Wh-questions in Vietnamese

There is an ongoing controversy over the treatment of wh-in-situ. However, even though linguists differ greatly in detail as to how the scope interpretation in wh-in-situ questions is obtained, in general, there are two approaches to the issue of wh-in-situ: Movement and non-movement (binding).

In this paper, I argue that Vietnamese employs both strategies in wh-questions: LF movement in questions without a question particle, and unselective binding in questions with a question particle. Consider, for instance, the examples given in (1). Sentence (1a) is equivalent to sentence (1b) in that they are genuine questions requesting information. The difference between them, I argue, is how the scope interpretation is realized: Binding in (1a) with the particle as a binder and the wh-phrase as a variable, and movement in (1b) in which the wh-phrase 'what' as an operator moves to Spec, CP. This hypothesis is strongly supported by the diagnostics of movement in examples (2) through (3). When the wh-phrase in (2) appears inside an island and the question lacks a particle, the sentence is ungrammatical but when it has a particle, the sentence is grammatical. In addition, the example in (3) shows that LF blocking effects (Beck 1996) also apply in Vietnamese. In Vietnamese, a wh-phrase when followed by cung obtains a universal reading, as in (3a). When a wh-phrase takes the place of the object, the sentence is ungrammatical as a question in (3b). However, the sentence becomes grammatical with the presence of a null operator licensed by the particle. There are two reasons for this proposal. Semantically, the particle encodes realis mood: the events characterized by the predicates in the questions have already happened as illustrated in (4). The absence of the particle in (4a) will make the sentence ungrammatical because the event is interpreted as already happened. By contrast, the use of the particle in the hypothetic event in (4b) will result in ungrammaticality. Theoretically, there is no semantic relation between realis mood and unselective binding. There is no reason a marker of realis mood would also function as an existential quantifier in wh-question. The second reason arises from the fact that in Vietnamese the particles are only used in matrix clauses, which leads to the need to posit a null operator in embedded clauses. Given the first reason, a uniform account would have to null in both, licensed by an appropriate lexical item: the matrix verb that selects interrogative complements, or the realis particle. Consider, for instance, the examples in (5). The matrix question reading of (5a) requires the particle since the wh-phrase is inside an island. When (5a) is embedded as shown in (5b), the occurrence of the particle makes the sentence ungrammatical. Under this proposal, the lexical verb in (5a) cannot license the null Q, so the wh-particle must be present to license it. By contrast, the matrix verb in (5b) can license the null Q in the embedded clause. The question particle may not appear, as it is restricted to matrix questions, which probably follows from its role as a realis marker.

In this theory, Vietnamese wh-questions involve unselective binding when a null Q is licensed, but LF movement otherwise. This is similar to proposals of Pesetsky (1987) and others that some wh-phrases move at LF, while others stay in situ. In those proposals it is crucially D-linked wh-phrases that need not move. However, there is no correlation between D-linking and unselective binding in Vietnamese. Consider, for instance, the example in (6). Suppose a show leader wonders which object the winner will choose in a contest. The question to be asked is (6a), not (6b). This means that D-linking does not require a particle, and particles do not induce D-linking.

In conclusion, the data in Vietnamese strongly confirm the need for LF movement and unselective binding in accounting for wh-in-situ. However, the exact division must vary from language to language. In a language like Vietnamese where wh-phrases can be ambiguous between a quantifier and an indefinite, both LF movement and unselective binding are required. Vietnamese also indicates that the role of D-linking, which is to allow wh-in-situ to receive interpretation via binding, is not universal.
(1) a. Tân mua gi the?
   Tan buy what PRT
   ‘What did Tan buy?’
b. Tân mua gi?
   Tan buy what
   ‘What did Tan buy?’

Subjacency Effects
(2) a. *Tan se chup hinh cua [NP con ho [CP da doa ai]] ?
   Tan ASP catch picture belong Cl tiger ASP scare who
   ‘Tan will take the photo of the tiger that scared who?’
b. Tân VFK p Kinh cua [NP con ho [CP da doa ai ] ] the?
   Tan ASP catch picture belong Cl tiger ASP scare who PRT
   ‘Tan will take the photo of the tiger that scared who?’

LF Blocking Effects
(3) a. Ai cung thich bong da.
   Who CUNG like football
   ‘Everyone likes football.’
b. *Ai cung thich cai gi?
   Who CUNG like what
   ‘What does everyone like?’
c. Ai cung thich cai gi the?
   Who CUNG like what PRT
   ‘What does everyone like?’
(4) a. Anh dua ai ve nha *(the)?
   You bring who go home PRT
   ‘Who did you bring home?’
b. Ai vo cung dau kho neu Nu Hoang qua doi cach day hai nam (*the)?
   who endless hurt suffer if Queen pass life ago two year PRT
   ‘Who would have suffered most if the Queen had passed away two years ago?’
(5) a. [Tan se mua [NP ngoi nha [CP ma ai da xay dung ]*(the)]?]
   Tan ASP buy Cl house REL who ASP build PRT
   ‘Who will Tan buy the house that built?’
b. [Lan muon biet [CP Tan se mua ngoi nha ma ai da xay dung (*the)]]
   Lan want know Tan ASP buy Cl house REL who ASP build PRT
   ‘Lan wants to know who Tan will buy the house that built.’
(6) a. Anh chon cai nao?
   you choose Cl which
   ‘Which do you choose?’
b. ?Anh chon cai nay the?
   you choose Cl which PRT
   Intended: ‘Which do you choose?’

Selected References: