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Questions and Inversion in Ocotepec Mixtec*

Roy Eberhardt

Yes/No questions, Wh-questions, and embedded questions in Ocotepec Mixtec are described and analyzed within the Government and Binding framework. Questions involving prepositional phrases are unique in that the whole prepositional phrase must be fronted and then the question word is subsequently fronted again. Similar inversion occurs when a possessive phrase is questioned. Smith Stark (1988) documents this phenomenon as occurring across language families throughout Meso-America. Aissen (1996) analyzes it for Tzotzil, a VOS language, as secondary movement to the specifier of PP or DP. This analysis is not possible for Mixtec, a VSO language, so I posit adjunction to the moved phrase, following Black (1994) for Zapotec.

1. Introduction

Mixtec languages are characterized by VSO word order. In the past VSO languages have been described in the literature with flat structures, making the relationships between Infl, the external argument, and the verb cumbersome to describe and characterize. In this paper I posit a deep structure SVO ordering with the subject as the specifier of the VP, following the Internal Subject Hypothesis (Koopman & Sportiche 1991, McCloskey 1991, among others). Verb movement to Infl derives the surface VSO order. When analyzed in this manner, the VSO word order of Mixtec complies with language universals such as the close relationship between a verb and its object, which has been shown to hold in other VSO languages (Chung 1983, McCloskey 1991, Black 1994).

Most of this paper is then devoted to describing Yes/No questions, Wh-questions, and embedded questions and to giving an analysis for the fronting which occurs. Finally, there is an interesting inversion of the Wh-word with its preposition after fronting in a question. I analyze this as Pied-Piping of the PP [+wh] with a secondary raising of the Wh-word. A similar secondary raising accounts for the inversion which occurs in a questioned possessive phrase. The analysis is presented within the Government and Binding framework (Chomsky 1981, 1982, 1986).

2. Basic Clause Structure

This section covers basic word order, focus constructions, nominal phrases, and prepositional phrases. This provides the necessary background for understanding the analysis of questions.

*This paper was originally done as a squib for a Government and Binding class taught by Cheri Black at UND. I am grateful for her invaluable aid in assembling and editing this paper, but I remain totally responsible for its content.
2.1. Basic Word Order

The basic word order of Ocotepec Mixtec is VSO, as shown in (1). Example (2) shows the normal unfronted position of adverbials.

(1) `xihì chílù ndùtè'
    CON:drink cat water
    The cat is drinking water.

(2) `sátìñú de mìtàn'
    CON:work he:RES now
    He is working now.

Woolford (1991) proposed an analysis for Jacaltecs, a genetically unrelated Mayan language which is like Mixtec in that it also has VSO order. If it were applied to Mixtec, example (1) would be diagrammed as in (3).

![Diagram of VSO word order]

An alternative analysis, which I posit here, claims that the subject occupies the specifier position of the VP in the D-structure, following the Internal Subject Hypothesis (Koopman & Sportiche 1991, McCloskey 1991, etc.). Movement of the verb up to I (Infl), which is filled by the Aspect marking morpheme, accounts for the VSO order. This verb movement is motivated by the

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1 Bradley and Hollenbach (1988) give the following background information: “The Mixtecan language family is one branch of the Otomanguean stock that has spread through central and southern Mexico. This family includes Mixtec, Trique, and Cuicatec, ... . It is found primarily in the western half of the state of Oaxaca, but extends over its western border into the state of Guerrero and over its northern border into the state of Puebla. The most prominent member of the Mixtecan group today is Mixtec, at least in terms of numbers of speakers, (almost 250,000) and area occupied (roughly 10,000 square miles). Furthermore, it is not the single language that its name suggests, but a collection of perhaps twenty mutually unintelligible languages” (p. 1). “Ocotepec Mixtec is spoken by approximately 8000 people living in Santo Tomás Ocotepec, Santa Cruz Nundaco, and Santa María Cuquila, all in the district of Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, Mexico” (p. 157).

