The correlation of syntactic position and semantic function of wh-phrases in Tundra Nenets multiple questions

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Tundra Nenets (Uralic, Northern Samoyedic) is an SO V language in which wh-phrases can occur at more syntactic positions in genuine content questions. Although wh-phrases remain by default in situ, they can also appear in the clause initial position (Nikolaeva 2014; Mus 2015). As the literature suggests, the position of wh-phrases in multiple questions seems also to be free, and there is no asymmetries in multiple questions (Nikolaeva 2014). Based on novel data, I will show that the order of wh-phrases in Tundra Nenets multiple questions is influenced by their semantic(-pragmatic) features, i.e. the more specific wh-phrase precedes the less specific one(s). Therefore, the wh-phrases in multiple questions cannot occur freely.

According to the literature, wh-phrases can either remain in situ (1), or occupy the sentence initial position (2) in genuine content questions (Nikolaeva 2014; Mus 2015). Although the constituents of the clause in (2) surface in a non-canonical OSV order, there seems to be no difference in the discourse-pragmatic interpretation of (1) and (2).

(1) Sergei xib’a-m? men’e? (2) xib’a-m? Sergei men’e?
Sergey who-acc love.3sg who-acc Sergei love.3sg
‘Whom does Sergey love?’ ‘Whom does Sergey love?’

Similarly, wh-phrases in multiple questions can appear in different orders: in (3) the wh-subject xib’a is followed by the wh-object xib’am, while in (4) their order is reversed, i.e. the wh-object precedes the wh-subject, and so the non-canonical OSV order is realised again. As the literature suggests it, the discourse-pragmatic interpretation of the clauses in (3) and (4) are equal.

(3) xib’a xib’a-m? men’e? (4) xib’a-m? xib’a men’e?
who who-acc love.3sg who-acc who love.3sg
‘Who loves whom?’ ‘Who loves whom?’

This is, however, not the case in the following minimal pair:

(5) ťamge-m? xanżeř? pær-ŋa-n? (6) xanżeř? ťamge-m? pær-ŋa-n?
what-acc how do-co-2sg how what-acc do-co-2sg
‘How did you do what?’ ‘How did you do something?’

It is only the clause in (5), that is interpreted as a multiple question, while the clause in (6) – exhibiting the reversed order of the wh-phrases in (5) – represents a single content question.

Following É. Kiss (1993), I will argue, that the order of the wh-phrases in Tundra Nenets multiple questions correlates with their specificity, i.e. the first wh-phrase has to be more specific than the second one. Since the VP-adverbial ‘how’ cannot be more specific than the wh-object ‘what’ in, the wh-adverbial cannot precede the wh-object in general. In clauses in which a wh-adverbial precedes a wh-object – as in (6) – the object gets an indefinite interpretation, and the clause is not interpreted as a multiple question.

References