Overt wh-Movement in Vietnamese

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1 Introduction

Wh-movement has played a key role in understanding the interface between syntax and semantics, the level of representation called Logical Form (LF). In order for wh-elements to be properly interpreted as questions by the semantics, it has been argued that they must be located in the specifier of the matrix CP in the LF representation. Movement to this position, however, is constrained by the syntax, hence the phenomenon of ‘islands’ or barriers over which wh-movement is prohibited. For example, a wh-element that originates within a complex noun phrase is unable to raise to SpecCP as in (1), and the same is true of wh-elements within complex subjects (2) and adjuncts, as in (3).

(1) *Who did Tan take a picture of [the tiger that scared ti]?
(2) *Who did [a book about ti] fall off the shelf?
(3) *Who did Tan just lose the race [because ti damaged his car]?

In this model, the status of questions in wh-in situ languages is unclear. If the wh-element does not move overtly, how does it get properly interpreted as a question by the semantics? Does it move covertly to SpecCP or is it bound by an operator located in SpecCP? Huang (1982, cited in Aoun and Li 1993) argued that in Chinese, wh-elements obligatorily raise at LF, which in more modern terms corresponds to covert movement. Aoun and Li, however, argued that Chinese wh-elements, along with the more limited cases of in-situ wh-elements in English, do not raise at all. Instead, they argued for the existence of a Question morpheme in SpecCP that would bind the in-situ element and allow for its proper interpretation.

The controversy was resolved when Breuning and Tran (2006) showed that in Vietnamese, both types of wh-interpretation were available. Covert wh-movement was constrained by syntactic islands, just like in English and other overt-movement languages. In-situ binding, however, was not. This was significant because it predicted that languages could vary in more ways than one. Instead of overt wh-movement versus in-situ questions, we can expect to find languages picking and choosing from three types of question processes: overt movement, covert movement, and binding. Theoretically, one might also expect to find a language that combines overt movement with binding, as the two, though subject to different constraints, are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The purpose of this paper is to add new data to the discussion on question processes by examining a rather limited case of overt wh-movement in Vietnamese, an otherwise purely
wh-in situ language. Vietnamese allows overt movement of the wh-phrase cãi gì (‘thing what’) in certain contexts, and I suggest that this movement is a hybrid of overt movement and binding.

2 Covert wh-movement and in-situ binding in Vietnamese

Breuning and Tran showed that covert movement in Vietnamese is subject to all the normal constraints of wh-movement, including island constraints like those mentioned above. In contrast, in-situ binding, which is licensed by the particle thê, is not subject to island constraints:

(4) Complex NP island
   a. *Tan se chuc hinh [con ho da doa ai]?
      Tan Asp take picture Cl tiger Asp scare who
      ‘Tan will take a picture of the tiger that scared who?’
   b. Tan vua chuc hinh [con ho da doa ai] the?
      Tan Asp take picture Cl tiger Asp scare who PRT
      ‘Who did Tan just take a picture of the tiger that scared?’

(5) Complex subject island
   a. *[Ai se bo di] lam moi nguoi boi roi?
      Who Asp leave make everyone embarassed
      ‘That who will leave made everyone embarassed?’
   b. [Ai vua bo di] lam moi nguoi boi roi the?
      Who Asp leave make everyone embarassed PRT
      ‘That who just left made everyone embarassed?’

(6) Adjunct island
   a. *Tan se thua cuoc [vi ai lam hu xe cua anh ta]?
      Tan ASP lose race because who make broken vehicle of he
      ‘Who will Tan lose the race because damaged his car?’
   b. Tan vua thua cuoc [vi ai lam hu xe cua anh ta] the?
      Tan ASP lose race because who make broken vehicle of he PRT
      ‘Who did Tan just lose the race because damaged his car?’

Covert movement is also subject to LF blocking by quantifiers and the negative morpheme chang, while in-situ binding is not:

(7) a. *Chang ai moi ai?
    Neg who invite who
    ‘Who does/will no one invite?’
   b. Chang ai moi ai the?
    Neg who invite who PRT
    ‘Who did no one invite?’
This is similar to the blocking effects that quantifiers and negative elements have on wh-elements in situ in German, as observed by Beck. In (8) the lower wh-element is blocked from raising by the negative niemanden (‘nobody’), but overt movement is not blocked in this manner. (Beck shows that certain quantifiers exhibit the same blocking effect.)

(8)  
   a. ??Wer hat niemanden angetroffen?
      who has nobody where met
      ‘Who didn’t meet anybody where?’
   b. Wer hat wo niemanden angetroffen?
      who has where nobody met
      ‘Who didn’t meet anybody where?’

Finally, Breuning and Tran are careful to point out two things about the particle. First, they show that it is attached to the matrix. And second, they distinguish between the overt particle, which itself has the separate semantic function of introducing a state of realis, from the covert operator that actually does the work of binding.

