

QUESTION FORMATION IN NKALAGU

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Abstract

Question is a universal phenomenon. However, the structures of questions and the derivational strategies for realizing them are not uniform across languages. Two main types of questions Wh-questions and 'Yes/No' questions have been identified in languages. One of the central issues in wh-question has been the question parametric setting – that a language is restricted to either in-situ or movement of the wh-element. On the part of polar questions, the question of movement and insertion of question particle has been topical. This paper examines question formation in Nkalagu dialect of Igbo with the aim of locating it in the universal assumptions of question. Data representing the question forms present in the dialect, as it relates to wh- and polar questions, were drawn and analysed using the descriptive method. Findings of the study show that both ex-situ and in-situ parameters are attested in the grammar of the dialect, challenging the assumption of binarity in the parametric setting of wh-syntax in languages. Furthermore, the dialect is found to employ a question particle – a phonosyntactic iterated vowel of the final word of the sentence – to mark Yes/No questions. The last vowel of the last word in the sentence, irrespective of the word category, is iterated to indicate polar question. This is significant because it counter-exemplifies the attested Standard Igbo strategy of lowering the tone on the ponominal subject or a resumptive pronoun, resulting from left-dislocation of a referential subject.

Keywords: wh-question, polar questions, content questions, Nkalagu dialect, question formation.

1. Introduction

The Igbo language is a Nigerian language spoken by the Igbo. The Igbo are found in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. The language consists of many distinct dialects. However, the dialectal distinctions notwithstanding, some levels of mutual intelligibility exist among the speakers of the different dialects. It is on the backdrop of the above fact that Emenanjo (2015:2) asserts:

Since all Igbo dialects derive from one proto-Igbo language, they share lots of grammatical, lexical and phonological features in common. Yet, as would be expected, they do differ in certain grammatical, lexical and phonological details. But these differences do not inhibit effective communication or mutual intelligibility.

Emenanjo's explanation implies that the existence of many dialects/variants of the Igbo language does not hinder the Igbo from communicating effectively.

One aspect in which the Igbo language varies is in its interrogative grammar. That is, Igbo speaker of different dialectal backgrounds are capable of asking questions using different patterns. It is based on this fact that this study conceived and carried out. It is, therefore, the interest of this study to examine the morphosyntax of interrogatives in the Nkalagu dialect of Igbo.

Interrogative sentence is a sentence that asks question, hence it is also referred to as question sentence. Cobbina (2013: 1) defines question sentence as "the type of sentence used to elicit information that may or may not be known and to seek for clarification of what has already been uttered". The implication of Cobbina's definition is that questions do not always suggest ignorance, as the answers to the question may be known or unknown to the interrogator. It, therefore, shows that interrogatives may be used to obtain new information, get clarification on obscure issues or simply conform or reinforce what is already known.

Question is a universal feature of all languages. In other words, all languages confers the speakers the capability to ask questions. However, just as we already note of the Igbo language, that various dialects realise questions using varying patterns.

Taxonomically, scholars classify questions into two types, based on the expected answers and the structural derivations. They are:

- i. Yes-No question (a closed-ended question whose answer is restricted to either yes or no)
- ii. Wh-question (an open-ended question, realised with a question word, and requiring a content answer)

These question types exhibit principles or universal features that cut across languages and parameters or parametric features that are language-specific.

This work examines question formation in Nkalagu dialect of Igbo, Nwaozuzu (2008) groups Nkalagu dialect along with Eha-Amufu, under the Northern Group of Dialects (NGD). The dialect is unique because it exhibits some features that are not present in the Standard Igbo (SI). For instance, Nkalagu has the front spread half-open vowel, /ɛ/ as the ninth vowel. This vowel sound is absent in the Standard Igbo. Again the consonants voiced velar fricative /ɣ/, which is present in the standard Igbo, is absent in the Nkalagu dialect. Comparatively, the dialect also exhibits several other parametric variations, including in its question formation. This study, therefore, aims at investigating the morphosyntactic formation of interrogatives in the dialect. In doing this, the study seeks to identify the question markers, as well as the derivational strategies, for both the wh-questions and polar questions in the dialect. This is considered significant in the hope that the findings will add to and enrich greatly the available data and literature relating to grammar of questions in the Igbo language.

