



ESSENTIAL ASPECTS OF 'INDIRECT QUESTIONS' FOR ESL\EFL STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

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ABSTRACT

Indirect questions (embedded questions) are considered one of the challenging grammar points for many ESL/EFL students. One of the issues for students is the difference between the complementizers whether and if which have been discussed by researchers from different perspectives. Students also find it difficult to distinguish the conditional if and the interrogative if. Another fact which makes this grammar point for the students problematic is how indirect questions are used in spoken and written language in terms of word order. Students also sometimes find it hard to distinguish nominal relative clauses and subordinate open interrogatives semantically and syntactically. This paper addresses the most important aspects of indirect questions, most of which are not discussed in course books.

Keywords: complementizers whether and if, conditional and interrogative if, nominal relative clause

INTRODUCTION

• *Overview of Indirect Questions*

In order to delve into the concept of 'Indirect Questions', we need to understand how they are formulated. The main component of indirect questions are interrogative clauses. Biber (1999) claims that interrogative clauses tend to occur in dialogue situations and they are frequent only in conversation and fiction. He then divides independent interrogative clauses into three group "wh-questions, yes/no-questions, and alternative questions. Their basic uses are to supply missing information (wh-questions), to invite the addressee to indicate whether a proposition is true or not (yes/no-questions), and to select among alternatives presented (alternative questions)." (p. 203). To explain the concept of indirect question, Huddleston & Pullum (2002) employ the notion of illocutionary force and believe that in indirect questions illocutionary force is very often conveyed indirectly rather than directly. They explain this through an example, "Do you know what time it is?" and explain that two likely contexts can be interpreted from this question based on the illocutionary acts, "one directly (a question as to whether you know what time it is), and one indirectly (a question as to what time it is, or where it is addressed to a child to go to bed)" (p. 861) and they then refer to indirect illocutionary acts as indirect speech acts.

✓ *Classifying Embedded Questions*

An indirect question (or embedded question) is so called because the utterer is typically not asking a question but reporting a real or hypothetical question, while unembedded questions (or direct questions) intend to ask questions. In order to describe the difference between embedded and unembedded questions, Huddleston & Pullum (2002) compare them in terms of

information questions and direction questions using some examples. “*I asked whether she told him* reports my asking the information question ‘Did she tell him?’, while *I asked whether to tell him* reports my asking the direction question ‘Shall I tell him?’” (p.878). As Table 1 shows, they then use this strategy to classify embedded questions from two dimensions (one dimension is information questions and direction question and the other one is between polar, alternative, and variable questions). The latter dimension (i.e. polar, alternative, and variable) illustrates three ways that indirect questions can be formulated. They use this classification to explain how these dimensions cut across each other and yield six categories:

Table 1: Dimensions of Indirect Questions

	Information	Direction
Polar	I don’t know <i>if it is possible.</i>	I don’t know <i>whether to tell them.</i>
Alternative	I don’t know <i>if it’s true or not.</i>	I don’t know <i>whether to go or not.</i>
Variable	I don’t know <i>what he wants.</i>	I don’t know <i>what to do.</i>

They believe that we can use this classification to understand the different forms of embedded questions regarding information and direction questions, “Variable questions are expressed by open interrogatives, polar and alternative questions by closed interrogatives, with alternative questions further marked by or-coordination. Information questions are expressed by finite clauses, direction questions by infinitival.” (p. 975). Carter & McCarthy (2006) also aim at this concept and mention reporting polar and alternative questions through examples, “She took his hand and asked whether he had slept and I asked her if she was full-time or just part-time”. (p. 805) Carter & McCarthy (2006) explain that why we use infinitival for the direction questions, “Where the subject of the reporting clause and the reported clause are the same, an infinitive construction may be used in the reported clause”.

Different Perspectives about Complementizers Whether vs. If in Embedded Questions

One of the challenges for students is to have a comprehensive source providing different perspectives about complementizers *whether* vs. *if* in embedded questions. Table 2 can be used as a resource for ESL\EFL teachers and students who would like to broaden their horizon in this concept. This table also provides the list of authors who investigated the difference between these complementizers along with their further explanations.

