

On the So-called Interrogative Nouns in Yorùbá

Simeon Olaogun

Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko

Simeonlaogun2@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper challenges an age-long claim in Yoruba Syntax that movement of interrogative nouns such as *kí, ta, méléòó, èlò*, etc. clause-initially is responsible for typing content word question clauses as interrogative. The paper, adopting descriptive method of analysis and leaning on information structure, clause structure and clause typing evidence posits that preposing the so-called interrogative nouns is for focus rather than questioning, and that what instantiates interrogative force in such question clauses is phonetically null contrary to traditional Yoruba grammarians' claim.

Keywords: *movement, information structure, clause structure, interrogative force*

Introduction

Yorùbá grammarians such as Bamgbose (1990:84), Adewole et al (2000:114) and Awobuluyi (2013:51-52) claimed that content word questions are formed with the use of interrogative nouns such as *kí*, 'what' *ta*, 'who' *méléòó*, 'how many' *èlò* 'how much', *èwo*, 'which one' as given in the examples below:

1. (a) Ta ni o rí?
Who FOC you see 'Who did you see?'
- (b) Kí ni ò n wá?
What FOC you PROG look for 'What are you looking for?'
- (c) Èwo ni o fẹ?
Which one FOC you want 'Which one do you want?'

In the spirit of transformational grammar, Yorùbá grammarians' view on the formation of questions in Yorùbá is that interrogative markers such as *şé*, *ńjẹ*, *dan-in*, *şèbí* are adjoined sentence-initially while *bí* is adjoined sentence-finally to a simple declarative sentence to form yes/no questions while content word questions are derived by movement of the interrogative nouns; *kí, ta, èlò* etc. to clause initial position, followed by a focus marker as exemplified in the examples below:

2. (a) Adé wa.
Ade come 'Ade came'
- (b) Njẹ Adé wá?
Q/M Ade come 'Did Ade come?'
3. (a) Şégun ra iwé.
Segun buy book 'Segun bought a book'
- (b) Şé Şégun ra iwé?
Q/M Segun buy book 'Did Segun buy a book?'
4. (a) Bólú sùn.
Bolu sleep 'Bolu slept'
- (b) Bólú sùn bí?
Bolu sleep Q/M 'Did Bolu sleep?'
5. Adé jẹ işu
Ade eat yam 'Ade ate yam'
- (a) Kí ni Adé jẹ? 'What did Ade eat?' ← Ade ke <kí> Ade ate what?
↑ _____
- (b) Ta ni ó jẹ işu? 'Who ate yam?' ← <Ta> jẹ işu 'Who ate yam?'
↑ _____

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to employ clause structure, clause typing and information structure evidence to question the veracity of the claim that items such as *ta* and *kí* in (1a-c) above instantiate interrogation in Yorùbá.

Evidence against Interrogative Nouns in Yorùbá

Clause Typing Evidence

Clause typing is simply an assumption that the complementizer system codes information that would indicate whether a sentence is a question, declarative, relative, etc. This is termed Clausal Type by Cheng (1991) and specification of Force by Chomsky (1995).

In human language, there are different types of clauses, and there are elements/markers that identify/indicate each clause. For instance, in Yorùbá, elements such as ‘*tí*’ and ‘*ni*’ type the clauses in (6a-b) as relative clause and focus construction respectively.

6. (a) *Owó [tí Adé jí] pò*
 Money [that Ade steal] much ‘The money that Ade stole is much.’

- (b) *[Bàtà ni Adé jí]*
 [shoe foc Ade steal ‘Ade stole a pair of SHOES’

The salient question is that ‘what identifies a clause as a question in the languages of the world?’ Cross-linguistic evidence shows that elements such as *kí*, *ta*, *èlò* and *who*, *what* in Yorùbá and English do not clause type sentences as questions. This is because in many languages, there is always the presence of a question particle different from *wh*-words in content word questions. For instance, in *Lélé* and *Ñjò-Kóo*, apart from these *wh*-phrases, other question elements do show up in the sentences where such interrogative nouns occur as demonstrated in the examples (7-8) below

- 7 (a) *Wey ba é gá?* Lélé
 Who FOC go INTER ‘Who went away?’

