

What sentence final particles tell us about the structure of conversations

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Sentences change in conversation. They can “shrink” to fragments. But they can also “grow” to include material that can only be interpreted in the context of a conversation. For example, Canadian *eh* as in “*I have a new dog, eh?*” is used to ask the addressee (A) for confirmation that s/he knows that the proposition expressed in the utterance (p) is true. Hence, *eh* is A-oriented in at least two ways:

- i) ... the speaker (S) indicates that s/he believes that – but is not sure if – A knows that p and
- ii) ... S requests a response from A and hence marks the end of his/her turn

Sentence final particles, such as Canadian *eh*, have long been explored in East Asian languages: there is a rich tradition of scholarship on their grammatical properties. This tradition spans from early descriptive grammatical work to current formal analyses in the generative tradition. In contrast, while other languages too make use of such particles they have not been incorporated into grammatical analysis to the same extent even though they are associated with similar formal and functional properties.

Based on the empirical properties of confirmational (such as *eh*) as well as other discourse markers across a number of unrelated languages, I argue that the human language faculty includes a *Conversation Competence*. That is, I argue that our conceptualization of Universal Grammar (UG) has to include a layer of structure that hosts units of language dedicated to expressing S’s attitude towards p; S’s assessment of A’s attitude towards p; as well as what S wants A to do with A. The analysis is couched within the Universal Spine Hypothesis (Wiltschko 2014) which allows for an exploration of the association of sound and meaning to an abstract functional spine.

The exploration of conversation competence brings with it a methodological problem: how do we investigate our abstract knowledge of conversational sentences? While the traditional method of conducting corpus analyses allows the researcher to discover certain patterns it does not allow us to tap into Conversation Competence (no negative data, no possibility to control specific contextual factors, no straightforward way for a comparative investigation). In this talk I report on how we (the *eh*-lab at UBC) explore Conversation Competence by means of corpus analyses alongside controlled story-board elicitations, online surveys, as well as traditional elicitation techniques (field-work).

In this talk I will specifically compare confirmational strategies of languages in which these strategies have long been explored (East Asian languages) with those of English, Ktunaxa (language isolate spoken in British Columbia), and Atayal (Formosan).