

# TRANSFORMATIONS VS. ALTERNATIONS: THE FRONTING ILLUSION IN CONTENT QUESTIONS

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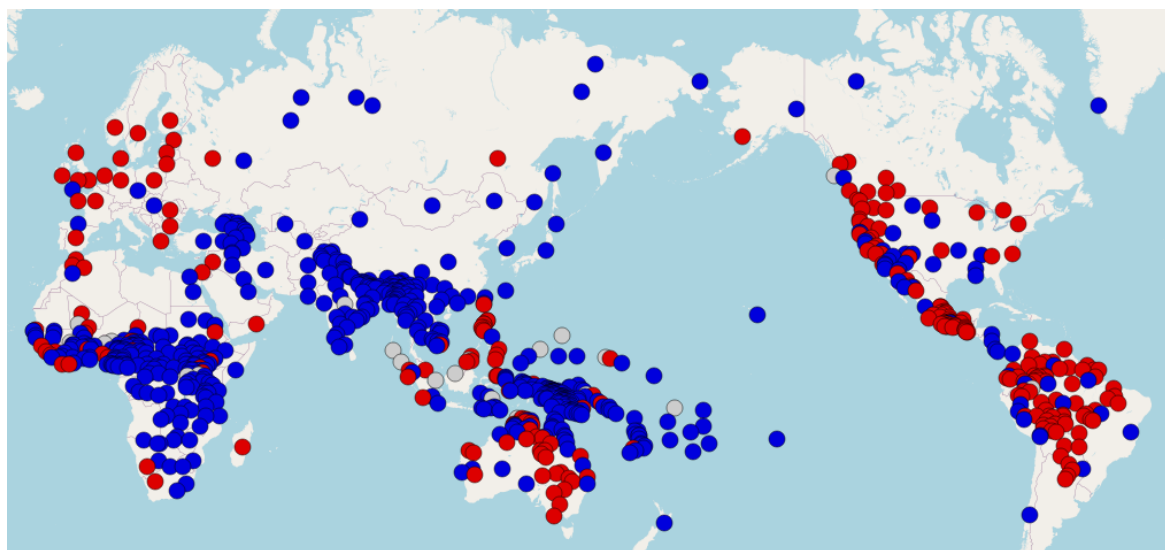
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Cross-linguistically, interrogative phrases in content questions typically occur (Dryer 2013):

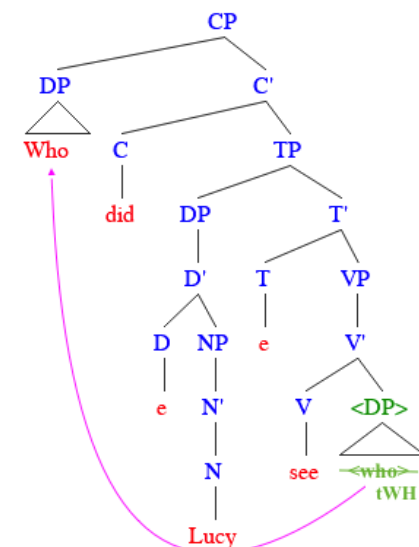
- at the beginning of the sentence ➡ **fronting**
- (when not at the beginning) most often, in the same position as ➡ **in situ** corresponding non-interrogative phrases



## Values

<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Initial interrogative phrase	264
<span style="color: blue;">●</span>	Not initial interrogative phrase	615
<span style="color: grey;">●</span>	Mixed	23

- In **generative** syntactic frameworks:
  - The **surface** constituent order with **sentence-initial** interrogative < The **underlying** syntactic structure with the interrogative **in situ** ➡ **wh-movement** (**wh-fronting**)
  - The **underlying** structure is assumed to be **universal**
  - According to one approach (cf. Karttunen 1977), for an interrogative to be interpretable, wh-movement is required even in languages with in situ interrogatives ➡ **covert wh-movement**
  - According to another approach (cf. Hamblin 1973), an interrogative may be interpreted **in-situ without movement**
  - ...a number of fixtures in between these two approaches.





- In **SVO languages**, such as English, the presumed underlying structure coincides with the surface structure in **statements**.
- **Content questions** are often construed as the result of a **fronting transformation of** the corresponding **statement**, as when one speaks about the interrogative being **moved** to the sentence-initial position **from** its expected **in situ position**.
- This construal of a content question as a result of the fronting transformation of the corresponding statement is also **commonplace in non-generative analyses**.

