Language contact between Basque and French: embedded questions
Sergio Monforte
(UPV/EHU)

Keywords: Syntax, wh-questions, Basque, French

This abstract presents data of language contact between Basque and French concerning the movement of the inflected verb in embedded questions. It is an acknowledged fact in the grammar of Basque that wh-word and inflected verb must be adjacent not only in matrix clauses but also in embedded ones:

1) Non utzi diozu aitari oparia?
   Where leave AUX father.DAT gift.ABS
   ‘Where did you leave the gift to dad?’

2) Ez dakit non utzi diozun aitari oparia.
   Not know where leave AUX.C father.DAT gift.ABS
   ‘I don’t know where you left the gift to dad.’

This adjacency has been explained in the literature of the Basque grammar by terms of checking features; so I₀ has a [wh] feature which has to check with the wh-word moved to [spec, CP] and this makes I₀ move to C₀.

The deep contact between Basque and French in these days is causing changes in the varieties of the Basque Country in France. One piece of evidence comes from the non-adjacency between wh-word and inflected form in embedded clauses, for instance:

3) Badakit noiz Beñat Pariserat joanen den. (Norantz 2009)
   CL.know when Bernard Paris.ADL go.FUT AUX.C
   ‘I know when Beñat will go to Paris.’

4) Ez dakit nun ote kazeta utzi dudan.
   Not know where P newspaper.ABS leave AUX.C
   ‘I don’t know where I left the newspaper.’

As shown above, the adjacency between I₀ and C₀ is not anymore a requirement in these varieties of Basque; just as in French, the I₀ does not trigger movement to C₀:

5) J’ai demandé où Jean a laissé les clés
   I.AUX asked where Jean AUX left the keys
   ‘I asked where John left the keys.’

Following Adger (2003), this variation can be explained through the dichotomy “strong/weak features”. Therefore, we conclude that the strong feature [uwh*] of I₀ has become (or, at least, is becoming) a weak feature [uwh] in these varieties.

This pattern can be found in Basque native speakers who grown up as Basque speakers but in a more and more French environment. Indeed, this could be the previous stage of the production of in situ questions found among young Basque speakers in the same area (Duguine & Irurtzun 2014).

Duguine M. & A. Irurtzun, 2014, “From obligatory Wh-movement to optional Wh in situ in Labourdin Basque”, Language 90.1