The Information Structure of superiority

Nomi Erteschik-Shir, Ben-Gurion University
shir@exchange.bgu.ac.il

I propose to use crosslinguistic variations in superiority effects to argue that these are due to differences in the mapping of Information Structure to syntactic structure in the languages examined. This analysis requires a view of Topic and Focus assignment as part and parcel of the externalization system and argues against the cartographic approach in which allows for syntactic projections of topic and focus features. It therefore provides support for the view expressed in Berwick and Chomsky 2011 among others that the externalization system (PF) is responsible for at least microvariation. It also follows that displacement is constrained by the externalization system and not by the computational system as generally thought.

I examine and compare the superiority effects in English, Danish and German. A multiple wh-question involves a dependency between the wh-phrases and dependencies require proper alignment between syntax and information structure. Whereas English requires alignment of Subject-Topic and Predicate-Focus, Danish, for example, only requires that the topic precede the verb and that the focus follow it. Proper alignment is a requirement on dependencies. It follows that whereas English exhibits superiority effects (1), Danish does not (3-4):

(1) What did who buy?
(2) Hvem købte hvad?
   who bought what
(3) ?Hvad købte hvem?
   what bought who
(4) Hvilken bog købte hvilken pige?
   Which book bought which girl?

(2) and (3) require a context in which the preverbal wh-phrase is d-linked and therefore qualifies as a topic. (3) exhibits overt d-linking. Optimal alignment is to be found in both (1)-(3): the preverbal wh-phrase is aligned with the topic and the post-verbal wh-phrase is aligned with the focus.

German is largely similar to Danish in this respect, but they differ from each other in that German allows scrambling (of topics) in subordinate clauses and Danish does not. It follows that the superiority effect is strong in Danish subordinate clauses (6) but not in German (7) (from Fanselow 2004):

(5) Jeg ved ikke hvem der købte hvad.
   I know not who bought what
(6) *Jeg ved ikke hvad hvem købte
   I know not what who bought
(7) ...wir sind nicht eher zufrieden, bis wir auch wissen wen WER angerufen hat
   ...we are not earlier content until we also know who.acc who.nom called has

Superiority effects in subordinate clauses are therefore not improved by overtly d-linked wh-phrases in Danish:

(7) *Jeg ved ikke hvilken bog hvilken pige købte
   I know not which book which girl bought

Danish marks the topic by fronting it to sentence-initial position. Topicalization within a
subordinate clause is excluded. It follows that whereas word order may signal the IS of the main clause, the order within subordinate clauses does not.

Microvariation among these languages in multiple wh-questions thus follows from two parameters: the alignment properties of the particular language and the availability of scrambling processes and their language particular properties. Superficial crosslinguistic differences in the manifestation of superiority effects are due to language-specific encoding of information structure allowing for an explanation of the effect which applies across languages. This approach is particularly appropriate since by tying the effect to information structure contextual effects are predicted.

References