2 Interlinear examples use the orthography and punctuation of Alexander’s 1988 article.

3 Abbreviations used, following Bradley and Hollenbach (1988:xi): ADD additive, COM completive, CON continuative, FAM familiar, INC incompletive, INT interrogative, ME male ego, NEG negative, PL plural, POT potential, REP repetitive, RES respect, SG singular, SPEC specifier, UN unspecified third person.

4 Note that Ocotepec Mixtec has an aspectual system that is marked by a prefix, or a tone, or both.
morphological subcategorization of the aspect marker to attach to V (Rizzi and Roberts 1989). See figure (4) for example (1).

![Diagram](image)

2.2. Focus Construction

One of the variations on the basic VSO order which can occur is due to focus. Subjects, as in (5), objects, as in (6), and adjuncts, as in (7), can be fronted. This focus fronting is analyzed as movement to the specifier of IP, as shown in (8) for example (5).

(5) teè ñúkwán kihin (Alexander 1988:172)
man that POT:go
THAT MAN will go.

(6) ndìkä xehè ñà nuu de (Alexander 1988:173)
banana COM:give she face his:RES
She gave him A BANANA.

(7) xehe tàtá de shí:kó de nuni (Alexander 1988:173)
foot father his:RES CON:sell he:RES corn
He sells corn FOR THE SAKE OF HIS FATHER.

(8) ![Diagram](image)
2.3. Nominal Phrases

Mixtec nominal phrases are not marked for case. A number of distinct positions are needed, most of which follow the noun. These first two examples show first a noun noun compound and second a noun modifier compound.

(9) yōhō kā:à (Alexander 1988:211)
    rope    metal
    wire

(10) ndūtē shéèn (Alexander 1988:212)
    water  fierce
    white rum

Examples (11)-(17) show that determiners and quantifiers occur before the head noun. Note that quantifiers always come before the determiners màá and ndá. See (26) for the ndá example.

(11) màá vèhè (Alexander 1988:213)
    SPEC    5
    house
    the very house

(12) kumi màá teè (Alexander 1988:213)
    four    SPEC    man
    four of only men

(13) ndá de (Alexander 1988:213)
    PL    he:RES
    they

(14) kumi teè (Alexander 1988:213)
    four    man
    four men

(15) kwaha kìtì (Alexander 1988:213)
    many    animal
    many animals

(16) kwaha ŋa (Alexander 1988:214)
    many    she
    many of them

(17) ūn ndivi (Alexander 1988:214)
    one    egg
    an egg or one egg

5 Alexander in this case uses SPEC as a grammatical category: “There are two elements that precede the nucleus, specifier and quantifier; the specifier occurs next to the nucleus.” (Alexander 1988: 212). The màa or ndá are both described as specifiers in Alexander’s work. They mean “that very one” or in the case of the plural, “those very ones.” The term SPEC as used by Alexander has nothing to do with Government and Binding’s use of the same word.
Quantifiers in adjectival position, following the noun, are interpreted as ordinals.

(18) kivi úshi
    day ten
the tenth day

The demonstrative pronoun follows the head noun, as shown in (19)-(20).

(19) sähmä yáhá
    cloth this
this cloth
(20) tìna ñúkwán
    dog that
that dog

The following four examples introduce two degree words and show their position in relation to the head noun and to each other. The order is noun, adjective, and then degree words. The nì always follows the ka when they are both present. The degree words function as phrase-level clitics modifying the entire phrase preceding them.

(21) ndikà nì
    banana LIM
just a banana
(22) sähmä ñukwán nì
    cloth that LIM
just that cloth
(23) ndika ka
    banana ADD
more bananas
(24) ita nì ka
    flower LIM ADD
just more flowers

Examples (25)-(26) show a combination of all the elements introduced thus far. Note the ndá plural marker preceding the head noun, the adjective following it and the demonstrative ñúkwán after the adjective.

(25) ndá sähmä lúlí ñúkwán
    PL cloth little that
those little cloths
(26) uu ndá ndikà náhnú ñúkwán nì ka
    two PL banana big:PL that LIM ADD
just those two big bananas

Simple possession, with the possessor following the head noun, is shown in (27)-(28).

