

DESCRIPTIVE SYNTAX OF YES-NO QUESTIONS IN IKWO-IGBO LANGUAGE¹

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Abstract

Two forms of yes-no questions have been identified in Igbo syntax. The first pertains to sentences with personal pronouns as subject, in which case the inherent high tone [+h] on the pronoun is changed to low tone [-h] in order to convert it to yes-no question. The second form pertains to sentences having subjects other than personal pronouns, in which case the subject is moved to the left periphery of the sentence, leaving a ghost of itself in its original position in form of resumptive pronoun. This study examines the syntax of yes-no questions in Ikwo, a dialect of Igbo spoken in Ebonyi State. The aim is to establish the extent to which the above syntactic analysis of the standard Igbo yes-no questions is consistent with that of Ikwo dialect. The dialect is seen to pattern neither of the two formats known in Igbo. An initial element ‘*o dū*’, which we refer to as a ‘yes-no question initiator’ marks the Ikwo yes-no questions. A simple descriptive approach is adopted in analysing the study data.

1.0. Introduction

Yes/no question is a phenomenon of universal spread, attested in all natural languages. However, it does not exhibit in universal uniformity, in terms of its structural

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manifestation. Put differently, yes/no exhibits varying syntax across languages. Ikegwuonu (2019, p.96) captures this simply thus: “Yes/no questions are formed in various ways in various languages.”

A yes-no question is a question for which *yes* or *no* is an acceptable answer. It is usually a form of question put forward to an addressee to affirm or to refute a proposition. This is a linguistic axiom of which no scholar has established any contrary attestation in any language. As Ikegwuonu (2019, p.95) puts it, “Whatever maybe one’s orientation in linguistics, it seems to be a general consensus that yes/no questions are questions whose expected answer is either yes or no.” This is in contrast to the non-yes-no question type, known as WH-question or content question, which demands more than a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Wh-questions demands elaborate information in sentence forms, or in clausal or phrasal fragments.

Yes-no question has received some reasonable share of inquiries in the Igbo language. As the strategies for deriving yes-no question differ from language to language, they also differ from dialect to dialect, at least marginally, within the Igbo language. Although, there are some general principles that define the syntax of yes-no questions in the language, there are also some microparametric differences worthy of note. This study, therefore, sets out to examine the syntax of yes-no questions in Ikwo, a dialect of Igbo language spoken in Ebonyi State of Nigeria by about 300, 000 speakers.

1.2 Yes/no question in Igbo

Ikekeonwu (1987) identifies three basic procedures readily available to languages for expressing their Definitive Answer Questions (DAQ) (yes-no questions) as including:

(a) Word-order re-organisation, usually involving the inversion of the position of the subject and verb as in English and French:

1. English:

He was there.

Was he there?

2. French:

Il est bleu

Est il bleu?

(b) The Insertion of question marker or segment, which could be in form of a single lexical item or phrase, or particle:

3. French:

il est bleu

‘it is blue’

Est-que il est bleu?

‘Is it that it is blue?’

4. Miya:

t gaa mara-za

‘He will find her’

t ga mara-za wa?

‘Will he find her?’

5. Yoruba:

O ri Teye

‘You saw Teye’

Se O ri Teye?

‘Did you see Teye?’

(c) The use of suprasegmental features of intonation or tone:

6. English:

He went to the party (lowering tune)

He went to the party? (rising tune)

7. Igbo:

Ó gàrà ahịa’

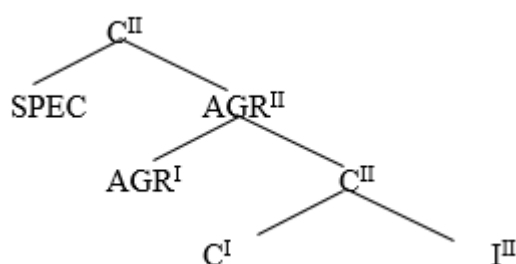
‘He went to the market’

Ò gàrà ahịa?

‘Did he go to the market?’

Ikekeonwu (1987) observes that two of the processes mentioned above are employed in the production of the DAQ in Igbo, namely, the insertion of the “pronoun in apposition to the NP” and the use of the obligatory low tone on this pronoun. It follows from the above that Igbo combines strategies (b) and (c). This agrees with Oluikpe (1978) and Emenanjo (1978), who had earlier identified these two forms of yes-no questions in Igbo syntax. Mbah (2006), and Nwala and Nwankwegu (2013) all make similar observation in various dialects of Igbo. Ndimele (1991) also recognises these strategies in Etche as manifesting in polar questions without overt pronominal trace (in which only tone change is noted) and polar questions with overt trace (involving pronominal element which surfaces after the original subject). A similar finding to Ndimele’s non-overt pronominal trace is made of Embosi language by Ibara (n.d). According Ibara (n.d), there is no syntactic marker for yes-no questions in embosi which means that they are affirmative. In fact, yes-no questions and affirmative differ only from their intonation patterns. Furthermore, Nwala and Nwankwegu (2013) make a similar observation in Izhi and Ezaa dialects of Igbo.

