

### Focus and wh-questions in Mongolian

In the following we present some new data about Mongolian focus and wh-questions, which - we think - may be significant for the general discussion about a) the semantics of questions and b) exhaustiveness of focus.

#### Two types of wh-questions in Mongolian

In Mongolian, like in Persian, French etc. (see Cheng 1991 & subsequent), *wh*-words in questions may appear either in-situ, (1a), or fronted, i.e. ex-situ, (2a). In addition, in the standard answer to the two question types, the focused constituent will appear either in situ or ex-situ depending on the question type, as in (1b) vs. (2b).

There is a very clear intuition about the semantic correlate: the question in (2a) is presuppositional, while (1a) is not. The fact that (1a) is non-presuppositional is shown by the fact that *nobody* is a perfect answer, for (2a) on the other hand it is out. In fact, if answering (2a) with *nobody*, the most likely interpretation is that the speaker doesn't want to tell, whom Peter kissed.

Finally, (2b) is interpreted exhaustively, while (1b) is not. Both in (1b) and in (2b), *Mary* is prosodically prominent.

- (1) a. *Peter hen-ig uns-sen be?*  
Peter who-ACC kiss-PST Q  
'Whom did Peter kiss?'
- b. *Peter Maria-g uns-sen.*  
Peter Maria-ACC kiss-PST  
'Peter kissed Maria (and maybe someone else, too).'
- c. Peter nobody kissed.
- (2) a. *Hen-ig Peter uns-sen be?*  
who-ACC Peter kiss-PST Q  
'Whom did Peter kiss?'
- b. *Maria-g Peter uns-sen.*  
Maria-ACC Peter kiss-PST  
'Peter kissed Maria (and noone else).'
- c. #Nobody Peter kissed.

The contrast is stable in embedded clauses, and ex situ *wh*-words are not sensitive to *wh*-island constraints, as shown in (3) and (4). We conclude that *wh*-fronting in Mongolian classical *wh*-movement, rather it is semantic feature driven.

- (3) *Hen-ig George tan' -dag gej Maria gaih-san be?*  
Who-ACC George know-HAB that Maria surprise-PST Q  
'Who is it that Mary is surprised that George knows'
- (4) *Hen-ig Maria George tan' -dag gej gaih-san be?*  
Who-ACC Maria George know-HAB that surprise-PST Q  
'Who is it that Mary is surprised that George knows'

#### DOM and wh-movement

In Mongolian fronted *wh*-question-words for non-human direct objects are obligatorily - *ig* marked, in situ question words are optionally marked.

- (5) a. *Peter yu-g har-san be?*  
Peter what-ACC see-PST Q  
'What did Peter see?'

- b. *Peter* *yu* *har-san be?*  
 Peter what see-PST Q  
 'What did Peter see?'
- (6) a. *yu-g* *Peter* *har-san be?*  
 what-ACC Peter see-PST Q  
 'What did Peter see?'
- b. \* *yu* *Peter* *har-san be?*  
 what Peter see-PST Q  
 'What did Peter see?'

The general triggering conditions of DOM in Mongolian are complex. What we are interested in are indefinite non-human direct objects. Although, indefinite non human direct objects are rarely marked with *ig*, the generalization holds, that indefinite non human direct objects must be specific if they are *-ig* marked.

- (1) a. *Peter* *neg* *mashin-ig* *har-san.*  
 Peter a car-ACC see-PST  
 'Peter saw a car. ' + specific
- b. *Peter* *neg* *mashin* *har-san.*  
 Peter a car see-PST  
 'Peter saw a car.  $\pm$  specific

Normally, if the answer to a fronted wh-question is an indefinite, other arguments are omitted. However, if asked to make all arguments explicit, we get the following contrast: only specific (*-ig* marked) indefinites may be fronted in the answer, and non-specific indefinites must remain in situ: if an indefinite remains in situ as an answer to a fronted wh-question, we know that it is non-specific. (normally non *ig*-marked indefinites are underspecified with regard to specificity).

- (7) a. *yu-g* *Peter* *har-san be?*  
 what-ACC Peter see-PST Q  
 'What did Peter see?'
- b. *neg* *mashin-ig* *Peter* *har-san.*  
 a car-ACC Peter see-PST  
 'Peter saw a car. ' + specific
- c. *Peter* *neg* *mashin* *har-san.*  
 Peter a car see-PST  
 'Peter saw a car. - specific

If we assume that question words are indefinites, like e.g. Haida (2009), it would seem that fronted question words are specific. If so, specificity would seem to be the licensing factor of "wh-movement" in Mongolian.

## Questions for discussion

What do we learn from the correspondence between focus and wh-words?

Is focus in English and other languages actually ambiguous between a presuppositional/exhaustive reading and a non-presuppositional reading/non-exhaustive reading?

What about this exhaustiveness inference? At any rate it seems stronger than in Hungarian (since in Hungarian non-specific indefinites may be in the focus position).

How does specificity fit into the scheme?

## References

- Cheng**, Lisa. 1991. *On the Typology of Wh-Questions*. Ph.D. Dissertation, MIT, Cambridge MA.
- Haida**, Andreas 2009, *The Indefiniteness and Focusing of Wh-Words*, Dissertation, ZAS, Berlin.
- Guntsetseg**, Dolgor 2009. *Differential Object Marking in (Khalkha-)Mongolian*. In: R. Shibagaki & R. Vermeulen (eds.). MIT Working Papers in Linguistics (MWPL) 58. Proceedings of the 5th Workshop on Formal Altaic Linguistics (WAFL 5), 115-129.