

# On the Formation of Questions in Edo

THOMAS O. OMORUYI

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Linguists commonly classify questions into the categories Yes/No and WH. These labels are based on the kind of response in the case of the former, and on the spelling of many English question words in the case of the latter. In this paper, we refer to these as polar and non-polar questions, respectively. Our aim is to describe the grammatical structures of both types of questions in Edo with a view to determining their formative processes.

Edo, also called Bini, is a member of the Edoid group of languages (Elugbe 1979) which belongs to the Kwa sub-group of the Niger-Congo family of African languages. It was the main language of the ancient Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria. The data for this study are drawn largely from my own native competence in the language. We have also benefitted from many native speakers who have served as informants.

## 2. POLAR QUESTIONS

Our data suggest that there are three principal methods of forming polar questions in Edo. However, two of these can be combined in the formation of one.

### 2.1. *Formation with Raised Pitch*

A statement, or even one word which constitutes an utterance, can be transformed into a polar question when it is pronounced with a higher pitch. This pitch-raising gives particular prominence to the final syllable. No morpheme or question word is added to the statement in the formation of such non-polar questions.

\* This paper has greatly benefitted from Dr. R.N. Agheyisi's comments. She must not, however, be held responsible for my shortcomings.

Gimson (1980:222) observes that stress, pitch, quantity and quality “may render a syllable more prominent”. In the Èdo case, only pitch performs the function of making the final syllable more prominent. All syllables are normally equally stressed. Quantity fails to perform this role because, as Amayo (1976:85) rightly observes, “all vowels have normal value in length; in other words, there are no long or short vowels in the language”. Pitch or tone is therefore the only means of making a syllable more prominent in Èdo and we observe that the pitch level or tone of statements is usually lower than that of questions. Consider the following pairs which consist of a question and a statement:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. [ — — ]  
           òwá        ‘a house?’  
       b. [ — — ]  
           òwá        ‘a house’
- (2) a. [ — — — — ]  
           nè í tótà?        ‘may I sit down?’  
       b. [ — — — — ]  
           nè í tótà...        ‘that are sitting down’
- (3) a. [ — — — — — — ]  
           Òsàró rrí èvbàré? ‘is Osaro eating?’  
       b. [ — — — — — — ]  
           Òsàró rrí èvbàré. ‘Osaro is eating’

Similar tonal changes have been observed in Engenni which is also an Edoid language: “In *polar questions* sentences not marked by any question morpheme, the pitch of the whole sentence is raised and the final tone, if H, falls to L.” (Thomas 1974:23.)

Èdo imperative constructions, and statements turned into questions, as above, share either characteristic of raised pitch. This appears to be a common phenomenon in Edoid languages, but according to Elugbe (personal communication), Isoko monosyllabic verbs bear low tones in imperative constructions.

## 2.2. Formation with the Particle yí

Polar questions can also be formed by adding the question particle *yí* to the end of a declarative sentence (in addition to raising the pitch as described above). This particle only performs the syntactic function of transforming declarative sentences into polar questions.

- (4) a. *Òsàró ghá rré.*  
 Osaro AUX come  
 'Osaro will come.'  
 b. *Òsàró ghá rré yí?*  
 Osaro AUX come Q  
 'Will Osaro come?'

We observe, however, that *yí* does not function as a question marker in a negative sentence. Edo verbs are negated by the particle *má* while nouns and pronouns are negated by the enclitic particle *í*. In a negative construction, *yí*, occurring sentence-finally, "expresses the adverbial meaning of before" (Agheyisi 1986).

- (5) *Ù má rhiè òkhuò yí*  
 you NEG take woman before  
 'You have never married (a woman) before'.

Apart from question marking, *yí* performs an additional function in focus constructions. In conjunction with the focalizing particle *èré* 'it-be', it brings the noun in focus into more prominence.

- (6) *Èvbàré èré Òsàró ré yí?*  
 food it-be Osaro eat Q-EMPH  
 'Is it food that Osaro is eating?'

