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Wh-Questions in English and Kokborok: A Generativist Analysis

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ABSTRACT

In second language (L2) pedagogy first language is a necessary evil. At the syntactic level word order disparity between the two, presence vs. absence of movements of items in the processes of transformation, unique morphosyntactic elements etc. threatens the process of learning the L2. To negotiate with this problem and for an effective teaching of a second language to the mature learners a Comparative Grammar Teaching mode (CGT) is effective, advisable but long awaited. Born of this strong conviction and of my three decades of English language teaching experience at the tertiary level an attempt has been made here to project a model of CGT. The paper, an offshoot of an ongoing study, compares the wh-questions (also yes-no questions) in Kokborok (a Tibeto Burman language spoken in Tripura, India) and English. Within its limited scope the study attempts to bring out the dissimilarities (with implicit similarities) between the interrogative constructions in the two systems. The generativist approach of Chomsky (1981) has been adopted as the mainstay of the analytical framework.

KEYWORDS | Kokborok, Comparative Grammar Teaching

1.0. Introduction

Teaching and learning of L2 become multiply simplified and rationalized especially to/for the 'adult' learners if the distinctive aspects of the grammars of the L2 and L1 are systematically presented through a comparative method of teaching. The prerequisite for such a model of teaching is the production of teaching materials born of such research addressed to discovering the disparities and differences along with similarities between the two. The present study aims to do that in respect of the structures of the interrogatives in English and KB. This yields some crucial insights into the word order phenomena in the two languages which promise to be extremely useful for the purpose of more effective teaching of English as a second language to the KB-speaking students of Tripura.

It is discovered that there is no use of *de* (an interrogative marker INTR) in *wh*-questions in KB unlike in *yes-no* questions. The rising tone however continues to play its role as an accompaniment of interrogative constructions. The major aspect of interest in *wh*-questions is the involvement of no movement of any item in KB compared to English. The *wh*-item remains in situ and the overall word order sequence is the same as in declarative sentences. Mandatory absence of *be* verb in the present indefinite tense in copular constructions is another significant aspect of distinction between KB and English interrogatives and declaratives.

Keeping in mind these points of differences will definitely help everybody concerned to approach the issue of English language teaching to the KB speaking students (ethnic tribes) in a more systematic, scientific and fruitful manner. This is because the teacher can now trace the systematicity of the errors committed by the learners and will be able to explain the mistakes in terms of the word order disparity, among others, between the two systems.

Section 1.1 deals with the *wh*-questions in English. 1.2 addresses the issue of *wh*-movement in English in generative syntax. The paper turns in 1.3 to interrogatives in KB. KB *yes-no* questions are briefly touched upon in 1.3.1. Section 1.4 presents a detailed discussion on *wh*-questions in KB with interrogative pronouns: *sabo*, *tamo*, *sabono*. 1.5 extends the discussion to *wh*-questions in KB with interrogative adverbs: *tangwi*, *buphuru*, *boro*, *bahai*, *bwswk*. Finally, 1.6 offers some insights into the *wh*-questions with determiners: *bobo* and *saboni*. 2.0 winds up the study under Conclusion.

1.1 *wh*-questions in English

wh- is the short form for what the traditional grammarians call interrogative pronouns i.e. *who*, *when*, *which*, *where*, *what*, and *how*. But even *wh*-questions in English share certain properties with the *yes-no* ones. Let us therefore briefly remind ourselves of some of the canonical properties of *yes-no* questions. *yes-no* questions are generally intended to elicit the reply *yes* or *no*. The word order in *yes-no* questions differs from that in declaratives. In declaratives the subject comes before the verb; but in *yes-no* question the auxiliary verb (which normally functions as an operator) in presence of which the main verb does not carry the AGR features like Person, Tense, Number and Gender etc., is placed before the subject.

1a. **John will marry Jill.**
1b. **Will John marry Jill?**
In (1a) the declarative sentence contains an auxiliary in the form of *will* which is placed after the subject NP *John* while in (1b) this order is reversed. This change is traditionally known as subject-operator inversion. Operator is generally the first or the only auxiliary. If the question does not have an auxiliary, nor is it a copular construction with a *be*-type verb, *do* is inserted as a dummy auxiliary. For instance, the *yes-no* question in (2a) corresponds to the declarative in (2b).

