

OBSERVATIONS ON WH-QUESTIONS IN OMAHA⁰

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This paper is a preliminary description of "wh"-questions (that is, constituent as opposed to yes-no questions) in Omaha-Ponca, a Siouan language spoken by members of the Omaha tribe in Nebraska and the Ponca tribe in Nebraska and Oklahoma. For the sake of brevity and since I have worked only with Omaha tribe members, I refer to the language here simply as Omaha. The observations presented here constitute a first step toward a full description of Omaha syntax in general and Omaha wh-constructions in particular; they are not to be taken as a definitive analysis.

I have chosen wh-questions for my first foray into Omaha grammar for two reasons. The first is their theoretical importance: a full analysis of Omaha wh-questions will test theoretical constructs such as the Empty Category Principle and the universality of LF wh-movement¹. The second reason is that interrogative constructions in general are barely touched upon in John Koontz's Preliminary Sketch of the Omaha-Ponca Language, the only modern work on Omaha. In this paper I discuss only word order and surface constituent structure in simple, main clause questions, thereby avoiding numerous thorny issues that arise in the analysis of embedded questions (to give just one instance, it is not clear how, if at all, embedded questions are formally distinguished from headless relatives in Omaha), and also the question of movement at Logical Form² or other abstract levels of syntax. These are all areas I hope to return to in later work.

With these caveats, let us turn to the data. Some Omaha wh-words are listed in (1). On the left are the three forms Koontz (1984) lists as indefinite (and interrogative) pronouns; the rest are other forms that I consider to be wh-words. (The list is not exhaustive.)

1. ebé 'who' athá(di/kki) 'when' awátta 'where'
 áwa 'which' águ(di) 'where' eá 'how'
 (ì/e)dáda 'what' ána 'how many/much' etc.

These words function as both interrogatives and indefinites. In general the two usages are formally distinguished, but some sentences are probably ambiguous between an interrogative and an indefinite reading. An interrogative wh-word is often (though by no means always³) accompanied by a clause-final question marker (complementizer) *a* or *dā*, and has no article or other modifier. The corresponding indefinite pro-form is usually followed by *šte*, *šti*, or an article, and has no question marker. A few examples of the interrogative and indefinite usages of wh-words are given in (2) and (3); compare (2a/3a) and (2b/3b). All examples in this paper are from my field tapes, recorded during the past year. Some are specifically elicited sentences, but most occurred in conversational or narrative contexts.

- 2.a. *Ebé ttí átta*
 who house inside
 'Who is in the house?'
- b. *İdádā gāye=a*
 what she-does-it=Q
 'What is she doing?'
- c. *Baby akhá İdádā dābe=dā=ha.*
 the what it-sees=Q=!
 'What does the baby see?' (woman speaking)
- 3.a. *Ebé=šti ttí átta*
 who=too house inside
 'Someone is in the house.'
- b. *İdádā=(e)thē gāya*
 what=the she-does-it
 'She is doing something.'
- c. *Wanāxe ama İdádā=šte gahíže thedi*
 ghost the what=soever it-blows when they-are-
 nāppe=nā=bi=ama
 afraid=pl= quote
 'Ghosts are afraid of anything blowing.'

One of the most basic questions one needs to answer in any study of the syntax of wh-questions is what position the interrogative word or phrase occupies in the hierarchical structure of the sentence. Several S-structure wh-positions are found in the world's languages. One possibility is for wh-words to be "in situ" in the sense that they occupy the same position as the corresponding phrase in a non-interrogative sentence;

in transformational terms they have not been moved. This appears to be the case in Chinese, for example. Another possibility is for wh-words to be in a Comp or Specifier of CP position at S-structure; under standard GB assumptions this means they have been moved, head chains, have coindexed traces, occupy A' (non-argument) positions, and so on, as in most European languages. A third possibility is that wh-words might be moved, but not to Comp or SpecCP position. For instance, I have argued (Rudin 1988) that some wh-words in Serbo-Croatian, Polish, and Czech are adjoined to IP, and interrogative wh-words in Hungarian and Turkish appear to be adjoined to V or VP. In all cases that I'm aware of when wh-elements occupy a specified position other than Comp or SpecCP, that position is a "focus" slot, i.e. a position normally occupied by material with a focused pragmatic/discourse function.

