

OBSERVATIONS ON WH-QUESTIONS IN OMAHA*

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Examples retranscribed 2009 using current Omaha orthography.

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-movement.¹ 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' | at ^h ó ⁿ (di/ki) | 'when' | awáta | 'where' |
| o ⁿ wa | 'which' | águ(di) | 'where' | eo ⁿ | 'how' |
| (i ⁿ /e)dádo ⁿ | 'what' | áno ⁿ | '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

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¹ For 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.

² Williamson 1984, for instance, argues for movement of wh-words at LF in Lakota, 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.

an indefinite reading. An interrogative wh-word is often (though by no means always³) accompanied by a clause-final question marker (complementizer) *a* or *doN*, and has no article or other modifier. The corresponding indefinite pro-form is usually followed by *shte*, *shti* 'too, also, soever', 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** tí áta
 who house inside
 'Who is in the house?'
 b. **Iⁿdádoⁿ** gághe=a
 what she-does-it=Q
 'What is she doing?'
 c. Baby ak^há **iⁿdádoⁿ** dóⁿbe=doⁿ=ha.
 the what it-sees=Q=!
 'What does the baby see?' (woman speaking)
- 3.a. **Ebé=shti** tí áta
 who=too house inside
 'Someone is in the house.'
 b. **Iⁿdádoⁿ=(e)t^he** gággha
 what=the she-does-it
 'She is doing something.'
 c. Wanóⁿxe ama **iⁿdádoⁿ=shte** gahítthe t^hedi nóⁿpe=noⁿ=bi=ama
 ghost the what=soever it-blows when they-are-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

³ Use 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.

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. **Iⁿdádoⁿ** thashtóⁿbe
 what you-see-it
 'What do you see?'
- b. **Eóⁿska** négoⁿ
 how you-think
 'What do you think?'
- c. **Iⁿdádoⁿ** shkághe wanát^he nishtóⁿ t^hedi
 what you-do-it you-eat-something you-finish when
 'What did you do after dinner?'
- 6.a. Bertha ak^há **iⁿdádoⁿ** gagha
 the what she-does-it
 'What is Bertha doing?'
- b. Hóⁿegach^hadi **iⁿdádoⁿ** utháhoⁿ.
 at-morning what you-cooked-it
 'What did you cook this morning?'
- c. Wáxe wa'ú thiⁿk^he **at^hóⁿki** wédathe=ta=thiⁿk^he=a
 white woman the at-what-time she-gives-birth=future=sitting=Q
 'When is the white woman going to have her baby?'
7. Thi sidádi **awá=k^he=ta** shí=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 ak^há* is a topic or topic-like element and the wh-word *iⁿdádoⁿ* is in SpecCP.

- 8.a. [CP [Spec wh][C' [IP]]]
 b. [CP Baby ak^há [Spec iⁿdádoⁿ][C' [IP dóⁿbe]=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 *wóⁿgithe*. 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** wóⁿgithe xtáwathe=a
 who all s/he-likes-them=Q
 'Who likes everyone?'
 b. *Wóⁿgithe **ebé** xtáwathe=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. Hiⁿbegóⁿexe iⁿdádoⁿ uthát^hoⁿ
 stockings what you-wear
 'What kind of stockings are you wearing?'
 b. Hiⁿbegóⁿexe sábe uwát^hoⁿ.
 stockings black I-wear
 'I'm wearing black stockings.'
11. a. John iⁿdádoⁿ athiⁿ t^hí=a
 what he-has-it he-arrives=Q
 'What did John bring?'
 b. John moⁿk^hóⁿ sabe t^he athiⁿ t^hí=a
 coffee the he-has-it he-arrives=Q
 'John brought the coffee.'

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

One certainly would not want to call the stative verb *sábe* in (10b) or the noun phrase *moⁿk^hóⁿ sabe t^he* in (11b) a Specifier, and I know of no reason to consider *iⁿdádoⁿ* to be in a different position than *sábe* or *moⁿk^hóⁿ sabe t^he*. 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 ak^há **iⁿdádoⁿ** gághe=a
 the what she-does-it=Q
 'What is Bertha doing?'
 b. **Iⁿdádoⁿ** gághe=a Bertha ak^há
 what she-does-it=Q the
 c. ?**Iⁿdádoⁿ** Bertha ak^há gághe=a
 what the she-does-it=Q

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. **Iⁿdádoⁿ** wáthat^he gahá gthiⁿ
 what table on-top it-sits
 'What is on the table?'
 b. Wáthat^he **iⁿdádoⁿ** gahá gthiⁿ=(a)
 table what on-top it-sits=Q
14. a. Tí t^he **ebé** dóⁿbe=a
 house the who sees
 'Who sees the house?'
 b. **Ebé** tí t^he dóⁿbe
 who house the sees

⁵ See, 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.

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 *tí t^he* in (14b) should be more easily focused than *Bertha ak^há* 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** dóⁿbe=a
 who s/he-saw-him/her=Q
 b. **Ebé** Mary dóⁿbe=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 *thi* in the second half of (16a)) and sentence-final particles like the interrogative complementizer *a* in (16c).

16. a. *Thí hiⁿbé thithíta awat^hégoⁿ ... Witúshpa, hiⁿbé thithíta awat^hégoⁿ thi*
 you shoe your what-kind granddaughter shoe your what-kind you
 'What kind of shoes do you have? As for you, granddaughter, what kind are your shoes?'
 b. *Móⁿghe k^he úgaxe iⁿdádoⁿ*
 sky the color what
 'What color is the sky?'
 c. *Shét^hoⁿ 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 *ánoⁿ níkashiⁿga* and *níkashiⁿga anoⁿ* with the same meaning. Obviously the internal structure of wh-phrases deserves further attention.

17. a. Óⁿba wiⁿ [NP iⁿdádoⁿ údoⁿ] shkághe.
 day one what good you-did-it
 'One day you did something good.'
- b. Óⁿba tóⁿshte [NP údoⁿ iⁿdádoⁿ shti] gághe=ta=ak^há.
 day some good what too he-will-do-it
 'Some day he'll do something good again.'
- c. ánoⁿ níkashiⁿga / níkashiⁿga ánoⁿ
 how-many person person how-many
 '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. At^hóⁿdi águdi duátha néwiⁿ?
 when where this-the you-buy-it
 'When (and) where did you buy this?'
19. Éde áwat^héta éoⁿ thíⁿt^he ithápahoⁿ=m=ázhi, á=bi=ama
 but whither how he-may-have-gone I-know=I=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 dóⁿbe (cf. (15))
 who=Q sees
 'Who did Mary see?/Who saw Mary?'
- b. Ebé=a wóⁿgithe xtáwathe (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.

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⁶ See Rudin 1988. Note that (18) looks somewhat odd with respect to schema (8), since duéa@a 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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