

The acquisition of wh-questions in Russian

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1. Introduction

How do children acquire the syntax of their first language? Do they construct the grammar based on the input data they have got and apply UG principles, or does it perhaps depend on some biological factors? These and many other questions have been discussed in the literature in the last few decades, but still there are many differing opinions among acquisitionists concerning the problem of acquiring first language.

In this paper, I study the acquisition of wh-questions in Russian by one Russian-speaking child from an early stage of syntactic development. For my analysis, I follow Plunkett (1992:73) in adopting a weak version of the Continuity Hypothesis¹ where all the principles of UG are available from the outset of the acquisition process, but the structure of the functional template must be built up before parameter setting can begin. I adopt this hypothesis due to its compatibility with my finding that in the acquisition of Russian wh-questions, the functional projection CP appears at a later stage of syntactic development than other functional projections. Following Plunkett, I assume that in the beginning, the landing site for the wh-word is [Spec,TP] and later, for the valuation of other features (such as finiteness), the child is forced to acquire another functional projection in order to create a landing site for the wh-word.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 1 briefly describes the Russian system of wh-questions, comparing different types of wh-questions in Russian with English. A syntactic structure for Russian wh-questions is suggested. Section 2 provides some theoretical background on the main Hypotheses of development in language acquisition: Continuity and Maturation. In section 3, I describe some of the methodological decisions made in the process of analysing the data. The data in section 4 are presented in figures and some brief description of the results is provided. In light of the results, and with reference to previous research and issues in acquisition theory, section 5 outlines an analysis which accounts for the acquisition of wh-questions by Russian children. Section 6 provides some conclusions.

¹ The Continuity Hypothesis is proposed by Pinker (1984), who claims that all principles and constructs of UG are available from the outset of the acquisition process.

2. Wh-questions in Russian

As is well known, Russian is a morphologically rich language, and this allows a relatively free word order. In this section I pay particular attention to the word order in Russian wh-questions and consider whether or not Russian is subject to the same restrictions on the formation of wh-questions as other languages. First and foremost, comparison is made with English.

2.1. Wh-expressions in Russian

First, I specify the elements which are considered wh-words in Russian, in order to analyse their use in child speech. These words are interrogative pronouns, which can be classified as follows:

Table 1: Wh-elements

Russian	English	Specification
kto	who	human
chto	what	non-human
kakoj	which	feature
kogda	when	time
kak	how	manner
pochemu, zachem	why, what for	reason
gde, kuda	where	place

These words can fulfil the following functions in a sentence:

Table 2: Functions

Function	Russian	English
Subject	kto chto	who what
Object	chto (Acc.) kogo (Acc.) komu (Dat.) kem (Instr.)	what whom whom whom
Predicate	kakoj kogda kak pochemu zachem gde kuda	which when how why what for where (place) where (direction)

2.2. *Russian wh-questions in comparison with English*

In languages such as German, English etc., the formation of wh-questions involves the fronting of wh-elements; typically, this fronting is obligatory:

- (1) a. Why did you go there?
 b. *Did you go there why?

Sentence (1b) is considered to be ungrammatical because the wh-element is not moved to sentence-initial position. But what about Russian wh-elements? Are they required to move to the initial position in the sentence, or can they occupy any position? What are the main types of wh-questions and what word order is permissible in each of them? I make a distinction between a few types of wh-questions in Russian, which will be discussed one by one.

2.2.1. Object wh-questions

Object wh-questions are questions with a wh-word which occupies object position and which usually carries Accusative case. In Russian, wh-word in object wh-question can occupy different position in the sentence.

- (2) Kogo ty videl?
who.acc. you saw
 ‘Whom did you see?’
 (3) Ty kogo videl?
you whom.acc. saw
 ‘Whom did you see?’
 (4) Ty videl kogo?
you saw whom.acc.
 ‘Whom did you see?’

The structure of the question in (2) is clear: the wh-word moves from within VP to [Spec,CP] to check the [*uwh**] feature².

In (3), the wh-word is lower than the subject. The question is where the landing site for wh-word is in this particular sentence. I assume that in (3) the wh-element still occupies [Spec,CP] and the subject *ty* (you) moves higher and occupies the Topic position, which is above CP. I assume that the upper position is a Topic position because the use of indefinite pronouns like *everyone*, *nobody*, etc. is impossible in these constructions.

² [*uwh**] stands for strong uninterpretable wh-feature.

- (5) *Nikto kogo videl?
nobody whom.acc. saw
 ‘Nobody saw whom?’

Example (4) provides a case where the *wh*-word remains unmoved. It should be noted that in Russian, unlike English, leaving the *wh*-word in-situ does not always create *echo-questions*, which are used for the expression of surprise or amazement, or in order to ask a speaker to repeat a particular word in the sentence. For example in (6), the *wh*-word in-situ does not produce this effect.

- (6) Ty razgovarival s kem?
you talked with who.instr.
 ‘With whom did you talk?’

2.2.2. Subject *wh*-questions

Russian does not have auxiliary verbs and thus subject *wh*-questions do not raise any special problems, as they do in English.³ In Russian, in this type of sentence (see example 7), the *wh*-subject raises from [Spec,vP] to [Spec,TP] in order to check T’s EPP-feature. CP is subsequently merged with a strong [*uwh**] feature and [*uclause-type*] feature, triggering movement of the subject to [Spec,CP].