2. Previous Studies on Questions and Interrogative

The content and polar question forms have their characteristic features – with which they are described in different languages. The Yes/No, hereafter, 'polar' questions are questions that ideally accept 'yes' or 'no' as answers. Cobbina (2013: 21) asserts that polar questions are questions that look at responses from the perspective of a polar continuum with the opposite ends being 'yes' or 'no'. He maintains that polar questions are question types that require the confirmation or the denial of a proposition using a simple 'yes' or 'no' answers. However, Dixon (2012: 425) argues that the term Yes/No question is inappropriate. For him, some languages lack the term 'yes' and 'no'. He, therefore, defines 'Yes/No' type of question as question inquiring whether or not a proffered statement is correct. He cites an instance from an Australian language called 'Yidin' which requires 'a full clause with predicate and appropriate core as a response to polar questions.

Several languages have different ways of forming their polar questions. Dixon (2012) cited in Cabbina (2013: 29) has it that "the strategies for forming polar questions in languages are numerous and can be broadly grouped into intonation, introduction of a question particle, word order and a combination of these strategies". Similarly, Ikekeonwu (1987), cited in Nwankwegu and Nwode (2020, pp. 50-51), identifies three basic procedures readily available to languages for expressing their Yes/No questions, which she refers to as 'Definitive Answer Questions (DAQ)', as including: (a) Word-order re-organisation, usually involving the inversion of the position of the subject and verb, as in English and French; (b) The Insertion of question marker or segment, which could be in form of a single lexical item or phrase, or particle, and (c) The use of suprasegmental features of intonation (as in English) or tone (as in Igbo). However, there could be more to the above listed strategies. Also worthy of note is the fact that polar questions are derived from their declarative counterparts.

For Nwankwegu (2015), yes/no question formation in Igbo is more complicated than what is described above. Nwankwegu tries to formulate a uniform operation that accounts

for all the instances of Yes/No question derivation in Igbo. In his own view, Nwankwegu (2015, p.207) maintains that in all instances of yes/no question derivation in Igbo, movement is obligatory. This movement, according to Nwankwegu, is obvious only when the subject-DP is referential or sentential, which is why it is generally acknowledged in the literature. However, Nwankwegu (2015, p.208) argues that the same operation also takes place even when a non-referential/sentential element occurs as the subject. He contends that in this case (where subject is a pronominal element/PE), the PE also has to move leftward for the Q-feature on its D-head to be checked-off against that of C, in keeping with the Principle of Full Interpretation (FIP). He posits that it is this same Q-operator force that is responsible for the movement of the wh-phrase to C-domain in wh-question. Nwankwegu (2015), therefore, argues that the obligatory low tone on the characteristic resumptive pronoun and on the wh-elements is fallout of this operation. This is to say that the obligatory low tone seen on the resumptive pronoun as well as on wh-elements in Igbo yes-no questions and wh-questions, respectively, is neither accidental nor coincidental (see Nwankwegu 2015, pp.207-214 for more details on this line of thought).

Though the content question is recognized across languages, different languages have equivalent words or structures with which they represent the question words. In several languages, the Q-words undergo movement and this is described by the transformational Grammar (TG). This work does not intend to go into transformational grammar. The work is limited to a descriptive analysis questions. The wh-elements are said to be in their natural position when they are at the right-most position or in-situ position in sentences. There are however cases where the wh-words elements occupy the left most position or non-in-situ position. This is also referred to as the syntactic wh- form. The principle of move -a takes care of all kinds of sentential movement involved because it allows anything to be moved to anywhere in the sentence.

Across languages, several researches have been done on the nature and behaviour of interrogatives (questions), particularly, in the Igbo language. Here we look at works of some Igbo scholars on the subject matter, such as Uwalaka (1991), Ndimele and Efere (2003) Ndimele (2003), Maduagwu (2012), Angitso and Anuradu (2012), Nwankwegu (2015) and Nwankwegu and Nwode (2020).