"[a]n interrogative word can either be in its expected position, or be **moved** to the beginning of the sentence." (Dixon 2012:405)



- A **wording** that is more coherently **non-generative**

“[t]he interrogative phrase **occurs** obligatorily at the beginning of the sentence. [...] the majority of languages do not obligatorily **place** the interrogative phrase at the beginning of the sentence” (Croft 2022:372)
- The **wording** should be **coherent** with one’s **analysis**
- **Alternative analyses:**
  - A **real** possibility
  - But only as long as different ways of analysis are conceived as different **descriptive tools**
  - Some tools may be **more useful** (practical, efficient, etc.) than others for the specific purpose of the synchronic grammatical description.



## ■ Alternative analyses:

- Explanatory adequacy: There are **no \*alternative truths**
- Alternative explanations are **not equal** ☞ It is just **the data** that are **inconclusive**.
- An **explanatory adequate** analysis should be **historically faithful**.

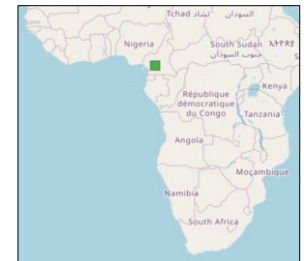


- In some languages, interrogatives can occur **both in situ and at the beginning** of the sentence.

Eton (BantuA71; adapted from Van de Velde 2008:329)

- (1) a.   ùyéń                               **zá**           á       mákíd?  
          ù-H-jén-H                       zá           á       mákíd  
          2SG-PST-see-NF               **who?**   LOC   market
- b.   **zá**           ú<sup>+</sup>yéń                               á       mákíd?  
          zá       ù-H-jén-H                           á       mákíd  
          **who?**   2SG-PST-see-NF               LOC   market

‘Whom did you see at the market?’



- The standard practice of analyzing such word order alternations is to treat (1b) as the result of a **fronting** transformation of (1a)  
 “question words can be fronted” (Van de Velde 2008:329)



- Historically, this synchronic word order alternation between in-situ and sentence-initial position of interrogatives in Eton is a result of **in-situing**, that is a change from a non-in-situ position to the in-situ position, and not fronting (cf. [Idiatov 2022:697-700](#))
- The data of languages such as Eton provide additional, particularly striking evidence that this **universalist transformational view** of synchronic word order alternations is **untenable**.

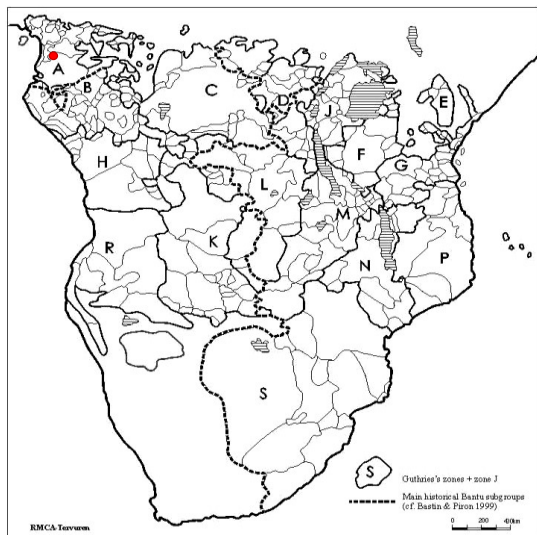




- Recognizing **in-situing** as a **possible type of diachronic syntactic change** may help us to account for the emergence and formal properties of **other types of elements**, such as focus markers.
- The **typological frequency of the sentence-initial placement of interrogatives** may be driven not by pragmatically conditioned word order alternations but by the frequent **origin** of interrogatives **in the asserted part of cleft constructions** that became **unverbated without undergoing further in-situing**.
  - **Clefts** dissociate the assertion of the exclusive identification of a participant in an event presented as presupposed from the rest of the information about the event.
  - **Content questions** request to exclusively identify a certain participant in an event the rest of which is presented as presupposed.



- **Once established** for some interrogatives (in particular, for those inquiring on core arguments), the sentence-initial placement pattern may **serve as a model** for other interrogatives, that do not have a cleft origin.
  - Indeed, a kind of **fronting**
  - But of a completely **different nature** than fronting in a universalist transformational sense
  - **Not a pragmatically conditioned** alternation (at least not directly)
  - ☞ A **result of analogy** based on functional similarity due to frequency effects.