- (b) *Me gba gol dí gá?*
 What FOC see 3.SG INTER ‘What did you see?’
 (Aboh and Pfau 2011)

- (c) *Ko Olú yè bọ ?* Ñjò-Kóo²⁵
 What Olu INTER drink ‘What did Olu drink?’

- (d) *Kòsan Adé yè dẹ isi?*
 Where Ade INTER buy yam ‘Where did Ade buy yam?’

- 8 (a) *Olu yè bọ ùji í*
 Olu INTER drink water EMPH ‘Did Olu drink water?’

- (b) *Ade yè dẹ isi í?*
 Ade INTER buy yam EMPH ‘Did Ade buy yam?’
 Olaogun (2016)

It is observed that the elements such as *gá* and *yè* are the question particles that instantiate interrogative force in *Lélé* and *Ñjò-Kóo* respectively. These elements are distinct from the *wh*-words. In addition, it is observed that the particle ‘*yè*’ which is used for asking yes/no question is also found in content word questions as in (7) and (8). The profound implication of these kinds of examples is that items such as *kí* and *ta* are not meant for asking questions in Yorùbá. However, it might sound bizarre that why should we generalize what happens in these languages to English and Yorùbá. In the spirit of Universal Grammar, the plausible characterization is to say that the elements that instantiate interrogative force are phonetically

²⁵ *Ñjò-Kóo* is the name proposed in Olaogun (2016) for a group of relatively mutually intelligible speech forms formally called *Ambé/Arigidi*-Cluster spoken in the North-western part of Akoko in Ondo State, Nigeria. The language is spoken in at least six towns; *Òkèàgbè*, *Ìgáṣí*, *Àjowá*, *Arigidi*, and *Erúṣú* made up of nine communities; *Ìgáṣí*, *Arigidi*, *Erúṣú*, *Oyín*, *Urò* in *Àjowá*, and *Àfá*, *Údò*, *Ògè*, *Àjè* in *Òkèàgbè* all in Akoko North West local government in Ondo State. *Ñjò-Kóo* is a compound name formed from *Ñ jò* and *Ñ Kó* (or *Ñ ghó* the variant of *Ñ kó* used in *Urò*) which is a form of greeting equivalent to *Pèlẹ̀ o* in Standard Yoruba.

realized in Njò-Kóo and Lélé while they are covert in Yorùbá. This explanation is heavily corroborated by Borer-Chomsky hypothesis which has reduced parametric variations to the features of lexical items (Borer 1984 and Chomsky 1995)

That the question item in content word questions is covert is not bizarre because this is also noticed in Yorùbá yes/no questions as shown by the evidence in examples (10a-b) below:

- | | | |
|--------|--|--------------------------|
| 9 (a) | Şé/ Njé olè ni?
Q/M thief FOC Is he a thief? | Bẹẹ ni/ Bẹẹ kọ
Yes/No |
| (b) | Şé/ Njé o ti jẹun?
Q/M 2.SG PERF eat? Have you eaten? | Bẹẹ ni/ Bẹẹ kọ
Yes/No |
| 10 (a) | Olè?
Thief? | Bẹẹ ni/ Bẹẹ kọ
Yes/No |
| (b) | O ti jẹun?
2.SG PERF eat You have eaten? | Bẹẹ ni/ Bẹẹ kọ
Yes/No |

Another language internal evidence is that if those elements instantiate interrogative force in content word questions, why is it that we have content word questions without wh-words. In other words, if interrogative nouns such as *ta*, *kí*, clause type sentences where they occur as wh-questions, why do we have wh-questions in Yorùbá without wh-words as exemplified below

- 13 (a) Bólú dà?
Bolu QM 'Where is Bolu?'
- (b) Şégun nkó?
Segun QM Where is Segun?

