

The role of information structure in Tundra Nenets content questions

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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) ʔuku jaʎa-ʔ xiʙa shkola-nʔ jader-ŋaʔ
this day-GEN who school-DAT go-CO.3SG
'Who goes to school today?'
- (2) Sergei xiʙa-mʔ meŋeʔ
Sergei who-ACC love.3SG
'Whom does Sergei love?'

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

- (3) *xíba* *ʔuku jaʎa-ʔ* *shkola-nʔ* *jader-ŋaʔ*
who this day-GEN school-DAT go-CO.3SG
'Who goes to school today?'
- (4) *xíba-mʔ* *Sergei meŋeʔ*
who-ACC Sergei love.3SG
'Whom does Sergei love?'

Similarly, the order of multiple questions, i.e. questions that contain more than one wh-phrase, mostly follows the SOV configuration (5).

- (5) *xíba xíba-m?* 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).

- (6) *xíba-m? xíba* meńe?
who-ACC who love.3SG
'Who loves whom?'

Literature and observations

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

There are examples, in which the *wh*-phrase appears together with certain discourse functional elements, and the order of the constituents is not free.

Invariant word order in single content questions

- (7) *Masha-*rí* *ɲ*ange-*m*? *ɲ*awor-*ɲ*a?
Masha-LIM what-ACC eat-CO.3SG
'What does only Masha eat?'
- (8) *ɲ*ange-*m*? Masha-*rí* *ɲ*awor-*ɲ*a?
what-ACC Masha-LIM eat-CO.3SG
'What does only Masha eat?'

It seems, that the 'only N' constituent cannot precede the wh-phrase.

Invariant word order in single content questions

- (9) **xíba-xərt* *ɲamge kńiga-m?* *ńi* *xamedaḿbu-??*
who-CONC what book-ACC NEG.3SG understand-CNG
'Which book did not understand anyone?'
- (10) *ɲamge kńiga-m?* *xíba-xərt* *ńi* *xamedaḿbu-??*
what book-ACC who-CONC NEG.3SG understand-CNG
'Which book did not understand anyone?'

The negative polarity item cannot precede the wh-phrase.

Invariant word order in multiple content questions

(11) *ŋamge-m? xanzer?* pær-ŋa-n?
what-ACC how do-CO-2SG
'How did you do what?' [multiple question]

(12) *xanzer? ŋamge-m?* 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 (11), that is interpreted as a multiple question, while the clause in (12) – exhibiting the reversed order of the wh-phrases in (11) – represents a single content question.

Research questions

Q1: Is the word order of genuine (single and multiple) questions free in Tundra Nenets?

Q2: If not, what motivates the order of questions?

Hypotheses

Discourse functions are encoded syntactically and this affect the word order of content questions. Information structure plays a crucial role in formulating content question in Tundra Nenets:

- certain kind of expressions (e.g. foci) cannot precede the wh-phrase;
- the order of the wh-phrases in multiple questions is not free, but it depends on the specificity of the wh-phrases.

The language and data

Word order constraints in single questions

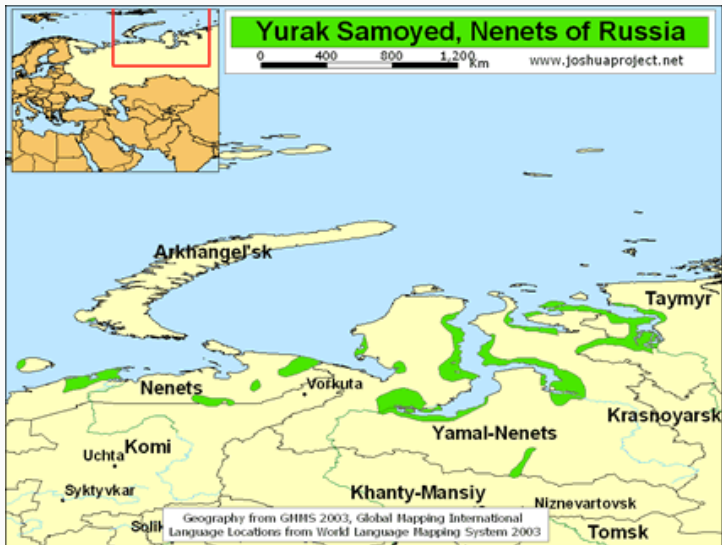
The order of wh-phrases in multiple questions

Conclusions

The language and data

The Tundra Nenets language

- Uralic > Samoyedic > Northern Samoyedic >
- c. 20.000/c. 45.000 speakers (bi-/multilingualism c. 80 %)
- threatened (EGIDS 6b)
- three dialectal groups



Map Source: Joshua Project / Global Mapping International

The Tundra Nenets data

- experiments and consultations with a native speaker
- target constructions
 - single questions containing wh-phrase and a
 - a focussed expression (the main focus markers used in Tundra Nenets are: *-ři-/-ři-* 'only' and *-xawa-* emph)
 - a negative polarity item ('no N')
 - a universal quantifier ('every N')
 - multiple question pairs containing
 - wh-argument–wh-argument
 - wh-argument–wh-adjunct
 - wh-adjunct–wh-adjunct

