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AN INVESTIGATION OF QUESTIONS IN ÈTULÓ LANGUAGE OF BENUE
STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the formation of questions in Etulo, a minority language spoken in Benue State. It specifically examines the strategies used in forming content and polar questions in the language. Data for the study were collected during a fieldtrip to Adi in Buruku Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. The study shows that both content and polar questions are formed in the language through different strategies. Whereas content questions are formed through the use of interrogative words such as òle/kò 'where', òle 'which', ème 'who' emine 'how many' among others, the main strategy employed in polar question formation is the use of tone. In addition to tone; the language also uses such particles as gbèè and lô in polar question formation. These particles occur at the final position of a declarative sentence to indicate that it is a question.

Key Words: Etulo, Question Formation, Polar, Interrogative Words

Introduction

Questions according to Collins (2006) may be classified based on the different types of possible answers. This means that, based on the answers provided when questioned, we have what we call yes/no questions, alternative questions and WH questions. These question types exist in different languages and are also formed employing various strategies. Studies on the formation of questions in languages suggest that question formation involve a transformational process between the statement and corresponding question. (Omachonu 2007, Mmadike 2017). Interrogatives have been investigated in various languages yet an account of such study appears to be lacking in Etulo language. This has necessitated the present study. In this paper, we explore polar and content questions in Etulo with particular reference to the strategies adopted in their formation.

Etulo belongs to the Idomoid group of the West Benue Congo of Niger Congo group of languages. (Gordon, 2005). Etulo refers simultaneously to both the language and the ethnic group. The Etulo are found in Benue and Taraba States, Nigeria. The Etulo speakers in Benue

are found in Adi, Buruku Local Government Area and parts of Kastina-Ala, Kastina Ala Local Government Area. The data for this work were elicited from Etulo native speakers. The language under investigation is a tone language, with high, low, downstep and gliding tones (Ezenwafor and Mmadike 2012:618).

The study comprises four sections. Section one is the introductory section while section two gives an overview of questions and the strategies employed in their formation. In section three, the strategies employed in forming questions in Etulo are shown. Section four summarizes and concludes the study.

Questions and Question Formation: An overview

Questions can seek information or confirmation. The latter types are referred to as polar while the former are known as content questions. Polar questions also known as yes-no questions have only two possible answers, that is yes (affirmative) or no (negative). Dryer (2005) opines that this question type contrast with content questions otherwise called wh-questions, that is questions containing words like who, which, where etc. Content questions rather than seek confirmation, looks for information to fill a gap in communication.

For Mmadike (2017) the interrogative sentence type which is usually employed in asking questions. The author also asserts that the speaker requests the addressee to give information about something. Citing Cruse (2006) Mmadike notes that a prototypical question expresses

- a. a lack of knowledge on the part of the speaker
- b. a desire for the lack to be made good
- c. a desire for a response from the addressee that will fulfill (b) and
- d. a belief that the addressee can supply such a response.

Interrogative words occur in different positions in languages. Whereas some languages have their interrogative words occurring at the initial position of the clause, others have theirs at the final position of the clause.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p.102) asserted that the basic theme of a question is request for answer. They also note that in a Yes/No interrogative, the element that functions as theme is the element that expresses polarity. For instance, in English, the finite verbal operator such as *is, isn't, do, don't, can, can't* operators are put first before the subject. A Wh-element searches for a missing piece of information and the element that functions as theme is the element that requests this information by means of interrogative words such as who, where, when, how etc.

According to Dixon (2012) polar questions are questions that enquire whether or not a proffered statement is correct. These questions examine responses from the perspective of a polar continuum with the opposite ends being either 'yes' or 'no'. Furthermore, Dixon (2012, p. 400) claimed that the defining feature of a content question is the inclusion of an interrogative word and argues that a content question is different from a statement because an interrogative word replaces a regular constituent in a particular functional slot.

Zerbian (2006) described polar questions as interrogative sentences whose answer is expected to provide the truth value of the corresponding declarative. These questions differ from declaratives in prosody and optionally in lexically means. A polar question can be classified as either positive or negative. Vavassori (2001) further noted that negative polar questions which are generally non-neutral, force a particular pragmatic interpretation and expect just one of the

two possible answers. This contrasts positive which are neutral and do not expect any particular answer among their possible options.

Ladd (1981) also posited that negated polar questions can be either inner (INPQ) or outer (OUPQ) negative questions. Furthermore, the author opines that a polar question with an inner negation questions the negative proposition while a polar question with an outer negation questions the positive proposition.

Romero and Han (2004) further expanded the typology to include what they refer to as high negation questions and low negation questions. The high negation points to the negation which is contracted and cliticized on the auxiliary while the low negation points to the negation which follows the subject. The examples in 1 and 2 are their instances of high and low negation.

