

Embedded inversion in Welsh English: Contact effects and markedness*

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1 Introduction

canonical word order in English: SVO

- (1) a. It was a bird.
b. Mary will say something.

subject–auxiliary inversion (modal verbs, auxiliaries, copulas) in main clause interrogatives (constituent questions and polar questions):

- (2) a. What **was** it?
b. What **will** Mary say?
c. **Was** it a bird?
d. **Will** Mary say something?

no inversion in embedded interrogatives in Standard English:

- (3) a. I don't know [what it was].
b. I don't know [what Mary will say].
c. I don't know [if it was a bird].
d. I don't know [if Mary will say something].

Welsh English: inversion common in embedded questions (Paulasto et al. 2021)

→ question: how this phenomenon can be explained

proposal: both contact effects (external factors) and the syntactic paradigm (internal factors) decisive

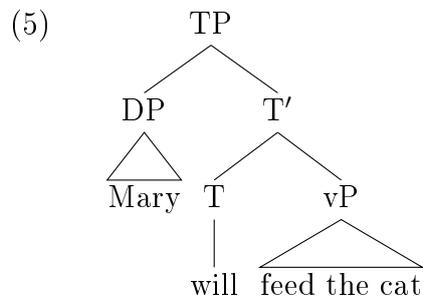
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2 Basic syntactic properties

English declaratives can be analysed as TPs – SVO order, no V2 (\leftrightarrow other Germanic languages)

(4) Mary will feed the cat.

structure:



no movement to CP

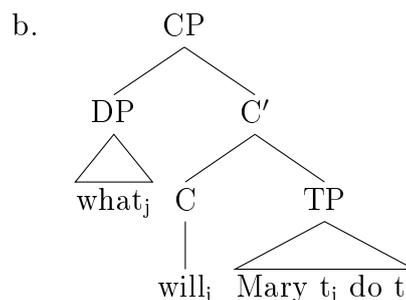
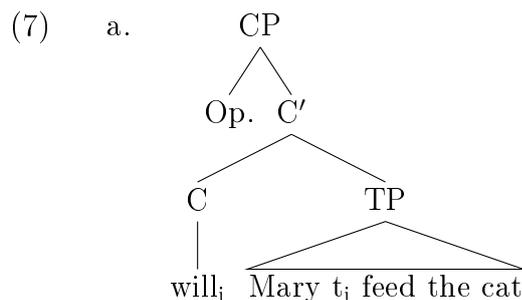
main clause interrogatives are CPs

- (6) a. **Will** Mary feed the cat?
 b. What **will** Mary do?

movement operations:

- T-to-C movement
- *wh*-movement to [Spec,CP] in constituent questions

structures:



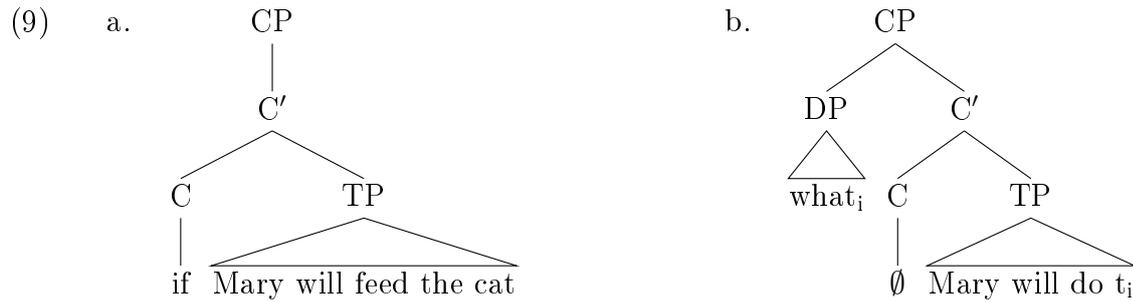
embedded interrogatives:

- (8) a. I don't know [if Mary will feed the cat].
 b. I don't know [what Mary will do].

no T-to-C movement but evidence for CP:

- *wh*-movement
- overt complementiser (*if*)

structures:



pattern in (9b) exceptional in the interrogative paradigm in English (marked pattern) – C not lexicalised overtly (Bacskai-Atkari 2020c)

→ asymmetries in Standard English both between main and embedded clauses and between constituent questions and polar questions

3 Celtic contact in Welsh English

embedded inversion common in Welsh English:

- (10) a. Did you see [what kind of coal **was** it]?
(SAWD: Gn 9: 3; Paulasto et al. 2021: 95)
- b. I don't know [what time **is** it].
(Penhallurick 2008: 104, citing Parry 1999: 119)
- c. I asked them in the camp, [**would** they like the plums].
(NWC, Criccieth: 2e; Paulasto et al. 2021: 95)
- d. I'm not sure [**is** it Caerleon or not].
(Penhallurick 2008: 104, citing Parry 1999: 119)

important: such embedded clauses are intonationally integrated (not direct quotations)

embedded inversion most likely influenced by Celtic contact (Paulasto et al. 2021: 95, citing Thomas 1994: 138 and Penhallurick 1991: 210)

Welsh: similar word order in questions, especially in colloquial Welsh (Paulasto et al. 2021: 95–96, citing King 1993: 305–310 and Thomas 1994: 138)

main clause *wh*-questions:

- (11) Beth **glywaist** ti wedyn?
what hear.PST.2SG you then
'What did you hear then?' (Borsley et al. 2007: 106)

embedded *wh*-questions:

- (12) Gofynnais [beth **oedd** yr achos].
asked.1SG what was the cause
'I asked what the cause was.' (Ellis Wynne, *Gweledigaethau y Bardd Cwsg*)

main clause polar questions (optional question particle in literary language):

- (13) a. A **fydd** Gwyn yn yr ardd?
Q be.IMPF.3SG Gwyn in the garden
'Will Gwyn be in the garden?' (Borsley et al. 2007: 36)
- b. **Fydd** Gwyn yn yr ardd?
be.FUT.3SG Gwyn in the garden
'Will Gwyn be in the garden?' (Borsley et al. 2007: 36)

embedded polar questions:

- (14) a. Gofynnais [a **oedd** Siân yn defnyddio cyfrifiadur].
asked.1SG Q was Siân AUX using computer
'I asked whether Siân was using the computer.' (Awbery 2009: 411)
- b. Gofynnais [**oedd** o'n sylweddoli beth roedd o newydd ei neud].
asked.1SG was AUX realise what he of new AUX do
'I asked him whether he realised what he had just done.'
(Gareth F. Williams, *Awst yn Anogia*)

further evidence for Celtic contact effect: similar structures in Irish English (Filppula 2008) and in Scottish English (Miller 2008)

analogy with Celtic: same word order in embedded clauses as in main clauses – inflected verb clause-initial

prevalence of embedded inversion in Welsh English: common but not the dominant pattern – total share in all embedded questions 9.3% (Meriläinen & Paulasto 2017: 684–685), with higher rates for older speakers (Paulasto et al. 2021: 97)

→ no sharp, parametric distinction from other varieties of English

4 Markedness

similarity to main clause questions: cognitive factors (ease of processing) also relevant, as evidenced by e.g. learner Englishes (Paulasto et al. 2021: 96)

similar structures in other varieties as well, e.g. Colloquial American English (Murray & Simon 2008), Appalachian English (Montgomery 2008), Newfoundland English (Clarke 2008)

→ Celtic contact probably reinforcing a more general tendency

recall the Standard English interrogative paradigm for overt elements in C:

	Main clause	Embedded clause
Constituent question	fronted V	\emptyset
Polar question		<i>if</i>

exceptional slot: C not lexicalised overtly \rightarrow marked pattern

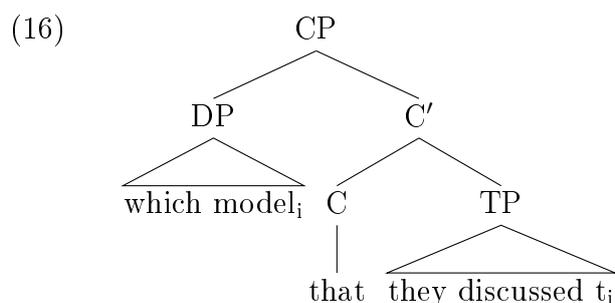
syntactic tendency in English:

- C specified as [fin] and [Q] lexicalised overtly by a [fin] element (finite verb or finite complementiser, Bacsikai-Atkari 2020c; 2022) – no extra null element required, transparent configuration
- preference for lexicalising C also in relative clauses (see van Gelderen 2004; 2009, Romaine 1982, Montgomery & Bailey 1991, Tagliamonte et al. 2005, Herrmann 2005, Bacsikai-Atkari 2020a;b)
- related to the general tendency of lexicalising [fin] in Germanic resulting in V2 (Bacsikai-Atkari 2020c, see also Pittner 1995)

one option to overcome the marked gap: doubly filled COMP patterns (Bacsikai-Atkari 2020c; 2022, see also Chomsky & Lasnik 1977)

- (15) They discussed a certain model, but they didn't know [which model **that** they discussed].
(Baltin 2010: 331)

doubly filled COMP structure:



interrogative paradigm for overt elements in C in doubly filled COMP varieties:

	Main clause	Embedded clause
Constituent question	fronted V	<i>that</i>
Polar question		<i>if</i>

Welsh English can exhibit the following paradigm for overt elements in C:

	Main clause	Embedded clause
Constituent question	fronted V	
Polar question		

maximally unmarked pattern regarding the C position

two possibilities:

- Welsh English pattern solely governed by markedness (paradigmatic effects and/or processing factors) – major factor: analogy with main clauses → symmetrical arrangement between constituent and polar questions expected
- Welsh English pattern also affected by the lexicalisation requirement on [fin] in questions → asymmetrical arrangement between constituent and polar questions expected (polar questions have the [fin] option by *if* anyway)

evidence from corpora: embedded inversion more frequent in constituent questions than in polar questions (Paulasto et al. 2021: 96–98; similar to other varieties showing embedded inversion, see Meriläinen & Paulasto 2017)

→ grammatical factors also play a decisive role

5 Conclusion

embedded inversion in Welsh English

- influenced by language contact (Welsh)
- markedness plays a role in terms of processing
- syntactic factors also important – fronting primarily in environments where C would not contain an overt element otherwise

→ language contact in the given case reinforces more general tendencies in the language

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