



QUESTION FORMATION IN HAUSA AND ENGLISH:
SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES AND PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS

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Abstract This paper explores the syntax-pragmatics interface in question formation in English and Hausa, analyzing the structural and pragmatic mechanisms underlying interrogative constructions. The study highlights the interplay between syntactic rules and pragmatic factors such as context, speaker intention, and information structure. By providing a comparative analysis of yes/no questions, wh-questions, and tag questions in both languages, the paper identifies shared principles and language-specific variations. The findings contribute to broader linguistic discussions on universal principles, typological distinctions, and the relationship between form and function in natural language.

Keyword: Syntax-pragmatics interface, Question formation, Interrogative constructions, English and Hausa, Syntactic rules, Pragmatic factors, Context.

Introduction

Interrogatives are one of the fundamental sentence types in human language, used to request information, confirm assumptions, or clarify misunderstandings. Despite their shared communicative goals, languages differ widely in their strategies for question formation. English, a Germanic language with a rich tradition of syntactic study, employs structural transformations like subject-auxiliary inversion and wh-movement. Hausa, a Chadic language of the Afro-Asiatic family, relies more heavily on tonal patterns, pragmatic particles, and insitu question words. This paper examines the syntax and pragmatics of question formation in English and Hausa, with particular attention to the interplay between grammatical structure and communicative intent. By comparing these two typologically distinct languages, the study aims to uncover both universal and language-specific aspects of interrogative construction.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis adopts a generative syntax framework, particularly the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), to examine syntactic structures. Pragmatic insights are drawn from relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) and

Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation, which emphasize the role of context and speaker intention in shaping meaning.

The syntax-pragmatics interface refers to the dynamic interaction between grammatical form and the communicative goals it serves. While syntax provides the structural foundation, pragmatics determines how these structures are used and interpreted in context.

Syntax of Question Formation

English

1. Yes/No Questions

Yes/no questions in English are formed through subject-auxiliary inversion, where the auxiliary verb moves to the clause-initial position:

- Declarative: She will come.
- Interrogative: Will she come?

When no auxiliary is present in the declarative sentence, English employs do-support:

- Declarative: They play soccer.
- Interrogative: Do they play soccer?

Modal verbs like can, should, and might follow the same inversion rule:

- Declarative: He can swim.
- Interrogative: Can he swim?

2. Wh-Questions

Wh-questions involve the movement of a wh-word (e.g., what, where, why) to the front of the clause:

- Declarative: She is reading a book.
- Interrogative: What is she reading?

The syntactic operation of wh-movement ensures that the wh-word occupies the specifier position of the Complementizer Phrase (CP). In embedded clauses, however, the question remains dependent on the matrix verb:

- Main Clause: Why did she leave?
- Embedded: I wonder why she left.

3. Tag Questions

Tag questions combine a declarative statement with a short question (the "tag") to seek confirmation or agreement:

- You're coming to the party, aren't you?
- He doesn't like coffee, does he?

Tag questions reflect a complex interplay of syntax and pragmatics, with the polarity of the tag often reversing that of the main clause.

Hausa

1. Yes/No Questions

Hausa uses tonal patterns and pragmatic particles for yes/no questions, with no syntactic inversion:

- Declarative: Zai tafi. (He will leave.)
- Interrogative: Zai tafi? (Will he leave?)

The question particle ko adds politeness or hesitation:

- Ko za ka zo? (Will you come, perhaps?)

2. Wh-Questions

Hausa does not employ wh-movement. Wh-words remain in their base positions, and context determines their interrogative function:

- Declarative: Ya sayi littafi. (He bought a book.)
- Interrogative: Me ya sayi? (What did he buy?) Common Hausa wh-words include:
- Wanene (Who)
- Ina (Where)
- Me (What) • Yaushe (When)

Examples:

- Wanene ya zo? (Who came?)
- Ina ka je? (Where did you go?)

3. Focus and Emphasis

The pragmatic particle fa often emphasizes the question or clarifies the speaker's intent:

- Ina fa kake? (Where are you, exactly?)

1. Politeness and Indirect Questions English speakers often use indirect questions to soften the impact of their queries:

- Direct: Where is the bathroom?
- Indirect: Could you tell me where the bathroom is?

These forms demonstrate the influence of pragmatic factors such as politeness and social hierarchy.

2. Discourse Functions

Tag questions serve diverse functions, including seeking agreement (It's a nice day, isn't it?), expressing doubt (You didn't see him, did you?), or challenging the listener (So, you think that's fair, do you?).

Hausa

1. Contextual Interpretation Hausa relies heavily on shared knowledge and context to interpret questions. For example:

- Wanene ya ci abinci? (Who ate the food?) Depending on the tone and context, this could imply curiosity, accusation, or surprise.

2. Use of Particles

Pragmatic particles like ko and fa guide the listener's interpretation:

- Ko za ku zo gobe? (Will you come tomorrow?)
- Me fa ya ce? (What, exactly, did he say?)

These particles enhance the speaker's ability to convey subtle shades of meaning.

Comparative Analysis

The comparison between English and Hausa reveals key differences in the syntax and pragmatics of question formation. English relies on rigid syntactic rules like inversion and whmovement, while Hausa emphasizes tonal variation, particles, and in-situ question words. Despite these differences, both languages demonstrate the universality of the syntaxpragmatics interface, where structural and contextual factors combine to achieve communicative goals.

Conclusion

This study underscores the diversity of strategies used in question formation across languages, highlighting the interaction between syntax and pragmatics. While English and Hausa employ different mechanisms, they achieve similar communicative functions, reflecting universal principles adapted to language-specific contexts. Future research could expand this analysis to other languages within the Afro-Asiatic and Germanic families, contributing to a deeper understanding of typological variation and the universal principles of the syntax-pragmatics interface.

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