

## A FIRST LOOK AT THE CLAUSAL DETERMINER IN MARTINICAN CREOLE “DIRECT” WH-QUESTIONS\*

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**Abstract :** Martinican Creole (MC) distinguishes between two types of wh-questions: canonical wh-questions, referred to here as indefinite wh-questions (IWQs), and definite wh-questions (DWQs). The latter are characterized by the presence of a clausal determiner in clause-final position. This determiner is homophonous with the definite article, which follows from the fact that both spell out a [+DEF] feature. I therefore argue that definiteness plays a crucial role in DWQs insofar as they rely for their licensing on the inclusion in the common ground of an antecedent proposition – an existential proposition which may also be thought of as the presupposition of the DWQ. This proposition must therefore be checked against the input common ground. This accounts for the fact DWQs cannot be uttered out of the blue, as well as the fact that they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers because this would result in an inconsistent common ground. Based on its distribution with respect to adverbials, I show that the MC clausal determiner is merged in a position where it scopes over the proposition-denoting IP, hence the fact that the DWQ’s must match the denotation of the IP.

### 1. Introduction

Martinican Creole (MC) distinguishes between (at least) two types of wh-questions. The first type, illustrated in (1a), comprises what I shall call definite wh-questions (DWQs) after their distinguishing property, viz. the presence of a clause-final particle homophonous with the definite article.<sup>1</sup> The second type, exemplified in (1b), is made up of canonical wh-questions, which I shall refer to as indefinite wh-questions (IWQs).

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<sup>1</sup> This clause-final particle shall be typeset in bold in all relevant examples. It should be noted that, on par with the definite article, it has four phonologically conditioned allomorphs (*la*, *lan*, *a*, and *an*) (Bernabé 1983).

- (1) a. Ki sa ou wè a?<sup>2</sup>  
 WH it 2SG see CD  
 ‘Who did you see (given our shared knowledge that you saw something)?’
- b. Ki sa ou wè?  
 WH it 2SG see  
 ‘Who did you see?’

Superficially, then, the main difference between these two types of wh-questions lies in the occurrence of the clause-final particle, which I shall henceforth refer to as a clausal determiner.

As reflected in the translations, DWQs are characterized by the additional property that they impose restrictions on the common ground. A DWQ is licensed if and only if the input common ground includes what I label an antecedent proposition. In (1b), that antecedent proposition is that there is a thing *x* such that the interlocutor has seen *x*. This property accounts for the fact that, in contrast with IWQs, DWQs cannot be uttered out of the blue and do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers. To account for these characteristics of DWQs, I argue that their antecedent propositions should be viewed as hard presuppositions, i.e. presuppositions that cannot be canceled (Abusch 2010).

These presuppositions, I propose, are triggered by the clausal determiner. Given its morphological similarity with the definite article, I take it to be the spell-out of a [+DEF] feature. Given the familiarity-based account of definiteness (Christophersen 1939; Heim 1982), I suggest that the clausal determiner marks the reliance of DWQs on previously established propositions. IWQs, on the other hand, are free from such constraints.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the basic theoretical assumptions. Section 3 describes the facts. Section 4 argues for the relevance of definiteness construed as familiarity to the study of DWQs. Section 5 investigates the syntax of the clausal determiner. Section 6 is the conclusion.

## 2. Basic theoretical assumptions

Stalnaker (1978, 2002) defines the common ground as the knowledge and assumptions shared by the discourse participants. It may thus be viewed as the set of propositions which are held to be true in common by the discourse participants. Given the standard view that propositions denote sets of possible worlds, from the common ground we can derive the notion of context set, which designates the set of possible worlds in which all the propositions in the common ground are true. These two notions are key components of the context, which Roberts (2004:198) defines as the “structure of the information that is presupposed and/or conveyed by the interlocutors in the exchange.” The context is therefore dynamic, and its content evolves with each utterance.

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<sup>2</sup> The list of glosses used in the paper includes the following: 1SG: first person singular; 2SG: second person singular; 3SG: third person singular; CD: clausal determiner; COMP: complementizer; DEF: definite article; FUT: future tense; IMPF: imperfective aspect; INDEF: indefinite article; PST: past tense; WH: wh-word.