In her work on wh-movement in Igbo, Uwalaka (1991) observes that move-wh is evident in Igbo. She notes that Igbo has both the syntactic wh-movement and the logical form (LF) wh-movement structures. As such, Igbo cannot be classified with English that has the syntactic wh-movement structure. The syntactic wh-movement structure places the wh-word at the sentence initial position. Likewise, Igbo cannot be classified with Chinese and Japanese that has the LF wh-movement structure. LF wh-movement structure is the structure that places the wh-words at sentence final position. This is because the Igbo language operates both structures. Uwalaka therefore, suggests a third type of the move-wh languages as against the two already identified. She then represents the three types as:

- ± syntactic wh-movement (Igbo/French-type languages)
- + syntactic wh-movement (English-type of languages)
- _ syntactic wh-movement (Chinese/Japanese-type languages)

The Igbo-French type shares some but not all the properties of each of the other language types.

Ndimele and Efere (2013) observe in Bumo-lzon a similar behaviour to the Igbo's, in terms of not fitting into any of the widely accepted parametric sets. According to them, there are three ways of expressing wh-questions in Bumo-lzon. One of such ways is to allow the interrogative words to remain in their base-generated position; the second is to optimally move them into the specifier of C⁰ in clause-peripheral position, and the third is to move interrogative phrase to the right of the verb. They conclude that any of these options is grammatical, and that they are all normal ways of forming wh-questions in Bumo-lzon. Again,

Ndimele (2003) observes that the widely-held view that the occurrence of a *wh*-phrase at the left most edge of a sentence is a result of an obligatory overt *wh*-movement is not completely so with African languages. He therefore suggests that the *wh*-parameter must not be conceived in terms of binary choice. This is because there is no sharp distinction between *wh*-in-situ and non-*wh*-in-situ languages. The implication of the above is that beyond the in-situ and non-*wh*-in-situ languages, there are other forms of the *wh*-parameter. For instance, languages like Igbo and French cannot be termed in-situ or non-in-situ languages as both parameters are grammatical in the languages.

Nwankwegu (2015) holds a somewhat different view from the Ndimele's above, regarding the grammaticality of ex-situ and in-situ *wh*-elements in Igbo. He has argued that, In Igbo, instances of *wh*-in-situ mechanism observed on the surfaces are cases of what he terms "Interrogative predicate in-situ question" (IPIQ), in which case the *wh*-in-situ is licensed by some underlying the yes-no question mechanism, or "Declarative predicate in-situ question" (DPIQ) in which case the *wh*-in-situ is interpreted based on pragmatic factors. Therefore, according to him, "the so-call *wh*-in-situ strategy in Igbo is parasitic; having no independent syntactic life of its own." (Nwankwegu 2015, p. 182). However, as it relates to this present study, Whatever substance Nwankwegu's (2015) argument may hold, we will not pursue or appreciate that line of thought any further, given that our approach here is simply descriptive.

3. Methodology

All data presented and analysed in this work are drawn from competent native speakers the Nkalagu dialect, through direct elicitation method. The data are presented in tripartite syntactic layers, in which case the interrogative forms in the dialect (Nkalagu) are represented in the first lines, the morphosyntactic glossing on the second and the interpretative/English gloss on the last line.

The Igbo language operates the SVO structure as its basic word-order pattern. Any other variation in word-order pattern found in the language is simply a case of derivation from this basic word-order pattern. All our analysis applied to the simple SVO sentence pattern. The question strategies instantiated in this study, as applied on these basic forms may, however, vary in relation to their various corresponding derived/transformed forms which we do not examine.

Tone plays a very vital semantic role in Igbo questions (Uwalaka 1991, Mbah 2011, Emenanjo 2015). Therefore, besides explaining their roles in the analyses, tones are also marked in this work. In marking the tones, the full-marking convention is used – all tone-bearing units are marked, particularly, the question words.

4. Data analysis

Our analysis of questions in Nkalagu is done under the following two headings: wh-questions and polar questions. We will, as clarity demands, make reference to Standard Igbo data, to further establish our observations.

4.1 Wh-Questions

The main goal of this section is to present and analyse wh-question data, showing the wh-elements/morphemes in operation, and their distributions (the privileges of occurrence), with regards to the ex-situ/in-situ description of the standard and other varieties of the Igbo language.

