

EXPLORING WH-QUESTIONS IN GOKANA: A PRINCIPLES AND PARAMETERS APPROACH

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Abstract

WH-Parameter is a major parameter that defines the setting of switches in Universal Grammar. This paper seeks to provide a principled analysis of the syntactic structure and thematic features of WH-questions in Gokana with insights from Principles and Parameters Theory. The paper claims that although base-generated and fronted WH-questions occur in Gokana; the parametric variation attested for the language in terms of switches in Universal Grammar for WH-question formation is that Gokana belongs to languages where WH-phrases remain in their base-generated position. The study shows that the movement of the WH-phrase to the left-most periphery of the clause at S-structure in Gokana is triggered by the thematic features of focus marking. The paper argued that any construction with a fronted WH-phrase in Gokana does not only function as a question but it is also a focus construction since the fronting is a direct response to focus summon. The study also claims that there is no vacuous movement in the fronting of a WH-phrase in SPEC-I' position and observes that every WH-phrase in any structural position within the minimal clause can either be fronted to achieve emphasis or left in its base-generated position in the formation of WH-questions in Gokana.

Keywords: Gokana, WH-Questions, In-Situ, Base-Generated, Left-Periphery, Fronting, Principles And Parameters, Thematic Features, Subjacency.

Introduction

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 Bantoid-Cross of the East Benue-Congo branch of Benue-Congo.

This paper seeks to provide a principled analysis of the syntactic structure and thematic features of WH-questions in Gokana with insights from Principles and Parameters Theory.

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. The data were analyzed within the framework of Principles and Parameters Theory.

The Phenomenon of WH-Questions

Questions constitute a universal linguistic phenomenon as they are attested in all human languages but the classification of questions may differ among analysts. Following Salawu (2007:916) questions can be classified into two categories:

“Polar questions and non-polar questions. Polar questions are the ones that do not have their responses bordering on affirmation or denial. They are commonly called Yes/No questions; while the non-polar questions are information seeking questions. The responses to such questions offer a detailed and comprehensive explanation on the issue”.

WH-Questions belong to the sub-group of non-polar questions. And like the Head-Parameter, it is a major parameter that defines the setting of switches in Universal Grammar. According to Ndimele and Efere (2003:525)

“...languages of the world are distinguished in terms of those where WH-movement is obligatory or where WH-phrases may remain at their base-generated position”.

There has been a strong debate on the WH-

phenomenon among generative grammarians, and there seems to be a consensus of opinion that the WH-phrase found in sentence initial position in most languages is not in its source position. A number of analysts have explained the occurrence of WH-phrases in pre-subject position in terms of WH-movement. According to Radford (1988:466):

“...clause-initial WH-phrase, cannot originate outside S... WH-phrase cannot originate in their superficial position as the left-most constituent of S-bar, but rather must originate inside S”.

Ndimele (1992:66) agrees that a WH-phrase is fronted and claims that “there is a general belief that the home of a WH-word is in SPEC C’ position corresponding to the position of the quantifier”.

It is also evident in the literature that there are languages in which WH-phrases are not fronted in

the formation of WH-Questions. Chomsky (1986 b) admits that some languages have both fronted and in-situ constructions in WH-Question formation. But noted that the predominant structure marks the WH-Parameter for such languages.

A number of analysts including Essien (1990) and Emenanjo (1978) have refuted the use of the term WH-Questions in African languages and have proposed terms such as ‘Question-Word Question (QWQ)’, ‘Lexical Marker Question (LMQ)’, ‘Content Word Question (CWQ)’ etc. But, this paper is not interested in the nomenclature debate but simply retains the term WH-Question in this study to refer to questions that require information about some entity and phenomenon in the same sense that the term is used in English. In what follows, we analyze the syntactic structure and thematic features of WH-Questions in Gokana.

