On the role of discourse factors in Russian MWF questions: A syntactic/semantic approach

I offer an analysis of Russian Multiple Wh-Fronting (MWF) questions based on new data collected on binary wh-questions. The data shows that superiority effects in Russian MWF questions are constrained by discourse, such that the wh-phrase of primary interest precedes the wh-phrase of secondary interest. Furthermore, while discourse-constrained structures are optionally available, they are not obligatory and a discourse-neutral order is possible, resulting in optionality with respect to the order of wh-phrases under most discourse conditions. Based on this data, I propose a mixed typology for Russian with respect to wh-movement, which reflects a complex interaction between the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of Russian wh-phrases.

Since Rudin (1988), cross-linguistic variation with respect to superiority effects in MWF questions among Slavic languages has been a subject of much debate. In particular, the puzzle presented by Russian's apparent insensitivity to superiority violations is puzzling in light of wh-movement within the Minimalist Program and the principle of Attract Closest (Chomsky 1995; Richards 1997). Theories proposed to account for Russian MWF superiority violations generally either obviate the role of Attract Closest (Zavinevich 1999, 2005; Liakin and Ndayiragije 2001; Liakin 2005, 2007; Dyakonova 2009) or eliminate wh-movement altogether, reducing wh-fronting to discourse-motivated movement (Bošković 2002; Stepanov 1998; Strahov 2001). However, these theories encounter at least one of the following problems: they fail to capture the role of complex discourse factors in the order of wh-phrases; they are too strong in their predictions concerning discourse factors; they do not sufficiently motivate wh-fronting to left periphery; they do not allow for inter-speaker variation.

Following an observation made by Chernova (2014), I collected new data on Russian binary wh-questions elicited under controlled discourse conditions. The data shows that in most contexts both superiority-violating and superiority-obeying orders are available, as shown by (1).

(1) Context: You know that two of your students, Ivan and Boris, are going somewhere for vacations, each to a different place, but you don't know where they will go exactly.

    a. Superiority-obeying question
        Kto   kuda   edet?
        who.nom   to.where   is.going
        'Who's going where?'

    b. Superiority-violating question
        Kuda   kto   edet?
        to.where   who   is.going

However, under certain conditions, superiority violations are degraded. In (2)b, where the structurally lower wh-phrase is of secondary interest to the speaker, it cannot precede the structurally higher wh-phrase of primary interest. The degraded status of (2)b indicates that at least for some speakers, superiority violations are constrained by discourse factors.

(2) Context: You know that some students will go for vacations to London, while others will go to Paris, but you don't know who exactly will go to which place.

    a. Superiority-obeying question
        Kto   kuda   edet?
        who.nom   to.where   is.going
        'Who's going where?'

    b. Superiority-violating question
        ?/*Kuda   kto   edet?
        to.where   who   is.going

Integrating this data with insights from previous proposals, I pursue a featural account and suggest that wh-phrases can be mapped to articulated discourse positions in the left periphery à la Rizzi: wh-phrases of primary interest target FocP and wh-phrases of secondary interest target low TopP. However, considering the data in (1), it's clear that wh-phrases can engage in discourse relations but, crucially, need not. Therefore, I propose that Russian is both a wh-movement and wh-in-situ language. Speakers have available to them two interrogative C^0: a discourse-neutral C^0 bearing an uninterpretable wh-feature with an EPP feature and a discourse-sensitive C^0, which bears a wh-feature without an EPP feature. When the discourse-neutral C^0 is merged, wh-movement occurs and superiority is maintained. When the discourse-sensitive C^0 is merged, the wh-phrases are endowed with syntactic focus and topic features, respectively, driving discourse movement. Thus, Russian wh-fronting is subject to optionality, which serves as a source of inter-speaker variation.

Lastly, I propose that in discourse-constrained questions, syntactically focalized wh-phrases move to specifier of FocP to escape existential closure. Dyakonova (2009) observes that syntactic focus is insufficient to motivate wh-fronting since non-wh focalized constituents may undergo movement to the left periphery, but need not. However, in order to be interpreted as question words, syntactically focalized wh-phrases must get out of the scope of $\exists_{reset}$ by moving to the left periphery (Yanovich 2006; Erlewine 2019). Wh-words that do not move receive a bare indefinite reading. Thus, wh-fronting occurs for both syntactic and semantic reasons.

The data presented here is an important contribution to our understanding of Russian MWF questions in that it makes undeniable the reality of discourse factors in the order of wh-phrases, which any viable theory of Russian wh-fronting must account for. Furthermore, it shows that optionality must be built into this theory. Thus, my analysis represents an advancement in that it accounts for a fuller range of data than previous analyses and contributes to a more flexible theory of Russian grammar, which allows for more inter-speaker variation.

References
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