- (7) Kto prishel na vecherinku?
who.nom. came on party
 ‘Who came to the party?’

2.2.3. Adjunct *wh*-questions

Adjunct *wh*-questions behave the same way as object *wh*-questions: *wh*-word can occupy different positions in the sentence. Thus it can be in the initial position (8), occupy some intermediate position in the sentence as in (9) and (10) where the subject is topicalized, or remain in-situ (11). We can

³ Adger (2003) claims that if we assume the same derivation for subject *wh*-questions as for the object *wh*-questions, then the derivation will be the following: The *wh*-subject raises to [Spec,TP] from vP, then C is merged bearing [Q, *uwh**]. It values [*uclause-type*] on T and triggers T to C movement, then the *wh*-element raises to [Spec,CP]. The movement of T to C breaks the chain between T and *v* and the broken chain requires *do*-support. It is predicted that *do*-support should apply in subject *wh*-questions as well, but it does not (apart from sentences where *do*-support is used for emphasis). Adger (2003) suggests that in this case the subject *c*-commands T and thus checks the [*uclause-type*] feature on T. There is no agreement between T and C and no T-to-C movement takes place. Finally, the subject moves to [Spec,CP] and checks [*uwh**].

see that Russian allows the *wh*-word to occupy any position in the sentence, whereas English does not.

- (8) *Kogda ty prishel domoj?*
when you came home
 ‘When did you come home?’
- (9) *Ty kogda prishel domoj?*
you when came home
 ‘When did you come home?’
- (10) *Ty prishel kogda domoj?*
you came when home
 ‘When did you come home?’
- (11) *Ty prishel domoj kogda?*
you came home when
 ‘When did you come home?’

We can see that Russian allows the *wh*-word to occupy any position in the sentence, whereas English does not.

All the cases above (adjunct-, subject-, object-, and in-situ *wh*-questions) are instances of single *wh*-questions (when only one *wh*-element is present in the sentence). In addition to single *wh*-questions Russian also allows *multiple wh-questions* (where two or more *wh*-elements are present in the sentence).

2.2.4. Multiple *wh*-questions

It is well known that in English, which also allows multiple *wh*-questions, at least one *wh*-element has to remain in-situ (Adger 2003):

- (12) Who showed what?
 (13) *Who what showed?

In Russian, both *wh*-words can move and occupy different positions in the sentence (absorption structure) and the meaning of the sentences is the same. Compare the sentences in (14) and (15).⁴

⁴ It should be noted that there is a difference in presupposition and focus in these two sentences. In the case of (14) there is a set of people (who are known to the speaker), who found something and the speaker wants to specify who found what. In (15), on the other hand, there is something (the set of things) that the speaker knows and she wants to know what was found by whom exactly.

(14) Kto chto nashel?
who.nom. what.acc. found
 ‘Who found what?’

(15) Chto kto nashel?
what.acc. who.nom. found
 ‘Who found what?’

Another issue is that of the *Superiority effect*. Superiority condition assures that the upper and thus the closer element (i.e. subject) will move and be fronted and not the lower element (i.e. object) if both are questioned (Rudin 1986). The Superiority effect is present in various languages, for example in Bulgarian and English (Pesetsky 2000:22).

(16) a. Koj kakvo vizda? (Bulgarian)
who what see
 ‘Who sees what?’
 b. *Kakvo koj vizda?
what who sees
 *‘What does who see?’

Sentences (16) demonstrate the Superiority effect in both Bulgarian and English. According to Pesetsky (2000), the Superiority effect follows from Attract Closest, i.e. the closest (the leftmost) wh-element will move and the second one “must have “tucked in” underneath the first phrase” (Pesetsky 2000:22).

It seems that Russian does not exhibit the Superiority effect at all, and that the wh-word can occupy any position, see the examples in (17).

(17) a. Kto komu chto skazal?
who.nom. who.dat. what.acc. said
 ‘Who said what to whom?’
 b. Komu kto chto skazal?
who.dat. who.nom. what.acc. said
 ‘Who said what to whom?’
 c. Cho komu kto skazal?
what.acc. who.dat. who.nom. said
 ‘Who said what to whom?’
 d. Komu chto kto skazal?
who.dat. what.acc. who.nom. said
 ‘Who said what to whom?’