WH-Questions in Gokana

WH-Questions in Gokana can be classified into two sub-types: Base-generated WH-Questions (in-situ) and Fronted WH-Questions. The base-generated WH-questions are a sub-type of WH-questions that occur within a minimal clause in which the WH-phrase is questioned in its source position. Consider the following data:

1) mee beè iri ni- ē?
who PST marry you EM

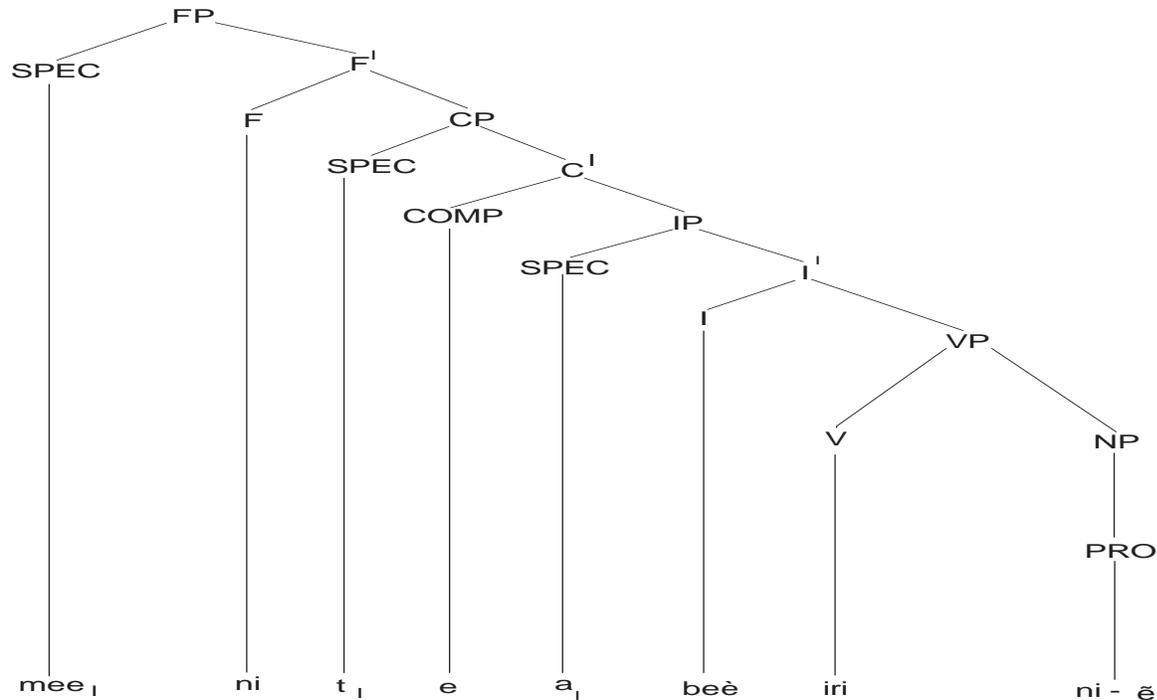
‘who married you?’

2) O beè zari ee-e
You PST buy what EM
‘What did you buy?’

The subject NP mee ‘who’ is questioned at source in (1) while in (2), the object NP ee ‘what’ is also questioned in its source position. This type of WH-question does not involve any movement rule as the questions are clearly base-generated.

The fronted WH-questions involve movement of the WH-phrase from the source position to the left-most periphery of the clause. Consider this data:

3) Mée ní e a beè irí ni -ē?
Who FOC RCM t PST marry you EM
‘WHO married you?’



Observe that in (3) the subject NP is fronted. The focus marker ni attracts mee ‘who’ the WH-phrase in SPEC-I’ position into SPEC-C’ position which leaves behind an overt trace a in SPEC-C’ position. When mee ‘who’ moves from SPEC-I’ to SPEC-C’ position, a complementizer e surfaces to introduce the next clause (i.e the relative clause). The complementizer e occurs as the head of the CP.

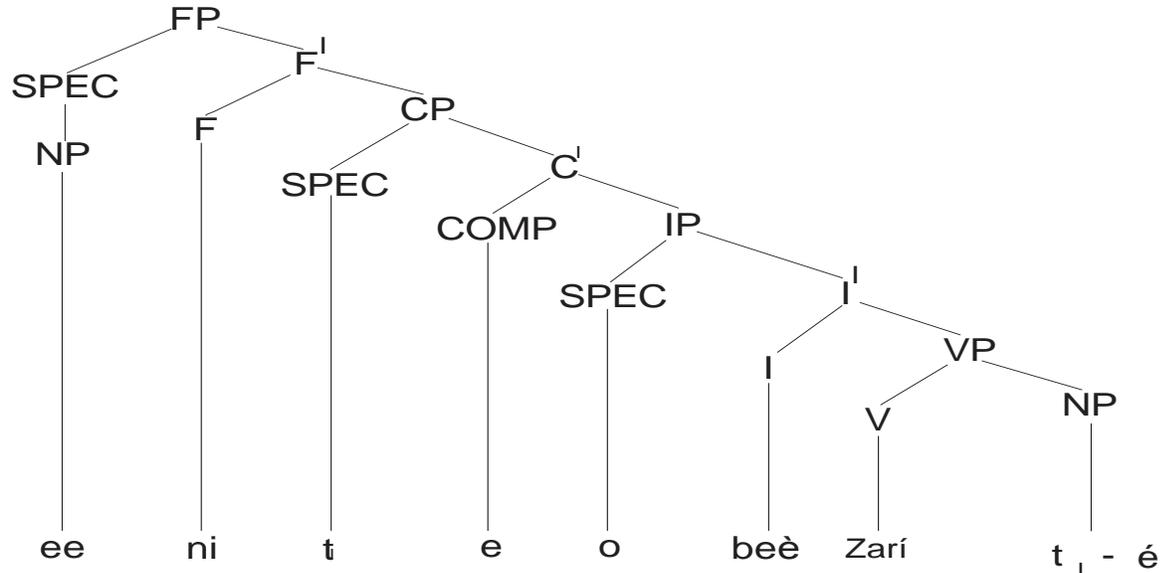
The movement of mee ‘who’ from SPEC-I’ position to SPEC-C’ position is to avoid long jump which is a threat to subadjacency. Subadjacency states that “any application of the rule $-\alpha$ may not cross more than one ‘bounding node’ “ (Ndimele 1992:41). But mee ‘who’ later moves into SPEC-F’ position, leaving behind a null trace that is coindexed with the moved item.

The trace in SPEC-I’ position and SPEC-C’ position (i.e the overt pronominal trace a and the null trace) assumes all the grammatical features of the preposed constituent mee ‘who’ because it was left behind by the rule $-\alpha$. The trace is co-indexed with the moved item, so that we can have a complete record of what has been moved and where it originated.

It is interesting to note that, the movement of the subject WH-phrase mee ‘who’ in Gokana does not involve ‘vacuous’ movement as Chomsky (1986 a) observes in English. Rather, movement is explicit. This is a major contrast in the syntactic structure of English and Gokana. According to Ndimele (1992:65) Chomsky asserts that WH-movement takes place except for the subject which he calls a case of ‘vacuous’ movement.

