

93. Position of Interrogative Phrases in Content Questions

Matthew S. Dryer

1. Defining the values

This map shows the position of interrogative phrases in content questions. **Content questions** are questions that contain an **interrogative phrase**, like the elements in boldface in the English examples in (1).

- (1) a. ***Who** did you see?*
 b. ***Which book** do you want to buy?*
 c. ***When** are you going to leave?*

Content questions differ from polar questions (see Maps 92 and 116) in that they elicit a specific answer other than ‘yes’ or ‘no’, and in containing interrogative phrases. All languages have a set of interrogative words that are characteristic of content questions, though in many languages they are identical in form

to indefinite words (like *someone* in English) (see Map 46). These interrogative words typically belong to different categories (interrogative pronouns, interrogative adverbs, “interrogative adjectives”, “interrogative verbs”). Because most interrogative words in English begin with *wh*-, content questions in English are often called *wh*-*questions*. Although interrogative phrases often consist of single words (interrogative pronouns or interrogative adverbs), they may contain additional words, as in *which book* in (1b).

@	1.	Interrogative phrases obligatorily initial	241
@	2.	Interrogative phrases not obligatorily initial	542
@	3.	Mixed, some interrogative phrases obligatorily initial, some not	20
		total	803

There are two common patterns crosslinguistically for the position of interrogative phrases. In some languages, like English, interrogative phrases occur **obligatorily at the beginning of the sentence**. It is possible in English to place

an interrogative phrase later in the sentence, but this word order is not normally used in neutral questions. It is used either in **echo-questions**, where the speaker is expressing surprise or incredulity at something that they have just heard, as in (2a), or by a teacher asking students questions, as in (2b).

(2) a. *You are leaving **when** !!?*

b. *Napoleon died in **what year**?*

If a language allows interrogative phrases to occur in positions other than the beginning of the sentence only under special circumstances like these, it is treated as obligatorily placing interrogative phrases at the beginning of the sentence.

In other languages, interrogative phrases **do not obligatorily occur at the beginning of the sentence**, and occur naturally in other positions in the sentence, most often in whatever position is natural for the corresponding noninterrogative phrase, as in (3) from Lango (Nilotic; Uganda).

(3) Lango (Noonan 1992: 173)

*òkélò ò-nènò **ɲà***

Okelo 3SG-see.PERF **who**

‘Who did Okelo see?’

The interrogative phrase *ŋà* ‘who’ in (3) occurs after the verb because Lango is an SVO language and *ŋà* is functioning as object; it thus occurs in the normal position for objects, immediately following the verb. Languages in which interrogative phrases occur in the same position as corresponding noninterrogative phrases are sometimes described as placing interrogative phrases **in situ**. There are languages, however, which obligatorily place interrogative phrases in initial position but which can nevertheless be described as placing them in situ. A number of languages normally employ a focus or cleft construction for content questions, where the focused element occurs at the beginning of the sentence. In Malagasy (Austronesian; Madagascar), for example, the normal form of a content question is that of a focus construction, which places a focused element before the verb, contrary to the normal verb-initial order in the language: (4a) illustrates a content question with the interrogative phrase in initial position, while (4b) illustrates an analogous use of the focus construction where the element in focus position is not an interrogative phrase.

(4) Malagasy (Keenan 1976: 270, 269)

a. *amin=inona no manasa lamba*

with=what FOC wash.ACTIVE clothes

Raso

Raso

‘With what did Raso wash clothes?’

b. *amin=ity savony ity no manasa*

with=this soap this FOC wash.ACTIVE

lamba Raso

clothes Raso

‘It is with this soap that Raso is washing clothes.’

The initial position for interrogative phrases in Malagasy thus does not involve a special construction: rather, content questions simply employ the focus construction, a reflection of the focus-like nature of interrogative phrases.

In some languages in which interrogative phrases do not occur obligatorily in sentence-initial position, they tend to occur in immediately preverbal position, as in (5) from Basque.

(5) Basque (Saltarelli et al. 1988: 6)

*aita-k Mikel eram**an du*

father-SG.ERG Michael **how** 3ABS.3ERG.PRES

etxera

house.SG.ALL

‘How has father carried Mikel home?’

While the placement of interrogative phrases in immediately preverbal position is found in a number of verb-final languages of Europe and Asia, it appears not to be common outside of this area, though an example in Africa is Harar Oromo (Cushitic; Ethiopia; Owens 1985: 207).

A few languages exhibit at least a weak tendency to place interrogative phrases at the *end* of sentences. For example, in Tenneset (Surmic, Nilo-Saharan; Sudan), the normal position for an interrogative subject in a transitive clause is after the object, contrary to the normal VSO order in the language (Randal 1998: 252-253). Noni (Broad Bantu, Niger-Congo; Cameroon) exhibits another less common position for interrogative phrases, namely immediately postverbal position (Hyman 1981: 104-105).

When we say that the position of an interrogative phrase is initial, this does not mean that the interrogative *word* is necessarily initial, since the interrogative phrase may be a larger

constituent containing the interrogative word and the interrogative word may not occur at the beginning of that constituent. In most languages, for example, if the interrogative word is the object of a preposition, and if interrogative phrases occur at the beginning of the sentence, then it will be the preposition that will occur as the first word, followed by the interrogative pronoun, as in the example in (6) from Karo Batak (Austronesian; Sumatra, Indonesia).

