

Building Rhetorical Interpretations: Evidence, Bias, and Update

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In this talk, I examine a construction in colloquial Japanese illustrated by the sentences in (1), from the Japanese comic *Rookies*.

- (1) a. konnan de gomakas-eru ka yo
this.kind.of.thing with trick-can ka yo
“You think you can fool us with something like that (no, you can’t!)”
- b. kyoushi-wa minna teki da ttutteta janee ka yo
teacher-TOPIC all enemy be COMP.say.PROG.PAST not.be ka yo
“Didn’t you say that all teachers are our enemy? (yes, you did!)”

The construction illustrated in (1) has three components: (i) plain (non-honorific) form of the predicate, (ii) the question particle *ka*, and (iii) the sentence final particle *yo*, or a sentence-final falling intonational contour. The construction can *only* be interpreted as a rhetorical question, and seems to commit the speaker to the negation of the overt proposition. The construction is similar to what Sadock (1971) labeled *queclaratives* in English, rhetorical questions which commit the speaker to the negation of the proposition used in forming the question. Details aside, Sadock proposes an analysis in which the semantics of the queclarative construction is equivalent to an assertion of the negation of the overt proposition, followed by a falling tag question with the same polarity as the overt proposition. In the analysis of Han (2002), the negation is derived through an interaction between the semantics of the construction and a general pragmatic process whereby questions are associated with (potential) bias for their negative answers. These analyses represent two choices in how the explanatory burden is divided between semantics and pragmatics in deriving rhetorical interpretations, with Sadock proposing a solidly semantic derivation and Han arguing for a process of semantic interpretation that is influenced by pragmatic factors. Other proposals in the literature divide the labor in other ways. A large focus of these accounts is deriving the *negativity* of the rhetorical interpretation, a fact that is linked with the licensing of NPIs in queclaratives.

The Japanese construction illustrated in (1) is most naturally given a negative rhetorical interpretation as well. The interpretation changes, however, when we add the particle *no*, as illustrated by the examples in (2), also from the comic *Rookies*.

- (2) a. shitten no ka yo
know.PROG no ka yo
“You know (him)? (yes, you do).”
- b. Aniya wa sonna yatsu ni furimawas-are-ten no ka yo
Aniya TOP that.kind.of.guy.ANTIHON by exploit-PASS-PROG.PRES no ka yo
“Is Aniya getting duped by a jerk like that? (yes, he is).”

The sentences in (2) are examples of the same construction illustrated above in (1). In these examples, however, we also find the particle *no* appearing just before the question particle *ka*. The effect is striking; as the translations indicate, the direction of the rhetorical interpretation has been switched from negative to positive. In other words, inclusion of the particle *no* commits

the speaker to the *positive* answer to the question, while the same construction without the particle commits the speaker to the *negative* answer to the question.

In this talk, I examine how the particle *no* forces this switch in polarity. I first observe that although *no* switches the polarity of the answer from negative to positive, it leaves unaffected the *negative bias* associated with the construction. This is illustrated by the constructed minimal pair in (3).

- (3) a. tori-ga konna tokoro ni sum-eru ka yo
bird-NOM this.kind.of place in live-can *ka yo*
“Can birds live in a place like this? (Of course they can’t!)”
b. tori-ga konna tokoro ni sum-eru no ka yo
bird-NOM this.kind.of place in live-can *no ka yo*
“Oh, birds can live in a place like this? (That’s surprising.)”

The sentence in (3a), which does not include *no*, is understood as a negative rhetorical question. The speaker is committed to the negative answer, and also seems to indicate that he takes this answer to be obvious, already established, or presupposed. The variant in (3b), in which *no* has been added, retains this pre-existing negative bias on the part of the speaker, while also indicating that this negative bias has been unexpectedly violated. This is seen by placing the sentences in (3) in natural contexts of utterance:

- (4) a. Context for (3a): The speaker believes that birds cannot live here. His friend says something that suggests they do. He utters (3a), thereby indicating that his friend is mistaken, and that it should be obvious birds cannot live here.
b. Context for (3b): The speaker believes that birds cannot live here, but looking out the window is surprised to discover that in fact they do. He utters (3b) to indicate his surprise.

In both contexts, the speaker has a pre-existing belief in or bias toward the negation of the overt proposition. The rhetorical question without *no* serves as a forceful reminder of this bias, and is naturally used as a way of correcting a mistaken addressee. The rhetorical question with *no* can only be used in a context where the speaker is being forced to give up this pre-existing negative bias when the truth of the positive proposition has become evident.

To explain these facts, I argue that while a rhetorical interpretation is hard-wired into the semantics of this construction, the direction of resolution (positive or negative) depends on an interaction of lexical and general pragmatic pressures. The default resolution toward the negative answer stems from a latent negative bias present in all questions, as argued for by Han (2002). This bias can be overridden by the pragmatic particle *no*, which I argue is used to indicate the presence of contextual evidence for the *positive* proposition. This sets up a conflict: the construction encodes a pre-existing bias for the negative answer, while *no* encodes contextual evidence for the positive answer. This conflict is always resolved toward the answer consistent with the contextual evidence, suggesting that (certain kinds of) evidentiality trump bias in driving rhetorical interpretation. I propose a compositional analysis of these facts based on Davis (2011), in which the construction is given a compositional semantics that interacts with general pragmatic pressures to derive the interpretational differences between rhetorical questions with and without *no*.

References

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