

VARIATION IN ENGLISH AND IGBO WH-WORDS: A MINIMALIST APPROACH

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Abstract

Working within the framework of minimalist program, this paper examined the variation in English and Igbo Wh-words. The study adopted a survey design and used secondary sources and the researcher's native competence to elicit data for analysis. The analysis showed the parametric variation in both languages. The Wh-word in English surface structure is a product of movement, while a two-way structure – based derivation and movement trigger exist in the Igbo language in overt syntax. The paper concluded that the knowledge of the parametric variation of Wh-construct amongst second language learners of both languages respectively will enhance well-formed sentences and help to reduce syntactic incongruities.

Keywords: Minimalist, program, parametric, variation, movement, base and overt

Introduction

Language is a broad term applied to the overall linguistic configurations that allow for human communication. The scientific study of language is called linguistics. Linguists sub-divide the study of language into four basic divisions: phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics / pragmatics. Syntax, according to its Greek etymology, means “the study of arrangement”. To the linguists, this means specifically the study of arrangements in languages. Such arrangements according to Lockwood (2002), “need to be studied because they are not automatically predictable” (p. 1). The order of linguistic elements that may seem “natural” to the speaker of one language may not correspond at all to what seem “natural” to the speaker of another language. This is the case made in Universal Grammar by Noam Chomsky (1983).

The notion of Universal Grammar accounts for the common grammatical properties shared by all natural languages (principles) as well as the variation among languages (parameters). Ndimele (1992) asserts that studies in Principles and Parameters have provided some insight into the kind of inter-linguistic variations which exist among languages and have illustrated the functioning of certain syntactic processes that may or may not be universal attributes of human languages (p. 2). The non-shared attributes of particular languages are assumed to mark the cross-linguistic parameterized variations of the individual grammars.

Nwala (2013) in a similar vein asserts that the parameterized variations are triggered by certain features of Universal Grammar that are not available to certain linguistic groups (p. 162). The parametric variations in language are broadly grouped into the Head Parameter, the Wh-Parameter, and the Null Subject or Pro-drop Parameter. The head parameter differentiates between languages with head-initial and complement final, and head final and complement initial. The Wh-Parameter distinguishes between languages that compulsorily move Wh-words to initial position in overt syntax and those that allow Wh-words to remain in situ. The null subject parameter distinguishes between languages that suppress the subjects of clauses in overt syntax and those that allow nominal at the subject slot. These variations account for the differences in syntactic structures amongst languages thereby making it impossible for a speaker of one language to apply their syntactic order to another language.

English language obligatorily moves Wh-words to sentence initial in overt syntax (except in echo questions), while Igbo language does not necessarily move its Wh-words. This variation causes incongruities among Igbo speakers of English and English speakers of Igbo respectively. The purpose of this work is to set clear the Wh-parameter of English and Igbo languages and using the knowledge of the variation to enhance well-formedness of sentences amongst second language speakers of English and Igbo languages respectively.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is the Minimalist Program (MP henceforth). MP which sees language as an optimal design that meets the interface levels, is a model of Transformational Generative Grammar which its core assumption is that grammar should be described in terms of the minimal set of theoretical and descriptive apparatus necessary. Obiamalu (2015) in discussing the conception of grammar within the MP framework, asserts that there are just

two interacting systems in the component of human brain dedicated to language – the language faculty. The two interacting systems are the Articulatory – Perceptual System (A-P) and the Conceptual – Intentional System (C-1) (p. 11). This means, according to Anurudu (2010), that MP reduces the set of four levels of representation: D-structure, S-structure, logical form and phonological form of Government and Binding to just binary interface level of phonetic form (PF) and logical form (LF) (p. 24). The PF is connected to the articulatory perception system while the LF interfaces with the conceptual – intentional system. A derivation is thereby adjudged grammatical if it converges at both interface levels: PF and LF, otherwise it crashes. MP being a minimal set of theoretical model adopts the conception of economy to find out universal principles and parameters as it uses mainly notions required by virtual conceptual necessity. By economy principle, we mean a principle which requires that, other things being equal, syntactic representation should contain as few constituents and syntactic derivations and involve as few grammatical operations as possible.

