Word order, Wh-licensing and the Left Periphery – toward a definition of discourse oriented language

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We will mainly concentrate on 4 types of languages – Hungarian, Chinese, E(uropean) P(ortuguese)/French and B(rzilian) P(ortuguese)/Tetum (East Timor) - and on 3 aspects of wh-structures where variation is observed: (i) wh-movement; (ii) inversion and (iii) presence vs absence of a complementizer form. We will claim that variation observed in wh-questions correlates with variation in other constructions, namely in wh-exclamatives, confirming Greenberg’s insight that variation is actually co-variation. Three main goals: (a) to give a unified account of variation in wh-questions across languages; (b) to unify mirror effects in wh-questions vs. wh-exclamatives, such as: availability of in situ wh-questions vs. unavailability of in situ wh-exclamatives; obligatory inversion in wh-questions vs. optional inversion in wh-exclamatives; absence vs. presence of a complementizer form in both constructions and (c) to contribute for a finer definition of ‘discourse-oriented language’.

In recent years much work has been devoted to the study of discourse properties encoded in the grammar. Two alternative views: (a) the “syncretic category” approach - different features are combined in the same projection (Uriagereka 95, Zubizarreta 98, Simpson 99 etc.); (b) the split CP approach - different properties are represented by different projections (Cinque 90, Rizzi 95, Kayne & Pollock 98, etc). We will argue for the 2nd view and will assume that movement is always visible and to the left, much in terms of Kayne (98).

We will claim that, with respect to Di(scourse), the parameters of variation have to be set according to a distinction between (at least) two classes of Di projections, which, tentatively we will relate with two pragmatic notions described in the literature: C(ommon) G(round) and U(niverse) of Di(scourse) (a.o. Heim 82, Calabrese 85). For concreteness, we suggest that two of the projections we will assume to exist – AssertiveP (a projection that accounts for presupposed information) and EvaluativeP (a projection that accounts for evaluations made by the speaker) – belong to the CG, whereas projections like FocusP and TopicP are U of Di related. Assume then the following representation for sentence structure:

(1) XP [EvaluativeP [EvaluativeP [AssertiveP [Assertive’ [XP [WhP [Wh’ [FocusP [Focus’ [XP [IP

Take now aspects (i)-(iii) referred to above. Let us consider each one in turn:

(i) wh-movement vs. wh-in-situ – 4 types of languages: 1) languages where wh-phrases obligatory occur in situ, i.e. languages that (at least apparently) lack overt wh-movement (e.g. Chinese); 2) languages where wh-in-situ are not available (e.g. Hungarian); 3) languages like English that allow for wh-in-situ just in case one wh-phrase has been moved and 4) mixed languages, i.e languages that allow both constructions (e.g. French, EP, BP, Tetum). In the latter group, however, some (micro)variation is at stake: although BP and Tetum allow overt wh-movement, contrary to EP, in situ wh-questions are more frequent (Rossi 93 for BP). Our main questions: why is overt wh movement obligatory, forbidden or apparently optional in some languages but not in others? Does this phenomenon correlate with other phenomena in the different particular grammars? Are in situ wh-questions free variants of fronted wh-questions or does their interpretation differ?

As shown in Ambar (99), EP wh-in-situ semantically differ from their corresponding structures with overt wh-movement (semantic and syntactic differences will be tested), see also Cheng and Rooryck (2000). Notice that neither Boskovic’s (96) proposal of LF insertion of C₀ for French, nor Simpson’s (99) claim of non-strict local checking, can account for the interpretative contrast of these constructions.

