

Rare and nonexistent interrogative pro-word types: interrogative pro-verbs and Co

Certain interrogative pro-word types have been considered rare or even nonexistent (e.g., Katz & Postal 1964:99; Weinrich 1963:122; Ultan 1978; Donegan & Stampe 1983:339; Zaefferer 1990:227; Gil 2001; Hagège 2003). Particularly, this pertains to interrogative pro-verbs and interrogative pro-adpositions. Thus, Gil (2001) suggests that “question words can ‘ask about’ items belonging to major (or open) syntactic categories, but not minor (or closed) ones”. This will allow for interrogative pro-verbs, but fails to account for the fact that interrogative pro-verbs are actually a rare phenomenon. As to their rarity, Hagège (2003) advocates a principle of linguistic economy: “it is much more economical to split the questions into an interrogative word ‘who?’ or ‘what?’ + one of the two verbs with a generic meaning, i.e. ‘be’ and ‘do’”. This cannot be a full answer either. Why would a two word construction be more economical than a one word construction? And even if it is, language is as much prone to redundancy as to economy.

This paper aims to further elucidate the issue of the rarity/ nonexistence of several types of interrogative pro-words against the background of a more general hypothesis on what constitutes a possible interrogative pro-word. The general hypothesis contains two ingredients: (i) a statement on the generality of the presupposition going with constituent questions, and (ii) a claim on the relevance of the endocentric vs. exocentric distinction. I claim that interrogative pro-words can be of endocentric phrase creating categories only – in the traditional sense of endocentricity.¹

The main emphasis of the paper lies on interrogative pro-verbs. I argue for a distinction between interrogative pro-verbs proper, as in (1), and interrogative pro-“non-verbal predicates” (i.e. “nominal predicates” in a broad sense), as in (2). A study based on a sample of some three hundred fifty languages suggests that whereas the former type is indeed rare, the latter is not that uncommon and in languages that do not use copulas it even seems to be completely normal. Furthermore, the difference in frequency between the two types, as well as the subtypes of interrogative pro-verbs proper, also hangs together with the centrality parameter.

- (1) Chukchi (Chukotko-Kamchatkan; <http://privatewww.essex.ac.uk/~spena/Chukchee>)
req-ərəkən-əm igirqej gə-nin ekək?
 do.what-PROG-EMPH right.now 2sg-POS son.ABS
 ‘What is your son doing right now?’
- (2) Tuvaluan (Eastern Malayo-Polynesian; Besnier 2000: 425)
Ne aa taulua olooga ki motu?
 NONPAST what your go:NOMINALIZER to islet
 ‘How did your trip to the islets go?’ (lit.: ‘What (was) your going to the islets’).

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¹ Only endocentric constructions can be reduced to their heads without being simply elliptical (see, among others, Hartman & Stork 1972:76, Crystal 1985:109).

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