The grammar components as conceived in the MP are: lexicon, computational system, spell-out, phonetic form (PF) and logical form (LF). Lexicon, otherwise known as numeration or lexical resources is the list of all the words present in a language. It is the lexicon that specifies what shape a word takes how a word is pronounced, what syntactic category a word belongs to, and other words with which a word may occur in a sentence. Radford (1997) explains lexicon as a mental dictionary containing the list of the words in a language and their idiosyncratic linguistic properties (p. 264). Computational system is the operation that combines and arranges lexical items in a particular way. It involves operations select, merge, and move. The first operation targets and selects the needed items spilled into the working area, while the second merges the select items in a recursive manner in comply with X-bar theory. Operation move is applied to move the already merged items to the PF and the LF.

However, the selected, merged, and moved items cannot converge at each of the two interface levels: PF and LF if they are not first checked for grammaticality at the spell-out stage. Crashed items are returned while well merged elements are moved to PF and LF for interpretation. Luraghi and Parodi (2008) explained spell-out as an operation that splits the computation in two parts leading to PF and LF (p. 174). PF is an interface level with the articulatory-perception component where sentences are assigned phonetic form, while LF is an interface level with conceptual- intentional component where meaning is determined. LF, in other words, “is a level at which representations include only semantic

features” (Radford (1977, p. 265). To make sure that elements in PF and LF are fully interpretable in their respective domains, the notion of feature-checking becomes very important.

Feature checking is a very important aspect of MP. It is the process of ensuring that only interpretable features are visible at the interface levels. Checking replaces the term “assignment” of the Government and Binding where some features like case are checked through case filter at the LF interface. In MP, attention is given to concepts that are related to economy since minimalism is the major feature of MP. Hornstein cited in Moravcsik (2006) sees minimalist framework as “grammatical downsizing” (p. 88). The practice here is that the process of computation should follow the most economical path to meeting the principal of full-interpretation at optimal level. The economy principles include: shortest move, greed, procrastinate, last resort and least effort.

Shortest Move

Shortest movement principle is a principle of grammar in MP which requires that a constituent should move the shortest distance possible in any single movement operation. Lamidi (2008) explains that shortest movement principle has taken over the functions of subjacency condition. Subjacency is any application of the rule that move- α may not cross more than one bounding node. Ndimele (1992) captures this fact when he explains that the main idea behind subjacency is the imposition of restriction on the illicit movement of constituents by the transformational rule schema move- α .

Movement of item in this principle must be to the next available upper space from its source. This means that an element must move to the closest available landing site from its in situ. Obiamalu (2015) avers that “the next available landing site is the one accessible to the element being moved” (p.23). He maintains that position is only accessible if it is the same kind with the moving item. Marantz (1995) posits that the Shortest Move principle has taken over much of the work performed by Relativised Minimality, and Head Movement Constraint (HCM) in earlier version of principles and parameters (p.355).

Greed

Nwala (2015) explains greed as a principle which defines the selfish behaviour of the move items as items are only moved to check their features in MP. In other words, Greed is a principle of grammar in MP which specifies that constituents move only in order to satisfy their own morphological requirements or well-

formedness. This means that a movement operation cannot apply to category α to enable some different category β to satisfy its own morphological needs. Thus, the principle does not allow the satisfaction of another element than the moving element. Also, the principle of Greed, according to Nnadozie (2014) ensures that constituents do not move in order to check features that have been already checked, hence, a DP already in a case marked position cannot move in order to check its case features; such movement will be altruistic. However, some scholars like, Lasnik (1995) posit that movement of an item α is not driven by α 's selfish requirement but rather for the satisfaction of formal requirement of α and β . He calls it the principle of Enlightened Self-Interest.

