Content interrogative constructions compared to narrow focus declarative constructions: A cross-linguistic view

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INTRODUCTION

- goal: compare the grammatical marking of narrowly focal constituents in declarative clauses with the grammatical marking of interrogative phrases in content interrogatives against data from genetically and areally diverse languages

  ➢ provide empirical feedback to the theoretical discussion whether interrogative phrases should be analysed as inherently focal

Outline

- Basic concepts

- Theoretical background

- Research questions

- Methodology

- Results

- Discussion and conclusions

- Prospects

BASIC CONCEPTS

- **focus** – non-presupposed semantic component of a proposition expressed by the clause (Lambrecht 1994: 213)

  o focus extending over a single argument or adjunct – **narrow focus** (Van Valin 2005: 71); cf. Lambrecht's (1994: 228—233) *argument focus*; (2B, 2B')

  narrowly focal phrase (**FOC.P**) may be marked by a focus construction (FOC-c)

- **content interrogative construction** (whQ-c) – clause containing an interrogative phrase (**whP**) and demanding a specific answer containing other information than yes/no (cf. Velupillai 356—359); (1A, 2A)

(1) A: *What is Mary doing?*

    B: *She is reading a book.*

(2) A: *What is Mary reading?*

    B: *She is reading **a book**.*

    B': *It is **a book** she is reading.*

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

- structural parallelisms observed between content interrogative constructions and narrow focus constructions in many languages

(2a) *máax hàant òon?*
     who   eat   avocado
     'Who ate an avocado?'

(2b) *Pèedróoh hàant òon*
     Pedro   eat   avocado
     '**Pedro** ate an avocado'.

(3)   context: 'What happened?'
     t=u   hàant-ah   òon   Pèedróoh.
     PFV=A.3   eat-CMP   avocado Pedro
     'Pedro ate an avocado.'

Yucatec Mayan (Mesoamerica; Verhoeven and Skopeteas 2015: 3—5)

Theoretical background

- structural parallelisms observed between content interrogative constructions and narrow focus constructions in many languages → claims that content interrogative constructions are a type of focus construction (cf. Horvath 1986: 118–122; Dik 1989: 278; Lambrecht 1994: 282–286; Van Valin 2007: 72; Givón 2001: 232–233; Beck 2006: 11–13; Börjars 2020: 166; Croft 2022: 375; Bentley 2023: 465)

- detailed studies showing structural or pragmatic asymmetries between the two constructions in individual languages → claims that content interrogatives should not be conceptualised as a type of focus construction (cf. Aboh 2007: 299—307; Cable 2008; Cruschina 2021)

Research Questions

intonation not considered – only grammatical marking!

1) How cross-linguistically common is it for languages to allow grammatical whQ-marking?

   o Are such languages attested that allow grammatical whQ-marking, but no FOC-marking in declaratives?

2) How cross-linguistically common is it for languages to allow grammatical FOC-marking?

   o Are such languages attested that allow grammatical FOC-marking in declaratives but no whQ-marking?

3) Are such languages attested that feature obligatory grammatical FOC-marking in declaratives but no obligatory whQ-marking?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

4) How cross-linguistically common is it for whQ- and FOC-marking to coincide in structure?

- o How cross-linguistically common is it for them to share a common underlying template, with the whQ additionally marked?

- o How cross-linguistically common is it for them to share a common underlying template, with the FOC.c in a declarative additionally marked?

Hypothesis:

if whQ-C are indeed a type of FOC-c → expected: whQ-C reducible to a FOC-c + interrogative marking

METHODOLOGY: LANGUAGE SAMPLE

- language sample: 55 languages from 23 families from 6 language areas:

- **Ethiopian highlands (11)**

  Afro-Asiatic (Cushitic 3, Semitic 4), Nilotic (1), South Omotic (1), Ta-Ne-Omotic (2)

- **Europe (11)**

  Afro-Asiatic (Semitic 1), Basque (1), Indo-European (5), Turkic (1), Uralic (3)

- **Mesoamerica (13)**

  Mayan (3), Mixe-Zoque (2), Otomanguean (3), Totonacan (2), Uto-Aztecan (3)

- **NW coast of North America (5)**

  Haida, Salishan (1), Tlingit (1), Tsimshian (1), Wakashan (1)

- **Southeast Asia (6)**

  Austroasiatic (2), Hmong-Mien (1), Sino-Tibetan (2), Tai-Kadai (1)

- **South Asia (9)**

  Austroasiatic (1), Dravidian (2), Indo-European (3), Sino-Tibetan (3)

METHODOLOGY: DATA COLLECTION

- data collected mostly from secondary sources, aided by independent analysis of glossed texts, by consulting language experts and native speakers