Which of these holds for Omaha? The easy answer is that wh-words fairly clearly are "in situ" in Omaha in the sense that they are not moved to Comp or Spec-CP in the syntax. (However, it should be noted that this does NOT necessarily mean they are in A (argument) positions. All NPs in Omaha are probably adjuncts rather than arguments, argument theta-roles being taken by pronominal elements in the verb; that is, Omaha is probably a pronominal argument language in the sense of Jelinek 1984.) The more complex answer is that the exact position that wh-words are "in situ" in probably depends upon pragmatic or discourse factors such as focus or topicality, the same factors which regulate the order of non-wh constituents in the sentence. These factors remain to be worked out in any detail, even for ordinary declarative sentences.

To determine the position of wh-elements, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the structure of the sentence as a whole. Schema (4) is a rough outline of Omaha clause structure as far as I understand it at present. The verb complex is normally clause-final and is the only obligatory element of the sentence. Infl(ection) is morphologically attached to V, and consists of tense markers, evidentiality markers, and so on. The order of other constituents is relatively free: "(XP)*" represents an indefinite number of NPs or other phrase-level constituents, possibly none. Comp is the position of the interrogative complementizer *a* and various declarative and imperative mood markers; possibly among others. Not shown in this simplified schema are

left- or right-dislocated elements, and sentence introducers such as conjunctions.

4. [CP [IP (XP)* V+Infl] Comp]

By far the most usual linear position for non-predicative wh-elements is as the rightmost XP, immediately before V. This may place it sentence initial, as in the examples in (5), following one major constituent, as in (6), or, less commonly, following more than one constituent, as in (7).

- 5.a. *Īdádą* *šastąbe*
 what you-see-it
 'What do you see?'
- b. *Eąska* *néga*
 how you-think
 'What do you think?'
- c. *Īdádą* *škąye* *wanáthe* *ništą* *thedi*
 what you-do-it you-eat-somethg you-finish when
 'What did you do after dinner?'
- 6.a. *Bertha* *akhá* *Īdádą* *gąya*
 the what she-does-it
 'What is Bertha doing?'
- b. *Hąegáčhadi* *Īdádą* *ušąhą*.
 at-morning what you-cooked-it
 'What did you cook this morning?'
- c. *Wąxe* *wa?ú* *šįkhe* *athąkki* *wédaše=ttą=šįkhe=a*
 white woman the at-what-time she-gives-birth=
 future=sitting=Q
 'When is the white woman going to have her baby?'
7. *Đi* *sidádi* *awą=khe=ttą* *šį=a*
 you yesterday where you-go=Q
 'Where did you go yesterday?'

The wh-words in sentences like those in (5), (6) and (7) are clearly not in Comp position, since Comp in Omaha, as in most verb-final languages, is to the right of the verb, while Omaha wh-words are to the left of the verb, usually as the first or second element in the sentence.

It would be possible to analyse the wh-words in all the sentences we have seen as being in the Specifier

position of CP (SpecCP). No such position is marked in the schema (4), because I don't have good evidence for one at this point. But if we assume that SpecCP is a left sister to C', as in most languages, the structure of wh-questions might be something like (8); anything preceding the wh-word would be a "left-dislocated" or topicalized phrase; presumably adjoined to CP. Thus in (8b) *baby akhá* is a topic or topic-like element and the wh-word *idáda* is in SpecCP.

- 8.a. [CP [Spec wh] [C' [IP]]]
 b. [CP Baby akhá [Spec *idáda*] [C' [IP *dábe*] =a]]
 the what it-sees-it=Q
 'What does the baby see?'

In fact, this analysis has some support, particularly from questions with a quantifier in them. One of the few situations in which the preferred or only word order places the wh-word somewhere other than immediately preverbal is in sentences like (9), which contains the quantifier *wágiðe*. Given structure (8), the oddness of (9b) could be explained by the fact that a quantified phrase is not a likely topic.⁴

- 9.a. *Ebé wágiðe xtáwaðe*=a
 who all s/he-likes-them=Q
 'Who likes everyone?'
 b. **Wágiðe ebé xtáwaðe*=a
 all who s/he-likes-them=Q

But there are also reasons to treat (most) wh-words as occupying a focus position rather than SpecCP (the preceding word might still be a topic, of course.) For one thing, the wh-element is in the same position as the corresponding word or phrase in the answer: (10) and (11) are examples of question/answer pairs, (10) from a spontaneous conversation, and (11) elicited.