Procrastinate

Procrastinate, according to Anurudu (2010), is "a principle that prefers derivations that postpone movement until after spell-out, so that result of such movement does not affect PF" (p.28). Procrastinate principle favours covert syntax over overt syntax where there is choice. Anurudu (2010) explains that procrastinate principle requires that features which do not need to be checked overtly must be checked covertly after spell-out and before LF. Luraghi and Parodi (2008) explain:

In this framework, movement occurs only when it is necessary, and as late as possible due to economy reasons. Covert movement is more economical because movement can be procrastinated only when weak features are involved. Strong features are uninterpretable at PF. Thus they must be deleted before spell-out. (p.158)

The assertion above means that some features (weak) can be halted (procrastinate) while strong features which are uninterpretable are deleted. Thus, these features that are not checked overtly thereby procrastinating them would later be checked covertly. The conception of movement in MP is opposite of the GB framework where movement was optional. In MP, movement has different function, due to the eradication of the two levels, of D-structure and S-structure. However, due to procrastinate, movement occurs but only if it is necessary and as late as possible because it wants to check features.

Last Resort

Last Resort principle is based on the assumption that operations are driven by necessity. Radford (1997) says that Last Resort "is a principle that grammatical operations do not apply unless they have to as only way of satisfying some

grammatical requirement” (p.264). He gave an example where “do-support” is used in questions only as a last resort, that is, where there is no auxiliary in the structure which can undergo inversion. Last Resort is, therefore, a condition on movement. Last Resort violates the principle of procrastinate which prefers derivation that holds off on movement until after spell-out. When movement is the last resort for grammaticality, such movement takes place before spell-out thus violating the presence of procrastinate for grammatical purposes. The movement of WH-operator into spec-CP for instance, is last resort to have the interrogative specifier – feature carried by COMP checked before erasing them since specifier features are interpretable.

Least Effort

Least Effort is one of the principles related to economy of minimalist program. Lamidi (2008) explains that “it deals with the choice of derivation in which comparably minimal effort is required” (p.64). Anurudu (2010) asserts that Least Effort and Last Resort options suggest a striving for the most economical and minimal way of satisfying principles. These economy principles show that MP is a model of syntactic analysis that is established toward minimizing principles of grammatical constructs.

The choice of MP in this paper is because, it is well able to account where and why an ill-formed sentence crashes in its derivation and by extension can account for grammaticality in constructions.

Literature Review

The notion of Universal Grammar, in the words of Nwala (2013) “characterizes human languages and defines common core principles of language from which each language selects its repertoire” (p. 161).

He further explained that languages, their similarity notwithstanding, differ compositionally since each language selects her elements differently (p. 161). This is what the concept of Principles and Parameters means. In the words of Anurudu (2010) languages “have the same overriding principles that guide the formation of sentences but the actual configuration is parameterized” (p. 3). The Wh-parameter explains the linguistic diversity in wh-words.

Wh-Questions according to Emenanjo (2015) belong to a class of interrogative questions. Others are polar questions and indirect questions (p. 389). In English,

this class of questions uses an interrogatives (words) which are often classified into interrogative pronouns (e.g. who, which), interrogative adverbs (e.g. why, where) or interrogative pronouns (e.g. who). They are collectively called interrogative determiners. Wh-words in English appear at the sentence initial position. Okoye (2016) explained that the sentence initial position of Wh-words is not their original position. He argues that Wh-words, underlyingly, serve as the complement of preposition, and that the movement of wh-words to the sentence initial position is because they are not allowed to remain in their original position in overt syntax except only in echo question. Emenanjo (2015) argued that interrogative words in Igbo constitute a closed class of nominal and can function as minimal NPS in sentences (p. 390). The parameterized aspect of English and Igbo languages is that English language obligatorily moves its wh-word to sentence initial position while Igbo can be at the initial position or at the prepositional complement position.

