

The structure of questions in Bokyi Language

Maria I. Obadan

Delta State University, Abraka

mariaobadan@yahoo.com

Reverend Kierien Ekpang

Theological College of Northern Nigeria, Jos

revkierienekpang@gmail.com

and

Bosco Okolo-obi

University of Port Harcourt

boscoobi@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper describes the different question types in Bokyi language spoken in Cross Rivers state Nigeria. To this end, four question types were examined namely; tag question, echo polar question, non-echo polar question and wh-question. Data for this study were gathered primarily through oral interview conducted by the researcher. The method adopted in this research is purely, findings show that tag questions are derived from their declarative counterparts by adding a tag structure to the declarative component; echo polar questions are derived by a rising intonation; non-echo polar questions are derived by inserting the question marker **di** at the right-most part of the sentence; wh question are either base generated at the rightmost part of a sentence or preposed into spec-position outside the sentence.

Keywords: *Bokyi language, tag question, polar declarative sentences*

Background

Boki is a Local Government Area in Cross River State of Nigeria. It was created on the 28th of August, 1991 and its capital headquarters is Boje. The region has a contiguous border with the Republic of Cameroon and is known internationally for being a commercial centre of agricultural commodities such as cocoa, coffee, timber, and palm products. Boki is a landlocked Local Government Area of Nigeria surrounded by Republic of Cameroon to the east and 5 other Cross River State LGA's. These are: Obudu and Obanliku in the north, Ikom and Ogoja in the West, and Etung to the south. The region has some of the most rugged terrains in Nigeria due to its being almost completely covered by the Cross River Rainforest (one of the last remaining in the country), and the Afi mountain range, 60% of which is inaccessible to vehicles throughout the year.

The language Bokyi (Boki, Nfua, Nki, Okii, Osikom, Osukam, Uki, Vaaneroki) is a regionally important language spoken by the Bokyi people of northern Cross River State, Nigeria. According to the Ethnologue, it is ranked among the first fifteen languages of the about 505 living languages in Nigeria, with a few thousand speakers in Cameroon. According to the Ethnologue, Bokyi has an estimated population of 140,000 in Nigeria and a total user in all countries: 143,700. The different dialects of the language include Basua (Bashua), Irruan (Eerwee, Erwan), Boje (Bojie), Kwakwagom, Nsadop, Osokom, Wula (Baswo, Kecwan, Okundi), Oku, Boorim, Oyokom, Abo (Abu), Eastern Bokyi (East Boki). On the *Ethnologue*, Bokyi (Boki, Nfua, Nki, Okii, Osikom, Osukam, Uki, Vaaneroki) is classified as vigorous with code number **ISO 639-3 bky**.

The language is classified as:

Niger-Congo

Atlantic-Congo

Volta-Congo

Benue-Congo

Cross River

Bendi

Alege [alf] (A language of Nigeria)

Bekwarra [bkv] (A language of Nigeria)

Bete-Bendi [btt] (A language of Nigeria)

Bokyi [bky] (A language of Nigeria)

Bumaji [byp] (A language of Nigeria)

Obanliku [bzy] (A language of Nigeria)

Ubang [uba] (A language of Nigeria)

Ukpe-Bayobiri [ukp] (A language of Nigeria)

Utugwang-Irungene-Afrike[afe] A language of Nigeria)

Source: *Ethnologue* (Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2016)

Long before the linguistic classification of Bokyi in 1989, the language has already been reduced to writing in 1971 and the complete Bible translated in the language in 1989 by Christian missionaries Rev. Paul C. Bruns, Rev. Charles Brehmer, Rev. Delbert H. Springer and a native speaker of the language Mr. Eugene Ebu Ekpang.

Data for this study were gathered primarily through oral interview. Data were supplied by two native speakers of the language; one of them is a Bible Translation Consultant who teaches at Theological College of Northern Nigeria, while the other is a farmer in Bokyi. The method adopted in this research is purely descriptive so as to enable even a non-linguist get a clear understanding of the question formation process in the language.

