

Short Answers and Metalinguistic Questions

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/7182187>

出版情報 : 九大英文学. 66, pp.1-10, 2024-03-31. The Society of English Literature and Linguistics, Kyushu University
バージョン :
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Kento Nagatsugu

1. Fragment Answers to Compound *Wh*-Questions

Kimura and Narita (2017) (henceforth, K&N) argue that fragment answers (FAs) to compound *Wh*-questions are subject to a morpho-syntactic condition which is only predicted by the in-situ deletion analysis of FAs. Specifically, they discuss FAs to the question in (1). As noted by them, a special feature of this question is that the *Wh*-element is part of a compound, i.e. *X-goroshi* “slaughter of X.”

- (1) Keisatsu-wa nani-goroshi-no hannin-o
 police-Top *what-slaughter-Gen* *culprit-Acc*
 tukamae-ta no?
 catch-Pst *Nmzl*

“The police caught the culprit of what murder?”

(Adapted from Kimura and Narita (2017: 142))

(2a) is felicitous as an FA to the question but not (2b).

- (2) a. Noraneko(-da/desu).
 Stray_cat(-Cop/Cop.Pol)
 “Stray cat(s).”
 b. Kainushi-ga i-nai neko.
 Owner-Nom *be-Neg* *cat*

“A cat/Cats that has/have no owner.”

(Adapted from Kimura and Narita (2017: 149))

K&N claim that the morpho-syntactic difference between (2a) and (2b), (2a) being an N but (2b) a phrase, is significant. They propose a morpho-syntactic identity condition on a remnant in deletion.

- (3) *Morpho-syntactic identity between the remnant of deletion and its correlate:*

The remnant of deletion must be morpho-syntactically isomorphic to its correlate in the antecedent clause. (Kimura and Narita (2017: 150))

The phrasal FA in (2b) itself is felicitous both semantically and syntactically, because it is well-formed as an answer to the question in (4), where the *Wh*-element is located inside a VP.

- (4) keisatsu-wa [[_{NP} nani]-o koroshi-ta] hannin]-o tsukamae-ta-no?
police-Top what-Acc kill.Conv-Pst culprit-Acc catch-Pst-Nmlz
 “(Lit.) The police caught the culprit who killed what?”

(Adapted from Kimura and Narita (2017: 149))

K&N argue that (2a) as an FA to (1) cannot be predicted to be grammatical by deletion analyses in which a FA is raised to a higher position than its base position, such as Saito (2004) and Nishigauchi and Fuji (2006), because an NP being part of a compound cannot be extracted. More specifically, the FA in (2a) has underlying structures like (5a) or (5b) according to these analyses, but the base structures are ungrammatical.

- (5) a. [_{CP} *Op_i* [_{TP} keisatsu-ga [_{t_i}-[_{N2} goroshi]-no hannin]-o
police-Nom slaughter-Gen culprit-Acc
 tsukamae-ta-no]-wa NORANEKO*i*
catch-Pst-Nmlz-Top stray_cat
 (da/desu).

Cop/Cop.Pol.Prst

“(Liy.) It is STRAY CAT(S)_{*i*} that the police caught the *e_i*-slaughter culprit.”

- (Kimura and Narita (2017: 148))

(6) sore-(ra)-wa NORANEKO da/desu.
it-Pl-Top stay_cat Cop/Cop.Pol
“It is (A) STRAY CAT(S).”

Although (6) is grammatical in itself, it is infelicitous as an answer to the question in (1). Hence, the Bare Copula Analysis cannot account for (2a).

Then, K&N argue for the in-situ deletion analysis of FAs, in which the remnant of an ellipsis remains in its base position, not moved higher (*cf.* Abe (2016)). According to K&N, the FAs in (2a) and (2b) have (7a) and (7b) as their underlying structures, which are well-formed even if fully pronounced.

