The Syntax of Questions in Moro

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In previously undocumented syntactic data from the Kordofanian language, Moro (Sudan), we find two question formation strategies: in situ wh-questions (1) and fronted wh-constructions (2). This combination poses a challenge to the constraint against optional wh-movement (Cheng 1997). Closer analysis reveals that the apparent “fronting” involves a cleft structure with a headless relative clause, not a movement structure.

(1) udʒi qa.tað.o edʒangano
    man 3SG.abandon.perf who\textit{\textsubscript{\textsc{situ}}}
    The man abandoned who?

(2) [\text{\textsc{pred}} n\textsc{w}/dʒe}ki ] \text{\textsc{dp}} \emptyset [\text{\textsc{cp}} n.udʒi nə.ge.tað.o.ŋo]
    who.is SUB.man SUB.3SG.abandon.PERF.3SG
    Who did the man abandon?

We propose that the wh-word is base-generated as the predicate phrase of the question and takes a headless relative clause as its subject (cf. Potsdam 2005 for a similar analysis of Malagasy). This account captures the morphological similarity between questions and other cleft constructions, and explains the verbal vowel change and subordinate-clause marking found both in questions and object relative clauses. The subordinating marker \textit{nə-} appears in object wh-questions, where it marks syntactic heads (verb, subject, and sentential adverbs) occurring between the wh-word and the gap. We further compare Moro’s clause marking to similar strategies seen in the VP-marking of Irish (McCloskey 1979) and the CP-marking of Chamorro (Chung 1994).

References


