

WORD ORDER OF WH- QUESTIONS IN OMANI ARABIC

Khalsa al-Aghbari

Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria, B.C., Canada

This paper offers an account of the word order of wh-questions in Omani Arabic as they occur in simple and long-distance questions. In simple questions, the word order of the Inflectional Phrase (IP) varies between Object Verb Subject (OVS) and Verb Object Subject (VOS) as examples (1) and (2) below illustrate. In OVS order, the object referring to the wh-word is expectedly fronted and the order of the subject and verb accords with one of the word order variations exhibited elsewhere in the language. However, VOS word order is peculiar to simple wh-questions since it is not attested in affirmative sentences.

1. muh ka1 Aħmed?
Q-what eat-Past & M. Ahmed.
What did Ahmed eat?

2. ka1 muh Aħmed?
eat-Past & M. Q-what Ahmed.
What did Ahmed eat?

Conversely, wh-words impose a unitary SVO word order when they occur in long-distance questions. Example (3) shows that the trace *t* which syntactically functions as the object to the verb [ka1] 'ate' is preceded by an SV word order. Such a restriction to only SVO is examined in light of Radford's (1997) adverb constituency test and explored in relation to the ECP (Chomsky 1981). In explaining this order, I will also adopt some version of the Lexical Clause Hypothesis (Fukui & Speas 1986). This hypothesis stipulates that subjects can originate inside a lexical projection, usually within VP. They don't have to move to a position higher in the tree.

3. hiʃ tɔini [Aħmed ka1 t]?
Q-what think- F & past [Ahmed eat- F & Past t]?
What do you think Ahmed ate?

I also propose that the verbs in simple wh-questions raise to the C position following Aoun *et al* (1994). Moreover, the discussion of the surfacing word orders is tested against the VSO word order proposed to be the base word order in Classical Arabic (Farghal 1986:6). The paper is structured as follows: § 1 offers an overview of the two word orders attested in affirmative sentences in Omani Arabic. § 2 introduces examples of the word order in simple questions. § 3 describes word orders in simple questions based on the examples in section two. In § 4, I explore the word order of long distance wh-questions. § 5 briefly shows the word orders in Classical Arabic and reviews the works proposing VSO as the underlying word order. Finally, § 5 summarizes the findings of this paper.

1. Overview of Word Order in Sentences

Although Omani Arabic, like Classical Arabic, accepts two word order variations; namely, SVO and VSO in affirmative sentences, the most frequent word order in daily conversations is SVO. Structures (5) and (6) are heard more often than sentences¹ (4) and (7) which can be ambiguously understood as yes/no questions.

4. ka1 Aħmed l- moz.

¹ This can be attributed to the preference to keep the object as close as possible to the verb it complements.

eat- Past Ahmed the-banana.
Ahmed ate the banana.

5. Aħmed kał l- moz.
Ahmed eat- Past the-banana.
Ahmed ate the banana.

6. Muna tu- gmaʔ l- bet.
Muna mop(e)- Pres. the- house.
Muna moped the house.

7. tu- gmaʔ Muna l- bet.
mop(e)- Pres. Muna the- house.
Muna moped the house.

It is worth mentioning that Omani Arabic never allows objects to surface sentence-initially. OSV and OVS are notoriously wrong.

8. *kum-tuh Ali fasax
cap- his Ali take off-Past.
Ali took off his cap.

9. *kum-tuh fasax Ali
cap- his take off-Past. Ali
Ahmed took off his cap.

2. Simple wh-Questions

Taking after one of the word orders of ordinary sentences, simple wh-questions surface with OVS where an O which refers to the wh-word is fronted. The VS order follows from orders licensed by OA. Examples with both “hen” meaning ‘where’ and “muh” meaning ‘what’ are provided to confirm that the order is the same and is not affected by the wh-word used. My arguments are based on the fact that “hen” is a complement and “muh” is an object.

