

Aspect of the Grammar of the So Called Wh-Words in Èchiè

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Abstract:

The grammar of wh-words is common in the literature. One may hold that its popularity may be due to its valence and linguistic versatility in language discourses. A point of interest in the literature has been the syntactic position of the wh-words in sentences. Opinions are divided on the syntactic position of the wh-words in clauses. Some scholars hold that the occurrences or the syntactic positions of the words in clauses is usually at the discretion of the users; while others hold that for adequate communicative potency, the wh-words occur in specified positions. In this paper, we uphold that the syntactic position of the wh-words in clauses is largely language specific. The words can be based generated in a particular slot in the clause, in which case, it is said to be in-situ; it can also occur in a non-in-situ position in which case, it is

said to be product of transformational displacement. To descriptively x-ray or get at the thrust of our concern, we divided this paper into two sections. Section one which is called Set-A-type, discusses the syntactic in-situ position of the wh-words. In this occurrence, the wh-words that occur at both subject and predicate in situ are defined; those that can only occur at predicate in situ are also shown. Section two which we tagged Set-B-type, discusses the syntactic non-in situ occurrence of the wh-words. This section explains the circumstances for the occurrence and also some grammatical nuances that follow the occurrence.

Introduction:

The grammar of the wh-words abounds in the literature. The pragmatic nature of the words according to Nwala (2004:185) has been the cause of its common place in the literature. Another reason for the commonness of the wh-words noted by Nwala (2000:118) is their prominence in communicative discourse, especially as they are dynamically used in interrogations.

It seems to be a universally accepted opinion that every language has forms of wh-words since speakers or language users usually get involved in speech act discourse. The use of these words in question formation follows a set of optional and obligatory rules in lects such as Igbo, French, English etc. In these languages, the wh-words may occur sentence finally or internally, or both, depending on the grammar of the language.

Èchiè belongs to the French type languages where the wh-words can occur in dual positions in the surface structure: sentence finally and internally, unlike English type languages where the wh-words can only occur sentence internally (perhaps except in echo questions), (Radford 1988).

The wh-words in Èchiè are:

- | | | |
|-------|----------|----------------------|
| i. | Ònye | who |
| ii. | Be ole | where |
| iii. | Mgbè òle | when |
| iv. | Kè òle | which |
| v. | Kwụ ole | how |
| vi. | Nni | what |
| vii. | Ndii | where/what/which/how |
| viii. | Ìle | how many |

2.1 SET-A-TYPE: Subject and Predicate IN-SITU:

1. Ònye jhèrè ornù?
(Who pst go farm)
Who went to the farm?
2. Ìle dhàrà n' àlà?
(How many pst fall on the ground)
How many fell on the ground?
3. Nni kùrù Àmàdi
(What pst hit Àmàdi)
What hit Àmàdi?
4. I gwàrà ònye?
(You pst tell who)
Who did you tell?
5. Ò wèrè ìle?
(He pst take how many)
How many did he take?
6. Ò mèrnè nni
(He pst do what)
What did he do?

Sentences 1-6 clearly show the use of the wh-words: **ònye**, **ìle** and **nni** in interrogative sentences. Whereas in 1-3, the words are at their subject in-situ, in 4-6, they are at their predicative in-situ. At these positions, the words are base generated. The sentences are grammatical and acceptable.

2.2 SET-A-TYPE: Predicate IN-SITU:

7. Nù gàrà kwu ole?
(you pst go how)
How did you go?
8. Nù mèrnè kè òle?
(you pst go what)
9. I jhèrè mgbè òle?
(You pst go when)
When did you go?
10. Nù jhèrè be ole
(You pst go where)
Where did you go?

Kwu ole, mgbè òle, kè òle and **be ole** in sentences 7-10 are at their subject in-situ, they are base generated at these positions. This set of wh-words in Èchiè belongs to another class; they do not occur subject in-situ. Why these words cannot be base generated at the subject slot like **ònye, ìle** and **nni** is not yet known. Ndimele's (1991) argument that **ònye, nni** and **ìle** are able to occur subject in-situ due to their inherent thematic properties which see them bearing either an Agent or thematic role is not explanatorily adequate. Whether an item inherently contains an Agent or thematic role or is assigned such role by another say, the verb, does not make much difference. Thematic roles are not base generated, they are products of the logical form, agreed to be assigned after the collapse of the Standard Theory (ST), and the Extended Standard Theory (EST) at the surface level of the grammar.

Each of the wh-words **kwu ole, be ole, kè òle,** and **mgbè òle** is historically a command word made up of what we may call a question _trigger' and a question _extender'. **Be-, be-, kwu** and **mgbè** are question _initiators' or _triggers', which inherently contain attributes of interrogation. **Òle** is an interrogative _extender' or a help mate of the interrogative triggers. The syntactic status or nature of **òle** suggest that historically, it used to be an interrogative word but lost its full qualities in course of time. This shows why it can as well collocate with other wh-words such as **ndii** and **ònye** apart from its compounding counterparts:

11. **Ndii òle biàrà?**
(Which which pst come)
Which people came?
Who came?
12. **Onye òle gwàrà gi**
(who which pst tell you)
Who told you?

The words **be-, ke-,** and **mgbè** as we said earlier contain interrogative attributes but lack syntactic and semantic wholeness. To achieve deserved grammatical adequacy especially at the logical form, the _extender' **òle** has to cliticize onto each of the question triggers. This argument seems a better reason why **kwu-ole, be ole, kè òle** and **mgbè òle** do not occur subject in-situ and therefore do not inherently bear Agent or theme roles in line with Ndimele (1991) position.

