QUESTION TRANSFORMATION IN EZZA DIALECT OF ‘IGBO’

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Abstract

Questions are puts of some derivative inputs via transformation rules. In Igbo language, speaking from the perspective of Ezza dialect, question transformation is obligatory, involving movement, deletion, substitution or adjunction, or combination of some or all of these. This study, focusing on movement transformation in Ezza question grammar shows that in Yes-No question, movement is obligatory if the subject is a referential NP, in which case the underlying NP moves to SPEC, leaving a phonetically filled trace (a resumptive pronoun). Wh-fronting is also noted, though this does not strictly apply in the dialect (and Igbo language generally) as in English. It is also observed that some instances where wh-words appear sentence initial do not show evidence of movement.

Introduction

Question is a universal property of human language. No language is devoid of question. However the mechanisms for realizing strings of utterance describable as question are language-specific.

Prior to the introduction of transformation grammar (TG), the model of grammar then in existence had already taken root with the relatively uncontroversial assumption that the words in sentences are grouped into phrases which themselves are grouped together into larger, phrase, and so on. This was during the eras of immediate constituent grammar (IC) and the phrase structural grammar (PSG) which were both context free grammars.

In the early 1950s, according to Ndimele (1999:164), it became increasingly apparent that human language is rife with amazing and interesting syntactic regularities that cannot be adequately accounted for by PSG being a more powerful grammar as Chomsky claims. PSG simply tells us how words are combined to form longer expressions and the part of speech to which each of these word belongs. It has no inbuilt capacity to tell us, in an explicit manner, how the regularities that exist between sentences can be captured. It was this pitfall that led to Chomsky’s (1957) proposal of TG.

TG came as a revolutionary theory for sentences analysis with superior capacity to deal with some underlying intricacies in the syntax of human language. With TG, it has always been shown that sentences exhibiting superficial syntactic differences may have a common origin, hence similar meaning. On the other hand, sentences with striking similarities on the surface can be proven to come from different underlying sentences. Question forms are surface structures relating to some underlying forms. In other words, questions (structurally referred to as integrative) are products of transformation. Mbah (2012:63-4) notes the transformation antecedent of question when he avers that in forming different kinds of question, movement is usually involved. Particularising this to Igbo, he says that the three main kinds of question in the language involve movement.

This work seeks to account for question formation in Ezza, a dialect of Igbo. Since question transformation as noted by Mbah involves movement (and of course insertion, deletion and permutation), the choice of transformation approach is considered sin qua non.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This work adopts the principle and parameter approach. The principle and parameter theory (P&P) is according to Mbah (2012:205) a brain shield of Chomsky (1981). According to him, Radford (2006) summarizes
the theory as imputing that natural language grammars include a set of innate universal principles which account for those aspects of grammar, which are common to all languages and set of parameters, which are individual language systematic dissension or observation that account for those aspects of grammar that characterize individual languages. Of the whole formulation of P&P, this work is limited to exploring the movement principle and movement parameter.

Movement principle, as Mbah notes, requires that a natural language has the capacity to move elements from one position of syntactic structure to another, this movement, of course triggers a number of reactions in the sentence after it has applied. These principles apply in varied manner, according to different languages.

On the other hand, movement parameter defines what get moved and to where with particular reference to a language of operation. This is to say that movement is not as unconstrained as movement principle makes it appear. Each language chooses “what moves, the pattern of movement and what it leaves at the extraction site after movement”. (Mbah 2012:219).

The choice of the P&P theoretic framework (with specific application of movement principle and parameter) stems from the fact already noted that question formation in Igbo involves movement. It is felt that by using the P&P approach, the intricacies involved in movement of syntactic element in question formation in Ezza would be more adequately explained.

2.2 Theoretical Studies
2.2.1 Transformational Grammar

Many scholars and authors have denoted considerable time and space to discussing T.G. as a concept and theory of linguistics. Almost all the scholars agree to the fact that TG is an insightful grammar model which represents utterance in different ways.

TG, specifically known as TGG (Transformational Genetive Grammar), is so called because, according to Crystal (2003:471) enables two levels of structural representation to be placed in correspondence. In essence, as Nwonu (2006) summarizes, TG reflects the results of grammatical operation at the levels of underlying structure and the derived structure through transformational rules (T-rules).

Nwala (2004:123), writing on TG, similarly sees it as one that specifies low utterances are represented in other ways. According to him, TG consist of symbols rewritten as another sequence according to certain conventions.

Luraghi and Parodi (2008) have it that TG attempts to construct a formalized theory of language within a framework that assumes the existence of rules or devices that modify or transform one ingartic structure into another structure in order to explain an array of phenomena pertaining to human language, mainly syntax.

