

Free relatives
or what the semantic investigation of non-interrogative wh-constructions
cross-linguistically can tell us about the meaning of wh-words

IVANO CAPONIGRO

University of Milan-Bicocca
ivano.caponigro@unimib.it

Abstract

Interrogative wh-clauses have captured most of the attention of the semantic investigation on wh-constructions. The meanings of wh-words that have been suggested based on the different analyses for wh-interrogatives constitute an unpleasantly heterogeneous class. Wh-words have been claimed to be like existentially quantified expressions, or to be ambiguous between existentially and universally quantified expressions, or to be very close to definite descriptions, or to introduce a free variable like indefinites. In other words, the whole semantic inventory for nominals has been suggested for wh-words. The main aim of this talk is to show that by studying the semantic behavior of non-interrogative wh-constructions across languages we can find interesting semantic patterns and, even more important, gain some better insights on the semantics of wh-words. I begin by touching on what little has been done on the semantics of non-interrogative constructions and then focus on free relatives. After discussing the main semantic property of free relatives across more than twenty languages, I conclude that free relatives are set denoting expressions and the wh-words that occur in them behave like set restrictors. The consequences of these conclusions for a compositional semantics of wh-interrogatives are discussed in the end.