Why 'why'? Towards a new typology of wh-expressions

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of the paper is to account for the exceptional behaviour of the wh-expression 'why' in relation to other wh-phrases across languages. I commence by demonstrating the special status of the phrase with regard to anti-superiority, island and blocking effects in wh-in-situ languages such as Japanese and Korean. An explanation that has been offered to account for the phenomena (Hong 2002), which distinguish 'why' from its wh-peers, puts forward an analysis of wh-phrases in terms of their feature composition, where wh-expressions are treated as polarity items. Under this approach, wh-phrases in wh-in-situ languages have no inherent quantificational force; hence, the link between them and C seems to involve Binding rather than Agree. 'Why', however, acts in an exceptional way in that it does carry an inherent interrogative reading. Thus, the link between C and this expression in wh-in-situ languages would be achieved by Match and Agree, as is the case with languages such as English.

I take the results as a starting point for the assumption that the apparent exceptionality of the wh-phrase 'why' is not restricted to Asian languages only, but is, in fact, a more universal feature. Namely, I propose that whereas most other wh-expressions can differ cross-linguistically with respect to whether they carry no inherent quantificational force and must therefore be treated as polarity items, 'why' universally, invariably and cross-linguistically is inherently interrogative. I give supporting data from Polish, Russian, and German, and suggest that the analysis offered for non-fronting languages can be extrapolated to Slavic, Balto-Slavic and Germanic languages as well. I then attempt to explain why it is 'why' and only 'why' that displays the special feature composition, first demonstrating that (in contrast with other wh-expressions) it cannot be easily replaced with an indefinite proform or a universal quantifier, and then giving an account that summons the Canonical Structural Representation (CSR) of constituents used as answers to various wh-questions. I finally venture a proposal that wh-constituents may be assigned a 'deeper' compositional structure, which may bear on their syntactic behaviour and perhaps even their landing sites when the phrases (or their features) undergo movement. In contrast with its wh-

peers, a question containing the word 'why' is usually answered using a CP. We might therefore posit that some feature inside the CP (perhaps a remnant of T inside the IP) may bear on the behaviour of 'why'. This might also explain the difference observed by Wierzbicka (1988) between sentences such as 'How to do it?' and 'Why do it?'

I conclude by attempting to show if and how the analysis drawn may bear on the behaviour of the word 'dlaczego' in Polish. Finally, I also indicate how the feature-analysis of wh-expressions and their according differentiation depending on whether the words are subject to Binding or Match and Agree can suitably be represented in the HPSG framework.

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