Interrogatives with \textit{wh}-pronouns in Kokborok and English

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Abstract

For an effective teaching of a second language to the mature learners a Comparative Grammar Teaching model (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 \textit{wh}-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 with \textit{wh}-pronominals in the two languages. The quintessence of the findings presented in tabular form in conclusion promises to be extremely useful for all concerned with second language pedagogy, especially in the context stated above.

Keywords: Comparative grammar teaching, Kokborok

1. Introduction

In Das (2011) I have discussed the major characteristics of the \textit{yes-no} questions in Kokborok (KB) spoken in Tripura and compared them with the word order phenomenon in English. But for a comprehensive picture of the interrogative structures in KB one must also look at the other type of question formation. In the present paper I therefore look at \textit{wh}-questions in KB with interrogative pronouns and compare them with those of English. In the process we expect to get some crucial insights into the word order phenomena in the two languages which promise to be 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 \textit{de} in \textit{wh}-questions in KB unlike in \textit{yes-no} questions. The rising or High tone however continues to play its role as an accompaniment of interrogative constructions. The major aspect of interest in \textit{wh}-questions is the involvement of no movement of any item in KB compared to English. The \textit{wh}-item remains in situ and the overall word order sequence is the same as in declarative sentences. Mandatory absence of \textit{be} verb in the present indefinite tense in copular constructions is another significant aspect of distinction between KB and English interrogatives and declaratives. The differences between KB and English in respect of their interrogatives and declaratives are given in a tabular form. Keeping in mind the points of differences mentioned in the table will definitely help everybody concerned to approach the issue of English language teaching to the KB speaking students (ethnic tribes) of Tripura 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 between the two systems.

The picture of \textit{wh}-question formation in KB is certainly not so complicated. But it has its own characteristic features. As a point of departure let us have a look at the relevant KB data. There are at least ten \textit{wh}-interrogatives in KB. They are divided into three groups: a) interrogative pronouns, b) interrogative adverbs and c) interrogative determiners. Although it sometimes becomes impossible to find an exact replica of this classification for English \textit{wh}-words in KB, because of certain cases of overlapping, cautions have been taken to observe
the classification as much as possible. In course of our survey certain interesting differences emerge not only in word order but also in the complement structures of certain categories. We shall point out these at appropriate junctures. As of now, only wh-constructions with interrogative pronouns are addressed.

### 1.1 wh-questions with interrogative pronouns: sabo, tamo, sabono

#### 1.1.1 sabo ‘who’

1. **KB: S P[WH] (V)**
   
   nwng sabo?
   
   2SG-NOM WH-NOM
   
   NP NP
   
   S P
   
   You who
   
   ‘Who are you?’

   **ENG: S[WH] V P**
   
   Who are you?
   
   WH-NOM mVt (be) 2SG-NOM
   
   NP VP NP
   
   S [WH] V P

2. **KB: S[WH] O V**
   
   sabo a-no chuba-NAI
   
   WH-NOM 1SG-DAT help-FT
   
   NP NP-DAT mVt
   
   who me help-will
   
   S O V
   
   ‘Who will help me?’

   **ENG: S[WH] V O**
   
   Who will help me?
   
   WH-NOM VP [AUX-FT mVt] 1SG-DAT
   
   [WH] S V O

3. **KB: S[WH] O O V**
   
   sabo no-no o bijap rw-NAI
   
   
   NP NP-DAT mVt
   
   S IO DO V
   
   who you this book gave
   
   ‘Who gave you this book?’

   **ENG: S[WH] V O O**
   
   Who gave you this book?
   
   WH-NOM V-PT 2SG-DAT DET book
   
   NP VP NP NP
   
   S [WH] V IO DO

4. **KB: (ADV) S[WH] V**
   
   a-ni logi sabo thang-NAI
   
   1SG-GEN P WH-NOM go-FT
   
   [NP PP] NP mVt
   
   ADV S V
   
   me with who go-will
   
   ‘Who will go with me?’

   **ENG: S[WH] V (ADV)**
   
   Who will go with me?
   
