

50th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea

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Why Is ‘Why’ Unique? Its Syntactic and Semantic Properties

Meeting description

It has been known for about 20 years that ‘why’ differs from other wh-elements syntactically, semantically and pragmatically: (i) for instance, unlike other wh-elements, ‘why’ can co-occur with focused elements, and this imposes different conditions on what can count as a possible answer to a why-question (Bromberger 1992), (ii) the latter trigger implicatures which are different from those of non-why-questions (Bromberger 1992), (iii) ‘why’ does not leave a trace or a copy within the IP, (iv) its peculiar properties extend to the PF interface as it exhibits special intonational contours.

Several authors have argued that unlike other wh-elements, the adjunct ‘why’ (and its equivalent in other languages) is externally merged in the left periphery of the clause (Rizzi 1990, 2001, Hornstein 1995, Ko 2005, Stepanov and Tsai 2008, Thornton 2008), or that it moves locally within the left periphery (Shlonsky and Soare 2011).

‘Why’ and ‘for which reason’ in multiple wh-constructions

One of the main goals of this workshop is to look into the distribution of ‘why’ and its counterpart ‘for which reason’ in multiple wh-constructions. Cross-linguistically, they may have distinct categorial status, which then has consequences on their merge positions.

‘Why’ and locality

Assuming that ‘why’ is merged in Spec InterrogativeP, it is not sensitive to any intervention effects. However, in long-distance construals, it has been argued that the target of movement of ‘why’ is FocusP (Rizzi 2001). Hence it is expected to give rise to minimality effects. The workshop proposes to investigate such cases further.

Acquisition of ‘why’

In point of acquisition, Thornton (2008) argues that the child acquiring English initially adopts the parametric properties of ‘why’ of Italian-like languages thus providing an important example of parametric discontinuity, meaning that the child adopts one value and then switches to another one. This raises the question of what determines the initial discontinuity, and the later convergence to the target value.

Call for Papers:

It has been known for about 20 years that 'why' differs from other wh-elements in point of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. This workshop aims at bringing together researchers working on any of these aspects which single out 'why'.

We welcome contributions exploring the above-mentioned topics and others including (but not limited to) the following research questions:

- How does 'why' behave in wh-in-situ languages? Is there a difference between partial wh-in-situ language like French (in main clauses) and true wh-in-situ languages? How does it behave in other languages?
- If 'why' is externally merged in the left periphery, does one find languages with a dedicated overt particle?
- What properties make 'why' attach to anything unlike other wh-elements (Why this book? Vs. *How/*When this book?) (see also de Villiers 1991, 1996)
- The acquisition results underscoring the specificities of 'why' are related to corpus study. Can one submit the properties of 'why' to experimentation?
- At the PF interface, 'why' has special intonational contours. Work on different languages is further needed to pursue this line of experimental investigation.

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