Prominence and Locality in Grammar:
The Syntax and Semantics of Wh-Questions and Reflexives

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the syntax and semantics of wh-questions and reflexives, and shows that, although wh-questions and reflexives belong to two different domains of study, their interpretation is basically constrained by the same factors: prominence and locality. Specifically, this dissertation shows that locality is used to guarantee the priority of the prominent wh-word in wh-movement so as to derive the pair-list reading in multiple wh-questions, whereas prominence defines the binding domain of reflexives in natural language.

The first part of the dissertation discusses how wh-questions are formed and how wh-elements are interpreted in Chinese and English, and shows that the formation and interpretation of wh-questions are constrained by some economy considerations, specifically, the Pure Clausal Typing Condition (PCTC) and the Principle of Economy (PE), both of which incorporate the above mentioned two
factors: prominence and locality. PCTC is a pure locality condition established on the notion of closeness, according to which a clause prefers to be typed by the closest wh-phrase. PE involves the interaction of prominence and locality, according to which a wh-phrase closer to the left periphery of the clause should generally move into [Spec, CP] first in multiple wh-questions, not only because the relevant movement is preferred by the locality condition, but also because the relevant wh-phrase is prominent in the Prominence Hierarchy, due to the fact that only a prominent wh-phrase can license wh-phrases following it to produce the pair-list reading.

The dissertation also discusses wh-island effects in English and Chinese, and unlike previous claims made in the literature, it argues that the so-called wh-island effects in English are also observed in Chinese. The dissertation employs PCTC and the principle of economy (PE) to explain why wh-island effects are observed in natural language. It also discusses the A-not-A question and the asymmetry between weishenme ‘why’ and other wh-expressions in Chinese, and argues that when weishenme or the A-not-A element occurs in a strong island, they cannot take wide scope since they cannot be interpreted with the relevant C via either the Agree operation or the choice function.

The second part of the dissertation proposes a unified account for both the non-contrastive compound reflexive and the bare reflexive in Chinese, and shows that they are constrained by the same reflexive binding condition proposed in this work, though they employ different definitions of the most prominent NPs to determine their binding domains. On the basis of an assumption made in Huang and Tang (1991), this dissertation derives the long distance (LD) binding properties of ziji from its lack of phi-features and referential features and shows that it is
constrained by the same binding condition that applies to the compound reflexive in Chinese. The dissertation uses the feature-searching engines to define the binding domains of reflexives. It claims that the binding domains for both compound and bare reflexives are determined by the candidate set related to the most prominent NP chosen by the relevant searching engines. Under the analysis assumed in this work, the compound reflexive, due to its lack of only the referential feature, depends on the R-engine (referential feature searching engine) to determine its binding domain, whereas the bare reflexive ziji employs the R-engine and the P-engine (phi-feature searching engine) to determine its binding domain, because, different from the compound reflexive like ta-ziji, ziji lacks both the referential feature and the phi-feature. Hence, the binding domain of ziji is determined by the union of the two candidate sets related to the two most prominent NPs chosen by the two searching engines. When the binding domain of the reflexive is defined, the blocking effect will be derived if it is bound outside of that domain.

This work shows that prominence and locality are two important factors in grammar, which can account for not only the interpretation of wh-questions, but also the interpretation of reflexives.
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