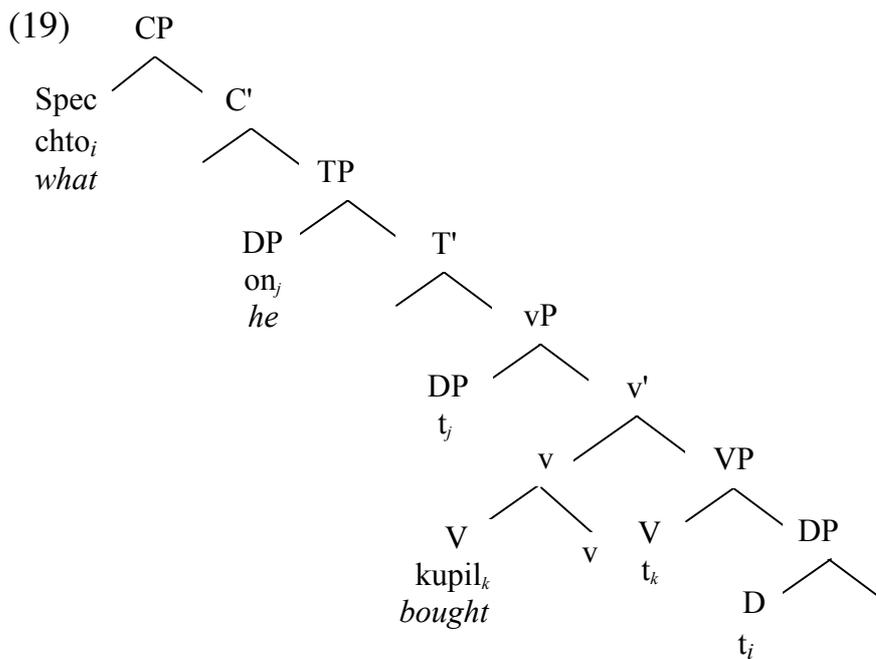
- e. Chto kto komu skazal?
what.acc. who.nom. who.dat. said
 ‘Who said what to whom?’

2.3. The Structure of *wh*-questions

As argued above, the landing site for *wh*-words is [Spec,CP], which targets the movement in order to check the [*uwh**] feature. This is clear in sentences such as:

- (18) Chto_i on kupil t_i?
what he bought
 ‘What did he buy?’

Here, the *wh*-word moves from the complement of V position to [Spec,CP], as in (19).



I will take this structure as the base one for *wh*-questions.⁵

To sum up, Russian allows rather free word order in the formation of *wh*-questions, with the *wh*-element able to occupy any position in the sentence. Russian does not exhibit the Superiority effect and permits movement of more than one *wh*-element to a higher clause.

⁵ I will not propose here the structure for multiple *wh*-questions as it is irrelevant for the present study.

In the next section I will provide some theoretical background on the main Hypotheses proposed to account for children's syntactic development and after that I will present data and the results.

3. Theoretical context

Two principal hypotheses have been proposed in the literature in order to attempt to explain the facts that determine the development of a child's language: the Continuity Hypothesis (Pinker 1984) and the Theory of Maturation (Felix 1984, Borer & Wexler 1987).

The Continuity Hypothesis (Pinker 1984, Hyams 1987) suggests that a child constructs a grammatical system based on the input data she receives, while operating within the principles of Universal Grammar. The child has access to different syntactic structures and functional projections from the very beginning of the acquisition process. The child's speech develops from one stage to the next by acquiring certain elements of the input data which force the child to reorganise the grammar (Guifoyle & Noonan 1992). Essentially, the main idea is that the principles of UG are available from the very beginning and the child applies them when the necessity arises.

According to the Maturation Hypothesis, the stages of development are determined by physical maturational factors, which influence the order of the availability of UG principles (Tsimpli 1991).

Plunkett (1992) argues against the Maturation Hypothesis in favour of the Continuity Hypothesis, suggesting that the Maturation Hypothesis fails to explain the acquisition of functional categories⁶.

Following Plunkett (1992), I will suggest an analysis of the acquisition of wh-question in Russian based on a weak version of the Continuity Hypothesis whereby a child has access to all of the principles of UG from the beginning of the acquisition process. The structure of the functional template, however, must start to be built up in order for parameter setting to begin.

The remaining sections focus on the present study. Section 4 provides the methodological background. Section 5 presents the data which are discussed in section 6.

4. Methodological decisions and procedure

To examine the process of wh-question acquisition by Russian children I investigated all 7 transcripts from the Russian child Varvara (18.5 to 28.5 months) on the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000) and extracted all

⁶ The reader is referred to Plunkett (1992) for the details.

utterances containing wh-questions. After excluding utterances where a wh-element was used as a complementizer in a relative clause, as well as the cases where the child's utterance consisted of only one wh-element (eg. *Why?*), repetitions of adult utterances, and repetitions of one of the child's immediately preceding utterances, this yielded a total number of 282 sentences.

