

Yes/No Questions in Ao

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the Yes/No (Y/N) question in Ao, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nagaland, India. A syntactic description is not sufficient to understand the intricateness associated with Y/N questions in Ao. The semantic and pragmatic interpretation is necessary. There are five Y/N question markers i.e., *ma/no*, *na*, *tu*, *ase*, *ni* in Ao, these markers occur post verbally. The marker *ase* is also used as an interrogative disjunctive affinity. The choice of the Y/N question particles depends on the speakers' intentions. Hence, in this paper, we will examine the relation of syntactic, semantics and pragmatics of Yes-No (henceforth Y/N) questions particles in Ao.

Key words: yes/no question, syntactic description, Ao

1. Introduction

Y/N question is a sub-classification of types of question where a grammatical reply is expected to be a 'yes' or 'no'. Y/N questions are formed in different ways among languages. Some languages use the raise of intonation; some languages inflect the verb (Greenlandic) and some language use different morphemes. In English it is marked by a mechanism known as auxiliary inversion, as in:

1. 'John will eat mangoes'
2. 'Will John eat mangoes?'

The formation of Y/N question in Ao does not involve the same mechanism of subject auxiliary inversion rather it has particles that are attached to the sentence finally. In Ao, the Y/N question is formed by using five different forms of question particles i.e., *ma/no*, *na*, *ni*, *tu*, *asə*. These Y/N question particles are used by a speaker when they want a positive or a negative answer. These particles occur at the end of the sentence as illustrated below:

3. pai ki ok-ti ma/no
 4. pa ki ok-ti (a)tu
 5. pa ki ok-ti na
 6. pa ki ok-ti asə
 3SG house sweep-FUT Q
 ‘Will s/he sweep the house?’

7. ni ki ok-ti ni
 1SG house sweep-FUT Q
 ‘Shall/can I sweep the house?’

The choice of the marker ‘ma’ and ‘no’ seems to be dialectal; where the most common usage is ‘ma’. In the absence of the question particles the statements can be interpreted as declaratives rather than interrogative, unless a raising tone is used. In many languages, including English, a raise in the intonation can replace a Y/N question marker. Besides the markers *na* and *asə* the question particles cannot be replaced by a raise in intonation.

2. Pragmatic Analyses

Yes/ No questions occur when the speaker and the listeners communicate and exchange information. Hence, it is more common to find these particles in conversations than on elicited data or written texts. The pragmatics and semantics take into account notions such as intentions of the speakers, effect on the listener, the implication that follows and the knowledge, presupposition, politeness, intimacy and formality of the speaker. The pragmatics and semantics associated with the yes/no markers in Ao are significant; its description is not complete without a pragmatic analysis.

The question formed with *ni* is neutral in the speaker's commitment to the truth condition of the sentence. A speaker is simply seeking permission to a request. The marker *ni* is used when the Speaker (S) believes the hearer (H) has the authority for permission for an activity (A). It is not obvious that H would allow (S) without being asked S wants H to do permit S to do A. A sentence like (8) will have the underlying meaning “I want to go to field, will you allow me? I will not go if you don't permit.

8. ni alu-i o-ti ni
 1SG field-to go-AFFFUT Q
 ‘Can I go to the field?’

The question particle *na* is used by the speaker when there is a reference to some discourse in the past or when the speaker assumes that the hearer is planning to or thinking to do an activity. This marker can be replaced by a raising intonation. This marker unlike *ni* is not neutral to the truth condition of the sentence. Speaker (S) has heard the hearer (H) saying H will do an activity (A). S wants to confirm whether (H) is really prepared/ said/ thinking to do the activity. Here the speaker is surprised or holds belief that is opposite denotation of the sentence. The underlying meaning would read like “you never swept the house before, are you really going to do it?”

9. na- i ki aok tsə na
 2SG-AGT house sweep-FUT Q
 ‘are you will sweep the house?’

The question marker *tu* is used when the speaker needs an assurance or a conformation. Underlying he wished for a positive answer. The speaker seeks affirmation of a preceding assertion. This marker can occur with person/personal pronouns. The underlying meaning would be “He usually sweep the house, you thing he will today too?”

10. pa-i ki ok ti tu?
 3sg-AGT house sweep Y/N QMRK
 ‘Won’t s/he sweep the house?’

