On the Nature and Distribution of Split Wh-questions in Basque

1. The Main Idea: I propose an analysis of split Wh-questions in Basque, constructions that have received no attention in the literature so far. I show that we have to distinguish two types of split questions: (i) Matching type questions (MTs), with pairs of Wh-phrase-Answer Phrase matching in syntactic and semantic type, and (ii) What-type questions (WTs), invariably showing a dummy what phrase at the left edge which doesn’t match with the potential answer. I propose that MTs involve a bi-clausal construction with sluicing in the second clause, while WTs involve a predicational small clause and multidominance of the clausal spine. Whereas MTs are available to all dialects of Basque, WTs are restricted to Southern dialects, which, I argue, may be a borrowing from Spanish.

2. Two Types of Split-Qs: Basque has different types of split Wh-constructions; these are examples like 1, 2, 3 and 4 where besides the Wh-phrase at the left of the clause, a potential answer also appears at the clause-final position (generating an confirmatory interpretation):

(1) Nori eman dizkiozu, Miren?  Is it to Miren that you gave them to?
   who sgD give AUX.3sgA.2sgE.3sgD D Miren.D
   Is it to Miren that you gave them to?
(3) Noiz zatoz, bihar?  Is it tomorrow that you come?
   when come.2sgA tomorrow
(2) Zer eman dizkiozu, Miren?  Is it to Miren that you gave them to?
   what sgA give AUX.3sgA.2sgE.3sgD Miren.D
   Is it to Miren that you gave them to?
(4) Zer zatoz, bihar?  Is it tomorrow that you come?
   what sgA come.2sgA tomorrow

I provide an analysis of the variability that can be found in these constructions, distinguishing two types of split questions: (i) Matching questions; that are characterized by the presence of a Wh-phrase that matches syntactically and semantically the answer tag (like in 1 and 3), and (ii) What-type split questions; where the fronted element is invariably zer (absolutive sg. ‘what’) and the potential answer does not match with it. Furthermore, the fronted what phrase does not participate in the argument structure of the verb and does not control Case/agreement (cf. 2 and 4). I show that both types of constructions can be employed with all sorts of Wh-phrases: DOs, IOs, PPs, etc. Besides, they can both involve Long-Distance extraction (5). However, only MTs can involve clausal pied-piping (cf. the contrast in 6, where the MT is completely grammatical but the WT is not):

(5) Nora/Zer esan du Jonek eraman dutela, Parisera?  Where did Jon say that they brought it, to Paris?
   where/what say AUX Jon.E bring AUX.C Paris.to
   [MT/WT]
(6) [Nora/*Zer esan dutela] esan du Jonek, Parisera?  Where did Jon say that they brought it, to Paris?
   where/what bring AUX.C say AUX Jon.E Paris.to
   [MT/*WT]

Besides, there is also a semantic difference between both types of constructions: whereas MTs are simple confirmatory questions, WTs also induce an evidential reading (which can be observed in the ungrammaticality of WTs with potential verb forms composed with the suffix -ke (cf. 7), the necessity of topicalizing (hence, anchoring in the discourse) other elements (cf. 8), or the impossibility of constructing a series with WT questions (cf. 9):

(7) Nork/*Zer leki-ke, Peiok?
   who/what know.3SGERG.3SGABS-KE Peio
   Is it Peio that may know it?
(8) a. Noiz/*Zer jaio zen Descartes, XVI. mendean?
   when/what born AUX.3SGABS Descartes XVI. century
   Was it in the XVIth century that Descartes was born?
b. Descartes zer jaio zen, XVI. mendean? Descartes what born AUX.3SGABS XVI. century

Was it in the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century that Descartes was born?

(9) \textsuperscript{77}Descartes zer jaio zen, XVI. mendean? XVII Lean? XVII Lean? Descartes what born AUX.3SGABS XVI. century XVII in XVIII in

Was it in the XVI\textsuperscript{th} century that D. was born? In the XVII\textsuperscript{th}? In the XVIII\textsuperscript{th}?

3. The Analysis: I propose a dual analysis for MTs and WTs:

• **Matching Type:** MTs involve a simple biclausal structure. I argue that the Wh-phrase undergoes regular Wh-movement and checks Case and agreement just like in other Wh-questions and propose that, just like in Spanish (cf. Arregi (2010)), the appearance of the postverbal tag is due to Wh-movement on the first clause + focus movement & sluicing on the second.

• **What Type:** As for WTs, I will argue that they are not amenable to a sluicing analysis (among other reasons, they violate the Case Matching Condition for sluicing (cf. Merchant (2001)). I will also depart from previous analyses for Spanish that propose complex Confirmation Phrases with full WhPs (cf. López-Cortina (2007)) which do not account for the syntactic (sentence-final position) nor the semantic interpretation of these constructions. My proposal will be that in Basque WTs we have a Small Clause (à la Dikken (2006)) containing a Wh-variable surfacing with the default morphology of zer (cf. Gutierrez (2007) for acquisition evidence that this is the default case) and a potential answer (the rightmost focus) in a predicative structure: \([\text{RP Wh [R Answer]}]\). Thus, it is this predicative construction that will generate the confirmational interpretation, given that the wh-variable is equated with the potential focus (as in [what [R tomorrow]], for 4). Besides, this structure will also produce the Case/Agr pattern characteristic of WTs, for the dummy Wh variable will be devoid of any argumental features (as opposed to the answer XP, which will be contentful and hence will get case and control agreement in its canonical position (even though it surfaces sentence-finally)). In fact, I will argue that the final position of these elements is due to the fact that WTs involve two CPs with multidominance of the clausal spine (just as in coordinated Wh-constructions (cf. ?)) and connected by an evidential head, as in Haddican et al. (2014). Thus, WTs like 2 will involve independent extraction of both elements of the RP to different Spec-CPs with sharing of the main derivational spine. Therefore, the independent extraction of each of the elements will naturally account for the clause-initial (zer) and clause-final (answer) position of the elements, as well as their differences in pied-piping possibilities, since in WTs like the one in 6 will involve an unbound trace in the pied-piped clause (unlike their MT variants).

4. The diatopic distribution: I will argue that the fact that MTs are available to all dialects is to be expected, since all dialects have the operations/structures (leftward movement + sluicing) underlying MTs. However, the fact that WTs are restricted to Southern dialects may be due to a syntactic transfer from Spanish, a language that also displays WTs and that cohabits with the Southern dialects of Basque.

References


