

Wh-interrogatives at the Prosody-Syntax-Pragmatics Crossroad

Project Summary

Many interesting and influential theoretical claims have been made in generative syntax based upon the scope interpretations of Wh-questions in Japanese. It is well-known, however, that many of the syntactic judgments reported there are fuzzy, unstable and variable. The most common approach to this problem in the field has been to suppress such chaos, appealing to "dialectal variations," and to pursue an analysis in accordance with each researcher's own intuition. Several recent research papers are converging on the evocation that the study of formal aspects of grammar should be conducted with careful attention to a larger context of language, and that exercising such caution may be the key to bring back order to the chaos of the field.

INTELLECTUAL MERIT: One of the goals of this project is to build up a more precise, objective and consensual research method than those generally exercised in the formal approach to language, which will yield immeasurable intellectual merit to the field of linguistics. There are several basic tactics that are adopted in this research program. First, those uncertain aspects of grammaticality judgments — fuzziness, instability and variation — are carefully reanalyzed and characterized, taking prosody and pragmatic factors (information structure in particular) into consideration. Crucially, they are treated as the target of explanation rather than irreconcilable contradiction. Second, with a more precise and reliable methodology of eliciting data, currently available theories of Wh-interrogatives will be reevaluated, and some new analyses will be presented. Third, as a subcomponent of the project, several phonetic and psycholinguistic experiments will be carried out in order to verify and consolidate the initial observations and intuitions concerning the direct and indirect influence of extra-syntactic factors on the interpretation of Wh-questions and a focus construction in general. It will be shown that the integration of prosody and information structure into the formal studies of Wh-interrogatives does not threaten the autonomy of syntax, the core assumption in most of the syntactic theories. Rather, such an approach is essential in order to give a clear definition of the empirical domain for formal syntax. The theoretical component of the project will be conducted collaboratively by the two PIs while the PIs and the two main collaborators in Japan will work closely in the experimental module. The combined expertise of the four linguists covers the diversity the project requires: Phonetics-Phonology, Syntax, Semantics-Pragmatics, and Psycholinguistics.

BROADER IMPACTS: The unfortunate tendency in the field of linguistics has been that sounds, structure and meanings, and their processing are investigated separately by the researchers in each subfield of linguistics, and their findings are rarely integrated in a systematic way. Involving close collaboration by the researchers with different expertise, this project has great potential to initiate a step toward more productive integration of the subfields of linguistics. The educational and professional merits go beyond the graduate assistants for the project, who are undoubtedly the primary beneficiaries. Developing a course on the theme of the project is an important part of the project, and such a course will be useful for graduate students of linguistics in general.

The following highlights the project plans:

- Wh-questions in Japanese are taken up as the main empirical domain of investigation.
- In addition to the weekly meetings between the PIs and the RAs, the PIs and the collaborators in Japan will meet twice each year to oversee the progress of the experimental section of the project and discuss its theoretical implication.
- In the final year, University of Delaware will host an international conference on the theme of the project, in which the core members of the project will participate as presenters and/or panel discussion leaders. The conference will also include papers selected from the general submission and be open to public.
- The results of the project will be reported in research articles and conference papers individually or collectively by the members of the project, as they become available.
- The main empirical findings and theoretical conclusions will be consolidated and summarized in a book form at the end of the project.