Partial wh-movement in Shona: A hybrid wh-question formation strategy

Overview. This paper addresses partial wh-movement in Shona ([sna], Bantu, Zimbabwe), which is sensitive to islands below but not above the pronunciation site of the wh-word. I argue for a composite derivation of this phenomenon: the wh-word moves overtly to its pronunciation site at an intermediate clause boundary, where it is unselectively bound (Pesetsky 1987) by a null operator in the scopal position.

Evidence for the overt movement step. I present three pieces of evidence that the wh-word moves from its base position to its pronunciation site: (i) Partially moved wh-words must appear with an allomorph of the copula ndi- in a cleft construction (1a), like fully moved wh-words (1b) and unlike in-situ wh-words (1c).

(1) a. W-ai-fung-a [kuti *(ndi)-Ø-ani *(wa)-t-aka-teng-er-a ___ Ø-rokwe]? 2SG.SM-PST.HAB-think-FV that COP-1a-who 1a.NSE-1PL.SM-PST-buy-APPL-FV 5-dress
b. *(Nd)-Ø-ani *(wa)-w-ai-fung-a [kuti t-aka-teng-er-a ___ Ø-rokwe]? COP-1a-who 1a.NSE-2SG.SM-PST.HAB-think-FV that 1PL.SM-PST-buy-APPL-FV 5-dress
c. W-ai-fung-a [kuti t-aka-teng-er-a Ø-ani Ø-rokwe]? 2SG.SM-PST.HAB-think-FV that 1PL.SM-PST-buy-APPL-FV 1a-who 5-dress
‘Who(m) did you think we bought a dress (for)?’

(ii) When a non-subject wh-word is partially moved, the verb in the clause in which the wh-word is pronounced must agree with it in φ-features (in addition to bearing φ-agreement with the subject) (1a); this non-subject extraction morphology (NSE) occurs with full wh-movement (1b) but not wh-in-situ (1c). (iii) Partial wh-movement of a non-subject out of an island is impossible (2a); the same is true for full wh-movement (2b) but not wh-in-situ (2c).

‘*Where do you think s/he likes the team that is from ___?’

Evidence for the unselective binding step. Partial wh-movement is acceptable within an island (3a), like wh-in-situ (3c) and unlike full wh-movement (3b).


Analyzing Shona partial wh-movement. This lack of sensitivity to islands above the pronunciation site distinguishes Shona from other languages with partial wh-movement, such as Singaporean Malay and Kitharaka, in which examples like (3a) are impossible. As a result, the Shona pattern is incompatible with analyses involving a movement relation between the pronunciation site and the scopal position, whether covert movement (Cole & Hermon 1998), overt movement with pronunciation of the lower copy (Richards 2001), or overt movement of a null operator (Abels 2012). Instead, the Shona facts provide novel support for proposals that posit a non-movement relation between the scopal position and the pronunciation site (Sabel 2000:441, Sabel & Zeller 2006:280, Abels 2012:155–156).

Conclusion. Shona partial wh-movement can be reduced to a hybrid of full wh-movement and wh-in-situ, a composite derivation that has been predicted to be possible but for which clear empirical support has been lacking until now.

Word count: 499
References