The ultimate aim of the discourse participants is to reduce the context set to a single possible world, viz. the actual world. Each utterance may then be conceived as a move toward that end, with a distinction between set-up and payoff moves (Carlson 1983). These two types of moves differ in how they affect the common ground and, by way of consequence, the context set. Questions, as typical set-up moves, do not affect the content of the common ground. Instead, they perform what Krifka (2008) calls common ground management. Given Hamblin's (1973) view of questions as partitions of the logical space, questions will impose structure on the common ground and limit subsequent changes to its content. Payoff moves, on the other hand, will influence the content of the common ground. Assertions are typical payoff moves insofar as they add propositions to the common ground, which in turn results in a new context set. In summary, every utterance is characterized by its capacity to affect the context.

On this view, we may then follow Heim (1983) in defining propositions as functions from context to context. A presupposition can then be construed as the definedness conditions of the proposition by which it is triggered. Crucially, that presupposition must be checked against the input context. In other words, an utterance will be felicitous if and only if its presuppositions are included in the input common ground.

I shall make frequent reference to these ideas in the rest of the paper, as they are essential to a proper understanding of MC DWQs.

### 3. The data

As noted above, the fundamental superficial difference between MC DWQs and IWQs is the presence of a clausal determiner in the former and its absence in the latter. These are exemplified in (2a) and (2b), respectively.

- (2) a. Ki doktè i wè a?  
 WH doctor 3SG see CD  
 'Which doctor did he see (given our shared knowledge that he saw some doctor)?'
- b. Ki doktè i wè?  
 WH doctor 3SG see  
 'Which doctor did he see?'

The examples in (2) also illustrate the fact that both types of wh-questions involve obligatory wh-fronting. For the sake of brevity, I will not provide evidence of it, but it should be noted that both DWQs and IWQs are subject to islandhood effects. They also conform to Richards's (1997) Principle of Minimal Compliance. In other words, in multiple wh-questions, only one wh-phrase will undergo fronting in narrow syntax. The takeaway, here, is that IWQs and DWQs are mostly identical in their syntax. I shall therefore focus on DWQs for the remainder of this section.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I refer the reader to Bernabé (1983) and Syea (2017) for a more exhaustive description of MC IWQs.

Long-distance extraction is possible in MC DWQs. This is illustrated in (3) where the object is extracted from the embedded clause and raises successive-cyclically to the left periphery of the matrix clause.

- (3)      Ki moun    Mari di'    w i    wè    —    a?  
           WH person    Mary say    3SG 1SG see    —    CD  
           ‘Who did Mary tell you that she saw (given our shared knowledge that Mary told you that she saw somebody)?’

DWQs can also appear in embedded contexts, as evidenced in (4).

- (4)      Man ka    mandé kò    mwen ki sa i    wè a  
           1SG IMPF ask    body 1SG WH it    3SG see CD  
           ‘I wonder what she saw (given our shared knowledge that she saw something)?’

It should also be noted that DWQs do not impose any restriction on the nature of the wh-phrase.<sup>4</sup> In other words, they are compatible with the extraction of an external argument, as in (5a), of an internal argument, as in (5b) and (5c), or an adjunct, as in (5d).

- (5) a.    Ki moun    ki    bat    ou a?  
           WH person    COMP beat    2SG CD  
           ‘Who beat you up (given our shared knowledge that someone beat you up)?’
- b.    Ki moun    ou bat    la?  
           WH person    2SG beat    CD  
           ‘Who did you beat up (given our shared knowledge that you beat up someone)?’
- c.    Ki moun    ou ba    gaz la?  
           WH person    2SG give    gas CD  
           ‘Who did you bother (given our shared knowledge that you bothered someone)?’ (Lit. ‘Who did you give gas to?’)
- d.    Bò      ki moun    ou dòmi a?  
           next.to WH person    2SG sleep CD  
           ‘Who did you sleep next to (given our shared knowledge that you slept next to someone)?’

