A Note on Infinitival Questions and Indefinite Pronouns
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Interesting, but true

It is a well-known fact about the syntax of English and German that they differ wrt the acceptability of embedded infinitival questions. Thus, consider the contrast in (1).

(1) a. Mary suddenly remembered [ where to put the soap ] (En)
    b. * Maria erinnerte sich plötzlich [ wohin die Seife zu legen ] (Ge)

Although various accounts for the unacceptability of (1b) have been put forward, this phenomenon has rarely been discussed in cross-linguistic perspective. Sabel (1996:chapter 8) is a notable exception. In fact, Sabel (1996:295) provides the rather neat generalization in (2).

(2) Sabel’s Generalization
    If a language \( L \) possesses \( Wh \)-movement to Spec,CP in infinitives,
    then \( L \) possesses the (independent) option
    of filling the infinitival C-system with a base-generated overt element

The existence of items like \( for \) in the English C-system, as shown in (3), and the lack of comparable things in German is taken to substantiate (2).

(3) They want [\( CP \) for [IP Mary to put the soap in the fridge ]]

Sabel goes on to implement (2) in terms of the “strength” of the (infinitival) head \( C^o \) interacting with \( X^o \)-to-\( C^o \)-movement and Rizzi’s \( Wh \)-Criterion (Rizzi 1996), which allows him to derive the contrast in (1).

For the sake of exposition, I will abbreviate Sabel’s generalization as in (4) and I will call WH-INF–languages \([+w] \)-languages and OBGC-INF–languages \([+o] \)-languages

(4) \( WH-INF \Rightarrow OBGC-INF \)

(5) presents the (small) typology of languages on which Sabel’s study is based.

(6) a. \([+w,+o]\): English, French, Italian, Polish, (Eur.) Portuguese, Spanish
    b. \([+w,−o]\): \( \emptyset \)
    c. \([−w,+o]\): ?
    d. \([−w,−o]\): Danish, German, Norwegian, Swedish

Now, the point of this squib is to demonstrate that (6) masks another generalization that – to my knowledge – has gone unnoticed so far. Thus, German word strings involving \( wh \)-indefinites and \( to \)-infinitivals are acceptable as soon as a non-interrogative interpretation is licensed. This is shown in (7).

(7) a. Ich habe was zu tun \( (≈ I \) have something to do) 
    b. Ich erinnere mich wohin zu fahren \( (≈ I \) remember going somewhere (specific))

Interestingly, Sabel’s \([+w,+o]\)-languages do not allow such an interpretation because their sets of interrogative and indefinite pronouns are strictly disjoint. (8) indicates this for (counterparts of) \( who \).

(8) a. English: \( who \) vs. \( someone \)
    b. French: \( qui \) vs. \( quelqu’un \)
    c. Portuguese: \( quem \) vs. \( alguém \)
    d. Polish: \( kto \) vs. \( kto-ś \)
    e. Italian: \( chi \) vs. \( qualcuno \)
    f. Spanish: \( quién \) vs. \( alguien \)

This curious fact inspires me to formulate the following (preliminary) hypothesis.

(9) If the pronominal system of a language \( L \) possesses an interrogative/indefinite ambiguity, then \( L \) does not possess embedded Wh-infinitives.

Let me call INT/IND-PRO–languages [+i.i]-languages and abbreviate (9) as in (10).

(10) INT/IND-PRO \( \Rightarrow \neg \) WH-INF

This yields a small typology where German appears to assume an isolated position.

(11) a. [+w,+i.i]: \( \emptyset \)
    b. [+w,−i.i]: English, French, Italian, Polish, (Eur.) Portuguese, Spanish
    c. [−w,+i.i]: German
    d. [−w,−i.i]: Danish, Norwegian, Swedish

Even more embarrassingly, Dutch is a language that follows Sabel’s generalization in being [+w,+o] (Sabel 1996:294f.) but not mine, the latter shown in (12) (cf. Postma 1994).

(12) Ik heb wat te lezen (≈ I have something to read / I have to read something)

However, a slight modification of (9) suggests itself, given the fact that the [i.i]-ambiguity is limited to \( \text{wat} \) (Hasepmlath 1997:246). (13) illustrates this further.

(13) a. Ich habe wo gelesen, dass der Sommer schön wird (Ge)
    b. Ik heb *waar / ergens gelezen, dat de zomer mooi word (Du)
    (≈ I read somewhere that summer is going to be nice)

Thus, Dutch lacks a (more) general, or robust, [i.i]-ambiguity. I revise (9) accordingly.

(14) If the pronominal system of a language \( L \) possesses a robust interrogative/indefinite ambiguity, then \( L \) does not possess embedded Wh-infinitives.

Other non-robust [+i.i]-languages are Latin (bare interrogatives function as indefinites only in certain cliticized environments (Hasepmlath 1997:254) as well as Russian (A. Malchukov, p.c.) and Slovene (Herrity 2000:109ff.) (bare interrogatives only allow non-specific readings). Slovene is a particularly interesting case – meriting further study – because Slovene is clearly is a [+w]-language (cf. Marušic 2005:chapter 5).

A survey based on Cheng (1991), Haspelmath (1997), and Bhat (2000) yielded the following 57 [+i.i]-languages (out of a sample of roughly 150).


I have already crossed-out languages for which I have evidence that they are [−w] (for Classical Greek I rely on Peter Staudacher, p.c.), not robustly [+i.i], as well as languages of the “Far East type” (e.g. Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong) because “they are neutral to the finite/non finite distinction” (Bisang 2001:1408). Further hypothesis-testing presupposes a cross-linguistically
applicable notion of finiteness, such as suggested by Bisang (2001). This brings in languages using converbs or action nominals as counterparts of infinitives. A survey of this would take us too far afield but so far, no counterexamples to (14) have been found (see Gärtner 2006).

Let me outline an account for (14) based on my intuitions about German. The core idea is that the development of infinitival wh-interrogatives is blocked in languages where these structures would be “hard to recognize.” The German pattern would thus be an instance of the tendency toward the avoidance of structural ambiguities. Now, first of all infinitives are hard(er) to recognize as clausal, given the default lack of nominative arguments. Secondly, the standard strategies for interrogative clausal typing (cf. Bhat 2000; Cheng 1991) don’t help to disambiguate: (i) [+i.i]-languages do not possess unambiguous interrogative pronouns, trivially. (ii) A fronting operation in infinitives could not (easily) be distinguished from scrambling in German. (iii) Interrogative pronouns in Spec,CP lack accentuation, which makes them formally indistinguishable from indefinites. (iv) Non V2-interrogatives (V-final, infinitival) possess rather peculiar speech act values when in root position (Reis 2003; Truckenbrodt 2004). Thus, wh-infinitives would be hard to recognize by their illocutionary force if one tried to construe them as complements in embedded root structures. This conspiracy, I submit, blocks embedded infinitival questions in standard German.

Such a rather parochial and “soft” account for German, of course, raises doubts as to the robustness of (14) taken as a universal tendency. Do we want a stronger account for German or do we expect exceptions to (14)?

Whatever the answer is, we should note that there are [+w]-dialects of German, namely, Reichenau German (Brandner 2004) and Pennsylvania Dutch (M. Louden, p.c). Curiously, both of these are both [+o] and [-i.i]!

References