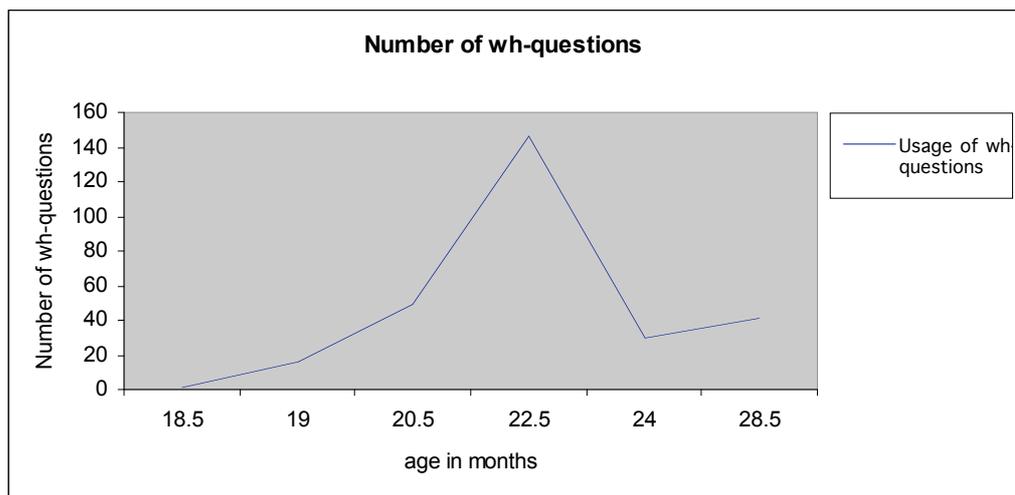
In my presentation of the data, I distinguish between instances where the wh-word is used as subject, object or predicate, and also whether the wh-element is moved or unmoved. I also tried to observe the use of the predicate in wh-questions. I studied the process of constructing the utterances with verbs and distinguished the cases where the child uses a finite/non-finite predicate or does not use it at all and with what frequencies. In the cases where the verb was absent I noted whether or not it was acceptable to omit the verb in adult speech. The type of wh-element was also taken into consideration: I distinguished between nominal and locative wh-words.

5. Data and Results

The figures below show the development of wh-structure in the child's language.

The first figure shows the use of wh-questions in the period from 18.5 to 28.5 months.

FIGURE 1: Number of wh-questions



As can be seen from the figure above, the child first starts using wh-questions at the age of 18.5 months. At the age of 19.0 months, 16 cases of use are observed; at 20.5 months, 49 cases; at 22.5 months, 146 cases; at 24.0 months, 30 cases; at 28.5 months, 41 cases. The use of wh-questions

reaches a peak at the age of 22.5 months. At that age the child uses a variety of questions with different syntactic structures. This can be explained by supposing that the child acquires the knowledge to construct wh-questions and at this point is practising creating them.⁷ After that age, the use of wh-questions decreases.

Studying the structure of the questions, I examined the use of verbs. The figure below depicts this⁸.

FIGURE 2: Use of verbs

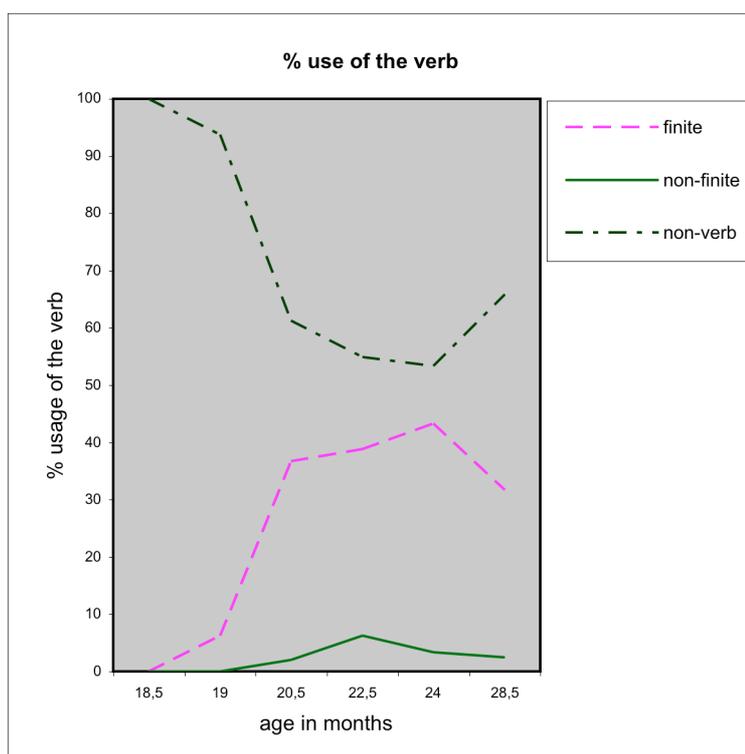


Figure 2 shows that the non-verb use prevails over the use of finite/non-finite verbs and only in the period between 20.5 and 24.0 months does it become more stable. During that particular period, the peak of wh-question use takes place. At this point, the child uses different and more complex sentence structures. Another factor that could explain the non-verb use at the early stage of constructing wh-questions is that the child

⁷ I do not ignore the possibility that it could also simply depend on the activity of Varvara and the parents at that particular time.

⁸ “Non-verb” stands for the absence of the verb where the verb is not obligatory. In these contexts, the verb can be omitted in adult speech as well, and in some cases it cannot be used at all (as in Russian sentences with the copula in the Present tense).

creates questions which contain the copula. The copula must be present in English; Russian, on the other hand, lacks the copula in the present tense.

- (20) De ___ bosjoj? (Varvara 1;6.5)
where ___ big
 ‘Where is the big one?’