From a pragmatic standpoint, DWQs are characterized by the fact that, unlike IWQs, they cannot be uttered out of the blue. A DWQ is felicitous if and only if the common ground includes an existential presupposition, which I shall refer to as an antecedent proposition to highlight the relevance of anaphoricity/familiarity to these constructions. This

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<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, this statement is not entirely accurate. Some of my consultants do not tolerate the extraction of the subject of an intransitive verb, whether unergative or unaccusative. I will not address this issue here, but I am inclined to think that this restriction finds its origin in information structure.

antecedent proposition must share the domain and the properties of the variable in the corresponding wh-question. By way of illustration, consider (6).

- (6) a. Ki moun ou enmen an?  
 WH person 2SG like CD  
 ‘Who do you like (given our shared knowledge that you like someone)?’
- b. For which x, person(x) & you like x?
- c. There is a person(x) s.t. you like x

The DWQ in (6a), whose logical form is given in (6b), will be felicitous if and only if the input common ground contains the proposition in (6c), i.e. the proposition that there is person x such you like x. Thus, (6c) is the antecedent proposition which licenses the DWQ in (6a). There are various ways for an antecedent proposition to enter the common ground and I shall now illustrate a few of these.

To begin with, an antecedent proposition may be provided as part of the proffered content of a prior utterance. Take, for instance, the DWQ in (7B). It is licensed by the previous utterance, (7A), which enriches the common ground with the proposition that there is a thing x such that John bought x.

- (7) A: Man achté yann dé bagay  
 1SG buy one two thing  
 ‘I bought a few things.’
- B: Ki sa ou achté a?  
 WH it 2SG buy CD  
 ‘What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?’

The antecedent proposition may also be introduced as an inference drawn from a prior utterance. This is illustrated in (8), where A’s utterance includes *o marché* ‘at the market’, a weak definite in Carlson et al.’s (2006) sense. In other words, (8A) denotes more than simply the event of A going to the market; it further implies that there is a thing x such that A bought x. This existential proposition obviously qualifies as an antecedent proposition to license the DWQ in (8B).

- (8) A: Man ay o marché  
 1SG go at.the market  
 ‘I went to the market.’
- B: Ki sa ou achté a?  
 WH it 2SG buy CD  
 ‘What did you buy (given our shared knowledge that you bought something)?’

Extralinguistic events may also contribute antecedent propositions. This is evidenced in (9), where upon hearing the noise of breaking glass in the kitchen, A draws the conclusion that there is a thing x such that B broke x.

- (9) Context: B is alone in the kitchen, when suddenly a noise of breaking glass is heard from the kitchen. A rushes to the kitchen and says...

Ki sa ou krazé a?

WH it 2SG break CD

‘What did you break (given our shared knowledge that you broke something)?’

Another distinguishing property of DWQs is that, unlike IWQs, they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers. This is a direct consequence of the fact that they rely on antecedent propositions for their licensing. As a matter of fact, such an answer would contradict the antecedent proposition. This would result in an inconsistent common ground, which would plunge the conversation in state of crisis (Farkas & Bruce 2010). I take this to mean that DWQs trigger hard presuppositions, i.e. presuppositions which cannot be canceled. They thus stand in contrast with canonical wh-questions, and thus IWQs. Although it is often said that wh-questions trigger existential presuppositions (see, a.o., Katz 1972; Lyons 1977; Karttunen 1977, 2016; Gawron 2001), I will side with other scholars (e.g. Abusch 2010; Schwarz & Simonenko 2017) who attribute this apparent existential presupposition to other sources. At any rate, the fact that DWQs are incompatible with *nothing*-type answers cannot simply be accounted by the fact that they are wh-questions.

As illustrated by 0 and (2), the obvious difference between DWQs and IWQs is the presence in the former of a clausal determiner. This leads to the obvious hypothesis that the hard presupposition trigger in DWQs is quite simply this clausal determiner. Given its homophony with the definite article, I hold that it spells out a [+DEF] feature. I shall therefore argue that definiteness plays a crucial role in DWQs.

#### 4. The crucial role of definiteness in MC DWQs

The felicity of MC DWQs depends on the inclusion in the common ground of an antecedent proposition. We can describe this proposition as familiar insofar as it is part of the background knowledge shared by the discourse participants. On the basis of this observation, I propose that a parallel can be drawn between definiteness in the clausal and the nominal domain.