- 10.a. *Hibegáexe idáda uđáthá*
 stockings what you-wear
 'What kind of stockings are you wearing?'
 b. *Hibegáexe sábe uwáthá*.
 stockings black I-wear
 'I'm wearing black stockings.'

- 11.a. John *ɨdádɑ* *aʃi* *thí=a*
 what he-brought-it=Q
 'What did John bring?'
- b. John *məkhá* *sabe* *the* *aʃi* *thí=a*
 coffee the he-brought-it=Q
 'John brought the coffee.'

One certainly would not want to call the stative verb *sábe* in (10b) or the noun *məkhá sabe the* in (11b) a Specifier, and I know of no reason to consider *ɨdádɑ* to be in a different position than *sábe* or *məkhá sabe the*. Answers and wh-phrases share the pragmatic property of being "in focus" in the sense of conveying the most salient information (or requested information) of the sentence. An immediately preverbal Focus position is rather common crosslinguistically: Basque, Turkish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian, to name just a few, all place focused information right before the verb.⁵ Wh-movement has been analyzed as a focusing rule, a rule of syntactic movement to the focus position, at least in Hungarian (Horvath 1985).

It is tempting to claim that Omaha too regularly places focused information, including most wh-phrases, in the immediately preverbal position. To substantiate such a claim it would be necessary to do a fairly thorough study of word order correlated with discourse context, a study I have not yet done. But my impression is that the claim would probably hold up. In many cases consultants prefer (XP) *wh V* over *wh XP V*. For instance, sentence (12a) was volunteered as a translation of "what is Bertha doing?", (12b), with extraposed subject, was readily accepted, but the reaction to (12c), with *wh* separated from *V*, was a very doubtful "well, I guess maybe you could say it like that".

- 12.a. Bertha *akhá* *ɨdádɑ* *gáʔe=a*
 the what she-does-it=Q
 'What is Bertha doing?'
- b. *ɨdádɑ* *gáʔe=a* Bertha *akhá*
 what she-does-it the
- c. ?*ɨdádɑ* Bertha *akhá* *gáʔe=a*
 what the she-does-it

Although their most usual position is immediately preverbal, wh-words are sometimes found in other

positions, both in natural, connected discourse and in elicited sentences. We have already seen one example, in (9); more are given in (13)-(14).

- 13.a. $\text{ɪdádá wáðathe gahá gǝ́ɪ}$
 what table on-top it-sits
 'What is on the table?'
- b. $\text{Wáðathe ɪdádá gahá gǝ́ɪ=(a)}$
 table what on-top it-sits=Q
- 14.a. $\text{Ttí the ebé dǎbe=a}$
 house the who sees
 'Who sees the house?'
- b. Ebé ttí the dǎbe
 who house the sees

It is not clear precisely how these differ from (12). One possibility is that consultants were simply more easily able to imagine situations in which another element would be more "focusy" than the wh-word in (13)-(14) than in (12), though it is hard to see why ttí the in (14b) should be more easily focused than Bertha akhá in (12c). Perhaps a more likely explanation is that a second word order principle, a tendency toward SOV order, interacts with and can at times outweigh the tendency to place focused material adjacent to V. This might account for (13a) and (14b) in particular. However, SOV order is not at all absolute (see e.g. (14a)), not even to the extent of disambiguating sentences with two animates. A group of consultants agreed unhesitatingly that (15a-b) can both have either the SOV or the OSV reading. ((15a) was the form volunteered for both; (15b) was accepted when I suggested it.)

- 15.a. Mary ebé dǎbe=a
 who s/he-saw-him/her=Q
- b. Ebé Mary dǎbe=a
 who s/he-saw-him/her=Q
- i. 'Who did Mary see?'
- ii. 'Who saw Mary?'

In those cases in which the wh-element is immediately preverbal, one might want to claim movement to this position ("scrambling"; i.e. presumably adjunction to V) -- but certainly the null hypothesis is that no movement has occurred. Having to this point noted no evidence of

movement, I assume for now that wh-phrases and indeed all phrases are generated in random order as shown in schema (4) and do not undergo syntactic movement. However, it is possible that evidence of movement may be found in complex sentences, which I have not yet investigated.

