Yes Or No Questions in Kanuri: A Minimalist Approach

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the three types of echo question sentences in Kanuri within the minimalist program. In conducting the research, the researcher uses his native speaker intuition and three other competent native Speakers to validate the data. The study identifies three types of movement: Subject movement from Spec. IP position to Spec. CP position, Object movement from Spec. VP position to Spec. CP position and finally the movement of the finite non auxiliary verb under Spec. V position to Spec. CP position to check question feature of Comp in Kanuri. The Study also identifies Structural ambiguity when one constituent moves across another constituent in Kanuri sentence structure. Case marking is used to disambiguate such sentence structures.

Keywords: Kanuri, Movement, Minimalist, Yes or No Questions.

INTRODUCTION

Kanuri is a member of the Saharan branch of the Nilo-Saharan phylum of African Languages. Bender (2000:44) presents the Saharan branch according to the following grouping: Kanuri-Kanumbu, Daza, Teda-Tubu and Zaghawa-Bideyat-Berti.

Kanuri Language provides an example of a language which strictly maintains its basic and permissible word-order throughout its grammar in main declarative sentences. This was confirmed by data available from research spanning the last three centuries (Hutchison 1976). The basic word-order is S.O.V. (Subject-Object-Verb) as illustrated in examples (1a and b) below:

1. a. tada-de bəri zəwin
   boy the food he is eating
   S O V
   "The boy is eating food"

   b. bəri-ga tada-də-ye zəwin
   food-DOM boy-the-SM he is eating
   O S V
   "The boy is eating food"

The above examples show that all case-marked NPS precede the main verb. It is on the basis of these basic words ordering that kanuri is classified as “rigid” subtype of S.O.V. languages (Greenberg, 1963:79).

Typology of Question Sentences in Kanuri

Questions vary in form and function. Generally, the classes of questions in natural languages are determined by the type of answer expected. There are two types of questions formations identified in Kanuri (Hutchison 1976, Cyffer 1998 and Fannami 2002).

(i) Yes or no question
(ii) Wh- questions

This paper is only concerns with yes or no questions in Kanuri language. Yes or no question sentence is formed in Kanuri by adding the particle –wa to the declarative sentences. Cyffer (1998) observes that the question particle
normally stands at the end of the sentence; he further opines that if a specific part of speech is to be put in question, it will be placed after that part of speech. Consider the following examples below:

2. a. Modu wa ngelaro cuwu
    modu q part. Ram bought
    “Was it modu that bought a ram?”

    b. Modu ngelaro wa cuwu
    modu ram q part. Bought
    “Was it a ram that modu bought?”

    c. Modu ngelaro cuwuna wa
    modu ram bought q part.
    “Has modu bought a ram?”

The above examples in (2a, b and c) are yes or no questions in Kanuri. The expected answer is àà or àá. Each of these sentences (in 2a, b and c) contains question particle wa. Fannami (2002) observes that when the question particle –wa stands at the end of a sentence, the whole sentence would be questioned. In question sentence of this type, the sentence must not be in simple past. The question particle –wa cannot stand at the end of a simple past declarative sentence except at the end of a present perfect or simple past negative declarative sentence. Consider the following examples taken from (Fannami 2002:48) below:

3. a. * Modu zawa cuwu –wa
    modu cap bought q part.
    “Has modu bought a cap?”

    b. modu zawa cuwuna –wa
    modu cap bought q part.
    “Has modu bought a cap?”

    c. modu zawa cuwu –nyi –wa
    modu cap bought –NEG. q part.
    “Modu didn’t buy a cap”

Example (3a) above is ungrammatical because the question particle –wa is suffixed at the end of a simple past declarative sentence while examples (3b and c) are grammatical because the question particle –wa occurs at the end of present perfect tense and negative declarative sentence in simple past tense respectively.

The above studies (Hutchison 1976, Cyffer 1998 and Fannami 2002) did not look at whether the specific part of speech to be put in question can be prepasted to the sentence initial position. Therefore, this study intends to look at the structure of the yes or no question formation using minimalist program.

Theoretical Framework

Minimalist Program

In the early 1960’s, linguists were trying to explain language acquisition and linguistics variation with the “formal frame work” which relied on rules and constructions to explain grammar. By the early 1980’s, linguists were building upon the earlier theories with a new frame work, the principles and parameters frame work, that sought to eliminate the reliance on rules and constructions in favour of a more generalised explanation of language acquisition. Perhaps the most widely known instance of the principles and parameters frame work was Government and Binding theory, which was primarily concerned with abstract syntactic relations. The research conducted in Government and Binding yielded promising results, and was widely accepted. According to Hornstein (2005), Government and Binding did not explain everything; it was viewed as “absolutely correct, in outline”. However, there was still a problem; the system that Government and Binding described was still very complex.