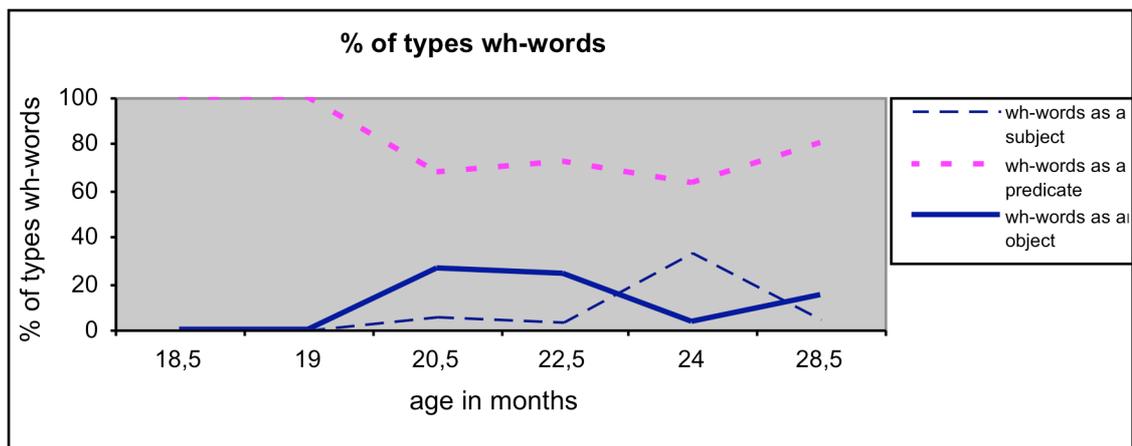
If this sentence is in the past or future tense, the copula must be present:

- (21) Gde byl bolshoj?
where was big
 ‘Where was the big one?’
 (22) Gde budet bolshoj?
where will be big
 ‘Where will be the big one?’

The figure 2 also shows that the use of non-finite verbs is very low in comparison with finite verbs. Russian has a very rich inflectional system and if the child uses the verb it is more likely to be finite than non-finite.

It has been claimed (Radford 1995, Klima & Bellugi 1966, Bowerman 1973, Plunkett 1992) that wh-complement questions appear first, and then at a later stage, subject wh-questions are produced. This is true for Russian as well. The figure below shows the acquisition of different types of wh-words and their frequency of use.

FIGURE 3: Wh-words as a subject, predicate, and object



The figure above shows that the wh-word as a predicate is the most frequently used type, than wh-object, and finally, at the age of 20.5, wh-subject. An analysis of these results is proposed in the next section.

THE ACQUISITION OF WH-QUESTIONS IN RUSSIAN

- (23) De matik, a? (wh-word as a predicate) (Varvara 1;7.13)
where boy a
'Where is the boy?'
- (24) Myska to nisjot? (wh-word as an object) (Varvara 1;8.24)
mouse what.acc. carry
'What is the little mouse carrying?'
- (25) To tut zyvet? (wh-word as a subject) (Varvara 1;10.14)
who.nom. here live
'Who lives here?'

As discussed above (see section 2), Russian allows rather free word order and the wh-word can occupy an initial position (26). The wh-word may also appear after the subject as in (27), in this case the subject is topicalized; and finally it may appear in-situ (28).

- (26) Kogda ty prishel domoj?
when you came home
'When did you come home?'
- (27) Ty kogda prishel domoj?
you when came home
'When did you come home?'
- (28) Ty prishel domoj kogda?
you came home when
'When did you come home?'

In the next three figures I show the nature of the movement of wh-words of different types.