Familiarity is the key ingredient in a well-known theory of definiteness which dates back to at least Christophersen (1939).<sup>5</sup> This approach is notably instantiated in Heim’s (1983) Novelty-Familiarity Condition. The first half of it, the Novelty Condition, stipulates that an indefinite DP must be used to refer to an entity that has not yet been introduced in the universe of discourse. The Familiarity Condition, conversely, imposes that a definite DP must be used to refer to an entity which already belongs to the universe of discourse. That this view of definiteness extends to MC finds support in (10).

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<sup>5</sup> I do not, however, deny the well-known fact that familiarity cannot account for all uses of definite DPs (Lyons 1999) and that it may very well be complementary to uniqueness (Schwarz 2009).

- (10) An nonm ek an fanm antré. Fanm lan té ka palé  
 INDEF man and INDEF woman enter woman DEF PST IMPF speak  
 alman  
 German  
 ‘A man and a woman came in. The woman was speaking German.’

In the first sentence, the referent of the indefinite DP *an fanm* ‘a woman’ is a novel entity. In the second sentence, this referent has become a familiar entity, as reflected in the fact that a definite DP *fanm lan* ‘the woman’ is used. This is the only possible configuration.

Now, definite descriptions are known to trigger existential presuppositions. A definite description is thus felicitous if and only if the input common ground includes such a presupposition. This requirement is obviously reminiscent of the licensing conditions of DWQs. I construe this as evidence for the crucial role that definiteness plays in these constructions. There is thus a clear parallelism between definite descriptions and DWQs. Let us see if the same holds between indefinite descriptions and IWQs.

It turns out that this parallelism quickly breaks down. According to the Familiarity Condition, an indefinite DP will be infelicitous if its referent already belongs to the universe of discourse. IWQs, in contrast, are acceptable even when the common ground includes a potential antecedent proposition. In other words, an IWQ can always be substituted for a DWQ, although the converse does not hold. Admittedly, it would be more appropriate to say that IWQs are underspecified in terms of definiteness. For the sake of convenience, however, I shall keep referring to them as IWQs.

In summary, the parallelism between the clausal and the nominal domain in MC is an imperfect one with respect to definiteness. IWQs are best viewed as underspecified in terms of definiteness. DWQs, on the other hand, do pattern with definite descriptions insofar as both involve familiarity. Furthermore, both DWQs and definite descriptions trigger hard presuppositions. This, I attribute to the [+DEF] feature lexicalized by the definite article in definite descriptions and the clausal determiner in DWQs. Let us now have a closer look at the latter’s syntax.

## 5. The syntax of the clausal determiner in MC DWQs

Previous studies of clausal and event determiners suggest that their Merge position on the clausal spine has significant implications for their interpretation, especially the presupposition they trigger (Lefebvre 1992, 1998; Larson 2003; Renans 2016; Grubic & Renans 2017; Grubic et al. 2019; Renans 2019). It is therefore critical that we establish the Merge position of the clausal determiner of MC DWQs. I shall therefore study its distribution vis-à-vis adverbials.

In line with Cinque (1999, 2004), I assume that the IP domain decomposes into a universal functional sequence which accounts for the rigid ordering of adverbials across natural languages. This follows from the hypothesis that adverbials are merged in the specifiers of the various functional projections which make up this functional sequence, represented in (11).

- (11) [ *frankly* Mood<sub>speech act</sub> [ *fortunately* Mood<sub>evaluative</sub> [ *allegedly* Mood<sub>evidential</sub>  
 [ *probably* Mod<sub>epistemic</sub> [ *once* T(Past) [ *then* T(Future) [ *perhaps* Mood<sub>irrealis</sub>  
 [ *necessarily* Mod<sub>necessity</sub> [ *possibly* Mod<sub>possibility</sub> [ *usually* Asp<sub>habitual</sub> [ *again*  
 Asp<sub>repetitive(I)</sub> [ *often* Asp<sub>frequentative(I)</sub> [ *intentionally* Mood<sub>volitional</sub> [ *quickly*  
 Asp<sub>celerative(I)</sub> [ *already* T(Anterior) [ *no longer* Asp<sub>terminative</sub> [ *still* Asp<sub>continuative</sub>  
 [ *always* Asp<sub>perfect(?)</sub> [ *just* Asp<sub>retrospective</sub> [ *soon* Asp<sub>proximative</sub> [ *briefly* Asp<sub>durative</sub>  
 [ *characteristically(?)* Asp<sub>generic/progressive</sub> [ *almost* Asp<sub>prospective</sub> [ *completely*  
 Asp<sub>completive(I)</sub> [ *tutto* Asp<sub>PICompletive</sub> [ *well* Voice [ *fast/early* Asp<sub>celerative(II)</sub>  
 [ *often* Asp<sub>frequentative(II)</sub> [ *completely* Asp<sub>Completive(II)</sub>