The semantic import of the above point is that questions are not clause typed by the so-called interrogative nouns. This is because, if really they do, they are expected to be found in examples (13) above

Information Structure Evidence

Information structure means the way speakers package messages and send them to the hearers. The traditional grammarians that claim that the elements are interrogative nouns have never asked the question why is it that the answer to every wh-question /content word question is always a focus construction. Interestingly, Bamgbose (1990:184) says that

... *òtẹ́ tí ó wa fún lílò wọn ni pé nínú gbólóhùn àkíyèsí alátenumọ́ ni a ti máa n ló wọn*

(The constraint for their use is that they are only found in focus constructions)

The explanation also supports our observation that because the content word questions are focused in Yorùbá, their answers must also be focus constructions. This being the case, the only satisfactory answer one can provide to the question asked above is that the question clause has got something to do with focusing. This is because these elements are preposed with a focus marker occurring adjacent to their right. This is revealed by the fact that not all languages permit this kind of syntactic operation. For instance, Aboh (2007) demonstrated the dichotomy between focused and non-focused wh-phrases/words. The answer to the non-focused wh-words is never a focus construction as demonstrated in the Oromo data in (14) culled directly from Yiman (1988:370)

- 14 (a) Eennu duf-e?
Who come-3sg-past 'Who came?'
- (b) Túlluu (duf-e)
Tulluu come-3sg-past 'Tulluu (came)
- (c) Eennu-tu duf-e
Who-Foc come-3sg-past 'Who is it that came?'

tu is the focus marker in the language but its non-occurrence in answer to the wh-question in (14a) is an attestation to the fact that wh-phrases may or may not be focused in the language.

The implication of this is that elements such as *kí*, and *ta* perform focus function rather than questioning ascribed to them by the traditional Yorùbá grammarians; which is why they are always followed

immediately by the focus marker at clause initial position. The real function of these elements is to delimit the constituents being questioned. For example, when we want to question a human noun, *ta* is used as opposed to when we want to question a non-human noun where *kí* is employed. Awobuluyi's (1978:25) explanation reinforces this claim when he says that:

...the interrogative nouns are used for asking questions about members of five sub-classes of nouns as given below:

Ta (who?)	for questioning human nouns
Kí (what?)	for questioning non-human nouns
Èwo (which one?)	for questioning demonstrative nouns
Èlò (how much)	for questioning value nouns
Mélòò (how many?)	for questioning quantity nouns

Clause Structure Evidence

Clause structure, in the context of this paper, explains the way constituents are systematically put together in clause to form a grammatical and acceptable structure. Another big question whose response will lend credence to the claim that the interrogative nouns perform focus function rather than interrogation is that, why is it that these nouns do not co-occur with the other focused nouns in a clause? The reason is that in Yorùbá, only a constituent per clause is permitted to be focused. This being the case, the examples below are ruled out in Yorùbá grammar.

15 *(a) Iṣu ni ẹwà ni Adé jẹ.
Yam FOC beans FOC Ade eat Ade ate YAM BEANS

*(b) Adé ni ó Olú ni ó ra bàtà.
Ade FOC HTS Olu FOC HTS buy shoe ADE OLU bought a pair of shoes

Similarly, the fact that the so-called interrogative nouns are focused disallows them from co-occurring with any other focused nominal in a clause. This accounts for the ungrammaticality of the sentences below.

