

The syntax and prosody of Content Questions in Tundra Nenets

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1 Goals

- In this talk, we examine the syntactic and prosodic characteristics of content (also called wh-)questions Tundra Nenets.
 - We focus on:
 - the possible word orders attested in wh-questions,
 - the positions occupied by a wh-phrase,
 - the prosody of wh-questions,
 - the accentuation patterns in the wh-questions.
 - the IS restrictions in wh-questions.
 - The main aim of our research is to answer the following questions:
 - Q1:** Is there a wh-movement in the Tundra Nenets wh-question?
 - Q2:** What is/are the available position(s) for a wh-phrase in the wh-question?
- ⇒ Even these questions won't be exhaustively answered in this talk, our present results (and further questions revealed) bring us one step closer to the solutions.

2 Background

- We set up tests containing target language manipulation elicitation, paradigmatic substitution elicitation, and grammatical judgment tasks.
 - We used the results of these tests for setting up reading aloud tasks, and we recorded the sentences.
 - We consulted one native speaker, who speaks the Yamal dialect.
- ⇒ This is a pilot study which will be used for formulating our hypotheses and set up the tests for our future fieldwork(s).

3 The syntax of wh-questions

3.1 Typology of wh-word position

- Cross-linguistically, two patterns are observed wrt the clausal position of the wh-phrase in genuine single wh-questions:

1. the wh-phrase is **fronted** (like in most of the European languages):

(1) *What did Peter buy _____?* [English]

2. the wh-phrase **remains *in situ*** (like in Chinese, Japanese, most of the Amerindian languages):

(2) *Qiaofeng mai-le shenme ne?*
 Qiaofeng buy-asp what Qwh
 ‘What did Qiaofeng buy?’ (Cheng 1991: 30) [Mandarin]

- This classification, however, does not explain the pattern attested in some languages, such as in Hungarian, in which the wh-phrase is **neither fronted, nor remains *in situ***, but there is an **internal wh-movement** in the wh-question:

(3) a. *Tegnap Péter mit vett?*
 yesterday Peter what.acc bought
 ‘What did Peter buy yesterday?’
 b. *Tegnap mit vett Péter?*
 yesterday what.acc bought Peter
 ‘What did Peter buy yesterday?’ [Hungarian]

⇒ The wh-phrase either **moves to a dedicated position** (that can be the sentence initial position or the preverbal position), or it **remains *in situ***.

- Note that there are languages, such as French, in which both strategies are available.
- Besides, we find languages in which some wh-phrases obligatorily move to a dedicated wh-position, while others can remain *in situ*.

3.2 Wh-questions in Tundra Nenets

- In Tundra Nenets, the wh-phrase usually remains *in situ* (4)–(5).

(4) *xíba Irina-m? meńe?*
 who Irina-ACC love.3SG
 ‘Who loves Irina?’ [Subject, *in situ*]

(5) *Sergei xíba-m? meńe?*
 Sergei who-ACC love.3SG
 ‘Whom does Sergei love?’ [Object, *in situ*]

- Other configurations are also observed (6)–(7).

- (6) *Irina-m? xība meńe?*
 Irina-ACC who love.3SG
 ‘Who loves Irina?’ [Subject, *ex situ*]
- (7) *xība-m? Sergei meńe?*
 who-ACC Sergei love.3SG
 ‘Whom does Sergei love?’ [Object, *ex situ*]

⇒ The wh-phrase is either *in situ* or *ex situ* in Tundra Nenets.

- The *in situ* vs *ex situ* categorization seems to be too vague (especially) for wh-adjuncts.

- (8) *śaxa? ηaćeeki škola-n? jaderya?*
 when child school-dat go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’
- (9) *ηaćeeki śaxa? škola-n? jaderya?*
 child when school-dat go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’
- (10) *ηaćeeki škola-n? śaxa? jaderya?*
 child school-dat when go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’

⇒ The wh-phrase can occupy an **initial**, a **medial**, and/or a **preverbal** position in Tundra Nenets.

- **Initial position:** The sentence initial position and/or the position before the subject.
- **Medial position:** Between the subject and the direct OR the indirect object.
- **Preverbal position:** a position in which the wh-phrase is directly adjacent to the verb.

