

Presentation of the structures and approaches to teaching wh-movement in indirect interrogative object clauses

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Abstract

In this article, we will present a summary of the characteristics of “wh-movement” in indirect interrogative sentences, which from a functional perspective are classified as object noun clauses, in English and Albanian. Starting off with the presentation of the most typical structures of indirect interrogatives we will then proceed with the juxtaposition of examples, to highlight similarities and differences of the structures in both languages.

Focusing on the main syntactic structures of wh-question word displacement within the subordinate clause or towards the main clause, we will present the cases where grammatical and ungrammatical sentences are obtained.

Furthermore, the goal is to describe their most typical types in grammatical terms to contribute to improving their acquisition by Albanian students who study English as a second language.

Keywords: clause structure, object clause, wh-movement, wh-question word, yes-no question

Indirect wh -questions and yes-no questions sentences are projections of the same semantic type of verbs in English and Albanian. These verbs usually belong to the following lexical categories: question verbs: ask, wonder / ask, verbs that express mental activity: *understand / kuptoj, remind / kujtoj*, decision *decide/vendos, care/kujdesem*, etc.¹

[1]

a. Carlo wondered where his mother went. “*Angles and Demons*” (p. 234)

(*Karlo pyeste veten se ku shkoi mamaja e tij.*)

a. I asked if Kristin would be a good mother. “*Ok,*” issue 27, 28 July 2012 (p. 64)

(*Pyeta nëse Kristina do të ishte një mama e mirë.*)

Indirect wh -questions and yes-no questions in English present different structures from their direct equivalents. Such a difference is illustrated in the following examples.

[2]

English

a. Carlo wondered where his mother went. “*Angles and Demons*” (p. 234)

(*Karlo pyeste veten se ku shkoi mamaja e tij.*)

b. *Carlo wondered where did his mother go.

¹ Miller, J. (2002), *An Introduction to Syntax*, Oxford, f. 211.

c. Carlo wondered where his mother had gone.

(*Karlo pyeste veten se ku kishte shkuar mamaja e tij.*)

Albanian

a. “Pa të shohim kë do të quajë njeri të paaftë, të cilit nuk mund t’i besohet, mbasi t’i ketë parë” (filmimet) “*Engjëj dhe djaj*” p. 265

b.* There is no Albanian equivalent structure

c. “Pa të shohim kë do të kishte quajtur njeri të paaftë, të cilit nuk mund t’i besohet, pasi t’i ketë parë (filmimet).”

A thorough analysis of the above examples brings about the following features of indirect interrogatives in English language:

The order of sentence elements resembles that of a declarative sentence:

(wh question word) + subject + predicate, sentence [2a].

Subject predicate inversion does not take place in example [2c] and vice versa in sentence [2a].

On the other hand, in contrast to English Language, the corresponding examples of the Albanian language, show that the order of sentence elements in indirect interrogative sentences resembles that of the direct questions:

(He wondered, where question word his mother subject, had gone predicate)

Indirect interrogative sentences functioning as subordinate clauses start with a question word in English and Albanian.

[3] English

a. I asked if Kristina would be a good mother. “*Ok,*” issue 27, 28 July 2012 (p. 64)
(*Pyeta nëse Kristina do të ishte një mama e mirë.*)

b. I asked who would be a good mother.

(*Pyeta se kush do të ishte një mama e mirë.*)

Albanian

a. Menjëherë, para se të zemë vend në karriget e verandës, ajo më pyet nëse (intervista) do të jetë (një intervistë) interesante. *Revista “Mapo” 5.09.2011*

b. Ajo më pyeti se cila do të ishte interesante.

Wh- question words generated in the deep structures of the subordinate clause are transposed at the front of the main clause once they undergo the wh-movement transformational rule. The interrogative word transposed at the beginning of the main clause leaves a gap in the subordinate clause where it was originally found.²

Yes-no questions, differently from wh -questions, are not preceded by a question word in English. The first element in these questions is the operator. As such, indirect yes-no questions make use of the conjunctions *if*, *whether* as first elements in English [3a] and their Albanian corresponding conjunctions *në*, *nëse*. A common feature in the examples of both languages is the fact that the conjunctions are obligatory elements of the clauses. Overall, the resemblance of such structures between the two languages is obvious. The only difference between the two is the choice between “*if*” and “*whether*” in English and “*në*” or “*nëse*” in Albanian. Regarding the use of “*në*” or “*nëse*” there are no limitations as opposed to the choice between “*if*” or “*whether*” which is limited by some semantic criteria.