- database organised by constructions

FOC construction type	number
cleft	20
cleft, FOC-morpheme	1
FOC-morpheme	13
NP gender change, FOC-morphology on V	1
OBJ-agreement on V	1
position	24
position, FOC-morpheme	6
position, FOC-morpheme, reduced morphology on V	1
position, FOC-morphology on V, FOC-morpheme	2
position, FOC-morphology on V, reduced morphological marking on V	1
position, reduced morphology on V	1
position, voice morphology on V	1
reduplication	1
total	74

whQ construction type	number
cleft	14
cleft, position	1
cleft, wh-PRT	1
expletive in position, Q-PRT	1
FOC-morpheme	3
FOC-morpheme, position	1
OBJ-agreement on V	1
position	24
position, FOC-morpheme	1
position, FOC-morpheme, reduced morphology on V	1
position, FOC-morphology on V	2
position, FOC-morphology on V, reduced morphological marking on V	1
position, reduced morphology on V	1
position, voice morphology on V	1
position, Q-PRT	1
position, wh-PRT, FOC-morpheme	1
Q-morphology on V	1
Q-PRT	1
wh-morphology on V	1
wh-morphology on V, FOC-morpheme	1
wh-PRT	2
wh-PRT, cleft	1
total	62

Methodology: Data annotation

o additional pragmatic features of the constructions (e. g. contrast, correctivity, exhaustiveness) **not** considered, due to a lack of data sources

each construction annotated for:

- structural elements it consists of: designated syntactic position (pre-core, post-core), cleft construction, morpheme on the FOC.P/whP, verb morphology

- obligatoriness

  o whether obligatory only for FOC.P/whP of a certain syntactic function

- whether there is different marking depending on the syntactic function of the FOC.P/whP

METHODOLOGY: DATA ANNOTATION

each construction annotated for:

- whether reducible to a template underlying both a FOC- and a wh-construction in the language

  - resulting in the FOC and whQ-c being structurally identical

  - with additional marking of FOC-c in declaratives

  - with additional marking of whQ-c

only annotated as positive if there is identifiable grammatical marking of both FOC and whQ!

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METHODOLOGY: DATA ANNOTATION

(4) *Makarna-yı*   *ise*   *ben*   *hiç*   *sev-mi-yor-um.*

spaghetti.ACC   TOP   1SG   at all   like.NEG.PROG.1SG

'As for spaghetti, I don't like it at all.'

(Erguvanli 1984: 38)

(5a) *Kaya-yla*   *kim*   *evlen-di?*

Kaya-COM   who   marry.PST

'Who married Kaya?'

(5b) *Kaya-yla*   *Oya*   *evlen-di.*

Kaya-COM   Oya   marry.PST

'**Oya** married Kaya.'

Turkish – analysed as featuring no marking   (Kiliçaslan 2004: 727)

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RESULTS: POSSIBLE MARKING

- 49/55 languages allow whQ-marking, 48/55 allow FOC-marking
  - **four languages allow whQ-marking, but no FOC-marking:**

    Min Bei (Sino-Tibetan, SE Asia), Kurukh (Dravidian, South Asia): optional special positon for whP, no grammatical FOC-marking

    Katso (Sino-Tibetan, SE Asia), Bunan (Sino-Tibetan, South Asia): interrogative particle for whP, no grammatical FOC-marking
  - **three languages allow FOC-marking, but no whQ-marking:**

    Sebat Bet Gurage (Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, Ethiopian H.), Kharia (Austroasiatic, South Asia): optional morpheme for FOC-marking, no grammatical whQ-marking

    Marathi (Indo-European, South Asia): optional special position for FOC-P, no grammatical whQ-marking

RESULTS: OBLIGATORY MARKING

- 37/55 feature obligatory whQ-marking, 18/55 feature obligatory FOC-marking

  o both whQ and FOC-marking obligatory: 16/55

  o whQ-marking obligatory, no obligatory FOC-marking: 21/55

  o **no obligatory whQ-marking, FOC-marking obligatory: 2/55**

  Zay (Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, Ethiopian H.), Zayse-Zergulla (Ta-Ne-Omotic, Ethiopian H.): whP optionally marked by a FOC-morpheme, FOC.P obligatorily marked by the same morpheme

RESULTS: COINCIDENCE IN STRUCTURE BETWEEN whQ-c AND FOC-c

- **40/55 languages feature at least one pair of a whQ-c and a FOC-c reducible to a common underlying template**

- **in 38/55 languages, all whQ-c's and FOC-c's are reducible to a common template**

  - 35/40 languages feature a structurally identical whQ-c and FOC-c

  - 6/40 feature an additionally marked whQ

  - 4/40 feature an additionally marked FOC-c

- **9/55 languages feature identifiable whQ-c's and FOC-c's not reducible to a common template**

RESULTS: COINCIDENCE IN STRUCTURE

- 40/55 languages feature a whQ-c and a FOC-c reducible to a common underlying template

  o 35/40 languages feature structurally identical whQ-c and FOC-c

  21 instances of the same syntactic position used for both, for example:

  (5a) *Nor-i*   *azaldu*   *zion*   *Jonek*   *atzo*   *bere*   *erabakia?*
        who-DAT   explain   AUX   Jon.ERG   yesterday   his   **decision**
        'Whom did Jon explain his decision to yesterday?'