2a. **Marry likes John.**
2b. **Does Marry like John?**
Does in (2b) has the appropriate inflection i.e. 3rd PERSON SINGULAR PRESENT TENSE which corresponds to the inflection of the verb *likes* in (2a). *Does* in (2b) ensures that the question begins with the sequence 'verb followed by subject'.

[1]*wh*-questions expect a reply that supplies the information that the *wh*-word indicates. They are called *wh*-questions since such interrogative sentences begin with a *wh*-word. *how* does not phonetically begin with *wh*- yet it is also included among the *wh*-questions. The *wh*-word may be a pronoun (3a-c), an adverb (4a-g), or a determiner (5a-b) that introduces noun phrase.

3a. *Who* is this man?
3b. *What* do you mean by this?
3c. *Whom* do you want to meet?
4a. *Why* is he here?
4b. *Where* did you stay last night?
4c. *When* will your brother arrive at the station?
4d. *How* did it all begin?

4e. *How* deep is the water here?
4f. *How* many people were there in the meeting?
4g. *How* much money do you need?
5a. *Which* song will you sing first?
5b. *Whose* house do you stay in?

In English, the *wh*-word generally begins the question. However, if the *wh*-word or the phrase it is part of, is the complement of a preposition, in formal style the preposition moves to the front together with the complement (cf. 6).

6a. I can go to any extent to help you.
6b. *To what extent* can I go to help you?
6c. *What extent can I go to to help you?

The two sentences in (6a) and (6b) correspond – the former being the declarative sentence and the latter being its comparable *wh*-interrogative. In the latter the *wh*-word *what* belongs to the prepositional phrase *to what extent* and hence when the interrogative form is being formed the *wh*-item needs to be fronted; but being the complement of a preposition the entire prepositional phrase or PP is fronted. The grammaticality of such a movement operation is justified by the ungrammaticality of (6c) where the head of the PP *to* remains *in situ* i.e. in the position where it originates. All said, one must remember a caveat: in less formal style, the preposition can remain *in situ* with a pause in between the two prepositions *to* and *to* (cf. 7).

7. What extent can I go to, to help you?
We have noticed that subject-operator inversion takes place in *yes-no* questions. The same rule of inversion also applies to *wh*-questions. For example let us note the flowing sentences.

8a. What do you think?
8b. ?You think what?
8c. You think something.

The declarative sentence in (8c) contains an object *something* to the transitive verb *think*. In (8b) we see the object, which is being questioned by the speaker, is replaced by the *wh*-word *what*. The grammaticality of (8b), though debatable, does not concern us here as we are trying only to trace the route of transformation lying behind (8a). In (8a) grammaticality is ensured by two operations: a) the *wh*-word moves from its place deep inside the sentence to the beginning; b) a dummy operator *do* moves to the left of the subject *you* through subject-operator inversion.

An interesting thing happens when the *wh*-expression is the subject of the sentence. In that case there is apparently no movement of the *wh*-item. But this view of the traditional grammarians has been challenged by the generativists who argue that movement definitely takes place: the *wh*-item moves further to the left but since the latter crosses no other item, the left-to-left movement remains invisible in the linear order of the constituents i.e. the normal declarative subject-verb order is retained (cf. 9).

9a. A: Who is coming by the next flight?
9b. B: The president [is coming by the next flight].

Speaker A asks the question with the intention to know the agent (subject) of the act of coming (9a). Speaker B answers (9b) by replacing the *wh*-word *who* with *the president* which is the subject of the declarative sentence corresponding to the interrogative form in (9a). However, in the informal style which is usual in spoken form, the normal subject-verb order is sometimes retained even when the *wh*-expression is not the subject as in (10-11).

10. You saw which movie?
11. You did what this morning?
This type of non-application of the rule of *wh*-movement to the beginning of the interrogative sentence is very intriguing for us especially when we notice that in KB and TB (Tripura

Bangla) avoiding such movement i.e. retaining the *wh*-word *in situ* is the norm. We shall have more discussion about this *invisible movement* before long.