The preverbal position, however analyzed, is not the only common location of wh-words in Omaha: they also frequently occur as the predicate of the sentence. In this construction the wh-word occupies the position of the verb, followed only by right-dislocated elements (such as *Ǿi* in the second half of (16a)) and sentence-final particles like the interrogative complementizer *a* in (16c).

16. a. *Ǿi* *hīb́é* *ǾiǾítta* *awathéǵǵ* ... *Wittúšpa*,
 you shoe your what-kind granddaughter
hīb́é *ǾiǾítta* *awathéǵǵ* *Ǿi*
 shoe your what-kind you
 'What kind of shoes do you have? As for you,
 granddaughter, what kind are your shoes?'
- b. *Máǵe* *khe* *úǵaxe* *ǵdádǵ*
 sky the color what
 'What color is the sky?'
- c. *Šéthǵ* *ebé=a*
 that-the who=Q
 'Who is that?'

It is also worth mentioning that wh-words can constitute part of a larger wh-phrase, as in most languages. Interestingly, the order of elements within such wh-phrases seems to be quite variable. Examples (17a) and (17b) were both produced by the same speaker, in the course of a single narrative, and contain similar elements, but the word order within what I take to be the wh NP is different. A similar example can be seen in (17c), in abbreviated form: I have come across both *ána* *níkkašǵa* and *níkkašǵa* *ána* with the same meaning. Obviously the internal structure of wh-phrases deserves further attention.

- 17.a. *Ába* *wǵ* [_{NP} *ǵdádǵ* *úǵǵ*] *škáǵe*.
 day one what good you-did-it
 'One day you did something good.'

- b. *Ába ttášte* [NP *údą idáda ští*] *gáye=tta=akhá.*
 day some good what too he-will-do-it
 'Some day he'll do something good again.'
- c. *áną níkkašiga / níkkašiga áną*
 'how many people'

Multiple questions appear to be possible in Omaha, although, as in most languages, they are not easy to elicit. Several consultants were reasonably happy with (18). John Koontz (pc) has noted the apparently multiple embedded question (19) in Dorsey (1890). I hope to find further examples of spontaneously produced multiple questions, as this is a construction of particular interest to me.⁶

18. *Athádi águdi duáða néwí?*
 when where this-the you-buy-it
 'When (and) where did you buy this?'
19. *éde áwathétta eą šéíthe*
 but whither how he-may-have-gone
išáppahą=m-áži, á=bi=ama
 I-know=neg he-said=prox=quote
 'But I don't know where (and) how he may have gone, he said.'

One final observation on Omaha wh-questions is that the particle *a*, which I have assumed to be an interrogative complementizer, needs further study. In all of the examples above where this *a* occurs, it is clause-final. In fact, however, it can sometimes be found attached instead to the wh-element itself:

- 20.a. *Mary ebé=a dąbe* (cf. (15))
 who=Q sees
 'Who did Mary see?/Who saw Mary?'
- b. *Ebé=a wągiše xtáwaše* (cf. (9))
 who=Q all likes
 'Who likes everyone?'

It is not clear under what conditions this occurs, or how (if at all) such sentences differ in meaning from the corresponding ones with *a* attached to the clause-final verb. Like many of the observations presented in this paper, this remains a problem for future research.

NOTES

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¹For discussion of these and other "Government-Binding" concepts, see Chomsky 1981 and much subsequent work. Recent textbooks such as Radford 1988 provide an overview of the theory.

²Williamson 1984, for instance, argues for movement of wh-words at LF in Lakhota, a language closely related both genetically and typologically to Omaha. Similar arguments have been made for a number of other languages which superficially have no wh-movement; Huang 1982, on Chinese, is the source of most of these arguments.

³Use of these particles may be typical of women's speech: a in particular seems to be more frequent in women's speech and has occasionally been remarked on by consultants as "the woman's way". However, a male consultant sometimes uses it as well.

⁴I am indebted to Barbara Partee for suggesting this example.

⁵See, for example, Ortiz de Urbina 1989, Horvath 1985, Rudin 1986. Several MALC audience members agreed during the oral presentation of this paper that focused information is often preverbal in other Siouan languages as well.

⁶See Rudin 1988. Note that (18) looks somewhat odd with respect to schema (8), since *duáǵa* is a very likely topic. In (19) I have omitted some of the word-internal morphological information provided by Koontz and Dorsey.

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