10. $\sqrt{}$ hen raah Ali?
Q-where go-Past &M Ali?
Where did Ali go?

11. * hen Ali raah?
Q- where Ali go-Past &M?
Where did Ali go?

12. $\sqrt{}$ muh ʔʃtar-a Ali?
Q-what buy-Past & M. Ali
What did Ali buy?

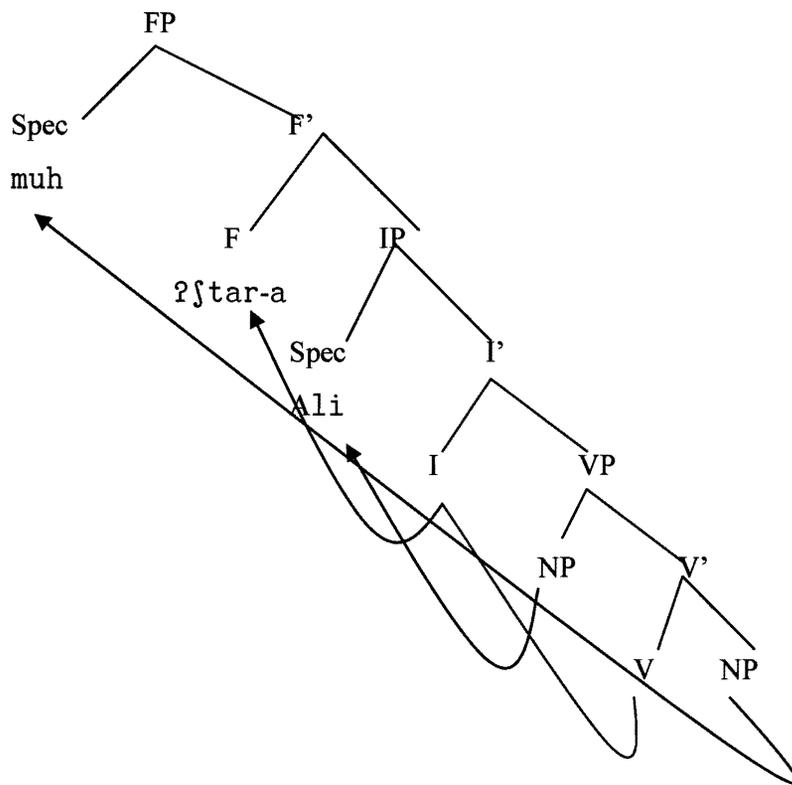
13. * muh Ali ʔʃtar-a?
Q-what Ali buy-Past &M.
What did Ali buy?

3. Word order in simple wh-questions

² Throughout this paper, $\sqrt{}$ is used to indicate grammatical structures and * is placed in front of ungrammatical sentences.

The following lines describe the word orders in simple questions as observed in the examples presented above. The verbs 'raaḥ' and 'ʔʃtar-a' always occur following the question words 'hen' and 'muh'. This shows that wh-questions only allow the order *whVS*. In other words, inversion of subject-verb is obligatory with regard to simple wh-formations. Verbs must move higher in the tree to fill the positions in the higher nodes.

As the tree structure below shows, verbs undergo three syntactic movements till they reside in their position as the specifier of FP. The subject, however, undergoes only one movement and can't move any farther. This is why the verb has more privilege of movement when compared to the subject. Also, the distance between the wh-word (complement in 10 and object in 12) and its verbs shouldn't be too far apart. The fact that they should be lexically linked renders the movements of wh-elements ungrammatical since there is an intervening subject. It has been observed that as complementizers occur freely with VS order in sentences, verbs can't raise to C (Aoun *et al* 1994). Interestingly enough, Aoun *et al* postulate some projections above the traditional IP when they research agreement in the VS order. They name it the FocusPhrase (F). So, whVS will be configured as follows, admitting FP:



When the head of any structure moves, it has to move to a head position. So, this entails that there is a further projection above the FocusPhrase.

