

POLAR QUESTIONS IN GOKANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper described polar questions in Gokana within a formal linguistic framework. The paper found that two types of polar questions are attested in the language, yes/no questions and alternative questions. The study identified two types of yes/no questions, the gé yes/no question and the ékọọ ... (se) yes/no question in the grammar of Gokana. The paper showed that the alternative question must contain at least two alternative clauses and noted that the alternative question marker has a discontinuous structure in which the first part is optional while the second part is obligatory. The study found that the markers of both question types are similar but they perform different grammatical functions and also have different morphosyntactic behaviour. The paper argued that yes/no questions are variants of the alternative question, and showed that it is possible to extract a yes/no question from the structure of an alternative question in Gokana syntax. The study recommended an investigation of the phonological features of question formation in Gokana.

KEYWORDS: Gokana, Polar Questions, Clauses, Structure, Syntax.

Introduction

This paper seeks to provide a principled analysis of the grammar of polar questions in Gokana. Gokana is spoken in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria by approximately 200,000 people. It is closely related to Baan, Eleme, Tee and Kana. These languages form a genetic unity and Williamson and Blench (2000:33) classify them in Delta-Cross of Cross River within the Bantoid-Cross of the East Benue-Congo branch of Benue-Congo.

Defining Questions

According to Crystal (1997:319), question is:

“A term used in the classification of sentence functions, typically used to elicit information or a response and defined sometimes on grammatical and sometimes on semantic or sociolinguistic grounds ... Semantically, questions express a desire for more information, usually requesting a reply from the listener. The term is usually contrasted with three other major sentence

functions: statement, command and exclamation. In grammatical discussion, questions are usually referred to as interrogative in form”.

Isaac (2021:63) notes that questions constitute a universal linguistic phenomenon as they are attested in all human languages, but the classification of questions may differ among analysts. Salawu (2007:916) affirms that questions can be classified into two categories:

“Polar questions and non-polar questions. Polar questions are the ones that do have their responses bordering on affirmation or denial. They are commonly called yes/no questions; while the non-polar questions are information seeking questions”.

Thus, in this study, our analysis is limited to the investigation of the grammatical features of polar questions in Gokana.

Methodology

The researcher collected data from fluent native speakers of Gokana with the help of field assistants. The researcher also relied on his intuition as a native speaker of the language but where any given set of data contradicted his intuition, direct oral interview was used to elicit comparative data from other native speakers of the language. Secondary sources of data such as texts and library materials were also utilized.

Analyzing Polar Questions

Two types of polar questions occur in the grammar of Gokana: yes/no questions and alternative questions. According to Lester (1976:46) “a yes/no question anticipates ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as the appropriate replies to its questions”. On the other hand, an alternative question (henceforth AQ) is one that expects “as the reply one of two or more options presented in the question” (Quirk and Greenbaum 1973:192). The grammatical analysis of these question types in Gokana is presented in what follows.

1. Yes/No Questions

Some of the major strategies of marking yes/no questions are:

- i) Word order inversion (e.g. English)
- ii) Placement of certain suprasegmental features such as tones (e.g. Igbo) or intonation (e.g. English)
- iii) Insertion of interrogative markers or particles (e.g. Kolokuma (dialect of Izon), Yoruba, (Ndimele 1991:95)

In Gokana, yes/no question is formed by the insertion of an interrogative marker. Two types of yes/no questions are attested in the grammar of Gokana. They are:

- i) The gé yes/no question
- ii) The ékọọ ... (se) yes/no question

1a. The Gé Yes/No Question

The gé yes/no question is formed by the insertion of the interrogative marker **gé**. This marker is a clitic that can be hosted by the verb, the object NP or the adjunct.