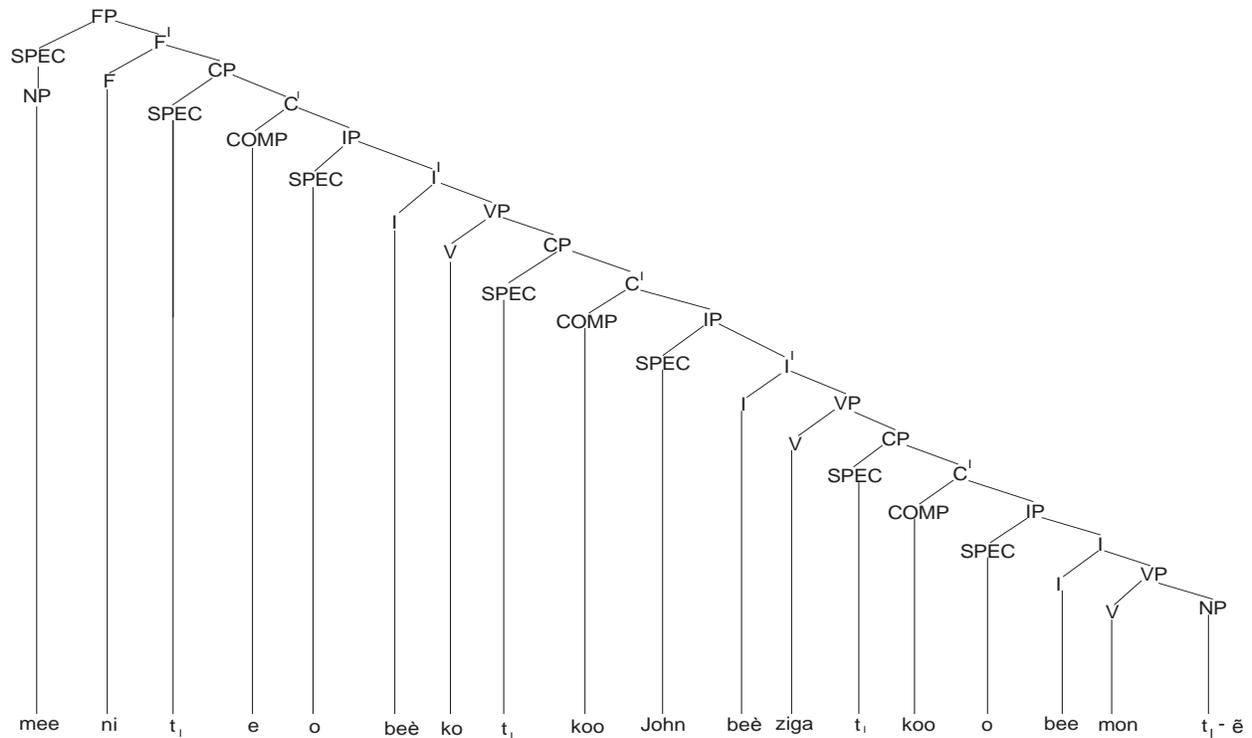
In the following construction in (4), the object NP is fronted:

- 4) ee ni e o beè zarí t -é?
 What FOC RCM you PST buy t EM
 ‘WHAT did you buy?’



The question constituent *ee* ‘what’ moves from its base-generated position into sentence-initial position. The first instance of movement is into SPEC-C’ position. It moves here to avoid long jump, which is a threat to subjacency. It subsequently moves from SPEC-C’ into SPEC-F’ position in response to focus. The moved item leaves behind a trace. The trace and the moved item are also co-indexed in order to establish a link between the moved constituent and its original position. Apart from crossing a single barrier node (one IP), a fronted WH-phrase in Gokana can cross three or more barrier nodes without losing the logic of the question preposition, as long as movement obeys the subjacency condition as shown in the data in (5):

- 5) mee ni ti e o bee kɔ ti kɔɔ John bee ziga ti kɔɔ o bee mon ti -ẽ
 who FOC RCM you PST say that PN PST believe that you PST see EM
 ‘who did you say that John believed that you saw’



