How come and other adjunct wh-phrases: A cross-linguistic perspective

How come in English is known to have properties distinct from why: its interpretation is clause-bound (1a) and it does not interact with a clause-mate quantifier (2a). Collins (1991) argues that how come is an interrogative C head, and thus obeys strict locality conditions and has no trace to bind (hence no scope interaction (3a)).

We present two types of wh-operators patterning with how come. First, why-the-hell in English (4-5). The second type, found in languages like Serbo-Croatian (6) and German (7), is a wh-operator WHAT whose interpretation is similar to “why.” They too show the relevant restrictions (8-9). Crucially, both types are XPs located in spec-CP: why the hell triggers the SAI (4-5) and German data like (8a) show a V2 effect with was “WHAT,” which would not be expected if was were located in C. As the restrictions imposed on how come also apply to phrasal elements, an alternative (and unified) account is worth exploring.

We propose a unified analysis of how come, why the hell, and WHAT, building on Collins’ idea that how come lacks a trace. Our claim is that all the adjunct wh-phrases above (except why) have a strong feature that must be checked off against the interrogative C. Under the so-called virus theory of feature strength (Chomsky 1995: chapter 4), which states that a strong feature must be checked off “immediately” (which we interpret to mean “by the next operation after it enters the structure”), such a wh-phrase must be merged directly into the spec of the interrogative C (10), upon which its strong feature is checked off. If it is merged elsewhere (VP or IP-internally), the derivation does not converge, as its strong feature cannot be checked off until the interrogative C is merged with IP (11). Since an element moved into an operator position is known to be frozen for a further movement (12), it follows that a wh-phrase merged into the spec of an interrogative CP is immobile (i.e., strict locality). Also, such a wh-phrase, with no trace, does not interact with another quantifier.

Further, assuming that 1) the SAI is triggered because the C has a strong [+v] feature (13a) and 2) how come is unique in bearing a [+v] feature (manifested as come), the C can check off its strong feature against how come without attracting INFL, another [+v] element (13b). This explains the lack of the SAI with how come (1a) under our analysis.

All the languages above are wh-fronting languages (i.e., with a strong interrogative C). We argue that this is not an accident. In particular, we argue that the relevant feature strength of those adjunct wh-phrases is specified on the basis of the feature strength of the interrogative C in that language: their feature strength acquires that of the C. In this connection, we discuss Japanese, in which WHAT is merged in-situ and patterns with naze “why” (Kurafuji 1997): with a weak interrogative C, the relevant feature of WHAT is specified as weak in Japanese, thus not being forced to merge into the spec of the interrogative C.
How come you think John is mad? (matrix only)

Why do you think John is mad? (ambiguous)

How come everyone hates John? (how come > every, *every > how come)

Why does everyone hate John? (why > every, every > why)

[How come [IP everyone hates John]] (there is no trace)

[Why does [IP everyone hate John t]] (everyone c-commands t)

Why the hell do you think John is mad? (matrix only)

Why the hell does everyone hate John? (*every > why, why > every)

Zašto/Šta si ustao tako rano?

why/what have get up so early “Why did you get up so early?”

Ich frage mich, warum/was Hans so gestresst ist.

I ask myself why/what Hans that stressed is “I wonder why Hans is so stressed.”

Was glaubst du daß er so lange schläft? (matrix only)

what believe you that he so long sleeps

“Why do you believe that he sleeps so long?”

Warum glaubst du daß er so lange schläft? (ambiguous)

why believe you that he so long sleeps (German)

Šta je svako toliko nervozan danas? (why > every, *every > why)

what is everyone so nervous today?

“Why is everyone depressed today?”

Zašto je svako toliko nervozan danas? (why > every, every > why)

why is everyone so nervous today (Serbo-Croatian)

Who do you wonder [IP t C [IP t bought what]]?

[C attracts INFL for [+ v]]
