Introduction to Optionality in *Wh*-Movement

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One non-trivial issue that generative theory has addressed, from the dawn of the theory in the late 50’s (Chomsky 1957), to its current development (Chomsky 2008), is the strategy that various grammars display pertaining to the formation of constituent questions. The enterprise dates back (at least) to Chomsky’s (1977) seminal work on the distribution of English interrogative structures (among others), which are introduced by *wh*-words/phrases, such as *who*, *what*, *how* and so forth, which are conventionally dubbed *wh*-questions.

Cross-linguistic investigations into the formation of *wh*-questions in languages other than English have led to the formulation of a *wh*-parameter. More precisely, *wh*-elements, in languages such as English, acquire scope overtly (i.e., “movement”), while in languages such as Chinese, the relevant *wh*-elements exhibit scope covertly (i.e., ‘in-situ’) (see, for instance, Cheng 1991).

Such (macro)parameters are (re)couched in the core assumptions of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995) as an interface requirement on grammars regarding the generation of interpretable syntactic objects. In particular, operations that take place in narrow syntax (i.e., in the computational component) are regulated by (or must comply with) bare output conditions. These are conditions of legibility, on the basis of which a syntactic object is read-off at the interface levels of Phonological Form (PF) and Logical Form (LF) (i.e., levels of representation) respectively. Satisfaction of such conditions takes place “optimally,” in the sense that a given grammar may not deploy alternative operations that generate a certain syntactic object; hence, so-called “optional” strategies are precluded. In the scope of the discussion revolving around “movement” and “in-situ,” then, a given grammar is bound to exhibit either one or the other of the two aforementioned strategies, as part of its lexical/functional specifications. In other words, if overt scope (or for that matter covert scope) is attested, then overt scope corresponds to the “optimal solution”—that is, the only possible option—that the relevant grammar may display in order to satisfy conditions of legibility.
Displacement of the *wh*-phrase is what typically constitutes instances of “movement.” In current minimalist terms, this kind of movement is the result of Agree between two positions in the tree and the presence of an EPP or Edge Feature (EF) that triggers the overt realization of the *wh*-phrase in a higher position. In similar terms, ‘in-situ’ options can be argued to involve Agree without an EPP/Edge feature in a hierarchically higher position. Agree can be taken to involve an Operator-like element in the higher position, responsible for covert scope. This set of assumptions has been considered sufficient to give us the basic parametric options: *wh*-movement: Yes/No. However, this macroparameter does not sufficiently capture the empirical data, since, as recent (as well as previous) research has shown, many languages (if not all) exhibit both options, even if they show a predominant preference for one of them (see Aoun et al. 1981, Bošković 1997, Chang 1997, Cheng & Rooryck 2000, Denham 2000, Kato 2004, Lassadi 2003, Mathieu 2004, Polletto & Pollock 2004, Sinopoulou 2009, Uribe-Etxebarria 2002, Vlachos 2010, among many others). This points towards a microparametric approach and raises the issue of “optionality” in grammar. The simple question that one could ask is the following: Is this dual pattern due to the optional presence of the EPP/Edge feature on a given head? If so, what determines its presence/absence, how does it interact with the interfaces, and what does it mean for parametric variation?

In order to actively engage in this ongoing discussion, the present collection on “Optionality in *wh*-Movement” presents papers which grew out of the workshop “The optionality of *wh*-movement” hosted by the 19th International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (ISTAL), in April 2009, as part of a large research project on *wh*-constructions funded by the University of Patras. The work reported here concentrates on the grammars of French, (Cypriot and Standard) Greek, (Standard and Singapore) English, Northern Italian varieties (and, to some extent, standard Italian), and Mandarin Chinese, with the aim of addressing several aspects of the formation of *wh*-interrogatives, and to shed new light on the more theoretically involved issues of: a) the variation among distant grammars (i.e., macroparametric); b) the variation between closely

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related grammars (i.e., microparametric); c) the variation within a single grammar (i.e., optionality); as well as d) computation of wh-interrogatives in relation to “wh&wh” constructions, topicalization, and so-called elliptical environments, such as “sluicing.”

The papers are organized as follows: the first five papers address the issue of in-situ questions in grammars that (may) also allow for overt movement (see Grohmann & Papadopoulou, Kellert, Manzini & Savoia, Oiry, and Yeo). The second three papers consider extensions of wh-movement with respect to topicalization, “wh&wh” questions and sluicing (see Sinopoulou, Junnan Pan, and Vlachos).

More precisely, Kleanthes K. Grohmann’s and Elena Papadopoulou’s (co-authored) paper presents a first, and in-depth, investigation of the distribution and interpretation of true information seeking wh-in situ questions in Cypriot Greek (CG), a typical wh-movement language. The authors also set out to explore how CG differs from the closely related Standard Modern Greek (SMG). In particular, they argue that what makes CG potentially interesting is that certain structures which should not be possible or at least should be less preferred than others, on the contrary seem to be used and interpreted readily, especially when compared to SMG. The previous evidence appears to suggest that the syntactic operations involved and the semantic interpretations available might not be identical between SMG and CG.

