

PS #1: Sluicing, how languages vary, and what this teaches us [rev. 2]

The English examples in (1) show a rule of syntax that we discussed informally in class, called *wh-movement*. The bracketed phrases *what he bought* and *who bought it* function as the direct object of *know* and are called "embedded questions". *Wh-movement* is happening inside the embedded questions:

- (1) a. John bought something, but I don't know [*what he bought* ____].
b. Someone bought the painting, but I don't know [*who* ____ bought it].

Consider now the examples in (2). These sentences have the same meaning as the corresponding examples in (1) but seem to have only a *wh-word* as the direct object of *know*. The phenomenon seen in (2) goes by the somewhat bizarre name of **Sluicing**.

- (2) a. John bought something, but I don't know [*what*].
b. Someone bought the painting, but I don't know [*who*].

Clearly, in some sense, the bracketed portions of (2) do the same "job" as the fuller forms in (1). But how does this work, exactly? Consider two possibilities:

Possibility 1: The "ellipsis" hypothesis

- A "sluiced" expression like the bracketed portions of (2a-b) is a full clause (i.e. an embedded question) in which *wh-movement* has occurred.
- After *wh-movement* happens, an optional process of **ellipsis** applies. **Ellipsis** is a deletion rule that eliminates a specific portion of the clause, leaving only the remainder of the clause pronounced.
- Ellipsis of a phrase X is possible only if X is *identical to* a phrase found elsewhere in the sentence or discourse (its "antecedent") — except for the replacement of words like *someone* in the antecedent with *wh-words* like *what*.¹
- If this possibility is on the right track, the bracketed portion of (2a) has exactly the same syntax as the bracketed portion of (1a), except that ellipsis has gotten rid of everything except the moved *wh-phrase* *what*: e.g. ...*but I don't know [what he bought ____]*.

Possibility 2: The "what you see is what you get" hypothesis

- A sluiced expression like the bracketed portions of (2a-b) is *not* a full clause in which *wh-movement* has occurred. It is just a simple *wh-phrase* that happens to function as the direct object of *know*. What you see is what you get.
- The semantic component of language assigns a meaning to a *wh-phrase* in this construction which is *similar* to the meaning of an embedded question like *what John bought*, but arises from a very different syntax.

- Thus, a phrase like *I don't know what* in (2a) simply means something like 'I don't know the identity of the inanimate object involved in this situation'. This is possible simply because *the inanimate object involved in this situation* is one of the things that the word *what* can mean. A speaker of English uses his general knowledge about the topics under discussion to figure out which "object" is being referred to — e.g. the thing that John bought in (2a).
- If this possibility is on the right track, the bracketed portion of a sentence like (2a) does *not* have the same syntax as the bracketed portion of (1a), and no ellipsis takes place in Sluicing.

Question 1:

The examples in (3) and (4) provide the basis of an *argument* for one of these possibilities over the other. Give the argument. (If you think the opposing hypothesis can be rescued — for example by making it a bit more precise — do so.) Make sure you mention each relevant example. Feel free to add other examples of your own.

- (3) a. *There was a fatal accident on I-95, but I don't know *who*.
b. *Yesterday was election day, but I don't know *who*.
c. *Today's my birthday, but I don't know *what*.
- (4) a. *John bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *who*.
b. *John bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *what*.
c. *Someone bought the painting yesterday, but I don't know *what*.
d. *John bought something yesterday, but I don't know *who*.

Question 2:

Recall the following contrast between English and Russian discussed in class:

- (5) a. Mary was talking about something, but I don't know *about what* she was talking.
b. Mary was talking about something, but I don't know *what* she was talking *about*.
- (6) a. Mary was talking with someone, but I don't know *with whom* she was talking.
b. Mary was talking with someone, but I don't know *who* she was talking *with*.
- (7) a. Maša govorila o čem-to, no ja ne znaju o čem ona govorila ____.
Masha spoke about something but I not know about what she spoke
b. *Maša govorila o čem-to, no ja ne znaju čem ona govorila o ____.
- (8) a. Maša govorila s kem-to, no ja ne znaju s kem ona govorila ____.²
Masha spoke with someone but I not know with whom she spoke
b. *Maša govorila s kem-to, no ja ne znaju kem ona govorila s ____.

