

ABSTRACT:

This talk aims to show how semantic study of Tlingit - a highly endangered and understudied language of Alaska - might advance understanding of certain well-known puzzles surrounding wh-constructions.

It has been observed that there is both an inter- and intra-linguistic relation between the presence of Superiority effects and the absence of Intervention effects in multiple wh-questions (Beck 1996, Pesetsky 2000). I will argue that a certain, novel semantics for wh-questions provides a new perspective on this relationship between Superiority and Intervention.

The special semantic theory employed in this analysis is initially motivated by the wh-questions of Tlingit, a Na-Dene language of Alaska, British Columbia and the Yukon. Certain properties of Tlingit wh-questions motivate a novel compositional semantics for wh-questions with fronted wh-words. The central idea behind this approach is that, in addition to the wh-word and the interrogative C, a third key structural and semantic component of wh-questions is an operator (called 'Q', but distinct from the interrogative C) which is sister to the wh-word (or a phrase containing it).

After introducing and motivating this analysis of Tlingit wh-questions, I show that extending this system to the wh-questions of more widely-studied languages (such as English and German) might bring new insight into the relationship between Superiority and Intervention effects. In addition, I show that the analysis of 'pied-piping structures' that follows from this theory correctly predicts that Intervention effects should arise within pied-piped phrases, regardless of whether a language generally exhibits Superiority or Intervention effects in its multiple wh-questions (Sauerland & Heck 2003).