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The Structure of Wh-Questions in Polynesian

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Wh-questions in Polynesian languages are typically formed with an initial wh-phrase followed by a clause with a gap or a resumptive pronoun corresponding to the wh-phrase, (1). There is general agreement that such questions are bi-clausal and numerous descriptive grammars suggest that they are pseudoclefts (Seiter 1980 for Niuean, Otsuka 2000 and Custis 2004 for Tongan, Besnier 2000 for Tuvaluan, and Bauer 1993 for Maori). The matrix clause consists of the predicate marker *ko* and the wh-phrase, while the remaining material (the REMAINDER) is a headless relative clause (HRC) in subject position, as schematized in (2). This paper argues that such questions are indeed bi-clausal but that they are not pseudoclefts. In particular, the material following the wh-phrase does not have morphosyntactic and distributional characteristics of a noun phrase.

Evidence for the bi-clausality of Polynesian wh-questions (consistent with both the cleft and pseudocleft analyses) comes from two sources: First, the wh-phrase behaves like a predicate, as suggested by the predicate marker *ko* in (1). In addition, the wh-phrase can appear with tense-aspect-mood (TAM) markers, (3), question particles, (4), or adverbs, all of which associate with predicates. These particles are independent of any that may associate with the verb in the remainder. Second, the remainder has dependent clause characteristics. In Niuean, for example, it uses TAM markers that are restricted to dependent clauses, (5). Other languages evidence subordinators in the remainder, for example, the relativizer in (6). Finally, in numerous languages, the remainder has the syntax of relative clauses (see Seiter 1980 for a detailed demonstration of this for Niuean).

Evidence that these structures are nonetheless not pseudoclefts comes from the observation that the remainder does not behave like a headless relative clause. In a number of Polynesian languages, HRCs of the form hypothesized in wh-questions do not exist outside the construction (for example, Niuean (Seiter 1980: 113), Tuvaluan (Besnier 2000: 23, 71-73), Maori (1993: 57)). In other languages, HRCs exist but are formally distinct from the remainder in wh-questions. For example, in Samoan, HRCs have a determiner and a relativizer, (7a), but the remainder in wh-questions does not, (7b). Additionally, the putative HRCs do not appear in other nominal argument positions; that is, they do not have the full distribution of NPs. Lastly, the HRC analysis does not easily extend to adjunct wh-questions (Moysse-Faurie 2004 for Futunan).

We propose that argument wh-questions in Polynesian are not pseudoclefts and propose instead that they are *it*-clefts, as in the English *Who is it that Mele hit?* with a structure as in (8). The construction is still bi-clausal. The wh-phrase and the remainder (a RELATIVE CLAUSE-LIKE CONSTITUENT (RCC)) are both part of the main predicate. The RCC is not strictly speaking a headless relative so it is not expected to have properties of a noun phrase. A cleft analysis is plausible in Polynesian because both the copula and expletive, if they exist, are null, (9). The paper concludes with a more fine-grained analysis addressing adjunct questions and suggesting that not all wh-questions, even with a single language, have the same structure. It also addresses the issue that not all Polynesian wh-questions necessarily have the same analysis.

References

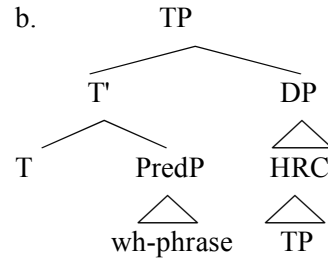
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Examples

(1) ko hai na'e tā 'e Mele? TONGAN
 KO who PAST hit ERG Mele
 'Who did Mele hit?'

(2) *pseudocleft structure*

a. [ko hai]_{wh} [na'e tā 'e Mele]_{HRC?}
 KO who PAST hit ERG Mele
 who the one that Mele hit
 PREDICATE SUBJECT
 lit. "The one that Mele hit is who?"



(3) ne'e ko ai ['ae ne'e 'alu ai] WALLIS
 PAST KO who that PAST go there
 'Who went there?' (Nguyen 1998: 313)

(4) ko hai nai na'e 'alu? TONGAN
 KO who Q PAST leave
 'Who left?'

(5) a. to tā e lautolu e fale haaku NIUEAN
 FUT build ERG they ABS house my
 'They're going to build my house.'

b. ko e hiegoa ka/*to tā e lautolu?
 KO ABS what FUT.DEP build ERG they
 'What are they going to build?' (Seiter 1980: 109-110)

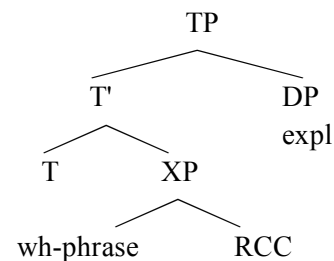
(6) teefea teelaa e too kiaa koe? TUVALUAN
 which REL NPST fall to you
 'Which is on your land?' (Besnier 2000: 23)

(7) a. 'o ai [l-e na fasia a'u]_{HRC?} SAMOAN
 KO who DET-REL PAST hit me
 'Who is the one who hit me?'

b. 'o ai [na fasia le maile]_{REMAINDER?}
 KO who PAST hit DET dog
 'Who hit the dog?' (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992: 633)

(8) *it-cleft structure*

[ko hai]_{wh} [na'e tā 'e Mele]_{rcc} *expletive?*
 who that Mele hit
 'It is who that Mele hit?'



(9) a. ko e faiako ia TONGAN
 KO DET teacher 3SG
 'She is a teacher.'

b. na'e 'uha *expl*
 PAST rain
 'It rained.'