   WH-NOM [AUX-FT mVt] P 1SG-OBLQ
   
   NP VP PP
   
   S V ADV

5. **KB: O S[WH] V**
   
   ‘Rajmala’ bijap sabo swi-NAI?
   
   [Rajmala 3SG-AC] WH-NOM write-PT
   
   NP NP mVt
   
   O S V
   
   Rajmala book who wrote
   
   ‘Who wrote the book ‘Rajmala’?’

   **ENG: S[WH] V O**
   
   Who wrote the book ‘Rajmala’?
   
   WH-NOM mVt [DET book Rajmala-AC]
   
   NP V NP
   
   S V O

A fourfold comparison helps us understand the distinctions better. The comparison on the one hand is between the KB-I or KB interrogative sentences and KB-D or KB declarative type of sentences; and on the other hand between their English counterparts. We present the summary of the sabo ‘who’ type wh-interrogatives in the two languages in (6-7) below.

#### 6a. KB Interrogative

   **nini para boro**
   
   your village where
   
   ‘Where is your village?’

#### 6b. KB Declarative

   **ani para oro**
   
   my village here
   
   ‘My village is here.’

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1 P is the abbreviated form for PREDICATIVE which is found in copular constructions, unless otherwise specified. The latter situation may arise when P stands for Preposition/Post position in a PP.

2 mVt stands for the main verb which also carries tense.

3 IO = Indirect Object, DO = Direct Object.

4 OBLQ = Oblique Case, which is the default case for the PP-internal Object NP in English.
9a. TB Interrogative
tomar bari koi
your house/village where
‘Where is your house/village?’

9b. TB Declarative
amar bari eikhane
my house/village here
‘My house/village is here.’

10a. SCB Interrogative
tomar gram kothay
your village where
‘Where is your village?’

10b. Declarative
amar gram ekhane
my house here
‘My house/village is here.’

While it is mandatory for the English version of these sentences to have an overt be-verb is, in KB, TB and SCB the be-verb can remain covert. However, that the be-verb form is underlyingly there in such copular constructions in the latter can be proved by the surfacing of the be-verb in other tense forms. (cf. 11).

11a. KB: ani para oro tongmani ‘My village here was.’
11b. TB: amar bari eikhane asilo ‘My house here was.’
11c. SCB: amar bDi ekhane chilo ‘My house here was.’

For all these sentences in (11) the English version is ‘My village/house was here.’

1.1.2 tamo ‘what’

12. KB: S P[WH] (V)
nini mung tamo?
[DET N] NP-NOM WH-NOM
NP VP NP
S P
Your name what
‘What is your name?’

ENG: S[WH] V P
What is your name?
WH-NOM be-3SG-PRES [DET-GEN N]
NP VP NP
S[WH] V P

13. KB: S O [WH] V AUX
nwng tamo khlai-wi tong?
2SG WH-AC do-PROG exist V
NP NP [mV tV]
S O V AUX
You what do-ing exist
‘What are you doing?’

ENG: O[WH] AUX S V
What are you doing?
WH-AC be-3SG-PRES 2SG-NOM do-PROG
NP tV NP mV
O AUX S V

In English the presence of an AUX+T is obligatory in most of the wh-constructions except when information is sought about the subject of the sentence. The AUX in English when present bears the Agreement or AGR features while the main verb either appears in bare form or participial form: will go, have gone or is going etc. In KB a similar phenomenon is observed not only in interrogative but also in declarative sentences. This is noted in particular in progressive tense constructions. To be specific, the verbal form is split up between mV+PROG and an existential verb which bears AGR feature which we designate as tV or verb with tense. The existential verb lends a sense of continuousness to the expression. In (13) above, we notice an illustration of this in khlai-wi tong translated as do-PROG exist V meaning ‘are/is doing’. One feels tempted to invite a comparison with Bangla compound verbs live kaj korche ‘working’ meaning do-ing. But the latter is obviously not a case of split up VP. The KB phenomenon resembles the English type AUX+T mV construction. Notice, in KB also the main verb takes the participial suffix –wi equivalent to English –ing. More research is needed in the morphological, syntactic and semantic aspects of such constructions!

nwng a-no tamo sa-wi tong?
2SG 1SG-AC WH-AC tell-PROG exist
NP NP-AC NP-AC [mV tV]
S O O V AUX
‘What are you telling me?’

