On the syntax of Tundra Nenets content questions

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Target constructions

- Single content questions: the order and the position of wh-phrases
- Multiple questions: the relative order of the wh-phrases

Word order constraints in single questions

In Tundra Nenets genuine content questions the basic order of the constituents is usually SOV and the wh-phrase remains *in situ* (1)–(2).

(1)   Sergei xiba-mʔ meńe?
        Sergei who-ACC love.3SG
        'Whom does Sergei love?'

(2)   t́uku jaĺa-ʔ   xiba shkola-nʔ   jader-ŋa?
        this   day-GEN who school-DAT go-CO.3SG
        'Who goes to school today?'

Other configurations are also observed (3)–(4), so the order of the constituents is said to be free in questions (Nikolaeva, 2014).

(3) xiba-mʔ Sergei meńe?
     who-ACC Sergei love.3SG
     'Whom does Sergei love?'

(4) xiba t́uku jaĺa-ʔ   shkola-nʔ jader-ŋa?
     who this day-GEN school-DAT go-CO.3SG
     'Who goes to school today?'

Literature and observations

The information structure of questions may influence the order of their elements (Nikolaeva, 2014). Thus, the different orders may represent different information structures, but it is not necessarily the case. The discourse-pragmatic interpretation of the different orders can also be identical.

↕

There are examples, in which the wh-phrase appears together with certain kind of expressions, and the order of the constituents is not free.

(5)   *Masha-ŕi   ŋamge-m? ŋawor-ŋa?
      Masha-LIM what-ACC eat-CO.3SG
      'What does ONLY Masha eat?'

Experiments

Speaker

- male, 28, Yamal Peninsula, Central/Eastern dialect

Methods

- grammaticality/acceptability judgement test (E1)
    - the most frequent nouns and verbs in a corpus (800K token)
    - fillers: existential and locative clauses, belong-constructions
    - repeated 2 times (in different randomized orders)

- situational context test (substitutionality test; E2)
    - input: TN texts/pictures & TN words and question pairs

- consultation (E3)
    - a questionnaire based on the results of E1 and E2

- focus + wh-phrase; negative polarity item + wh-phrase;
  universal quantifier + wh-phrase

Invariant word order in single content questions
The interaction between focus and wh-phrases

In TN, discourse clitics/suffixes can attach to a focussed constituent:
-ŕi-/-ĺi- 'only' and *-xaw(a)-* emph.

The focussed element marked by *-ŕi/-ĺi-* 'only' cannot precede the wh-phrase.

(6) *xasawa-ŕi xańaɲi laxanako-mʔ tolabi?
     man-LIM which story-ACC   read.3SG
     'Which story did ONLY THE MAN man read?'

(7) *weńeko-ŕi-mʔ xańaɲi ɲaćeki mańije?
     dog-LIM-ACC which child see.3SG
     'Which child sees ONLY THE DOG?'

The interaction between -*xaw(a)*-focus and wh-phrases

If the **object** is focussed and marked by the -*xaw(a)*- suffix, it cannot precede the wh-phrase (*$O_{foc}S_{wh}V$).

(8)   xiba weńeko-xowa-mʔ mańije?
        who dog-AFF-ACC   see.3SG
        'Who sees THE DOG?'

(9)   ?/*weńeko-xowa-mʔ xiba mańije?
        dog-AFF-ACC   who see.3SG
        'Who sees THE DOG?'

The interaction between -*xaw(a)*-focus and wh-phrases

In contrast, in the case of **subject** focus (marked by the -*xaw(a)*-suffix) both $S_{foc}O_{wh}V$ and $O_{wh}S_{foc}V$ orders are grammatical.

(10)   xasawa-xawa xańaɲi laxanako-mʔ tolab́i?
         man-AFF   which story-ACC   read.3SG
         'Which story does THE MAN read?'

(11)   xańaɲi laxanako-mʔ xasawa-xawa tolab́i?
         which story-ACC   man-AFF   read.3SG
         'Which story does THE MAN read?'