Examples:

- 1a) Lédùm beè fé gbógó á
 PN PST kill dog the
 ‘Ledum killed the dog’
- b) Lédùm beè fé - gé gbógó á?
 PN PST kill Q dog the
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’
- c) Lédùm beè fé gbógó á - gé?
 PN PST kill dog the Q
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’
- d) Lédùm beè fé gbógó - gé?
 PN PST kill dog Q
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’
- e) Lédùm beè sẹ̀rẹ a gyãà mm bā -gé?
 PN PST keep his fish in pot the
 ‘Did Ledum keep his fish in the pot?’
- f) Lédùm beè sẹ̀rẹ -gé a gyãà mm bā?
 PN PST keep the s/he fish in pot
 ‘Did Ledum keep his fish in the pot?’
- g) Lédùm beè sẹ̀rẹ a gyãà -gé mm bā?
 PN PST keep s/he fish the in pot
 ‘Did Ledum keep his fish in the pot?’

Apart from the verb, the object and the adjunct, it will be ungrammatical to attach this question marker to any other host. This is responsible for the ungrammaticality of (2a-d).

- 2a) *Lédùm-gé beè sẹ̀rẹ a gyãà mm bā?
 PN Q PST keep s/he fish in pot
- b) *Lédùm beè -gé sẹ̀rẹ a gyãà mm bā?
 PN PST Q keep s/he fish in pot

c)	*Lédùm	beè	sere	a	-gé	gyāà	mm	bã?
	PN	PST	keep	his/her	Q	fish	in	pot
c)	*Lédùm	beè	sere	a	gyāà	mm	-gé	bã?
	PN	PST	keep	his/her	fish	in	Q	pot

Focus also plays some role in the **gé** yes/no question. Any constituent that can be focused can host the **gé** question marker. Under focus, this marker directly questions the focused constituents.

Examples:

3a)	Lédùm-gé	ní (e)	a	beè	sere	a	gyāà	mm	bã	ě?
	PN	Q	FOCRCM	s/he	PST	keep	his	fish	in	pot
	'Is it Ledum that kept his fish in the pot?'									
b)	a	gyāà -gé	ní (e)	Lédùm	beè	sere	mm	bã	ě?	
	his fish	Q	FOCRCM	PN	PST	keep	in	pot	EM	
	'Is it his fish that Ledum kept in the pot?'									
c)	gé	sere	-gé	gyāà	mm	bã	ní (e)	Lédùm náa	ě?	
	to	keep	Q	fish	in	pot	FOCRCM	PN	do	
	'Is it keeping his fish in the pot that Ledum did?'									
d)	mm	bã	-gé	ní (e)	Lédùm	beè	sere	a	gyāà	ě?
	in	pot	Q	FOCRCM	PN	PST	keep	his	fish	EM
	'Is it in the pot that Ledum kept his fish?'									

Most speakers prefer the focused variants because it is emphatic and actually suggests a stronger and more specific enquiry. But this marker co-occurs with more elements under focus than when it occurs in a simple interrogative structure. Observe that it cannot be hosted by the subject NP in a simple interrogative structure but it can in focus constructions. Compare (2a) and (3a).

The questions in (3a-d) are more prominent, direct and emphatic than their counterparts in (1). Focus marking in yes/no questions follow the same strategy as in indicative sentences.

1b. The **ékọọ** ... (sẹ) Yes/No Question

The **ékọọ** ... (sẹ) yes/no question is formed by the insertion of the interrogative marker **ékọọ** in sentence-initial position. Sometimes **ékọọ** may co-occur with **sẹ** in sentence final position but while **ékọọ** is obligatory **sẹ** is optional. The deletion of **sẹ** from an **ékọọ** question has no effect on the grammaticality or well formedness of the question.

Examples:

4a) ékọọ Lédùm beè fé gbógó á se?
 Q PN PST kill dog the Q
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’

b) ékọọ Lédùm beè fé gbógó á?
 Q PN PST kill dog the
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’

In fast speech, **ékọọ** may occur as **é** where **kọọ** is deleted as in (5):

5) é Lédùm beè fé gbógó á?
 Q PN PST kill dog the
 ‘Did Ledum kill the dog?’

Thus, **ékọọ** is a complex formative that is made up of **é** and **kọọ**.

kọọ in isolation may function as a complementizer or as the verb ‘to say’.

Focus plays some significant role in the **ékọọ ... (sé)** yes/no question. It makes them emphatic. Any constituent of the sentence that can be focused can co-occur with the **ékọọ** question marker. Thus, **ékọọ** in focus constructions directly questions the focused constituent.

Example:

6) ékọọ Lédùm ní (e) a beè fé gbógó á é se?
 Q PN FOC RCM s/he PST kill dog the E/m Q
 ‘Did LEDUM kill the dog?’

The focused variant in (6) is more common than its non-focused counterpart in (4a-b). The difference between (6) and (4a-b) is that (6) is emphatic and directly questions a particular constituent that is focused in the construction, whereas (4) is non-emphatic and does not single out any constituent as the questioned constituent. The two markers **ge** and **ékọọ ... (sé)** occur in free variation.

2. Alternative Questions

An alternative question (henceforth AQ) is one that expects “as the reply one of two or more options presented in the question” (Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:192).

In Gokana, the structure of the AQ can be schematized as:

Question marker + Alternative clauses + (Emphasis marker)

Example:

- 7) ékọọ a beè zib nu sẹ a beè fé nen ě?
Q s/he PST steal something Q s/he PST kill person EM
'Did he steal or did he kill someone?'

The AQ marker is **ékọọ ... sé**. It has a discontinuous structure. The AQ must contain at least two alternative clauses and an optional emphasis marker. But it is more common to find an AQ with the emphasis marker because it makes the question emphatic. In principle, there is no upper limit on the number of alternative clauses that can be presented in an AQ.

The first part of the AQ marker (**ékọọ**) ... **sé** is optional while the second part is obligatory. Thus, it is possible to find AQs with only **sé** as in (8).

- 8) a beè zib nu sẹ a beè fé nen (ě)?
s/he PST steal something Q s/he PST kill person EM
'Did he steal or did he kill someone?'

Since it is possible to have several alternative clauses in an AQ, the question marker **sé** is repeated to serve as a link or alternative marker between the clauses as in (9):

- 9) o beè ò múú sẹ o beè dé gyāà sẹ o beè
bà gyāà (ě)?
You PST drink water Q you PST eat food Q you PST
eat fish EM
'Did you drink water or did you eat food or did you eat fish?'

It is striking to point out that apart from the first clause, the entire constituents of the subsequent clause(s) of an AQ can be deleted except the contrastive constituent.

Examples:

FULL FORM

- 10) a beè sí boòrì sẹ a beè sí mòògò é?
s/he PST go Boori Q s/he PST go Moogo EM
'Did he go to Boori or did he go to Moogo?'

DELETED FORM

- 11) a beè sí boòrì sẹ mòògò é?
s/he PST go Boori Q Moogo EM
'Did he go to Boori or (did he go) to Moogo?'

The deletion in (11) is based on equi-sense relation. a **beè sí** 'he went' is deleted in the second clause to avoid repetition.

Focus marking is also involved in AQs. Apart from giving emphasis to alternative questions via the emphasis marker as in (7-11). AQs can be made semantically prominent via focus marking. In this case, the questioned constituent is focused.

Example:

- 12) fīī ní (e) a beè fé ẹ sẹ gbógó ní (e)
a beè fé ẹ?
rat FOC RCM s/he PST kill EM Q dog FOC RCM
s/he PST kill EM
'Is it a rat that he killed or is it a dog that he killed?'

Equi-sense deletion can also apply to the AQ in (12) to produce the contracted form in (13):

- 13) fīī ní (e) a beè fé ẹ sẹ gbógó ẹ?
rat FOC RCM s/he PST kill EM Q dog EM
'Is it a rat that he killed or a dog?'

In (13) the second instance ní (e) a beè fé is deleted to avoid repetition.

It is reasonable to point out that with emphasis via focus marking as in (12) and (13), each alternative clause has an emphasis marker. This is because the questioned constituent in each alternative clause is focused. And each instance of focus marking attracts the emphasis marker as there is a complex interconnection between the focus marker and the emphasis marker. It has been argued that equi-sense relation permits us to delete certain elements from a subsequent option clause of an AQ in order to avoid repetition. But consider this data:

FULL FORM

- 14) múú ní (e) a beè ò ẽ sẹ gyǎá ní (e) a
beè de é?
Water FOC RCM s/he PST drink EM Q food FOC RCM s/he
PST eat EM
'Is it water that he drank or is it food that he ate?'