(27) shini tí:ñí
    head mouse
the mouse's head
(28) shíni vétu
    hat Robert
Robert's hat
The following two examples show the position of the possessor in relation to the other elements previously introduced. Note specifically that the possessor follows the adjective in (29) and it also follows the degree words in (30).

(29) \( uu \) sehë lülü tina

\( \text{two \ child \ little \ dog} \)

\( \text{the dog’s two little pups} \)

(Alexander 1988:223)

(30) \( uu \) vëhë nï ka tëë ŋúkwán

\( \text{two \ house \ LIM \ ADD \ man \ that} \)

\( \text{that man’s only two houses} \)

(Alexander 1988:223)

This last example illustrates possessor nesting.

(31) \[ [[[tina] sehe] ŋäni] teë ŋúkwán \]

\( \text{dog \ child \ brother:ME \ man \ that} \)

\( \text{that man’s brother’s child’s dog} \)

(Alexander 1988:224)

In order to accommodate all the distinct positions required, I use a version of the DP hypothesis (Abney 1987, Stowell 1989) as shown in the following tree diagram. Quantifiers and/or determiners head the DP. The possessor occupies the specifier of DP on the right and Degree words adjoin to \( D’ \). The NP complement has the demonstrative in its right specifier position, and adjectives right-adjoin to \( N’ \). The only required element is \( N^0 \).

(32)
2.4. Prepositional Phrase

As expected for VSO languages, the P comes before its complement NP.

(33) xíín ndá sehē de
    with PL child his:RES
    with his children

(34) mahñú vēhē
    between house
    between the houses

A simple tree for (34) is given below in (35)

(35) PP
    |
    P'
    P
    mahñú
    between
    vehe
    house

Body part nouns are also used as prepositions, as shown in (36)-(37).

(36) ini nūnu
    insides net:bag
    in a net bag

(37) nuu nūhān
    face woman
    in front of the woman or to the woman
3. Yes/No questions.

3.1. Main clause Yes/No questions.

Yes/No Questions in Ocotepec Mixtec are very simple. Any declarative sentence can be made into a Yes/No Question by simply preceding it with the interrogative marker á. This marker is placed in the C[+q] position in the tree structure, as is shown in (39) for example (38).

(38) á kíshin nu (Alexander 1988:181)
INT CON:sleep you:FAM
Are you sleeping?

(39)

(40) á n-taān (Alexander 1988:181)
INT COM:quake
Was there an earthquake?

(41) á màēstru kūù de (Alexander 1988:182)
INT teacher CON:be he:RES
Is he a teacher?

Example (41) shows that focus movement may occur in Yes/No questions. The tree for (41) is given in (42).

(42)
3.2. Embedded Yes/No questions.

Embedded Yes/No questions have the same internal structure as main clause Yes/No questions. The CP\textsuperscript{[+q]} is subcategorized for by the matrix verb and is thus connected at the V' node. Example (43) illustrates such a sentence, and its tree structure is shown in (44).

(43) katuhún ní de á ne\textsuperscript{6}ndà ŋāni de
POT:ask you:RES him:RES INT COM:return brother:ME his:RES
Ask him if his brother has returned. (Alexander 1988:187)

(44) IP
    | I'
    |
    VP
    | I
    |
    L-katuhún\textsubscript{i} DP ni V' VP CP\textsuperscript{[+q]}
    |
    POT-ask you:RES V DP t\textsubscript{i} CP\textsuperscript{[+q]}
    |
    C' COM-return ŋāni V DP t\textsubscript{j} his:RES

\textsuperscript{6} Colons are Alexander’s way of expressing vowel length.
4. Content Questions.

4.1. Main Clause

The Wh-questions are formed in a manner similar to English questions. That is, the Wh-phrase starts in its subcategorized position in the clause and then is fronted. The subject, object or any nominal complement as well as adverbials can be questioned, as shown in the following examples.