- (7) a. ~~Keisatsu wa~~ [[NORANEKO-geroshi-no] — ~~hannin-o~~]
 police-Top stray_cat-slaughter-Gen culprit-Acc
~~tukamae ta.~~
 catch-Pst
- b. ~~Keisatsu wa~~ [[[NP [kainushi-ga i-nai] neko]-o
 police-Top owner-Nom be-Neg cat-Acc
 koroshi ta] — ~~hannin]-o~~ — ~~tsukamae ta.~~
 kill.Conv-Pst culprit-Acc catch-Pst

If K&N's analysis is on the right track, there is no semantic difference between (2a) and (2b). So, semantics-based analyses of FAs cannot account for the asymmetry

between the two FAs. More precisely, the contrast cannot be accounted for by Merchant's ((2001)) semantics-based identity condition on deletion (*cf.* Merchant (2004)). Merchant (2001) proposes to define the identity condition on a target of deletion and its antecedent, which goes back to Hankamaer and Sag (1976), in terms of logical entailment; simply put, if the target and its antecedent logically entail each other, the former is deletable. This identity condition is irrelevant to the contrast between (2a) and (2b) because they are semantically the same.

K&N also suggest that the contrast in question is also problematic to what they call the non-structural approach, where FAs have no abstract syntactic structures, which is advocated by Yanofsky (1978), Culicover and Jackendoff (2005) and Jacobson (2016), among others. They state:

[...] The interpretation of the missing part is supplemented by an extra-syntactic (discourse-semantic) mechanism, crucially without recourse to phonetically nonexistent structures.

Under the non-structural approach, then, it is a purely accidental fact that phrasal *wh*-questions but not compound *wh*-questions allow phrasal FAs, given the alleged nonexistence of covert structures. Therefore, advocates of the non-structural approach cannot explain why the generalization in [(3)] holds, clearly an undesirable result.

(Kimura and Narita (2017: 152))

It is not plausible, however, to claim that the generalization in (3) cannot be predicted without giving FAs unpronounced structures, because (3) only pertains to remnants of ellipsis and their antecedents, not to omitted elements. Hence, there is a possibility that the condition in (3) can be integrated into an analysis along the non-structural approach. This possibility cannot be immediately rejected because how the condition in (3) is motivated is unclear. K&N give no explanation of why the condition must apply to ellipsis in FAs. Thus, even if the condition is real, one cannot reject the non-structural approach just for that. Yet I will reject the condition in (3) and provide an alternative analysis which is consistent with the non-structural approach, in the following section.

2. Morpho-Syntactic Condition or Metalinguistic Condition?

There is a doubt on the plausibility of K&N's identity condition on remnants of ellipsis, which is repeated in (8).

- (8) *Morpho-syntactic identity between the remnant of deletion and its correlate:*

The remnant of deletion must be morpho-syntactically isomorphic to its correlate in the antecedent clause.

Although exactly what morpho-syntactic property matters is unclear in the condition itself, K&N's analysis focuses on the word-phrase difference. In (2), specifically, the *Wh*-element *nani* "what" is a word, not a phrase, for being embedded in a compound; hence, an FA to it must be a word. Although the condition is intended to cover ellipsis in general, whether it is general or not cannot be examined, because leaving a word (not a phrase) as the remnant of an ellipsis is only possible in FAs in Japanese. Thus, the plausibility of (8) as a general condition can be neither affirmed nor denied at the state of the art.

Nevertheless there is a question on the plausibility of the condition. It is not generally observed that an answer to question is required to be identical to its antecedent. Phrase size is not significant, as shown in (9). The question in (9) can be responded by a FA which is larger than the *Wh*-element, as in (10b).

- (9) Sensei-wa nani-go-wo hanasu hito-o
teacher-Top what-language-Acc speak.Prst person-Acc
sagashi-te-i-ru-no?
seek.Conv-Conn-Asp-Prst-Nmlz

"Lit. What language is the teacher looking for someone that speaks?"

- (10) a. Tai-go.
 Thai-language
 "Thai."
 b. Tai-go-o hanasu gakusei.
 Thai-language-Acc speak.Prst student

Category-mismatch is allowed in Q&A, too. For example, (12b) is appropriate as an answer to the question in (11), although the *Wh*-word in (11) is an NP but (12b) does not have any NP directly corresponding to the *Wh*-word; rather, the VP in (12b), “putting together a chair,” fills the missing information in (11).

