

Deconstructing (non-)canonical questions in English: a cross-modular approach

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In this talk, I explore the complex syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic properties of several canonical and non-canonical questions in North American English. Questions (in this language) are often characterized by a combination of morphosyntactic and prosodic cues and a requirement to provide the speaker with the resolution of a choice between propositional alternatives. Nevertheless, it has proven difficult to identify the characteristic cues that mark questions as questions without drawing on their functions as questions (Gazdar 1981, Beyssade & Marandin 2007). This circular nature of the notion of questionhood suggests that we require a new approach of characterizing questions and the cues that help us identify them. In search of such a characterization, I survey the form and functions of seven different phenomena in English that can all be considered questions: polarity questions, content questions, alternative questions, declarative questions, echo questions, high-rise questions and utterances with a rise-fall-rise contour.

For their analysis, I propose a syntactic account which incorporates the prosodic and pragmatic properties under the assumption that syntax is best equipped for mediating between different forms and functions. I decompose canonical and non-canonical questions into different configurations of two pragmatic variables which interact with the morphosyntactic information. These pragmatic parameters, which I refer to as Commitment and Engagement, are prosodically encoded through the shape of the sentence-final contour (Heim 2019). Commitment, which captures the degree to which the speaker publicly commits to the truth of a proposition, is encoded through the duration of the final contour. Engagement, which captures the degree to which the addressee is expected to resolve a propositional choice, is encoded through the pitch excursion of the sentence final contour. This allows us both to reconceptualize the pragmatic properties of different questions and to explain how prosody complements morphosyntactic cues in encoding them.

This talk, therefore, provides three components to a deconstruction of canonical and noncanonical questions in English. Empirically, it demonstrates that prosody plays an important role in encoding them independently of the contribution of morphosyntactic information (cf. Sadock 1974, Levinson 1983). Analytically, it proposes a reconceptualization of different question types that builds on pragmatic variables prominent in the recent speech act literature (Gunlogson 2008, Beyssade & Marandin 2006, Krifka 2015). Theoretically, it introduces a syntactocentric framework that can integrate the prosodic and pragmatic information with a conservative machinery that can be independently motivated by the properties of discourse particles in various unrelated languages (Hageman & Hill 2013, Heim et al 2016, Wiltschko & Heim 2016).

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