

Minor sentence types – their form and its impact on grammar

Invited speaker: Jonathan Ginzburg (Laboratoire de linguistique formelle, Université de Paris)

4th September 2025

The large bulk of research in syntax and sentential semantics focuses on assertive declarative clauses, information seeking interrogative clauses, and, to a much lesser extent, imperatives. A key concept for the understanding of word order variation and prosodic prominence was introduced by Roberts (2012) and Ginzburg (1996) in form of the *Question Under Discussion* (QUD). As has been shown on various occasions, different word order permutations and stress patterns express different focus placement. Focused constituents typically occupy a prominent position in the clause or exhibit more prominent prosodic features. The placement and the prosodic properties of focussed constituents is determined by QUD.

To gain a deeper understanding of these major sentence types and their interaction with the discourse, it is often productive to analyse the internal structure of minor sentence types. Minor sentence types frequently differ from major ones in that they (i) lack features that are characteristic of major sentence types such as overt subjects, finite verbs—or verbs all together; (ii) exhibit unusual word order and/or prosody, as seen in English exclamatives (*What small hands!*), (iii) or they exhibit segmental material, such as particles or markers, that does not occur in other sentence types.

Among the minor sentence types are those identified by König and Siemund (2007), Evans (2007) and Altmann, Meibauer, and Steinbach (2013). These are listed below and supplemented here by further types:

1. Imperatives and prohibitives lacking overt subjects in many languages (cf. Schmerling 1982, Kaufmann 2012, Condoravdi and Lauer 2012), also in Meithei (Tibeto-Burman, cf. Chelliah 1997) .
2. Exclamatives in many Indo-European languages characterised by unusual intonation and/or word order (Michaelis and Lambrecht 1996, Zanuttini and Portner 2003).
3. Optatives in Germanic (cf. Grosz 2012, Grosz 2013) and in Meithei (Tibeto-Burman) , (cf. Chelliah 1997).
4. Rhetorical questions (Dehé and Braun 2019, Farkas 2020).
5. Deliberative self-addressed questions.
6. Other non-canonical questions (cf. Trotzke 2023).
7. Echo questions A: *I tell you he is a braggart* – B: *He is what?* (cf. Beck and Reis 2018).
8. Declarative questions in Germanic languages (cf. Gunlogson 2001).
9. *What if* questions (cf. Bledin and Rawlins 2019, Li and Liu 2023).
10. Directive root infinitives in Germanic and elsewhere (cf. Reis 1985, Schwabe 1994, Reis 1995, Gärtner 2013, Gärtner 2014, Gärtner 2017) and *wh*-root infinitives (cf. Reis 2003)
11. Non-finite presentatives/mad magazin sentences: *Him play the piano? Ludicrous!* (cf. Akmajian 1984, Lambrecht 1990, Fernández-Pena and Pérez-Guerra 2024).
12. Verbless utterances such as:

- (a) Verbless directives in West-Germanic languages: *Off with his head!* (cf. Jackendoff and Pinker 2005:220, Jacobs 2008:22, Wilder 2008, Ørsnes 2011)
 - (b) Directive dative constructions in Russian: *khui vojne* ‘penis.NOM war.DAT= f*ck war’.
 - (c) Nominal sentences in Afro-Asiatic languages including Arabic, Biblical Hebrew (cf. Watson 2002), Egyptian Coptic and other (cf. Callender 1985), Chadic such as Mina (cf. Frajzyngier, Johnston, and Edwards 2005:273–285) and Wandala (Frajzyngier 2012:317–330). Russian also exhibits such structures as does Hungarian (Uralic), Warlmanpa (Pama-Nyungan) spoken in Australia (cf. Browne 2024:401–403), Mapuche (Araucarian) spoken in Chile (cf. Smeets 2007:143–145).
13. Main clauses that display characteristics of embedded clauses (*insubordination*), as suggested by Evans (2007), such as:
 - (a) Verb forms that typically occur only in dependent clauses, such as the subjunctive in certain languages.
 - (b) Word order variations, such as verb-final sentences in Dutch and German.
 - (c) Sentences headed by complementisers.
 14. Short answers and response particles derived from deictic adverbs, e.g. Portuguese *sim*, French *oui*, Polish *tak* or from finite forms as Portuguese *tá* (cf. Ginzburg 2012:217–265).
 15. Other non-sentential utterances: *hm*, *huh* in English (cf. Ginzburg 2012:217–265) and West-African Atlantic-Congo languages (cf. Painter 1975, Dingemanse, Torreira, and Enfield 2013).
 16. Vocatives (Zwicky 1974, Ladd 1978, Portner 2007, Hill 2007, Hill 2022, Portner 2007 Maché 2020, Maché 2025).
 17. Evaluative or expressive “vocatives” prevalent in many European languages such as English *you idiot!* or Portuguese *seu idiota!* ‘POSS.3S idiot’ (cf. Svennung 1958, Rauh 2004, Espinal 2013:120–127, d’Avis and Meibauer 2013).
 18. Greetings (cf. Ginzburg 2012:74–80).
 19. Exclamative interjections and evaluative expressions like *Wow!* or *Oh God!* (cf. Ginzburg 2014, Sieberg 2016)

Questions of interest may involve, but are not limited to, various aspects of the relationship between form and meaning, as illustrated below:

1. What is the role of finiteness in determining the illocutionary force? Are certain speech acts dependent on the presence or absence of finiteness (cf. Nikolaeva 2007, Truckenbrodt 2006, Klein 2008)?
2. What is the role of the QUD in minor sentence types? Is it necessary to assume QUDs to account for prosodic prominence and/or word order variation?
3. Which impact does the marked form of minor sentence type have on what kind of at-issue and/or non-at-issue meaning it may convey (cf. Potts 2005, Potts 2015)?
4. What is the underlying syntactic representation of defective minor sentence types? Is there any empirical evidence for covert verbs, subjects or matrix predicates?
5. Is there any empirical evidence to determine which approach to the relationship between sentence type and illocutionary force is more adequate: *correspondence approach* or *derivational approach* as proposed by Reis (1999) and Meibauer (2013)?

This workshop follows the annual HPSG-colloquium but warmly welcomes contributions from any theoretical framework including constraint-based theories such as GPSG, HPSG, LFG, CG, CxG and derivational approaches such as Minimalism. Submissions related to the application of theoretical linguistics in NLP, as relevant to the workshop's theme, are also encouraged.

The workshop aims to provide a forum for proponents of diverse theoretical approaches who are open to learning from one another.

Submissions should be two pages in length, including data, figures, and references. They must be submitted in PDF format and should not include the authors' names. Authors are also asked to avoid self-references. All abstracts must be submitted by 30th March, 2025, via EasyChair.

<https://easychair.org/conferences?conf=hpsg2025>

- Deadline for abstracts: 30th March 2025
- Notification of acceptance: 30th April 2025
- Date: 4th September 2025 (preceded by the HPSG colloquium on 2nd–3rd September)
- Invited speakers: Jonathan Ginzburg (Laboratoire de linguistique formelle, Université de Paris)
- Conference proceedings submission: 15th October 2025
- Contact/local organizer: jakob.mache@letras.ulisboa.pt

A call for contributions to the proceedings will be issued after the conference. The proceedings are going to be an indexed publication; the contributions will undergo a separate round of reviews. The proceedings of previous conferences are available at: <https://proceedings.hpsg.xyz/>

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