FIGURE 4: Movement of wh-predicate

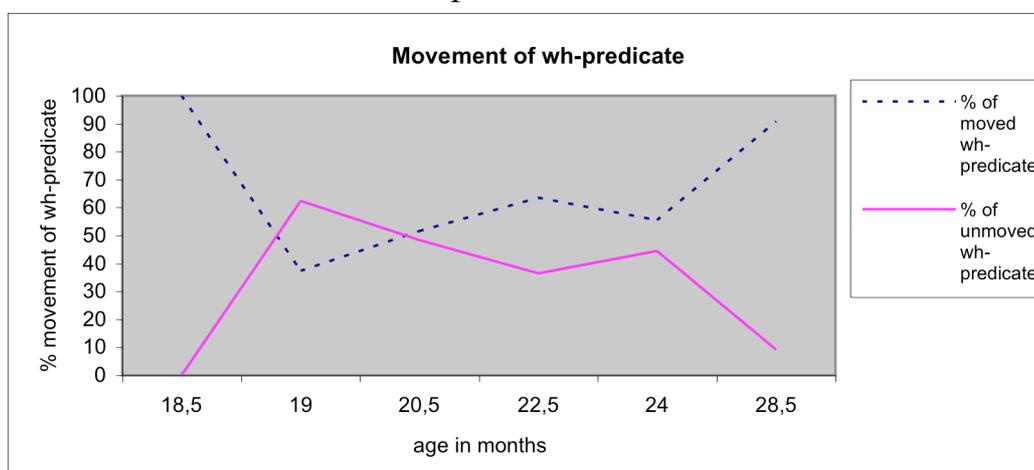


FIGURE 5: Movement of wh-object

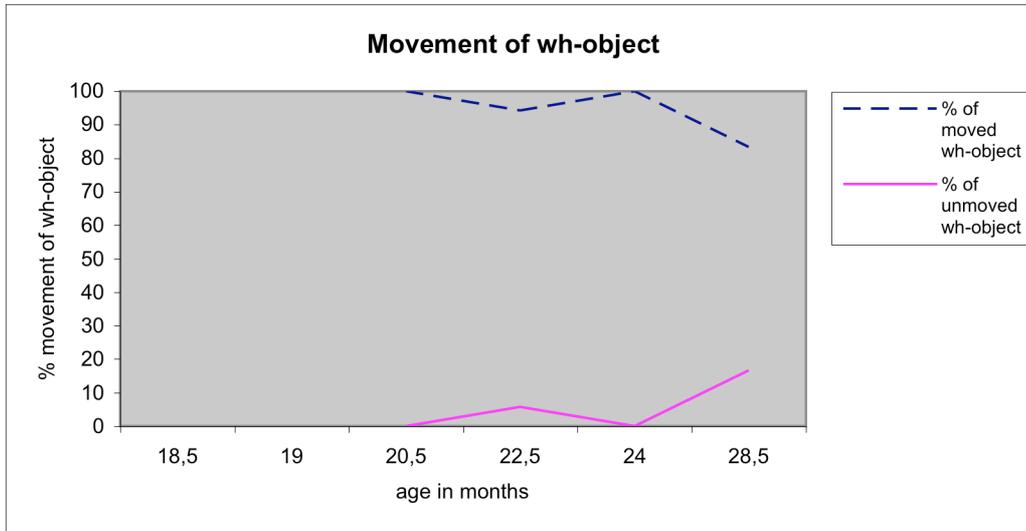
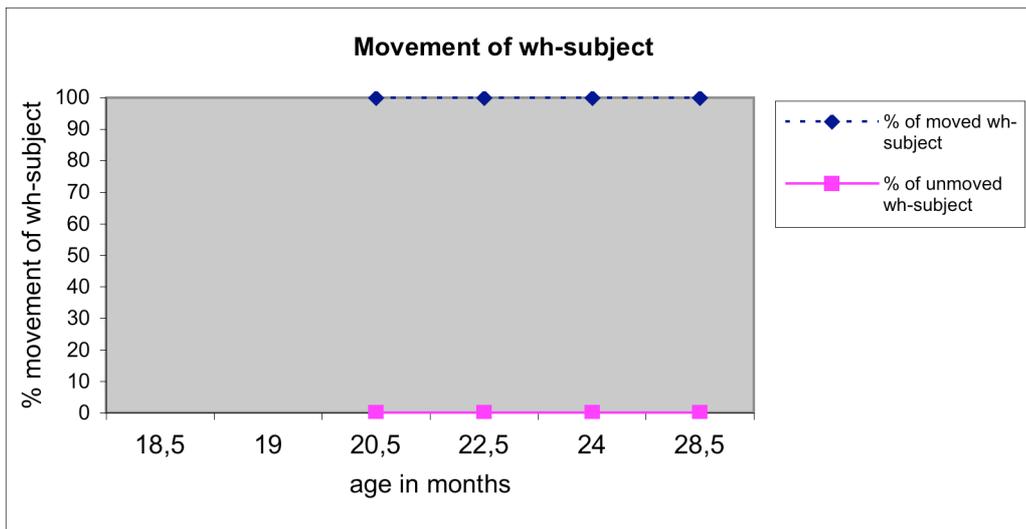


FIGURE 6: Movement of wh-subject



It seems that the child always moves wh-subjects and practically always moves wh-objects.

(29) Kto idet? (moved wh-subject) (Varvara 1;10.14)

who.nom. come

‘Who is coming?’

(30) On xochet med, on, on, on xochet, on xochet chto?

(unmoved wh-object) (Varvara, 1;10.14)

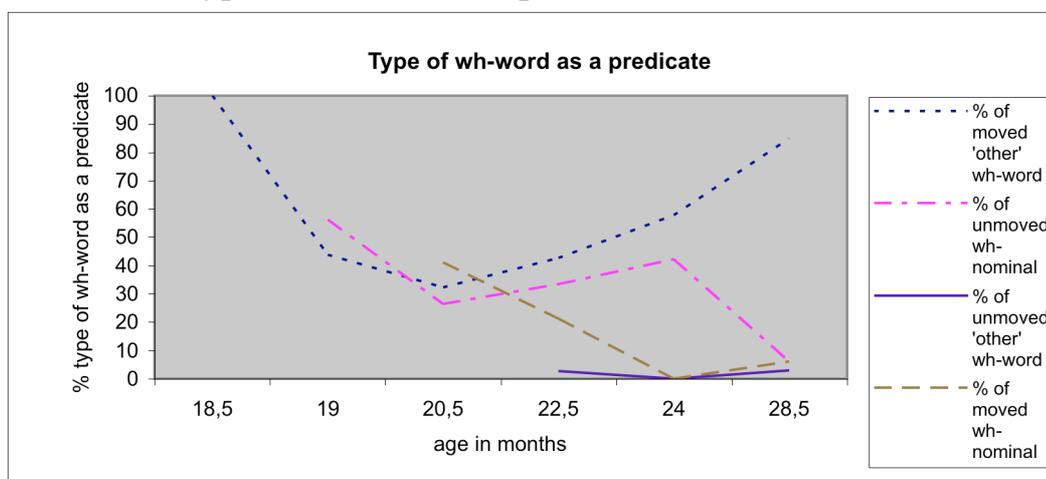
he wants honey, he, he, he wants, he wants what.acc.