However, in a negative focus construction *yí* only functions as an emphatic particle. For example:

- (7) *Èíré èvbàré Òsàró ré yí*  
 it-NEG-be food Osaro eat EMPH  
 'It is not food that Osaro is eating either'.

A plausible conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that *yí*, occurring in sentence-final positions, can represent different, though homophonous, lexical items. It functions as a question marker in (4b), as a temporal adverbial in (5), it performs the dual role of question marking and emphasis in (6) and in (7), it is used for emphatic purposes only. As we shall see below, the question marker *yí* can occur optionally in all non-polar questions.

### 2.3. Formation of the Alternative Question

The deep structure of this type of Edo polar question consists of a compound sentence which combines two or more sentences. These sentences are conjoined by *rà* 'or' which consequently becomes the only question marker in the compound sentence. In other words, whenever two sentences are conjoined by *rà*, the resultant sentence must be interpreted as a question.

In the formation of such questions, the speaker makes a declarative sentence and then links it with *rà* to an alternative declarative sentence which is a negation of the first sentence or contains a totally different proposition.

- (8) *Òsàró bọ òwá rà Òsàró rhié òkhùò?*  
 Osaro build house or-Q Osaro take woman  
 'Did Osaro build a house or Osaro married a woman?'

We have glossed *rà* as 'or-Q' because of its dual role as a coordinating conjunction and as a question marker in (8). Note that since there are coreferential relations between *Òsàró* in the first sentence and *Òsàró* in the second, the latter can be pronominalized as *ó* 'he' without affecting the grammaticality or semantic interpretation of the sentence.

We should add that *rà* can also function as a coordinating conjunction of two or more nominals. Sentences in which such coordinated nominals occur are not normally interpreted as questions – unless, of course, the sentence is pronounced with a raised pitch as discussed in 2.1.

- (9) *Òsàró rà Òsàgié ghá rré.*  
 Osaro or Osagie AUX come  
 'Osaro or Osagie will come.'

Since (8) contains two different propositions, the question arises as to whether or not we can truly label it a polar question. Our finding is that respondents generally begin with *één* 'yes' or *éó* 'no' and then follow it with an appropriate answer. Therefore, we can say that the following responses to (8) are well-formed:<sup>2</sup>

- (10) a. *Één, ó bọ òwá* 'Yes, he built a house.'  
 b. *Één, ó rhié òkhùò.* 'Yes, he married a woman.'  
 c. *Éó, ó má bọ òwá.* 'No, he did not build a house.'  
 d. *Éó, ó má rhié òkhùò.* 'No, he did not marry a woman.'

The role of *rà* as a question marker and the justification for regarding questions formed with it as polar become clearer when the second sentence is deleted. This is commonly the case when a speaker does not want to suggest answers or limit the hearer's range of response. Such alternative questions end in *rà* as in the following example, but strictly speaking, *rà* is no longer a conjunction so we shall gloss it as Q (question marker):

- (11) *Òsàró bọ òwá rà?*  
 Osaro build house Q  
 'Did Osaro build a house?'

Welmers (1973:305-6) observes a similar phenomenon in Fante. He says "there is a simple conjunction /*ànáá*/; this, however, may also be used as a question marker at the end of a yes-no question". He does not give underlying forms of such questions.

In Edo alternative questions, the second sentence is not necessarily totally deleted as in (11) since we can also have an elliptical construction such as the following:

- (12) *Òvbókhàn rùé ònà khín rà òtùén?*  
 wife your this-one be or-Q relation-your  
 'Is this your wife or your relation?'

Again, the response to (12) can begin with *één* 'yes' or *éó* 'no', parallel to what we observed in (10) above. Such a response may not be appropriate in English.

Thus far, we have seen *rà* used as a sentence conjunction with the derived coordinated sentence obligatorily interpreted as a polar question. It can also occur as a nominal coordinator and sentences in which such coordinated nominals occur are not interrogative, cf. (9). However, the two forms can co-occur in the same sentence. In the following example, the second sentence is deleted:

- (13) *Òsàró rà Òsàgié ghá rré rà?*  
 Osaro or Osagie AUX come Q  
 'Will Osaro or Osagie come?'