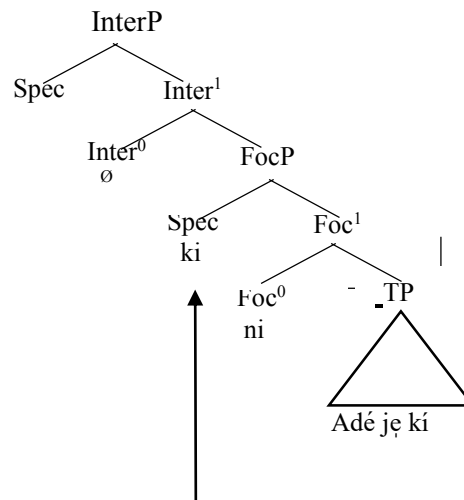
16 *(a) Kí ni iṣu ni Adé jẹ?
What FOC yam FOC Ade eat What YAM Ade eat?

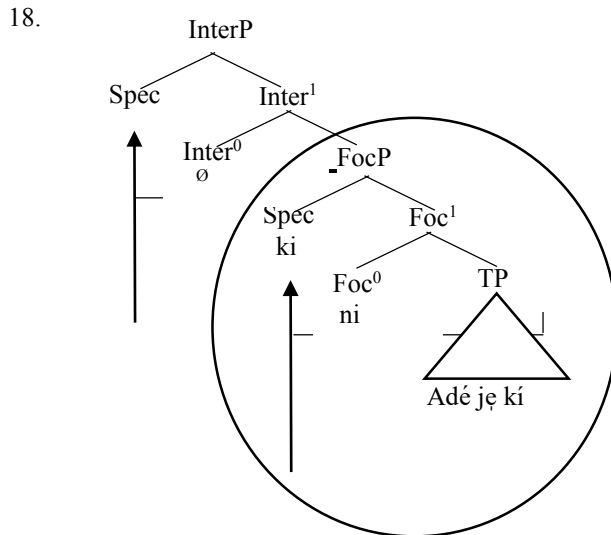
*(b) Ta ni ó Adé ni ó ra bàtà?
Who FOC HTS Ade FOC HTS buy shoe What ADÉ buy shoe?

The Structure of Content Word Questions in Yorùbá

The structural implication of the explanations offered so far is that every content word question expression in Yorùbá has two functional projections, namely, InterP and FocP as given in the tree diagrams below

17.





The tree diagrams above show that the covert interrogative marker can occur clause-initially or clause-finally.

Conclusion

This paper has employed cross-linguistic and language internal evidence, with insights from clause typing, information and clause structure to show that it is a grammatical misnomer to dub items such as *kí*, *ta*, *èlò*, etc. interrogative nouns. The reason is that the said items do not perform interrogative function but rather focus function. This being the case, the paper suggests focus nouns (i.e. nouns that delimit the constituent being focused in content word questions).

References

- Aboh, E. 2007. Focused versus non-focused wh-phrases. Focus and grammar: The Contribution of African Languages. E.O. Aboh, H. Katharina, and Z. Malte. Eds. Moulton Berlin
- Aboh, E. and Pfau, R. 2011. What's a wh-word Got to Do with it? *The cartography of syntactic structures*. B. Paola. Ed. New York: Oxford University Press. 5.
- Adewole, L. O. et al. 2000. Exam Focus. Yoruba Language for WASSCE & SSCE. Ibadan: University Press Plc.
- Awobuluyi, O. 1978. Essentials of Yoruba Grammar. Ibadan: University Press Limited.
- Awobuluyi, O. 2013. *Èkọ́ Gíràmà Èdè Yorùbá*. Oşogbo: Atman Limited
- Bamgbose, A. 1990. *Fonólójì àti Gíràmà Yorùbá*. Ibadan: University Press Limited
- Borer, H. 1984. Parametric syntax: case study in Semitic and Romance Languages. Dordrecht: Foris
- Cheng, L. 1991. On the typology of wh-questions. PhD. Thesis. MIT.
- Chomsky, N. 1995. *Categories and Transformations. The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge. M.A: MIT Press. 219 – 394.
- Olaogun, S. O. 2016. Information Structure Categories of the Ñjò-Kóo Language in Àkókó North-West of Ondo State, Nigeria. Ph.D Thesis. Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan.