On the Study of the Parametric Variations in Igbo and English Yes/No Questions

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Abstract

The Igbo language is one of the languages of the Benue Congo family spoken chiefly spoken in the south-east part of Nigeria. It is also among the Kwa group of languages in Nigeria and one of the three major languages in Nigeria. This paper sets out to investigate the expression of yes/no questions in Igbo and English syntax with aim of identifying the how yes/no questions operate in the two languages, the differences and similarities that that exist in expressing the notion in the two languages, the words the languages employ in expressing it and their movement in the syntactic structures. The principles and parameters model serve as the theoretical framework for the study. The work also employs the descriptive approach in the analysis of the data. The study discovers that movement is attested in expressing yes/no questions in the two languages and both languages share common leftward movement. In English language, it is observed that subject aux inversion exists while in the Igbo language it does not exist. In Igbo language, resumptive pronoun trace phenomenon which is always on the low tone exists but it does not exist in English. This resumptive pronoun is always found in the subject position in the place of the moved NP functioning as the antecedent and both share agreement features. The subject c-commands the resumptive pronoun traces and assigned it all the necessary properties. In Igbo language, low tone is a question trigger in yes/no questions. This study attempts to tone mark all the syllables, that is, high, low and down-step tones are marked. The study therefore, recommends that more comparative research works be done in the language by applying the linguistic theories in order to find out how they operate in the language.

Key Words: Movement, Parameter, Principles, Yes/no questions, Resumptive pronoun

Introduction

Yes/no question is a universal phenomenon that is attested in many natural languages. Yes/no questions are questions which demand either a yes or a no response from the hearer. According to Radford (1988) and Nwachukwu (1995), yes/no questions are questions which have the possibility of yes/no answer. The response is usually simple and short in form. It does not demand elaborate answer from the hearer. It usually occurs when the speaker wants to elicit a response or information from the addressee. They formally exhibit disjunction; a pair of alternatives of which only one is acceptable. In languages, the expression of yes/no questions vary from one language to another. This implies that there are some parametric variations that exist in the expression of yes/no questions across languages of the world. In their view, Akmajian Demers, Fermer and Harnish (2001:259) maintain that 'all languages show internal variations''

Theoretical Framework

The Principle and Parameters (P&P) is the theoretical framework for this study. This theory was the brain child of Chomsky (1981). In this theory, languages can be analysed parametrically to find out how they vary. That is, within principles and parameters, language variations are evaluated in terms of variation values of parameters of some sorts or another. The theory views grammatical development as an interactive process where different languages are usually compared. Radford (2004:354) "claims that natural language grammar incorporates not only a set of innate universal principles which account for all languages, but also a set of parameters which account for those aspects of grammar which vary from language to another''.

In this theory, there exist two operational terms namely: principles and parameters. Principles account for potentially universal characteristics of human languages or the attributes of grammatical operations that are common. According to Mbah (2011, p. 204), principles refer to ''those properties of natural languages that are common to man''. The following are the principles of universal grammar: structure dependency principle, projection principle, binary principle, movement principle, headedness principle, and so on. Parameters refer to the kinds of differences which a principle of grammar exists in various languages. In other words, parameters relate to the dimension of grammatical variations. Radford (2004, p. 350) referred to parameter "as a dimension of grammatical variations between languages or different varieties of the same". The proponents of the P&P syntax recognize three major parameters along which languages can differ in terms of their grammatical structures. They include: null- subject or pro-drop parameter, wh-parameter and head parameter. Radford (1997) claimed that parameters are binary in all languages of the world, so that every language selects solely one value either [±] for each of them. The parameters are generally based on principles. The main difference between principles and parameters is that principles account for all languages put together while parameters only account for some of the languages at the same time. Language variation is characterized as different setting of parameters provided by the universal grammar. So, in order to examine how principles are observed uniformly by language(s) in form of parameters, only languages that behave similarly along a certain parametric variation are said to behave alike and generalizations are made along such linguistic behaviours. Then other languages that do not observe such features are not seen as exception to the rule rather they are regarded as not relevant to the parameter under consideration. Therefore, languages are grouped according to their unique linguistic features.

