More on the indefinite-interrogative affinity: The view from embedded non-finite interrogatives

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• **Goal:** relate the presence (e.g. English) vs. absence (e.g. German) of embedded non-finite interrogatives to the indefinite-interrogative affinity.¹

• **Main Conclusion:** if a language possesses embedded non-finite (wh-)interrogatives (as in (1)), then the pronominal system of that language does not possess any robust indefinite/interrogative ambiguity.

(1) Mary suddenly remembered [where to find the keys]. English
→ Wh-words cannot be used as indefinites.

(2) *Maria erinnerte sich plötzlich [wo die Schlüssel (zu) finden]. German
→ Wh-words can be used as indefinites.

1 Starting point: Sabel (2006)

• **Generalization:** languages who allow WH-movement to Spec-CP in infinitival constructions, have the option of filling the infinitival C-system with a base generated overt element. E.g. English:

(3) They would prefer [CP for [IP Mary to put the keys in the safe]]
→ No counterpart available in German.

¹Abbreviations used throughout the handout:
- [+enfi] = language with embedded infinitival interrogatives (see (1)).
- [+obs] = language with overtly base generated infinitival complementizers (see (3)).
- [i=i] = language with Interrogatively/Indefinite ambiguity.
• Typology proposed by Sabel:

- **Group 1** = [+enfi, +obs]: e.g. English, French, Italian, Polish, (European) Portuguese, Spanish, Basque, Modern Hebrew (Last two added by Gartner)

- **Group 2** = [-enfi, -obs]: e.g. Danish, German, Norwegian, Swedish

⇒ Other combinations are not attested.

2 Gartner (2009): if [+enfi] → no interrogative/indefinite ambiguity

• **Initial observation by Gartner:** Word strings involving Wh-interrogatives and to-infinitivals are acceptable in German when the interpretation of the WH-word is not interrogative (but instead used as an indefinite):

(4) Ich habe vor, was zu tun. German
I intend to do something.

• **Main observation:** No language in **Group 1** allows an interpretation as in (4), because they have strict different lexical entries for interrogative and indefinite pronouns (e.g. English: *Who vs. Someone*, Italian: *chi vs. qualcuno*). In other words, (5-a) is never interpreted as in (5-b).

(5) a. Mary suddenly remembered *[where to find the keys]*.

b. Mary suddenly remembered *some place* to find the keys.

• **Gartner’s hypothesis:** Languages that possess embedded non-finite (wh-)interrogatives do not possess any indefinite/interrogative ambiguity.

- **Group 1**: [+enfi] [i=i] Not attested
- **Group 2**: [+enfi] [i≠i] Basque, English, French, Modern Hebrew, Italian, Polish, (European) Portuguese, Spanish.
- **Group 3**: [-enfi] [i=i] German
- **Group 4**: [-enfi] [i≠i] Danish, Norwegian, Swedish.

⇒ **Main part of Paper:** Reporting more languages that confirm Gartner’s hypothesis.

3 **The Issue of Non-Robustness**

• Gartner classifies the interrogative/indefinite ambiguity even further. Namely, languages can be [i=i] in a robust or non-robust way.
• Three ways of Non-Robustness:

1. Not all WH-words can also be used as indefinites.

Dutch *wat* (=who) can be used as an indefinite ((6-a)), but it also allows overtly base-generated infinitival complementizers ((6-b)). BUT Dutch does ONLY have WH-indefinites for persons. Hence, ((6-c)) is not possible.

(6) Dutch (Indo-European)
   a. Ik weet niet [wie te bezoeken]
      I know not who to visit
      'I don't know who to visit.' (Sabel (1996): 295)
   b. dat zij probeerde [CP om [IP het boek te lezen]]
      that she tried comp the book to read
      'that she tried to read the book' (Sabel 1996: 294)
   c. Ik heb *waar/ergens gelezen, dat de zomer mooi wordt.
      I have *where/somewhere read, that the summer nice be-FUT.
      'I read somewhere that summer is going to be nice.'
      (Added by Liz)

2. Bare interrogatives can only be used in specific environments.

For example in Latin, a [+enfi] language, bare interrogatives can be used when they are enclitic upon an element (e.g. in an if-construction as in (7-a)).

(7) a. Si quid petieritis me in nomine meo, hoc
      if what ask.sbjv.fut.2sg me in name my that faciam do.sbjv.1sg
      'If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it.' (Haselmath (1997): 255)
   b. Licet mihi loqui *quid / ali-quid ad te?
      allowed me.dat say.inf what / some-what to you
      'May I say something to you?' (Haselmath (1997): 254)

Another case is Newari: non-interrogatively used bare wh-pronouns are reported to be confined to the scope of negation, meaning *nobody and nothing* only (Haselmath 1997: 170)

3. Bare Interrogatives can only have a non-specific reading
   (e.g. In Russian, Lithuanian, Slovene, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Gothic, Latin, Polish).
   This seems to hold for almost all Western Indo-European Languages, except German (see (9)).

(8) Skal us hwa qian. Gothic (Indo-European)
    I.must to.you what say
    'I must tell you something.' (Hapelmath 1997: 173)

(9) Gestern hat mich wer angerufen, den kenne ich noch aus der
    yesterday has me who called dem know I still from the
Side Note: How is the use of the Bare Indefinite in the Slovene example in (10) non-specific?:

\[(10)\] Odločil sem se \([kje\ zgravitih o]\)
\(\text{decided aux refl where build.inf house}\)
‘I decided where to build a house.’