3 Overt wh-movement in Vietnamese

In addition to wh-in situ, Vietnamese allows cases of overt wh-movement for the wh-phrase cãi gì (‘thing what’ or ‘what’). The following paradigm shows that this movement can pass through multiple clauses but requires the presence of the particle the to do so.

(10)  
   a. Tan tin cãi gì?
      Tan believe thing what
      ‘What does Tan believe?’
   b. Cãi gì Tan tin *(the)?
      Thing what Tan believe PRT
      ‘What does Tan believe?’
   c. Tan tin Hoa da mua cãi gì?
      Tan believe Hoa ASP buy thing what
      ‘What does Tan believe Hoa bought?’
   d. Tan tin cãi gì Hoa da mua *(the)?
      Tan believe thing what Hoa ASP buy PRT
      ‘What does Tan believe Hoa bought?’
   e. Cãi gì Tan tin Hoa da mua *(the)?
      Thing what Tan believe Hoa ASP buy PRT
      ‘What does Tan believe Hoa bought?’

However, even with the presence of the, the wh-element cannot move overtly out of syntactic islands like complex NPs, complex subjects, or adjuncts, though it can of course be bound in situ.

(11) Complex NP island
In other words, overt c’ai  gi movement is like covert wh-movement in that it is constrained by syntactic islands, and it is like binding in that it requires licensing by the particle the. I suggest that this movement is a hybrid of the other two question-formation processes available to Vietnamese: it is a product both of binding and of movement.

4 Overt movement and LF blocking

We saw above that, in questions with the negative chang, c’ai  gi can be interpreted in situ as a question word with the help of the particle the. It turns out that the particle also licenses overt movement over the negative.

(14) a. *Cai  gi chang ai mua?
   Thing what Neg who buy
   ‘What did no one buy?’

b. Cai  gi chang ai mua the?
   Thing what Neg who buy PRT
   ‘What did no one buy?’

However, in this environment, overt movement appears to be clause-bound.

(15) a. *Cai  gi Hoa tin chang ai da mua the?
   Thing what Hoa believe Neg who ASP buy PRT
   ‘What does Hoa believe no one bought?’
b. *Cai gi chang ai tin Hoa da mua the?
   Thing what Neg who believe Hoa ASP buy PRT
   ‘What does no one believe Hoa bought?’

This is a genuine problem because we can’t easily show that the negative element is blocking either overt movement or the binding relationship, since in monoclausal sentences both are allowed. However, there is evidence that it is the binding relationship that is affected. Multi-clause sentences with the negative also disallow in-situ wh-elements.

(16) a. *Hoa tin chang ai da mua cai gi the?
   Hoa believe Neg who ASP buy thing what PRT
   ‘What does Hoa believe no one bought?’

b. *Chang ai tin Hoa da mua cai gi the?
   Neg who believe Hoa ASP buy thing what PRT
   ‘What does no one believe Hoa bought?’

Given Beck’s observation that it is overt movement, rather than covert movement, that escapes the blocking effect of negatives and quantifiers, we would expect this result. The real problem is how to explain the difference between monoclausal and embedded clause environments. There is no easy way to explain the mechanics of this effect.

In (15) for example, repeated below, nothing should prevent the’s operator from establishing a binding relationship that crosses a negative. (We saw that this was permitted in 14.) Even if we stipulate that, upon encountering a negative, the operator is required to bind within that clause, we fail to account for the ungrammaticality of (a), which has an available wh-element in the negative clause. It is also of no use to stipulate that the must be attached to the negative clause. Though this would correctly rule out (a) by preventing the from attaching high enough to give the wh-element its proper scope, the stipulation fails to rule out (b).

(17) a. *Cai gi Hoa tin \[CP chang ai da mua <cai gi>] the?
   Thing what Hoa believe Neg who ASP buy t PRT
   ‘What does Hoa believe no one bought?’

b. *Cai gi chang ai tin \[CP Hoa da mua <cai gi>] the?
   Thing what Neg who believe Hoa ASP buy t PRT
   ‘What does no one believe Hoa bought?’

Pending some flash of inspiration, we seem to be be stuck for the moment in the uncomfortable position of having to make both stipulations.

5 The morpheme cái

I haven’t said anything yet about what is so special about cái gì that it should be able to undergo overt movement when, for example, ai (‘who’) cannot. I think it has to do with the morpheme cái, which can modify gì but not ai and is required whenever overt movement occurs. I do not want to make the claim that cái licenses movement, but simply that it
allows the wh-element to appear clause initially. The reason for this is that cãi is necessary even in situ if the wh-element appears clause initially.

(18) a. Tan vua thua cuoc vi cai gi lam hu xe cua anh ta the?
    Tan ASP lose race because thing what make broken vehicle of him PRT
    ‘Tan just lost the race because what damaged his car?’

b. *Tan vua thua cuoc vi gi lam hu xe cua anh ta the?
    Tan ASP lose race because what make broken vehicle of him PRT
    ‘Tan just lost the race because what damaged his car?’

c. (Cai)* gi lam hu xe cua Tan?
    Thing what make broken vehicle of Tan?
    ‘What damaged Tan’s car?’

Not just cãi but any nominal element can serve this function.

(19) Chuyen gi vua xay ra lam moi nguoi boi roi the?
    story what happen make everybody embarassed PRT
    ‘What just happened that made everybody embarassed?’

I also do not claim that cãi is a d-linked element. Breuning and Tran identify d-linking in Vietnamese as a process that causes pied-piping of islands at LF, which in turn requires the question to be answered with the whole island. The wh-element in (18a) is located in an island, but my consultants informed me that any of the following can be a proper answer to this question:

(20) a. Vi anh Thanh lam hu xe cua anh ta.
    because brother Thanh make broken vehicle of him
    ‘Because Thanh damaged his car.’

b. Anh Thanh lam hu xe cua anh ta.
    brother Thanh make broken vehicle of him
    ‘Thanh damaged his car.’

c. Anh Thanh.
    brother Thanh
    ‘Thanh’

So if cãi is not a d-linker or a licener of movement per se, what is it? For the moment I don’t have an answer other than some vague notion of topicalization. Cãi restricts the set of all possible ‘what’ answers, but since ‘who’ cannot be restricted this way it cannot be topicalized.

6 Further limitations

The main analytical problem pointed out in this paper is how to account for the clause-boundedness of overt movement in negative sentences, and a secondary problem is how to account for the need for a nominal element in clause-initial ‘what questions’. One methodological problem that I would like to point out is an area where my consultants’ judgments differed from those reported in Breuning and Tran.
My consultants consistently allowed the in-situ elements 'what' and 'who' to appear in islands, unaided by the particle the. Some restrictions were placed on ai, but none having directly to do with the particle. For example, future tense, which is incompatible with realis mood, blocks interpretation of ai in object position within a complex subject, regardless of the presence of the particle. It was permitted for other tenses, also regardless of the particle.

(21) a. *[Tan se danh ai] lam moi nguoi boi roi (the)?
   Tan FUT punch who make everyone embarrassed (PRT)
   ‘That Tan will punch who makes everyone embarrassed?’

   b. [Tan vua danh ai] lam moi nguoi boi roi (the)?
   Tan ASP punch who make everyone embarrassed (PRT)
   ‘That Tan punched who made everyone embarrassed?’

I should also note that not all instances of cai gi movement were equally unacceptable without the particle, and one case was even acceptable.

(22) a. *Cai gi Tan tin/noi/thich mua?
   Thing what Tan believe/say?
   ‘What does Tan believe/say?’

   b. *Cai gi Tan biet/muon biet/ban khoan?
   thing what Tan know/want to know/wonder
   ‘What does Tan know/want to know/wonder?’

   c. Cai gi moi nguoi deu thich?
   Thing what everyone all like
   ‘What does everyone like?’

I have tried to be conservative, considering an 'awkward' sentence as ungrammatical for the purposes of this paper. However, because my consultants differed from those of Breuning and Tran, caution should still be taken in interpreting my conclusions. Nevertheless, the judgments I received pertaining to the phenomenon of overt movement were clearly patterned, always requiring the in cases of overt movement. They were also consistent across the verbs ‘say’, ‘know’, ‘want to know’, and ‘wonder’.

7 Conclusion and future work

In this brief paper I have looked at a limited case of overt wh-movement in Vietnamese. This kind of movement is like in-situ binding in that it requires licensing by the particle the, (which encodes realis mood). It is also like wh-movement in general in that it can move through multiple clauses and respects island constraints. The major problem regarding this type of movement is how to account for its being clause-bound in sentences with negation. It appears that blocking of the binding relationship, rather than of movement, is the cause.

I briefly examined the nominal cai, which is necessary for all ‘what’ elements in clause-initial position, whether moved or not, and shown that it is not a case of d-linking, assuming that d-linking causes LF pied-piping of islands. Finally, I have pointed out some areas where
my consultants differed from those of Breuning and Tran, though I do not believe that this interferes with my conclusions on the phenomenon of overt movement.

One area for further study is the difference between ‘who’ and ‘what’, and to examine the other wh-elements to see which pattern with which. One difference already pointed out is the fact that the latter can be modified by nominal elements like cái and raised overtly, while the other cannot. Another, less consistent pattern, is that my consultants disliked ‘who’ within islands a little more frequently than ‘what’. In fact, for the complex NP island, my consultants disliked ai in situ, and suggested replacing it with người nào (‘person which’).

(23) *Tan vua chuc hinh [con ho ma da doa ai] the?
    Tan  Asp catch picture Cl  tiger that Asp scare who PRT
    ‘Tan just took a picture of the tiger that scared who?’

(24) *Tan vua chuc hinh [con ho ma da doa nguoi nao] the?
    Tan  Asp catch picture Cl  tiger that Asp scare person which PRT
    ‘Tan just took a picture of the tiger that scared which person?’

If this wh-phrase patterns with cái gì and others like it can be found, we will have more resources for fleshing out the essential characteristics of overt movement in Vietnamese.

References


