OBSERVATIONS ON WH-QUESTIONS IN OMAHA[0]

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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-movement[1] The second reason in that interrogative constructions in general are barely touched upon in John Koontz's Preliminary Sketch of the Omaha-Ponka 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 Form[2] 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'   athą(di/kki) 'when'   awátta 'where'

   ąwa 'which'   águ(di) 'where'   eą 'how'

   (į/e)dádą 'what'   áną 'how many/much'   etc.

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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
always[3]) accompanied by a clause-final question marker
(complementizer) a or da, 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. **Ɨdádạ** gáɣe=a
           what   she-does-it=Q
           'What is she doing?'

        c. Baby akhá **ɨdádạ** dạbe=dạ=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. **Ɨdádạ=(e)the** gáɣa
           what=the   she-does-it
           'She is doing something.'

        c. Wanạ́xe ama **ɨdádạ=šte** gahíðe   thedi
           ghost the what=soever it-blows when they-are-
           nạ́ppe=nạ=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.   Įdádą ðaštą́be
       what   you-see-it
       'What do you see?'

  b.   Eą́ska négą
       how   you-think
       'What do you think?'

  c   Įdádą škáɣe   wanáthe   ništą́   thedi
       what   you-do-it you-eat-somethg you-finish when
       'What did you do after dinner?'

6.a.   Bertha akhá įdádą gą́ɣa
                    the   what   she-does-it
       'What is Bertha doing?'

  b.   Hą́egachadi įdádą uðáhą.
       at-morning what   you-cooked-it
       'What did you cook this morning?'

  c.   Wáxe waʔú ðįkhe athą́kki   wédaðe=tta=ðįkhe=a
       white woman the   at-what-time she-gives-birth=
                                      future=sitting=Q
       'When is the white woman going to have her baby?'

7.   Ði sidádi   awá=khe=tta ší=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 idádạ is in SpecCP.

8.a. [CP [Spec wh][C' [IP   ]]]
   b. [CP Baby akhá [Spec idádạ][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. Hịbegáexe idádạ uðáthạ
          stockings what you-wear
          'What kind of stockings are you wearing?'
    b. Hịbegáexe sábe uwáthạ.
          stockings black I-wear
          'I'm wearing black stockings.'

11.a.   John įdádą aði thí=a
             what   he-brought-it=Q
        'What did John bring?'

  b.   John mąkhą́ sabe the aði 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 mąkhą́ sabe the in (11b) a
Specifier, and I know of no reason to consider įdádą to
be in a different position than sábe or mąkhą́ 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 įdádą gáγe=a
                 the what   she-does-it=Q
        'What is Bertha doing?'
  b. Įdádą gáγe=a   Bertha akhá
       what she-does-it   the
  c. ?Idádą Bertha akhá gáγe=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.   Įdádą wáðathe gahá   gðį
            what   table   on-top it-sits
            'What is on the table?'
        b.   Wáðathe įdádą gahá   gðį=(a)
            table   what on-top it-sits=Q

    14.a.   Ttí   the ebé dąbe=a
            house the who sees
            'Who sees the house?'
        b.   Ebé ttí   the dąbe
            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 tti 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 dąbe=a
                 who s/he-saw-him/her=Q
        b.   Ebé Mary dąbe=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 ð͓i in the second half of (16a)) and sentence-
final particles like the interrogative complementizer a
in (16c).

16. a.   Ðí h͓ibé ðiðítta **awathégą** ... Wittúšpa,
         you shoe your   what-kind   granddaughter
         h͓ibé ðiðítta **awathégą** ði
         shoe your   what-kind   you
          'What kind of shoes do you have? As for you,
          granddaughter, what kind are your shoes?'

    b.   Mą́ɣe khe úgaxe **idádą**
         sky the color what
         'What color is the sky?'

    c.   Séthą   **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 áną
níkkaš͓igą and níkkaš͓igą aną with the same meaning.
Obviously the internal structure of wh-phrases deserves
further attention.

17.a.   Ą́ba wį [NP **idádą** údą] škáɣe.
        day one   what   good you-did-it
        'One day you did something good.'

     b. Ąba ttą́šte [NP údą į̇dádą šti] gáɣe=tta=akhá.
          day some   good what   too he-will-do-it
        'Some day he'll do something good again.'
     c. áną níkkašį̇ga / níkkašį̇ga 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. **Athą́di águdi** duáða   néwį̇?
        when   where this-the you-buy-it
        'When (and) where did you buy this?'
    19. éde **áwathétta eą́** ðéį̇the
        but whither   how he-may-have-gone
        į̇ðáppahą=m=ázi, 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, is 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 dą́be   (cf. (15))
          who=Q sees
          'Who did Mary see?/Who saw Mary?'
      b. Ebé=a wą́giðe xtáwaðe   (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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knowledge of the Omaha language with me.

[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 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.

[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.

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

[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.

[6]See Rudin 1988.   Note that (18) looks somewhat odd with
respect to schema (8), since duáða 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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