

Wh-features as non-manual features in LIS

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The literature on the syntax of questions in sign languages has straightforwardly imported the notion of ‘wh-element’ into the signing modality, without really reflecting upon the validity of this extension. It is a fact, indeed, that in known sign languages interrogative elements do not appear to share any morphological (manual) feature: while wh-signs “look alike” in English and other spoken languages (e.g. in Italian and French ‘k’ recurs: *chi/qui, cosa/quoi, quando/quand, come/comment* etc), interrogatives elements, say, in LIS, LSF or ASL do not belong to a morphological family.

1. Wh-feature is the NMM

It is possible that this is an example of an improper extension of a spoken language category to the signing modality. But the talk will explore another possibility, namely that there is indeed a morphological feature which is shared by interrogative elements, but that it is (usually) non manual: we claim that the NMM associated to content questions is not simply the signing correlate of prosody, but that it is rather a morphological feature instantiating the same abstract feature that is lexically realized as /k/ in Italian and as /wh/ in English. Crucially, we claim, this feature is not a clause typing particle merged in the complementizer area, but rather a component of the interrogative phrase (see Aboh and Pfau 2010 for a discussion).

2. Explaining the spreading pattern: interrogatives vs. relatives

The complementizer area is on the right in LIS (cf. Cecchetto et al. 2009): this is where interrogatives move and where the relativizer goes as well (Cecchetto et al. 2006; Branchini and Donati 2009). As shown by Cecchetto et al. (2009), the NMM is either realized on the interrogative sign itself, or it spreads over the path of the movement that displaced the interrogative, as in (1).

- _____wh
- (1) PAOLO STEAL BOOK_i WHICH_i
‘Which book did Paolo steal?’

Crucially, if the interrogative is extracted from the object position, as in (1), the spreading does not extend to the subject. This pattern of spreading is very different from the one observed in relative clauses, where the NMM is either located on the relativizer itself (PE), or spreads over the entire clause. Crucially, the spreading is not restricted to the movement path, but it can include the subject even in an object relative, as in (2).

- _____rel
- (2) PAOLO MARIA IDEA_i SUGGEST PE_i IMPORTANT
‘The idea that Paolo suggested to Maria is important’

Cecchetto and Donati (2016) explain this by assuming that PE is a particle that moves to COMP and nominalizes the clause. Thus, the NMM associated to PE spreads over the entire constituent PE heads. In wh-questions, the NMM (wh-) belongs to the wh-phrase not to COMP, and is thus restricted to the Wh-phrase dependency in its spreading.

3. Evidence for the wh-head

The analysis we are proposing suggests that wh-phrases in LIS are made of two parts: a functional head marked –wh, which is only realized as a NMM in most cases, and its complement, corresponding to the interrogative sign. This analysis would receive great comfort if we had at least some instantiation of this abstract head. This is, we claim, what happens with the sign ARTICHOKE (Branchini et al. 2013).

4. The sign ARTICHOKE

The sign ARTICHOKE is typically found in LIS in two types of contexts we will discuss in details. It can occur alone; or it can occur together with another



interrogative sign. When ARTICHOKE occurs alone it is usually clause-final, and the sentence is interpreted as a content (not as a polar) question.

(3) IX-2 LEAVE ARTICHOKE '

*Are you leaving?'

'Why/when are you leaving?'

This shows that ARTICHOKE is not a generic question operator (contrary to what we find in NGT, cf. Aboh and Pfau 2010) but rather a wh-operator. ARTICHOKE can act as a lexical variant for any wh-interrogative sign in any grammatical function. When this happens, ARTICHOKE may be coupled with a mouthing reproducing vowels or consonants present in the corresponding Italian wh-word, thus disambiguating the question.

(4) IX-2 LEAVE ARTICHOKE

'Why are you leaving?'

This is reminiscent of what is attested in IndSL (Aboh and Pfau 2010), with the crucial difference that LIS does not lack other interrogative elements, which it possesses in a full paradigm. But ARTICHOKE can also occur together with an interrogative sign. When this happens, we observe two possibilities. They can sit together at the right edge of the clause and when this happens they are strictly adjacent, and ARTICHOKE obligatorily follows the wh-interrogative:

(5) a. PRESENT SEE WHO ARTICHOKE

b. *PRESENT SEE ARTICHOKE WHO

'Who saw the present?'

This, notice, is the typical position of heads with respect to their complement in LIS, which is head final and thus supports the analysis we propose, where ARTICHOKE heads the wh-phrase. Another possibility is that they split, with one sign occupying the left edge and the other sitting at the right edge : (6).

(6) a. ARTICHOKE GIFT SEE WHO

b. WHO GIFT SEE ARTICHOKE

'Who saw the gift?'

This double option confirms that ARTICHOKE is not a simple question particle typing the clause: given the constituency of the two signs, either can move (as in 5) or only one does, the other being focused (as in 6). This splitting is a general possibility for LIS syntax: see Branchini et al. 2013. Interestingly, mouthing, as illustrated in (4), is not possible when ARTICHOKE occurs together with an interrogative sign (7):

(7) *IX-2 LEAVE WHY ARTICHOKE

'Why are you leaving?'

This suggests that mouthing in (5) is to be interpreted as incorporation of the interrogative sign into ARTICHOKE, a morphological process that is known to be sensitive to head-complement constituents. Incorporation is of course incompatible with an independent realization of the incorporated sign/word.

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