1. Isn't Jane coming too?
2. Is Jane not coming?

Fiedler (2013) distinguishes between biased and unbiased (neutral) polar questions. According to the author, unbiased polar questions are questions whose answers are not generally marked. They ask for confirmation or non-confirmation of the truth of a proposition and can normally be 'yes' or 'no' (this kind of polar question is mostly found in conversations) while biased questions on the other hand, show some expectations concerning the answer.

In a study of questions in Igala, Omachonu notes that in Igala, yes/No questions are formed by means of a rising intonation on the final syllable and the corresponding of the final vowel sound. The author further asserts that Yes/No questions in Igala can also be formed through the use of adjunction and extraposition (Omachonu 2007, pp. 194-195) For the Wh questions, Omachonu notes that they are formed through the use interrogative pronouns or question morphemes which are mostly hightoned.

Questions in Etulo

In this section, we present those questions that require either èè (yes) or eè (no) as their responses. Polar question in Etulo language are shown by final vowel lengthening and the use of question particle. The former strategy automatically turns a declarative sentence into a polar question. Questions formed through final vowel lengthening usually bear an extra tone on their last vowels. This is in consonance with Dryer's (2008) assertion that in languages where intonation marks polar question, the pitch on the final syllable is either raised or lowered. However, Etulo being a tone language achieves this by means of tone rather than intonation. This extra tone is usually absent in a declarative sentence. The examples below are the instances of polar questions that are formed through final vowel lengthening.

- 3a. ò ki ìdùu ?
3SG go marketQp
Did he /she go to the market?
- b. mbwo lì kiàa?
Rain is fall QP
Is it raining?
- c. Nè lì injuùu?
DET is injuQP
Is this inju?

d. Ò lì tɛ ɔnyàa?
3SG is run race Qp
Is he/she running?

e. Li angwòò ?
Is yam QP
Is it yam?

f. Inju dʒe udèe
Inju stay homeQP
Is Inju at home?

Examples in 3a-f show polar questions. Notice that the extra tone is achieved by lengthening the final vowel in the segments and that the tones are all high tones. It is also observed that the extra vowel which serves to indicate a polar question does not copy the tone on the last vowel of the verb. These questions differ from the declaratives shown in 4a-f only on the basis of tone. We assume that the examples in 3a-f are derived from the declarative sentences shown in 4a-f below

4a. ò ki ìdù
3SG go market
He /she go to the market

b. mbwo lì kià
Rain is fall
It is raining

c. Nè lì inju
DET is inju
This is inju

d. Ò lì tɛ ɔnyà
3SG is run race
he/she is running

e. Li angwòò
Is yam
It is yam

f. Inju dʒe udè
Inju stay home
Inju is at home

Another strategy for forming polar question in Etulo involves the use of the question particle gbèè. This strategy is usually employed when the addressee's ability is questioned as exemplified in examples 5 following

5a Èyî kà lu gbèè?
We aux go Qp
Can we leave?

b. Abu li gbò Ètùlo gbèè
2SG is speak Ètùlo Qp
Can you speak Etulo?

- c. Abu ka fa àyàtu gbèè
2SG aux drive car Qp
Can you drive a car?
- d. Ònwè na ka yagba bi iche na gbèè
child that aux Can hold chair that Qp
Can that child hold the chair?
- e. Abu ka nū anî mchà gbèè
2SG aux give me mango Qp
Can you give me some mango?

Another particle lô is also employed in polar question formation. The lô particle is mostly used in asking negative polar questions and at such functions as a negative question particle. The morpheme is described thus because in terms of the position of occurrence, it occurs at the same position with the negative marker ba ‘not’ and the question particle gbèè. Consider the examples in 6 below

- 6a. Ò li tse onyà
3SG is run race
He/she is running
- b. Ò li tse onyà ba
3SG is run race Neg
He/she is not running
- c. Ò li tse onyà lô
He/she is run race Qp
Isn’t he/she running?

Example 6a is affirmative; 6b is negative while 6c is an interrogative sentence type. When one compares example 6c with example 3d repeated as 6d below, one observes a difference in the two polar questions.

- 6d. Ò li tse onyàa?
3SG is run race Qp
Is he/she running?

The example in 6c represents what Vavassori (2001) refers to as negative polar question which are generally non-neutral and force a particular pragmatic interpretation which yields one of the two possible answers. Fielder (2013) also suggests that there are some expectations concerning the answers to this question type and thus labels it biased polar question. This contrasts example 6d which is neutral and unbiased and do not expect any particular answer among their possible options.

