

Unit 4: INDIRECT QUESTIONS

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIRECT AND INDIRECT QUESTIONS

An indirect question is a question embedded inside a statement (i.e., a declarative sentence), another question (i.e., an interrogative sentence), or an order.

- **Direct question:**

Where is the bank?

- **Indirect question:**

Could you tell me where the bank is?

Examples:

- I wonder whether Anne is happy.

The embedded direct question is *Is Anne happy?*.

This is a direct question within a statement, i.e., within a declarative sentence.

- Do you know if anyone was listening?

The embedded direct question is *Was anyone listening?*. This is a direct question within a question, i.e., within an interrogative sentence.

- Please find out what time the train is due.

The embedded direct question is *What time is the train due?*. This is a direct question within an order, i.e., within an imperative sentence.)

Notice that in the indirect question the verb *is* comes after the subject *the bank*, in the same way as in a positive sentence (i.e. *The bank is over there.*), but in the direct question the verb *is* comes before the subject *the bank*, which is called inversion.

Inversion is used to make direct questions in many verb tenses in English, but we don't use inversion in indirect questions. This is very similar to the grammar of reported questions.

However, we use indirect questions in a different way from reported questions. Indirect questions are a way of being polite. They are very, very common in English, especially when you're talking to someone you don't know.

YES / NO QUESTIONS

When the direct question is a yes/no question, the indirect question will start with **if** or **whether**.

- I'm asking *if / whether* you are cold.

When using the *Present* or *Past Simple* of any verb except *be*, you form direct questions by using *do / does / did*. When we want to make indirect yes / no questions using these tenses, we need **if** and we don't need the auxiliary verb.

WH QUESTIONS

When the direct question starts with a question word like *how, what, when, where, which, who, whose, or why* (called interrogative pronouns or interrogative adjectives), the indirect question will start with the question word, but the word order not inverted.

- I'm asking what the time is.

The embedded direct question is *What time is it?*. Notice that the indirect question has the word order *the time is* (i.e., subject + verb) not *is the time* (i.e., verb + subject). In other words, an indirect question has the same word order as a statement, not a question.)

- I'm asking where you are going.
- I don't know who my grandfather was; I am much more concerned to know what his grandson will be. (American president Abraham Lincoln)

Common Problems

It can be difficult to remember to put the verb after the subject, especially when the indirect question is in the present simple tense of *be*. For example, we need to say:

- Could you tell me where the station is?
NOT:
- ~~Could you tell me where is the station?~~

EXERCISES

- [Exercise 1 \(Present Simple tense\)](#)
- [Exercise 2 \(Past Simple tense\)](#)
- [Exercise 3 \(Modal verbs\)](#)