Discussing Yes/No question formation in Igbo further, Mbah (2011, p.181) formulates its underlying structure as follows:



According to Mbah (2011), question formation movement in Igbo is an optional transformation with the following alternatives:

Either

Move NP to SPEC yielding a resumptive pronoun

OR

Superimpose C^I on subject thereby reducing its tone

pattern to low irrespective of its inherent tone pattern. (p.181).

In Nwankwegu's (2015) view, yes/no question formation in Igbo is more complicated than the above descriptions make it appear. In his own view, Nwankwegu (2015, p.207) maintains that in all instances of yes/no question derivation in Igbo, movement is obligatory. According to him, for every interrogative clause, a Question-morpheme (Q-morpheme) is selected for computation. This Q-morphemes, he argues, is merged on the Complementizer head in Igbo. At the same time, a Question operator (Q-operator) feature is also selected for computation, which, he supposes, is merged on the determiner head (D^0) of the Subject-DP, in the case of yes/no question. For the reason of the Q-operator feature on the determiner head, the subject DP moves, and this becomes necessary considering the fact that movement in minimalist conception is forced for feature-checking purpose. This movement, according to Nwankwegu, is obvious 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-interrogative. Nwankwegu (2015), therefore, argues that it is in the course of the movement to C that the PE acquires the low tone feature of Question affix in the complementizer head. Implicit in Nwankwegu's (2015) position is that the low tone seen on the PE in Igbo yes-no questions is not a mere superimposition. (For more details of this argument, see Nwankwegu 2015, pp.207-214).

Although Nwankwegu's (2015) argument is plausible, this study will not pursue that line of thought given that the treatise here is simply descriptive.

2.0. Yes-No Questions in Ikwo

Formation of the yes/no question in the Ikwo dialect patterns neither of the two strategies attested in Igbo so far. The dialect employs adjunction transformation in which, according to Mbah (2006:68), elements which were not originally at the deep structure is inserted to the surface structure level. Instances of adjunction in English include *Do-support* and *There-insertion*. Consider the examples of Ikwo yes/no question derivation below:

8. (a) (SD) I lụ-wà-rù nji
 2SG marry-PERF-PST husband
 You have married a husband (You are married)?

(b) (SC) ọdù Ì lù-wà-rù nji?
 YNQP 2SG marry-PERF-PAST husband
 Have you married a husband (Are you married)?

9. (a) (SD) Nwàhchòr jè-rù ẹkwō
 Nwanchor go-PAST book
 Nwanchor went to school

(b) (SC) ọdù Nwàhchòr jè-rù ẹkwō?
 YNQP Nwanchor go-PAST school
 Did Nwanchor go to school?

In Ikwo (8-9), an element ‘ọdù’, which we will be referring to as a ‘yes-no question particle, labelled as YNQP’, is usually adjoined to the left periphery of the queried statement, and, if the subject is a pronoun, its tone is lowered to derive a yes-no questions as in (8b). From the data, we also note that besides *ọdù*-adjunction, the characteristic pronominal subject tone lowering in Igbo also apply in Ikwo. This goes to confirm

Mbah's (2011) position that the low tone is a characteristic of Yes/No question in Igbo grammar. Nwala and Nwankwegu (2016) also observed that low tone is almost indispensable in all question types in Igbo.

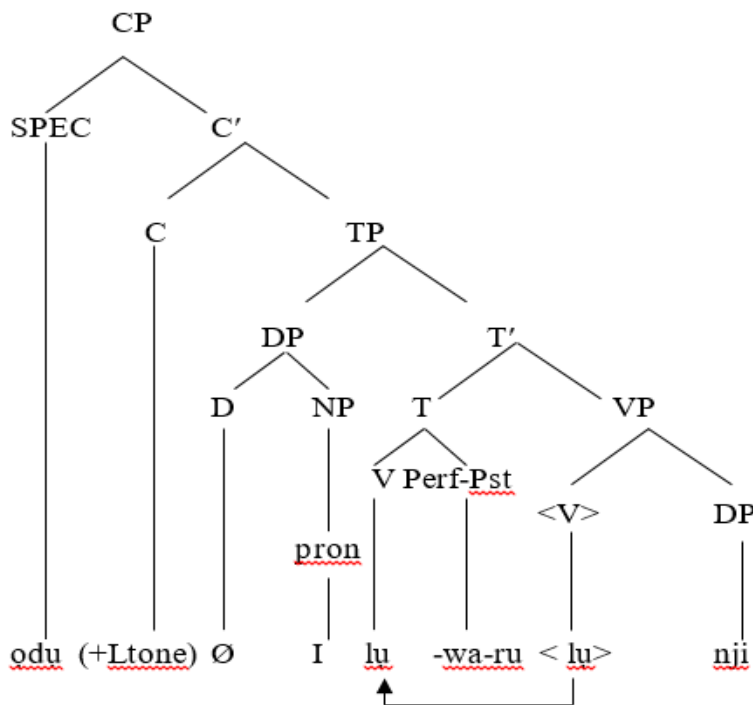
Following from the data presented above, the yes-no question transformation rule in Ikwo can be formalised thus:

$$10. \quad \emptyset \longrightarrow \left\{ \text{YNQI} \right\} \text{ — [TP]} \quad \text{[TP]}$$

With this formalisation (8b) can be diagrammed as follows:

11. odu $\text{\dot{I}}$ $\text{l\ddot{u}-w\grave{a}-r\ddot{u}}$ nji?
 Q-part 2sg marry-perf-pst husband

Have you married?



3.0. Tag Question and Yes-No Question Pattern

Tag questions are “the type of question, which seeks agreement with the earlier declaration stated in the preceding statement.” In forming tag question in Igbo, Mbah

posits that movement is involved. He subscribes to Ikekeonwu's (1987) postulation that tag question in Igbo is invariably marked by *Ọ kwa ya* and illustrates this as below:

12. Anjelina bụ onye ose foto; ọọ kwa ya?

Angelina is one who takes picture; is it not true?

Mbah (2006) states that in tag question formation as above, three types of transformation are involved: substitution, deletion and movement. Fleshing this postulation out, he explains that the transformation substitutes the entire declarative sentences with the proform *ya* and moves the same constituent to the end of the sentence; furthermore, it deletes the first letter of the verb so that the subject pronoun *ọ* progressively assimilates the residue of the copula verb, hence *ọọ*.

Tag questions in Ikwo seems to pattern fully the yes-no questions. In other words, a tag question in Ikwo is usually the yes-no counterpart of the earlier declaration. Consider (13) and (14):

13. E tọ je-du ije, ọdu o je ije?
 3SG CLneg go-NEG walk, YNQP 3SG go walk?
 He/she does not walk, *does he/she walk?*

14. Èphe anụ iphe m ekfu, ọdu èphè ta anụ-du
 3PL (PROG)hear thing 1SG (PROG)talk YNQP 3PL CLneg hear-NEG
 3SG
 They can hear me/what I am saying, *can't they hear me/it?*

We observe that apart from a full yes-no question as a tag, there is a startling similarity between the Ikwo tag-question syntax and that of English, in terms of agreement in number and person between the NPs of the declarative sentence and its tag and also in

terms of positive-negative polarity sensitivity. In (13), the subject of the statement and the tag agree in number (both are singular) and in person (both are third person). The same hold in (14). Note that the object pronoun *iya* appearing sentence finally in the tag (14) is a proform of the verb complement *iphe m ekfu* in the declarative statement.

4.0. Summary and Conclusion

From our analysis, we noted the major features of yes-no questions in Ikwo to include

- (1) Pre-sentential insertion of YNQP (ọdụ) to derive a yes-no question from a statement.
- (2) Absence of subject NP movement as in the standard Igbo language, and related to this, the absence of resumptive pronoun.
- (3) A tone change on the subject pronoun if used.
- (4) Tag questions copy the whole host declarative statement.
- (5) Tag questions are sensitive to positive-negative polarity of the host structure. That is, the tags on statements usually have reversed polarity with their matrix clauses.

In conclusion, Yes-No questions in Ikwo dialect, unlike in the standard Igbo, have an overt marker (ọbụ), which occurs pre-sententially as a clause introducer. The affirmative and the yes-no questions structures are similar with the only significant difference being the *ọbụ*-adjunction to the left of the affirmative clause. There is also no structural difference between the self-standing yes-no questions and the tag questions in the dialect. In fact, but for the polarity reversal in respect to the matrix sentence, the tag questions in Ikwo would be just the same as the matrix clause.

List of abbreviation and notations

[+h] - high tone

[-h]	-	low tone
2SG	-	second person singular pronoun
3PL	-	third person plural
3SG	-	third person singular
AGR	-	agreement
C	-	complemetizer
C'	-	complementizer bar
CL	-	clitic
D	-	determiner
DAQ	-	definitive answer question
DP	-	determiner phrase
I	-	inflection
n.d	-	no date
NEG	-	negation
NP	-	noun phrase
Ø	-	null element
PERF	-	perfective
PROG-		progressive
SC	-	structural change
SD	-	structural description
SPEC	-	specifier
T	-	tense
TP	-	tense phrase
VP	-	verb phrase
YNQP	-	yes-no question particles

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