A logical conclusion drawn from (13) is that *rà* as a coordinating conjunction and *rà* as a question marker are separate lexical items in their underlying forms. They are only homophonous in their phonetic realizations.

Finally, we observe that *rà* as a question marker cannot occur in embedded questions. Thus, adding *rà* to the end of sentence (14) would make it ungrammatical.

- (14) *Ò nòó mwè àdégghè ù ghá rré.*  
 he ask me whether you AUX come  
 'He asked me whether you will come.'

### 3. NON-POLAR QUESTIONS

We discuss five methods of forming non-polar questions in Edo. However, the same question may be asked in more than one way. What is common to all these question types is that the question word *yí* can occur optionally in sentence final position as a second question marker.

#### 3.1. *The dè + NP + S Formation*

A common method of forming non-polar questions in Edo is to place the question particle *dè* before the noun phrase about which the questioner wants more information; the information qualifying the noun phrase then occurs in a relative clause that follows it. Finally, the particle *yí* occurs optionally at the end.

- (15) a. *Dè èbé nè Òsàró tié (yí)?*  
 What/which book REL Osaro read Q  
 'What/which book is Osaro reading?'  
 b. *Dè Òsàró nè ò tié èbé (yí)?*  
 which Osaro REL PRO read book Q  
 'Which Osaro is reading a book?'

An adequate derivation of these questions must take into account the presupposition of the questioner and the syntactic status of the constituent being questioned. In both questions we know that the presupposition of the questioner is as follows:

- (16) *Òsàró tié èbé.*  
 Osaro read book  
 'Osaro is reading a book.'

The constituents isolated for questioning are *èbé* 'book' in (15a) and *Òsàró* in (15b). These noun phrases are brought into focus by the preceding question particle *dè* while (16) is embedded as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- (17) a. *Dè èbé <sub>s</sub>[Òsàró tié èbé ](yí)*  
 What/which book <sub>s</sub>[Osaro read book] Q  
 b. *Dè Òsàró <sub>s</sub>[Òsàró tié èbé ](yí)*  
 which Osaro <sub>s</sub>[Osaro read book] Q

The embedded sentence is transformed into a relative clause by the occurrence of the relativizer *nè*. In the relativization process, the noun phrases, now in focus, are deleted. However, if the noun phrase is the subject of the embedded sentence, a pronominal trace (PRO) is left behind. This pronoun is always *ò* irrespective of the number, gender and person of the noun phrase focus. These processes will derive (15a) and (15b) above.

Note, however, that the reference to the embedded sentence as a relative clause does not imply that *dè* and the noun phrase in focus are the main clause. A correct immediate constituent analysis of this question type must group the noun phrase in focus with the relative clause as one constituent. In other words, the noun phrase is the head of the relative clause. In fact, the noun phrase and the relative clause can function as the subject of non-interrogative sentences such as the following:

- (18) a. *Èbé nè Òsàró tié ònà khín.*  
 book REL Osaro read this-one be  
 'This is the book which Osaro is reading.'
- b. *Òsàró nè ò tié èbé ònà khín.*  
 Osaro REL PRO read book this-one be  
 'This is Osaro who is reading a book.'

Our data strongly suggest that through this process, questions can be asked about all Èdo noun phrases, i.e., pronominals, nominal clauses, verbal nouns, genitival and associative constructions, etc. However, *dè* will translate as 'who', 'what', 'which', 'whose' and so on, depending on the noun phrase that occurs after it. Of course, it can also be ambiguous as in (15a). Here are some examples:

- (19) a. *Dè èhé nè ù rhié?*  
 What place REL you go  
 'Where are you going?'
- b. *Dè èghè nè ú yá rré?*  
 What time REL you use come  
 'When did you come?'
- c. *Dè òmwá nè ònń́ khín?*  
 what person REL that-one be  
 'Who is that person?'
- d. *Dè èmwí nè íràn rú?*  
 what thing REL they do  
 'What are they doing?'
- e. *Dè óghé òmwá nè Òsàgié rhièrè?⁴*  
 What belonging-to person REL Osagie take + Past  
 'Whose did Osagie take?'