In the early 1990’s, the minimalist program was presented as a solution to this complexity. The minimalist program takes the assumption that language is a “perfect system” and that the faculty of language fits the constraints of this system in the most efficient way possible (Chomsky 1995:1). Within this assumption, the minimalist program attempts to uncover how this optimal system is structured and what its underlying mechanisms are.
Minimalist program takes into account “two types of economy considerations” (Hornstein 2001:4). The first of the two types is methodological economy. This type of economy considers factors “such as simplicity and parsimony”, and attempts to reduce the number of factors, modules and principles present in any given theory. The second type of economy is “substantive economy”, which places a value on the available resources: derivations should be as computationally efficient as possible, maximizing resources (Hornstein 2001:6).

Another reduction might be possible in the transformational system. A single rule set would be preferred over the two rules (movement and construal) in Government and Binding. In the case of the minimalist program, movement is assumed to be the only transformation rule. While reducing movement to a single operation, traces as “grammatical features” would ideally be eliminated in the minimalist program “unless strong empirical reasons force this conclusion (Hornstein 2001:7). This study will adopt minimalist program to see how echo – question sentences operates in Kanuri language.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Yes or no questions are formed in Kanuri with the suffix question particle –wa. The question particle –wa can be suffixed to the subjects DP (hence forth DP not NP), objects and verbs in sentence structures in Kanuri. Our assumption in minimalist program is that clauses are only interpretable as interrogative at logical form (hence forth LF) if they contain an interrogative operator that raises interesting questions such as (4) below:

4. Modu –wa ngəlaro cuwo
   Modu q part. Ram bought
   “Was it modu that bought ram?”

Here, the question particle –wa is suffixed to the subject complement Modu, in IP- Spec. position. The yes or no question particle –wa contains operator of some kind which is directly generated into Spec – CP. Example like (4) above will have the structure (5) below:

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5. CP
   C
   IP
     VP
       Modu
       Q.part.wa
       DP
         t
         DP
         V
         ngəlaro
         cuwo
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“Was it Modu that bought ram?”

Example (5) above shows that the question particle –wa is suffixed to the subject complement. The question particle –wa contains operator of some kind which is directly generated from Spec- IP into Spec. CP. The example (5) implies that the subject complement DP of the sentence is in question. The subject complements DP under IP in example (5) raises and moves into specifier complement position, leaving behind traces in order to check the question feature of Comp in Kanuri.

The question particle –wa can also be suffixed to an object complement when the object complement is in question. The object complement DP under VP raises and moves across subject complement to specifier CP position. This can be illustrated in example (6) below:

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Example (6) above shows that the object in question ngəlaro (ram) moves from VP Spec to CP Specifier position leaving behind traces. The crossed subject complement is casemarked to avoid structural ambiguity. If the subject “Modu” is not marked with subject marker –ye, the sentence will have two possible interpretations.

7. a. Was it ram that bought Modu?
   b. Was it Modu that bought a ram?

Cases are marked to disambiguate sentences when one constituent moves across another constituent in Kanuri sentence structure.

Another type of movement operation refers to as verb movement. According to Radford (1997) head movement operation, simply refers to as verb movement or V movement, since it involves movement of a finite non auxiliary verb from the head V position of VP into the head I position of IP. He further observes that part of the evidence for V movement involves negative sentence. This study identifies V movement in Kanuri. Verb movement can be observed when verbs are negated and the question particle –wa is suffixed to the verb. This can be exemplified in (7) below:
The above example shows that the subject complements “Modu” and the object complement “ngalaro” (ram) are case marked constituents. Cases are marked in example (7) above to avoid structural ambiguity. The subject marker –ye marks the subject complement, direct object marker –ga marks the verb complement and the verb in simple present negative cuwunyi didn’t buy and finally question particle –wa is suffixed to the verb. The verb under VP – Spec. position moves across the subject complement and the verb complement to C under CP Spec. position.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing, the study has identified three types of movement in echo question sentences in Kanuri language. In echo question formation in Kanuri, the question particle –wa is suffixed to the subject complement, verb complement and finite non auxiliary verbs. The study further identifies three types of movement in ord to check question feature comp in Kanuri. The question feature coms are:

(i) Movement of the subject complement from Spec. IP position into Spec. CP position to check question feature of comp.
(ii) Movement of the object complement from Spec. VP position into Spec. CP position to check question feature of Comp.
(iii) Movement of the finite non auxiliary verb under Spec. VP position into Spec. CP position to check question feature of Comp.
The study finally identifies how ambiguous sentences are disambiguated by marking cases when constituents crossed over another constituent in Kanuri sentence structures.

REFERENCES