

Czech wh-existential constructions do not involve questions

Czech, among other Slavic, as well as Romance and some other languages, allows the verbs “be” or “have” to select besides standard noun phrases (as in possessive constructions), and infinitives (as in ‘have-to’ constructions), also non-finite wh-clauses (as in (1), called wh-existential constructions by Pancheva Izvorski, 2000).

- (1) Mám koho pozvat.
 have_{1sg.pres} who_{acc} invite_{inf}.
 ‘I have someone who I can invite.’

The account for these clauses that has been suggested in the literature includes grouping them with Free Relatives (FR) (as in e.g. Grosu and Landman, 1998; Caponigro, 2001, and others), non-finite embedded questions (most notably Pancheva Izvorski, 2000), or “something else” without giving any specifics (see Babby, 2000).

In this presentation I will show that in Czech the wh-complement of the matrix verb (specifically the ones including an infinitival, rather than a subjunctive verb) 1) has to be smaller than a CP, and 2) cannot receive semantic interpretation of a (non-finite) question. I propose to treat the wh-complements as restructuring infinitives.

It has been argued by Rezac (2005); Dotlačil (2005) that Czech clitics need a restructuring context to be able to climb out of their originating clause (specifically, they cannot climb out of a CP with a PRO/Subject, see (2)). At the same time, clitics can climb out of the wh-constituent of the constructions under discussion without any problems (see (3)).

- (2) *Petr mu nevěděl co dát.
 Petr_{nom.sg} he_{dat.sg-cl} not-know_{3sg.past} what_{acc.sg} give_{inf}
 ‘Petr didn’t know what to give him.’

- (3) Petr mu nemá co dát.
 Anna_{nom} him_{dat.sg-cl} not-have_{3sg.pres} what_{acc.sg} give_{inf}.
 ‘Anna doesn’t have anything to give him.’

Even though Pancheva Izvorski (2000) gives good reasons to treat the wh-clauses as interrogative clauses, there are serious problems with her question-semantics for them, as the semantics she adopts is argued to provide semantics that is not a real question semantics by Lahiri (2000). If we try to adopt another question semantics here (e.g. that of Karttunen, 1977), we run into serious problems trying to satisfy all the properties these embedded clauses show. One, these wh-clauses can be coordinated with DPs, as in (4).

- (4) Mám sešit i čím do něj psát.
 have_{1sg.pres} notebook_{acc.sg} and what_{inst.sg} in it_{gen.sg} write_{inf}
 ‘I have a notebook and something to write in it with.’

Question semantics standardly gives a set of propositions. It is semantically impossible to coordinate a set of propositions with a DP (of type <e,t>) without some version of type-shifting. Even if the wh-clauses were questions, they don’t have any exhaustivity and it is not trivial to find a question semantics that would allow a type-shifting and without assuming some exhaustivity for the clauses.

The second problem with question semantics for the wh-clauses is trying to give a full semantic account for the whole sentence with the Subject that the wh-clause takes from

the matrix predicate (a case of control, but PRO is usually treated as semantically null). The only proposal for treating the wh-clause as a question is Pancheva Izvorski (2000), but that account does not provide semantics for the whole clause.

Following the previous arguments, the obvious alternative for the wh-clause is treating it as a restructuring infinitive (along the lines proposed by Rezac, 2005, and Dotlačil, 2005, based on analysis of restructuring by Wurmbrand, 2002). That provides a semantics of the embedded “wh-clause” that does not have all argument positions filled (and that can be filled from the matrix clause) and returns an argument of the semantic type that can be coordinated with a DP.

References

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