**Questioning subjects and objects.**

(45) naá chóho  
what CON:cook  
What is cooking?  
(Alexander 1988:182)

(46) naá kí:kū ñã  
what CON:sew she  
What is she sewing?  
(Alexander 1988:183)

(47) na ñãhān n-kùnũ shikin yáhá  
what woman COM:weave tunic this  
Who wove this tunic?  
(Alexander 1988:183)

(48) ní kūū xa váxí  
who CON:be UN INC:come  
Who is coming?  
(Alexander 1988:184)

(49) na njìvi n-kã:nã de  
what person COM-COM:call he/him;RES  
Whom did he invite? or Who invited him?  
(Alexander 1988:183)

(50) ní kūū xa n-kã:nã de  
who CON:be UN:COM COM-COM 10 :call he/him;RES  
Whom did he invite? or Who invited him?  
(Alexander 1988:185)

**Questioning verbal complements.**

(51) naá kúu ñã  
what CON:be she  
What is she?  
(Alexander 1988:183)

(52) naá teč kúu de  
what man CON:be he:RES  
Who is he?  
(Alexander 1988:183)

(53) na sehč kúu xìn  
what child CON:be he:FAM  
Whose child is he?  
(Alexander 1988:184)

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7 The translation of na as what, and ní as who, or where is somewhat misleading perhaps. Ruth Mary Alexander tells me that they are really less specific and more specific counterparts of the same function. na is a general questioning word: any of many, ní is more specific. It is like English which, a selection from a known group.

8 naá is an interrogative pronoun. na is an interrogative demonstrative.

9 Without a context there is no way of knowing which argument raised.

10 Com-Com is used because the aspect is represented here both by a tone and a prefix. This type of glossing is used in the source.
Questioning adjuncts.

When  nama

(54) nāmā n-kuṭū de prēsidēnte  (Alexander 1988:186)
when COM-COM:be he:RES president
When was he president?

(55) na kwiya n-kuṭū de prēsidēnte  (Alexander 1988:186)
what year COM-COM:be he:RES president
What year was he president?

Why  nuku

(56) nukū sākwihná de ndātīñú ňāni de  (Alexander 1988:186)
why CON:steal he:RES thing brother:ME his:RES
Why does he steal his brother’s things?

Where  nī

(57) nī kwahan de  (Alexander 1988:185)
where INC:go he:RES
Where did he go?

(58) nī kūū nuu kikū ňā sāhmā  (Alexander 1988:185)
where CON:be face POT:sew she cloth
Where will she sew the cloth?

For now, we will assume that this fronting is the normal movement of a [+wh] phrase to the Specifier of the CP $^{+[q]}$ as shown in (59) for example (46). (In section 5.5 we provide a different analysis.)
Similarly the tree in (60) illustrates example (54) with an interrogative adjunct.

(60)

The following examples with the Wh-phrases in situ are ungrammatical.\textsuperscript{11}

(61) *n-ku
\textsuperscript{ū} na nāhān shikin yāhá
COM-COM:weave what woman tunic this
(Who wove this tunic?)

(62) *n-kānā de na njìvi
COM-COM:call he/him:RES what person
(Whom did he invite?)

(63) *n-kānā na njìvi de
COM-COM:call what person he/him:RES
(Who invited him?)

\textsuperscript{11} Personal conversation with Ruth Mary Alexander, July 1996.
4.2. Embedded Wh questions.

Example (64) demonstrates that embedded Wh-questions parallel main clause Wh-questions. Its tree structure is given in (65)

(64) xíni nā naá ndóhō de
CON:know she what CON:suffer he:RES
She knows what is the matter with him. or She knows what has happened to him.

(65)

In the following example a question word appears in a nonfronted position. Notice that this is a declarative clause, not interrogative. That means the function of the interrogative is carried in the position of the CP[+q] specifier and not in the Wh-word alone.

(i) dě ndūú ná íñí yáhá
and NEG:CON:be what CON:stand here
and there hasn’t been anyone standing here.

The following utterance is an interesting exception that seems to be reminiscent of Polish since it looks like more than one Wh-word is fronted.

(ii) na ní nuu xíkā ki tù nú
what where face CON:walk recently REP you:FAM
Where were you walking just now?