Emenanjo (2015) in his study of Igbo Wh-words explains that wh-words in Igbo can begin with a vowel or with a consonant. Wh-words such as *kedu*, *gini* and *ndii* all start with consonants whereas *ònye*, *Òlèè* and *èbeé* start with vowel letters. This is in contrast with English Wh-words that are consonant initial. In view of the Wh-words glosses, Nwachukwu (1976), in his study raised issues about referring to the questions introduced by these interrogatives as Wh-questions. He, therefore, suggested that Wh-questions in Igbo should be called *kedu*-questions because they do not start with Wh-words. This is an interesting argument! However, if it is decided that question-words should not be called Wh questions on the ground that they do not start with Wh letters, what is then the justification for the proposed “*Kedu-question*” when all question words in Igbo do not start with “*kedu*”?

In a study on the syntactic classification of Wh-words carried out by Emenanjo (2015) he categorized all Wh-words into dependent and independent forms depending on their ability to initiate questions without additional structure. The independents include: *èbeé* (where?), *gini* (what?), *ònye* (who?) etc. The dependents are *èléé* (where?) *ndii* (where?) etc.

A study by Anurudu (2010) on wh-parameter in Igbo language revealed that wh-words can remain in situ or be moved into spec of CP but not for checking purposes. This is because Igbo language has no strong Q features as in English and thus need not to be checked. The movement of “*gini*”, for example, into CP is optional. This type of movement is not for the selfish needs of the Wh-operator “*gini*”, nor for the need of C, since C is weak in Igbo language (p. 30).

Methodology

The study adopted a survey design and used secondary sources and the researcher's native competence towards eliciting data analysed in this paper. The data were purposefully selected and analysed within the purview of minimalist framework. Nominal phrases at the subject position are analysed as Determiner Phrase (DP) in line with Abney's (1987) Determiner Phrase Hypothesis. The Igbo data for this study were drawn from the Standard variety for comprehensive coverage.

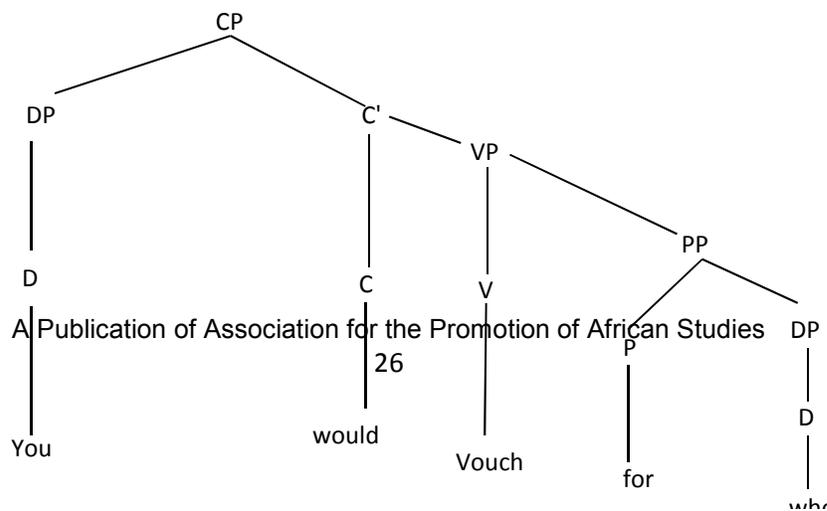
Data Analysis

Parameter setting restricts the options that a language learner has to make in their constructions. In principles and parameters, we have Wh-parameter which distinguishes between languages that obligatorily move their Wh-words to the front of appropriate clauses especially in relation to Wh-questions, and the languages that have theirs remain in situ. Wh-words appear at the sentence initial position in overt syntax but can appear at both initial and final position in Igbo language. The left-most-edge position of English Wh-word is not the original position. Wh-words, underlyingly, serve as the complement of prepositions. They are, however, not allowed to remain in their original position; as a result, they are dislocated and moved to the left most edge of the construction in question formation. This is with the exception of echo questions. By the above assertion, it means that wh-questions in English are only made possible by the movement of Wh-words. Let us consider the sentence below:

1. Who would you vouch for?

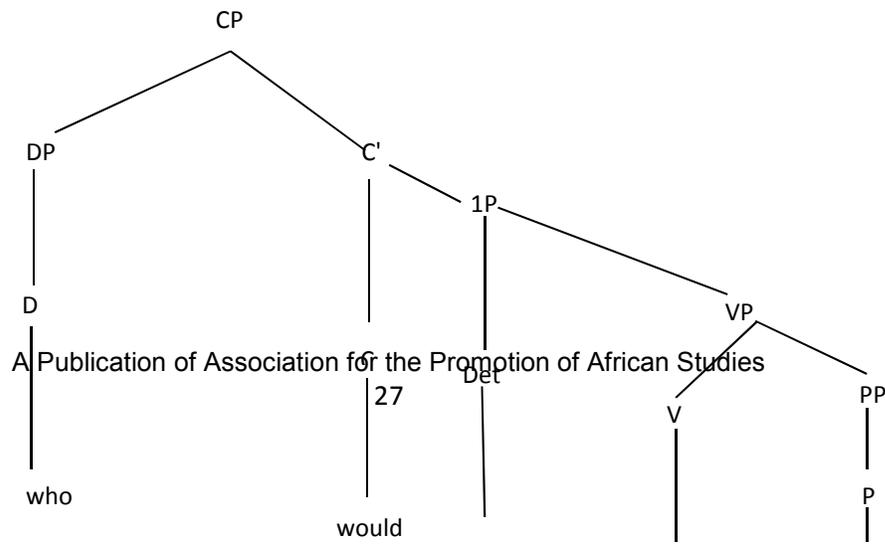
The sentence (1) above can be paraphrased to give an echo question which also is the base form of the sentence. In the base form, it is assumed that the moved or inverted auxiliary "would" originates in INFL position and that the Wh-word "who" which is a pronominal determiner originates as the complement of the preposition "for". The assumption gives this question:

2. You would vouch for who?



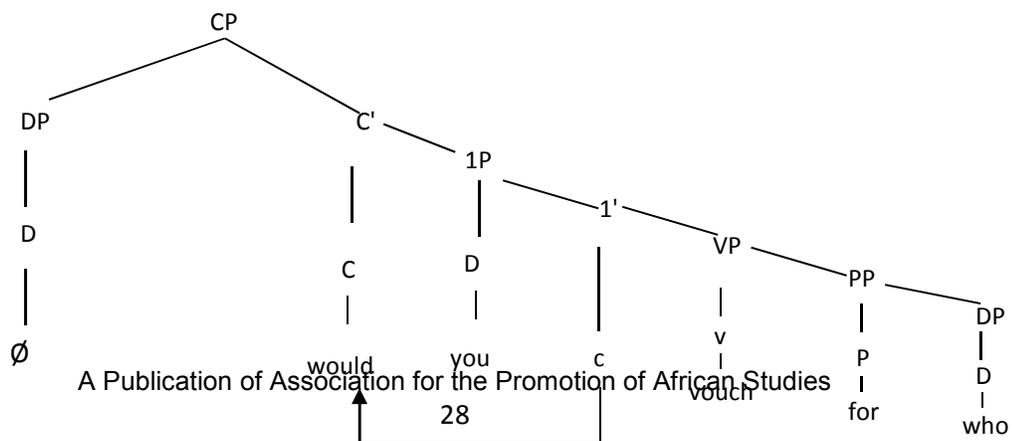
The reason why Wh word *who* is not permitted to remain in situ as the complement of the preposition *for* in English except only in echo question, as illustrated by the diagram above, is not far-fetched. Every interrogative operator must be moved to specifier position within CP (spec-CP), that is, a position before a preposed auxilliary. According to Radford (1997), the movement is in line with Lasnik (1995) principle of Enlightened Self-Interest which specified that constituents move in order to check features carried by other constituents. This is not just as a result of the availability of landing side as proposed in Government and Binding Syntax

This means that the movement of the Wh-word *who* in this context is motivated by a form of altruism. The principle of Enlightened Self-Interest by Lasnik contradicts that of Chomsky's Greed which suggests that movement is only made for selfish interest of an element to check its own features. According to Lasnik (1995), in an Enlightened Self-Interest, "movement of α to β must be for the satisfaction of formal requirement of α or β (p. 66). The reason, therefore, for the wh- operator movement into spec-CP is to check the interrogative specifier-feature carried by COMP which needs to be checked and erased since specifier-features are uninterpretable. The Diagram below shows the movement.