Objective of the study

Beyond the Bible translation, no attempt has been made to describe the language. Even the grammatical sketch of the language developed for the purpose of Biblical translation remains unpublished. As such, little or no linguistic data exist in this language. Blench (2001) in his article “The Bendi Languages: More lost Bantu Languages”, he laments that “very little research has been conducted on Bendi languages and modern work that does exist, mostly on Bekwara and Bokyi, remains unpublished or inaccessible”. Against this background, this study sets out to:

1. Provide a description of the different types of question in Bokyi language.
2. Explain the various strategies by which these interrogative structures are derived from their underlying declarative structures.

Since not much is known about Bokyi language, save some ethnographic information and linguistic classification, it is deemed pertinent to give a background description of the types and structure of sentences in the language. In Bokyi language, we have the simple, complex and compound sentence.

Examples

- a. Ekpang ó re bíru
 Name 3sg he buy yams ‘Ekpang bought yams.’

- b. Onynchéng [mú ó bê nyín kyísong] mu bonchi ejí.
Man REL. PRON 3.sg came here yesterday is father mine.
The man [who came here yesterday] is my father.
- c. Wilma mu ó zóngê ochéé ne Ruby mu ó cên bucen.
Name is 3.sg.running run and Name is 3.sg. walking walk.
Wilma is running and Ruby is walking.

Example (a) is a simple sentence; example (b) is a complex sentence, while example (c) is a compound sentence. From these constructions, we observe that Bokyi is an SVO language.

Question formation in Bokyi

A question is a linguistic expression used to make a request for information, or the request made, using such an expression. The information requested is provided in the form of an answer. In languages, there are different question types and the most prevalent ones include; tag question, Yes/No echo question, Yes/No non-echo question and wh-question. As stated in the objective, we will proceed to discuss how some of these question types are represented in the Bokyi language.

Tag question

Sil.org defines a tag question as a constituent that is added after a statement in order to request confirmation or disconfirmation of the statement from the addressee. Often it expresses the bias of the speaker toward one answer. A tag question often includes a ‘be’ verb, a predicate meaning ‘true’, and a negative marker.

Examples (English)

The English *isn't he?*, as in the following sentence:

1. He's a pleasant fellow, *isn't he?*

In Bokyi language, a similar structure occurs as shown in the following sentence.

2. Okon ó da ce Calabar; ó cé dí?
Name he NEG. went Calabar; he went QM. 'Ekapng did not go to Calabar; did he?'
3. Ekpang ó da ryí byirying; ó ryí dí?
Name he NEG. eat food he eat QM. 'Ekpang did not eat food; did he?'
4. Bosco ó fe nyin, mú kó dí?
Name he NEG. here; is in QM. 'Ekpang is not here; is he?'
5. Bosco mu nyin; ó fě dí?
Name is here; he NEG. QM. 'Ekpang is here; is he not?'
6. Ekpang ó ryi byirying; ó dá ryí dí?
Name he eat food he NEG eat QM. 'Ekapng ate food; did he not?'
7. Okon ó ce Calabar, ó da cé dí?
Name he went Calabar; he NEG go QM. 'Okon went to Calabar; did he not?'

8. *Ekpang ó ryi byirying; ó ryí dí?
 Name he eat food he eat QM. 'Ekapng ate food; did he?'

9. *Okon ó da ce Calabar, ó da cé dí?
 Name he NEG went Calabar; he NEG go QM. 'Okon did not go to Calabar; did he not?'

In Bokyi language, there are two ways to ask a tag question. As exemplified in examples (4-6), the declarative structure can be negated; in that case, there is no negative marker in the tag structure. In another instance, the declarative structure can be uttered without a negative marker; in that case, the corresponding tag structure must obligatorily carry a negative marker as in examples (7-9). This rule explains the ungrammaticality of examples (10 and 11), because in (10) there is no negative marker in both the declarative structure and the tag structure while in (11), there is a negative marker in both the declarative and tag structures.

