

Natural and Unnatural Conversations

Our goal is to find out if there's any difference in the grammaticality of sentences like those in (1), below. You probably find both of these sentences to be quite unacceptable; however, in some languages, a sentence like (1b) is grammatical, while a sentence like (1a) is ungrammatical.

- (1) a. What does Sal **date** the professor who claimed?
b. What does Sal **know** the professor who claimed?

Our hypothesis is that sentences like (1b) are more acceptable than sentences like (1a). This difference has been found for other languages, but hasn't been investigated much for English. We're interested in this because current theories about grammar can't explain why (1b) would be more acceptable than (1a). They'd predict both of these sentences to be equally unacceptable. To explain why, let us tell you a little bit about how we think the word order in questions comes about.

When you hear a question like the one in (2), you know that the question word *what* corresponds to whatever thing Sal likes. But in an ordinary sentence like (3), the thing that is liked normally comes after the verb *like*.

- (2) **What** does Sal like? (3) Sal likes **pizza**.

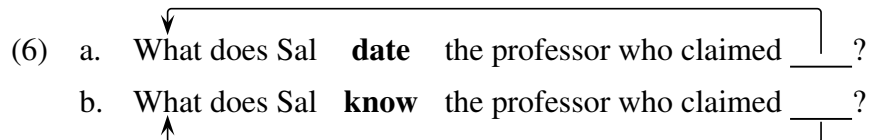
To explain this word order difference, we say that the question word *what* starts out where *pizza* is in (3)—after the verb—and moves to the front of the sentence, as illustrated below.

- (4) What does Sal like ?
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Some parts of a sentence can't have things moved out of them, and we call these things ISLANDS. One kind of island is known as a RELATIVE CLAUSE—exemplified by the underlined part in (5).

- (5) Sal believes the professor who claimed something outrageous.

Notice that the questions back in (1) have a relative clause, and that they involve moving the question word *what* out of the relative clause island, like we've shown below in (6).

- (6) a. What does Sal **date** the professor who claimed ?
b. What does Sal **know** the professor who claimed ?
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Current theories of grammar prevent anything from being moved out of an island. This creates the prediction that the questions in (1) should be equally unacceptable, in contrast to our hypothesis. If we find out from this study that questions like (1b) are actually better than questions like (1a), this will suggest that some revisions are needed for our theories of grammar.

Thanks for participating in this experiment! If you have any questions or want to hear about the outcomes, e-mail the researcher: jwvincen@ucsc.edu.