¹ Sluicing doesn't actually require the specific words *someone* or *something*. Other "indefinite" phrases like *a certain book* are also fine — but let's ignore that here.

² *Kem* is a form of *kto* used with certain prepositions. Likewise *čem* is a form of *čto* used with certain (other) prepositions. None of the starred sentences improve if a different form of *kto* or *čto* is used.

Russian has Sluicing, as shown in (9):

- (9) a. Ivan kupil čto-to, no ja ne znaju čto on kupil ____.
 Ivan bought something but I not know what he bought
 'Ivan bought something, but I don't know what he bought.'
- b. Ivan kupil čto-to, no ja ne znaju čto.
 'Ivan bought something, but I don't know what.'

Consider now a striking contrast between English Sluicing and Russian Sluicing. This contrast argues for one of the two possible analyses of Sluicing over the other. **State the argument carefully, making explicit reference to the examples.**

- (10) a. Mary was talking about something, but I don't know *about what*.
 b. Mary was talking about something, but I don't know *what*.
- (11) a. Maša govorila o čem-to, no ja ne znaju o čem.
 b. *Maša govorila o čem-to, no ja ne znaju čem.
- (12) a. Mary was talking with someone, but I don't know with *whom*.
 b. Mary was talking with someone, but I don't know *who*.³
- (13) a. Maša govorila s kem-to, no ja ne znaju s kem.
 b. *Maša govorila s kem-to, no ja ne znaju kem.

Question 3:

Here are some facts from a variety of languages (and there's many more where these came from — a monograph by Jason Merchant with data from scads of languages) that should strengthen the argument you made in answer to Question 2. Explain!

Basque

- (14) a. *Nor ekin hitzegin zuen ____?*
 who with talk-to AUX
 'Who did he talk with?'
- b. **Nor hitzegin zuen ____ ekin.*
- (15) a. *Ana-k norbait ekin hitzegin zuen, baina ez dakit nor ekin.*
 Ana-ERG⁴ someone with talk.to AUX but not know who with
 'Ana spoke to someone, but I don't know with whom.'
- b. **Ana-k norbait ekin hitzegin zuen, baina ez dakit nor.*

³ Do not worry about *who* vs. *whom*, which is largely (though not entirely) a matter of prescriptive grammar.

⁴ ERG='ergative', a suffix that indicates that *Ana* is the subject of a sentence (that also contains a direct object).

Moroccan Arabic

- (16) a. *M^{ca} mⁿ tk' llem Driss ____?*
 with who spoke Driss
- b. **Mⁿ tk' llem Driss m^{ca} ____?*
- (17) a. *Driss tk' llem m^{ca} šiwah' d, walakin ma ^craft š m^{ca} mⁿ.*
 Driss talked with someone but not know NEG with who
 'Driss talked with someone, but I don't know with whom.'
- b. **Driss tk' llem m^{ca} šiwah' d, walakin ma ^craft š mⁿ.*

Frisian

- (18) a. *Mei wa hat Piet sprutsen?*
 with whom has Piet spoken
- b. *Wa hat Piet mei ____ sprutsen?*⁵
- (19) a. *Piet hat mei ien sprutsen, mar ik wyt net mei wa.*
 Piet has with someone spoken, but I know not with whom
- b. *Piet hat mei ien sprutsen, mar ik wyt net wa.*

Swedish

- (20) a. *Med vem har Per talat?*
 With whom has Peter spoken
- b. *Vem har Pet talat med?*
- (21) a. *Petur har talat med någon; jag vet inte med vem.*
 Peter has spoken with someone; I know not with whom
- b. *Petur har talat med någon; jag vet inte vem.*

Question 4 (open-ended, but just give me a few sentences):

How does this problem set reflect what we discussed in the first class. If it adds something to what we discussed (besides an intimate acquaintance with Sluicing), state what it adds and how.

⁵ That's right, no star.