This is part of a text elicited from a native speaker. The free translation only gives a single question, making the function of these two question words unclear. Ruth Mary Alexander (p.c., July 1996) explained that she was uncertain whether this was normal speech. Until a native speaker of the language can be asked, or other data found, nothing else can be done to test or analyze this particular example.
5. Inversion in Questions

Inversion occurs in two constructions: interrogative prepositional phrases and interrogative possessive phrases. The phenomenon of inversion in question formation is shared by various language families throughout Meso-America (Smith Stark 1988). Data is presented in the first two sections, and then analyses which have been proposed for other languages are discussed. My proposal for Mixtec follows in section 5.5.

5.1. Pied-Piping with Inversion in interrogative prepositional phrases.

The following data illustrates the fact that interrogative prepositional phrases must front and invert. It is ungrammatical to extract just the Wh-phrase and leave the preposition in situ. Example (68) demonstrates that the final inversion is necessary.

(66) ní nuu ñdée ñā | (Alexander 1988:185)
   where face CON:sit she
   Where does she live?

(67) na nuu xehē de tùtu | (Alexander 1988:185)
   what face COM:give he:RES paper
   To whom did he give that paper?

(68) *nuu na xehē de tùtu
   face what COM:give he:RES paper
   (To whom did he give that paper?)

5.2. Inversion in interrogative possessive phrases.

Interrogative possessive phrases also must front and invert much like the data in 5.1.

(69) na sehē kūū xīn | (Alexander 1988:184)
   what child CON:be he:FAM
   Whose child is he?

The published data on Ocotepec Mixtec had only this example for whose. In Ocotepec Mixtec, na is used for what and who. In order to clarify that these are indeed possessors, I also included here data from two other Mixtec languages which illustrate this fronting and inversion. In (70) the noun phrase shō ñaha what person acts as the possessor of doo cloth, and in (71) the possessor is yō who and it has fronted from after the adjective.

(70) shō ñaha doo | (Small 1990:359)
   what person cloth
   whose clothes?

(71) yō tinā lōhō | (Shields 1988:368)
   who dog small:SG
   whose little dog?

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13 Personal conversation with Ruth Mary Alexander, January 2000.
14 Note that na what as a demonstrative would start in specifier of NP position and also undergo inversion.
15 Although (70) and (71) are not complete sentences, the sources that contain them clearly state that they are ordered before the verb (Small 1990:357, Shields 1988:367).
5.3. Aissen’s proposal for Tzotzil.

For both interrogative prepositional phrases and possessive phrases in Tzotzil, Aissen (1996:464, 471) assumes movement of the whole phrase to the specifier of CP with secondary movement to either the specifier of DP or PP. See (72) for an example with DP and (73) for an example of PP.

\[(72)\]
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{CP} \\
\text{DP}\_i \\
\text{DP}\_j \\
\text{D'} \\
\text{D} \\
\text{NP} \\
\text{x-ch'amal} \\
\text{A3-son}\end{array}
\]
\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{C}\_i \{+\text{wh}\} \\
\text{IP} \\
\text{\ldots t}\_i \\
\text{buch'\_u} \\
\text{who} \\
\text{N'} \\
\text{t}\_j \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{\textbf{Aissen} (1996:464) claims these movements are motivated by the need for abstract agreement. In (72) \text{buch'\_u} agrees with \text{D} and \text{DP}\_i through specifier-head agreement and the projection of a head to its phrase. \text{DP}\_i agrees with \text{C}\_i \{+\text{wh}\} because it is in the specifier of CP. By transitivity, \text{C}\_i \{+\text{wh}\} agrees with \text{buch'\_u}. Similarly in (73) \text{buch'\_u} agrees with \text{P} and therefore PP. PP agrees with \text{C}\_i \{+\text{wh}\}. Transitivity again applies and \text{buch'\_u} agrees with \text{C}\_i \{+\text{wh}\}.}
\end{array}
\]

This analysis works for Tzotzil since it is a VOS language. Specifiers of lexical phrases are on the right side, but functional specifiers are on the left side.

However in Mixtec, which is a VSO language, the specifier of the DP on the right is already filled with possessor, as shown in section 2.3. The case is not as clear for the PP, but Mixtec appears to follow Zapotec where all [-V] specifiers are on the right, with [+V] specifiers and extensions of V, like IP and CP, on the left (Black 1994:299-300).