  (5b) *Bera-ri*   *azaldu*   *zion*   *Jonek*   *atzo*   *bere*   *erabakia.*
        he-DAT   explain   AUX   Jon.ERG   yesterday   his   decision
        'Jon explained his decision **to him** yesterday.'

        Basque (isolate, Europe; Etxepare & de Urbina 2003: 459)

RESULTS: COINCIDENCE IN STRUCTURE

- 40/55 languages feature a whQ-c and a FOC-c reducible to a common underlying template

  o 35/40 languages feature structurally identical whQ-c and FOC-c

  2 instances of the same particle used for both:

  (6) *Naagtée*   *bàad*   *aragtay?*

  woman=which   FOC=2SG.M   see-2SG-PST

  'Which woman did you see?'

                     Somali (Afro-Asiatic, Cushitic; Saeed 1999: 202)

  (7) *Wíilku*   *shimbírta*   *búu*   *dilay.*

  boy=DEF=SUBJ   bird=DEF   FOC=3SG.M   kill-3SG.M-PST

  'The boy killed **the bird**.'

                   Somali (Afro-Asiatic, Cushitic; Green 2021: 329)

RESULTS: COINCIDENCE IN STRUCTURE

- 40/55 languages feature a whQ-c and a FOC-c reducible to a common underlying template

  - 6/40 feature an additionally marked whQ

(8) *ón-āg-ì*   *yēʔ-ì*   *yīst-ὲ?*

who-FOC-3SG.M   come.FAC-3SG.M   be.located-CQ

'Who has come?'

(9) *tàn-āg-á*   *gὸt-ù.*

1SG.STR-FOC-1SG   trade-1SG

'I bought it.'

Benchnon (Ta-Ne-Omotic, Ethiopian H; Rapold 2006: 421, 239)

RESULTS: COINCIDENCE IN STRUCTURE

- 40/55 languages feature a whQ-c and a FOC-c reducible to a common underlying template

  o 4/40 feature an additionally marked FOC-c

(10a) *Jachin   x-tze'n-ik?*

who   CPL-laugh-SS

'Who laughed?'

(10b) **Aree**   *ri   a   Xwaan   x-tze'n-ik.*

FOC   DET   CLF   Juan   CPL-laugh-SS

'**John** laughed.'

Central Nahualá K'ichee' (Mayan, Mesoamerica; Velleman 2014: 60)

Results: Non-coincidence in structure between FOC-c and whQ-c

- 9/55 languages feature whQ-c and FOC-c that are not reducible to a common underlying template

  o 4 languages where a special syntactic position is available for whP, but not for FOC.P:

(11a) *Hvað   sá   María?*

      what.ACC   see.PRS.3SG   Mary.NOM

      'What did Mary see?'

(11b) *Það   var   lítinn   hund   sem   María   sá.*

      EXPL be.PST.3SG   little.M.SG.ACC   dog.M.SG.ACC   REL   Mary   see.PST.3SG

      'It was a little dog that Mary saw.'

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Icelandic (Indo-European, Europe; Þráinsson 2007: 76, 360)

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- 9/55 languages feature whQ-c and FOC-c that are not reducible to a common underlying template

  o whQ marked by interrogative verb morphology; NP's in FOC change gender to masculine and trigger a special verb morpheme

(12) *har   ko=ham-á?*
what   3F=say-PST.Q
'What did she say?

(13) *hammó   wóngo?*
which.F.SG cow.F.SG
'Which cow?'

(14) *anqasɛ í=sa   kárc'a-n   gaʔ-idí-ne*
bee.M 1SG=GEN cheek-F.OBL   bite-PFV-FOC
'**The bee** bit me on my cheek.'

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Hamer-Banna (South Omotic, Ethiopian H; Petrollino 2016: 250, 251, 163)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

- whQ- and FOC-constructions most commonly do coincide in structure

- however, the data do **not** support the hypothesis that whQ-constructions should categorically be reducible to a FOC-construction with conceivable additional interrogative marking

  o languages featuring FOC-marking, but no whQ-marking

  o languages featuring whQ-marking, but no FOC-marking

  o languages with disparate whQ- and FOC-marking

- ➢ whQ-constructions should **not** be categorically conceptualised as a type of FOC-construction, although the two tend to be related cross-linguistically

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PROSPECTS

- further research necessary

  o with data from more languages

  o considering finer interpretative details of individual constructions (e. g. contrast, correctivity, exhaustiveness)

- descriptions of information structure-marking grammar in more languages needed!

THANK YOU!

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