² This grammatical phenomenon was first noted by George dhe Chomski in 1980, 1986, 1995. Chomski (1993, 1994, 1995) “*The Checking System and Overt Movement*” argues that the movement occurs due to feature checking principles and parameters.

The verbs from which subordinate interrogative clauses are projected function as bridges³ between the wh-interrogative words and the original position⁴ they held in the clause.

A major part of free - ordered subordinate clauses are placed between the wh-question word and the fixed position of the complement. The structures obtained from the syntactic phenomenon are termed “*filler*,” “*wh-phrase*,” “*gap*.”

- [4] English “*Angles and Demons*” (p. 77)
She had pictured this moment differently.
(*Ajo e kishte imagjinuar këtë moment ndryshe.*)
- a. Who did Sue believe (that) had pictured this moment differently?
(*Cili besonte Sju (se) e kishte imagjinuar këtë moment ndryshe?*)
- b. What did Sue believe (that) she had pictured differently?
(*Çfarë mendonte Sju (se) ajo kishte imagjinuar ndryshe?*)
- c. What did Sue believe (that) John said (that) she had pictured differently?
(*Çfarë mendonte Sju (se) Xhoni tha (që) ajo kishte imagjinuar ndryshe?*)

- Albanian
Deri para dy javësh e kish quajtur të pamundur punën që e prishte në fund të tunelit.
“*Engjëj dhe djaj*” (p. 79)
- b. Çfarë mendonte Ani (se)⁵ e kishte quajtur të pamundur punën që e prishte në fund të tunelit?
- c. Çfarë mendonte Ani (se)* kishte thënë Eri (që)* ishte e pamundur?

It should be noted that main wh -clauses start with the operator “do” in English. In addition, a subordinate clause that follows, is normally preceded by the subordinating conjunction *that*, which can be omitted in certain cases [4b]. In case the question word is prepositioned, then the conjunction is dropped. Example [4] highlights the fact that the verb in the main clause belongs to the group of verbs known by Erteshik, as connecting verbs or bridges, which we were mentioned in the above paragraphs.

Examples [4] illustrate a similarity between English and Albanian, the universal aspect of natural languages and universality of grammar. Indirect interrogative sentences of both languages are characterized by wh-movement transformational rule according to which the wh-interrogative element is transposed from its initial position to the beginning of the subordinate clause. What distinguishes the complex sentences of the English language from the corresponding ones in the Albanian language is the presence of an auxiliary verb in case the predicate in the interrogative sentence is expressed with a simple tense verb. An auxiliary verb is used, in the main clause of the English language, which is not the case with the corresponding sentences in Albanian. Regarding the presence of the conjunction at the beginning of the subordinate clause, in contrast to the examples of English language where its use is not mandatory, in Albanian language the conjunction cannot be omitted due to the different parameters of the transformation of the declarative sentence into an interrogative sentence in Albanian. The absence of the conjunction would result in an ungrammatical sentence. That is the reason making the conjunction's presence in this language obligatory.

³ Erteshik, refers to the predicate of the main clause as *bridge* in 1973. Other terms used by him related to *wh - movement* are: *filler*, *gap*, etc.

⁴ Koleci F. - Turano G. (2011), *Hyrje në sintaksën gjenerative të shqipërisë*, Shblu, Tiranë.

⁵ * The asterisk signals that the omission of the conjunction *që*, in Albanian would result in an ungrammatical sentence.

Despite being classified as a language with free wh-question word order (wh-ex-situ), there are examples English language which illustrate syntactic phenomena that characterize languages with an inflexible wh-word order (in-situ), mainly when in a complex sentence there is more than one interrogative element. In such cases only one of the elements can be transposed, not all of them. The others do not undergo this change of position. They remain in their initial position.

- [5] English
Monica gave Susan the money. “An Introduction to English Syntax” p. 106
a. Who_a t_a has given what to whom?
b. *Who_a what_b t_a has given t_b to whom?
c. *Who_a what_b to whom_c t_a has given t_b t_c?

- Albanian
Monika i dha paratë Suzanës.
a. Kush_a t_a i dha Çfarë_b kujt?
b. *Kush_a t_a Çfarë_b t_a i dha kujt?
c. *Kush_a Çfarë_b kujt_c i dha t_b t_c?

In the preceding paragraphs it was mentioned that symbol *t* marks the trace or gap left at the initial position by a displaced element. It is the position that determines the syntactic function of the transposed element. In case we have more than one displaced sentence element, then we can assign each of them a symbol, for example *t_a*, *t_b* etc.

In examples [5b], *t_a* denotes the gap created by the movement of the wh-word *who*, *t_b* marks the gap left by the movement of *what*, and *t_c* marks the gap caused by *whom*. We have illustrated the same movement of elements in the relevant examples of the Albanian language, with the corresponding changes which are: Sentence [a. b.] in both languages represent a similar case of wh-word movement. They contrast to example [c.]

