Coordination in multiple *wh*-interrogatives: an empirical and comparative perspective

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Romanian, like other languages (Bulgarian, Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, Russian, etc., see Citko & Gračanin-Yuksek 2013), allows the alternation between coordinated *wh*-questions (CWQs) (1a) and 'paratactic' multiple *wh*-questions (MWQs) (1b), where two (or more) *wh*-phrases are fronted with (1a) or without (1b) a conjunction, regardless of their syntactic function (in particular, the fronted *wh*-phrases can be arguments of a verbal head, like in (1)).

(1) a. **Cine și ce** a mâncat? (CWQ) b. **Cine ce** a mâncat? (MWQ)
     who and what has eaten   who what has eaten
     'Who ate what?'

According to the previous theoretical literature based on introspection data (Comorovski 1996, Rațiu 2011, Citko & Gračanin-Yüksek 2013), there are no ordering constraints (no superiority effects) in CWQs, compared to MWQs. Experimental and corpus-based studies on English (Lewis et al. 2012, Whitman 2002, Park & Kim 2025) show an argument/adjunct asymmetry in the ordering of *wh*-phrases (e.g. *what&when* vs. *when&what*), depending on the syntactic behaviour of the verbal head (optionally vs. obligatorily transitive verb): obligatorily transitive verbs, like *fix* in (2b), are unacceptable if their subcategorized complement is in the left conjunct, compared to optionally transitive verbs, like *eat* in (2b), which are more acceptable.

(2) a. *What and when did John fix?   vs.   When and what did John fix?
    b. What and when did John eat?   vs.   When and what did John eat?

The generalization that adjunct-argument order is more acceptable than argument-adjunct order with obligatorily transitive verbs is assumed to hold in non-multiple *wh*-fronting language like English, but not in multiple *wh*-fronting languages (Larson 2013, Potter & Frazier 2021). I experimentally test this syntactic asymmetry in Romanian, a multiple *wh*-fronting language, and show that the argument/adjunct asymmetry is a more general constraint that may apply not only to non-multiple *wh*-fronting languages, but also to multiple *wh*-fronting languages. The difference between these two kinds of languages mainly lies in the rigidity of this constraint : strong constraint in English vs. soft constraint in Romanian. As discussed by Keller (2000), Bresnan et al. (2001), Sorace & Keller (2000) a.o., hard constraints trigger categorical linguistic judgments (leading to serious unacceptability when violated), whereas soft constraints trigger gradient judgments (leading to mild unacceptability when violated).

I adopt a non-derivational biclausal analysis of CWQs in Romanian, with ellipsis in the first conjunct, and a full clause in the last conjunct. I will discuss attested data from *The Reference Corpus of the Contemporary Romanian Language* (Barbu Mititelu et al. 2018) involving several types of mismatch, that challenge the structure-sharing strategy proposed by the previous work postulating a biclausal structure (Citko & Gračanin-Yuksek 2013 a.o.). This kind of data is problematic for any syntactic approach that appeals to a syntactic reconstruction mechanism, but nor for approaches assuming a semantic reconstruction and a fragmentary syntax (Ginzburg & Sag 2000).

Overall, this study shows the importance of empirical methods (making use of corpora and experimental investigation), which provide more reliable and richer data (Wasow & Arnold 2005, Gibson & Fedorenko 2013, Sprouse et al. 2013).

Selected references
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