Other instances of polar questions formed with the lô particle are shown in 7 below

- 7a. M kà din òwà àbû lô?
I can see wife you Qp
Can’t I see your wife?
- b. Èyî kà lu lô?
We can go Qp
Can’t we leave?
- c. Nè li inju lô

- Det is inju Qp
Is this not inju?
- d. Ò lì ñgise mā lô
3SG is person the Qp
Isn't he the person?
- e. Inju kà yagba gye angwò lô
Inju aux can eat yam Qp
Can't Inju eat yam
- f. Abû li gbò Ètùlo lô?
2SG is speak Ètùlo Qp
Don't you speak Etulo?

Having identified the various means through which Etulo language forms polar questions, we now turn to content questions.

Content Questions in Etulo

From our data, the following interrogative words are used in forming content questions in Etulo. The interrogative words include *òle/kò* 'where', *òle* 'which', *eme* 'who' *emine* 'how many'. Table 1 below shows the identified question words

Table of Etulo Interrogative Words

Concept	Interrogative Word	Gloss
Person	Eme	Who
Location	kò/ole	Where
Enumerative	Emine	How many
Opinion	èkye /Àli nwūō	What
Time	Àli ònō	When

- 8a. A kɛ òle
They go where
Where did they go?
- b. Tàkérādā mgbi ani kò
book my own where
Where is my book?
- c. Abu dzè òle
2SG stay where
Where are you
- d. ònjùlò na kò
man Det where
Where is the man?

The sentences in 8a-d show the use of the interrogative *kò/ole* 'where'. These interrogative words occur at the final position and can question the location of both animate and inanimate entities. In 8a, c and d, the inquiry is about the location of persons while 8b inquires about a thing. Observable also is the fact that the question word is a single word not a phrase and remains invariable for both singular and plural subjects.

We show in examples 9 following the use in the interrogative eme ‘who’ in sentential constructs.

- 9a. Li ème nwi ani dī
COP Who COMP 1SG see
Who do I see?
- b. Li ème nwi Efu di
COP who that Efu see
Who did Efu see?
- c. Li ème gbo Efu
COP who beat Efu
Who beat Efu?
- d. Li ème tsoo mwogie nâ
COP who cook food DET
Who cooked the food?
- e. Abu li eme
2SG are who
Who are you?

From the Etulo examples in 9a-d, it can be seen that the interrogative eme ‘who’ occurs at the preverbal position while in 9e, it occurs at the final position. Notice that the Etulo expressions in 9a-d have the copula verb ‘li’ at their initial positions. These appear to be focus constructions. The present study however, will not delve into focus construction as a separate study will examine the phenomenon.

- 10a. A li èmine
3PL AUX how many
How many are they
- b. Li èmine nwi abu mina
COP how many ka 2SG desire
How many do you want?
- c. Mmyà angwə li èkye
Price yam AUX what
How much is yam?
- d. A gbèéè èkye
3PL say what
What did they say?
- e. Li àli ònò nwi Efu kaka
COP What time COMP Efu enter
When did Efu arrive?
- f. Àli ònò ka àbu lu òpòàduà
What time COMP 2SG go church
When will you go to church?
- g. Àli nwuo kyon
What thing do him
What happened to him?

- h. O kyɔ ali nwo
She do what thing
What did she do?
- i. Abu kye sinè
2SG are how
How are you?
- j. Egbe mgbàbù kpasinè
Day POSS2SG how
How was your day?
- k. ònò mgbàbù tsosinè
Mother POSS2SG how
How is your mother?

In examples 10a, the enumerative interrogative èmìne which questions quantity can be seen at the word final position while in 10b, it occurs at the middle of the interrogative construction, yet the interrogative idea expressed still remains the same. It is also observed that the enumerative interrogative can be used to question both animate and inanimate entities. The interrogative èkye ‘what’ in examples 10c and d occurs at the sentence final position and also apply to animate and inanimate entities. Examples 10e and f inquire about the time while 10g and h are typical of interrogatives which inquire concerning opinion. Having discussed the formation of polar and content questions in Etulo, the next section concludes the study.

Conclusion

Question formation is an inherent feature of human language which provides an avenue for studying and understanding the syntactic structure different languages. This study has examined how polar and content questions are formed in Etulo language. From the findings of the study, both content and polar questions are formed in the language through different strategies. With regard to the polar questions the language uses strategies which include tonal elongation and use of particles whereas content questions are formed through the use of various interrogative words. The question particle lô which not only occurs as a polar question particle but also results to a negative polar question calls for further studies in order to clearly delineate this particle from *ba* which is the negative marker. The examples in 10i, j and k demonstrate a number of Etulo interrogative words for ‘how’. Although we suspect ‘sinè’ to be the base word for expressing the concept of how in the language based on the data available to the present study, further studies will explicate this issue.

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