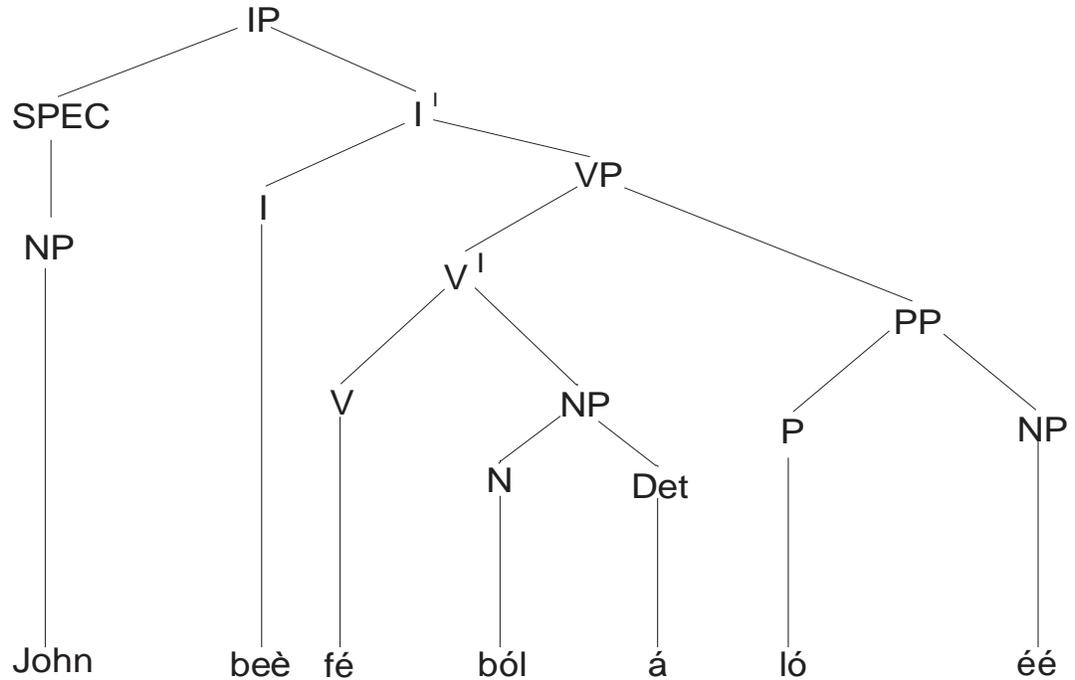
Scope of WH-Movement

Ndimele (1992:67) asserts that “the minimal clause from which a WH-phrase is extracted is the scope of WH-movement”. The implication of this assertion is that any WH-phrase occupying any syntactic position within the minimal clause can be fronted.

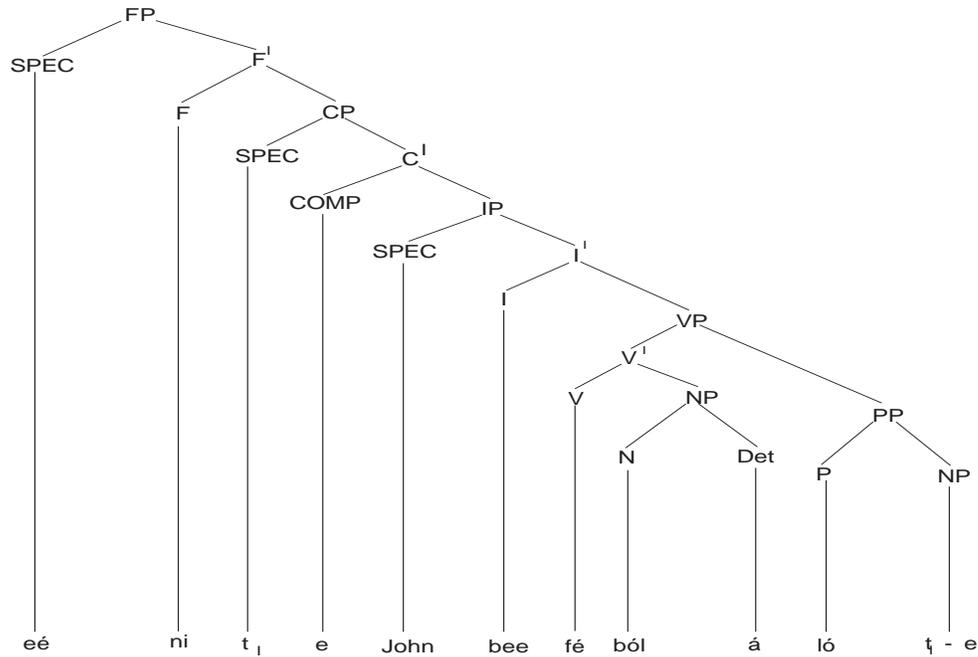
In Gokana, it is possible to find a WH-phrase in the subject position, object position or adjunct position of the minimal clause. The entire WH-phrase occupying a given grammatical position in the minimal clause can be fronted from the source position. When such fronting occurs, a trace is left behind at the extraction site of the moved WH-phrase. The trace shares the same grammatical features with the moved constituent. Thus, like the WH-phrase, a WH-trace can be found either in the subject position, object position or adjunct position of the minimal clause.