Movement Principle

The movement principle demands that a language has the capability of moving items within a syntactic structure from one place to another. This means that each language selects what moves, the pattern of movement and what it leaves at the extraction site after movement. Radford (1997, p. 265) posited that movement is ''is an operation by which a word or a phrase is moved from its position in a syntactic structure to another''. It is believed that once movement principle is employed in the syntactic structures, it affects a lot of other reactions in those syntactic structures. In linguistics, movement is meaning preserving. It is parameterized differently in different languages. When an item moves from its extraction sites into the landing site, the evidence of movement is indicated by a trace. The extraction site and the landing site must have categorical properties.

Movement Parameter

This parameter concerns move alpha that is, move something somewhere. This means that any element could be moved from one place to another in a syntactic construction. According to Rimesdijk and Williams (1986:92) it involves the ''movement of any item from one place to another in a syntactic construction and when an item is moved, it leaves behind a trace to indicate that something is moved from the position''. Note that the element that can be moved across is a syntactic unit should be either a lexical item or a phrase. When an item is moved, it leaves behind a trace following the empty category principle which is stated in Radford (1988, p. 55) that ''any moved constituent X leaves behind at its extraction site an identical empty $[X_n$ e]. This empty category is known as a trace, and a trace constituent is said to be the antecedent of the trace. That is why, when any category moves to another position, the source position and the landing site coindexed.

Research Methodology

The data for this study comes from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were made up for data drawn largely from the native speakers of the Igbo Language through listening and the recording of their speeches during conversations and discourses. For the secondary sources, insights were gained from various sources which include textbooks, journal articles and so on. The materials in Igbo, English and other languages also constitute the sources of the data for this work. The data collected were carefully analysed. Also, the work employs a descriptive research approach in the analysis of the data while the principles and parameters theory serve as the theoretical framework for the study. Tape recorder forms the instrument used for the collection of the data for study.

Yes/No Question: An Overview

Basically, yes/no question belongs to the domain of syntax; hence, they are types of sentences. Supporting this view, Yusuf (1997, p. 75) affirms that yes/no questions are to be of basic syntax, hence; they are types of sentence. Yes/no questions have been variously described in the linguistic literature. 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.* Yes/no questions are in contrast with non-polar wh-question with the five Ws which do not necessarily present a range of alternative answers or necessarily restrict that range to two alternatives. Radford (2004, p. 364) posited that yes/no question is a question which yes/no would be appropriate answer. He gives example using the sentence below:

  1. Is it raining?

Yes/no questions are formed in various ways in various languages. Yusuf (1997, p. 76) asserted that in English the general rule for the formation of yes/no question is to move the first member of the INFL along with tense sentence- initially. He illustrates using the examples below:

  2. a. You are coming tonight.

   b. The teacher will show up for lecture.

   c. Kofo has been studying hard.

The above sentences can be represented in question forms by applying some movements as in:

  3.a. Are you coming tonight?

   b. Will the teacher show up for lectures?
   c. Has kofo been studying hard?

In Latin, yes/no questions are indicated by the addition of a special grammatical particle or an enclitic. In the language, the enclitic particle-*ne* can be added to the emphatic word to turn a declarative statement into yes/no question as in:

  4.a. Declarative: Tuid veritus es.

     You feared that.

   b. Question: Tu-**ne** id veritus es?

     Did you fear that?

Furthermore, in Latin the yes/no question are formed with the word *nōnne* to mean that the interrogator thinks that the answer should be in the affirmative and with *num* to imply that the interrogator thinks that the answer should be in the negative as in:

  5. a. Mithridates **nōnne** ad Cn. Pompeium Lēatum misit?

    Didn't mithridates send an ambassordor to Gneaus Pompey?

   b. **num** negare audes.

    You are not denying, do you?