Uba-Mgbemena (1981) summarizes the objectives of TG as one which seeks to characterize in an explicit manner the initiative linguistics knowledge which nature speakers possess that enables them to produce and understand sentences of their language. In a similar vein, Olateju (1998:1) writes:

Transformation grammar, which dates back to 1957 whose exponent was Noam Chomsky, dealt exclusively with how to fully and explicitly account for everything that is involved in the competence or intuitive knowledge of the native speaker of any particular language.

These have been several versions or models of TG since its inception. The first published version of this theory appears in 1957 with Chomsky’s “Syntactic structures” (Luraghi and Parodi, 2008:47). Most of the changes correspond to changes introduced by Chomsky himself in several key words:

- Classical transformational generative theory (1950-1957)
- Standard transformational generative theory (1965).
- Extended Standard Transformational Generative Theory (1970)
- Revised Extended Standard Transformational Generative theory (1973-1977)

According to Luraghi and Parodi (2008:47) despite the fact that there were previous modern attempt to develop transformational grammars, such as Harri’s (1951, 1957), Noam Chomsky’s publication of syntactic structures (1957) was breaking groundwork that changed the field of contemporary linguistics.

TG has always been traced to Chomsky; mention of Harris as the first propounder of a variant of TG is always in passing. There is no elaborate discussion of Harris’ TG – its features and scope. Perhaps, the wrong in this is that Harris’ TG is buried without honour of proper acknowledgement, a situation that presents Harris’ TG as completely worthless, but which is not true.
2.3 Empirical Studies

2.3.1 Question in Grammar

Question is a term used in the description of sentence function, typically used to elicit information or response. Crystal (2003:384) sees the concept from both syntactic and semantic perspective. According to him, syntactically, a question (in English) is a sentence with inversion of the subject and the first verb in the verb phrase (for Yes/No questions); commencing with a question word (wh-question); or ending with a question tag. In some literature, the use of sentence with a rising intonation to be a class of question. Semantically, Crystal (2003) continues, questions express a desire for more information, usually requesting a reply from Listener (with the exception & rhetorical question).

From Crystal’s definitions above, three basic classes of question can be distinguished: Yes-No questions, wh-questions and tag questions.

In characterizing Igbo question transformation, Mbah (2012) agrees with the Crystal’s classifications above. According to Mbah, three main kinds of question exist in Igbo. Demonstrating that question formation in Igbo involves movement of the entire questions from the end of the tag questions.

1. Okeke byara; o bukwa ya?
   Okeke came; is it not true?

He explains that the proform ‘ya’ in the example given represents the entire declarative sentence from which the tag question was derived. The tag question may take the form:

   b kwa Okeke byara?
   (Mbah 2002:63)

Movement is also involved in yes/no question. Mbah illustrates this with the following example:

2. Okeke gara Ahya (Okeke went to the market)
   Okeke O gara ahya (Okeke did he go to the market)

Mbah explains that in the question form above, the subject of the sentence, Okeke, is moved to the SPEC position thus yielding a resumptive pronoun in its original position.

Similarly in the formation of wh-question, movement is also involved. Mbah also demonstrates this as follows:

   a) Okereke lere onye anya?
      (Okeke looked at whom?)
   b) Onye ka Okeke lere anya?

The object of the question form above is focused and therefore moved to the grammatical subject position.

This study adopts the empirical approach of Mbah 2012 above, only differing in the dialect of application.

3.1 Data

Data for this study are drawn from the Ezza dialect, a variety of Igbo spoken by the Ezza people of Ebonyi State. The data are subjected to transformational analysis using the P&P framework. P-markers are used to parse the syntactic forms so as to be able to note the relationship between/among elements of the constructions.

4.1 Question Formation Movement in Ezza

Transformation or change, according to Mbah (2012:61) exists in four forms: movement, deletion, substitution and adjunction. Of these we are interested in movement, not ignorant of the involvement of perhaps some or all of the rest. Transformation can also be either optional or obligatory. Question transformation is rather obligatory in Igbo. In what follow, we are present structural exemplifications of two of the three types of question noted in Igbo from Ezza data gathered/

4.2 Yes-No Question Movement in Ezza

Yes-No questions are those that requires strictly yes or no response from the addressee. Largely, Yes-No questions are realized by tonal change over the pronominal subject (if the subject is a pronoun). This, of course, is a kind of transformation, but we will not pursue such analysis here. We are particularly interested in pure syntactic transformation in movement.

When the subject of a declarative sentence is a referential NP-name of person, or thing, movement becomes obligatory.

4 (a) Nweke r r lo
Nweke built-Pst house
Nweke built a house
(b) Nweke built-Pst house
Did Nweke build a house?
5 (a) Nkuta l’ataje nshi
Dog aux chew-prog excreta
Dogs eat excreta
(b) Nkuta l’otaje nshi
Dog aux it chew-prog excreta
Do Dogs eat excreta?

