



IZKUNTZALARI GAZTEEN ELKARTEA ASOCIACIÓN DE XOVES LINGÜISTAS  
ASSOCIACIÓ DE JOVES LINGÜISTES ASOCIACIÓN DE JÓVENES LINGÜISTAS

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“People ask me, ‘What’s my research?’: The Syntax of Subordinated Interrogatives in English”

Robert Allen Cloutier

In spoken American English, there is a trend involving a shift in the formation of indirectly quoted interrogative clauses. The result is a clause that has characteristics of both direct quotes and indirect quotes as demonstrated in the title of this paper. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable with interrogatives since in addition to changes in tense and deixis, interrogatives usually have a further syntactic modification. For instance, the quote in the title “people ask me, ‘what’s my research?’” shows subject-auxiliary inversion as in a direct quote, but instead of “your”, which would be expected if this were a direct quote, the speaker says “my”, resulting in a mixed construction. These subordinate interrogatives with the syntax of main clause interrogatives are not well understood. Until now, studies mentioning this construction (Seppänen 1984 and Huddleston and Pullum 2002) have focussed only on pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects while the formal characteristics have so far been neglected: Seppänen (1984) relegates this construction to popular Irish speech and African American English. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) develop pragmatic criteria for the occurrence of this construction: they ascribe this phenomenon to “contexts of strong-question orientation”. This study zooms in on formal aspects of this construction. In order to shed more light on the criteria that trigger this kind of construction, I conducted an analysis of spontaneous speech data of American English taken from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. I show that there are instances of subordinated interrogatives that the criteria developed by Huddleston and Pullum fail to capture. I propose an alternative account based on more formal factors.