Polar or Yes/No question

Polar questions are ones to which the expected answer is the equivalent of 'yes' or 'no' (and which are thus sometimes called yes-no questions). Generally, there are two categories of polar questions. These two types are presented in the following section.

Yes/No echo question

This type of polar question according to Matthews (2005) involves the same words, morphemes and word order as the corresponding declarative sentence, but with a distinct **intonation pattern** as the sole indication that it is a question. Examples of such structures in Bokyi are shown below.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>12a. Juliet ó câ Calabar ké Monday []
 Name she go Calabar on Monday
 Juliet is going to Calabar on Monday.</p> | → |
| <p>12b. Juliet ó câ Calabar ké Monday []
 Name she goes Calabar on Monday.
 Juliet is going to Calabar on Monday?</p> | ↗ |
| <p>13a. Loveth ó bê kyísóng []
 Name she came yesterday.
 Loveth came yesterday.</p> | → |
| <p>13b. Loveth ó bê kyísóng []
 Name she come yesterday.
 Loveth came yesterday?</p> | ↗ |

Typically in Bokyi, declarative sentences usually have a falling intonation towards the end of an utterance. However, in yes/no echo question, the intonation is rather rising.

Yes/No non-echo question

Unlike the echo question, the non-echo type employs other grammatical strategies that do not necessarily involve the use of intonation contrast to distinguish declarative from interrogative structures. Matthews (2005) highlights some strategies that languages employ to derive yes/no non-echo questions. Some of these strategies will be discussed here. According to him, the first strategy for forming polar questions is the use of a **question particle** which is added to a corresponding declarative sentence to indicate that it is a question. In Maybrat (West Papuan; Papua, Indonesia), the interrogative morpheme is a particle that is added to the end of the sentence, as in (14).

14. Maybrat (Dol 1999: 200)

ana m-amo Kumurkek a
 3pl 3-go Kumurkek **Q** 'Are they going to Kumurkek?'

The second general strategy for signalling yes/no non-echo questions involves the use of distinct **interrogative verbal morphology**. Most commonly, the verbal morphology may involve an affix that specifically signals that the utterance is a question, as in (15) from Hunzib.

15. Hunzib (van den Berg 1995: 112)
eł'e-čó-y
 go-pres.1/2-**Q** 'Are you going?'

In some languages, the verbal morphology involved in questions is more fusional and it is more difficult to isolate a specific morpheme as the interrogative morpheme. For example, in Gimira (Omotic, Afro-Asiatic; Ethiopia), there is a set of pronominal subject suffixes used in polar questions that are completely different from the subject affixes used in declarative sentences (Breeze 1990: 33). The distinction between separate question particles and interrogative affixes is not always clear. It is common in verb-final languages for question particles to immediately follow the verb, and they often loosely attach to the verb as clitics. Because it is difficult to distinguish verbal suffixes from clitics that can only attach to the verb, these are not distinguished here and morphemes which attach to the verb are all treated as instances of interrogative verb morphology, even if by some criteria they might be analyzed as clitics.

The third type is languages that have **both question particles and interrogative verb morphology**, either as two separate constructions or occurring together in a single construction. For example, in Pirahã (Mura; Brazil), there is both a question particle, as in (16a), and an interrogative verbal suffix, as in (16b); it is also possible to use them together.

16. Pirahã (Everett 1986: 236)
 a. *xíí* *bait-áo-p-i* *"híx*
 cloth wash-telic-impf-prox **Q** 'Are you going to wash clothes?'
 b. *xísi* *ib - áo - p - óxót*
 3.animal hit.arrow-telic-impf-q 'Did you arrow fish?'

