This paper discusses the semantics and syntax of the particle kwestje in the West Flemish (WF) dialect of Dutch. Kwestje selects interrogatively-typed clauses. Described by users as meaning something like “God knows whether…”, the function of prefixing kwestje to an interrogative clause is to mark that the addressee is not expected to provide an answer to the interrogative, as would be the case in a canonical question; hence the interrogative form is no longer associated with a request for information. Section 1 introduces the core interpretive effects of kwestje. Section 2 summarizes conditions on its use and identifies discourse factors that license it. Section 3 develops a cartographic syntactic analysis of kwestje (Rizzi 1997, 2001).

1 West Flemish ‘kwestje’ and the neutralization of question force

(1) illustrates contextualized root interrogatives in WF: (1a) is a yes-no question and (1b) is a wh-question. These interrogative clauses function as requests for information: the speaker is ignorant of the truth of some proposition (Speaker Ignorance, Farkas 2022), (s)he expects that the addressee can provide the relevant information (Addressee Competence, Farkas 2022) and that the addressee will comply in doing so (Addressee Compliance, Farkas 2022). As such, the goal of uttering clauses like (1) is to resolve, as soon as possible, the question that they pose.

(1) Context: The interlocutors are talking about their friend George from Knokke, who’s on holiday with family. A has been in touch with George recently so B asks:
   a. Komt George were nor Knokke?  b. Wanneer komt George were no Knokke?
      comes George back to Knokke.         when comes George back to Knokke

The examples in (2) are built on (1), with a change of context and the interrogative clauses preceded by the formative kwestje.

(2) Context: A and B are talking about their friend George from Knokke, who’s on holiday with family. Neither A nor B has been in touch with George recently. B says:
   a. Kwestje komt George were nor Knokke.
      KWESTJE comes George back to Knokke
   b. Kwestje wanneer komt George were no Knokke.
      KWESTJE when comes George back to Knokke

Though the utterances in (2) contain the same root interrogatives as those in (1), their felicity conditions differ. The speaker in (2) is ignorant as to the true answer (Speaker Ignorance) but her utterance does not entail that she believes that the addressee can (Addressee Competence) or will (Addressee Compliance) supply the true answer, as suggested by the context. Her goal therefore is not to resolve the question, but to posit an open issue in the discourse context. This means that the utterances in (2) would be surprising in contexts such as in (1).

Kwestje is not compatible with declarative (3a) or with imperative (3b) clauses:

(3) a. *Kwestje hij komt donderdag were.   b. *Kwestje kom donderdag were!
       KWESTJE he comes Thursday back       KWESTJE come Thursday back!

We assume, following e.g. Farkas (2022), that for canonical declarative and imperative clauses, Addressee Compliance means that an overt linguistic response – specifically the expression of agreement – though possible, is not necessary. (3a,b) demonstrate that if the contribution of kwestje simply reduced to the fact that the addressee need not reply, then it should be able to prefix to declaratives and imperatives. Rather, kwestje selects an interrogative clause and modifies it to ensure that the clause posits an open issue without
being interpreted as a request for information. In other words, *kwestje*-marked utterances bring to the fore a dissociation between ‘interrogative form’ and ‘question force’.

1.1 Speech act particles

The combinatory possibilities between speech act particles and *kwestje*-questions illustrate that they also differ from questions in terms of the discourse commitments they encode. *Kwestje*-questions are incompatible with WF particles that associate with information-seeking questions but are compatible with particles that associate with assertions. The particle *da* (Haegeman 2014) combine with interrogative clauses, conveying that the speaker is surprised at the question’s propositional content (4a). *Da* cannot combine with a *kwestje*-interrogative (4b). The particle *wè* marks a speaker’s authority to make a claim (Haegeman 2014) and is compatible with declaratives and imperatives (see Haegeman 2014: 122) but is incompatible with regular interrogatives (5a). *Wè* is, however, compatible with *kwestje*-questions (5b).