‘He wants honey, he, he, he wants, what does he want?’

- (31) *Ālta to lisa deait?* (moved wh-object) (Varvara 1;8.24)
this what.acc.fox do
 ‘And what is the fox doing here?’

The position of the wh-word as a predicate varies. To analyse this phenomenon I offer the following figure, which shows the differences between various wh-words which are used as predicates. In this figure I distinguish between wh-nominal (*This is what?*) and ‘other’ wh-words (*Where is the boy?*)⁹.

FIGURE 7: Type of wh-word as a predicate



At the early stage, ‘other’ wh-words are nearly always moved to initial position: the percentage of unmoved ‘other’ wh-words is very low. Wh-nominals first appear at the age of 19.0 months and remain in-situ. The movement of wh-nominals increases at 20.5 months, at which point the difference between moved and unmoved wh-nominals is not large. What makes ‘other’ wh-words move to the higher position, while wh-nominals are left in-situ? I attempt to find an answer to this question in the following section.

6. Analysis

As reported in the literature, the earliest wh-questions that children produce are typically wh-complement questions (where the wh-word is used as a complement to the verb). Radford (1995) cites examples from Klima & Bellugi (1966) where the first wh-questions were *What cowboy doing?* and

⁹ Under ‘other’ wh-words I include wh-words that are used as predicates and which express manner, locative or temporal meaning, i.e. adjuncts (‘how,’ ‘why,’ ‘when,’ etc.).

Where horses go?. Bowerman (1973) provides examples such as *Where pillow go?* and *Where doggie go?*.

The data illustrated in the previous section show that this is true for Russian as well. I argue that the first wh-questions produced by Russian children are questions in which the wh-words are used as predicates. The first of Varvara's questions contain wh-words which can be specified as 'other' wh-words (*gde, kuda* = 'where,' *kak* = 'how,' *kogda* = 'when') and wh-nominals (*chto, kto* = 'what,' 'who,' e.g. *Eto kto/chto?* = 'This who/what?')¹⁰. The interesting thing about this type of question is that when the child uses 'other' wh-words, she always moves them to initial position and hardly ever leaves them in the base position; wh-nominals on the other hand are left in-situ. How can this be explained?

Let's first compare Russian and English data with respect to adjunct use.

- (32) *Na stole lezhit kniga.*
on table lies book
 'On the table lies the book.'
- (33) *Kogda ty zahochesh menja uvidet', skazhy mne.*
when you want me to see, tell me
 'When you want to see me, tell me.'
- (34) *Vchera ja hodil v magazin.*
yesterday I went in shop
 'Yesterday I went to the shop.'

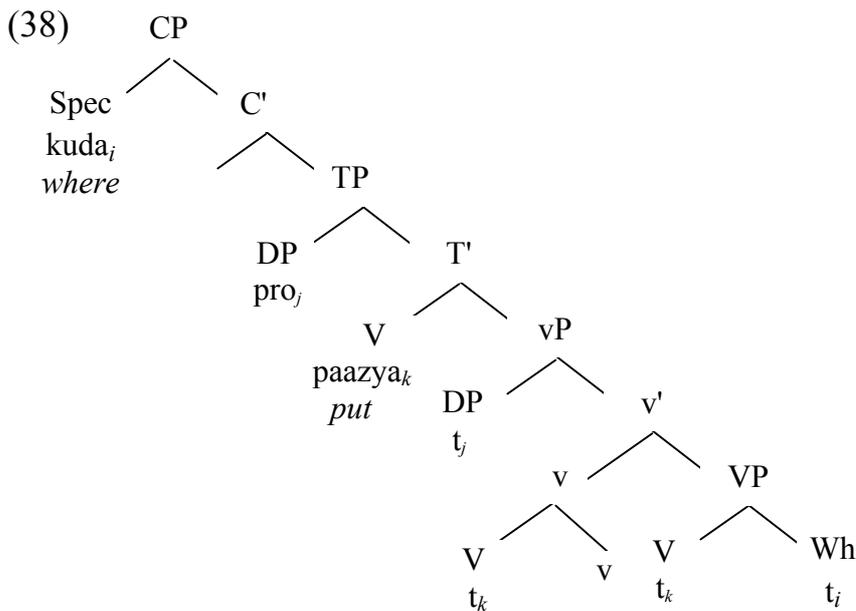
It seems that in both languages the fronting of adjuncts can freely apply. Can this explain the fact that in Russian wh-questions 'other' wh-words move to initial position and wh-nominals do not? As Bernadette Plunkett (pc.) and Anders Holmberg (pc.) propose, this might be the case because the child constructs grammar based on the data she gets from the linguistic environment. If a child frequently hears the fronting of this kind of adjunct in these sentences, the child simply applies the UG principles to the input data and constructs the grammar.

The movement of wh-nominals, on the other hand, takes place at a later stage (20.5 months), when object wh-questions appear. What structure does the child use to construct her early wh-questions? Following Plunkett (1992) I assume that at an early stage the child's grammar does not have a CP projection.