Therefore movement to the specifier of PP and DP is not an option for Mixtec languages.

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\[16\] A3 is third person singular absolutive agreement (Aissen 1996:Appendix).
5.4. Black’s proposal for Zapotec.

At least some Zapotecan languages have an overt $C_{[+q]}$ before the Wh-word or phrase, so Black (1994) argues that the Wh-phrase adjoins to the phrase immediately below $C_{[+q]}$ (either IP or NegP), in a minimal government relationship. This leaves two options available for the secondary movement needed for inversion: to the Spec of $CP_{[+q]}$ or adjoined to the moved Wh-phrase below $C_{[+q]}$. Black (1994:170) provides the following examples and analyses.

(74)  a. In Specifier of CP

(75)  b. Adjoined to the moved phrase below $C^0$

Note that the adjunction option would also be possible if the whole phrase occupies the specifier of $CP_{[+q]}$ position.
5.5. Proposed analysis for Mixtec

I have not found any cases in Mixtec of an overt $C_{[+q]}$ co-occurring with a Wh-phrase. However, examples (76)–(77) show that focused phrases and Wh-phrases cannot co-occur in Mixtec. The focused phrase must be in situ after the verb.

(76) ní tee shi:kó nuni xehe tātā de
which man CON:sell corn foot father he:RES
Who sells corn FOR THE SAKE OF HIS FATHER?

(77) *ní tee xehe tātā de shi:kó nuni
which man foot father his:RES CON:sell corn
(Which man, for the sake of his father, sells corn?)

Example (78) shows that a focused phrase may occur in a yes/no question. It is clear that the position of the focus phrase is below $CP_{[+q]}$.

(78) á xehe tātā de shi:kó de nuni (Alexander 1988:182)
INT foot father his:RES CON:sell he:RES corn
Does he sell corn FOR THE SAKE OF HIS FATHER?

Therefore, I propose that Wh-phrases and focus phrases both occupy the specifier of IP position. I choose the adjunction option for the secondary movement, since the movement to specifier of $CP$ requires an extraction that is not allowed from its original position, as shown by the fact that pied-piping is required.

Tree (79) gives the tree for example (67) with a fronted prepositional phrase.

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17 Examples (76) and (77) are from correspondence with Ruth Mary Alexander, December 1999.
Tree (80) shows the proposed analysis for an interrogative possessive phrase, example (69).

(80)

Note that abstract agreement can still hold in the adjoined structure. It does not explain why the movement must take place in the possessive phrases, however, since the possessor already occupies the specifier of the DP [+wh] on the right, so abstract agreement would hold before the inversion. Some other constraint requiring Wh-phrases to be peripheral must be involved.

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18 Black (1994:171-2) suggests that a ranking of the Wh-Criterion over the ECP may be involved. Broadwell (1999) provides an Optimality Theory account to allow for the variation from the normal order of specifiers, heads, and complements seen in these inversion constructions.
6. Conclusion

I have shown that the VSO surface order of Ocotepec Mixtec can be analyzed in such a way that it falls within the constraints and universals of Government and Binding Theory. I have done this by positing an SVO D-structure with the subject internal to the VP, then raising the verb to the Infl position.

I have then illustrated how Mixtec Yes/No questions are formed, and analyzed the word order in content questions as arising from required movement of the Wh-phrase.

The analysis of Pied-Piping with Inversion accounts for the unique word order required when the Wh phrase is a PP: the whole PP \ [+wh \] must front, then the DP \ [+wh \] object fronts again. Similar fronting with inversion occurs in interrogative possessive phrases. Due to differences in word order and phrase structure between Tzotzil and Mixtec, I was not able to directly utilize Aissen’s (1998) analysis of movement to the specifier of the functional projection. Instead, I propose that the secondary movement adjoins the minimal Wh-phrase to the pied-piped phrase, which occupies the specifier of IP position directly below C\ [+q \] (similar to Black’s (1994) analysis of Zapotec).

Though this proposal provides a structural account for the inversion, an explanation for what motivates the inversion across language families throughout Meso-America is still lacking.

References


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