ENG: [WH]O AUX S V O
What are you telling me?
WH-AC be-3SG-PRES 2SG-NOM tell-PROG 1SG-AC
NP tV NP mV NP
(D)O AUX S V (I)O

Once again we summarize the contrastive picture prevailing in KB and English through a four-fold comparison.

15a. KB-I
S WH[PRD] (V)
S WH[O] (V)
15b. KB-D
S O WH[O] V
S O O V

16a. ENG-I
S[WH] V P
S[WH] V P
16b. ENG-D
O[WH] AUX S V
O[WH] AUX S V O
S AUX V O
S AUX V O

1.1.3 sabono ‘whom’

17. KB: S WH[O] V
nwng sabo-no suri?
2SG[DET] WH-AC worship
NP NP-AC mV
S O V
You whom worship
‘Whom do you worship?’

ENG: O[WH] AUX S V
Whom do you worship?
WH-AC AUX PRES 2SG mV
NP-AC AUX NP mV
O AUX S V

18. KB: S WH[O] V-INF (V)
nwng o-sabo-no mouch-ni
2SG[DET] WH-AC see-INF desirous

5 The semantics of muchung is a problematic one. This word can be used also as a verb as in muchung-kha. This is however not our concern here.
The SOV structure of KB simple declarative sentences obtains even in wh-constructions. The only difference is that the wh-word can take appropriate morphemes to signify its case feature. So sabo-no = who to = ‘whom’ i.e. who-AC[cusative]. That movement of wh-items is redundant in KB is perhaps because KB is still predominantly a synthetic language where post positions are yet to take over en masse the role of syntactic relations between words. Case markers (read suffixes) signify the inflections. The following summary in abstract forms of functional categories substantiates our observations.

19a. KB-I
S WH[O] V S O V
S WH[O] V-INF (V) S O V-INF A (V)

19b. KB-D
S WH[O] V S O V
S WH[O] V-INF (V) S O V-INF A (V)

20a. ENG-I
O[WH] AUX S V S V O
O[WH] V S A PP S V A PP O

20b. ENG-D
O[WH] AUX S V S V O
O[WH] V S A PP S V A PP O

2. Conclusion
In this article we have surveyed the syntax of wh-interrogatives with wh-pronouns in KB and English. This has given us a comprehensive picture of the word order differences in the two languages. Das (2011) has noted the major differences in respect of yes-no questions and their implications for English language pedagogy in Tripura particularly concerning a more effective teaching of English to the KB speaking students at various levels. The same holds good for the present study too. The major points having emerged here are.

a. KB and English belong to two totally different families of languages: Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European respectively. The KB students learning English find various problems in coping with the latter.

b. It is a truism in second language research that the first language grammar plays a significant role, mostly as a hindrance, in cases where the two systems i.e. the first language and second language, are radically at variance with each other.

c. Through this comparative study it has been established that KB is a HEAD LAST language while English is a HEAD FIRST language.

d. This parametric variation is largely responsible for the word order differences noted in the two languages.

e. The morphological property of VP determines the phenomena of Tense and AGR representation in both the languages.

f. In English AUX is mandatory in non-copular structure of such interrogatives. KB fulfills this demand of the interrogative formation by optionally introducing a non-morphemic element de, in addition to a rising (High) tone in wh-questions (also in yes-no type questions).

g. The formation of the VPs gets complicated in accordance with the need to represent the complex concepts of the time continuum of the two languages.

h. Use of an additional verbal item renders the KB VP look like [(O) mV tV], where mV stands for main verb, and tV for the Tensed Verb.

i. No verbal movement is necessary in KB, unlike in English. (Only de moves around the VP without affecting the semantic value of the sentence concerned.)

The entire picture of differences between KB and English in respect of their respective interrogative formations with wh-pronominals and also in respect of formation of declaratives is given in (21). Keeping these points of comparisons and differences in mind will definitely help everybody concerned to approach the issue of English language teaching to the KB speaking students of Tripura 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 them in terms mainly of the word order disparity between the two systems.

References