(6) Karo Batak (Woollams 1996: 227)

ras isé kam ku jénda

with who 2 to here

‘Who did you come here with?’

Note that English is like this, although there is a choice (largely determined by dialect or register) between whether the preposition occurs at the beginning, with the pronoun, as in *With whom did you come here?*, and whether the pronoun occurs at the beginning of the sentence without the preposition (thereby “stranding” the preposition), as in *Who did you come here with?* English is quite unusual crosslinguistically in allowing the stranding of prepositions in content questions.

The fact that it is interrogative phrases, rather than simply interrogative words, whose position is important is also illustrated by languages in which particular interrogative modifiers of nouns follow the noun. In such languages, it will be the noun rather than the interrogative modifier that will be the first word in the sentence, as illustrated by the example in (7), again from Karo Batak.

(7) Karo Batak (Woollams 1996: 227)

arah apai aku ku das

way which 1SG to top

‘Which way do I take to go up?’

Again, we can still say that the interrogative *phrase* is initial in these examples, in the sense that the interrogative phrase is the entire noun phrase containing the interrogative word.

A final though rather unusual example of an interrogative phrase containing an interrogative word that is not the first word in the sentence is also provided by Karo Batak. While the most common order in active clauses in Karo Batak is SVO, as in (8a), the normal order in active clauses in which the object is an interrogative phrase is VOS, as in (8b).

(8) Karo Batak (Woollams 1996: 214, 188)

a. *nandé m-bayu amak*

mother ACTIVE-weave mat

‘Mother is weaving a mat.’

b. *nukur kai kam ku tiga*

buy what 2 LOC market

‘What did you buy at the market?’

Since the normal position for interrogative phrases in Karo Batak is otherwise initial, as illustrated by examples (6) and (7) above, it is apparently the case in this language that the verb cannot be “stranded” without its object, just as prepositions cannot be stranded, and the interrogative phrase here is an initial phrase consisting of the verb followed by the noun phrase containing the interrogative pronoun. Similar facts obtain in Gavião (Monde, Tupian; Brazil; Moore 1984: 110).

Most languages fall fairly clearly into one or the other of the two types described above. There are two types of languages whose classification is less clear. First, in some languages, the interrogative phrase is usually placed in sentence-initial position, but this is not obligatory. Examples of languages of this sort

include Mangarrayi (Merlan 1982: 6) and Awa Pit (Curnow 1997: 315). Such languages are treated here as languages in which initial position is not obligatory, unless the option of leaving an interrogative phrase in non-initial position only occurs in special circumstances, as in the English examples in (2) above. Heath (1999a: 237) describes Koyraboro Senni (Songhay; Mali) as “almost always” placing the interrogative phrase in initial position, and he describes the exceptions as being ones where placing the interrogative phrase in initial position would make the question awkward and difficult to parse. This too is treated as a special circumstance and Koyraboro Senni is shown on the map as obligatorily placing the interrogative phrase in sentence-initial position.

A second type of language which does not fall clearly into one of the first two types consists of languages where **some interrogative phrases must occur in sentence-initial position, while others need not**. For example, in Koyra Chiini (Songhay; Mali), interrogative pronouns and adverbs occur at the beginning of the sentence, in a focus construction, as in (9a) and (9b); however, noun phrases containing interrogative modifiers (one meaning ‘which’, another meaning ‘how many’) optionally remain *in situ*, as in (9c), and an

interrogative pronoun functioning as a predicate in an equational sentence need not be initial, as in (9d).

(9) Koyra Chiini (Heath 1999b: 177, 177, 183, 178)

a. *maa na wor o fai hondu jiiroo*

what FOC 2PL IMPF grow dune this.year

‘What will you (pl) grow on the dune this year?’

b. *man na ni hun*

where FOC 2SG leave

‘Where did you come from?’

c. *afoo kul go hima ka jow ije merje*

one all IMPF should INF take **piece** **how.many**

‘How many pieces should each one take?’

d. *woo či mey*

that be **who**

‘Who is that?’

In Malakmalak (Daly; Northern Territory, Australia), interrogative noun phrases occur in initial position but interrogative adverbs need not (Birk 1976: 26). In *Tukang Besi* (Austronesian; Sulawesi, Indonesia), interrogative noun phrases functioning in predicates must be initial while other interrogative

noun phrases need not be (Donohue 1999: 355, 451). And in Pohnpeian (Oceanic; Micronesia), the interrogative word for ‘why’ must be initial; other interrogative phrases do not have to be (Rehg 1981: 314-323).

2. Geographical distribution

The two major types represented on the map are both widespread, but there are clear geographical patterns. Areas in which languages predominate which obligatorily place interrogative phrases in initial position include (i) Europe and North Africa; (ii) the Philippines and the adjacent areas; (iii) much of Australia, except the northern part of Northern Territory and Cape York in the northeast; and (iv) the Americas. Areas in which languages predominate which do not obligatorily place interrogative phrases in initial position include (i) much of Africa, though less so in the west and northwest; (ii) most of the mainland of Asia, plus Japan; and (iii) New Guinea and the Pacific. Languages of a mixed type seem also to exhibit some geographical clustering: (i) there are a number in the general vicinity of Indonesia and the western Pacific; and (ii) there are also a number in West Africa.

