# How do Remind-Me questions work again?

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## 1 Introduction

**Remind-Me questions (RMQs)** have been analysed as questions asking for an information to be repeated inside a discourse event (Sauerland & Yatsushiro 2017). This analysis accounts well for the use of English *again* or German *wieder* 'again' as triggers of RMQs, but it does not apply to other languages reusing other grammatical devices for RMQs, like Danish *nu* 'now' or French *déjà* 'already/ever'. We propose a new characterisation of RMQs as non-canonical Qs conveying both past knowledge and current ignorance. Building on this, we offer two novel analyses for the Danish and French cases, and show how they integrate into the cross-linguistic landscape of RMQ-triggers.

## 2 Characterisation of Remind-Me questions

*[All examples in this section are only displayed in English for space reason, but the (un)acceptability of RMQs was also confirmed for at least German, English and French.]*

Sauerland & Yatsushiro (2017) (S&Y henceforth) characterise RMQs as questions that can only be uttered if the answer has already been provided in the same discourse event, cf. the context in (1) where the information was provided in the discourse event but not registered by the speaker. However, such characterisation comes with three problems: first, the definition of a discourse event, even though rather loose, rules out contexts such as (2), where the speaker could not have learned the information in the discourse event, and would be expected to know it already before signing up to the book club. Second, it misses the fact that in (1), even though the speaker never knew the answer, the use of the RMQ serves the pretense that they actually did (in order to mask their impoliteness). Similarly, the context in (2) can come in two variants: the speaker (i) has genuinely forgotten who the author of *Don Quixote* is, or (ii) actually doesn't know it but, embarrassed, pretends to have only momentarily forgotten it. In the second case, the RMQ has a pretense-use, and becomes infelicitous if the speaker admits that they never knew the answer, cf. (2b). Third, S&Y's definition would predict RMQs to be accepted in immediate-repetition contexts like (3) where the answer was provided immediately before, though not heard. In such a context, a RMQ is however infelicitous (contrary to the repetition-asking expression *come again*). In fact, RMQs allow for the answer to have been accessible directly before, but only if the speaker could indeed know/register it, cf. (4).

(1) *Context: At the beginning of a reception, the names of all the participants are announced. However, I make no effort to listen. Later, I encounter you:*
What is your name again? (Sauerland & Yatsushiro 2017: p. 653)

(2) *Context: I just signed up to a prestigious Spanish book club. Just after signing up, I encounter a member of the book club, who tells me that their favourite book is* Don Quixote*:*
   a. Ah yes, *Don Quixote* is a great book... What is the name of the author again?
   b. I have never heard of that book... What is the name of the author (#again)?

(3) *Context: I am at a party and I meet you for the first time. You tell me your name, but because of the loud music, I cannot hear it and I ask you to repeat it:*

[1] All authors are first authors and are listed alphabetically.

a. #What's your name again? b. Come again, what's your name?

(4) *Context: I am telling a story, but start digressing about something else. After a 30-secondes digression, I don't remember anymore where I left my story at:*
Anyway, back to my story. Where was I again?

Thus, the trigger for the RMQ in (1)–(3) is not a previous utterance of the answer in the discourse event, but rather the supposed knowledge of the speaker, who acknowledges that they should be able to retrieve the answer on their own in usual circumstances. This explains why RMQs can sometimes act as self-addressed questions, cf. (5), especially in tip-of-the-tongue situations.

(5) *Context: I am a 96-year-old and talk to myself about my past life in order to pass the time:*
I loved playing with my dog so much back then... What was his name again? Oh well...

We propose that RMQs are non-canonical questions in Farkas (2022, 2024)'s sense, toning down Speaker ignorance to a temporary one (which explains why they can be used for pretense and face-saving situations as in (1)[2]; see also Apothéloz 2015). They prototypically signal what Bhadra (2022) calls "lost knowledge", which derives from the contrast between two different components: (i) past knowledge, and (ii) current ignorance. Since current ignorance comes for free with the question act itself, the specificity of RMQs is past knowledge, as translated in (6). Given this, it is expected that after the Addressee replies to the RMQ, the Speaker's knowledge-state will be restored to its previous state before they forgot, aligning again with the set of all p accepted by both Speaker and Addressee.

