The Syntax of Q-particles in Manipuri Wh-Questions
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OVERVIEW: This work explores the syntax of Q-particles in Manipuri (a Tibeto-Burman, SOV language) in 3 basic, yet structurally distinct, types of wh-questions, with the claim that these particles are overt morphosyntactic markers of agreement with a higher probe head FOC and a lower phase head Φ – both of which are discourse opposites in terms of their feature matrices. This claim differs from previous Q-particle analyses (Hagström 1998 for Sinhala; Kushimoto 2005 for Japanese; Cable 2010 for Tingit), that view the Q-particle as a head in itself c-commanding the wh-word, and heading a QP that is ATTRAICTed by the C. The three types of Manipuri wh-questions are in (1), - with a particle-less question being labeled TYPE 1, one with a question-final particle labeled TYPE 2, and one with two different particles (one on the wh-word and one question-final) labeled TYPE 3:

(1) a. John-no kodai
   John-NOM where LOC:go
   \("Where is John going?\"
 TYPE 1 (no Q-particles present)

b. John-no
   \("Who is it that ate the cake?"
 TYPE 2 (question-final Q particle \(--no\) present)

c. John-no kodai-no
do?
   John-NOM where LOC:NO
do
   \("Where is it that John is going?"
 TYPE 3 (two different particles: \(--no\) on the wh-word and question-final \(--do\) present)

As shown in the English translations, (1c) is different from (1a-b) in the fact that its interpretation is similar to a cleft question of the form ‘Who is it that ate the cake?’ However, I will argue in this paper that the structure of the TYPE 3 question is not a canonical cleft-like structure (Heggie 1988, Percus 1997, Kiss 1998, Pavey 2004, den Dikken 2008) but a biphrasal configuration resulting from feature valuation of two different probes, while TYPE 2 results from valuing a single probe, and TYPE 1 results from none of the probes being present at all.

ANALYSIS: It has been widely assumed in the literature that wh-words are inherently focused or F-marked, and thus carry, in addition to [+Wh] feature, a [+FOCUS] feature (Jayaseelan 1996, Sabel (2000), Sabel and Zeller (2006), Haida (2008)). Following that assumption, I claim that Manipuri wh-words carry the interpretable feature matrix \([Wh,F]\). Redefining traditional theories of feature percolation (cf. Weibelhuth 1989, Ortiz de Urbina 1990, Moritz and Valois 1994), which allowed transfer of features from a dominated element to its maximal projection in a rigidly local (Spec-Head) configuration (shown in (2)), I propose a new system of feature percolation where an XP containing an element Y with the feature [+\(\alpha\)] becomes [+\(\alpha\)], (shown in (3)):

(2) a. \(\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\) by Spec-Head agreement
b. \(\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\) (the higher DPs in now [+\(\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\)])
c. \(\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\) (dominate Spec-Tag
   \("Where is it that ate the cake?"
   \("Where is it that ate the cake?"
   \("Where is it that ate the cake?"

In the system in (3), the transfer of the features \([\text{Wh},F]\) is obligatory from the original element bearing it to the till the next strong phase projection. Thus, the claim is that in Manipuri wh-questions, the CP always carries the feature matrix \([\text{Wh},F]\) by feature percolation from the wh-word, as in (3). The percolation stops at the CP, given its phase-bound nature (see Kidwai 2010 for arguments for the Manipuri CP as a phase). In a TYPE 1 question then, such as in (1a), schematized in (4) below, the whole CP has an interpretable Wh feature, as well as an interpretable focus feature:

(4) \(\{\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\} \{\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\} \{\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\} \{\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\} \{\text{\textbf{[Wh,F]}}\}\) (assuming the extended verbal spine structure proposed in Kidwai (2010) for Manipuri)

The interpretable feature matrix on the CP does not require any valuation at LF, given the nature of interpretable features (Chomsky 2000, 2001), and the derivation goes on smoothly. In a TYPE 2 question, such as in (1b), the crucial claim is that there is a FOC head above the CP that is a probe due to its feature matrix consisting of two uninterpretable features – \([\text{Wh},\text{F}]\). Several authors have postulated the presence of a FOCUS projection in the syntax of wh-questions in various languages (Sabel 2000, Muriungi 2003, 2005, 2011; Madhavan 2007, Abels and Muriungi 2008). Following them, I posit the structure in (5) for all Manipuri TYPE 2 questions:

In a TYPE 3 question, such as in (1c), the crucial difference from TYPE 2 is in the presence of the particle \(--no\) on only the wh-word, and the presence of a separate particle \(--do\) question-final. Before we get to an exposition of the structure of TYPE 3 questions, the data in (7) is to show us that \(--do\) functions as a...
familiarity marker in Manipuri:

(7) a. jm-jj ice do, ma-di school-gi oja ni. I-GEN sister-DO, 3P-top school-GEN teacher COP
b. *thopnaw amm-do, hawjik-phok hat-li window-DO, now-still open PROG

‘My sister, she’s a school teacher.’ (left dislocation of –do marked constituent possible)

‘A window, its still open.’ (cannot be attached to an indefinite)

Given these facts of –do marking familiarity, I claim below that –do appears on a phrase as the result of AGREEment with the head ϕ, which has a discourse-related feature [+GIVEN], postulating that all the information contained within its projection is old information that already been established in the discourse or the common ground of participants.