A fourth but fairly uncommon way to signal that an utterance is a question is by using a **different word order** from that used in corresponding declarative sentences. This method is used in a number of European languages, like German, in which the inflected verb is placed at the beginning of the sentence. Compare the declarative sentence in (17a) with its corresponding interrogative sentence in (17b).

18. **German**

a. *Der Lehrer trink-t das Wasser.*
 The teacher **drink-3sg** the water 'The teacher is drinking the water.'

b. *Trink-t der Lehrer das Wasser?*
 drink-3sg the teacher the water 'Is the teacher drinking the water?'

Bokyi utilizes first strategy in deriving the non-echo question type in the language by inserting the question marker (QM) [**di**] at the end of the declarative construction.

19a. *ó* *ce* *kyifāt*
 3sg/He went farm 'She went to the farm.'
 19b *ó* *ce* *kyifāt di*
 3sg/She went farm QM 'Did she go to the farm?'

- 20a. Bosco ó ce kasî
 Name 3sg/he went market 'Bosco went to the market.'
- 20b. Bosco ó ce kasî dí
 Name he went market QM 'Did Bosco go to the market?'
- 21a. Ekpang okân onet
 Name warrior person. 'Ekpang is a great warrior.'
- 21b. Ekpang okân onet dí.
 Name warrior person QM. 'Is Ekpang a great warrior?'

Content Question

As opposed to polar question that require either a yes or no answer, content questions elicit specific answers. Ndimele (1994) states that content/*wh*- question refers to a class of questions in which a query is focused on a particular syntactic constituent. When a questioner uses content question words, he seeks information from his questioner regarding the identity of a particular entity or phenomenon. He notes that in Echie, content questions can be analyzed as the interrogative substitute for nominals in the language which express such notions as temporal, locative, manner, degree, intensity, enumerative, frequency, reason, activity, quantity and identity. All languages have a set of interrogative words that are characteristic of content questions. Since most interrogative words in English begin with *wh*-, content questions are often called *wh*-questions. In the Bokyi language, content question words include;

Yee 'who'/'whom'; **Ebong** 'what'/'why'; **Nya** 'where'; **Ora** 'which' and **Naa** 'how'

These classes of interrogatives are use in the derivation of content questions in the language as exemplified in the data below.

22. Ekpang mu o kye ng **yee**?
 Name is he search CONT who 'Ekpang is looking/searching for who?'
23. Ekpang mu o kye ng **ebong**?
 Name is he search CONT what 'Ekpang is looking/searching for what?'
24. Ekpang mu o kyu u **nya**?
 Name is he stay CONT where 'Ekpang is staying where?'
25. Ekpang o be nkere **ora**?
 Name he came time which Which time did Ekpang come? /Ekpang came which time?
26. Ekpang o kwon kyichi **naa**?
 Name he planted tree how 'Ekpang planted the tree how?'

In the discussion of the structural configuration of *wh*-question, the forms in examples 22-26 are referred to as *wh*-insitu-question (see Chomsky 1977, Ndimele 1994, Haegeman 1991, Radford 2006). By this they mean that the *wh*-question word is not moved from its original position within the sentence. This is based on the orientation that *wh*-question words are based-generated within the sentence as the rightmost constituent of the sentence. In Bokyi language, the *wh*-question word can either remain in-situ or can be moved as shown in the the examples below.

27. **Yee** nke Ekpang mu o kye ng
 Who FOC Name is he search CONT 'Who is Ekpang looking for?'
28. **Ebong** nke Ekpang mu o kye ng?
 What FOC Name is He search CONT 'What is Ekpang looking/searching for?'
29. **Nya** nke Ekpang mu o kyu u
 Where FOC Name is he stay CONT. 'Where is Ekpang staying?'
30. Nkere **ora** nke Ekpang o be?
 Time which FOC Name he come 'What time did Ekpang come?'
31. **Naa** nke Ekpang o kwon kyichi?
 How FOC Name he planted tree 'How did Ekpang plant the tree?'