(6) $[\![\text{RMQ}]\!]^c \quad \rightsquigarrow \quad \exists t' < t_c \, [K_{Sp,t'}(\text{ANS}(\text{RMQ}))]$
*A RMQ asked in context c implies that there is a time $t'$ before the context time $t_c$ such that the speaker knew the answer to the RMQ at $t'$*

The doxastic element here is Speaker's knowledge, which unties the RMQ from the discourse event (contrary to S&Y's conception of Common Ground, tied to the discourse event and which we will discuss more in-depth in Section 4). This allows us to unify RMQs with Bhadra (2022)'s Recall-questions (expressed with *jyano* in Bangla) and widens the empirical scope of RMQs. Under this view, the main difference between RMQs across languages is whether a language has a dedicated RM-particle or whether its RM-device have a different original meaning unrelated to lost knowledge. The first category is exemplified by Bangla *jyano* and Japanese *-kke*, the second by RM-'again' in English and German. The second category poses the challenge of how the 'non-dedicated' RM-particles modify a question to derive a RMQ. In the next two sections, we will address this challenge by showcasing Danish and French RM-particles, both of which have a different temporal core meaning ('now' and 'already/ever', respectively), and sketch a way to derive lost knowledge from these meanings.

## 3 Danish *nu* 'now' as denoting current ignorance

Danish expresses RMQs using the particle *nu* 'now', cf. (7). Although it has been noted that *nu* could sometimes read as a contrastive discourse marker in declaratives (Davidsen-Nielsen 2011), with its modal use diachronically deriving from its temporal meaning (Westergaard 2021), there is to our knowledge no literature accounting for the semantic contribution of 'now' in RMQs, nor in Danish nor in its neighbouring languages (whose cognates also have a RM-use, see e.g. Finnish *nyt*, Estonian *nüüd*, and Saami *dal*).

[2]In S&Y's view, the Speaker in (1) is faithful and only acknowledges that the answer was provided in the discourse event, not that they used to know it; in our view, that Speaker is using the RM-marker to make the Addressee believe that they knew the answer (even though that is not true). In other words, the mismatch between the semantics we propose for RMQs and the real state of affair in (1) comes from the Speaker's intentions to mislead the Addressee.

(7) a. *Hvad* ***hedder*** *han nu?*
what be.called.PRS he now
'What **is** his name again?' (Danish)
b. [$_Q$ what is he called] now?

We propose that past knowledge can be derived from *nu* 'now' by pragmatic reasoning. A key assumption is that we take *nu* to make **a metapragmatic comment** on the question (König & Requardt 1991, Döring 2018, Heine et al. 2021; see also Karagjosova 2004's higher-level discourse acts), meaning roughly that *now* is the only relevant time to ask it. In (7), *nu* can only apply to the speech-act, and not the eventuality that the RMQ is about, since it would then imply that the referent's first name has changed (Altshuler (2010); this would make the sentence odd without a specific context supporting the idea that the Addressee's name might have changed). Note that RM-*nu* is also compatible with epistemic past, cf. (8). Epistemic past can also trigger RM-readings (Ippolito (2004)), making salient a past time where the answer was known, rather than modifying the eventuality time. This compatibility is expected, as they both signal lost knowledge by contrastively referring to one of its two components: past knowledge for epistemic past, and current ignorance for *nu* 'now'.

(8) *Hvad* ***var*** *det nu du* ***hed****?*
what be.PST it now you be.called.PST
'What **was** your name again?' (Danish)

(9) *Context: after checking tomorrow's movie programme yesterday:*
What was there tomorrow at the movie theater? (adapted from Ippolito 2004: (3f))
⇝ referring to the time at which the Speaker knew/learned the answer to Q
*(≈ t at which they read the movie programme)*

As a result of its metapragmatic function, *nu* relates to the question speech-act and triggers pragmatic reasoning involving two question alternatives that differ in the presence vs. absence of *nu*, [Q?+now] vs. [Q?] for short. We take a question [Q?] to convey the speaker's expectation that they will know the answer at a future time t′, cf. (10) (Farkas & Bruce 2010, Dayal 2016, Farkas 2022). Adding *nu* to the question opens up an additional contrast between ignorance at the utterance time $t_c$ and *non*-ignorance at *some time excluding* $t_c$, be it past or future:

(10) $[\![\text{Q?}]\!]^c \rightsquigarrow \exists t' > t_c\ [K_{Sp,t'}(\text{ANS(Q)})]$

(11) $[\![\text{Q?+now}]\!]^c \rightsquigarrow \exists t' > t_c\ [K_{Sp,t'}(\text{ANS(Q)})]$ *– via (10)*
$\&\ \exists t'' \neq t_c\ [K_{Sp,t''}(\text{ANS(Q)})]$ *– via 'now'*

The second conjunct C2 in (11) (arising with *nu*) is asymmetrically entailed by the first conjunct C1 coming from Q itself: C2 could target either past or future non-ignorance, a.k.a. knowledge. Since future knowledge is already stated by C1, *nu* cannot have been added to convey such a knowledge (cf. Grice 1975's Maxim of Brevity). As a result of pragmatic reasoning, it is thus understood that 'now' can only convey *past* knowledge, which derives the desired past-knowledge reading in (12).