There is yet another attested word order in simple wh-questions. It seems that the inverted verb can move further and precede the wh-element. Consider:

- 14. √raaḥ hen Ali?
- 15.*raaḥ Ali hen?
- 16.*Ali hen raah?

The following question can be raised in regard to the above structures:

1. Why does OA accept 14. but not 15. and 16.?

In an attempt to answer this question, I will apply Radford's adverb constituency test. Consider where the adverb 'ʔams' meaning 'yesterday' is located in both of the exhibited word order variations whVS and VwhS:

17. raaḥ [hen Ali ʔams]?
 18. raaḥ [ʔams hen Ali]?
 19. hen raaḥ [ʔams Ali]?
 20. hen raaḥ [Ali ʔams]?

As illustrated by Radford (1997), adverbs occur at the border of VP [or IP]. Radford considers adverbs as adjuncts to some phrasal category. In both of the word order variations, the adverb 'ʔams' occurs at the border of IP.

Ordinarily, adverbs can freely occur with verb phrases like in the English verb phrase 'went yesterday'. Interestingly enough, the adverb 'ʔams' also occurs sentence-finally in OA. So, what makes the adverb in OA occur freely in two positions? I propose that in all the above structures, the adverb 'ʔams' modifies the verb and occurs at the borders of VP [or IP] in both the D-structure and S-structure. The free word order variation 'ʔams' enjoys in the S-structure does not change its assigned function in the D-structure. The variation it exhibits is just stylistic and not particularly functional. This also supports another argument; namely, when 'ʔams' occurs word-finally, it has a wider scope as it relates to the whole sentence.

4. Long-distance wh-questions

In this section, I'll examine the syntactic behavior of wh-elements when they occur in embedded structures. Syntactic behavior here refers to how word order is reflected. More interesting observations can be noted with regard to what order is licensed and which seems not to filter in surface sentences. Let's study the word order of the following structures:

21. hiʃ taʃtaqd-i Marjam ʔʃtarat t? Complete fronting
 Q-what think- F & Past Maryam buy- F & Past t?
 What do you think Maryam bought?
22. taʃtaqd-i hiʃ Marjam ʔʃtarat t? Partial movement
 think- F & past Q-what Maryam buy- F & Past t?
 What do you think Maryam bought?
23. taʃtaqd-i Marjam ʔʃtarat hiʃ ? Wh-in-situ
 think- F & Past Maryam buy- F & Past Q- what?
 What do you think Maryam bought?

'hiʃ' in the embedded structures, be it moved or in-situ, restricts surface word order to SVO. Constructions with VSO word order are not licensed and if they do surface, they sound awkward. My initial assumption follows from the Lexical Clause Hypothesis (Fukui and Speas 1986). This hypothesis posits that subjects, unlike verbs, don't have to move to a position higher in the tree. They can remain in their base-generated position. Therefore, I assume that OA has two types of subjects: those that are topicalized and must occur pre-verbally and those remaining in their base generated position. Languages with in-situ subjects allow subjects to follow the tensed verb, pro-drop is licensed and extraction from subject position is normally allowed (Bernadette 1991:237). This supports the fact that in OA SVO and VSO are attested in affirmative sentences.

Let's reverse the order of 23. and see how the sentence reads:

24. *taʃtaqd-i [ʔʃtarat Marjam hiʃ]?

Wh-in-situ always follows the verb in the embedded sentence [ʔʔtar-at] and never occurs after the subject. This shows that OA places restrictions to the free movement of the subject and verb situated in the embedded sentences. The subject-verb inversion is not obligatory and is actually said to have no effect. However, this word order accords with that observed in simple wh-in-situ questions where O occurs immediately after V and not after S.