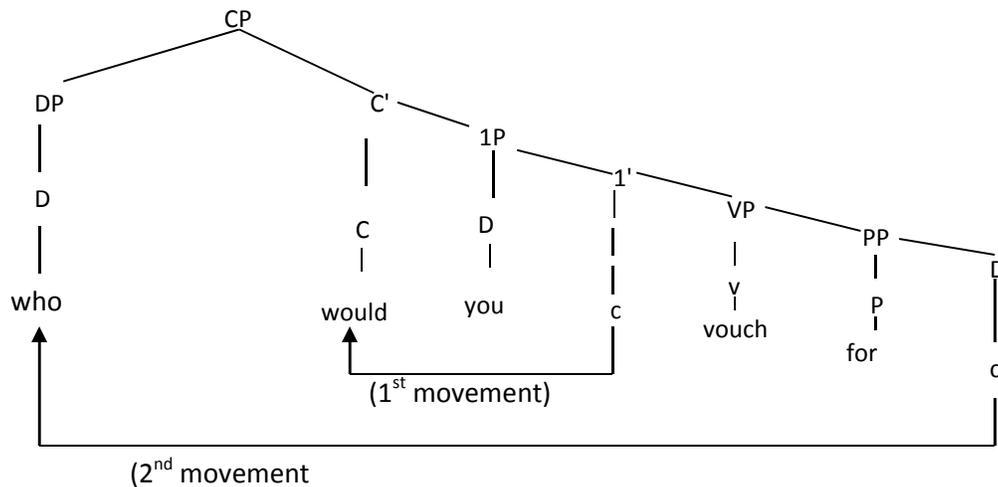


The sentence just illustrated above shows that there are two movement carried out in a successive manner. First is the movement of the auxiliary *would* from the head INFL position of 1P into the head C position of CP. This type of movement is known as auxiliary inversion. Another movement is that of the wh-word *who*. A COMP in a spec- CP position (mostly interrogative COMP or auxiliary functioning as COMP) is, according to Chomsky (1995) a strong head. A strong head is a COMP in question node which is believed to have an abstract Q(uestion) affix. It could be a complementizer such as *if*, auxiliary such as *will*, or determiner such as *who*. This explains why the sentence *You would vouch for who?* is not permissible in English unless if it is used as an echo question. This is because the determiner *you* which is in spec-COMP position is not a strong head. It is not a strong head because it does not carry the abstract (Q)uestion affix needed to check the interrogative specifier feature carried by the COMP *would*.

The first movement in our sentence (1) *Who would you vouch for?* is a head-to-head movement which dislodged *would* from head INFL position of the IP to the head C position of CP as the way of forming polar question from the echo question. The tree diagram below illustrates the movement:



The diagram above which illustrates the first movement shows that the spec-COMP position (that is, specifier of complementizer phrase) is unfilled. In MP, the spec-COMP node needs to be filled in order to check the interrogative specifier feature carried by COMP *would* which must be checked and erased according to the practice of MP because no uninterpretable feature like specifier feature is allowed to converge at either the PF or LF. In order to check this, the determiner *who* has to be moved into the spec - COMP node where it will check the COMP *would* since it is a strong head and can check for such feature. After the checking, the specifier feature is deleted before convergence at PF and LF interface levels. The diagram below shows the second movement.



The movement of the determiner *who* from the position of prepositional complement to spec-COMP position is a violation of the shortest move principle of MP. However, it enables the spec-COMP node and COMP node to be adjacent of each other in order to enable the feature checking which caused the movement in the first place. The subscript "c" and the arrow line in the above diagram show the successive cyclic movement in the formation of the sentence. The subscript is used to mean copy which has replaced the principle of trace. By copy, it is believed that any moved constituent or item leaves behind at its extraction site an identical category. The inherent grammatical properties of an antecedent are transmitted back to its copy in the source position. This is however, not the case in all languages.