(12) $[\![\text{Q?+now}]\!]^c \rightsquigarrow \exists t' \boxed{>} t_c\ [K_{Sp,t'}(\text{ANS(Q)})]$ *– via (10)*
$\mathbf{\&\ \exists t''\ \boxed{<}\ t_c\ [K_{Sp,t''}(ANS(Q))]}$ *– via (10) + 'now' + Gricean maxims*

One could argue that on top of adding past non-ignorance to the question (*I am ignorant now, I was not before*), RM-*nu* does evoke future non-ignorance after all (*I am ignorant now, I will not be later*), in addition to the question act itself: past knowledge combined with current ignorance amounts to forgetting, and when one forgets something, one can usually expect to remember it later. This may account for why the answer to an RMQ tends to be 'on the tip of the speaker's

tongue'. This emphatic effect would not follow directly from pragmatic reasoning, but from standard (extralinguistic) expectations associated with loss of knowledge.

Overall, the case of RM-'now' shows how a temporal device can, by applying on the speech-act itself rather than the discourse content, act as a modal marker (see also the case of epistemic past cited above, Ippolito 2004). The temporal meaning is especially relevant for RMQs whose defining features are bound in time. We extend this observation in the next section with French.

## 4 French *déjà* 'already/ever' as denoting past knowledge

French on the other hand uses the aspectual particle *déjà* 'already/ever' to express RMQs (Hansen & Strudsholm 2008, Apothéloz 2015). (Similar particles are found with North-Western Italian cognate *già*, cf. Squartini 2013, 2014, and with Slovenian *že*, cf. Marušič et al. 2016.) In its RM-use, contrary to its canonical aspectual use (see (15a)), *déjà* appears in sentence-final position (or alternatively, after the *wh*-pronoun for *in-situ* questions). Just like e.g. English, Japanese and Danish, French can use its RM-particle in combination with an epistemic past, without change in meaning.

(13) ***C'est*** *quoi ton prénom déjà ?*
it.is what your name *déjà*
'What **is** your name again?'

(14) ***C'était*** *quoi ton prénom déjà ?*
it.was what your name *déjà*
'What **was** your name again?' (French)

Even though *déjà* is usually translated as 'already', we want to point out that it also has an existential use shared with the NPI 'ever', as shown in (15). As a result, the core meaning of this existential *déjà* is a temporal one, conveying pastness with no obligatory counter-expectedness (or earliness) implication, contrary to *already* or German *schon* (Löbner 1989, Krifka 2000). We depart from previous analysis by Hansen & Strudsholm (2008), which use the notion of earliness and take RM-*déjà* to signal that now is an early time to ask the question. Such analysis would not be compatible with contexts like (5) (which readily allow for *déjà*-RMQs), and incorrectly predicts *déjà* to be available in other questions being asked surprisingly early, such as (15) where the speaker is expected to ask the question at a later stage of the dinner. Thus, we take it that Hansen & Strudsholm (2008)'s proposal cannot derive the specific reading of RMQs (past knowledge). Rather, we identify RM-*déjà* with existential *déjà*, in the sense that it refers to a proposition that the speaker once knew to be the answer to the question. In (14), RM-*déjà* and epistemic past can separately convey past speaker-knowledge of the answer, rather than interacting with each other at the level of the eventuality that the question is about: neither conveys anything about the time of the name-eventuality that is asked about. As a result, both (13) and (14) are strictly equivalent.

(15) a. *Qui a déjà visité Paris ?*
who has *déjà* visited Paris
'Who has ever visited Paris?' / 'Who visited Paris before?' *(Canonical use)*

b. *Qui a visité Paris déjà ?*
who has visited Paris *déjà*
'Who visited Paris again?' *(RM use)*

(16) Context: *I am at a very fancy restaurant serving a 5-course mystery menu (where each course is a surprise). But even before discovering the first course, I am impatient about the dessert:*

a. *#C'est quoi le dessert déjà ?*
#it.is what the dessert *déjà*
*Intended:* 'What's the dessert already?'