Prior to investigating DWQs, I shall establish the distributional patterns of adverbials in declaratives, focusing on their position vis-à-vis the verb and its object. As regards low adverbials such as *souvan* ‘often’ and *bien* ‘well’, the data in (12) establish that they may either precede or follow both the verb and its object, but they cannot intervene between them.

- (12) a. Jan ka (*souvan*) wè (\**souvan*) manman ’y (*souvan*)  
 John IMPF often see often mother 3SG often  
 ‘John often sees his mother.’
- b. Jan (*bien*) fè (\**bien*) travay li (*bien*)  
 John well do well work 3SG well  
 ‘John did his job well.’

These observations lead to two conclusions. First, the acceptability of low adverbials in pre-VP position suggests that Cinque’s hierarchy applies to MC. Second, the fact that these adverbials cannot intervene between the verb and its object implies that verb movement does not obtain in MC. The post-VP position of the low adverbials in (12a,b) is therefore derived by phrasal movement – a functional projection which contains the verb and its object raises past the low adverbials. For the sake of simplicity, I equate this projection with VP in (13), the schematic representation of the derivation of (12b).

- (13) [[VP fè travay li] ... [bien ... tVP]]

When two low adverbials cooccur, as in (14), two observations can be made. First, as illustrated by the contrast between (14a) and (14b), when both adverbials appear in pre-VP position, *bien* must necessarily follow *souvan*, which buttresses the fact that MC conforms with Cinque’s hierarchy. Second, as evidenced in (14c), this relative ordering can be reversed when the higher adverbial *souvan* appears in post-VP position, while the lower adverbial *bien* remains in pre-VP position.



- (14) a. Jan ka souvan *bien* fè travay li  
 John IMPF often well do job 3SG  
 ‘John often does his job well.’
- b. \*Jan ka *bien* souvan fè travay li
- c. Jan ka *bien* fè travay li souvan

To account for this last observation, I posit that, here again, (14c) is the result of phrasal movement. As illustrated in (15), a functional projection which contains the lower adverbial, the verb and its object raises past the higher adverbial.

- (15) [[<sub>FP</sub> *bien* fè travay li] ... [souvan ... t<sub>FP</sub>]]

I am now able to demonstrate that the clausal determiner in MC DWQs is not merged either in a VP-internal position or some position between low adverbials and VP. Consider the contrasts in (16) and (17).

- (16) a. Ki sa Jan fè bien **an**?  
 WH it John do well CD  
 ‘What did John do well (given our shared knowledge that John did something well)?’
- b. \*Ki sa Jan fè **a** bien?
- (17) a. Ki sa Jan ka bien fè souvan **an**?  
 WH it John IMPF well do often CD  
 ‘What does John often do well (given our shared knowledge that John often does something well)?’
- b. \*Ki sa Jan ka bien fè **a** souvan?

The DWQ in (16) contains the low adverb *bien* in post-VP position, which presumably results from a derivation similar to (13). The ungrammaticality of (16b) shows that the clausal determiner cannot be merged inside VP. Otherwise, it should have preceded, rather than followed, the low adverbial. The DWQ in (17) contains two low adverbials in a configuration identical with (14c) and is thus subject to a derivation in line with (15). Here, the fact that the clausal determiner must follow the higher adverbial shows that the clausal determiner cannot be merged in an intermediary position between the IP domain and the VP. Thus, I propose that (16a) and (17a) are derived as in (18) and (19), respectively. (As reflected in the bracketing, at this stage I remain agnostic as to the position of the clausal determiner.)

(18) [Ki sa]<sub>i</sub> [Jan ka [[<sub>VP</sub> fè t<sub>i</sub>] ... [bien t<sub>VP</sub>]]] **an**?