(4)  a. Context: *A heard that a bar lost its alcohol license, but a friend suggests a beer there.*
    Meugen ze doar nog alcohol schenken, *da*?
    May they there still alcohol serve *da*
    b. Context: *The speaker can’t tell if a new establishment is a coffee bar or a pub.*
    *Kwestje* meugen ze doar alcohol schenken (*“da*).
    *KWESTJE* may they there alcohol serve (*“da* )

(5)  a. *Meugen ze doar alcohol schenken, *wè*?
    may they there alcohol serve, *wè*
    b. Context: *A talks about a coffee bar where she’s only had non-alcoholic drinks before.*
    *Kwestje* meugen ze doar alcohol schenken, *wè*.
    *KWESTJE* may they there alcohol serve, *wè*

(4-5) confirm that, despite containing an interrogative clause, *kwestje*-marked interrogatives are not requests for information and do not pattern with interrogatively-typed clauses uttered and interpreted as such. However, they are not assertions or commands, as they do not add a single proposition to the interlocutors’ shared knowledge or impose action on the addressee. That is to say, their contribution to the discourse differs from that of a typical declarative or interrogative. In *kwestje*-questions, an issue is simply communicated as being unresolved.

1.2 Responses

Responses to *kwestje*-questions further illustrate that their discourse commitments differ from canonical questions. A common response to a *kwestje*-question is to confirm that no-one knows the answer (6). A *kwestje*-question may be directly referred to as ‘a question’ (7B), but neither its questionhood or its propositional content can be agreed with or challenged (7B’,B’’):

(6) A: *Kwestje wanneer goa ze kommen?* 
   *KWESTJE* when goes she come
   B: K weten‘t ook #*(niet).*
   I don’t know also
   B’*: Ja, *kwestje* wanneer.
   Yes, *KWESTJE* when
   B’’*: Ja, moesten we dat weten.
   Yes, should we that know

(7) A: *Kwestje komt Monique dissendag?*
   *KWESTJE* comes Monique Tuesday?
   B: Da is de vroage.
   That is the question
   B’*: #Dat is juste: da weten we niet.
   That is right: that know we not
   B’’*: #Dat is (niet) woar.
   That is (not) true

1.3 Direct speech reporting and embeddability

A commonality between *kwestje*-interrogatives and assertions is evident in direct reporting of *kwestje*-interrogatives, which are introduced by verbs like ‘say’ rather than ‘ask’:

(8) Valère zei/*vroeg:  *Kwestje* meugen ze doar alcohol schenken.
Valère said/*asked: *KWESTJE may they there alcohol serve

Importantly, kwestje-insertion is a root phenomenon: kwestje-interrogatives are generally unembeddable, be it under ‘ask’ (9), ‘say’ (10) or ‘know’ (11). We illustrate this with kwestje-wh-interrogatives but the same holds for kwestje polar interrogatives:

(9) Je vroeg (*kwestje) hoe lange goat het deuren/dat da goat deuren

He asked KWESTJE how long goes it take/that goes take

(10) Kzeggen (dat) {ik niet weet/*kwestje} hoe lang goat het deuren/dat het gaat deuren

I-say (that) KWESTJE how long goes it last/that it goes last

(11)*Ik weet niet kwestje hoe lang dat het goat deuren

I know not KWESTJE how long that it goes take

We return to this property in Section 3.

2 Discourse conditions on the use of kwestje

In this section we refine the interpretation of kwestje-interrogatives in terms of Addressee Competence and Addressee Compliance. Consider the exchange in (12): (12B) is a regular wh-interrogative used as an information-seeking question: B uses it because she assumes that A can supply a true answer and expects A to do so. The interpretation of kwestje-question (13) differs: starting from the same point, kwestje radically weakens Addressee Compliance. B indicates that they do not expect A to reply. The inference may then arise that B expects A cannot reply, which would constitute cancellation of Addressee Competence.

(12) Context: Monique is a frequent visitor to A’s house; B is A’s guest.

A: Monique komt ’t noaste weke. B: Wanneer ga ze kommen?

Monique is coming next week when goes she come

(13) Context: Monique is a weekly visitor to A and B is aware, but the day of the visit changes.

A: Monique komt ’t noaste weke. B: Kwesta wie neer ga ze komen?

Monique is coming next week KWESTJE when goes she come

However, kwestje does not encode lack of Addressee Competence. In fact, it may be used in contexts in which the speaker knows that the addressee knows the answer to the question – for example, questions with second-person subjects that query the addressee’s direct experience. In (14), B can ask when A arrived home, prefaced by kwestje, even though they assume that A knows when he arrived home.

