"What do you do?" Variation in interrogative predicates

Louise Mycock, University of Oxford

Content ('wh') questions have been the subject of numerous studies conducted in a variety of frameworks, but relatively little of this research has dealt with interrogative predicates ('question-verb' constructions), which may be expressed by an interrogative verb (1) or a nominal question word combined with a non-interrogative verb (2).

(1)　Paamese
　　ko-<u>gosein</u>　　　　　tuu-mali?
　　2SG-do.what.to.REALIS　brother-2SG.MASC
　　'What have you done to your brother?'　　　　　　　　　　　　(Crowley 1982: 159)

(2)　a. <u>What</u> did John <u>do</u> to Mary?
　　b. <u>What happened</u> to your car?

While these strategies are morphosyntactically distinct, their communicative function and meaning are fundamentally the same. I therefore outline a unified analysis of interrogative predicates on the basis of their semantics, developed in the framework of event semantics (Parsons 1990) and the version of Ginzburg & Sag's (2000) semantics for questions in Mycock (2006). I propose that an interrogative predicate is used to express a question about the event-type of a presupposed event e, as in (3). A felicitous answer will supply appropriate new information to fill the gap in the questioner's knowledge. This new information represents the focus of the answer sentence, but it need not correspond to a syntactic constituent. Rather, I argue that the focus is best defined in terms of semantic objects: (i) the event-type, and (ii) any entity that bears a thematic role and which did not appear in the question (i.e. represents new information). For example, in (3) the focus is the event-type *hitting*. Focus cannot be defined as the head of the f-structure 'hit <SUBJ, OBJ>' because this would create circularity (King 1997).

(3)　Q:　<u>What</u> did John <u>do</u> to Mary?
　　　　$\Lambda\{x\}.\exists e[\underline{x}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{John}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, \text{Mary})]$
　　A:　John [hit]$^{\text{FOCUS}}$ Mary.
　　　　$\exists e[\underline{\text{hitting}}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \text{John}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, \text{Mary})]$

Nor is it always the case that focus can be adequately defined in terms of a c-structure constituent, as the answer in (4) illustrates. (The box represents the VP.)

(4)　Q:　<u>What happened</u> to the car?
　　　　$\Lambda\{x\}.\exists e[x(e) \wedge \text{patient}(e, \text{car})]$
　　A:　[Sam $\boxed{\text{sold]}_{\text{FOCUS}}$ the car [to Charlie}]_{\text{FOCUS}}$.
　　　　$\exists e[\underline{\text{selling}}(e) \wedge \text{agent}(e, \underline{\text{Sam}}) \wedge \text{patient}(e, \text{car}) \wedge \text{goal}(e, \underline{\text{Charlie}})]$

I therefore argue that the values of discourse functions such as focus are semantic objects rather than syntactic constituents, and that the relationship between information-structure and semantic-structure in the parallel architecture of LFG is more direct than previously assumed.

REFERENCES
Crowley, T. (1982). *The Paamese language of Vanuatu*. Canberra: ANU.
Ginzburg, J. & I. A. Sag (2000). *Interrogative Investigations*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
King, T. H. (1997). 'Focus Domains and Information-Structure'. In M. Butt & T. H. King (eds.) *Proceedings of the LFG97 Conference*. Online: CSLI Publications.
Mycock, L. J. (2006). *The Typology of Constituent Questions*. PhD thesis, University of Manchester.
Parsons, T. (1990). *Events in the Semantics of English*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.