The data above show the wh-question words in pre-sentential position. What this implies is that the forms in examples (27-31) are the surface structure of the deep structure in examples (22-26). Within the generative framework, this process of raising a wh-question word from its original position into a SPEC-C position is technically referred to as wh-movement or wh-fronting.

In Bokyì language, this process of wh-fronting results in focusing which is indicated by the focus marker *nke*. The process of focus marking a moved constituent is not unusual since the raising attaches some kind of topical prominence on the moved constituent. It is very significant to add here that the insertion of a focus marker is optional as it does not necessarily affect the meaning of the structure nor does the absence of it render the structure ungrammatical as shown in the following examples.

32. **Yee** Ekpang mu o kye ng
 Who Name is He searchCONT 'Who is Ekpang looking for?'
33. **Ebong** Ekpang mu o kye ng?
 What Name is he search CONT 'What is Ekpang looking/searching for?'
34. **Nya** Ekpang mu o kyu u
 Where Name is he stay CONT. 'Where is Ekpang staying?'
35. Nkere **ora** Ekpang o be?
 Time which Name he come 'When did Ekpang come?'
36. **Naa** Ekpang o kwon kyichi?
 How Name he planted tree 'How did Ekpang plant the tree?'

Interestingly, in complex sentences in Bokyì, the moved wh-constituent lands in the SPEC position of the minimal clause or the main SPEC position outside the main sentence. This type of derivation is exemplified in the data below.

- 37a. á kabe áfu Loveth ó re **ebóng** *in-situ*
 You think that Name she bought what
 You thought that Loveth bought what? /Can't it be 'what did you think (that) Loveth bought?'
- 37b. á kabe áfu **ebóng** ñkyí Loveth óre *partial movement*
 You think that what did name buy 'you thought that Loveth bought what?'

- 37c. **ebóng** ñkíyí á kabe afu Loveth óre. *full movement*
What do you think that Name bought 'What do you think that Loveth bought?'

Conclusion

This research has carefully examined tag questions, polar questions and content questions in the language. It has also been able to provide a basic description on how these questions are derived from their deep structures; for instance, rising intonation is used to derive echo (polar) questions from declarative sentences, non-echo polar questions are derived from their declarative counterparts by the introduction of the question marker *di* as the rightmost constituent of the construction. The Bokyi language has five wh- question words (**Yee, Ebong, Nya, Ora, Na**) which can either occur in-situ or ex-situ.

References

- Breeze, M.J. (1990). A Sketch of the phonology and grammar of Gimira (Benchnon). In Hayward, Richard J. (ed.), *Omotic language studies*, 1-67. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Chomsky, N (1977). On wh-movement. In P.W Culicover et al (eds). *Formal syntax*. New York: Academic Press.
- Dol, P. (1999). A Grammar of Maybrat: A Language of the Bird's Head, Irian Jaya, Indonesia. University of Leiden.
- Haegeman (1991). *Introduction to government and binding theory*. Oxford: Blackwell Ltd.
- Lewis, M. P. (2016). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world, 16th edition*. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics International. <http://www.ethnologue.com>. Accessed 23/09/2016.
- Matthews, S.D. (2005). polar question. <http://wals.info/chapter/116>. Accessed 2/10/2016.
- Ndimele, O. (1994). On the nature of wh-questions in Echie. *Journal of West African Languages* XXIV,2: 31-43
- Radford, A (2006). *Minimalist syntax: exploring the structure of English*. Cambridge: C.U.P
- Sadock, J.M., & Zwicky, A.M. (1985). Speech act distinctions in syntax. *Shopen*, 155–196.
- SIL <http://www-01.sil.org/linguistics/glossaryoflinguisticterms/WhatIsATagQuestion.htm> Accessed 2/10/2016.
- Van den Berg, Helma. (1995). A Grammar of Hunzib. *Lincom Studies in Caucasian Linguistics*, 1. München: Lincom Europa.