DELETED FORM

- 15) múú ní (e) a beè ò ẽ sẹ gyǎá é?
Water FOC RCM s/he PST drink EM Q food EM
*'Is it water that he drank or food?'

Observe that the highlighted verbs of the alternative clauses in (14) are not the same and therefore do not share the same sense relation yet it is possible for deletion to occur in the second clause of the AQ in (15).

Interestingly, while the deletion in (15) has an ungrammatical gloss in English, in Gokana, a construction such as (15) is perfectly well-formed.

One way to account for this is to argue that the verbs *õ* ‘drink’ and *de* ‘eat’ are related in sense in some way. At least, they basically share the sense of feeding. But how they differ is in the exact process of feeding. Thus, based on this premise, we may modify our earlier condition for deletion and argue that in Gokana deletion is possible in the alternative clauses of an AQ if the deleted elements are exactly the same as those in the first clause or if the deleted elements can be traced to share a broad sense relation with those in the first clause.

3. Yes/No Question as a Variant of the AQ

In the linguistic literature, scholars like Stockwell et al. (1973), Langacker (1972), Lyons (1977) and Harris (1978) agree that yes/no questions are variants of the AQ. In Gokana, the yes/no question is a reduced form of the AQ. It is possible to extract a yes/no question from an AQ.

Examples:

AQ

16) *ékọọ* a beè sí ól se a beè sí ki é?
 Q s/he PST go farm Q s/he PST go market EM
 ‘Did he go to the farm or did he go to the market?’

YES/NO QUESTION

17) *ékọọ* a beè sí ól se?
 Q s/he PST go farm Q
 ‘Did he go to the farm?’

The yes/no question in (17) is derived from the AQ in (16) by deleting the option clause of the AQ.

The AQ and the yes/no question share the same question marker (*ékọọ ... se*). By contrast, while *ékọọ* is obligatory in yes/no question, *se* is obligatory in (AQs).

This difference requires some comment. *se* is obligatory because apart from functioning as a question marker, it also functions as the alternative marker but it is optional in yes/no questions because there is no alternative clauses.

The speaker is therefore free to delete *sè* or retain it in yes/no questions. There is no grammatical rule that specifies whether or not to delete *sè* along with the option clause.

On the other hand, *ékọọ* is obligatory in yes/no questions since *sè* can be unpredictably deleted along with the option clause. Thus, an AQ becomes a yes/no question when the option clause(s) are deleted.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have described the grammar of polar questions in Gokana. The study identified yes/no questions and alternative questions as sub-categories of polar questions in Gokana.

The paper found that two types of yes/no questions occur in Gokana, the *gé* yes/no question and the *ékọọ ... (sẹ)* yes/no question. The paper argued that the *gé* yes/no question is formed by the insertion of the interrogative marker *gé* which is a clitic that can be hosted by the verb, the object NP and the adjunct into the sentence structure.

The paper noted a severe syntactic constraint on the *gé* question particle as any illicit attachment of the particle to an unspecified lexical category generates ill-formed constructions.

The paper showed that the *ékọọ ... (sé)* yes/no question is formed by the insertion of the question particle *ékọọ* into the sentence-initial position of the question clause. Sometimes *ékọọ* may co-occur with *sé* in sentence final position but while *ékọọ* is obligatory *sé* is optional.

The study found that the AQ must contain at least two alternative clauses and noted that the AQ particle has a discontinuous structure in which the first part is optional while the second part is obligatory. In principle, there is no upper limit on the number of alternative clauses that can be presented in an AQ. The study argued that yes/no questions are variants of the AQ; and showed that it is possible to extract a yes/no question from an AQ in Gokana syntax.

Recommendations

The paper recommended an investigation of the phonological features of question formation in Gokana.

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