The wh-question elements in Igbo have both the standard and dialectal variants. This is true of Nkalagu and the Standard Igbo varieties. Therefore, some marginal variations exist between the standard and Nkalagu (dialectal) forms of the wh-question elements, as shown below:

Standard Igbo	Nkalagu variants	English gloss
ónyé	ónyé	Who
ńké ólé	òhú ole/anya ole	which
màkà gini	màkà gúnū	why
étù ólē anáá	gẹẹ òlé	how
gini	gunū	what
m̀gbè ólè	m̀gbé òlé	when
èbéé	wéé	where

The Nkalagu wh-elements, just as their Standard Igbo variants, occur both in the in-situ position and the non-in-situ position. In the in-situ position, the question element is the complement of the verb (1); whereas in the non-in-situ position, the question element is a pre-subject position (2), except in a case where the subject element is questioned (3), in the case of which the wh-element is actually base-generated in its position – no movement applies; at least on the surface.

1. Í bù òhýe?
 2sg be who
 You are who?
2. Ònyé bú í bù?
 Who Comp 2sg be
 Who are you?
3. Onye la-abia?
 Who Prog-come
 Who is coming?

In the non-in-situ position, to borrow the transformational analysts' description, the wh-morpheme is moved to the specifier of the complementizer phrase (CP) with an

intervening element (a complementizer) *bù* separating it from the subject (4). This position makes it appear on the surface as though it is the subject of the sentence. It is believed by the transformationalist that the movement of the wh-morphemes leaves a trace (*t*) at the extraction site (that is the in-situ position from where it is moved). The trace is usually co-indexed with the moved wh-element. See example (4) below:

4. Ònyé bù í bù ?
 Who_i Comp 2sg(subj) be _{t_i}
 ↑
 Who are you?

Examples (5)- (10) – where (6) is the ex-situ form of (5), (8) of (7), and (10) of (9) – further illustrate the descriptions in (1) – (3) above.

5. Ì rùrù gúnù?
 2sg work-pst -what
 You worked what?
6. Gúnù bù I rùrù?
 What Comp 2sg work-pst
 What did you work?
7. Ì jéré wée?
 2sg go-pst where
 You went where?
8. Wèè bú i jéré?
 Where Comp 2sg go-pst
 Where did you go to?
9. Ì shìrù òhú ólé
 2sg cook-pst one¹ which
 you cooked which one?
10. Òhú ólé bù í shìrù
 One which Comp 2sg cook-pst

¹ One here is a pronoun substituting for an entity/something of a specified kind or distribution of same being pointed at.

Which one did you cook?

From the examples above, the only variations observed between the Nkalagu wh-question patterns and those of the Standard Igbo variety lies only in the lexical/pharasal variation in the wh-elements employed, and other phonological variations which cut across other elements in the structure.

4.2 Polar Questions

Scholars have identified two strategies of forming Yes/No in the Igbo language (Ikekeonwu 1987, Oluikpe 1978, Mbah 2011, Nwala & Nwankwegu 2013, Emenanjo 2015): namely, the insertion of the “pronoun in apposition to the subject-NP and the use of an obligatory low tone on this pronoun. Mbah (2013, p. 181) summarises the strategies thus:

11.

Either

Move NP to SPEC yielding a resumptive pronoun

OR

Superimpose C' on subject thereby reducing its tone pattern to low irrespective of its inherent tone pattern. (p.181).

It is pertinent to note that a combination of these two strategies actually applies when deriving a polar question from a declarative sentence whose subject-NP is a named entity or a nominal clause, On the other hand, when the Subject-NP is a pronoun, only the second strategy applies.

It is interested to note that neither of the established Igbo polar question formation strategies above is attested in Nkalagu. The same observation (of non-attestation of these general strategies of Igbo yes/no question formation) has also been made in Mgbo dialect (Nwankwegu 2015). In Ikwo (Nwankwegu & Nwode 2020), a similar observation is also

made, except that in this case, the second strategy actually applies but is consonance insertion of a question particle at the sentence initial position.

In Nkalagu, the polar question marking strategy is lengthening of the final vowel of the final word of the clause/sentence. In other words, Nkalagu does not have a specific question particle or element; it only lengthens the last vowel in the last word of the sentence to mark yes/no interrogation. To turn any declarative statement to a polar question in the dialect, the final vowel of the very last element in the structure irrespective of the word category to which it belongs, is lengthened. It is a phonological iteration of a sort, but of grammatical/syntactic import. We demonstrate this in what follows.