It is observed that when a WH-phrase moves from either the subject or object position of a minimal clause, it moves with its entire referential content and leaves behind a trace. But when a WH-phrase moves from an adjunct position, it can either move with the entire referential content of the constituent or leave a category of the constituent stranded at the source position to co-occur with the trace and only the WH-word will be fronted. Consider this data:

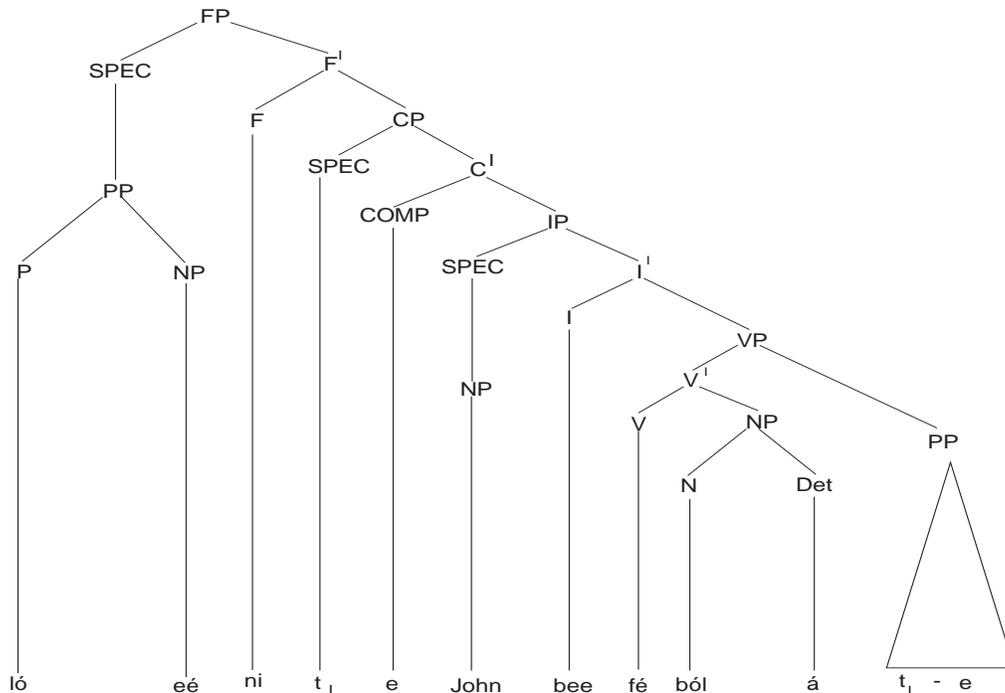
- 6a) John beè fé ból á ló éé
- PN PST kill goat the for what
- ‘For what did John kill the goat’



b) éé ní e John beè fé ból á ló t-e
 what FOC RCM PN PST kill goat the for t EM
 'For what did John kill the goat'



c) ló ee ní e John beè fé ból á ló t-é
 for what FOC RCM PN PST kill goat the t EM
 'For what did John kill the goat'



Observe that in (6a) the WH-phrase *ló éé* ‘for what’ is in the source position of the minimal clause. In (6b), the WH-word *éé* ‘what’ is fronted to the left-most periphery of the clause without *ló* ‘for’. Thus, the preposition is stranded without the NP but the construction is grammatical and acceptable. A trace appears in the base-generated position of the NP to indicate that the NP has been fronted. But in (6c), the entire content of the WH-phrase, the whole PP is fronted leaving behind a trace in the PP to indicate that it is the base-generated position of the moved WH-phrase *ló éé* ‘for what’.

Whereas it is grammatical to move only a part of a WH-phrase contained within a PP in adjunct position; it is not possible to move only a part from a WH-phrase contained in an NP occupying either the subject or object position of the minimal clause.

Free Variation in WH-Questions

The in-situ and fronted WH-questions in the language are grammatical and acceptable to all speakers of the language. This means that the speakers have two distinct ways of forming WH-questions in the language since they can freely use both as alternative forms. In other words, both forms occur in free variation.