- Possible explanations:

1. There is a **wh-movement**, like in (11)–(13):

- (11) _____ *Irina-m? [FocP xība meńe]?*
 Irina-ACC who love.3SG
 ‘Who loves Irina?’ [wh-movement]
- (12) _____ *ηaćeeki škola-n? [FocP śaxa? jaderya]?*
 child school-dat when go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’ [wh-movement]

Note that in (11)–(12), one has to stipulate further movements, such as at least a verb movement to the FocP).

- (13) *xība _____ Irina-m? meńe?*
 who Irina-ACC love.3SG
 ‘Who loves Irina?’ [wh-movement]

2. The **information structurally marked** wh-questions result in the different configurations, like in (14)–(15):

(14) *Irina-mʔ_i xibá ______imeńe?*
 Irina-ACC who love.3SG
 ‘Who loves Irina?’ [wh-*in situ*]

(15) *ɲáčeki_iškola-nʔ śaxaʔ ______ijaderya?*
 child school-dat when go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’ [wh-*in situ*]

...

⇒ We will get back to this.

4 The prosody of wh-questions

4.1 Typology of wh-word accentuation

- Two typical patterns across languages:

1. wh-questions maintain the same accentuation pattern as declaratives (e.g. English, German, Italian),

(16) What did Peter BUY? [English]

2. the wh-word receives the main accent, similarly to focus (e.g. Hungarian, Romanian, Greek), while the other words are typically deaccented.

(17) MIT vett Péter?
 what.acc bought Peter
 ‘What did Peter buy?’ [Hungarian]

4.2 Observed patterns in Tundra Nenets

- Interrogative: ‘When does the child go to school?’ with three different word orders.

Sound samples and annotations available here:

phon.nytud.hu/mady/corpora/tundra_nenets

(18) *śaxaʔ ɲáčeki škola-nʔ jaderya?*
 when child school-dat go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’ [initial]

(19) *ɲáčeki śaxaʔ škola-nʔ jaderya?*
 child when school-dat go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’ [medial]

(20) *ɲáčeki škola-nʔ śaxaʔ jaderya?*
 child school-dat when go.3sg
 ‘When does the child go to school?’ [preverbal]

- (a) **Initial** wh-phrase: all words carry a pitch accent, overall falling intonation contour.
 - (b) **Medial** wh-phrase: wh-word has strong prominence. The other words are deaccented or have weaker prominence than the wh-word.
 - (c) **Preverbal** wh-phrase: wh-word has strong prominence. The other words are deaccented or have weak prominence.
- Overall pattern: the wh-word receives prominence in all three word orders.

[Q:] Why does deaccentuation of the other words appear only if the wh-word is non-initial?

- Possible explanations:
 1. **Syntactic markedness**: the word order wh + subject + adverb + verb corresponds to the default, unmarked syntactic structure. In this case, no special prominence of the wh-word is needed. Other word orders are marked, highlighting the prominence structure.
 2. **Reading style**: the accentuation of the non-initial words is an artifact of reading. Possibly, the initial wh-word would be the only accented one in spontaneous speech. Missing deaccentuation is frequently observed in context-free read speech.

4.3 Stress placement in wh-words

- Tundra Nenets is said to have word-initial stress (Nikolaeva, 2014). Indeed, the wh-word *śaxa?* has a falling intonation contour, and the first syllable is stressed.
- BUT: this is the only wh-word with a falling pitch contour. All other wh-words, e.g. *xibá*, show a rising pitch contour with a peak on the second syllable. This indicates stress and prominence on the 2nd, non-initial syllable.

⇒ A careful investigation of word stress patterns is needed.

5 The syntax and information structure interface

- The literature suggests, that the different orders may represent different discourse-pragmatic interpretation, but it is not necessarily the case. Thus, the initial, medial, and preverbal positions of a wh-phrase may reflect free variations (Nikolaeva, 2014).
- We tested the three positions in IS-marked, i.e. non-neutral sentences.

5.1 The insertion of focus in the wh-question

- There are languages, in which the wh-phrase cannot cooccur with focus, such as Hungarian.
- Tundra Nenets allows for a focussed constituent in its wh-questions (at least identificational foci???)

- There are morphological markers in Tundra Nenets, which ensure the focus interpretation of a phrase:
 - *-rí-* or *-lí-* for ‘only’ focus
 - *-xVwa-* for ‘even’ focus

5.1.1 The ‘only’ focus

- The **initial** position for the wh-phrase is accepted.