Table 2: Different Perspectives about Complementizers whether vs. if in Embedded Questions

Whether vs. If	Examples	Authors and their explanations
1. Whether can be followed by ‘or not’ (<i>if</i> cannot)	We do not ask whether or not an axiom is ‘true’.	Biber (1999) Quirk (1985), Carter & Mc Carthy (2006), and Huddleston & Pullum, (2002) agree that <i>if</i> cannot be followed directly by <i>or not</i> , but <i>or not</i> can be postposed (i.e. he didn’t say if he’ll be staying or not).
2. Both are frequently used with a negative in the main clause.	I don’t care if/whether you’re ...	Biber (1999)



3. <i>Whether</i> is used when the interrogative clause is infinitival	She can't make her mind whether to accept.	Huddleston & Pullum (2002) Quirk (1985) Swan (2005)
4. <i>Whether</i> is used to be the complement of a preposition	It all depends on whether they <i>will</i> support us.	Quirk (1985) Swan (2005) Huddleston & Pullum (2002)
5. <i>Whether</i> is used in formal style	We discussed whether we should close the shop. (More normal than We discussed <i>if</i> ..)	Huddleston & Pullum (2002) Quirk (1985) Swan (2005)
6. Both can be repeated when the unit is a full clause, but when the second unit is an abbreviated form, the subordinators is not repeated.	I can't find out whether/if the flight has been delayed or whether/if it has been cancelled.	Quirk (1985) also states "Repetition is optional with to- infinitive clauses' and continues 'But the subordinator is not repeated if the second clause is abbreviated by the omission of the infinitival to'

Reflections on Table 2

As we can see from Table 2, there are some specific rules and conditions than should be considered when choosing between these two complementizers in indirect questions. Teachers should be aware of these possibilities when teaching this grammar point, especially in advanced level, since most of the course books and teaching materials only provide basic rules. Although this table provides useful information, it is not exhaustive. One of the ways for both teachers and students for further investigation is analyzing authentic examples containing these complementizers through some corpora such as Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

Conditional if vs. Interrogative if (in direct questions)

Another issue which might cause confusion for ESL\EFL learners when discussing indirect questions is how *if* used as a conditional *if* and interrogative *if*. As Huddleston and Pullum (2002) state, "*If* is used as a marker of conditionality as well as of closed interrogative clause type- and there may be ambiguity between the two constructions". (p. 975). Huddleston and Pullum (2002) claim that for each use of *if*, two interpretations can be made. Example (1) and (2) below help to illustrate their point:

- (1) I won't tell her *if you bring it back today*.
- (2) Let me know *if you need any help*.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002) continue:

"In (1) with conditional *if* the meaning is if you bring it back today then I won't tell her (something contextually retrievable, e.g. that you borrowed her ring). With interrogative *if* the



meaning is I won't tell her whether you bring it back today. In (2) there is little pragmatic difference between the two interpretations: In the conditional interpretation, I am asking you to tell me that you need help if you do, and in the interrogative interpretation to tell me whether or not you need help". (p. 975)

Quirk (1985) brings up another reason that might cause confusion between conditional *if* and interrogative *if*; both convey doubt about the truth value of the clause. Examples (1) and (2) below shows this point:

- (1) If she wants you, (then) she will say so. (Conditional *if*)
- (2) She will tell you if she wants you. (Interrogative *if*)

We can see doubt in both sentences by asking this question: 'Does she want you?'

Quirk (1985) suggests that punctuation separation may sometimes be necessary to distinguish the interrogative from the conditional clause. The examples (1) and (2) below shows this point:

- (1) I'll tell you later if I can find the time. (Interrogative *if*)
- (2) I'll tell you later, if I can find the time. (Conditional *if*)

The interrogative *if* in example (1) can be substituted with *whether*, which indicates the existence of indirect question. In the second example, on the other hand, we use a comma to separate the clauses to show that we are using a conditional *if*. The second sentence can be also written as 'If I can find the time, I'll tell you later'.

Not All Wh-questions are considered indirect questions

Another issue that is worth noting when analyzing indirect questions is the difference between fused/nominal relative clauses and dependent indirect interrogative (indirect question). As Huddleston and Pullum (2002) say, "There is a considerable degree of overlap between fused relatives and subordinate open interrogative clauses" (p. 1072). Biber (1999) believes that having the same set of *wh*-words in both clauses makes it challenging for students. Biber (1999) also believes that we can distinguish them by paraphrasing. He illustrates this through an example:

- (1) I forgot to ask you **what was in the caravans**, the sleeping arrangement.
- (2) I meant basically we can go up the Top Shop and buy **what we like** can't we?