- f. *Dè òwá nè ú vbièrè?*  
 what house REL you sleep+Past  
 'In which house did you sleep?'
- g. *Dè vbé nè Òsàró yé hèè?*<sup>5</sup>  
 what like REL Osaro be ?  
 'How is Osaro?'

Even independent pronouns can be questioned:

- (20) *Dè ìmè nè ú rhié íghó ná?*  
 what me REL you give money to  
 'Who is me that you gave money to?'

Sentence (20) is actually expressing surprise and asks the question to whom the hearer gave money. It is perhaps better translated into English as: 'Was it to me that you gave money?'

The derivation of questions containing genitival noun phrases deserves close attention.

- (21) *Dè òwá óghé òmwá nè ú vbièrè (yí)?*  
 what house belonging-to person REL you sleep+Past Q  
 'In whose house did you sleep?'

This question is different from (19f) because in (21) it is the whole constituent 'house belonging-to person' that is questioned. Nevertheless, the following sentence can be a possible answer to the two questions:

- (22) *Òwá óghé Òzó Í vbièrè*  
 house belonging-to Ozo I sleep+Past  
 'It is in Ozo's house that I slept.'

On the other hand, the following sentence can be an answer to (19f) but it fails to answer the question in (21):

- (23) *Òwá nè ò rré òdòđ í vbièrè.*  
 house REL PRO be there I sleep+Past  
 'It is in the house over there that I slept.'

This failure shows that the presuppositions of the questioners in (19f) and in (21) are different. In (21) the presupposition is as follows:

- (24) *Û vbié òwá óghé òmwá.*  
 You sleep house belonging-to person  
 'You slept in somebody's house.'

*òmwá* in (24) refers to a person whose identity is unknown to the questioner. An appropriate response must provide this information as in (22).

### 3.2. The *ínú* + NP + S Formation

Non-polar questions can also be formed by preposing *ínú* 'how many' or 'how much' to Edo focus constructions. Focussing is overt in this type of question. The noun being questioned is focussed and the focus marker *èré* 'it-be' optionally occurs. This focus marker underlyingly consists of a pronoun *è* and a copula *ré*.

Similar to our observation in 3.1., the information qualifying the noun in focus occurs in an embedded sentence. The occurrence of *ínú* at the beginning transforms the whole sentence into a question. The question particle *yí* can then optionally follow the embedded sentence. For example:

- (25) *Ínú èmwá èré ú mièrèn (yí)?*  
 how-many persons it-be you see+Past Q  
 'How many persons did you see?'

A translation that takes the focussing process into account would be: 'How many persons is it that you saw?' The derivational process follows the stages in (26).

- (26) a. Simple declarative sentence/Presupposition:  
*Ù mié èmwá.*  
 you see persons  
 'You saw persons.'
- b. Focus construction formation rule:  
*Èmwá èré ú mièrèn.*  
 persons it-be you see+Past  
 'It is persons that you saw.'
- c. Question formation rule:  
*Ínú èmwá èré ú mièrèn?*  
 how-many persons it-be you see+Past  
 'How many persons did you see?'
- d. Optional question formation rule:  
*Ínu èmwá èré ú mièrèn (yí)?*  
 how-many persons it-be you see+Past Q  
 'How many persons did you see?'

The focus construction marker *èré* 'it-be' and the simple past tense inflection *-rèn* can be optionally deleted, especially in rapid speech, and the

meaning and grammaticality of the sentence are not affected. In such cases, (25) will be realized as in (27).

- (27) *Ínú èmwá ú mié(yí)?*  
 how-many persons you see Q  
 ‘How many persons did you see?’