The third important thing to note about *wh*-expressions in English is that a single interrogative sentence sometimes can contain more than one *wh*-item, if the question seeks to elicit more than one piece of information. For example, consider the following:

12. Who copies whom?
**1.2 *wh*-movement in English in generative syntax**
In generative syntax particularly Chomsky (1981) onwards all English declarative sentences are assumed to be at the most a complementizer or Comp or C phrase or CP. This is because any declarative sentence in English can be made a subordinate clause by introducing a C such as *that*, *if*, *as*, *since*, *whether* etc. etc. (cf. 13a-d).

13a. He is honest.
13b. I know *that* he is honest.
13c. John knows *that* I know *that* he is honest.
13d. Mary believes *that* John knows *that* I know *that* he is honest.

Another major premise of the Transformational Generative grammar or TG is that for all transformations the simple declarative form is the basic: transformation is effected by only one single rule: Move . Understandably, *yes-no* and *wh*-questions also, being derived in nature, emerge through some item/s having been moved from their place of origination in the underlying i.e. declarative form. The job of the grammar therefore is to explain where do the moved items go and land. We use the tool of phrase marker or tree diagram to show the origination, movement and landing site of the relevant items. We begin with subject-operator inversion involved in a *yes-no* question[2].

14. The boys are playing.

15.
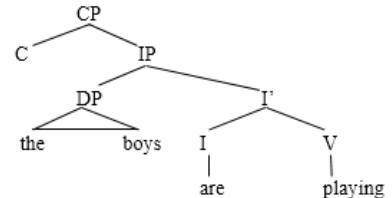
The origination of the constituents of the sentence (14) are shown in the phrase marker in (15) where CP = COMP Phrase, C = COMP, IP = INFLEXION or INFL Phrase, I = INFL, I' = single bar (i.e. the intermediate category between the zero category I and the maximal phrasal category IP), DP = Determiner Phrase, and V = Verb. To transform this simple declarative sentence into its corresponding *yes-no* question what is needed is to move the AUX or operator to the left of the Subject NP *the boys* and the empty docking site to accommodate the moving item i.e. . The docking site is the head position C. The arrow marked with dotted line shows the movement route.

16.
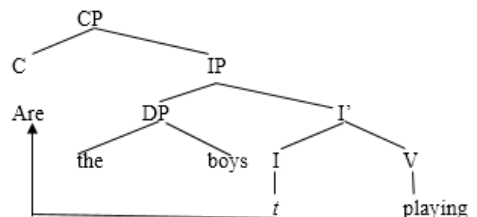
This type of inversion operation involves movement of a word from the head position in one phrase into the head position in

another phrase (in this case, from the head INFL position of IP into the head C position of CP). Hence such type of inversion movements is called head movement. What is interesting to note is that the moved item leaves behind a trace *t* of itself so that no other item can occupy this vacated place without violating the grammaticality of the construction. Hence the underlying picture of the sequence of words after movement looks like (17).

17. Are the boys *t* playing?
Let us now turn to *wh*-question type of transformations. So far it has been implicitly assumed that the CP comprises a head C constituent and an IP complement. The C position is filled by a complementizer in some structures and by a preposed auxiliary in others. A vital question crops up at this point: where are the pre-auxiliaries like *wh*-items positioned in a structure like (16). One such structure is given in (18).

18. What games *can* you play?
In (18) the verb *play* is a transitive one and hence must have an object. This intermediate form is as in (18a).

18a. *Can you play what games?
Reversing the process of auxiliary movement we get the form that approximates the original declarative form.

18b. ?You can play what games?
(18b) is unacceptable because in a declarative sentence there can be no *wh*-item functioning as an interrogative marker. Replacing *what* with a non-*wh*-word like *some* gives us a completely grammatical structure of declarative type.

(18c) You can play some games.
Now tracing back the process we notice that the mapping from the declarative form in (18c) to the interrogative form in (18) involves two movements: a) the auxiliary movement and b) *wh*-movement, the latter being also known as operator movement. That the former is known operator movement has already been taken note of earlier. We demonstrate the two movements in the following diagram in (19).