In Modern Greek and Portuguese, the only way to distinguish a yes/no question from a simple declarative statement is the rising question intonation used when saying the question. It is important to note that the use of rising intonation from a simple declarative statement to question is one of the universals of human languages. In many Germanic languages, yes/no questions are formed using subject inversion. In Dutch, a yes/no question is formed thus:

  6. a. Ik ben een jongen.

    I am a boy.

   b. Ben Ik een jongen?

    Am I a boy?

In Esperanto, the word *Ĉu* added to the beginning of statement makes it a polar question as in

  7.a. Vi estas blua.

You are blue.

b. **Ĉu** vi estas blua?

Are you blue?

In Yoruba, in expressing yes/no question, it involves adjourning a question particle to the declarative sentence. No movement is involved, neither is any morphonemic rule is employed. The language employs particles such as *njè* and sé as the question markers as in:

8.a**. Ńjè** [o wá?]
Q- marker you come?
Did you come?

b. **Sé** [s Adé gbo ìròyìì náà]?
Q-M Ade hear new the?
Did Ade hear the news?

In Hausa, the question marker *kó ''or''* is adjoined to the S to give a question reading as in:
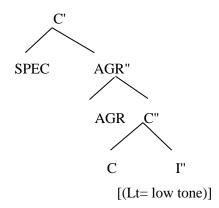
9.a **Kó** [s Audù yad zo?]
Q- M Audu INFL come?
(**or**) Audu has come?

From the above data, Yusuf (1997:83) notes Ladeforged's claims that there is a special high tone in the sentence.

In Igbo language, Mbah (2011:181) claims that in the Igbo yes/no questions, that the question formation movement is an optional transformational movement with the following alternatives, either

a. Move NP to SPEC yielding a resumptive pronoun or

b. Superimpose C on the subject thereby reducing the tone pattern to low irrespective of the inherent tone pattern. He gives the underlying structure of the yes/no question in Igbo thus:

Fig. 1: C' configuration in Igbo

[(Lt= low tone)]

Source: Mbah (2011, p. 181)

Furthermore, it is important to note that some languages do not answer yes/no questions with simple words *yes* or *no*. For instance, Welsh and Finnish are among the several languages that

typically employ echo answers, repeating the verb with an affirmative or negative form, rather than using words for *yes* or *no*, though both languages do also have words that are similar to *yes* or *no*.

Analysis of the Parametric Variations in Igbo and English Yes/No Questions

Yes/no questions are attested in Igbo and English constructions but there exist some parametric variations that exist between them as regards to the ways of expressing them in the two languages. Consider the examples below:
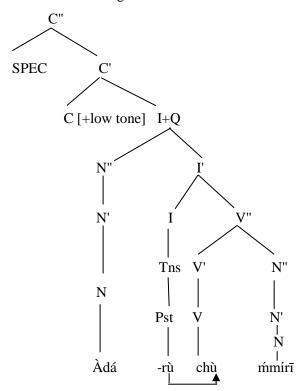
10.   Àdá chùrù   ḿmírī.

        Ada fetch-rvpst water.

        Ada fetched water.

The data above is represented thus:

Fig. 2:   Diagram showing declarative statement in Igbo

In the above diagram, *Àdá* is either moved to the SPEC and the Lt is superimposed on it if the former is chosen. Then *Àdá* moves to occupy the SPEC position. The movement yields a resumptive pronoun at the extraction site. The movement presents the following question counterpart:
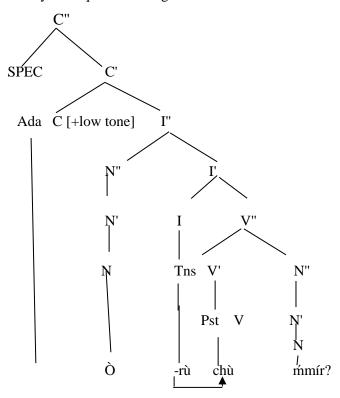
11.   Àdá [ò] chùrù ḿmírī?

        Ada [Q] fetch-rvpst water?

Did Ada fetch water?