(8)

The strong phase head ϕ, with the feature [+Given] intervenes between the FocP and the CP – which is the crucial structural difference between TYPE 2 and TYPE 3 questions. ϕ’s character of being a strong phase head is fed by an EPP requirement, making it a probe by itself (Obata and Epstein 2011), and via Shortest Move (Chomsky 1989), the first goal it finds is the CP, which moves to [Spec, ϕ] to satisfy EPP. The particle –do appears on the moved CP as a morphological indication of this movement to the Spec of a projection that contains old/familiar information.

This structure is, however, not the complete structure of a TYPE 3 question. Another probe, namely FOC, has been merged and is looking to value its uninterpretable feature matrix. 4ϕ being a phase, FOC can only see its edge, i.e. [Spec, ϕ] and thus the –do marked CP is visible to it. The possibility of agreement with this CP would result in (9) with the prediction that it is grammatical. However, (9) is strictly ungrammatical:

EVIDENCE FROM MULTIPLE WH-QUESTIONS: Manipuri has been argued to be a wh-insitu language (Chelliah 1997, Thangjam 2003), and the data seen till now confirms that fact. Multiple wh-questions present strong evidence in favor of the analysis presented above. In (10-12) below, we see that TYPE 1 and TYPE 2 multiple wh-questions show Superiority Effects, while TYPE 3 wh-questions do not:

(10) a. kana keri lot-k’li? who what hide-PAST
b. *keri kana lot-k’li?

Llt.: “Who hid what?”

I argue here that this difference of facts is a result of FOC-agree-ing with multiple goals simultaneously in TYPE 3 questions. A many-to-one mapping of feature-checking/validation configuration where there is one Probe but multiple Goals has been argued for by many authors (Stjepanović 1995, Bošković 1997d, Richards 1997). Following them, the claim here is that in TYPE 3 multiple wh-questions, it’s the same structure as shown in (8), except now FOC, (after rejecting the –do marked CP as a Goal), has two possible Goals in the two wh-words, both of which bear the same feature matrix – [Wh,ϕ,F]. Thus, FOC-agrees with both of them simultaneously, and consequently, both the wh-words get marked with –no. This is shown in (13):

(13) a. kana no lot-k’li? who what hide-PAST
b. *keri no lot-k’li?

Llt.: “Who is it that (what is it) hid?”

After both wh-words have been –no marked, the relative order between them is freed up such that each can move over each other, making (12b) grammatical. In TYPE 2 questions, however, FOC agrees with the CP (shown in (5)), and thus the wh-words inside the CP still retain the fixed order, as seen in (14):

(14) a. kana no lot-k’li? who what hide-PAST
b. *keri no lot-k’li?

Thus, AGREE-ment with FOC obliterates Superiority effects among wh-words in Manipuri. In TYPE 1, there is no FOC, while in TYPE 2, FOC agrees with the CP, keeping Superiority effects inside the CP intact. Only in TYPE 3 questions, FOC can agree with all wh-words, making them ‘equal’ in a sense and leading to the dissolution of concerns of superiority.

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS: The theory of question-particles presented in this work has broader consequences for the grammatical theory of Q-particles in general. The data from TYPE 3 multiple wh-questions in Manipuri compel us to reject previous accounts of Q-particles (Hagström 1998; Kishimoto 2005; Cable 2010). Cable argued that the Q-particle is a head by itself in the grammar that is adjointed to the wh-word. C’S ATTRACTS the Q-particle, which then moves, leaving the wh-word in situ. This account would be unable to explain the data in (11a-b): one would have to claim that every wh-word in TYPE 3 multiple wh-questions have a Q-particle –no adjointed to it, and that C’S ATTRACTS(ion) pulls up all the particles, leaving the wh-words insitu. Not only does that crucially violate word order facts, it also leads to stipulation of multiple unnecessary adjunctions, because Manipuri can have all wh-words marked with –no, even if there are more than two. Neither can the Q-particle adjunction theory account for the dependency with the second particle (–do) that is seen in Manipuri wh-questions, i.e. it appears question-finally whenever the wh-words are –no marked, leading to a clitic-like interpretation. The theory of phase-bound feature percolation by containment along with the feature valuation hypothesis proposed here, can explain the Q-particle facts observed in the previous works mentioned above. I will argue in the talk that keeping the tenets of the theory proposed here intact – i.e. Feature transfer is also obligatory in Sinhala/Japanese/Tlingit, just as in Manipuri, and assuming the same universal feature matrix for wh-words - [Wh, ϕ, F], and the presence of the same interrogative FOC head as in Manipuri, the derivations would be almost identical.

Selected References:
Thangjam, Hindustani (2003) MeiteiLon Wh-questions. MPhil.Diss, Delhi University, New Delhi, India.