

What's in a question?

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Hadas Kotek
Yale University

linguistics.uci.edu

One of the most important goals of linguistic theory is to identify the elementary operations involved in the expression of complex meanings. The task of identifying the set of syntactic and semantic operations available in grammar – and diagnosing which operation is used when – remains one of the most difficult challenges in current research.

In this talk I investigate the structure and interpretation of questions. A wide range of operations has been proposed for the composition of questions, including movement, focus-alternatives computation, choice functions, unselective binding, and type-shifting. These operations are all adopted and used by contemporary linguists studying questions and related phenomena. Given the strength inherent in each of these operations, we must ask ourselves two important questions: (a) Does grammar indeed avail itself of all these operations? and (b) If multiple operations are available to the grammar, can we identify which operation is used at which time?

I will argue based on evidence from sentence processing and from the behavior of island effects and intervention effects in English questions that at least two distinct operations – movement and focus-alternatives computation – must exist side by side. Nonetheless, I show that these operations are constrained in a way that makes them learnable and predictable in a given context, suggesting a clear underlying systematicity to the composition of a question.