In Igbo language, a Wh-operator can remain in situ or be moved into Spec of CP but not necessarily for checking purposes. Within the MP, the differences (parameters) among languages are accounted for in terms of feature strength. For example, Igbo language has no strong Q feature as in English and thus needs not necessarily be checked. This accounts for why the movement of Wh-words in Igbo into Spec of CP is optional and not for checking purposes. According to Anurudu (2010), this type of movement is not for the selfish needs of the Wh-operator in Igbo language nor for the needs of C, since C is weak in the language (p. 30). In Igbo syntactic structure, Wh-words are found at both initial position and at final position. The condition of a feature being strong in one language and weak in another is dependent on the morphological robustness of the language in question. This accounts for the correctness of the expressions below.

3. Emeka gara ebee? (D-Structure)

Emeka go (past) where wh-operator

Emeka went where?

4. Ebee ka Emeka gara? (S-Structure)

Where do (past) Emeka go (past)

Where did Emeka go?

The Igbo and the English S-Structure sentences above have something in common. They both contain auxiliary verbs - "ka" in the Igbo sentence and "did" in the English equivalent. Any sentence that does not contain an auxiliary in its base form, is provided with one (do or any of its variants) before the sentence is converted into its question form. This is in line with Last Resort principle of the MP. The principle states that grammatical operations do not apply unless they have to as the only way of satisfying grammatical requirement. The introduction of "dummy do" here is the last resort in having a grammatical interrogative sentence.

It is, however, not all interrogative words in Igbo can appear at both initial and final positions. This is the case with Igbo *kedu* (what?) which can only be found at the sentence initial position. In other words, *kedu* movement from its final position in the base form to the initial position in the overt syntax is not an

optional one but as compulsory as its English equivalent. The sentences below show that *kedu* can only appear at the initial position.

5a *Kedu aha gi?*

What name you? (singular)

What is your name?

5b* *Aha gi kedu?*

Name you (singular) what?

The ungrammaticality of sentence (5b) illustrates that not all Wh words in English can appear at both positions. The *kedu* word in Igbo appears to be more than just a question marker as it is not covered by the optionality Wh movement as others like *gini*. This can be argued to mean that *kedu* as an interrogative word carries an auxiliary which has, through morphosyntactic process, collapsed on the interrogative word. Let us consider the sentences below.

5. *Gini ka Emeka mere?*

What do (past auxiliary) Emeka do (present)?

What did Emeka do?

In sentence (5a) *Kedu aha gi?* has no separate auxiliary which is different from other Igbo constructions as seen above. It therefore suggests that the word *kedu* carries the verb of the sentence and cannot, by virtue of this feature, appear at the final positions as copular verbs do not end sentences. The fact that there is no other verb in the sentences suggests that the word *kedu* contains the verb of the sentence as sentences are incomplete without verbs. The grammaticality of the sentence shows it contains a verb. This is the reason why it is permissible to simply ask someone *Kedu?* which can be interpreted as *How are you?*

Conclusion

The paper explained the parametric variation of Wh-word in Igbo and English languages. It was discovered that the Wh-words in Igbo have different positions in sentences, which obviously is not the case in English. This because, Igbo do not have strong features that need to be checked. The movement of Wh-words in English is for the purpose of feature checking. However, it has been observed that not all Wh-words in Igbo can appear in both initial and final positions.

The Wh-word *kedu* in Igbo can only be found in initial position. This is because, in some expressions, *kedu* is seen to be more of content word than a question. Therefore, the paper concludes that the Wh-parameter is clearly different in the two languages; English only permits Wh-words at initial position, while Igbo permits the occurrence of such words at both initial and final positions depending on the style of the speaker (except *kedu* which is only permitted at initial position). Hence, *kedu* functions structurally as English Wh-words. Igbo speakers of English are encouraged to deal with the problem of transferring Igbo Wh-word-order to English by intent study of the Wh-parameter of Igbo and English. The study provides a reference guide to the Wh-structure of Igbo, and as a result reducing grammatical incongruity by Igbo English speakers.

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