

The Spanish complex interrogative pronouns *el qué* and *lo qué* ‘what’

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The use of the complex interrogative pronoun *el qué* ‘what’, which alternates with the neutral interrogative *qué* ‘what’ in certain contexts, is documented in all varieties of Spanish. The use of *lo qué* occurs in the Spanish of Spain, Argentina and Uruguay, although with differences in the way it is assigned to certain levels of language and in the normative judgement that speakers make about it. The aim of this talk is to describe the interpretative and distributional properties of these complex interrogatives, with special attention to the type of questions in which they appear, and to propose an analysis of their internal structure to explain the combination of the article *el* ‘the_{masc.sg}’ / *lo* ‘the_{neuter.sg}’ with the neuter *qué* ‘what’. None of these issues have been addressed until now.

El qué and *lo qué* alternate with *qué* ‘what’ when asking about non-human entities or expressions with propositional content which have been previously mentioned in discourse, are part of the shared knowledge of the interlocutors or are strongly presupposed. They are not used, instead, when the speaker asks for information of which s/he is completely unaware or about the existence of which s/he has no presuppositions. Thus, three types of interrogatives admit the presence of *el qué/lo qué* in a characteristic way: a) echo or metalinguistic questions, with which the speaker asks the interlocutor to repeat what he has just said because he has not heard it clearly or has not understood it properly (1), sometimes associated with a (pseudo)exclamatory interpretation (2); b) clarifying interrogatives, which ask about an argument already introduced in the discourse (3); and c) truncated indirect interrogatives, where the sentence is elided and the interrogative refers to some argument of the previous context (4):

- (1) MARTÍN: *¿No vieron a Fausto?*

LETICIA: *¿Lo qué?*

MARTÍN: *Fausto, si no lo vieron.*

(Sarser, M., *Los modernos*, Uruguay)

‘–Didn’t you see Faust? –**What?** –Faust, I ask if you didn’t see him.

- (2) *–¿Que le ha prometido al matusalén ese el qué?*

–Ya lo ha oído.

–Lo habrá dicho en broma, espero.

(Ruiz Zafón, *La sombra del viento*, España)

‘–That matusalem has been promised **what?** –You’ve heard it. –You must have been joking, I hope.’

- (3) SIRENA: *¿Dónde está?*

ÁGUILA: *¿Dónde está, lo qué?*

SIRENA: *Mi esmalte.*

(Merelli, *Nidito de amor*, Argentina)

‘–Where is it? –Where’s **what?** –My nail polish.’

- (4) *¿Su biopsia? Sí, el doctor me dijo algo acerca de ella, pero ahora he olvidado el qué*

‘Your biopsy? Yes, the doctor told me something about it, but now I have forgotten **what?**’. (*El Mundo*, España)

On the other hand, *el qué/lo qué* ‘what’ are not usually used in neutral or canonical questions, which ask for new information and whose domain is not contextually restricted. The very rare documented examples of this use are associated with a very strong presupposition about the existence of what is being asked about. Thus, the questioner in (5) probably has before his eyes the work started by E2. Nor are *el qué/lo qué* ‘what’ possible in the *aggressively-non-D-linked* interrogatives, used when the

speaker considers that there is no accessible answer in the universe of discourse and explicitly excludes all possible answers that are familiar to him/her (6):

- (5) E1: ¿**El qué** va a hacer?
 E2: Una chaqueta.
 ‘–What are you doing? –A jacket’. (Oral, Guadalajara, España)
- (6) ¿(***El**) **qué diablos** quiere decir esto?
 ‘**What the hell** does that mean?’

Our analysis is based on the fact that the complex forms *el qué* and *lo qué* are anaphoric expressions, in a broad sense, while the neutral interrogative pronoun *qué* has both anaphoric and non-anaphoric value. Adopting the Determiner Phrase Hypothesis, we start from the idea that pronouns are determiners and project a DP (Cardinaletti 1994, Cardinaletti and Starke 1999, Dechaine and Wiltschko 2002, van Koppen 2012). We also assume that interrogative words consist of at least one interrogative operator that introduces the variable and a specific meaning that restricts its range (Bosque and Gutiérrez-Rexach 2009: 442, Reis 2012: 7, Beck and Reis 2018: 404), and that both semantic components have a syntactic embodiment. We use the proposal on DP structure by Zamparelli (2000), who distinguishes a DP1 level for strong or definite determiners and a DP2, which houses indefinites of non-specific interpretation, which rise to DP1 when they are specific. Finally, we assume that interrogative pronouns and adverbs are existential indefinites with an added feature of interrogative illocutionary force. Under these assumptions, our proposal on the internal structure of *el qué* and *lo qué* is as follows:

- (7) a. [DP1 Ø [DP2 qué [NP Ø_[-hum]]]]
 b. [DP1 qué_i [DP2 t_i [NP Ø_[-hum]]]]
 c. [DP1 el/lo [DP2 qué [NP Ø_[-hum]]]]

The interrogative indefinite *qué* ‘what’ can have anaphoric value –when the proposition or entity alluded to has been mentioned or is strongly presupposed– or non-anaphoric –if it asks for information that is not available at all. This difference is captured by assuming that *qué* remains in DP2 in the second case (7a) but rises to DP1 in the first (7b). *El* and *lo* are explicit marks of anaphoricity and occupy the core position of DP1 (7c); thus, complex forms always have anaphoric value and are restricted to contexts compatible with this value. This analysis reflects the fact that the anaphoric *qué* and the complex forms *el qué* and *lo qué* have the same reading. The variation is not, therefore, in the meaning, but is lexical in nature: it consists in choosing between the form without article and the forms with article, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in choosing as marker of anaphoricity the masculine form of the definite article (the unmarked gender present in adjectives with neutral pronouns: *Eso es nuevo* ‘that_{neuter} is new_{masculine.sg}) or the neutral form *lo*, in which case two “semantically” neutral lexical items are combined (*lo qué*).

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