

Question Formation in the Karonga Dialect of Tumbuka

Wendell A. Kimper
Hampshire College

In this paper, I discuss aspects of question formation in Tumbuka, a Bantu language spoken primarily in Malawi.¹ The data I will present illustrate several unexpected features of Tumbuka question formation. Only subjects can be Wh-moved or extracted; objects and adjuncts remain in situ. Additionally, the landing site of Wh-movement may precede or follow the clause. Multiple Wh-words are prohibited within the same clause. Relative complementizers play a significant role in cleft constructions, which are used in some types of question formation.

Section 1 will discuss the formation of Yes/No questions. Sections 2 and 3 will describe Wh-movement, the formation of Wh-questions, and a constraint against multiple Wh-constructions. Section 4 concerns relative clauses, and section 5 will discuss the role of cleft constructions in the formation of another type of Wh-question.

1 Yes/No Questions

The formation of yes/no questions in Tumbuka is fairly straightforward; the question particle *kasi* is added to the beginning of the sentence, and final syllable stress and a rise in pitch is required. This is illustrated in the following statement and corresponding yes/no question:

- (1) *iyē a-ku-gon-a*
3S SM-pres-sleep-fv
“He is sleeping.”
- (2) *kasi iyē a-ku-gon-a*
Q 3S SM-pres-sleep-fv
“Is he sleeping?”

The question particle *kasi*, which is required at the far left of all Tumbuka questions (with a few noteworthy exceptions to be discussed in Section 2.2) is a complementizer. Question-specific rising intonation is required with yes/no questions, and is also found optionally in Wh-questions.

2 Wh-Questions

Wh-questions in Tumbuka display an interesting asymmetry between subjects, which extract, and objects and adjuncts, which are questioned in situ. Additionally, Wh-subjects can move either to the left or to the right edge of the clause.

2.1 Wh Objects and Adjuncts

Wh-movement does not occur when the Wh-word is an object or adjunct. In these situations, the Wh-word remains in situ and the basic structure of the Wh-question is identical to that of yes/no questions. The question-specific intonation is optional, as with other Wh-questions. The following example illustrates the statement/Wh-question contrast for objects:

- (3) *Sužo a-ka-phik-a masamba*
Sužo SM-pst-cook-fv 2-vegetable
“Sužo cooked the vegetables.”

- (4) *kasi Sužo a-ka-p^hik-a viči*
 Q Sužo SM-pst-cook-fv what
 “What did Sužo cook?”

The question particle *kasi* appears at the left edge of the sentence, and the object is questioned in situ. The same is true for adjuncts:²

- (5) *iye a-ka-rut-a ku-kaya*
 3S SM-pst-go-fv 17-home
 “He went home.”
- (6) *kasi u-ka-rut-a kočī*
 Q SM-pst-go-fv where
 “Where did he go?”

The pattern holds true even within an embedded clause:

- (7) *kasi ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a kuti u-ka-rut-a kočī*
 Q SM-pres-think-fv comp SM-pst-go-fv where
 “Where do you think he went?”

Again, the question particle appears at the left edge of the sentence, and the Wh-word is questioned in situ.

2.2 Subject Extraction

In sentences with embedded clauses, long-distance extraction of Wh-subjects is visible. We can see that *njani* ‘who’ has extracted and raised to Spec-CP position within the matrix clause. Note that the question particle *kasi* is absent from this example, in contrast with the in situ questioning of an embedded clause in (7):

- (8) *njani ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a (t) o-pang-a čongo ičo*
 who SM-pres-think-fv SM-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem
 “Who do you think made that noise?”
- (9) [_{CP} who [_{IP} (you) think [_{CP} (t) made noise that]]]

The Wh-subject *njani* has raised to Spec-CP position, but the question particle *kasi* is conspicuously absent in this example. In single-clause sentences, however, it is not obvious that Wh-movement has occurred:

- (10) *kayuni ndiko ka-ka-pang-a čongo ičo*
 bird dem³ SM-pst-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem
 “A bird made that noise.”
- (11) *njani o-pang-a čongo ičo*
 who SM-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem
 “Who made that noise?”

If the Wh-subject has extracted and raised to Spec-CP position, it is not visible; *njani* was already at the left edge of the sentence. Note however that the question particle *kasi* is conspicuously absent from (11), consistent with the extracted-subject example in (8) but inconsistent with the in situ questioning of objects and adjuncts in Section 2.1.

2.3 Rightward Movement

Interestingly, an extracted Wh-subject can move to either the beginning or the end of a clause. When this occurs, the question particle *kasi* is required in clause-initial position. The following example was

given as an alternative to (11), and involves extraction from a single-clause sentence:

- (12) *kasi (t) o-pang-a čongo ičo njani*
 Q SM-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem who
 “Who made that noise?”

In (11) we saw that the Wh-subject remained at the left edge of the sentence, with the question particle absent. In this example, however, we see the Wh-subject extracted and moved to the right edge of the sentence, and the question particle *kasi* appears at the left edge.

The following example was given as an alternative to (8) — repeated for contrast as (13a) — and involves extraction from an embedded clause:

- (13) (a) *njani ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a (t) o-pang-a čongo ičo*
 who SM-pres-think-fv SM-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem
 “Who do you think made that noise?”
 (b) *kasi ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a kuti (t) a-ka-pang-a čongo ičo njani*
 Q SM-pres-think-fv comp SM-pst-make-fv 7-noise 7-dem who
 ‘Who do you think made that noise?’

In (13a), the subject *njani* has been extracted and appears at the left edge of the sentence, without the question particle *kasi*. In (13b), however, the subject *njani* appears to the right edge of the sentence and the question particle *kasi* appears at the left edge.