The two foci in TN

The 'only' focus in TN shows a more rigid syntactic behaviour, i.e. it cannot precede the wh-phrase neither in the basic SOV configuration.

We do not know much about TN foci in general. Based on experiments (whose methods were adopted from Pintér, 2017) both 'only' and -*xaw(a)*-focus express exhaustive identification.

The 'Only'-focus tends to behave differently in languages in general (see e.g. É.Kiss, 2002 for Hungarian 'only'-focus).

$\rightarrow$ There may be a difference between the two foci in TN.

The interaction between negative polarity items and wh-phrases

In TN, NPIs are derived from wh-words by means of the focus marker
-*xərtə-* (Nikolaeva, 2014).

The negative polarity item cannot precede the wh-phrase either.

(12) *xiba-xərt ŋamge kńiga-mʔ ńi   xamedambú-ʔʔ
       who-CONC what   book-ACC NEG.3SG understand-CNG
       'Which book did not understand anyone?'

(13) ?/*xasawa-xarta-mʔ xańaŋi ńe   ńi
       man-CONC-ACC   which woman NEG.AUX.3SG
       lada-ʔʔ
       hit-CNG
       'Which woman do not hit any man?'

The interaction between universal quantifiers and wh-phrases

Expressions quantified by the universal quantifier *xusuwej* 'every' cannot precede the wh-phrase.

(14)   *xusuwej xasawa xurka laxanako-mʔ tolabú?
        every   man   which story-ACC   read.3SG
        'Which story did every man read?'

(15)   ?/*xusuwej xasawa-mʔ xańaɲi ńe   lada?
        every   man-ACC   which woman hit.3SG
        'Which woman hits every man?'

Although the judgments on these examples are by no means invariable or stable, there is a very clear tendency according to which the focus, NPIs and expressions containing the universal quantifier cannot precede the wh-phrase in genuine content questions.

Q: What is common in the focus, the NPIs and the expressions containing the universal quantifier?

$\rightarrow$ They are all operators that have scope.

Generalization[1]: expressions that have scope cannot precede the wh-phrase in genuine content questions: *[op...wh].

Is there a wh-movement in TN single constituent questions?

The fact that operators induce strong intervention effects in TN single content questions suggests that the wh-phrases undergo LF movement in TN.

Similar word order constraints can be observed a.o. in Japanese (Watanabe, 1993), Turkish (İşsever, 2009), Hindi (Malhotra, 2009), etc. By adopting their proposals one can assume that the wh-phrases in TN are **variables** that are linked to their **wh-operator**, i.e. the wh-phrase decomposes into a wh-indefinite and a wh-operator. The intervention of another operator between the variable and its wh-operator breaks the link between them. Therefore, these constructions are ungrammatical.

Wh-phrases as indefinites

The fact that TN wh-phrases, at least 'who' and 'what', can be used as indefinites may support this assumption.

(16)　 t́axaŕi sata　 xiba-n　　　 ŋæ-we-n.
　　　 very　 strong someone-2SG be-2SG
　　　 'You were a very strong person (lit. someone).'
　　　 (Pushkareva Khomich 2001: 250)

(Still, there are more questions than answers...)

The order of wh-phrases in multiple questions

The order of multiple questions, i.e. questions that contain more than one wh-phrase, mostly follows the SOV configuration (17).

(17)   xiɓa xiɓa-mʔ meńe?
         who who-ACC love.3SG
         'Who loves whom?'

The relative order of wh-phrases in multiple questions seems to be free, and there is no asymmetry in multiple questions (Nikolaeva, 2014).

(18)   xiɓa-mʔ xiɓa meńe?
         who-ACC who love.3SG
         'Who loves whom?'

The relative order of the two wh-phrase in multiple questions: observations

S O	O S
S IO	IO S
IO O	O IO
Time/Place S	S Time/Place
Time/Place O	O Time/Place
S Manner	*/#Manner S
O Manner	*/#Manner O
Time/Place Manner	*/#Manner Time/Place

The wh-phrases appear in the question in any relative orders, with one exception: the manner adverbial wh-phrase cannot precede any other element.