(19) [Ki sa]<sub>i</sub> [Jan ka [[<sub>FP</sub> bien fè t<sub>i</sub>] ... [souvan t<sub>FP</sub>]]] **an**?

Let us move up the clausal spine and establish the distribution of higher adverbials with respect to the verb and its object, beginning again with declaratives. Following Cinque (1999), I hold that *pwobabman* ‘probably’ instantiates his ModP<sub>epistemic</sub>, the fourth-highest projection in (11). It is in fact a cutoff point for the position of the subject in MC insofar as it is the highest adverb which can follow the subject. Higher adverbials must all precede it. This is, for instance, the case of *érezman* ‘fortunately’, the instantiation of Cinque’s MoodP<sub>evaluative</sub>. Evidence for these claims is offered in (20).

(20) a. (Pwobabman) i (pwobabman) ké ja fini travay li  
 probably 3SG probably FUT already finish work 3SG  
 (pwobabman)  
 probably  
 ‘John will probably have already finished his work.’

b. (Érezman) Jan (\*érezman) ké ja fini travay li  
 fortunately John fortunately FUT already finish work 3SG  
 (érezman)  
 fortunately  
 ‘Fortunately, John will have already finished his work.’

The above facts suggest that the MC subject can occupy a position higher than Cinque’s ModP<sub>epistemic</sub> but lower than MoodP<sub>evaluative</sub>. More importantly, as attested by (20a), *pwobabman* can appear in post-VP position. Here again, I posit that this order is derived by phrasal movement. As illustrated in (21), a functional projection which contains the subject, the verb and its object raises past the adverb.

(21) [[<sub>FP</sub> Jan ké ja fini travay li] ... [pwobabman ... t<sub>FP</sub>]]

Given these observations, it can now be established that the clausal determiner in MC DWQs is not first-merged in the IP domain. Consider the data in (22).

(22) a. Ki sa Jan ké ja fè pwobabman **an**?  
 WH it John FUT already do probably CD  
 ‘What will John probably have already done (given our shared knowledge that John will probably have done something)?’

b. \*Ki sa Jan ké ja fè a pwobabman?

c. [Ki sa]<sub>i</sub> [[<sub>FP</sub> Jan ké ja fè t<sub>i</sub>] ... [pwobabman ... t<sub>FP</sub>]] **an**?

Placing the clausal determiner before the adverb, as in (22b), results in an ill-formed DWQ. Therefore, I propose that (22a) is derived as in (22c), a derivation akin to (21). Had the clausal determiner been merged inside the IP domain, it should have preceded the high

adverbial. I take this to mean that the clausal determiner is merged outside the IP domain, although I cannot determine with greater precision its exact merge position.

However, the fact that the clausal determiner is merged outside the IP domain, probably somewhere in the left periphery, is a welcome result. My earlier description of MC DWQs stressed their reliance on an antecedent proposition. Now, if we assume that IPs are proposition-denoting constituents (Kratzer 1998), it would make perfect sense that the clausal determiner scopes over the IP. The proposition denoted by the IP in the DWQ would then constitute its presupposition.

To recap, as evidenced by its distribution with respect to adverbials, the clausal determiner which appears in MC DWQs is merged outside the IP domain. That it scopes over IP concurs with the observation that DWQs are licensed by the inclusion in the common ground of an antecedent proposition.

## 6. Conclusion

MC distinguishes between two types of wh-questions. The first type is made up of canonical wh-questions, which I have referred to as IWQs. The second type encompasses pragmatically marked wh-questions which I have labeled DWQs. Superficially, the defining characteristic of DWQs is that they feature a clausal determiner in clause-final position. This determiner, which happens to be homophonous with the definite article, spells out a [+DEF] feature merged in the left periphery. It therefore scopes over the proposition-denoting IP. This accounts for the fact that DWQs trigger a presupposition which matches the proposition denoted by the IP complement of the clausal determiner. In line with the Stalnakerian view of presuppositions, I assume that this presupposition must be included in the input common ground of the DWQ. This accounts for the fact that DWQs cannot be uttered out of the blue and that they do not tolerate *nothing*-type answers. There is obviously much more that needs to be said about MC DWQs, but this must be left for further research.

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