True to Form
Rising and Falling Declaratives as Questions in English

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This talk is concerned with the meaning and use of two kinds of declarative sentences:

(1) It’s raining?
(2) It’s raining.

The difference between (1) and (2) is intonational: (1) has a final rise, while (2) ends with a fall. I use the standard orthographic devices of the question mark and the period, respectively, to indicate the difference between sentences like (1), which I call rising declaratives, and like (2), their falling declarative counterparts.

The central claim of the analysis is that the meaning and use of both kinds of sentences must be understood in terms of their defining formal elements, namely declarative sentence type and rising vs. falling intonation. I support that claim through an investigation of the use of declaratives as questions. On the one hand, I demonstrate that rising and falling declaratives share an aspect of conventional meaning attributable to their declarative form, distinguishing them both from the corresponding polar interrogative (Is it raining?) and limiting their distribution in discourse. For example, declarative questions are not appropriate in situations where the questioner is supposed to be impartial or uninformed, as in a courtroom or committee hearing:

(3) [at a committee hearing]
   a. Are you a member of the Communist party?
   b. #You’re a member of the Communist party?
   c. #You’re a member of the Communist party.

Nor can declarative questions be used ‘out of the blue’, without relevant preceding context, as syntactic interrogatives can be:

(4) [A enters the room and says to B, who is eating a piece of orange fruit]
   a. Is that a persimmon?
   b. #That’s a persimmon?
   c. #That’s a persimmon.

On the other hand, since (1) and (2) constitute a minimal pair, differing only in intonation, systematic differences between rising and falling declaratives – in particular the relative naturalness of rising declaratives as questions compared to falling ones – must be located in the contrast between the fall and the rise. This difference, too, has distributional reflexes, as seen in examples like (5), where the rising declarative patterns with the interrogative rather than the falling declarative:

(5) A: The king of France is bald.
   B’s response:
   a. Is France a monarchy?
   b. France is a monarchy?
   c. #France is a monarchy.

To account for these two sets of differences, I give a compositional account of rising and falling declaratives under which declarative form (in contrast to interrogative), expresses commitment to the propositional content of the declarative. Rising vs. falling intonation is responsible for attribution of the commitment to the Addressee vs. the Speaker, respectively. The compositional analysis is implemented in the framework of context update semantics (Heim 1982). I introduce an articulated version of the Common
Ground (Stalnaker 1978) that distinguishes between the commitments of the individual discourse participants and allows development of a general notion of contextual bias, with utility beyond the particular application illustrated here. Restrictions on the use of declaratives as questions, as well as differences between rising and falling declaratives as questions, are shown to follow from the context-update account. I argue that neither rising nor falling declaratives are inherently questioning. Rather, the questioning function of declaratives arises through the interaction of sentence type, intonation, and context. Declaratives operate as questions only when they can be understood as intentionally uninformative with respect to the Addressee – a property that interrogatives have by nature but that declaratives must acquire by virtue of the context. Falling declaratives are further restricted as questions by the fact that they commit the Speaker to their content; rising declaratives, like interrogatives, leave the Speaker uncommitted.

I treat both intonational meaning and sentence type meaning as part of conventional locutionary content, not as special ‘function-indicating devices’ (Searle 1965). The relationship of locutionary content to discourse function is indirect. The picture that emerges is one where intonational and sentence type meaning constrain how utterances with particular content function in discourse but do not determine their function. Understanding the questioning use of declaratives does not reduce to a problem of knowing when to assign ‘question force’ but requires a deeper investigation of the complex interaction between context and elements of linguistic form that speakers can exploit to achieve their purposes. It will be shown that declaratives as questions remain faithful to their essentially declarative nature.