- (21) *xíba shkola-rí-xina jewej-m? ɲǎwor-ca?*
 who school-FOC-LOC soup-ACC eat-INTERR.3SG
 ‘Who ate the soup ONLY IN THE SCHOOL?’
- (22) **shkola-rí-xina xíba jewej-m? ɲǎwor-ca?*
 school-FOC-LOC who soup-ACC eat-INTERR.3SG
- (23) **shkola-rí-xina jewej-m? xíba ɲǎwor-ca?*
 school-FOC-LOC soup-ACC who eat-INTERR.3SG

- The **initial** and **medial** positions for the wh-phrase are accepted.

- (24) *xíba-n? Vera kniga-rí-m? temda-sa?*
 who-dat Vera book-only-acc buy-3sg.pst
 ‘For whom did Vera buy only book?’
- (25) *Vera xíba-n? kniga-rí-m? temda-sa?*
 Vera who-dat book-only-acc buy-3sg.pst
 ‘For whom did Vera buy only book?’
- (26) **Vera kniga-rí-m? xíba-n? temda-sa?*
 Vera book-only-acc who-dat buy-3sg.pst

5.1.2 The ‘even’ focus

- The ‘even’ focus shows the same restrictions as the ‘only’ focus.

- (27) *xíba weńeko-xowa-m? mǎńije?*
 who dog-AFF-ACC see.3SG
 ‘Who sees EVEN THE DOG?’
- (28) *?/*weńeko-xowa-m? xíba mǎńije?*
 dog-AFF-ACC who see.3SG

⇒ The ‘only’ and ‘even’ focus cannot precede the wh-phrase.

- Note that further operators, such as negative polarity items (29) and universal quantifiers (30), indicate the same syntactic restriction.

- (29) **xíba-xǎrt xurka jewej-m? ní-śa ɲawor-ʔ?*
 who-FOC what.kind soup-ACC NEG.AUX-INTERR.3SG eat-CNG
 intended: ‘What kind of soup did not eat anyone?’

- (30) **xusuwej* *ńe-m?* *xíba* *mane?-ća?*
 every woman-ACC who see-INTERR.3SG
 intended: ‘Who saw every woman?’

- Possible explanations:

1. The wh-phrase moves in the logical form, and the operators cause intervention. In this case we assume a **(covert) wh-movement**.
2. The wh phrase remains *in situ*, and it is linked with a null operator. The overt operators cause an intervention in this link. In this case we assume **wh-indexing**.

5.2 The insertion of topic in the wh-question

- It is not clear to what extent the topic interpretation can be assured, since there are no morphological topic markers in the language.
- It is known, however, that topical objects obligatorily trigger agreement on the verb. Topical, i.e. agreeing objects, however, do not occupy a dedicated position in the wh-question.

- (31) *xíba* *śo-m?* *namda-da-sa?*
 who song-acc hear-sg.3sg-interrog
 ‘Who heard the song?’

- (32) *śo-m?* *xíba* *namda-da-sa?*
 song-acc who hear-sg.3sg-interrog
 ‘Who heard the song?’

⇒ The order is not invariant.

- Note that agreeing objects do not necessarily occupy a dedicated syntactic position, they may remain *in situ*.
- Additionally, topics, PossPs, and DPs share some typical characteristics, such as *referentiality*, and *definiteness*.
- We tested the order of the PossPs/DPs and the wh-phrase.

- (33) *ťuku* *ńe* / *ńe-r* *ŋamge-m?* *namda-da-sa?*
 this woman woman-2sg what-acc hear-sg.3sg-interrog
 ‘What did this woman/your woman heard?’

- (34) *ŋamge-m?* *ťuku* *ńe* / *ńe-r* *namda-da-sa?*
 what-acc this woman woman-2sg hear-sg.3sg-interrog
 ‘What did this woman/your woman heard?’

⇒ The order is not invariant.

6 Summary

- Three positions are available for the wh-phrase: initial, medial, preverbal.
- The wh-phrase receives prominence in all positions. But! there is a deaccentuation process in questions with a non-initial wh-phrase.
- The IS-marked questions show a restriction that might indicate that there is a wh-movement.

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