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**Strategic Functions of Questions and Ambiguity.  
A Comparison between German and Swedish**

**Abstract**

The talk focuses on the strategic functions of *Wh*-questions at the Syntax-Discourse Interface comparing two closely related Germanic languages, German and Swedish. *Wh*-questions are in both languages ambiguous in several respects and require the use of additional devices in order to be interpreted as explicit strategies for marking certain expectations on the answers in the communicative situation. Especially the marking of "real", information-eliciting questions and the signalling of "rhetorical questions" have a relevant strategic function, by opening different possibilities and imposing different constraints on the answers. The requirements on the marking of an expected empty set in the answer and the need for a referential specification of the *Wh*-element seem to be language-specific. Swedish and German show considerable differences in the syntactic realization of *Wh*-questions and in their mapping to discourse strategies.

*Wh*-questions in Swedish without additional lexical or syntactic marking show a strong tendency to be interpreted as rhetorical questions (1) and require special syntactic marking for the expectation of referential specification by clefts (2).

- (1) Vem vill göra det?  
who wants do it
- (2) Vem är det som vill göra det?  
who is it that wants do it

In contrast, *Wh*-questions in German prefer strategically referential specification of the *Wh*-element (even if the case cannot be excluded that the answer given by the hearer – *no*, *nobody*, *nothing* etc. – does not correspond to the expectations). The additional marking of an expected empty set is essential in German and can be achieved by the use of modal particles (e.g. *schon*, *auch*) in rhetorical questions.

- (3) Wer schon will das tun?  
who 'schon' wants this do  
'Who ever wants to do this?'

The use of other modal particles in German (e.g. *denn*, *nun*) is, however, also possible (but not obligatory) in *Wh*-questions (5). Modal particles in German questions can be relevant strategic devices for requiring a referential specification in the answer making possible close equivalents to the clefted *Wh*-questions in Swedish (4):

- (4) Vad är det som har försvunnit?  
who is it that has disappeared
- (5) Was ist denn verschwunden?  
who is 'denn' disappeared

Our analysis is based on corpus evidence provided by the comparison of Swedish *Wh*-questions in Sjövall-Wahlöö's Martin Beck detective series and their translations into German by Eckehard Schulz. The quantitative and qualitative aspects of the empirical investigation demonstrate convincingly the cross-linguistic differences between German and Swedish w.r.t. the distribution and discourse-semantic effects of *Wh*-questions in these two languages.