Word order changes in Basque constituent questions

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Unlike Modern Basque (MB), Old Basque (OB; archaic & classical Basque: 16-17th c.; SOV) does not systematically display adjacency between *wh*-phrases and the finite verb in constituent questions (Lakarra 1996; Aldai 2011):

(1) Nok   esperanzeen kontra pekatu egiten dau?
     who.ERG hopes.GEN   against sin   make AUX

     Who sins against hope?   [Kapanaga 1656]

We argue that this signals that a change happened in the syntax of Basque: while OB had *wh*-movement (Duguine and Irurtzun 2014), movement of the verb to the CP domain (V-to-C) came later, producing the 'residual' V2 effects observed in MB (Ortiz de Urbina 1995).

A multifactorial explanation. We propose that a variety of linguistic phenomena result in (superficial) *wh*-V adjacency in OB ([1]-[3] below), which was then reanalized as a strict requirement on verb-movement, a change fostered by contact with Romance languages.

1. Cliticization of finite V. Aldai (2011) shows that in *wh*-interrogatives, synthetic verbs almost always surface right-adjacent to the *wh*-phrase, and suggests an explanation in terms of a cliticization requirement on finite verbs: while auxiliaries cliticize onto the lexical verb, synthetic verbs attach to a 'focused' constituent. We show that this also accounts for (i) word-order facts of declaratives where, as in e.g. (2) the synthetic *doa* is not clause-final while the auxiliary *duzue* is, as well as (ii) the *V1 constraint that holds over finite verbs.

(2) [...] [zuen aitzinean doa   Galileara]: [han hura ikusiren duzue].
         your front.in   1sgABS.go Galilee.to there him see.FUT 3sgABS.AUX.2plERG

     [...] he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.   [Leizarraga 1571]

Under phenomena 2-3, analytic verbs also display *wh*-V adjacency. ***2. Aux-raising.*** In negative clauses, auxiliaries move (together with the negative marker) to a higher position (Laka's (1990) ΣP), thus surfacing on the immediate right of the *wh*-phrase in interrogatives:

(3) Nor ez-ta   hire   beldur izanen, Iauna ...
     who NEG-3sgABS.AUX you.GEN scare   be.FUT Lord

     Who will not be afraid of you, Lord...   [Leizarraga 1571: Revelation XV.4]

3. Three-way pro-drop. Omission of subject and object pronouns has the effect that *wh*-phrases often appear adjacent to the *wh*-phrase, albeit only in a superficial way:

(4) [...] Iauna, noiz *pro pro* ikusi augu   goserik   [...]
         Lord   when   see 2sgABS.AUX.2plERG hungry.PART

     [...] Lord, when did we see you hungry [...]   [Leizarraga 1571: Matthew XXV.37]

Contact with V2-grammars. Basque has been in contact with Latin and then Romance varieties uninterruptedly (though in varying degrees) since the latinization period, and their mutual structural influence has been largely established (Menéndez Pidal 1950; Michelena 1974; Landa 1995; Echenique 2005; Marcus 2010; Gómez Seibane 2020; Ledgeway 2020). Around the 16th c., Basque cohabits especially with Spanish, Gascon and Navarrese Romance (Lakarra and Mounole 2018). We explore the hypothesis that the verb-movement reanalysis has been fostered by contact with Romance languages, characterized by a prevalence of a general V2-grammar in older stages and residual V2-effects in modern stages –retained in particular in *wh*-interrogatives– (Thurneysen 1892; Benincà 2004; Salvi 2012; Wolfe 2019). We also argue that cliticization of synthetic verbs in Basque is a similar process as observed by Thurneysen (1892) for the emergence of general V2 effects in Old French (and Old Romance). Accordingly, in a first step, auxiliaries were cliticized onto the first element in the sentence, and this cliticization was subsequently extended to all finite verbs. In sum, MB's V2-effects are thus not 'residues' of an earlier V2-grammar, but are rather an emergent property resulting in part from contact with grammars with V2 or residual V2.

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