



Sentence mood effects in Chinese, French and Korean: an empirical study

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What are the differences in the mental processing of interrogative versus declarative mood? How do they relate to differences between negative and affirmative declaratives? And what role is played by cross-linguistic differences in the coding of mood and polarity?

Previous studies on German and Japanese (Bach & Zaefferer to appear) have shown both sentence mood and language type effects. In order to test Zaefferer's hypothesis that interrogatives are not represented as alternatives of positive and negative propositions (complexity view), but as weak variants of affirmatives (stability view), we designed a psycholinguistic experiment roughly replicating Bach and Zaefferer's study, but with Chinese, French and Korean native speakers and with negative declaratives added to the linguistic stimuli. Participants were first shown pictures with two geometrical forms in different color. They then had to decide as quickly as possible whether sentences that referred to the pictures matched them or not. We measured reaction times and error rates and controlled for the difference between initial (French) and final (Chinese, Korean) mood marking.

We found that first, across our languages, negative sentences triggered substantially higher RTs and error rates. Second, compared to affirmatives, interrogatives increased RTs in all languages, but much less so than negatives, against the prediction of the complexity view. Third, language type (locus of mood marker) had an effect on RTs: In Korean, interrogative sentences were processed considerably faster than in French.

References:

Bach, Patric & Zaefferer, Dietmar. To appear. "What exactly is the question-assertion distinction based on? An exploration in experimental speech act theory." Hans-Jörg Schmid & Susanne Handl (eds.), *Cognitive foundations of linguistic usage patterns*. Berlin: De Gruyter.