- (12) a. Niwajjiri
gardening
“Gardening.”
- b. Isu-o kumi-tate-te-ta
chair-Acc assemble.Conv-build-Conn-Pst
“I was putting together a chair.”

Then, how can the contrast between (2a) and (2b) be explained? Reconsider the question in (1), which is repeated as (13).

- This question can be also answered by (14a) and (14b).

- Since the *Wh*-element in (13) is *nani* “what”, which basically denotes an unidentified non-person entity, these answers appear to be infelicitous due to a type-mismatch between *nani* and *keikan* “police officer.” Therefore, the acceptability of (14a) and (14b) suggests that *nani* in (13) has a special status. More precisely, the *Wh*-phrase meta-linguistically questions a content of a preceding utterance. In fact, it cannot be uttered out of the blue.

That the *Wh*-word *nani* can be used to make a meta-linguistic question is also shown by the following examples.¹

- (15) a. A: Taro-tte kakkoi-i-yo-ne?
Taro-Quot handsome-SFP-SFP
“Taro is handsome, isn’t it?”
B: Taro-ga nan-datte?²
Taro-Nom what-Q
“Taro is WHAT?”
- b. Ano eiga-no daimei, nani-gurashi-no nani-etti-dakke?
that film-Gen title what-living-Gen what-etty-Q
“The title of the film is “WHAT-gurashi no WHAT-etty”?”

In (15a), speaker B suggests that what speaker A said about Taro is unbelievable. In (15b), the speaker wants to clarify the title of an animated feature film, *Karigurashi no Arrietty* (*The borrower Arrietty* or *The Secret World of Arrietty*), only some part of which the speaker remembers.

Given that (1)/(13) is a meta-linguistic question, the contrast between (2a) and (2b) is straightforwardly explained, which are repeated as (16a) and (16b), respectively.

- (16) a. Noraneko(-da/desu).
stray_cat(-Cop/Cop.Pol)
“Stray cat(s).”
- b. Kainushi-ga i-nai neko.
owner-Nom be-Neg cat
“A cat/Cats that has/have no owner.”

It is not surprising that an answer to a meta-linguistic question cannot be formally non-parallel with the latter. In other words, it is not sufficient if the answer is semantically and pragmatically plausible. In fact, even if (2b) is augmented to a full sentence as in (17), it sounds awkward as an answer to (13).

- (17) Keisatsu-wa kainushi-ga i-nai neko-o koroshi-ta hannin-o tsukamae-ta.

“The police arrested the culprit who killed a cat who has no owner.”

Therefore, the infelicity of (2b) as an answer to the question is not due to a morpho-syntactic constraint on FAs. Rather, it is attributed to some properties of meta-linguistic question. Let us assume a generalization in (18).

- (18) An answer to a meta-linguistic question must be formerly identical to the *Wh*-word of the question or a constituent containing it.

(18) is in a sense a definition of meta-linguistic question, but it can be reduced to one of Grice’s maxims, i.e. the Maxim of Relation; it requires us to respond to a question by directly fulfilling the missing part of the question.

To sum up, we do not need any special condition on FAs or remnants of ellipsis to account for the contrast between (2a) and (2b). Now the contrast is irrelevant to how fragment answers are generated. K&N argue that the contrast receives no explanation under what they call the non-structural approach. However, we have seen above that this is not true. The condition in (18), which is not unique to ellipsis, is enough. It is compatible with the non-structural approach as well as the deletion approach.

Notes

¹ In English, *what* can be used meta-linguistically, too, as exemplified by (i), an echo question, which is cited from an *Apple TV+* feature film *The Banker*.

(i) Matt: You want me to what? (*The Banker*, 2020)

² Particle *dakke* marks a reaffirmation question, which I regard as a sort of meta-linguistic questions.

List of Glosses

Acc	accusative
Asp	aspect
Conn	connector
Conv	converb
Cop	copular
Gen	genitive
Loc	locative
Neg	negative
Nmlz	nominalizer
Nom	nominative
Pol	polite
Prst	present
Pst	past
Q	question
Quot	quotative
SFP	sentence-final particle
Top	topic

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