Another observation is that *ínú* can be employed when questioning non-count nouns but not when questioning singular nouns.

- (28) *Ínú àmè èré òkhòkhò wón vbè èzè?*  
 how-much water it-be chicken drink in river  
 ‘How much water does the chicken drink from a river?’

Finally, we observe that unlike the *dè* + NP + S formation discussed in 3.1., the S in the *ínú* + NP + S formation can be deleted in a discourse if contextual information is provided, or if there is a previous mention of what is said in the S. Thus, while it is possible to say in isolation *ínú èmwá* ‘how many people?’, we cannot say *dè èmwá* ‘who (pl)’ without the embedded S.

### 3.3. *The ghá Interrogative Pronoun Formation*

Non-polar questions can also be formed by placing the interrogative pronoun *ghá* ‘who’ in sentence-initial position. In fact, *ghá* occurring at the beginning of a declarative sentence transforms it into an interrogative sentence.

- (29) *Ghá ò kpòlò òtò-òwá (yí)?*  
 who PRO sweep ground-house Q  
 ‘Who is sweeping the floor?’

If we delete *ghá* and *yí* from (29), we are left with a well-formed declarative sentence. *Ghá* is only used for inquiring about a person or persons performing the action or being in the state described in the following declarative sentence. It is an alternative way of saying *dè èmwá* ‘who (sg)’ as in (19c). It can also be an alternative for *dè èmwá* ‘who (pl)’ because there are no restrictions as to the number of persons it can question.

### 3.4. *Formation with ávbáo*

Non-polar questions are also formed by the use of *ávbáo* ‘who (pl)’ occurring at the beginning of a declarative sentence. It functions like *ghá*

'who', discussed in 3.3., but it can only question plural human nouns. It appears to be underlyingly derived from *ávbé*, which has no lexical meaning of its own, but functions as a pluralizer whenever it precedes a count noun.

(30)	<i>òwá</i>	'a house'	<i>ávbé òwá</i>	'houses'
	<i>ímótò</i>	'a car'	<i>ávbé ímótò</i>	'cars'
	<i>èkì</i>	'a market'	<i>ávbé èkì</i>	'markets'
	<i>èbé</i>	'a book'	<i>ávbé èbé</i>	'books'

Once more, it is a different way of saying *dè èmwá* 'who (pl)' and also *ghá* 'who' with a plural interpretation.

- (31) *Ávbáó ò rré'èvbá (yí)?*  
 who (pl) PRO be there Q  
 'Who is there?'

Again, we observe that if *ávbaó* and *yí* are deleted from (31), we are left with a well-formed declarative sentence. Although the questioner in (31) may not be sure of the number of people he is inquiring about, the presupposition is that there must be more than one, otherwise he should have said *dè òmwá* 'who (sg)' or *ghá* 'who' which is not specific as regards the number of persons.

This question type with *ávbaó* is derived from Edo focus constructions in which the focus marker *èré* 'it-be' is deleted, especially in rapid speech. When it is not deleted we have the following structure:

- (32) *Ávbáó èré Òsàró dé èwú ná (yí)?*  
 who (pl) it-be Osaro buy shirt for Q  
 'Who is it that Osaro bought a shirt for?'

*Ávbáó* in (32) is a pronominal replacive for the plural human noun in focus.

### 3.5. Formation with the particle *Vbè*

Finally, we shall examine a type of non-polar question which is introduced by the interrogative particle *vbè*. It can be employed in question formations that involve a variety of nouns and adverbial notions such as location and manner, actions, events, and so on. We are unable to find an adequate single gloss for *vbè* in English because it corresponds to a variety of question words in English. It cannot, however, function as a human interrogative pronoun as can *ghá* and *ávbaó* above. It can only be employed to inquire about actions, activities, events, conditions, location, and so on.

