The pragmatics of reversed-polarity questions in Máihíki (Western Tukanoan)

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The language: Máihíki

- Western Tukano language of Máihuna ethnic group
- Endangered: ~80 speakers in Napo and Putumayo river basins, northern Peruvian Amazonia
- Data source: ~100,000-word corpus of phonemically transcribed, translated, and parsed naturalistic texts

Figure: Approximate location of Máihuna settlement areas

The problem: reversed-polarity questions (RPQs)

- "Reversed-polarity questions" (RPQs, Koshik 2000) are ubiquitous in the Máihíki corpus
- 399 RPQs in ~13.5 h of transcribed speech sampled here
- A Máihíki reversed-polarity question:
  - Has the morphology and tonal shape of a polar question of polarity A
  - But the phrase-level intonational contour of a declarative
  - And is interpreted as a declarative of polarity A
  - Felicitously replaced with opposite-polarity declarative
  - Glossed in contact language as opposite-polarity declarative

Examples

1. Negative polarity RPQ read as positive polarity declarative:
   Roberto hetè nòò dàmàmà.
   (say, 455)

2. Positive polarity RPQ read as negative polarity declarative:
   ãòò ñòò rë ñì ñòò non.indigenous.man -non.si see -1PL.PST.INTERR
   "We had not seen non-indigenous people." (mgn, 59)

What do RPQs mean?

- Cross-linguistically, RPQs are a common strategy for expressing weak epistemic modality
  - English RPQ as conjectural: Isn’t it raining?
  - In Siona, most closely related language, verb forms derived from RPQs are weak epistemic modals and indirect evidentials
- Máihíki RPQs are frequent in contexts of epistemic uncertainty, but also in verbal conflict: moral reasoning, scolds, rebukes
  - Epistemic certainty in these contexts is high; mode of access is direct
  - Thus RPQ is not (exclusively) an epistemic modal or evidential strategy
- Question: What are the semantic and pragmatic differences between declaratives and RPQs in Máihíki?
- Question: How and why did RPQs grammaticalize into epistemic modal and evidential markers?

Hypothesis: RPQ as affiliation-seeking strategy

A. An RPQ forms the first half of an adjacency pair in which the preferred response is an opposite-polarity declarative.

B. When S employs an RPQ, she solicits H to affiliate with her own attitude toward the proposition under discussion by giving the preferred response.

RPQ’s and face

Aren’t RPQs simply a politeness strategy? No: RPQs can threaten H’s negative face in contexts such as (4) -- a contradiction of S by H.

(4) Context: Supporter of a local politician rebukes a heckler
   nà wèè ëchë kiî ímîyô.
   (hum, 114)

S does not expect H to comply and affiliate in response to (4) -- as in certain English RPQs: Do you think I was born yesterday?

Gendered inter-speaker variation in RPQ use

In the corpus, women employ RPQs often and in a wide range of epistemic contexts. Men use RPQs far less frequently, primarily as markers of uncertain epistemic modality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table: Gendered variation in RPQ use

For men, RPQ’s have narrowed from general affiliation-seeking strategy to epistemic modal device
- Epistemic modal use of RPQs in men’s Máihíki strongly resembles cognate construction in Siona
- Signals convergent grammaticalization paths from an interrogative in proto-language to RPQ, epistemic modal, and evidential constructions in modern languages

RPQ’s are cognate with epistemic modals and evidentials

- In Puerto Bolívar Siona, negative polar questions conventionally read as positive polarity conjecturals (Bruil 2014: 264)
- In Sotosiyana Siona (Bruil 2014: 265) and Colombian Siona (Wheeler 1987: 153), verb forms derived from negative polar questions encode indirect evidentiality

Why does grammaticalization of RPQ’s matter?

- Trajectory below adds interrogative morphology as a new diachronic source of epistemic modal and evidential markers
- Exemplifies grammaticalization driven by the pragmatic relations of the grammaticalized construction, rather than by its semantics or grammatical relations

Grammaticalization trajectory: question to evidential

1. RPQ as affiliation strategy
   Proto-Máihíki-Siona
   S: V-NEG-INTERR
   H: V-DECL
   Preferred response lost H response erodes

2. RPQ as affiliation strategy
   Women’s Máihíki
   S: V-NEG-INTERR
   (H: V-DECL)
   Semantic narrowing

3. RPQ as weak epistemic modal
   Men’s Máihíki
   Puerto Bolívar Siona
   S: V-NEG-INTERR
   (H: Ø)
   Intercategorical morphological change

4. Former RPQ as indirect evidential
   Sotosiyana Siona, Colombian Siona
   S: V-*NEG*-INTERR
   (H: Ø)
   Endless thanks to my Máihíki teachers, especially Soraida López Algaba, Otilia López Gordillo, Adriano Ríos Sanchez, and Romero and Severino Ríos Ochoa. This research was supported by a Parker Huang Undergraduate Travel Fellowship from Yale University; NSF BCS-1065621 to the University of California, Berkeley; and an NSF Graduate Research Fellowship. Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the NSF.

Acknowledgements

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