Biber (1999) continues:

"Example (1) contains a dependent interrogative clause; notice that we might paraphrase it as 'I forgot to ask you this question, about what ...?'. In the nominal relative clause 2, the *wh*-word can be paraphrased by *that*, *which*, or anything which, i.e. with an antecedent and a relativizer as in ordinary clause." (p.193)

Huddleston & Pullum (2002) also aim at this concept and believe that these two clauses differ both semantically and syntactically. They argue that paraphrasing technique gives us only the semantic difference and to find the syntactic difference they propose another strategy. They



maintain that NPs represent nominal relative and Clauses represent subordinate open interrogatives. They employ three criteria to identify NPs and clauses.

Table 3: Identifying indirect questions through distinguishing NPs and clauses

NPs = fused/nominal relative constructions	Clauses = subordinate open interrogatives
1a. Agreement <u>what ideas he has to offer</u> <u>are</u> likely to be half-baked.	1b. Third person singular <u>what ideas he has to offer</u> <u>remains</u> to be seen.
2a. Subject-auxiliary inversion Is <u>what she wrote</u> unclear?	2b. Extraposition It is unclear <u>what she wrote</u> .
3a. Adjective complementation He's not sure <u>what he should say</u> .	3b. Preposition fronting I can't imagine what he is referring to/ to what he's referring.

Reflections on Table 3

As explained above, not all sentences containing *wh*-words represent indirect questions. Table 3 could be considered a good guide to identify indirect questions through distinguishing NPs and clauses. Huddleston & Pullum (2002) suggest three categories through which we can do this comparison. For example, in sentence 2a shown in Table 3, we have subject-auxiliary inversion, so *what she wrote* must be an NP, while in 2b we have extraposition, so here *what she wrote* must be a clause; therefore, we can conclude that the underline sentence in 2b is an indirect question.

Can we break the rules?

Celce-Murica and Larsen-Freeman (2016) believe that non-inversion rule in embedded questions is not always followed, particularly in some areas such as New York. They also employ the Corpus of Contemporary American English to show that when the sentence is long, the non-inverted form is not followed because it would be more difficult to produce in real time speech. (p.740). Biber (1999) refers to this as a compromise between direct and indirect speech where the subject-operator inversion is preserved, but pronouns have been adjusted and the verb forms backshifted to the reporting situation. He claims that this compromise form expresses a more direct report than ordinary dependent interrogative clauses. He provides some examples to illustrate this:

- (1) She said, "Can you turf the lawn for me?"
- (2) Semi-direct: She said could we turf the lawn for her.
- (3) Indirect speech: She asked whether we could turf the lawn for her. (p. 920)

Sentence (1) is a direct question, and sentence (3) is the indirect question by using the complementizer *whether*, inverting the subject *we* and the operator *could*, adjusting the pronouns *you* and *me*, and changing the verb *can* to *could*. In sentence (2), which is an alternative form of indirect questions, the complementizer *whether* is not used, the subject *we* and the operator *could* are not inverted, pronouns *you* and *we* have been adjusted, and the verb *can* has been backshifted to *could*.



Swan (2005) (p.253) also aims at this concept and believes that questions beginning who/what/which + be can ask either for a subject or a complement. When we report the first kind of question (where who/what/which + be asks for a subject), two word orders are possible:

Direct: Who's the best player here?

Indirect: She asked me who was the best player./ She asked me who the best player was.

However, this does not happen when who/what and which asks for a complement.

Direct: What's the time?

Indirect: She asked what the time was. (*She asked what was the time.)

CONCLUSION

Indirect questions are generally dealt with in so many English-teaching materials. This discussion has covered different aspects of indirect questions which might cause confusion for both students and teachers. It provides a table as a guide to help choose between two complementizers *if* and *whether* regarding some aspects such register, meaning, and form of indirect questions. We can see from the table that sometimes authors have different perspectives of choosing between these two complementizers. Teachers need to be aware of these perspectives and consider students' need when teaching this grammar point. The paper also explains how conditional *if* and interrogative *if* can be interpreted in both embedded and unembedded sentences and suggests a punctuation rule to avoid the ambiguity. It also explains that not all of *wh*-words in a sentence indicated the indirect questions and provides a table in which we can identify indirect questions. Overall, we can see that there is more to discuss and investigate about indirect questions than what most course books suggests, which could be useful for both students and teachers. Teachers can broaden their knowledge by considering these aspects of indirect questions when preparing their lesson plans, and students can benefit this information academically and socially.

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