In the examples above, (4a) and (5a) are declarative while (4b) and (5b) are question forms. The question form show the referential NP and pronominal NP in apposition. The transformational explanation to this is that the original subjects, Nweke and Nkuta are moved to the SPEC positions respectively leaving behind an overt trace in pronominal form. This movement can be represented in a p-marker as below

The above explanation and tree diagram cannot be straightforwardly applied to example (5b). Example (4a&b) are habitual. Due to the use of auxiliary la\le, the movement transformation applied becomes somehow different. Consider the tree diagrammatic representation below:
This is the atomic syntactic formation of the question structure “Nkuta l’orije nshi?”

4.3 Wh-Movement in Ezza Question

Wh-movement, otherwise known as a wh-word to the initial position of the clause in which it appears. There are various types of wh-movement treated in linguistic literature. However, for our purpose in this study, only wh-question movement is considered.

It shall be noted that wh-words in Ezza are not orthographically words starting with ‘wh’ as in English. The label ‘wh’ is a metaphoric generalization influenced by the English orthographical structure of question word. Wh-word (ie question words) in Ezza include the following items:

- g n (what) ‘nteke ole (when), ‘nde (how), nde eka (where), onye(who), awe(where), ole (which), nke
- g n (why), ole (much) and agha (how). As can be seen not all the items interpreted as wh-words are single forms: some are phrase, thus we can refer to such items as wh-phrases. It is also pertinent to point out that the wh-word/phrases listed above are used for diverse grammatical and semantic imports – not only for asking question although, we will explore only the question or interrogative use. Again, the translation into English of those items are authentic only in their isolated forms as above. When used in expressions, the combination, and the contexts determine their meaning, which may differ from the translation above. For merobation purpose, we will consider only few of the wh-words/phrases above.

8 (a) gb kè mèrù gùnù
Igboke do past what
What did Igboke do

The obligatory wh-word movement condition in English language does not apply in Igbo. Igbo language has been shown to exhibit both wh-insitu and wh-initial tendencies. This is why the above structure with the wh-word (gùnù) occurring sentence finally is acceptable. There is no movement involved in the above. However, the structure can be optionally transformed via wh-movement as follows:

8(b) gùnù be Igboke meru
What comp Igboke do past?
What did Igboke do

8 (c)
9(a) I s r le I je awe?
You say past that you go where
Where did you say you are going
9 (b)
There is no movement involved in the above.

9(c)
Wh-words can be generated anywhere within the sentence, depending on the position of the entity questioned. Thus it is not in all case that the wh-word is generated sentence. Finally, as it seems reading from our examples so far, consider the following:

10(a) Nworie yeru gunu le ekpa?
   Nworie put pst what in a bag
   What did Nworie put in the bag
(b) Gunu be Nworie yeru le ekpa?

The data presented in 8-9 above shows that Ezaa wh-words have privilege of occurring insitu or clause-initial. The movement to the SPEC position as shown in the transformed forms is optional. The movement involves insertion of complimatizer ‘bè’. It has been argued that for a non-echo question, a wh-word which occurs internally within the sentence must be moved to an empty position at the left of the complemantizer slot. This is a case for English. But this has been over-stretched to seem a universal property of every language of the world. From the data available to us in Ezaa-Igbo, it is not all instances of wh-word in the initial position that is a product of movement. In other words, there are few instance, in which wh-words in the sentence initial position do not show any evidence of movement. Such wh-words appear in the subject positions not in the pre-complematizer slot (SPEC).

Examples:
11(a) Nkụta taru Nwọrụ
Dog bite past Nwọrụ
A dog bit Nwọrụ
   If the nominal NP of the above sentence is questioned, the question word involved does not undergo movement. Hence, questioning ‘Nkuta’ above would yield a structure as below
11(b) Gunu taru Nwọrụ
What bite past Nwọrụ
What bit Nwọrụ
   This situation holds true for English, Igbo and Ezaa
None of (b) (c) or (d) above show evidence of movement. What happens is substitution of the NP for a wh-word.

5. Conclusion

Yes –No questions and wh-questions in Ezaa have been found to be products of transformation. In yes-no question formation in Ezaa, the subject NP usually moves to SPEC position, leaving behind a phonetically filled trace at the extraction site, the overt trace is called a resumptive pronoun. This overt movement applies only when the subject NP is a named entity; if a pronominal NP, tonal variation is employed.

The dialect also display both wh-initial and wh-in-situ grammar, wh-words both at the SPEC position and anywhere else in the sentence are grammatically acceptable in non echo question, unlike what obtains in English.

It has also been argued that not every instance of wh-words in the sentence initial position can be attributed to movement. In fact, when a subject NP is questioned, the substituting question word is placed at the same subject NP position. This observation contradicts the general notion that every appearance of wh-word clause initially is a product of movement transformation both in English and other languages.
References


