Wh-questions and V2 in ÍTM

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In this paper, we report the results of Brynjólfsdóttir (2012), the first study of wh-questions in Icelandic Sign Language (ÍTM, Íslenskt táknmál). ÍTM is the native language of nearly 300 deaf speakers in Iceland and until very recently the grammar of ÍTM had not been subject to any serious study.

The primary non-manual marking for wh-questions in ÍTM is brow lowering. The non-manual marking accompanies the wh-phrase alone or spreads to the whole clause and this seems to be independent of the position of the wh-phrase. A wh-phrase usually remains in-situ in wh-questions in ÍTM, the clearest examples of which involve wh-objects in SOV-clauses (1). (ÍTM is an SVO language but some speakers accept SOV orders quite freely.) ÍTM also has wh-initial clauses (2a), and wh-doubling (2b). As in many other sign languages of the world, wh-doubling is used for emphatic focus in ÍTM and it is restricted to wh-heads (see Petronio 1993 for ASL and Nunes and Quadros 2005 for Libras).

Wh-initial clauses like (2a) involve wh-movement to the left periphery of the clause but the status of rightward wh-movement, which is attested in many sign languages (see e.g. Cecchetto, Geraci, and Zucchi 2009 on LIS), is somewhat unclear in ÍTM. This is so because nearly all the examples of wh-final clauses in ÍTM that have been found could be analyzed as wh-in-situ; see e.g. (3). Thus, we have only found one example of a clause-final wh-subject in the naturalistic data we have examined although some speakers accept such subjects in judgment tasks.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, the most intriguing aspect of wh-constructions in ÍTM is verb second (V2) in matrix constituent questions, as exemplified in (4a). As shown in (4b), V2 is not found in embedded questions just as in the Germanic V2 languages. To the best of our knowledge, V2 has not been reported in any sign language investigated so far.

In all likelihood, V2 in ÍTM wh-questions is a borrowed word order from Icelandic. V2 appears to be a fairly recent innovation in ÍTM as it is widely used by young speakers of ÍTM but absent in the speech of older speakers. When leftward wh-movement applies, V2 seems to be obligatory in the grammar of those speakers of ÍTM who have V2. In contrast to V2, there is no reason to assume that leftward wh-movement in ÍTM is a recently borrowed construction from Icelandic since it is used by different age groups and is in fact quite common with certain wh-items (e.g. AFHVERJU ‘why’).
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(1) AFI HVAD LESA  
Grandpa what read  
‘What is grandpa reading?’

(2) a. HVER ÞÚ  
Who You  
‘Who are you?’

b. HVAR FJÁRMÁLAEFTIRLITÍÐ HVAR  
Where the.financial.supervisory.authority where  
‘Where on earth was the financial supervisory authority?’

(3) ÞÚ AFMÆLI HVENÆR  
You birthday when  
‘When is your birthday?’

(4) a. HVAD VERA TÁKNMÁL  
What be sign.language  
‘What is sign language?’

b. ÞÍÐ HUGMYND HVAD HEIMSMENNING VERA  
You.DUAL idea what world.culture be  
‘Do you know what world culture is?’

References