We claim that AssertiveP is involved in the derivation of in situ wh-questions. In an utterance like O Pedro encontrou quem ?Peter met who ?, the speaker asserts that Peter met ‘someone’. Assuming structure (1), let us consider that the wh-phrase of in situ wh-questions has moved to WhP to check the Q feature and that ulterior movement of the Remnant IP takes place in
order to check the Assertive feature (cf (2)); if some material follows the wh-phrase, it has moved to a Topic position, as in (3), where clearly à Ana is prosodically separated from o quê by a pause, much in the spirit of Kayne & Pollock (98) and Ambar & Pollock (98) for Portuguese; in the resulting structures the desired word order and intonation obtain:

(2) (i) XP [ AssertiveP [ Assertive’ [XP [ WhP quem] [Wh’ [ FocusP t] [ Focus’ [ XP [IP o Pedro encontrou tô]]]]]]]]
(ii) XP [ AssertiveP [O Pedro encontrou tô] k [ Assertive’ [XP [ WhP quem] [Wh’ [ FocusP t] [ Focus’ [XP [ IP tk]]]]]]]]

(3) a. O Pedro ofereceu o quê à Ana ?
   Peter offered what to Ana

   b. (i) XP [ AssertiveP [ Assertive’ [XP [ WhP o quê] [Wh’ [ FocusP t] [ Focus’ [ TopP à Ana m [Top’ [IP o Pedro ofereceu tô tk]]]]]]]]
      (ii) XP [ AssertiveP [O Pedro ofereceu tô tk] k [ Assertive’ [XP [ WhP o quê] [Wh’ [ FocusP t] [ Focus’ [TopP à Ana m [Top’ [IP tk]]]]]]]]

In situ wh-questions and fronted wh-questions are different structures with different numerations. As for exclamatives we will see that both AssertiveP and EvaluativeP are involved - we will present argumentation based, respectively, on Grimshaw’s (77) observation on the ‘determined status’ of exclamatives and on Barwise and Cooper’s distinction between pure and evaluative quantifiers (only evaluative quantifiers like muitos/many can enter exclamative constructions). The impossibility of in situ exclamatives is also derived (as we will see Infl is unable to check evaluative features).

(ii) Inversion – 3 types of languages can be considered for wh-questions: 1) languages where inversion is always obligatory (e.g. Hungarian); 2) languages where inversion is impossible (Tetum, BP, in the unmarked case; 3) languages where inversion coexists with absence of inversion in given contexts (e.g. EP, French). We will claim that non-inverted wh-structures result from a conspiracy between the activation of AssertiveP and the activation of XP it selects. Only more restricted/determined wh-phrases can check the Assertive feature. We are then predicting that, whenever there is a wh-question without inversion, it has an ‘assertive flavor’, typical of exclamatives and of echo questions - the availability vs. unavailability of these structures will depend on the + or – definite status of the wh-phrase in each language.

(iii) Presence vs. absence of a complementizer – we will assume the form que that occurs in wh-questions in some languages (e.g. BP: Onde que você vai? Where that you go?) is merged in AssertiveP and gives to the structure a more ‘determined’ interpretation. Further research is needed in order to motivate the movement of the wh-phrase to spec of that projection, namely we will try to explore Chomsky’s (99) idea of “φ-complete” categories.

The analysis outlined suggests a possible unifying link among the structures and the languages described: languages where AssertiveP is prominent will display a tendency for moving constituents to that projection, i.e. for having wh-in-situ, wh-structures without inversion and complementizer forms, which lexicalize the head of AssertiveP (the case of BP and Tetum); languages where AssertiveP is not prominent will exhibit rather absence of wh-in-situ, obligatory inversion (Hungarian); mixed languages will have common behaviors to both types of languages (case of French and EP). As we will see these tendencies correlate with other properties, namely the fact that a language is more or less ‘grammaticalized’

Further issues: Iraqui Arabic (Simpson 99) allows wh-in-situ in root and in infinitival embedded clauses, but not in tensed embedded ones. The wh-phrase can however overtly move out of the embedded tensed domain. In our terms, this means that Tense of embedded clauses blocks Remnant IP movement in some languages - it is then necessary to characterize the Infl system of these languages, as opposed to the languages that allow that movement. Complex DP islands in EP provide a mirror effect: wh-in-situ is possible in relative clauses, but overt extraction is blocked. We will try to accommodate these cases to our system.