Olga Kellert’s paper presents an analysis of the observation that (optional) French wh-in situ occurs in genuine root wh-interrogatives, but not in root wh-exclamatives. It is claimed that the optionality of wh-in situ is directly linked to the illocution “question” in French; hence the impossibility of wh-in situ in exclamatives. Moreover, the author considers so-called multiple wh-questions in French, since they also involve wh-in situ elements. Following, in part, earlier pragmatic approaches to wh-in situ questions, Kellert maintains that focused constituents are precluded in presupposed clauses. In particular, she assumes that wh-exclamatives are linked to the focus-background partition, which prevents any wh-constituent from being embedded in a background clause. However, she adds that the behavior of wh-exclamatives cannot be explained on a purely pragmatic basis. Therefore, she proposes to spell out the seemingly pragmatic explanation within Chomsky’s (2000, 2001) phase and agree approach. Finite clauses and complements that are interpreted as highly presuppositional have a phase status in French (but seemingly not in Japanese), thereby ruling out an operator-variable dependency.
Rita Manzini’s and Leonardo Savoia’s (joint) paper discusses *wh*-in situ questions and *wh*-doubling in Northern Italian varieties, and entertains a number of theoretical and empirical arguments that have been raised in favor of the Remnant Movement approach to such data. The authors argue that Remnant Movement is (at best) unnecessary in accounting for the relevant evidence, and they propose that the parameter between *wh*-in situ and *wh*-movement, in Northern Italian varieties, is the classical parameter between overt scope (i.e., *wh*-movement) and scope construal (i.e., *wh*-in situ). As for *wh*-doubling, they conclude that it is restricted to pairs of bare *wh*-elements, of which the lower bears Focus properties, while the higher one is the scope marker. No role, even a descriptive one, is played by the notion of “weak” *wh*-pronouns.

Magda Oiry’s contribution, based on the results of an elicited production study involving children and adult speakers of French, concludes that, contrary to earlier assumptions, French *wh*-in situ is productively attested in embedded contexts, on a par with long distance *wh*-questions. Moreover, by comparing such evidence with partial *wh*-movement questions, the author argues that children clearly exhibit a preference depending on the truth value of the embedded clause: as with long movement, *wh*-in situ is produced in a context where the truth value of the embedded proposition is denied, whereas partial movement is strongly disfavored in that same context. Adult controls also produce *wh*-in situ in embedded contexts, conferring the same semantic status to long movement and to *wh*-in situ.

In his paper, Norman Yeo proposes that optional *wh*-movement is, contrary to popular belief, compatible with current Minimalist syntax. In particular, by extending and generalizing on the use of question particles, the author proposes that such particles are far more prevalent in languages than previously assumed, and that these particles take *wh*-phrases as their complements, thereby forming a larger constituent. The EPP feature on C, then, may be multi-satisfied, Yeo argues, either by triggering the raising of the *wh*-phrase, or the particle, or the *wh*-phrase/particle constituent. In the previous sense, “optionality” is considered as a formal property of a given grammar to employ two (or more) economical derivations for the generation of a certain syntactic object.

Ourania Sinopoulou’s paper concentrates on the syntactic and semantic properties of *wh* & *wh* questions in Greek. The author points out that: a) verbal sucategorization requirements are a major factor
regulating the conjunctions of \textit{wh}-phrases with different grammatical functions; and b) the relative ordering of the conjoined \textit{wh}-elements is restricted when one of them is a subject, in which case the \textit{wh}-subject has to precede all other question words. The examination of the semantic properties of \textit{wh} & \textit{wh}-questions reveals that their readings are different from those of both multiple questions and \textit{wh}-constructions with postverbal conjunction of a second question word. After refuting two earlier proposals (i.e., monoclausal and backward ellipsis), Sinopoulou adopts a biclausal analysis.

Victor Junnan Pan’s paper discusses so-called “ATB-constructions” in Chinese and argues that these are in fact a case of topicalization, since they show the characteristics of both nominal topicalization and of \textit{wh}-topicalization. Regarding syntax, ATB-topicalization in Chinese obeys all the independent syntactic constraints that apply to general topicalization, such as island effects. Therefore a left peripheral TopP (Topic Phrase) is the landing site of ATB-topicalized elements. With respect to semantics, it is argued that an Intersection Operator is generated at TopP and that it extracts the common variable from the conjuncts. The common variable is generated in the intersection of the range (not the domain) of the coordinated functions. Only one copy of the two occurrences of the extracted elements is conserved at TopP due to the economy principle. From a cross-linguistic perspective, the author argues that Chinese ATB cases differ from the congeneric English ones in that the Intersection Operator is the only interpretation tool that is required to facilitate the relevant readings in Chinese, since there are no independent syntactic selectional restrictions on the extraction from both coordinates.

Finally, Christos Vlachos’s paper examines the syntactic and interpretational properties of sluicing in Greek. Contrary to standard assumptions that take sluicing to involve movement of the \textit{wh}-element to the Spec,CP of an elided clause, the idea put forward is that sluicing is an ‘in-situ’ strategy. That is, the \textit{wh}-element (“fragment” in the author’s terms) is directly selected by the relevant predicate (in a way similar to the selection of full-fledged \textit{wh}-interrogatives), and it is anaphorically dependent on an extrasentential antecedent (in a way similar to extrasentential pronominal anaphora). In other words, sluicing is viewed as a self-sufficient representation which reflects (extra)sentential relations that make use of information provided by (morpho-)syntax and the lexicon. Moreover, the author observes three unnoticed properties of Greek sluicing and proposes that such
properties strongly support the conclusion that the interpretation is computed on the basis of surface syntax. Finally, a potential comparison of sluicing with two instances of (extrasentential) anaphora (i.e., E-type and Null Complement Anaphora) is also considered.

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Works Cited