19.
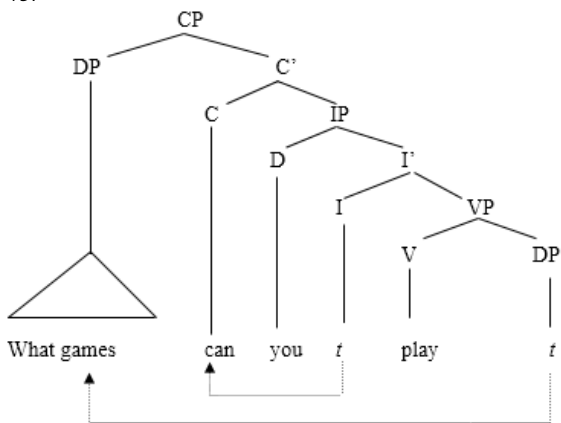
What being a determiner of some kind *what games* is a DP. This DP which originates as a complement of the V in the VP deep inside the sentence, is obligatorily moved in the interrogative form of the sentence and the landing site of the DP is the Specifier or Spec position within the CP. This movement is called Operator Movement, *wh*-word being an operator. In the other movement where the AUX *can* moves from the Head position of IP i.e. I to the Head position of CP i.e. C is known as Head Movement.

A theory internal question arises at this point: how do we know that the *t* position of the moved item actually remains intact even after movement takes place. Two pieces of evidence are very common in the literature for justifying this theoretical stand. Let us look at the two following sentences:

20a. What game can you play *t*?
20b. *What game can you play cricket?
The first sentence is correct because the *t* position vacated by the DP *what game* is not filled in subsequently by any item. In other words, the native speakers of English know that the *t*-position is there and should be kept intact. The second piece of evidence in support of *traces* is provided by the practice of *have* contraction in English. This is also known as *have*-cliticization. The form *have* of the perfect auxiliary has the clitic variant *'ve* and can cliticize to an immediately preceding word which ends in a vowel or diphthong. Significantly however cliticization is not possible in sentences such as (21).

21a. Which students would you *say have* won the match?
21b. *Which students would you say've won the match?

(21a) is acceptable as no cliticization takes place as opposed to (21b) where *have* cliticizes to *say*. This is because the DP *which students* actually originates as the subject of the embedded clause in informal use as shown in (22).

22. ?You would say which students have won the match.

The DP phrase containing the *wh*-item cannot remain *in situ* in an interrogative sentence and hence has to move out to the initial position leaving behind the trace *t* to look after its vacated position. The native speakers' knowledge of this underlying presence of *t* prevents the cliticization of *have* in (21b).

To sum up, we can say that in English there are two types of interrogative constructions: *yes-no* and *wh*- questions. In both the cases some items are moved to the sentence initial position. In the *yes-no* question it is the AUX or *be* verb with tense. In this case the movement employed is called Head Movement (cf. 15-16). In *wh*-questions both the AUX and *wh*-item are moved. While the AUX is moved to the Head position C of CP, the *wh*-item is moved to the Spec position of CP. Speaking differently, we can define a *wh*-question formally as that a clause is interpreted as a question in English if it has an interrogative specifier i.e. a *wh*-item in the Spec position of CP.

1.3 Interrogatives in KB
In the light of the above it would be interesting and useful to examine how the interrogative sentences are constructed formally in Kokborok (KB) spoken in Tripura, India. Though our main focus here is on *wh*-quesitons in KB with interrogatives pronouns, a brief sojourn with *yes-no* questions will not be out of place.

1.3.1 *yes-no* questions
de is an interrogative marker particle (INTR) in KB but its presence is optional and moveable. A rising tone signifying interrogativeness is mandatory as also in *wh*-constructions to be dealt with shortly. The formal structure of the sentence is identical to that of the declarative. Tone makes the difference. In addition, unlike English there is no movement of any item.
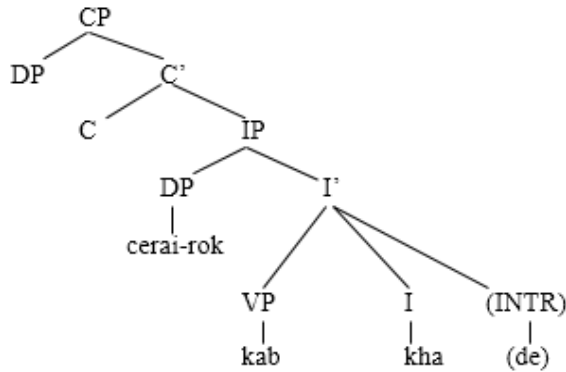
23.

