

Gikūyū Wh-questions: A Role and Reference Grammar Approach

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Cross-linguistic studies of Wh-constructions are known sources of interesting linguistic arguments and hypotheses that require cross-linguistic verification. Formal generative theories analyse Wh-questions as instances of syntactic transformations, formulating abstract transformational movements and phonologically null elements. One such movement transformation related to Wh-constructions is the so-called extraction constraints.

However there are theories such as Role and Reference Grammar [RRG] by Van Valin & LaPolla (1997), and Van Valin (1995, 2005) that do not posit movement transformations or make claims of phonologically null elements in their analysis of Wh-constructions in languages. Instead, RRG accounts for such Wh-constraints as instances of the interaction between discourse-pragmatics and syntactic interfaces (cf. Van Valin 1995). This is the approach that is adopted in the analysis of Gikūyū Wh-constructions. The paper analyses Gikūyū Wh-questions based on the Role and Reference Grammar framework.

Gikūyū Wh-words present interesting features. In both simple and complex sentences they occur in three positions: in-situ (1a), intermediate or partially ex-situ (1b), and fully ex-situ (1c). In (1b) and (1c) the Wh-word is obligatorily accompanied by *ne*, a focus marker. The combination of *ne* and the Wh-word supports the information structure-syntax interaction analysis posited in RRG.

- (1) a. *Mo-tumia a-ra-he-ir-ε mw-ana kee?*
1-woman 1-PST-give-PFT-FV 1-child Q
'What did the woman give the child?'
- b. *Mo-tumia ne kee a-ra-he-ir-ε mw-ana?*
1-woman FM-Q 1-PST-give-PFT-FV 1-child
'What did the woman give the child?'
- c. *Ne kee mo-tumia a-ra-he-ir-ε mw-ana?*
FM Q 1-woman 1-PST-give-PFT-FV 1-child
'What did the woman give the child?'

In the complex Wh-sentence in (2), when the subject of the embedded clause is questioned (2b), the question word *o* 'who' co-occurs with the focus marker *ne*, to become *noo* (*ne + o*) 'who', and it can be fully displaced (ex situ) or partially displaced. In both cases, the subject remains in the sentence-initial position. Further, the displacement changes the pronominal anaphor from *a-* to *o-*, a pronominal relative prefix.

- (2) a. *Kamau a-ra-ug-ir-ε (ate) mo-tumia a-ra-he-ir-ε mw-ana mo-gate.*
Kamau 1-PST-say-PFT-FV (CLM) 1-woman 1-PST-give-PFT-FV 1-child 3-bread
'Kamau said that the woman gave the child bread.'
- b. *Noo Kamau a-ra-ug-ir-ε (ate) (noo) o-ra-he-ir-ε mw-ana mo-gate?*
FM.Q Kamau 1-PST-say-PFT-FV (CLM) (FM.Q) 1.REL-PST-give-PFT-FV 1-child 3-bread
'Who did Kamau say that s/he gave the child bread?'

The examples in (1) and (2) easily support the Wh-movement transformations in generative theories, and this has been done for Gĩkũyũ by Clements (1984) and Bergvall (1983, 1986), Sabel (2000), who resort to null elements and transformations in their analyses.

Clements (1984) argued that although Gĩkũyũ ex-situ Wh-constructions, preverbal focus constructions, and relative clauses show constraints that obey the island constraints, though there is also evidence of violations of the same constraints. Bergvall (1983) discussed Gĩkũyũ Wh-questions and relative clauses *vis-à-vis* the Complex NP Constraint (CNPC), and she highlighted counterexamples to the CNPC. She acknowledged that the Gĩkũyũ ex-situ and in-situ Wh-questions pose a problem for a Government and Binding analysis. For a solution, Bergvall proposed a pro-drop explanation that is influenced by factors such as weight of the lexical head of the relative clause, the heaviness of the initial wh-word or phrase, and the choice of the verb. Bergvall also noted that although Chinese and Gĩkũyũ have in-situ Wh-questions, they require different analyses, which led her to conclude that restrictions on the CNPC do not apply uniformly cross-linguistically, since languages differ on the constituent that the CNPC restrictions applies to. Chaves (2021) notes that the crosslinguistic heterogeneity of island phenomena is a challenge to linguistic theories. This is evident in Gĩkũyũ as exemplified by Clements (1984) and Bergvall (1983, 1986).

Unlike the previous studies that explained the Wh-constructions based on the formalist generative models, the present discussion is grounded on a monostratal and non-derivational theory of language that does not resort to movement, nor does it make claims of phonologically null elements in order to account for Wh-phenomena in Gĩkũyũ. In the end it is shown that extra-syntax or structural explanation is plausible for the Wh-constructions in Gĩkũyũ. The paper shows that there is interaction of syntax is not the only component involved in the formation of the different Wh-constructions in the Gĩkũyũ. An example of such interaction is shown in (3) in the so-called pied-piping phenomenon.

The examples in (3) highlight additional interesting features of Wh-elements in Gĩkũyũ. In (3a) the Wh-reference phrase in the neutral in-situ position, (3b) has the Wh-RP in the marked ex-situ position accompanied by the focus marker. Example (3c) contradicts the pied-piping phenomenon. Whereas in (3b), the Wh-RP ‘which cow’ moves to the ex-situ position as a unit, the Wh-word is separated from the nominal in (3c). The noun *ngɔmbɛ* ‘cow’ occupies a topical position that bars the focus particle. Such a position must be clause-external, hence beyond the scope of focus. The Wh-word is compatible with the focus marker *ne*, hence it must be clause-internal, and therefore within the scope of focus.

- (3) a. *Ma-r-endi-a ngɔmbɛ e-reko?*
 2-PRS-sell-FV 9.cow 9-which
 ‘Which cow are they selling?’
- b. *Ne ngɔmbɛ e-reko ma-r-endi-a?*
 FM 9.cow 9-which 2-PRS-sell-FV
 ‘Which cow are they selling?’
- c. *Ngɔmbɛ ne e-reko ma-r-endi-a ?*
 9.cow FM 9-which 2-PRS-sell-FV
 ‘Which cow are they selling?’

Example (3) provides evidence for the interaction between syntax and information structure, particularly the delineation of the potential focus domain (PFD) in sentences, as

posited in RRG. By way of applying the linking algorithm, the paper shows the interaction of syntax-semantics-pragmatic interfaces in Gĩkũyũ Wh-constructions.

RRG has been used to account for Wh-phenomena in a Lakhota, a language without with only in-situ Wh-constructions (Van Valin 1995) and Esteban (2012), without resort to abstract movements or null elements. The fact that Gĩkũyũ presents multiple positions for Wh-elements: ex-situ -, intermediate, and in-situ means that the language represents Lakhota-like and English-like Wh-constructions, which is an opportunity for a unified explanation of Wh-constructions in variant languages. Such an analysis has a strong bearing on RRG's comparative typological description of Wh-constructions in languages.

Selected References

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