The above data is represented thus:

Fig 3: Diagram showing movement in yes/no questions in Igbo

Further examples include

12.   a. Declarative: Úchè jèrè   úgbō.
                        Uche go-rvtpst farm.
                        Uche went to the farm.

        b. Question: Úchè$_i$ ò$_i$ jèrè   úgbō?
                        Uche he$_i$ go-rvpst farm.
                        Did Uche went to the farm?

13.   a. Declarative: Àdá nà   Òbí gà-àgá ụ̀kà.
                        Ada conj Obi fut-pr-go Church.
                        Ada and Obi will go Church.

        b. Question: Àdá nà Òbí$_i$ hà$_i$ gà-àgá ụ̀kà ?
                        Ada conj Obi 3pl fut-pr-go Church.
                        Will Ada and Obi go Church?

In the examples above, it is observed that when the subject of the sentence or the antecedent of the resumptive pronoun is singular, the resumptive pronoun which is its pronominal copy will be singular as shown in (12b) and plural when the subject of the sentence is plural as shown in example (13b) above. Therefore *Uche*, *Ada* na *Obi* are moved into SPEC position, thus resulting in leaving behind appropriate resumptive pronouns *ọ* and *ha* at the extraction sites in the normal

subject positions to fill the positions of the moved items. The resumptive pronouns serve as co-referential with the moved items in the sense that they share the same characters. What is moved is the antecedent of what is left behind. The pronouns are governed and bound by the subjects of the matrix subject sentences. There is also agreement between the pronominal elements and the NPs in the subject position. Ikegwuonu (2008:49) represents the structural description and the structural change thus:

14.　　SD:　　Q　NP　INFL　　VP (NP)
　　　　SC:　　Q　NP　Pro　　INFL　VP (NP)
　　　　　　　　　　　　+L ( )

In English, yes/no questions are derived by using the following rules (Lamidi, 2000 & Yusuf, 2007):

　　i. Subject – Aux inversion (the auxiliary verb and the subject swap positions)

　　ii. Do-support or insertion (required when tense is stranded).

Consider the following examples below:

15.　　a.　　Declarative: Paul　　will eat the food.
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Subject　Aux

　　　　b.　　Question:　Will　Paul eat the food?
　　　　　　　　　　　　　Aux subject

16.　　a.　　 Declaration:　Anthony has rejected the work.
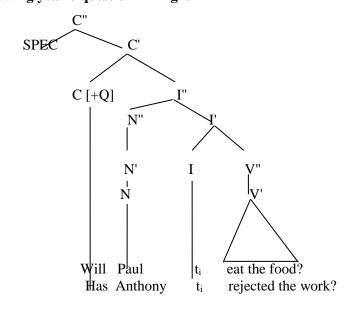　　　　　　　　　　　　　Subject　 Aux

　　　　b.　　Question:　　Has Anthony rejected the work?
　　　　　　　　　　　　　 Aux subject

The data in (15b) and (16b) are represented thus:

Fig. 4: Diagram showing yes/no question in English

17.   a.   Statement: You know her father.

      b.   Transformation: [Do] You know her father.

      c.   Question: Do you know her father?

18.   a.   Statement: The boy killed a lion.

      b.   Transformation: [Do + pst] the boy kill a lion.

      c.   Question: Did the boy kill a lion?

In Igbo example (11) and (fig3) counterpart indicate that there is movement. The movement left behind a trace that is co-indexed with it the moved item. It is only a set of elements which forms yes/no questions are indicated by low tones which are marked on the pronominal copy of the subject of the sentence. The rule applies thus when a full-fledged noun functions as the subject of the simple yes/no question, a resumptive pronoun is introduced to bear the burden of yes/no question. Therefore, the resumptive pronoun with low tone plays a significant role in Igbo yes/no question. It is also observed that in Igbo data, subject Aux inversion does not exist in the language while in English, it exists. The English yes/no questions tend to have a simple movement structure (just inverting the subject and INFL, and allowing some adjustments processes within the verbal system) with attendant rise in intonation. In (15b) and (16b), the auxiliary *will* and *has* occupied the position dominated by 1. The examples in (15b and 16b) are the derived structures; the auxiliaries are moved from 1 to the position dominated by C, leaving its trace as shown in the figure (4) above. That is, the auxiliaries are moved in front of the subjects in (15b and 16b) respectively. In (17c) and (18c), there is insertion of *do* and *did* in the sentence initial positions. It is solely one auxiliary that can move and not the main verb and the one to be moved is the first auxiliary.