[b. c.] are ungrammatical sentences in both languages because it is impossible to move the object *what* immediately after the subject *who*.

Let us consider the following example. Sentence [5a] can otherwise be expressed as follows:

What_a has who given t_a to whom?
Çfarë_a kush i dha t_a kujt?

We notice that in these examples the transposed category is that of the object and not the subject. This example would not be an accurate choice to characterize the phenomenon of wh-movement in English. This phenomenon is randomly encountered in multiple interrogative sentences (where more than one interrogative wh – word is present). In such cases, it is the syntactic category closest to the initial position that moves to the beginning of the interrogative sentence and not the furthest ones from it. The exact phenomenon is encountered in Albanian too. This phenomenon is termed *the Principle of Superiority*⁶. There is only one element for the specifier in both languages English and Albanian and that position cannot be filled by two elements simultaneously. On the other hand, the Albanian language does not allow the formation of these types of sentences as it lacks the syntactic mechanism for their formation. As

⁶ “Principle of Superiority”, is thoroughly explained by Chomsky in “Principles and Parameters”.

we pointed out, this principle is language specific. Different languages exhibit different structural features in the formation of wh -questions.

PRINCIPLE OF LOCALITY⁷

The above examples reflect the wh-movement of the wh-question word in the nominal object clause within the subordinate clause. However, a wh-question word can be moved towards the main clause. This phenomenon, where the syntactic categories of the subordinate clause are not transposed within the subordinate clause of which they are a part, but to a further position, i.e., in the main clause, is called "Long Distance wh-movement"⁸.

[6]

- a. What_{ta} did Cathren think *that Shena would tell t_a*?
(Çfarë_a mendonte Kethrin që Shena do të thoshte t_a?)

In this example the object of the verb think is transposed to the main clause. The opposite cannot happen. That is, the object of the main clause cannot be transposed to the subordinate clause, moving this way to a lower position. This does not imply that the wh-movement transformational rule does not allow the movement of another wh-word to the main clause:

[7]

Terence had passed over the bag in exchange for a fat brown envelope.

(Terensi e dha çantën në këmbim të një zarfi të madh kaf.)

Which bag_a do you wonder why_{CP} Terence had passed over t_a?

(*Cilën çantë_a mendoni se pse_{CP} Terensi e dha t_a?) "An Introduction to English Syntax" (p. 144)

We note a difference between sentences [6] and [7]. In sentence [6] the intermediate position of the specifier, (between the position in which the displaced element is located and the position to which it goes), is free, while in the indirect interrogative sentence [7] the position of the specifier is filled exactly by the wh-question word *why*.

The question word can first be transposed to the specifier position of the subordinate clause in which it is located, then to an intermediate level, and finally to that of the main clause. Such gradual, step by step displacement, is known as, *Successive Cyclic Movement*. Therefore, we conclude that the displacement of the interrogative wh-word in example [6] is complete, since this displacement also leaves traces, gaps at the intermediate level of the complex sentence with subordinate clauses before reaching the final position. This implies that it must follow successive cycles or stages before arriving at the destination that of the main clause.

Referring to sentence [7] the constituent *which bag* cannot be moved to its initial position in the subordinate clause since it is a position filled by *why*. In this case the cyclic wh-movement cannot be applied. The sentence illustrates another principle according to which not all wh-question words of a subordinate clause can be transposed to the main clause, at the same time.

In sentence [7], one must gradually move *which bag* through the position of the specifier of the subordinate clause and then move the word *why* to this position. This last transformation is known as *the Countercyclic Movement*. This means that a

⁷ "Principle of Locality" was first used by Chomsky in 1957. Later on the term was updated by Aron Kaplan in his "x-bar Theory, Minimalist Theory" and Ana Kibort in "Perspectives on a key notion in Linguistics" (2009).

⁸ Memushaj, R. (2008). *Gjuhësia Gjenerative*, Shblu, f. 166.

movement to a subordinate clause is made where a movement to the main clause previously occurred.

CONSTRAINTS

In many cases the wh-movement principle cannot be applied or is limited. This syntactic phenomenon is known as the *Island Constraint*⁹. Apart from the wh-word, there are sentence elements that cannot be transposed. Such restrictions will simply be mentioned in this paper as their analysis in both languages would require an in-depth article.

Island Constraints are:

1. *Complex NP Constraint* which refers to the restriction of movement of a complex noun phrase constituent. This occurs in English language when a syntactic category cannot be transposed, by undergoing the wh-movement, outside the sentence of which it is a part.

