

How to embed polar questions in Akan

Joint work with Jeanne Lecavelier, Uni Potsdam

This talk focuses on embedded polar questions in Akan (Kwa, Ghana), which has a single complementizer "sɛ". This complementizer introduces declaratives and interrogatives alike, in (1a) and (1b) respectively.

(1) a. Ama susu sɛ Mike dii nkonim.

Ama thinks sɛ Mike ate victory

Ama thinks that Mike won.

b. Ama bisaa sɛ Mike dii nkonim.

Ama asked sɛ Mike ate victory

Ama asked whether Mike won.

Some verbs, like English "know", are compatible with declarative and with interrogative complements ("x knows that/whether p"). We might then expect sentences like (2), where the verb "nim" translates "know", to be ambiguous between embedded declarative and interrogative readings. But this is not what we find: (2) has an embedded declarative reading but not an embedded interrogative one.

(2) Ama nim sɛ Mike dii nkonim.

Ama knows sɛ Mike ate victory

a. Available: Ama knows that Mike won.

b. Unavailable: Ama knows whether Mike won.

Polar question embedding under verbs like "nim" requires alternative strategies, despite the fact that "sɛ" clauses do, in general, introduce them, e.g., in (1b).

The talk will focus on why the intended reading is absent in (2), and on the different polar question embedding strategies that Akan has to offer, including with "nim".

This all is important for methodological and empirical reasons (How to elicit sentences with embedded polar questions at all?) as well as for theoretical ones. Embedded polar questions have been taken to be the gold standard in some theorizing about clause embedding (Egré 2008), as they can't be mistaken for free relatives and do not display exhaustivity effects. But, there also are severe semantic and pragmatic restrictions on their distribution (Adger & Quer 2001, Paillé & Schwarz 2019) and intriguing questions about their force and form (McCloskey 2006, Woods 2016, Bhatt & Dayal 2020, a.o.)