I will test such an interesting word order to the ECP which stipulates that moved objects have to be lexically linked to their transitive verbs (Shlonsky 1988:194). This proper binding governs the new positioning of verbs and objects after movement has taken place. It ensures that elements don't just move arbitrarily to any place. Rather, their landing site is determined as I here posit, prior to their movement. In sentence 23 where the question word remains in its generated position, the wh-element is lexically linked with the verb it complements. But, in both 21 and 23, the trace and the extracted wh-word are separated by more than two constituents. The wh-word has moved across so many constituents yet still the structures are grammatical. This can be accounted for by Wahba's neat argument that LF movement applies freely here and unites the readings of these structures into one meaning only.

Let us now check the position of the adverb 'ʔams' in long-distance wh-questions:

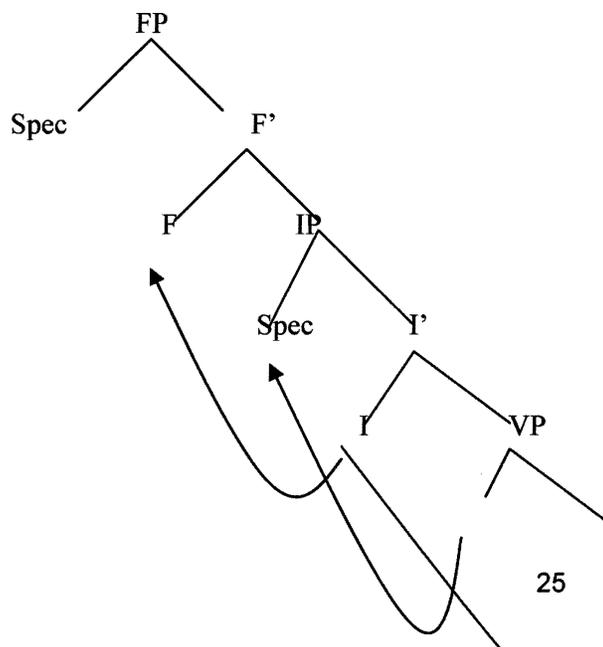
25. hiʔ taʔtaʔd-i [Marjam ʔʔtarat ʔams] tʔ
 26. taʔtaʔd-i hiʔ Marjam [ʔʔtarat ʔams] tʔ

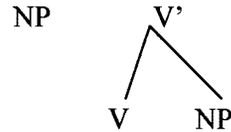
ʔams occurs at the borders of VP [or IP]. This makes us comfortable with our earlier postulation that adverbs always take on one function no matter what position they surface in. In sentence 19, the final ʔams relates to the whole structure.

5. The VSO order and Classical Arabic

Bakir (1980) proposes VSO as the base word order in Classical Arabic. According to Bakir, the free word order variation exhibited in surface sentences happens as a result of 'preposing' constituents to other positions in the syntactic structure.

Farghal (1986: 6) also argues in favor of VSO as the base word order. He states that "stylistic variations don't alter grammatical relations which have been assigned in the VSO order, i.e., government remains intact". By testing this proposition against the word order surfacing in the data introduced so far, I conclude that this is the right underlying word order. The VSO order violates the ECP, which is argued to have a great influence on surface structures and wh-constructions in OA.





6. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to understand the word order variations exhibited in simple and long-distance wh-questions in OA. It shows that subject-verb inversion is obligatory in simple wh-questions. Verbs undergo successive syntactic movements till they reside in the Spec of FocusPhrase.

On the other hand, SVO surfaces in the embedded sentences of long-distance wh-questions. I adopt the Lexical Clause Hypothesis which assumes that some languages have in-situ subjects and thus subjects don't have to move higher in the tree and can remain in their base-generated position. This paper also proves that the subjacency principle is active in the language and crossing of wh-elements over more than one constituent isn't acceptable. Salient work done on wh-questions and word order (Farghal 1986 and Aoun et. 1994) have contributed a lot to a better understanding of how wh-questions act in the grammar of OA. A crucial point to consider for future research is how word order variations react with agreement in wh-words. Will they impose different orders to wh-elements as agreement turns out to be the focus?

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