Methods

- grammaticality/acceptability judgement experiment
 - designed to investigate whether certain orders are grammatical
 - input: TN clauses without context
 - the most frequent nouns and verbs in a corpus containing 800K token
 - fillers: existential and locative clauses, belong-constructions
 - repeated 2 times (in different randomized orders)
- situational context test (acceptability test)
 - designed to test the substitutionality of the possible orders in different contexts
 - input: TN texts/pictures & TN words and question pairs
- consultation
 - a (short) questionnaire based on the results of E1 and E2
 - designed to verify and clarify the results

Word order constraints in single questions

The interaction between focus and wh-phrases

In Tundra Nenets, discourse clitics/suffixes can attach to a focused constituent: *-rí/-lí-* 'only' and *-xaw(a)-* emph.

The focused element marked by *-rí/-lí-* 'only' cannot precede the wh-phrase.

- (13) **xasawa-rí xańaŋi laxanako-m?* tolábí?
man-LIM which story-ACC read.3SG
'Which story did ONLY THE MAN man read?'
- (14) **weńeko-rí-m? xańaŋi ŋaćeeki mańije?*
dog-LIM-ACC which child see.3SG
'Which child sees ONLY THE DOG?'

The interaction between focus and wh-phrases

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

- (15) *xíba weńeko-xowa-m?* mańije?
who dog-AFF-ACC see.3SG
'Who sees THE DOG?'
- (16) *?/*weńeko-xowa-m? xíba* mańije?
dog-AFF-ACC who see.3SG
'Who sees THE DOG?'

The interaction between focus and wh-phrases

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

- (17) *xasawa-xawa xañaŋi laxanako-m?* tola'í?
man-aff which story-acc read.3sg
'Which story does THE MAN read?'
- (18) *xañaŋi laxanako-m?* *xasawa-xawa* tola'í?
which story-acc man-aff read.3sg
'Which story does THE MAN read?'

The two foci in Tundra Nenets

The 'only' focus in Tundra Nenets 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 Tundra Nenets foci in general, but we know, that both 'only' and *-xaw(a)*-focus express exhaustive identification.

The 'Only'-focus tends to behave differently in languages in general. In Hungarian, for instance, 'only'-focus has a lexical [+focus] feature that percolates onto the category that is modified by the 'only'-focus (cf. É.Kiss, 2002).

Generalization[1]

There is a constraint in Tundra Nenets single content questions that seems to be determined by discourse-pragmatic factors.

Due to this constraint, a focussed expression cannot precede the wh-phrase: *[foc...wh].

Q: Can we observe similar asymmetries in genuine single content questions?

The interaction between negative polarity items and wh-phrases

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

(19) *xíba-xərt ɲamge kúnga-m? ní xamedambú-??
who-CONC what book-ACC NEG.3SG understand-CNG
'Which book did not understand anyone?'

(20) ?/*xasawa-xarta-m? xañaŋi né ní
man-CONC-ACC which woman NEG.AUX.3SG
lada-??
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.

- (21) **xusuwej xasawa xurka laxanako-m?* tola^ábu?
every man which story-ACC read.3SG
'Which story did every man read?'
- (22) ?/**xusuwej xasawa-m?* xa^áñaji *ñe* 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?

→ They are all operators that have scope.

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

The order of wh-phrases in multiple questions

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

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.

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

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

(24) **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 Tundra Nenets multiple questions

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

- (25) Igor xanzer? ηamge-m? tolaŋko-sa?
Igor how what-ACC read-INT.3SG
‘How did Igor read something?’
#‘What did Igor read how?’
- (26) Igor ηamge-m? xanzer? tolaŋo-sa?
Igor what-ACC how read-INT.3SG
‘What did Igor read how?’

Certain order still seems to be free.

(27) Igoʻ *xañana xíba-mʻ* jadabtamʻbi?

Igor where who-acc meet.3SG

'Where did Igor meet who?'

(28) Igoʻ *xíba-mʻ xañana* jadabtamʻbi?

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.

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

In Tundra Nenets, 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).

- (30) Waña *xíba-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.

- (31) *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 Tundra Nenets.

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.

→ The ordering of multiple wh-phrases follows from specificity requirement.

Conclusions

We have seen that there are information structure-related rules that affect the syntactic structure of genuine content questions.

According to the literature, there is no dedicated position for the wh-phrase(s) in genuine (single and multiple) content questions.

Generalization[1']: Operators induces strong intervention effects in Tundra Nenets single content questions, therefore they cannot precede the wh-phrase: *[op...wh].

The wh-phrase is *not in-situ* in single content questions but it has a dedicated position at least at the level of the logical form.

According to the literature, the order of the wh-phrases is free in multiple questions.

Generalization[2]: 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!

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