a character exclaims, "How does he not know?" This rhetorical question expects no answer. Thus, how-questions are not only about retrieving procedural information but also about negotiating social bonds and shared understanding.

5.5 Why-Questions

Why-questions are fundamentally causal in nature, targeting the motivation or reason behind an action or state within the ECM. In the dialogue "Why would her number not be working?" the questioner presents a puzzling event and invites the answerer to provide a causal explanation. The tentative response, "Well, could she have gotten a new one?", offers a possible reason, creating partial resonance. According to Wang and Zeng [14], such questions often elicit partial or zero semantic resonance, as the answerer may not have access to the reason or may choose to avoid direct causation. In another instance, the investigator asks, "Why didn't you just check the number?" expressing frustration at a missed opportunity for verification. This question implies negligence and seeks justification, though the response is cut short: "You just check it, okay?" Perhaps the most poignant why-question in the dialogue comes from a parent's desperate speculation: "Well, if someone did take Milo Irvine, why would they pretend to be you?" This question probes the kidnapper's motive. Such questions reveal not only causal structures but also the boundaries of shared knowledge.

5.6 When-Questions

When-questions serve to locate an event within a temporal frame, thereby activating the time-related features of the action (A) in the ECM. As Wang and Zeng [12] note, the auxiliary verb in WH-questions often carries the temporal reference, and when-questions explicitly foreground this dimension. The question "When do we hear?" seeks temporal specification about receiving news of the missing child. "It's usually within the first 24 hours. But there's no exact rules to these kinds of things." This response exemplifies partial resonance, leaving the exact time unspecified while offering a general guideline. According to Wang and Zeng [14], such answers reflect a local coupling of event domains, where the answerer cooperates but with limited precision due to the inherent uncertainty of the situation. The use of when-questions in this context highlights the agonizing uncertainty faced by parents of missing children.

5.7 Which-Questions

Which-questions presuppose a closed set of options and ask the answerer to select one, thereby engaging both the participant (B) and the categorization principle within the ECM. "Which one is yours?" "Milo. Irvine. ", the answerer provides a minimal but fully resonant response, directly instantiating the which-slot with the child's name. According to Wang and Zeng [14], which-questions often elicit focal resonance, as the answerer need only provide the specific item. This economy of language aligns with Grice's maxim of manner. The directness of the question and answer reflects the gravity of the situation, where clarity and precision are paramount. Thus, which-questions test the shared knowledge between interlocutors and the clarity of the referential frame.

5.8 Summary

Across all WH-question types in the provided dialogue files, the theoretical framework developed by Wang and Zeng [12-14] reveals a complex interplay between cognition, syntax, and social cooperation. The ECM model grounds each question in a structured event domain, while the schema-instance relationship explains how answers either fulfill or deviate from expectations. The dialogic syntax approach highlights the formal parallelism between questions and answers, and the semantic resonance framework categorizes the degrees of cooperation. In the missing child narrative in *All Her Fault*, WH-questions become instruments of desperation: "What happened? Who took him? Where is he? Why would someone do this?" The answers, fragmented, evasive, or simply unknown, create a pattern of zero resonance that mirrors the agonizing uncertainty of the situation. Ultimately, WH-questions are not mere information-seeking devices but are deeply embedded in the negotiation of meaning, identity, and social reality in dialogue.

VI. Conclusion

This study has examined WH question–answer constructions in dialogue through an integrated theoretical framework combining dialogic syntax, construction grammar, and cognitive pragmatics. Drawing on corpus data from *All Her Fault* (Episode 1), the analysis has applied the Event-domain Cognitive Model (ECM) and the concept of semantic resonance to investigate how WH interrogatives and their responses function as dialogically emergent units in interaction. By integrating multiple theoretical traditions within a unified analytical framework, it has shown that these constructions are not merely devices for seeking and providing information but are deeply involved in the ongoing negotiation of meaning, identity, and social reality in human dialogue. Future research may extend the analysis to larger corpora or compare scripted and spontaneous dialogue to further explore the dynamics of dialogic emergence.

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