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Intervention Effects: Why Amharic Patterns Differently

Attempts to explain the phenomenon of intervention effects, in which a quantificational or focusing element *c*-commanding a *wh*-phrase leads to ungrammaticality (illustrated in (1)), have run the gamut from syntactic (Pesetsky 2000), through semantic (Beck 2006), to information-structural accounts (Tomioka 2007). By presenting novel data from Amharic, a Semitic *wh*-in-situ language, this paper shows that the empirical basis of these accounts is lacking, and that intervention effects are sensitive to hierarchical structure in a manner not previously considered.

Unlike any other language documented until now, and contra the descriptive generalization suggested in Beck (2006) whereby intervention effects are universal, Amharic does not generally exhibit ungrammaticality when a quantificational or focusing element *c*-commands a *wh*-phrase, regardless of whether or not the latter is nominal (2), adverbial (3), or a D-linked 'which'-phrase (4). Intervention effects are found solely with NPIs, so that in (5) the configuration in which the *wh*-phrase is scrambled over the intervener (b) is preferred over the one where it is not (a).

It is commonly claimed, following Pesetsky (2000), that the absence of intervention effects signals the occurrence of covert phrasal movement, which is in turn argued to be correlated with the existence of Superiority effects. Assuming, accordingly, that Amharic *wh*-phrases undergo covert phrasal movement results in the erroneous prediction that they should give rise to Superiority effects (6). I argue that a covert phrasal movement account, which may be considered independently undesirable given considerations of parsimoniousness and uniformity within Minimalism (e.g., Grohmann 2006), is in fact unnecessary; an analysis appealing to feature movement alone is possible, and preferable in light of orthogonal properties of Amharic clause structure. Although feature movement is sensitive to intervention effects, because quantificational and focusing elements intervene in the trajectory between the [+Wh] feature in the probe, C, and the [+Wh] feature on the goal *wh*-phrase (Lipták 2001), Amharic does not exhibit these effects due to the fact that interveners, like all subjects, are dislocated in the left periphery, above the C probe. The latter hypothesis is supported by the existence of obligatory subject agreement affixes (7) (strong agreement in Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998), the positioning of adverbs between the subject and verb (8), which can only be explained if the subject is in a high A'-position, assuming that adverbs cannot adjoin to the X' level (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998), and the existence of string-vacuous left-dislocation (LD) (9), in which the object moves to an A'-position in the C domain, with syntactic and interpretive consequences but no surface reflex (Eilam 2007). Thus, LD is used to mark topic continuity, and unlike an object remaining in its base-generated position, an LD-ed object cannot be a non-referential pronoun, a *wh*-phrase, or a reflexive pronoun. LD does not change linear order, however, due to the left-peripheral position of the subject, on a par with cases of concealed movement in other languages (Simpson & Bhattacharya 2003).

Given the position of potential interveners in the left periphery in Amharic, they are precluded from blocking movement of the [+Wh] feature from the *wh*-phrase, allowing the uninterpretable [+Wh] feature of C to be checked and the derivation to converge. A further advantageous corollary of this proposal is that it is straightforwardly compatible with the observation that Amharic *wh*-phrases can appear in islands (10), as expected of feature movement, but not covert phrasal movement (Pesetsky 2000). Two problematic issues remain: first, Amharic also does not show intervention effects in contexts where the potential intervener is a non-matrix subject (11) or a non-subject (12); second, intervention configurations involving NPIs are nonetheless degraded (5a). To account for the former, I argue that Amharic has multiple topic positions in the C-domain, which also serve as the landing site of fronted *wh*-phrases, thus explaining the lack of Superiority effects (6): this type of movement is not driven by the *wh*-features relevant to Superiority (Grohmann 2003). Finally, I address the issue of NPIs, and following Hwang (2007), establish that their distinct behavior follows from independent conditions on NPI licensing.

Although there is increasing recognition of the extent to which intervention effects vary crosslinguistically (Beck 2006), the typological picture of this phenomenon is obviously partial. Beyond constituting a step towards filling this lacuna, this paper demonstrates the importance of taking into account independent properties of a language's clausal structure in attempting to explain this phenomenon.

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- (1) a. *Minsu-man nuku-lûl po-ass-ni? (Korean: Beck 2006, (1))
 Minsu-only who-ACC see-PAST-Q
 'Who did only Minsu see?'
 b. nuku-lûl Minsu-man po-ass-ni?
 who-ACC Minsu-only see-PAST-Q
 'Who did only Minsu see?'
- (2) a. haile bəčča mən anəbbäb-ä? (only + nominal *wh*-phrase)
 Haile only what read.PER-3MS
 b. mən haile bəčča anəbbäb-ä?
 'What did only Haile read?'
- (3) a. haile bəčča lämən ya-n mäs'haf anəbbäb-ä? (only + adverbial *wh*-phrase)
 Haile only why that-ACC book read.PER-3MS
 b. lämən haile bəčča ya-n mäs'haf anəbbäb-ä?
 'Why did only Haile read that book?'
- (4) a. haile bəčča yätəññaw-ən mäs'haf anəbbäb-ä? (only + 'which'-phrase)
 Haile only which-ACC book read.PER-3MS
 b. yätəññaw-ən mäs'haf haile bəčča anəbbäb-ä?
 'Which book did only Haile read?'
- (5) a. ?mannəmm mən al-anəbbäb-ä-mm? (NPI + nominal *wh*-phrase)
 anyone what NEG-read.PER-3MS-NEG
 b. mən mannəmm al-anəbbäb-ä-mm?
 'What did no one read?'
- (6) mäče mən man adärräg-ä? (Demeke 2003:290)
 when what who do.PER-3MS
 'When did who do what?'
- (7) aster doro-wa-n arräd-*(äčč).
 Esther hen-DEF-ACC butcher.PER-*(3FS)
 'Esther butchered the hen.'
- (8) aster tolo / tänant čäffär-äčč.
 Esther quickly / yesterday dance.PER-3FS
 'Esther danced quickly / yesterday.'
- (9) a. yonas anbäsa-w-ən gäddäl-ä. b. yonas anbäsa-w-ən_i gäddäl-ä-w_i. (Demeke 2003:66)
 Jonas lion-DEF-ACC kill.PER-3MS Jonas lion-DEF-ACC kill.PER-3MS-3MS_o
 'Jonas killed the lion.' 'Jonas, the lion, he killed it.'
- (10) haile man yä-s'af-ä-w-ən mäs'haf anəbbäb-ä-w?
 Haile who that-write.PER-3MS-DEF-ACC book read.PER-3MS-3MS_o
 'Haile read the book that who wrote?'
- (11) girma haile bəčča mən ənd-anəbbäb-ä y-asəb-all?
 Girma Haile only what that-read.PER-3MS 3MS-think.IMP-AUX.3MS
 'What does Girma think that only Haile read?'
- (12) girma lä-haile bəčča mən sät'a?
 Girma Haile only what give.PER.3MS
 'What did Girma give only to Haile?'

Selected References

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