These forms raise some significant questions for theories of Wh-movement. While rightward Wh-movement has been attested in Dzamba, where it is obligatory (Bokamba, 1976), one currently accepted view is that Wh-movement can only be leftward (Kayne, 1994).

3 Multiple-Wh Constructions

Tumbuka does not allow multiple Wh-words within a single clause. The following examples were constructed forms containing two Wh-words within the subject extracted from the embedded clause. When presented with these forms, the consultant responded very clearly that they were not possible:

- (14) **njani ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a a-ka-rut-a kočī*
 who SM-think-fv SM-pst-go-fv where
 “Who do you think went where?”
 (15) **njani ⁿk^h-u-ghanaghan-a a-ka-p^hik-a viči*
 who SM-pres-think-fv SM-pst-cook-fv what
 “Who do you think cooked what?”

When asked to produce “Who went where?” the consultant was unable to produce a form. When asked for “Who cooked what?” he was either unable to produce a form, or produced a form that used only one Wh-word plus a demonstrative in place of the object-Wh, as in the following:

- (16) *kasi a-ka-p^hik-a ivi njani*
 Q SM-pst-cook-fv 8-dem who
 “Who cooked what?” Literally: “Who cooked this?”

Additionally, the translation offered by the consultant was “Who cooked these things?” and not “Who cooked what?”

The following forms — simple sentences with multiple Wh-words — were then constructed, and presented to the consultant:

- (17) *kasi njani a-ka-rut-a koči*
 Q who SM-pst-go-fv where
 “Who went where?” Literally: “Someone went where?”
- (18) *kasi njani a-ka-p^hik-a viči*
 Q who SM-pst-cook-fv what
 “Who cooked what?” Literally: “Someone cooked what?”

He responded skeptically, and when asked what they meant, he translated *njani* to mean “someone.” This suggests that *njani* is functioning as an indefinite in these sentences, and not as a Wh-word. Note also the presence of the question particle *kasi*, which suggests that *njani* remains in situ.

4 Relative Clauses

Relative clauses in Tumbuka are not constructed with overt Wh-movement, but with the use of a special kind of complementizer. The relative complementizer takes the form of a demonstrative belonging to the class of the head noun, as can be seen in the following data. The example in (19) is an object relative clause, and (20) is an example of a subject relative clause:

- (19) *iye a-ka-ry-a masamba awo Sužo a-ka-p^hik-a*
 3S SM-pst-eat-fv 2-vegetable 2-RC Sužo SM-pst-cook-fv
 “He ate the vegetables that Sužo cooked.”
- (20) *iye o-mu-many-a munt^hu uyo a-ka-p^hik-a masamba*
 3S SM-OM-know-fv 1-man 1-RC SM-pst-cook-fv 2-vegetable
 “He knows the man who cooked the vegetables.”

There is not enough data at this point to draw any conclusions about the structure of Tumbuka relative clauses; they are described here because they play a significant role in the formation of certain Wh-questions, as described in the next section.

5 Wh-Questions and Cleft Constructions

Another kind of Wh-question in Tumbuka involves the use of Cleft constructions. The following examples make use of a Wh-word, a relative complementizer, and an optional copula:

- (21) *kasi mwana wa njani uyo iye a-ka-mu-won-eš-a*
 Q 1-child loc who 1RC 3S SM-pst-OM-see-asp-fv
 “Whose child did he see?”
- (22) *a-ka-y-a mwana uyu uyo iye a-ka-mu-wo-na*
 SM-pst-cop-fv 1-child 1-dem 1-RC 3S SM-pst-OM-see-fv
 “(It) was this child that he saw.”

Because the copula is optional in Tumbuka, it is not necessarily clear from (21) alone what type of construction is involved. At first glance, it appears as though there could be Wh-movement. However, the copula in (22) suggests that this is, in fact, a Cleft.

The example above parallels a certain type of Cleft construction in Chichewa, a related Bantu language (Mchombo, 2004):

- (23) *kodí anyaní á mísala a-ku-phwány-á chiyáni*
 Q 2-baboons 2assoc 4-madness 2SM-pres-smas-fv what
 “What are the mad baboons smashing?”

- (24) *kodí ndi chiyáni chi-méné anyaní á mísala*
 Q cop what 7SM-relpro 2-baboons 2assoc 4-madness
 “(It) is what that the mad baboons are smashing?”

The Chichewa sentence in (24) also makes use of a Wh-word, a relative complementizer (“relative pronoun” in Mchombo’s analysis), and a copula. The examples in (22) and (24) parallel each other very closely, suggesting that Tumbuka does indeed make use of a Cleft construction in the formation of certain types of Wh-questions.

6 Conclusion

Yes/no questions are formed in a very straightforward manner in Tumbuka, with the initial complementizer *kasi* as well as final-syllable stress and rise in pitch. Wh-movement only occurs for subjects, and the landing site can be either preceding or following the clause. Objects and Adjuncts are questioned in situ, with a process closely resembling that for yes/no questions. Multiple-Wh constructions are prohibited.

Relative clauses are formed with a special complementizer that agrees in class with the c-commanding noun, and plays a significant role in the formation of Wh-questions with Cleft constructions.

There are still many aspects of Tumbuka question formation — and Tumbuka syntax generally — which remain unclear, and which merit continued research.

Notes

¹The data was collected over several months in the Fall of 2004, under the supervision of Ellen Woolford at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. The consultant is Siegfried Mkandaŵire, and his dialect is that of the Karonga district of Malawi.

²Tumbuka is a pro-drop language, so the absence of the third-person pronoun in (6) is not significant.

³The consultant identified this word independently as a demonstrative, but identified the phrase as meaning “a bird.”

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