- Eton is a **Bantu** A70 language spoken in Cameroon (Niger-Congo > Benue-Congo > Bantoid...)
- Idiatov ([2022](#)) presents a detailed typologically informed **reconstruction of the Bantu non-selective interrogative pronominals** (NSIPs) ‘who?’ and ‘what?’
- Bantu NSIPs cognate to the Eton interrogative *zá* ‘who?’ go back to a **clause-level interrogative construction** used sentence-initially as a **part of a larger cleft construction**, viz. *\*à ndé yé-yà* [3SG COP NMLZ<sub>1</sub>-which?] ‘it is which one?’ and *\*à ndé yé-yà-yé* [3SG COP NMLZ<sub>1</sub>-which?-NMLZ<sub>2</sub>] ‘it is which one exactly?’ > usually ‘who?’, occasionally ‘who?; what?’ or ‘what?’.
- At the same time, PB already had a NSIP *\*yĩ* ‘**what?**’ probably going back to the same pre-PB structure *\*yé-yà-yé* [NMLZ<sub>1</sub>-which?-NMLZ<sub>2</sub>]



- In the **diachronic process of in-situing**, the erstwhile clause-level construction that resulted in Bantu NSIPs cognate to the Eton interrogative *zá* ‘who?’:
  - becomes **unverbated**
  - becomes **deranked** into a nominal expression
  - the biclausal cleft construction becomes **simplified into a monoclausal** one with the morphosyntactic properties related to its biclausal status being lost (such as various aspects of the relative clause marking)
  - the **in situ placement** of the interrogative becomes **possible**
  - the sentence-initial placement may become impossible



- Various formal (segmental and tonal) traces of a complex origin of *zá* ‘who?’ as suggested by its **non-trivial segmental and tonal allomorphy** and **irregularities in correspondences**.
- The emergence of the homophonous exclamatory modifier *zá* ‘what (kind of) [N]!’, which represents an absolutely **non-trivial semantic evolution**.
- As compared to other interrogatives, the sentence-initial position is **particularly common for *zá* ‘who?’**.



- A limited number of verb forms in Eton have a special form in relative clauses, such as the present affirmative form of the copula *nè* (Van de Velde 2017:54-55). When **a dedicated relative verb form** is available, it must be used with a sentence-initial interrogative.

Eton (BantuA71; Mark Van de Velde, p.c.)

- (1) **zá**            <sup>ʔ</sup>nó                    <sup>ʔ</sup>vá-lá?  
       zá            à-nè-<sup>H</sup>                <sup>L</sup>vá-lá  
**who?**    1-COP-**REL**        ADV.DEM-NADR

‘Who is it?’ (for example, asking a person approaching in the dark about their identity) (lit.: ‘(It is) who that s/he is there near you?’)

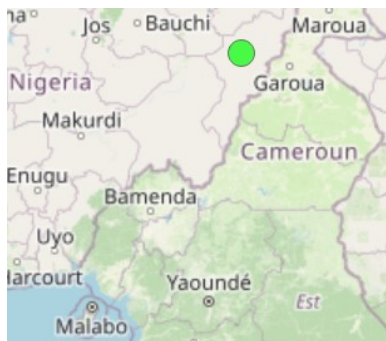
- Compare **Ewondo** (A70), where the relative verb form is marked consistently and the dispreference or even restriction on the sentence-initial use of interrogatives other than *zá* are also much more pronounced.



- That the **in situ position** for interrogatives may be **historically more recent** than the sentence-initial position is also suggested by the data of the A80 language Gyeli (Grimm 2021:500):
  - In Gyeli, interrogatives can occur both **sentence-initially** and **in situ**.
  - However, “the object position in-situ is the **focus position**, and thus the object interrogative appears in focus” when it is in situ.

Gyeli (Bantu A80; Grimm 2021:500)

- (1) a. **nzá** wèé kwálè-lè?  
       **who?** 2SG.PRS.NEG like-NEG  
       ‘**Who** don’t you like?’
- b. wèé kwálé-lé **nzá**?  
       2SG.PRS.NEG like-NEG who?  
       ‘**WHO** don’t you like?’