The phrase marker analysis of the sentence in (24) further ob-

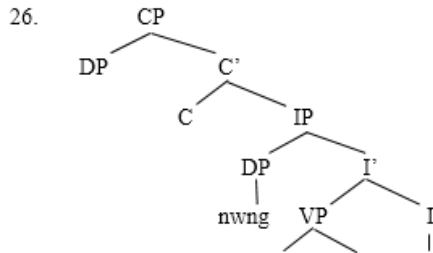viates the inner edifice of the *yes-no* question.

24.

1.4 *wh*-questions in KB with interrogative pronouns: sabo, tamo, sabono

In *wh*-qustions also there is no movement of any element especially the *wh*-item. INTR *de* is typical of *yes-no* questions and hence disallowed in *wh*-structures.
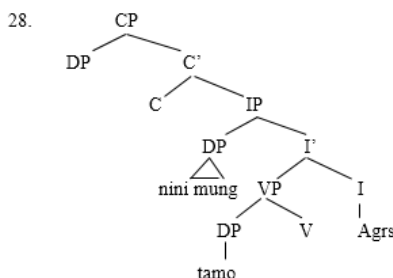
25. KB: S P[WH] (V) : sabo 'who'

nwng	sabo?	
2SG-NOM	WH-NOM	
DP	DP	
S	piii	
You	who	'Who are you?'

26.

27. KB: S WH[P] (V) : tamo 'what'

nini	mung	tamo?
2SG-GEN	NP-NOM	WH-NOM
[DET	N]	NP
DP		DP
S		P
Your name		what	'What is your name?'

28.

29. KB: S WH[O] V : sabono 'whom'

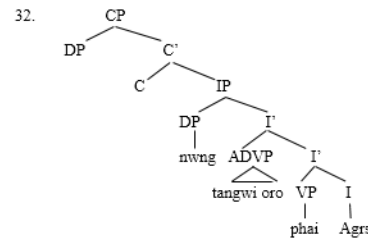| nwng	sabo-no	suri?
2SG	WH-AC	worship
DP	DP-AC	mVt
S	O	V
You	whom	worship	'Whom do you worship?'

30.
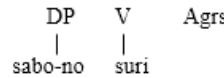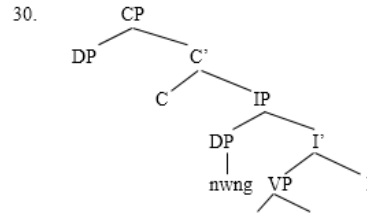
1.5 *wh*-questions in KB with interrogative adverbs: tangwi, buphuru, boro, bahai, bwswk
31. KB: S WH[ADV] ADV V : tangwi 'why'

nwng	tangwi	oro	phai?
2SG-NOM	WH[ADV]	LOC-ADV	come
NP	WH[ADV]	ADV	VP
S	WH[ADV]	ADV	V
You	why	here	come	'Why do you come here?'

32.

33. KB: S WH[ADV] V : buphuru 'when'

nwng	buphuru	phai-nai?
2SG-NOM	WH[ADV]	V-FT
NP	WH[ADV]	mV
S	WH[ADV]	V
You	when	come-FT	'When will you come?'

34.
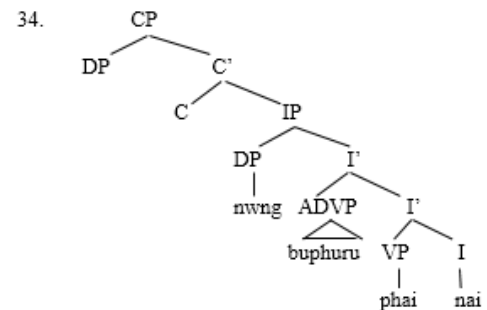
35. KB: S WH[ADV] (V) : boro 'where'

nini	kami	boro?	
2SG-GEN	NP-NOM	WH[ADV]	
[DET	N]	WH[ADV]	
DP		WH[ADV]	
S		P	(V)
Your	village	where	'Where is your village?'