Kwu-ole, mgbè òle, be ole and **kè òle** syntactically contract with **ndii**. Whereas the former are base generated at the predicate, the

latter can only be base generated at the subject. In fact, the syntax of **ndii** is completely different from the other Èchiè wh-words. **Ndii** is the only wh-word of the lect that must collocate with another wh-words or a question extenders or triggers such as **ònye, òle, ìle, mgbè nne**, etc.

13. Ndii ònye o bù?
(Who who he be)
Who is he?
Who is that?
14. Ndii òle biàrà?
(Who which pst come)
Which people came?
Who came?
15. Ndii hne mènè ni?
(What thing pst happen what)
What happened?

Sentences 13-15 validate our opinion about **ndii**. In each of the sentences, **ndii** is a form of focus marker and occupies the pre-subject position. This explains why all the wh-words in Èchiè save **ndii** occur with the focus marker **O bu** it is.

2.3 SET – B – TYPE: Secondary Position:

16. Ìle, bù hne, o wèrè t_i?
(How be thing he pst take)
How many did he take?
17. Be ole_i, bù be, o jhèrè t_i?
(Where be where he pst go)
Where did he go?
18. Ndii_i hne, o gwàrà gi t_i?
(What thing he pst tell you)
What did he tell you?
19. Mgbè òle_i, bù mgbè, ò mènè t_i?
(When be when he pst happen)
When did it happen
20. Nni_i, bù hne, o gwàrà gi t_i?
(What be thing he pst tell you)
What did he tell you?
21. Kè òle_i, bù kè o mènè t_i?

- (Which be which he pst do)
Which did he do?
22. Ònye_i, bù onye, I gwàrà t_i?
(Who be who pst tell)
Who did you tell?
23. Kwu ole_i bù kwu, o dì t_i?
(How be how he be)
How is he?

The set shows the *wh*-words in alien positions. The words are in these positions via transformational rules. Their movements necessitated the manifestation of trace with phonetic shapes and those without phonetic shapes. The moved items which now occupy the subject positions are internally generated; their movements were cyclic or successive in obedience to bounding rule (see Chomsky 1980, 1981, 1982 Radford 1988 and Haegeman 1991).

In sentences 16, 18 and 20, the *wh*-words **ìle**, **ndii** and **nni** left at their first landing sites yielding to the emergence of the trace, **hne**, which in the parlance of GB is called a variable. Morphologically, **hne** is a free lexis in the lect with polysemous semantic reference. It could mean *‘something’* or *‘what’*. Why **hne** is not recognized as one of the *wh*-words in the lect is still a matter of debate.

Our opinion about **hne** is that its inability to collocate contiguously with the focus marker, **o bu** *‘is it’*, freely without the *wh*-words **ìle**, **òle**, **nni** and **ònye** and its parallel behaviour with the traces of other *wh*-words suggest that it is not semantically and syntactically a full fledged *wh*-word. In the sentences under investigation, the *wh*-words, their variables, **hne** and traces, **t_i**, observe all the syntactic and semantic principles of the GB grammar.

Sentences 17, 19, 21 and 22 depict same transformational output save in the variable (or the trace with a phonetic shape). The sentences are complex like those of 1, 3 and 5. The traces or variables of these sentences are reductions or are parts of the *wh*-words. The traces or variables are **be**, **mgbè**, **kè** and **kwu**. The grammatical appearance of these words as traces suggests first and foremost that the *wh*-words **be ole**, **mgbè òle**, **kè òle** and **kwu ole** are not originally words in the lexicon but are derived through historical contact with other languages.

Apart from the fact that in the constructions under investigation **kè**, **mgbè**, **be** and **kwu** are traces, they are also described at least in this

paper as question triggers like **hne** in sentences 16, 18, and 20. Each of these words or traces inherently contains attributes of interrogation. The concatenation of the interrogative triggers **kè**, **be**, **mgbè**, and **kwu** with the interrogative extender **òle** make the triggers and extenders to function fully as wh-words in the lect.

The wh-word **ònye** in sentence 22 is somewhat different from the other examples. **Ònye** functions dually in the sentence. It is a wh-word and at the same a variable. The trace or variable **ònye** is of the same syntactic and semantic status as **hne**, **kè**, **kwu**, **mgbè**, and **be** in the constructions above. The wh-word **ònye** is the only wh-word in Èchiè that can subcategorize or select + human features. This ‘elitist’ status of **ònye** perhaps may be the reason why its trace or variable in the construction above is different from others.

Conclusion:

Thus far, we have been investigating aspects of the syntactic and semantic behaviour of the wh-words in Èchiè. We noted morphologically the number of the wh-words in the lect; their base generated instances and their surface level realization. The wh-words **ònye**, **ìle**, **nni** and **ndii** are the only subgroup that can occur sentence initially. **Ndii** in addition always collocates with either another wh-word or with an interrogative trigger **hne**. The wh-words **ònye**, **ìle** and **nni** are syntactically able to occur sentence finally at the base of the grammar.

The wh-words **kwu ole**, **mgbè òle**, **kè òle** and **be ole** only occur sentence finally at the base; their occurrence sentence initially is always as a result of transformation. In the movement of the words to the sentence initial position, the principle of subjacency or cyclic movement is always adhered to. Again, the movement or dislocation of every wh-word to the sentence initial position warrants the realization of a complex sentence and the emergence of a trace with a phonetic shape.

The paper clearly pinpoints the divergence of **ònye** which is purely a human interrogative sheds or reduces its status to its like in cases of movement or complex wh-word questions realization, while **ndii** which does not occur sentence finally at the surface level needs or requires another wh-word or an interrogative trigger in every circumstance.

One may ask, what is the cause of the rekindled interest in the syntax of the wh-words since a lot has been said about it in the literature? Our answer is that this study has revealed among other things the distinction and peculiarity of the wh-words in the Èchiè lect.

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