

Right-shifted wh-words in African Languages: the state of the art

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According to authors such as Greenberg (1966: 82-83, 111), Ultan (1969: 55), Reis & Rosengren (1991: 4), Dayal (1996: 18-19) and Puglielli (1998: 190), most languages of the world put wh-words in wh-questions into the sentence-initial position. Bach (1971: 164) even develops the theory that wh-movement can only proceed to the left, i.e. to the beginning of a sentence.

Due to insufficient data on many African languages, the present study cannot evaluate whether there is a case of rightward wh-movement. To achieve this, one would have to clarify the conditions of wh-movement in every single language. This is possible only if certain syntactic properties are known and certain sorts of example sentences are at hand.

However, the aim of the present study is to summarise which African languages have cases of so-called "right-shifted" wh-words. This means that the wh-word representing the subject or object of a wh-question occurs further right than the corresponding element in a declarative sentence. In this context, it will be argued that only wh-pronouns can be regarded as indicators of such shifts: They normally ask for the subject or the object of a sentence, and these two constituents have relatively fixed positions in the syntax of many languages.

The languages to be discussed can be found, amongst others, in Chadic (Schuh 1982), Surmic (Arensen et al. 1997) and Bantu (Bokamba 1976). Besides that, single languages such as Amharic (Semitic; Fulass 1974) and Limbum (Grassfields Bantu; Fransen 1995) will have to be considered as well. For some of these languages, right-shifted wh-words can be denied. All the others, however, are indeed possible candidates for rightward wh-movement. Thus, the present study aims to collect the latter cases in order to indicate that there are several African languages with uncommon wh-word positions, on which more research is needed.