Word Order Variation in Urdu/Hindi Wh-Constituent Questions

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Urdu/Hindi is traditionally characterized as an SOV language in which major constituents can scramble and which has wh-in-situ (Bayer and Cheng 2015). Example (1) shows the wh-phrase *kis=ko* placed in-situ.

(1)　a.　**sita=ne**　dʰyan=se **ram=ko**　dekʰ-a　　tʰ-a
　　　　Sita.F=Erg carefully Ram.M=Acc see-Perf.M.Sg be.Past-M.Sg
　　　　'Sita had looked at Ram carefully'

　　　b.　sita=ne　　dʰyan=se **kɪs=ko**　　dekʰ-a　　tʰ-a?
　　　　Sita.F=Erg carefully who.Obl=Acc see-Perf.M.Sg be.Past-M.Sg
　　　　'Who had Sita looked at carefully?'

However, a closer investigation reveals that the default position for wh-words in constituent questions is in fact the immediately preverbal position (2). This position has also been shown to be the focus position (Gambhir 1981, Butt and King 1996, 1997, Kidwai 2000) in Urdu/Hindi. As wh-words are considered to be semantically focused, it stands to reason that their preferred position is immediately preverbal, the default position for focused constituents.

(2)　a.　**sita=ne**　ram=ko　　dekʰ-a　　tʰ-a
　　　　Sita.F=Erg Ram.M=Acc see-Perf.M.Sg be.Past-M.Sg
　　　　'Sita had seen Ram.'

　　　b.　ram=ko　　**kɪs=ne**　　dekʰ-a　　tʰ-a?
　　　　Ram.M=Acc who.Obl=Erg see-Perf.M.Sg be.Past-M.Sg
　　　　'Who saw Ram?'

Manetta (2012) demonstrates that wh-phrases have the same kind of scrambling possibilities as normal NPs. So, wh-words can in principle appear anywhere in the clause, as shown in (3).

(3)　a.　**kɪs=ne** uma=ko　tofa　　　　di-ya?
　　　　who=Erg Uma.F=Dat present.M.Sg.Nom give-Perf.M.Sg
　　　　'Who gave Uma a present?'
　　　b.　uma=ko **kɪs=ne** tofa di-ya?
　　　c.　uma=ko tofa **kɪs=ne** di-ya?
　　　d.　uma=ko tofa di-ya **kɪs=ne**?

A question that arises is what, if anything, governs the distribution of wh-constituents within a clause. Given existing proposals that relate different positions in the clause to information-structural categories such as TOPIC, FOCUS or BACKGROUND information (Gambhir 1981, Butt and King 1996, Kidwai 2000, Mycock 2013), it seems reasonable to assume that the different positioning of wh-constituents should give rise to differing pragmatic effects. Indeed, the clause-final postverbal position has been associated with echo questions (Mahajan 1997, Bhatt and Dayal 2007, Manetta 2012) and Butt et al. (2016) investigate examples as in (4) where the wh-word appears immediately postverbally within the verbal complex (Bhatt and Dayal 2007, Manetta 2012) between the main verb and attendant auxiliaries. They argue that this immediately postverbal position within the verbal complex reflects a secondary focus position in sense of Büring (2015), whereby the wh-word occurs within the domain of the primary focus, which is on the verb.

(4)　sita=ne　　dʰyan=se [dekʰ-a　　**kɪs=ko**　　tʰ-a]?
　　　Sita.F=Erg carefully see-Perf.M.Sg who.Obl=Acc be.Past-M.Sg
　　　'Who had Sita looked at carefully?'

In this talk, we report on a study in which we looked at the word order variation of wh-constituents as found in 10 Bollywood scripts. Bollywood scripts are ideal for a study of the pragmatic effects attendant with word order variation because they: a) represent natural speech; b) provide a rich context via the story line and the visual information in the movie; c) allow for an investigation of the prosodic properties of the utterance.

We find that the overwhelming number of wh-constituents are found in the immediately preverbal position, the focus position. These tend to be straight-forward information seeking (ISQ) questions, but are not confined to them. When wh-constituents are found in other positions, on the other hand, the overwhelming tendency is for a non-information seeking interpretation (NISQ), which includes expressions of outrage as in (5) or self-addressed questions as in (6).

(5)   tum ho kya!?
        you be what
        'What are you anyway!? (Who do you think you are?)'

(6)   mer-e   jut-e   ga-ye   kahã?
        I.Poss-Pl. shoe-Pl. go-Perf.M.Pl where
        'Where have my shoes gotten to?'

The examples in (5) and (6) also illustrate is that there is no one-to-one correspondence between position of the wh-constituent and question type. Rather, there is a complex interaction between word order, information-structure and prosody that serves to determine whether a question is ISQ vs. NISQ and the particular type of NISQ that is realized. We illustrate this interaction in terms of a prosody-syntax-pragmatics interface based on Bögel's (2015) parallel architecture (Butt et al. 2017) and focus particularly on different readings of postverbal wh-constituents as in the examples above.

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