WHAT?! SERIOUSLY?!: Emphatic Rising Declaratives and Wh-In-Situ Constructions in English

Gwen Gillingham, UCSD – gwen.gillingham@ling.ucsd.edu

This paper concerns the meaning and felicity of emphatic rising declaratives and Wh-In-Situ constructions in English, such as echo questions. Consider the rising declaratives in (1):

(1) a. (... and) John’s dating Mary?
   b. John’s dating MARY?!

By uttering (1a), a speaker indicates that he has reason to believe that John is dating Mary, but that he is relying on the authority of his interlocutor to confirm it, rather than asserting it directly. By uttering (1b), though, the speaker expresses an additional bias: Mary is an unlikely person for John to be dating. Similarly, consider the pair of wh-in-situ sentences in (2):

(2) a. (... and) John’s dating who (, again)?
   b. John’s dating WHO?!

The speaker of (2a) neutrally asks his interlocutor to tell him the identity of John’s companion; however, by uttering (2b) the speaker conveys shock at the identity of John’s date, and seems to demand confirmation of the surprising news he has just received, just as in (1b).

The emphatic and non-emphatic versions of the sentences in (1) and (2) differ not only in their neutrality, but also in the circumstances where their use is felicitous. If the speaker has just heard that John is in fact dating Mary, he may express his surprise through either (1b) or (2b); but (1a) or (2a) would be redundant in such a context. Rather, (1a) and (2a) are most natural as part of an on-going discourse about John’s life. By contrast, a speaker may utter (1b) felicitously even without an interlocutor, if he stumbles upon supposed enemies John and Mary on a clandestine date and cannot believe his eyes. Curiously, (2a) is pragmatically deviant if the speaker utters it while alone, even if he believes John to be celibate and is unaware of John’s companion’s identity.

This paper argues that the facts above are due to two interacting factors: the presence of accent, which marks a speaker-oriented implication of Mirativity (de Lancey 1997, Rett and Murray 2013), and the sentence final rise, which marks the utterance as a sub-question of an inferrable Question Under Discussion (Roberts 1996, Büring 2003). This paper analyses the English Mirative as a focus-sensitive illocutionary operator whose effect is similar to that of even, as shown in (3):

(3) $[\text{Mirative}] = \lambda p \lambda C : \forall p' \in C \land p' \neq p \rightarrow p \leq \text{likely} \ p' . p$

Where $C$ is a set of contextually salient propositional focal alternatives to $p$. The likelihood of any proposition, under this analysis, is relative to the speaker’s epistemic state: in order to licitly apply the Mirative accent to a constituent, the speaker must consider it surprising, in comparison with its alternatives. In the case of accented Wh-elements (following Karttunen 1977), applying the Mirative focuses the construction’s true answers – thus it is infelicitous for the speaker use accent to indicate their surprise if they are unaware of the answer, regardless an interlocutor’s presence.

For a speaker to utter a rising declarative as in (1a), the QUD must be something like “Who is John dating?” and he must be seeking confirmation for his belief that John is in fact dating Mary; similarly, for a wh-in-situ construction like (2a), the QUD should be akin to “What’s happening with John lately?”, and who John is dating should be immediately relevant. In either case, the speaker must not be in a position to settle the issue the utterance raises to their own satisfaction. Similarly, (1b) and (2b) suggest the speaker’s unsettled attitude due to their surprise – asking, in essence, “Is it really true that John is dating MARY?”. In the absence of an interlocutor, the speaker’s direct observation of the event makes the QUD “Who is John dating?” salient. Additionally, the analysis presented here can be extended to cover cases of discourse-initial rising declaratives, discussed by Gunlogson (2002, 2008), in addition to the contrasts above.