(14) Context: A is B’s grandson. They are talking on Sunday morning. A was out on Saturday and B knows that A usually stays out very late.

A: Kzyn lyk moeg vandoage. ‘I kind of feel tired today.’

B: Kwesta hoe loate zy’j gisteren tusgekomen?

KWESTJE how late are you yesterday home come

(14) thus forces us to refine our hypothesis: Addressee (in)Competence is not a precondition for the felicitous use of kwestje. Rather, (14B) demonstrates that Addressee Competence and Addressee Compliance can be decoupled: it is the absence of the latter that is crucial in the deployment of kwestje – in other words, the utterer of a kwestje-question does not expect the addressee to provide a true answer. (14B) merely raises the issue (perhaps teasingly) that A may have been home late. B could naturally follow up on their kwestje-interrogative as in (15):

(15) B’ K goan’t mo nie vroagen! B” Kmoeten’t nie eens weten!

I go but it not ask I must it not even know

‘I don’t even want to know.’

Hence, the goal of a kwestje-interrogative to merely raise the issue of when A got home is met, while the goal of an information-seeking question (to gain an answer) is not.

To conclude this data survey: kwestje-marked interrogatives posit a ‘question’ insofar as they express Speaker Ignorance with respect to some proposition. However, they fail to
function as questions in the discourse exchange in that they explicitly mark that an answer is not expected, that is, they lack an Addressee Compliance condition.

3 Syntax: A cartography for kwestje

Kwestje is invariant and cannot be modified. It has sometimes been classified as an adverb in the philological literature. We provisionally assume that it is a particle, and occupies a head or a specifier position. It is obligatorily on the left edge of the utterance. Because it determines speech act properties of utterances, we assume that kwestje is located in the high left periphery of the clause at the interface between the proposition and the discourse context.

3.1 Polar questions: an asymmetry

Kwestje may introduce a typical root wh-interrogative with fronted finite verb (16a), a wh-question with word order typical of embedded clause (finite verb in final position) (16b) with the wh-phrase to the left of the mandatory (agreeing) complementizer dat (i.e. a ‘doubly filled comp effect’), or a root polar question with fronted finite verb (16c). However, kwestje may not introduce a polar question with verb-final order and of (‘if’) with dat to its left (16d).

(16) a. Kwestje wanneer goat Joan kommen? b. Kwestje wanneer dat Joan goa kommen
   kwESTJE when goes Joan come kwESTJE when that Joan goes come
   Kwestje goat Joan kommen? d. *Kwestje of dat Joan goa kommen
   KWESTJE goes Joan come kwESTJE if that Joan goes come

The contrast in (16) between wh- and polar kwestje-questions shows that, unlike English whether (17a), Flemish of is not analogous to a full-fledged wh-constituent (17b; FP represents a left-peripheral maximal projection, possibly FocP).

(17) a. [ fp when/whether ] [ f ] [ tp subject finite verb]]
   b. [ fp wanneer/*of ] [ f dat] [ tp subject... finite verb]]

We start from the hypothesis that in regular embedded questions the fronted wh-constituent targets a specifier of a functional projection (‘FP’, tentatively), and that the agreeing complementizer dat occupies either the head F or a lower functional head (say Rizzi’s 1997 Fin). Let us also assume that root wh-questions with the verb fronted to a left-peripheral position are closely analogous, that the fronted wh-constituent occupies SpecFP, and that the fronted finite verb has reached at most the head F associated with the wh-phrase . If of, which precedes the embedded complementizer, is analysed as a head, it follows that it must target a higher left-peripheral head. We identify that head as Int (following Rizzi 2001 and later work).

(18) a. [ fp wh-constituent ] [ f { dat, finite verb} ] … [ tp
   b. [ inp ] [ int of ] [ fp... [ f dat] ] [ tp…

The asymmetry in the distribution of polar interrogatives in (16c) and (16d) suggests that kwestje can select (18a) but not (18b), i.e. it selects FP but not IntP.

Given kwestje’s distribution and tight link with interrogative clauses, we hypothesise that the incompatibility between kwestje and a selected IntP is because kwestje itself associates with IntP: if kwestje is a head, its incompatibility with of (also in Int) then follows.