This study therefore argues for the occurrence of both Syntactic WH-movement and LF WH-movement in Gokana in agreement with Chomsky (1986 b) that recognizes two types of WH-movement, Syntactic WH-movement (English) and LF WH-movement (Chinese and Japanese) or both (French).

Thus, unlike English where WH-movement is obligatory and allows only categories in SPEC-C’ position to be questioned; in Gokana a WH-phrase can also be questioned in its base generated or source position without necessarily moving it into SPEC-C’ position. But the alternative fronting that occurs in the language is a stylistic choice triggered by the thematic features of focus marking. We claim that this is a syntactic WH-movement since the WH-phrase must be fronted with a syntactic strategy.

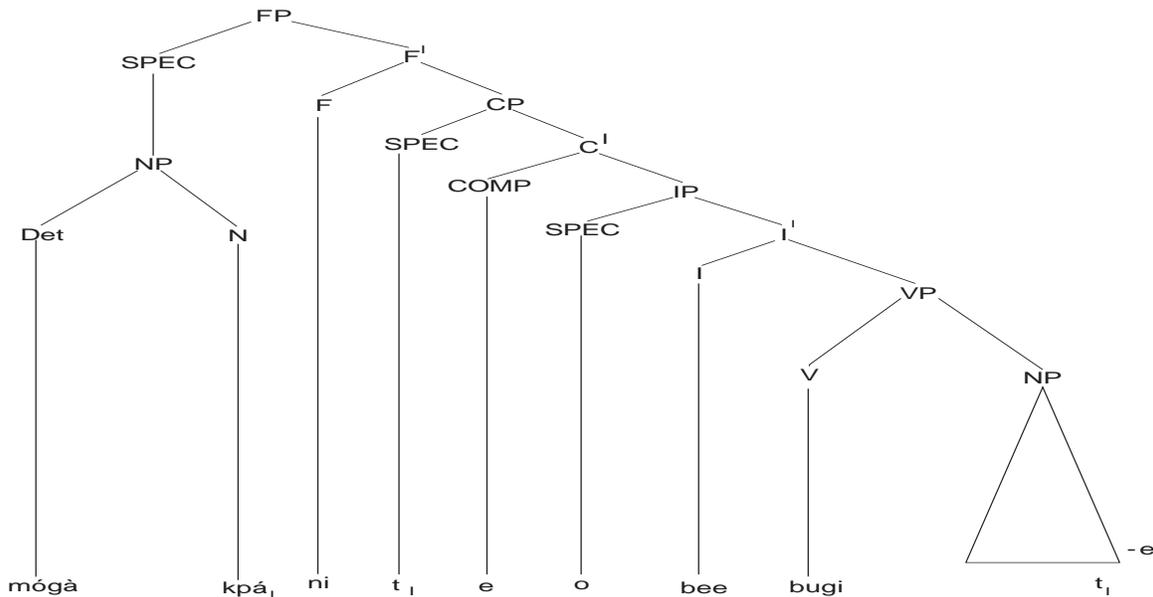
The language users, however, are not usually conscious of the thematic difference between the in-situ WH-question and the fronted WH-question and would simply assume both to be alternate WH-question structures.

Thematization in WH-Questions

The fronted WH-question in Gokana is a syntactic WH-movement which is a response to focus summon. The movement of the WH-phrase to the left-most periphery of the clause at S-Structure is triggered by the thematic features of focus marking. We argue here that the alternative fronting of a WH-phrase in the language is an S-Structure requirement motivated by focus at LF which means WH-fronting in Gokana syntax

is a combination of focus marking and WH-question. Hence, no WH-phrase can be fronted in Gokana without focus marking. Consider this data:

- 7) *mógà kpá ní e o beè bugi t-é*
 which book FOC RCM you PST read tEM
 ‘which book did you read?’



- 8) * *mógà kpá -o beè bugi t*
 Which book you PST read t

The data in (7) shows that a fronted WH-phrase is a response to focus summon. The WH-phrase *mógà kpá* ‘which book’ that occurs as the right-most internal constituent of the clause is raised to the left-most periphery of the clause by focus marking. Once there is a focus marker *ní* in the clause, the WH-phrase must move from sentence internal position to SPEC-C’ position and finally to SPEC-F’ position since the construction ultimately is a maximal projection of focus.