- Mbula is a **Jarawan Bantu** A70 language [mbul1261] spoken in Nigeria
  - Idiatov ([2022](#):670-671) presents the Mbula interrogative *yá* ‘ná that can be construed in a number of ways:
    - As a full-fledged **clause...**
- (1)     **yá**                                     **↑ná?**  
           <sup>H</sup>-yà                                     ná  
           NMLZ-which?    COP.PRES  
           ‘**Who is it?**’ (lit.: ‘Which one is it?’)





- ...also as the identificational part of a **cleft** construction

(2) **yá** **n** ndà mḃwààmó ʔmáán?  
<sup>H</sup>-yà ná ndà mḃwáámá màán  
 NMLZ-which? COP.PRES [3SG]COP.EQ woman this  
 ‘**Who** is this woman?’ (lit.: ‘**Who is it** (that) she is this woman?’)

(3) **yá** ʔná à-són-ĩ?  
<sup>H</sup>-yà ná à<sup>H</sup>-sèn-í  
 NMLZ-which? COP.PRES 2SG-see-3SG  
 ‘**Who** did you see?’ (lit.: ‘**Who is it** (that) you saw him?’)

- As a **nominal expression** meaning ‘who?’

(4) ndà **yáʔná?**  
 ndà yáʔná  
 [3SG]COP.EQ who?  
 ‘**Who** is he?’ (lit.: ‘(He) is who?’)

(5) à-són-ĩ **yáʔná?**  
 à<sup>H</sup>-sèn-i yáʔná  
 2SG-see-3SG who?  
 ‘You saw **who**?’ (an echo-question)

- It can even take the regular **nominal plural marker** **à<sup>H</sup>-**, as **à-yáʔná**, while preserving the same **structural ambiguity** between the predication ‘Who are these?’ and the nominal expression ‘who? (PL)’.

- The **typological frequency of the sentence-initial placement of interrogatives** may be driven not by pragmatically conditioned word order alternations but by the frequent **origin** of interrogatives **in the asserted part of cleft constructions** that became **unverbated** without undergoing further in-situating.
- **Louisiana Creole ‘who?, what?’** *(ki)saki* (SUBJ), *(ki)sa* (OBJ) (cf. [Idiatov 2007:252-253](#))
  - This NSIP is **strictly sentence-initial**
  - It clearly **originates** from the **the cleft constructions** that in standard French would be rendered as:
    - (1) c’est                                      qui    ça            qui...  
      DEM.M.SG:COP.PRS.3SG who? that.N.SG REL.SUBJ  
      ‘It is who that one who [did this]?’
    - (2) c’est                                      qui    ça            que...  
      DEM.M.SG:COP.PRS.3SG who? that.N.SG REL.OBJ  
      ‘It is who that one that [you saw]?’

- Proto-Slavic *\*kъ-to* ‘who?’ (and *\*cъ-to* ‘what?’)
  - This NSIP is the **NOM** and **ACC** form (in other cases *\*-to* is absent)
  - Structurally a **clause** [NSIP.M.NOM (is) that.N.NOM]’, that is literally something like ‘which one [M] is that?’, functioning as the initial part of a **cleft** construction

Compare Russian *kto* ‘who?’ and the cleft *kto èto* [who this.N.NOM] ‘who is it (who P)?’
  - In its **other case forms** DEM is absent
    - ☞ these other forms did **not make part of a cleft construction**
    - ☞ they were **not sentence-initial**
    - ☞ their use in the sentence-initial position is due to a **later fronting by analogy**.



- The tendency for the in-situating change in the languages of NSSA is probably driven by the **rigidity of the constituent order** typical for these languages.
- Contrast this to the prominence of **pragmatically conditioned word order alternations** in Slavic and many other IE languages.



- Recognizing **in-situing** as a **possible type of diachronic syntactic change** may help us to account for the emergence and formal properties of **other types of elements**
- In particular, **focus constructions** in many African languages and beyond.
  - That **FOC markers** are often **sourced from DEM and COP** in African languages is well-known.
  - Typically, this process results from the evolution of a **cleft construction** (cf. Creissels 2021)
  - Often, the focused NP that originated in such a way subsequently gets access to the respective **in situ positions** as well ➡ **in-situing**
  - Such focused NPs in the in situ position have been occasionally referred to as **internal** clefts (as opposed to **external** clefts)

Lake (1980:79-81) for Tigre (Semitic); Bassong (2024) for Limbum and Lamnso' (Bantoid)