- **New classification of \([i=i]\):**
  1. Languages with a Robust Interrogative/Indefinite Ambiguity = \([+i=i]\)
  2. Languages with a Non-Robust Interrogative/Indefinite Ambiguity = \([%i=i]\)
  3. Languages with NO Interrogative/Indefinite Ambiguity = \([-i=i]\)

- **More specific typology:**
  - **Group 1:** \([+enfi, +i=i]\): Ø
  - **Group 2:** \([+enfi, %i=i]\): Dutch, (Reichenau German), (Latin), Lithuanian, Russian, Slovene
  - **Group 3:** \([+enfi, -i=i]\): Basque, English, French, Pennsylvania German, Modern Hebrew, Italian, Polish, (European) Portuguese, Spanish
  - **Group 4:** \([-enfi, +i=i]\): German
  - **Group 5:** \([-enfi, %i=i]\): (Latin)
  - **Group 6:** \([-enfi, -i=i]\): Danish, Norwegian, Swedish

- **Revised Generalization:** Languages with embedded infinitival Interrogatives cannot also have a Robust Interrogative/Indefinite Ambiguity. \((+[enfi] \rightarrow \neg[+i=i])\)

## 4 Crosslinguistics Survey

- **Gartner’s approach:** prove that languages with a robust interrogative/indefinite ambiguity do not possess ENFI’s. He does this by investigating the respective inventories of non-finite forms that could plausibly underlie ENFI’s.
  - Uses other papers and trusts labels glossed as *infinitives, converbs* and *action nominals* as his prime candidates for non-finite sources of ENFI’s.
  - Embedded interrogatives are often arguments of predicates like *wonder, know, and tell*.  
  - A necessary condition for possession of (counterparts of) infinitives requires a language to be **m-asymmetric** according to the following definition (based on Bisang (2001:1404-1408)):
    *If a language L has clause types with obligatory marking of relevant features in the extended projection of the verb, then*
1. $L$ is $m$-(minus)-asymmetric if that marking disappears in dependent clauses, and
2. $L$ is $p$-(plus)-asymmetric if that marking disappears in independent clauses.

⇒ This definition concerns ALL types of functional marking!

- **Example of Gartner’s approach/reasoning:** Gothic seems to be a good candidate for an ENFI. BUT! Although a sentence translatable as ‘I know what to do’, is shown to appear with *tajau*, a finite version of do bearing optative mood: *andahta mik / hva tajau/*. Therefore we have to classify Gothic as a [?enfi, +i=i]-language, like German.
  - This approach naturally excludes languages lacking ENFIs “trivially”, i.e., because they are not m-asymmetric (at all or in the relevant clausal domain)
  - Excludes languages that are neutral w.r.t. the finite/non-finite distinction (i.e., Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong).
  - Excludes languages WITHOUT infinitives, converts and action nominals can impossibly be [+ENFI].

5 Relating the ENFI-gap to the indefinite-interrogative affinity

⇒ Focus on German

- **General Principle:** Avoid Ambiguities: ENFIs is blocked in languages where these structures would be ”hard to recognize”.

- **Strategies** languages might have for turning declaratives containing indefinite pronouns into interrogatives.
  1. Having separate pronouns for indefinites and wh-words.
  2. Putting them in different positions (e.g. in-situ indefinites vs. WH-movement when interpreted as an interrogative.)
  3. Difference in intonation
     Chinese (Sino-Tibetan)

(11) a. Zheli que-le shenme
    here miss-asp something
    ‘Something is missing here.’ (Bhat 2000: 379)

b. Zheli que-le shenme?
    ‘What is missing here?’ (Bhat 2000: 379)

- The fronting strategy, i.e., strategy 2, is not reliable when it comes to the attempt of forming ENFIs, given the fact that German is an OV-language with scrambling. Namely, (Specific) wh-indefinites will easily end up on the left edge of an infinitival constituent independently, as shown in (12)
Ich habe vor, was zu tun.
I have for, what to do
‘I intend to do something.’

Gartner argues that in the case of German, ENFIs would be hard to recognize as interrogatives due to

1. The lack of unambiguous clausal typing (because of the indefinite/interrogative ambiguity).
2. The lack of unambiguous identification as interrogatives in terms of interpretational properties:
   (a) The semantics of predicates selecting both infinitivals and interrogatives: verbs who allow both infinitival and interrogative complements are *ergessen* (’forget’), *entscheiden* (’decide’), *erklären* (’state’), *lernen* (’learn’), *mitteilen* (’inform’), *(sich) berlegen* (’ponder’). None of these verbs denote default acts of seeking information. Thus their complements would not easily be recognizable as interrogatives from interpretation alone.
   (b) The peculiar illocutionary force potential of infinitival interrogatives when used as independent clauses: both infinitival interrogatives and indefinites are not to be interpreted as request by the speaker to get some information from the addressee.

(13) a. An welch mich wenden?
    at who shall I me turn.inf
    ?Who should I talk to??
    
   b. #An welch sich wenden?
    at who oneself turn.inf

Non-V2-interrogatives in root position only function as ‘uncertainty’ questions, with the uncertainty implying a deliberative attitude toward the question raised, and thus inducing self-directedness? (Reis (2003): 191).

6 To be aware of when studying other languages:

- Can all WH-words be used as indefinites?
- Does the language allow embedded infinitival interrogatives?
- Requirements? Specificity, Negation, Conditional constructions
- ......

References