- (33) a. Activity or action:
- (i) *Vbè ó rú (yí)?*  
What PRO do Q  
'What is he doing?'
- (ii) *Vbè ó gbé (yí)?*  
what PRO kill Q  
'What is he killing?'
- b. Event:
- (i) *Vbè ó sùnú (yí)?*  
what PRO happen Q  
'What happened?'
- (ii) *Vbè ó khín (yí)?*  
what PRO be Q  
'What is it?'
- c. Condition or state:
- (i) *Vbè ó yé hẹ́ẹ́ (yí)?*  
what PRO be ?  
'How is it?'
- (ii) *Vbè ó tán sé hẹ́ẹ́ (yí)?*  
what PRO tall reach ? Q  
'How tall is it?'
- d. Reason or cause:
- Vbè ó sí ẹ̀rè (yí)?*  
what PRO cause it Q  
'Why is it so?'
- e. Location:
- (i) *Vbè ó yé (yí)?*  
where PRO be Q  
'Where is it?'
- (ii) *Vbè ó rriẹ́ (yí)?*  
where PRO go Q  
'Where is he going?'

From the foregoing examples, we see that *vbè* serves a variety of interrogative functions and it can be a substitute for *dè èhé* 'where' in (19a) and *dè èmwí* in (19d).

This is a short description of three methods of forming polar questions and five methods of forming non-polar questions. It is by no means an exhaustive study of question formation in Edo. We have only in passing dealt with such issue as focussing, relativization, coreferentiality and pronominalization, which are intimately associated with non-polar questions in Edo. We have also ignored the formation of indirect questions, rhetorical questions, echo questions, and so on.

## NOTES

1. In the Edo orthography that we adopted in this paper, the oral vowels *i, e, ɛ, a, o, o, u* correspond approximately to *i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u* in the I.P.A. chart. Nasalization of vowels is represented by a following *n*; nasalization is not marked for vowels following a nasal consonant. Consonants correspond to the I.P.A. transcriptions except for the digraphs *kh, gh, rh, vb* and *mw*, which represent *x, γ, ʃ, v, ̄v*, respectively; cf. Amayo and Elugbe 1983).
2. This conclusion is based on spontaneous reactions of respondents to this and similar questions. Some respondents who hesitated before replying did not, however, begin with *éḗn* 'yes' or *éó* 'no'.
3. The syntactic derivation of Edo focus constructions and how they relate to question formation is not fully investigated here. Our tentative conclusion is that all Edo non-polar questions discussed in this paper are underlyingly derived from focus constructions.
4. A full description of the simple past tense suffix and its variants occurs in Omoṛuyi 1986. These never occur if a verb is followed by an object noun as in (24).
5. *hèḗ* has no English gloss. According to Aghẹyisi 1986 it is "the second part of the interrogative formula for 'how' questions"; see also (33c).

## REFERENCES

- Aghẹyisi, Rebecca N. 1986. *An Edo-English Dictionary*. Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation.
- Amayo, Airẹn. 1976. A generative phonology of Edo (Bini). Ph.D. diss., University of Ibadan.
- Amayo, Airẹn, and [Ben] Ohi Elugbe. 1983. Edo orthography. In *Orthographies of Nigerian Languages: Manual II*, ed. Kay Williamson, pp. 1-11. Lagos: National Language Centre.
- Elugbe, Ben [Ohi]. 1979. Some tentative historical inferences from comparative Edoid studies. *Kiabara: Journal of the Humanities* 2, Rains issue: 82-101.
- Gimson, A.C. 1980<sup>3</sup>. *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English*. London: The English Language Book Society and Edward Arnold.
- Omoṛuyi, Thomas O. 1986. Adjectives and adjectalivization processes in Edo. *Studies in African Linguistics* 17:283-302.
- Thomas, Elaine. 1974. Enginni. In *Ten Nigerian Tone Systems* (Studies in Nigerian Languages, 4), ed. J. Bendor-Samuel, pp. 13-26. Jos: Institute of Linguistics.
- Welmers, Wm. E. 1973. *African Language Structures*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

*Department of Linguistics and African Languages  
University of Benin, Benin City*