2. *Island Constraint* in subjects and adjuncts. Other restrictive structures are the subject and the adjunct. In contrast to the object of a sentence, the wh-movement transformational rule cannot be applied to these two syntactic functions.

3. *Coordinate structure constraint*: The displacement of the wh-word occurs in coordinated sentences, but it is limited. In a coordinated sentence, we cannot move an element of the sentence, from clause [1], to the other coordinated clause [2], if simultaneously there is no displacement of an element from this coordinated clause [2] towards clause [1].

4. *Left Branch constraint*¹⁰: It is possible to move the head of a noun phrase outside of it, but it is impossible to move the specifier of the phrase in the same way. This phenomenon is known as, "Left Branching Constraint", since the specifier is positioned on the left side of their graphical representation tree and the head is positioned on the right.

CONCLUSIONS

► Indirect interrogative sentences are projected from verbs that express specific lexical meanings. Wh-question words are positioned at the beginning of the sentence in both languages, in direct and indirect questions. There is an exception in some examples of the Albanian language where the question word is also found in the middle of the sentence.

► In the formation of an interrogative sentence, the interrogative element moves from the initial position, in an affirmative sentence, to the left periphery of the sentence. The syntactic phenomenon of shifting the interrogative element is called "wh- movement" in English and is called the transformation rule or shifting of the interrogative element in Albanian. This is a syntactic phenomenon widely addressed by the most vocal representatives of generativism.

► In English and Albanian languages, when the wh -question word undergoes the wh-movement it moves from its initial position to another position within the indirect wh-question interrogative sentence in which it is located, then it is head positioned, i.e.

⁹ Syntactic issue by John Ross 1967, often referred to as Ross Island Constraint
J. R. Ross (1967), *Constraints on Variables in Syntax*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

¹⁰J. R. Ross (1967), *Constraints on Variables in Syntax*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

is placed at the beginning of the subordinate clause leaving a trace or gap (*ta*) in the position where it was originally found. The question word is preserved in the indirect interrogative sentences, in contrast to the relative or complement clauses, where it is usually omitted.

► If the question word is transposed from the subordinate clause to the main clause, then this element is placed once in an intermediate position and then in that of the main clause, thus performing a gradual movement towards the final position. When the question word is transposed towards the intermediate levels of the sentence or even towards further distances, which means towards the main clause, then its position is determined by the position of the trace or gap with which it will form a structure.

► In the long - distance movement of wh-question words to the main interrogative clause, the reverse never happens. This implies that the object of the main clause cannot be transposed to the subordinate clause.

► Different languages such as English and Albanian share common characteristics regarding the application of wh-movement. In the deep structure, indirect interrogative wh -questions have the same form in English, Albanian or Italian, etc... The difference lies in the surface structure of these languages. Languages like English and Albanian are characterized by a displacement of the question word at the beginning of the question sentence. In multiple interrogative sentences (consisting of more than one question word) only the question word closest to the front position undergoes wh-movement in English language. In Albanian language only a question word can be moved to the beginning of the sentence too. However, in the Albanian we can use multiple interrogative sentences (consisting of more than one wh-question word which follow one another) in conversational speech.

Po kur, si, Çfarë, i pati thënë?
(So *when, how, what*, did he say?)

► There are some syntactic structures which limit the displacement of wh-question words in the main clause of indirect interrogative sentences. All the structures or "islands" which do not allow the displacement of a question word, have been an issue of debate and are currently studied by different linguists. The issues they try to answer about these limiting structures are the cause of their existence, their common characteristics, etc.

TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Any natural language has its own peculiarities. The grammatical knowledge of forming various kinds of sentences declaratives, interrogatives etc., is part of our linguistic competence. Whereas, in acquiring a new language, we pay attention to the structure of our expressions so that we do not form ungrammatical sentences. Hence, Albanian students encounter difficulties with topics of relevant difficulty such as those related to transformational grammar. Due to the traditional approach still widely preserved and predominating our teaching context. Grammar issues of this degree of difficulty often serve as a cause for concern, discouragement, and misconception. Teaching is a process of interrelated stages whose aim is not to avoid failure from happening but to encourage students to focus and facilitate their work.

Clear guidance and insight on grammar issues aids student comprehension and analytical skills.

One way of sensitizing students to the dangers of ungrammatical structures is clear advice illustrated through examples. It seems sensible that students should be provided with examples and exercises practice in class. Another way of approaching these grammar issues which pose some degree of difficulty is by comparing the examples in both languages. Independent guessing work from them contributes to their gaining confidence on grammar issues, minimizing the difficulties and encouraging students not to give up.

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