¹⁰ See figure 7.

- (37) Kuda paazyya? (Varvara, 1;7,13)
where put.past.sg.fem.
 ‘Where did you put it?’

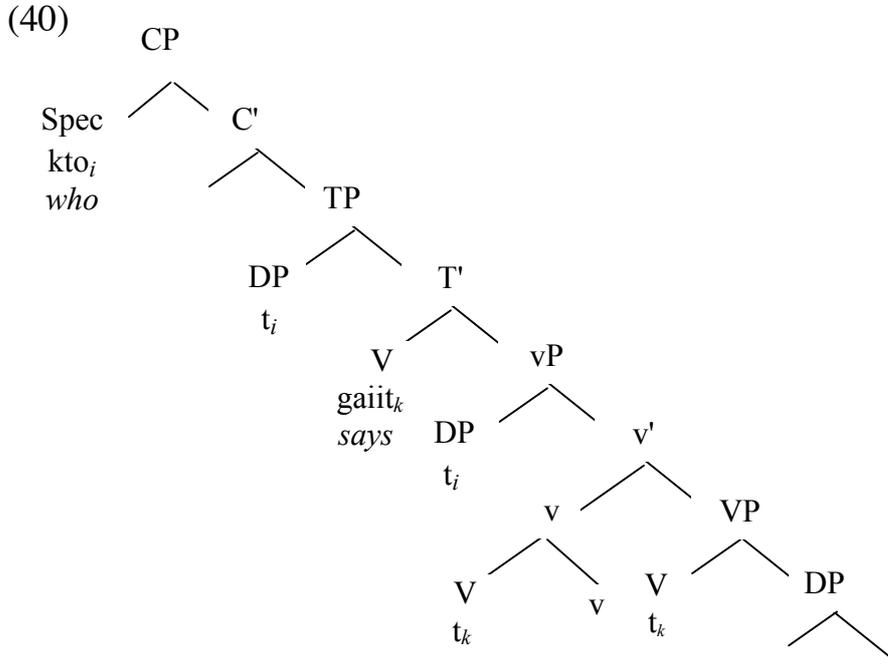
In (37) the subject is not pronounced but the rich inflection on verbs in Russian makes it clear that the subject (*pro*) is present and the verb agrees with it in gender (female) and number (singular). I propose the following structure for (37).



As is seen from (38), the subject moves to [Spec,TP] and the verb raises to T. Since the position that the *wh*-word could potentially occupy is filled, it has to move higher in order to occupy the position above both the subject and the verb. I assume that the presence of an overt verb forces the child to move the verb to T, and to move the subject to [Spec,TP]. This requires the child to generate a new projection because the *wh*-word must move to a position above the subject.

Subject *wh*-questions, as mentioned above, appear in child grammar quite late (the first subject *wh*-question in Varvara’s data appears at 20.5 months). They appear at the stage when the child has already acquired the CP projection. I assume that subject *wh*-questions could not appear earlier because the *wh*-word has to move to [Spec,CP] for checking the [*uwh**] feature, which can be valued by C. If the *wh*-subject does not move to [Spec,CP], then the sentence will be pronounced affirmatively.

- (39) To tak gaait? (Varvara 1;8:24)
who.nom. so say.Pres.3sg.
 ‘Who is saying so?’



In (40), the subject wh-word moves from its base position in [Spec,VP] to [Spec,TP], where it checks the EPP feature. Then CP is merged with the [*uwh**] feature and [*uclause-type*] feature and this triggers movement of the wh-subject to [Spec,CP].

At 20.5-22.5 months the child reaches the stage of development of wh-questions close to the adult pattern and exhibits different types of wh-questions of varying complexity.

7. Conclusions

In this paper I have presented some acquisition data on wh-questions from a Russian child from an early stage of syntactic development. Before providing results and an analysis of child data, I briefly explained theoretical issues concerning wh-questions in Russian. I showed that Russian allows rather free word order in the formation of wh-questions and that the wh-element can occupy many different positions in the sentence. Russian does not exhibit the Superiority effect, permits movement of more than one wh-element to a higher clause, and allows wh-branching in [Spec,CP]. In section 2, I provided some theoretical background to the Continuity Hypothesis, a weak version of which was adopted for my analysis. This approach claims (according to Plunkett 1992) that although all the principles of UG are available from the very beginning of language

acquisition, the structure of the functional template starts to be built up before parameter setting begins. The rest of the paper presented the results and analysis of the data which were taken from the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000). In the analysis, I showed that the first wh-questions acquired by the child are wh-complement questions in the construction of which the child posits some projection YP (which can be associated with TP) in order to generate a wh-question. I assume that the appearance of the CP projection is forced by the use of finite verbs, which in Russian have to move to T, while the subject moves to [Spec,TP] (where the verb and the subject check features and agree). Thus, the [Spec,TP] landing site previously used for the wh-word is occupied and this forces the child to generate another functional projection, CP. When the CP projection is acquired by the child, she starts to produce subject wh-questions, and by the age of 2;4.14, the child's structure of wh-questions is close to that of adult speech.

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