	<u>Statement</u>		<u>Question</u>
12. (a)	Ada no Ada be Ada is in	(b)	Ada no o? Ada be QM is Ada in?
13. (a)	Ngozi jeru Ngozi go-past Ngozi went	(b)	Ngozi jeru u? Ngozi go-past QM Did Ngozi go?
14. (a)	Unu megbuwo 2pl do-complete perfect You have finished	(b)	Ngozi megbuwo o? 2pl do-complete-perf QM Have you finished
15. (a)	I gburu ewu 2sg kill-pst goat You kill a goat.	(b)	I gburu ewu uu? 2sg kill-pst goat QM Did you kill a goat?

As evident in the data displayed (12-15) above, insertion of a Vocalic Q-morpheme is obligatory. It is usually the very last element in the sentence. Note that the vocalic Q-morpheme is a vowel in a harmonic agreement with the last vocalic segment of the sentence final word. Observe also that no specific vowel is solely dedicated for the polar

question derivation in the dialect, Therefore, the vocalic question-marker, in keeping with the vowel harmony principles, could be any of the eight (8) vowels in a dialect (a e ɪ i ɔ o u ʊ),.

Also, worthy of note is the fact that the q-morpheme insertion strategy applies, not minding the word class to which the element in the sentence-final position belongs. This can be seen in the examples that follow.

Adverb at the sentence-final position

16. Nwoke nu le-eme osiso o?

Man DET Prog-do fast QM

Is that man fast?

17. Unu la-abia uhuna a?

2pl Fut-come immediately QM

Are you coming immediately?

Adjectives at the sentence-final position

18. Nwoke nu du oji u?

Man DET be dark QM

Is that man dark?

19. Ngozi du ihoma aa?

Ngozi be pretty QM

Is Ngozi pretty?

Noun at the sentence-final position

20. Unu jeru ahia aa

2pl go-pst market QM

Did you go to the market?

21. I gburu ewu uu?

2sg kill-pst goat QM

Did you kill a goat?

Pronoun at the sentence-final position

22. I churu Eku gu uu?
 2sg wash-pst cloth 2sg(poss) QM
 Did you wash your cloth?
23. Ngozi nọ be unu u?
 Ngozi be place 2pl(poss)
 Is Ngozi at your house?

The data analysed also show that there is no change relevant to or that can affect/make a difference in the derivation of the negative polar questions. The negative morpheme *gu/gu* in accordance with the vowel harmony rule is simply attached to the verb to form negation. Instances of Negative Polar Questions are given below (24-25). It is also the case that only the basic changes for derivation of difference sentence forms do apply, without affecting the question formation strategies as already shown in the foregoing.

Negative polar questions

24. Gozi asagu ite e?
 Ngozi wash-NEG pot QM.
 Did Ngozi not wash the pot?
25. Unu eshigu nri ii?
 2pl cook-NEG food QM.
 Did you not cook food?

Polar question and Perfective forms

26. O biawo oo?
 He/she (sg) come (PERF-M) QM
 Has he/she come?
27. I shiwo nri i
 He/she (sg) cook (PERF-M) food QM.
 Have you cooked food?

Polar question and progressive form

28. Ngozi le-eje Ekwo oo?
Ngozi be PERF go school QM
Is Ngozi going to school?

Polar question and Future interrogative

29. Ngozi le-eri nri I?
You (sg) FUT-prf eat food QM
Will you eat food?

As in can be seen, the polar question derivation is the same across all sentence forms and polarity.

5. Conclusion

This work has looked at the wh-question and the polar question formation in Nkalagu. It has been revealed that typical of the Igbo language, the dialect of which it is, Nkalagu operated the $\pm$ syntactic movement strategy in deriving the wh-question. This is beyond its deployment of virtually all the wh-question elements found in the Standard Igbo, varying only in phonological regards. Regarding the derivation of polar questions, the study found it interesting that Nkalagu does not pattern the Standard Igbo. The dialect deploys a polar question particle (QM), which results form a phonosyntactic iteration of the last vowel of the word at the sentence-final position. The question morpheme is not restricted to any specific vowel – any vowel that comes in the final the sentence-final word is an eligible candidate. This strategy operates unrestrictedly across all sentence forms and polarity in the dialect.

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