(19) a. [ kwestje ] [ fp wh-phrase ] [ f dat ] [ tp…
   b. *[Kwestje ] [ inp ] [ int of ] [ FP ] [ F dat ] [ tp…
   c. [ inp kwestje ] [ fp ] [ finite verb ] … [ tp…

Evidence from coordination will be provided in support of this IntP hypothesis.

3.2 Non embeddability (examples 9-11)

The crucial interpretive function of kwestje is speech act related. Based on Giorgi & Pianesi’s (2005) analysis of the grammaticalization of credo, we argue kwestje encodes a [+speaker] feature that must be licensed by the temporal features of the root speech act domain.
3.2.1 Phi features on adverbial elements

According to Giorgi and Pianesi (2005), the first person present tense form *credo* (‘I believe’) developed into an epistemic adverb merged outside TP. They offer distributional evidence for this hypothesis, including that *credo* is no longer modified by typical temporal adverbs:

(20) Ieri alle cinque credo Gianni mangiasse un panino.

Yesterday at 5 (I) believe Gianni was eating a sandwich (Giorgi & Pianesi 2005 (26))

= *Gianni eating yesterday at five; ≠ I believed it yesterday at 5*

Giorgi & Pianesi (2005:136) hypothesise that *credo* as an epistemic adverb retains the phi-features of its verbal form and that these still require checking and licensing. These cannot be checked against the subject because *credo* is merged in the CP layer; therefore, they are checked by speaker coordinates in an extended left periphery.

Exploring the etymology of *kwestje*, we speculate that the formative [k] on *kwestje* overtly spells out the feature [+speaker], in the same way that -o on adverbial *credo* spells out phi-features. The formative [k] independently encodes first person in the verbal paradigm.

This [+speaker] feature on *kwestje* must be licensed. *Kwestje* itself lacks temporal features and hence does not provide the relevant coordinates (on TP or FinP). Its [+speaker] feature is licensed by association with the discourse coordinates of the root speech act related domain (Haegeman and Hill 2014 a.o). In principle, the required local licensing relation can be achieved overtly (by movement) or covertly (in situ) by an AGREE relation. The root Force head has the required local relation with the Speech Act domain, so while merged in Int, *kwestje* must attain a relation with the root Force. Hence, *kwestje*-questions are not embeddable.

3.2.3 *Kwestje* and ‘why’

On the basis of distributional evidence drawn from a range of languages, Rizzi (2001) argues that wh-phrases encoding ‘why’ are located in the specifier position of the specialised projection IntP. We will show that the distribution of WF *kwestje* in relation to *waarom* (‘why’) offers suggestive support for a movement analysis of *kwestje*.

If *kwestje* is merged in the head position Int and *waarom* (‘why’) occupies SpecInt, then the predicted word order would be that in which *waarom* precedes *kwestje*. This prediction is incorrect, as shown in (21). As shown in (22), *kwestje* precedes *waarom*.

(21) a. *Waarom kwestje heef ze dat gezeid?* (22) a. Kwestje waarom heef ze dat gezeid?
why *KWESTJE* has she that said

b. *Waarom kwestje dat ze da gezeid heet?* b. kwestje waarom dat ze da gezeid heet?
why *KWESTJE* that she that said has

We hypothesise that *kwestje* moves from its merge position Int to Force to allow the licensing of the [+speaker] feature:

(23) a. [\_FocP Kwestje [\_IntP waarom [\_Int kwestje [\_FocP [Foc have] dat gezeid]]]]

b. [\_FocP Kwestje [\_IntP waarom [\_Int kwestje [\_FocP [Foc have] dat gezeid heef]]]]

The distributional properties of *waarom* in relation to *kwestje* might thus be an overt piece of evidence – so far the only one that we have encountered – that the [+speaker] feature of *kwestje* is licensed by leftward head movement of *kwestje*. For this movement to be allowed one has to assume a version of relativized minimality according to which head movement of *kwestje* is not blocked by the phrasal *waarom* in its specifier position.

Time permitting we will also show that an alternative in situ analysis can be envisaged to account for the data in (21)-(22).
References