36.
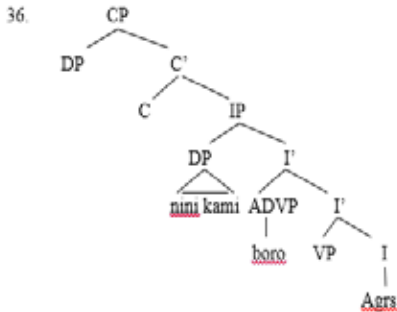
37. KB: S WH[ADV] V : boro

nwng	boro	thang-nai?
2SG-NOM	WH[ADV]	mV-FT
DP	WH[ADV]	V
S	WH[ADV]	V
You	where	go-FT	'Where will you go?'

38.
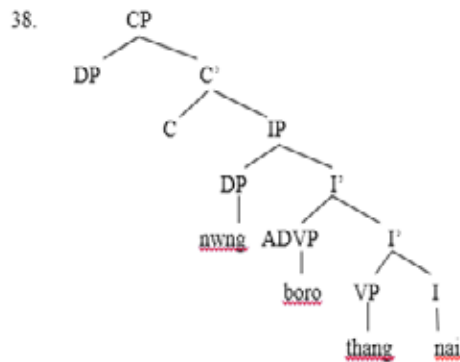
39. KB: S WH[ADV] V(V) : bahai 'how'

nwng	bahai	tong?
2SG	WH[ADV]	exist (V)
DP	WH[ADV]	mVt
S	WH[ADV]	V
You	how	exist	'How are you?'

40.
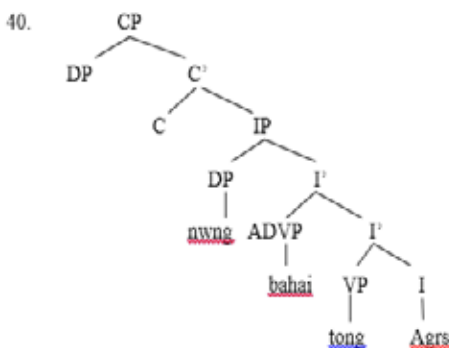
41. KB: S WH[ADV] (V) : bwswk 'how much/ how many'

nini	bwsa	khorok	bwswk?
[[2SG-GEN	child	[+HUM]	WH[ADV]
NP			WH[ADV]
S			WH[ADV]
Your		child-PL	how many 'How-many are your children?'

42.
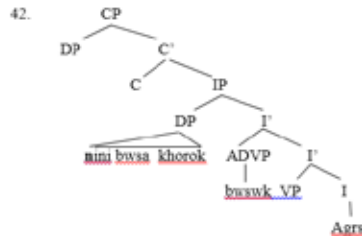
1.6 *wh*-questions with determiners: bobo, saboni

43. KB: S WH[P] (V) : bobo 'which'

nini	bijap	bobo?	
2SG-GEN	book-NOM	DEM-PRO	(V)
[DP	DP]	DP	
S		WH[P]	
Your	book	which	'Which is your book?'

44.
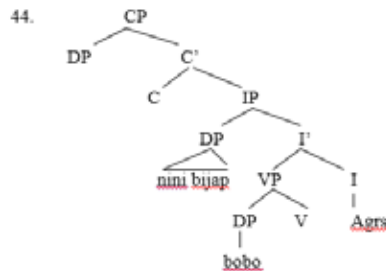
45. KB: S WH[P] (V) : saboni 'whose'

o	malkhung	sabo-ni?	
[DET	N]	WH[PRON]-GEN	
NP		DET	
	S	WH[P]	(V)
This	vehicle	whose	'Whose vehicle is this?'

46.
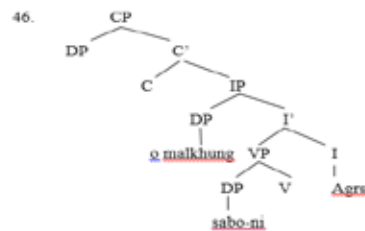
2.0 Conclusion

Aiming at projecting a CTG or Comparative Grammar Teaching model the present study brings out the essential differences between the interrogatives of *wh*-questions and *yes-no* questions in KB and English. The generativist framework of Chomsky (1981) functions as the analytical mode. It is expected that the L2 pedagogy of English to the KB adult learners will be particularly benefitted from the insights emerging out of the investigation here.

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