Igbo has a much more complex picture. There is the movement of NP subject of the declarative sentence into the position of a dummy symbol Q, a phenomenon that gives room at the extraction site for a resumptive pronoun trace on low tone. The resumptive pronoun shares agreement features with the preposed subject NP. In general terms, a resumptive pronoun trace in Igbo language is always found in the subject position in the place of the moved NP functioning as antecedent. That the resumptive pronoun occurs in the subject position tends to suggest that, that kind of subject is properly governed as its internal argument (Koopman, 1983). That is, the subject c-commands its resumptive pronoun trace and assigns it all the necessary properties.

Furthermore, unlike English language, Igbo simple yes/no question is also signaled by a low tone which is marked on the pronominal subjects as in:

19.   a. Declarative: Há rìrì jí.
                3pl eat-rvpst yam.
                The eat yam.

      b. Question: Hà rìrì jí?
                3pl eat-rvpst yam.
                Did they eat yam?

20.   a. Declarative: Únù hùrù yá.
                2pl see-rvst 3sg.

<div style="text-align:center">You saw it/him/her.</div>

    b. Question: Ùnù hùrù yá?
                     2pl see-rvpst 3sg.
                     Did you see it/him/her?

21.   a. Declarative: Ó jèrè   úgbō.
                     3sg go-rvtpst farm.
                     He went to farm.

    b. Question: Ò jèrè   ugbō?
                     3sg go-rvpst farm.
                     Did he/she went to farm?

22.   a. Declarative: Ànyị gà-àgá ụkà.

                     1pl aux-pr-go Church.
                     We will go Church.

    b. Question: Ànyì   gà-àgá ụkà?
                     1pl aux-pr-go Church.
                     We will go Church?

In examples b of (19 - 22), it is observed that there is no overt [+Q or + wh] feature. The questions are licensed by the low tone feature on the pronominal NPs in the subject positions because there is absence of interrogative wh-words in the S-structures. Therefore, low is a question trigger in Igbo language.

Conclusion

This study has examined the parametric variations that exists in yes/no questions in Igbo and English. The findings of this work reveal that both languages show evidence of yes/no questions in the syntactic structures. Both have words which are used for expressing yes/no questions. Both share in leftward movement of the question elements to the specifier position and both languages leave traces at the extraction sites movement. The major syntactic differences include: subject auxiliary inversion that exists in the English language but it does not exist in the Igbo language. In Igbo language, there are instances of resumptive pronoun traces phenomena in the structures in yes/no questions in the language. The trace in form of resumptive pronoun is overtly morphologically marked in the syntactic structures but English does not have traces of any resumptive pronoun phenomenon. Generally, in Igbo language, the resumptive pronoun [*o/ọ/ha*] occurs at the subject position pre-verbally in the place of the moved NP functioning as antecedent. The use of a resumptive in question is to fill the position of the moved item because they share the same characters. The pronoun is both governed and bound by the subject of the matrix subject as an anaphor. This implies that the subject position of the structures with resumptive pronoun is not properly governed as the intern al argument of the verb. The subject then c-commands its resumptive pronoun traces and assigns it all the necessary properties. Therefore, whether a phonological filled trace is left behind or not, the argument position is marked with an index, which is semantically identical with lexical item that is moved. The moved item and its trace form a referential chain. Note that the moved subject shares the same number and person with the resumptive pronoun. In Igbo yes/no questions, tone licenses question without overt [+ Q] feature. This implies that low tone in Igbo

language is a question trigger. The study therefore, recommends the application of linguistic theories in the language in order to find out the extent they operate in the language.

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