The movement of the WH-phrase *mógà kpá* ‘which book’ is first into SPEC-C’ position in order not to violate the subadjacency principle since both IP and CP are bounding nodes, and movement is prohibited from crossing two barrier nodes in one fell swoop. The moved constituent leaves behind a trace in its source position and the first landing site, SPEC-C’ position, before it moves to its fixed destination SPEC-F’ position.

Once the syntactic strategy of focus is generated within the clause-structure, the WH-phrase must obligatorily respond to the summon and move to the left-most periphery of the clause through successively cyclic movement, where it acquires emphasis in addition to being a question. This movement is therefore obligatory because of the emphasis requirement.

Observe that the construction in (8) is similar to the construction in (7); but (8) is ungrammatical because there is no focus marking in the syntax of the construction. The fronting of the WH-phrase *mógà kpá* ‘which book’ failed because there is no focus summon, and the construction crashes since there is no landing site. This shows that movement of the WH-phrase is triggered by focus marking and every fronted WH-question is as well a focus construction in Gokana because there can be no fronting without focus.

The ungrammatical construction in (8) can regain its grammaticality if the fronted WH-phrase *mógà kpá* ‘which book’ is returned to its base-generated position as in (9):

- 9) *O beè búgi mógà kpá*
 You PST read which book
 ‘Which book did you read?’

This shows that WH-question without focus is also attested in Gokana which confirms our free variation argument.

Co-occurrence of WH-Phrases in Clause Structure

Ndimele (1992:68) claims that “there is no upper limit to the number of WH-phrases that can occur in a sentence”. It is possible to find questions with two or more WH-phrases in a single clause. Such questions are referred to in the linguistic literature as Multiple WH-questions (MWHQs).

Karttunen (1978) posits that:

“The syntactic distribution of Multiple WH-questions is the same as that of a single WH-question. There is no justification for creating a special syntactic category for them”

These assertions dismiss the claims of scholars like Bolinger (1978) and Hiz (1978) who observe that multiple WH-questions were heavily loaded questions that could remain a hard topic for grammarians to tackle. Multiple WH-questions are attested in Gokana and we analyze their syntactic structure in what follows. Let us consider this data:

- 10) Mée beè zará éé ne mée -è?
Who PST buy what give whom
‘Who bought what for whom?’
- 11) Mée beè zará éé ne mee ló éé -e
Who PST buy what give whom for what EM
‘For what reason did who buy what for whom?’

Observe that in (10), there are three WH-phrases in a single clause, while in (11), there are four WH-phrases in a single clause. Also note that the clauses convert into serial verb constructions in order to accommodate the multiple WH-words. There are two verbs predicted on a single subject in both structures. All the WH-phrases are in their source positions as there is no application of the movement rule.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have described WH-questions in Gokana and also analyzed their syntactic peculiarities. The paper claimed that there are two distinct ways of forming WH-questions in Gokana but noted that every fronted WH-question in the language is a focus construction as no WH-phrase can be fronted in Gokana without focus marking. The paper found that the landing site of the Gokana fronted WH-phrase is SPEC-F’ position instead of SPEC-C’ position which means that movement of the WH-phrase is triggered by the focus marker ní. Thus if ní is deleted, the WH-phrase cannot be fronted. The study found that the main reason for fronting the WH-phrase in the language is to focus the questioned proposition. It appears that an emphatic question is clearer to the addressee and likely to

elicit a quicker response than a non-emphatic one. Thus, the pre-dominant and unmarked WH-parameter in the language is the base-generated WH-question.

The paper found that there is no vacuous movement in the fronting of a WH-phrase in SPEC-I’ position in Gokana as movement is explicit and the moved constituent leaves behind a resumptive pronominal trace a in the extraction site which is co-indexed with the fronted WH-phrase. In terms of scope, we observed that every WH-phrase in any structural position within the minimal clause can be fronted or left in-situ in the formation of WH-questions in Gokana. The paper also showed that multiple WH-phrases can occur within the minimal clause-structure of the language.

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