The Syntax of Mean
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The aim of this paper is to examine what syntactic categories mean may take as complements, analyzing the syntactic structure of (1) from the minimalist perspective.

(1) What do you mean that I’m a liar?

Mean takes a DP or a clausal complement, but not both simultaneously.

(2) a. Do you mean me?
   b. Do you mean that I’m a liar?
   c. *Do you mean me that I’m a liar?

Given the ungrammaticality of (2)c, the grammaticality of (1) is surprising, because it follows that mean can take both a DP and a clausal complement simultaneously, if the former is a wh-phrase. Moreover, it is intriguing that what in (1) does not seem to have a gap associated with it in the sentence. Thus, what appears to be base-generated in the matrix SpecCP.

However, for the following two reasons, I propose that what in (1) actually has undergone wh-movement. (i) what seems to bear uninterpretable features (i.e. Case- and Q-features). However, these features could not be checked in overt syntax if what is base-generated in the matrix SpecCP, because under the standard mechanisms (e.g. Chomsky 2001), the matrix v and C must establish Agree (probe-goal) relations with what in order to check them. (ii) Lasnik and Saito (1992) observe that wh-in-situ cannot be modified by the hell, as in (3)a, whereas (3)b shows that what in (1) can.

(3) a. *Who read what the hell?
   b. What the hell do you mean that I’m a liar?

The question is where what in (1) is base-generated. Given that mean basically cannot take both a DP and a clausal complement simultaneously, the most plausible candidate seems to be the position for a DP taking an appositive clause; namely, the position for the idea in (4).

(4) Do you mean the idea that I’m a liar?

However, since the appositive clause forms a constituent with the DP, as in (5)a, it seems implausible that what has undergone wh-movement from this position, stranding the appositive clause behind, as in (5)b.

(5) a. Do you mean [DP the [NP idea [CP that I’m a liar ] ] ]?
   b. What, do you mean [DP [NP the [CP that I’m a liar ] ] ]?

Thus, I propose that mean may take an “appositive CP” as a complement, illustrated in (6)a. (6)b shows that what, base-generated in the embedded SpecCP, is accessible to the matrix v in
accordance with the Phase Impenetrability Condition. Thus, *what* moves to the matrix SpecCP via the matrix vP, having the uninterpretable features checked off.

(6)  a. \([\text{CP } \text{what } [C' \text{ that I'm a liar }]]\)
    b. What, do you \([vP t_t \text{ mean } [\text{CP}_t t_t [C' \text{ that I'm a liar }]]]?)

One important consequence is that v may be able to establish an Agree relation with an XP in the base-generated SpecCP, which is inherently an A'-position by definition. Thus, the Agree-related movement illustrated in (6)b should not be allowed, even under Chomsky’s (2005) characterization of the A/A’-distinction.

Thus, in support of the traditional characterization of A/A’-distinction, I make two assumptions.

One is that an XP in the base-generated SpecCP can enter into an Agree relation with v if it is: (i) coindexed with an element bearing a θ-role, and (ii) has both A- and A’-properties. In (6)b, *what* is coindexed with the whole embedded CP that bears a propositional θ-role and has both A- and A’-properties (i.e. Case- and Q-features), thus entering into an Agree relation with the matrix v.

The other is that on the way to the matrix SpecCP, *what* in (1) adjoins to SpecvP, where its accusative Case is checked off (cf. Kayne 1984, Ura 1993). What is crucial is that the vP-adjunction results in exactly the same configuration as that for object shift, which is substitution into the outer SpecvP, as shown in (7):

(7)  \([vP \text{what}_t [vP t_{SUBJ} \text{ mean } [\text{CP}_t t_t [C' \text{ that I'm a liar }]]] \] )

Note that the vP in (7) should have been spelled out at the point where the matrix C enters the structure. Thus, given two distinct derivations targeting the vP, economy considerations should prefer the more economical one over the other. However, given that vP-adjunction and object shift are configurationally equivalent, both derivations should be equally economical, and the differences reduce to the A/A’-distinction alone. Notice that under Case-checking via vP-adjunction, *what* in (1) does not have to stop by at any A-position throughout the A’-movement from the embedded to the matrix SpecCP.

References
Chomsky, Noam. 2005. On phases. Ms. MIT.