Invariant word order in multiple content questions

(19)   ŋamge-mʔ xanʑerʔ pær-ŋa-n?
       what-ACC how   do-CO-2SG
       'How did you do what?'   [multiple question]

(20)   xanʑerʔ ŋamge-mʔ pær-ŋa-n?
       how   what-ACC do-CO-2SG
       #'How did you do what?'
       'How did you do something?'   [single question]

It is only the clause in (19), that is interpreted as a multiple question,
while the clause in (20) – exhibiting the reversed order of the wh-phrases
in (19) – represents a single content question.

In languages like Hungarian, the higher wh-expression (that has a wider scope) cannot be represented by a nonspecific wh-phrase (É.Kiss, 1993).

(21) *Miért/ ??Hogyan kit   választottak meg?
      why   how   whom elected.they PERF
      *'Who did they elect why/how?'

(22) Kit   miért/ hogyan választottak meg?
      whom why   how   elected.they PERF
      'Why/how did they elect who?'

Wh-phrases such as 'how' and 'why' are inherently nonspecific phrases in Hungarian.

Specificity in TN multiple questions

The inherently nonspecific wh-expression 'how' cannot precede the wh-object.

(23)   Igor xanźerʔ ŋamge-mʔ tolaŋko-sa?
        Igor how   what-ACC read-INT.3SG
        'How did Igor read something?'   [single question]
        #'What did Igor read how?'

(24)   Igor ŋamge-mʔ xanźerʔ tolaŋo-sa?
        Igor what-ACC how   read-INT.3SG
        'What did Igor read how?'   [multiple question]

Certain order still seems to be free.

(25)   Igoŕ xańana xiba-mʔ jadabtambi?
        Igor where   who-ACC meet.3SG
        'Where did Igor meet who?'

(26)   Igoŕ xiba-mʔ xańana jadabtambi?
        Igor who-ACC where   meet.3SG
        'Whom did Igor meet where?'

The wh-expressions 'who', 'what', 'where' etc. lend themselves to
the relevant discourse reading in appropriate contexts.

The fronted wh-object may trigger agreement on the verb that serves as a supporting evidence for the specificity of the fronted wh-phrase.

(27)   xańaŋi kńiga-mʔ xurka xasawa temda-sa(-**da**)?
        which book-ACC what man   buy-INT.3SG(-SG.3SG)
        'What man did buy which book?'

In TN, the 3rd person topical objects trigger agreement on the verb (Nikolaeva, 2014).

Agreement is not possible with interrogative objects in single questions (Dalrymple & Nikolaeva, 2010).

(28) Wańa xiba-m? lada-*da?
      John who-ACC hit.3SG/-SG.3SG
      'Whom did John hit?'

If the wh-object is not fronted in multiple questions, the agreement is not possible either. Thus, the second wh-phrase cannot have a specific interpretation.

(29) xurka xasawa xańaŋi kńiga-m? temda-sa-*da?
      what man   which book-ACC buy-INT.3SG(-3SG.SG)
      'What man bought which book?'

The first wh-phrase in multiple questions behaves as the topic in TN.

Generalization[2]

The first element of the wh-phrase pairs in multiple questions (at least in non-insitu orders) is specific, while the second one can only be interpreted as a nonspecific expression.

$\rightarrow$ The ordering of multiple wh-phrases follows from specificity requirement.

Conclusions

Conclusions

The literature suggests, that

- there is no dedicated position for the wh-phrase in single content questions,

- the relative order of the wh-phrases is free in multiple questions,

- the order of genuine single and multiple content questions is free.

Conclusions (cont.)

The preliminary results suggest, that

- operators induces strong intervention effects in TN single content questions, therefore they cannot precede the wh-phrase: *[op...wh]. The wh-phrase is not *in-situ* in single content questions but there is a wh-operator movement in the logical form;

- the ordering of multiple wh-phrases follows from specificity requirement: the first wh-phrase is specific/topical(?) in multiple questions (wh1 has a [+spec] feature), while the second wh-phrase cannot be specific.

Thank you for your attention!