

Wh-words in East Asian Languages: Intonation and Meaning

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Abstract

Wh-words in East Asian languages are ambiguous between interrogative and indefinite readings (e.g., *shei* in Chinese, *dare* in Japanese, *nwukwu* in Korean can all appear in phrases that indicate either ‘who’ or ‘someone’). This talk concerns how the two meanings of *wh*-words can be distinguished by intonation. While several intonational factors such as phonetic prominence, phonological phrasing, and sentence-final intonation have been mentioned in the literature to affect the interpretation, I argue that the most decisive factor is *phonological phrasing* that affect the global intonation pattern, presenting evidence from production/perception experiments (Jun and Oh 1996, Maekawa 1991, Yang et al. 2020, Yun 2019). In particular, the experimental results disconfirm the previous impressionistic observations that *wh*-interrogatives are intonationally distinguished from their indefinite counterparts by their prominence; the prosodic prominence of the *wh*-word *per se* does not induce an interrogative reading unless the change of the global intonation pattern is accompanied.