In Section 2 we argued, against S&Y, that RMQs are not about the CG (defined as the set of all propositions added in the discourse event), but about (the loss of) speaker-knowledge. We now

revisit the definition of CG to make it relevant to our discussion, and propose that it actually consists of the set of all propositions accepted by the interlocutors (implicitly or explicitly, cf. Stalnaker 1974, 2002; but see also Repp 2013 for an extension). As long as none of these propositions has been explicitly rejected, they still belong to the CG, no matter if both interlocutors still remember them or not. As a consequence of that, the CG is not subsumed under Speaker's knowledge anymore: forgotten propositions belong to the CG, but are not part of Speaker's knowledge.

Having this distinction in mind, we now turn to *déjà*-RMQs, and propose that they are **inquiries into the CG**: the loss of knowledge they signal is about one specific CG-proposition, namely the answer to the question. In other words, French *déjà*-RMQs can be seen as implicit acknowledgments that the answer to the question is *already* part of the CG, with the question act itself signaling the speaker's temporary lack of access to this answer, thereby revealing a tension between the CG and their state of knowledge. To make this idea more explicit, we assume a *déjà*-RMQ [Q-*déjà*] to have a denotation along the lines of (18) (for ease of exposition, we represent *déjà* as 'already', despite our above concerns regarding the correspondence). This denotation is based on the standard assumption in (17) that a question denotes a set of possible answers. In a *déjà*-RMQ, this set is further constrained by the requirement for each potential answer to 'already' be in the CG.

(17) $[\![[_{Q}$ what's your name$]]\!]$ = {p: p is a possible answer to Q}
{*your name is honoré, your name is victor, your name is emile...*}

(18) $[\![[_{Q}$ what's your name]-***déjà***$]\!]$ = {p: p is a possible answer to Q **& p is *already* in the CG**}
{*your name is honoré* ***& this is already in CG****, your name is victor* ***& this is already in CG****, your name is emile* ***& this is already in CG****...*}

Under the account sketched in (18), the definition of a *déjà*-RMQ is more restrictive than the definition of its bare counterpart Q, thus making an answer to the RMQ a potential subset of the answer to Q. This predicts that a complete true (exhaustive) answer to the RMQ can in principle correspond to a partial ('mention-some') answer to the bare counterpart Q, if the CG only contains this partial answer. This prediction is borne out in (19), where the expected answer to the RMQ is only what used to be shared knowledge. In (19), this knowledge amounts to a partial answer to Q (the bike), which makes the exhaustive answer to the RMQ necessarily partial as well (only the bike is targeted): the more complete answer to Q (including further items than the bike) is infelicitous as a reply to the RMQ, as it adds information that was not asked for, despite the fact that it constitutes an answer to the bare Q, and would thus misleadingly convey that more than a single item had already been added to CG. Hence, there is a divergence between what counts as an exhaustive answer to the RMQ and to the 'bare' Q itself, as the first one can only target propositions from the CG.

(19) *Context: A always has a hundred wishes for Christmas, but they only told B about one of them: "This year, I want a bike among other things!" Unfortunately, B forgot. B asks A:*

a. Question from B: *Qu'est-ce que tu veux pour Noël* ***déjà*** *?*
what=is=DEM COMP you want for Christmas *déjà*
'What do you want for Christmas again?'

b. Expected answer from A: ✓a bike
# a bike, a new computer, pencils, books...

## 5 Conclusion and outlook

We have shown that RMQs could be characterised as non-canonical questions emphasising a state of temporary ignorance by contrast with a general supposed state of knowledge (the speaker should

know the answer), thus partially overlapping with self-addressed questions (Farkas 2024). Such characterisation explains why, cross-linguistically, epistemic past is the most common device to express RMQs (Ippolito 2004, Sauerland & Yatsushiro 2017: a.o.), and why the two grammatical devices introduced in this paper originate from a temporal meaning, deriving their RM-reading at the metapragmatic level. In the present paper, we thus contribute to the taxonomy of RM-triggers, and more generally, we show yet another case where epistemicity can be derived from a non-dedicated device (in contrast with Bhadra 2022's Bangla RM-*jyano*, e.g.).

Our analysis of RMQs is of further importance for the linguistics and philosophy of knowledge, as it shows that, pragmatically, there are different types of ignorance, and speaker-knowledge can be temporarily misaligned with the CG consisting of all propositions mutually accepted. Thus, forgetting differs from not knowing as it only affects the epistemic state of the speaker without also affecting the CG. The notion of CG we are entertaining here is somewhat less dynamic than standardly assumed in virtue of tracking neither knowledge nor belief. We leave it to future research to assess if this notion, which proves useful in the cases under consideration, can apply to further phenomena.

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