The following example is a discourse taken from a group of students who were going on a trip. In (11) the speaker is seeking permission from the entire group that they go since he arrived.

- S1: 11. na aru-er čī, asenokbo o-ti ni?
 2sg come-CP DEF, we go-IMMFUT Q
 “(since) u have (finally) come, shall we go”

The reply (12) was based on the fact that Narola has already confirmed that she is coming sometime back in the past. Hence, *tu* is used to confirm than, expecting an affirmative answer.

S2: 12. narola a? arutsə tu?
 Narola also come-FUT Q
 “wont Narola (also) come?”

The marker *ma/no* is used when a stated activity does not normally happen. The marker ‘ma’ is used to negate a verb or an adjective: The Speaker(S) believes the activity (A) is not possible. S asks the hearer (H) to confirm whether S is right or wrong. For instance, (13) is a case where the agent *pa* hardly sweeps the house. The speaker and the hearer left the house dirty and they do not expect him to sweep the house.

13. pa-i ki ok ti ma
 3SG-AGT house sweep AFFFUT Q
 ‘will he sweep the house’

Sentence (14) is from one of the earliest written text in Ao (John 1:46). This is an illustration of how *ma* is used. History tells about how Nazareth was proverbially bad. To be a Galilean or a Nazarene was an expression of decided contempt. The meaning of this cryptic question is debated. Some commentators and scholars suggest that it means Nazareth was very small and unimportant, but the question does not speak of Nazareth’s size but of its goodness. Note that the other question markers are not used here.

14. asər natanil-i pa daŋ aši , “nazaret nuŋi laŋka
 and nathanie-AGT 3SG to said, “Nazareth from something
 tajuŋ adok-tet-tsə ma
 good come out -POS-FUT Q”
 ‘And Nathaniel said to him “can anything good come out of Nazareth”

The negative marker in Ao is *ma* and a word can be turned negative by prefixing *ma*. The marker *ma* as a yes/no question marker might be derived from the negative marker *ma*;

the marker *no* also have negativity as in *nung* ‘don’t’. Hence it is possible to assume that the morphological similarity and the semantic of negativity in the question particle of *ma/no* is rooted in the negative particle.

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|-----|--------------|-----|-------------------|
| 15. | ajung ‘good’ | 16. | ma-jung ‘bad’ |
| 17. | ači ‘eat’ | 18. | ma- ači ‘not eat’ |

The particle *asə* is an interrogative marker. Here the S is requesting the H to do an activity. This marker occurs with all person/pronoun. This marker cannot be replaced by an intonation.

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|-----|---|-------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 19. | na-i | ki | aoktse | asə |
| | 3SG-AGT | house | sweep | FUT Q |
| | “will you sweep the house” | | | |
| | | | | |
| 20. | tanur | kən | apon- | tsə asə |
| | child | once | carry(on the back)- | FUT Q |
| | ‘will (you) carry the child once?’ | | | |
| | | | | |
| 21. | tsəbu-i | tsək | porok-oko | ta narola-i metet-er ase |
| | father-AGT | paddy | sow-PERF | COMP narola-AGT know-PRS Q |
| | ‘Does narola knows that father has sown the paddy?’ | | | |

3. Syntactic Analyses

Nouns in any person and number can occur in the subject position in a sentence with the question particles *ma/no*, *na*, *tu*, *asə*. In a simple sentence, the question particle *ni* can be used only when the subject is first person and second person. The marker *ti* has been analysed as immediate future (Gowda 1975). However, I would like to identify it as affirmative future. Immediate future: right now; affirmative future: affirmative decision about future.

In (6) if we use the simple future *tsə*, then the activity will not be affirmative but a tentative one, where one is planning. However if we use *ti* there is affirmation. Note that this discourse can be spoken any time before December.

(a) takəm bənčəŋ nuŋ-bo ak ka təpsət- ti
 this year celebration (Christmas) PP pig one kill AFFRFUT
 ‘This Christmas we will kill a pig.’

However, the other marker *ni* can occur only with affirmative future (23). The *ni* with simple future will be ungrammatical.

23. ni ki ok - ti ni
 1SG house sweep-AFFFUT Q
 ‘Can I sweep the house?’

24. *ni ki ok-tsə ni
 1SG house sweep-FUT Q
 ‘Can I sweep the house?’

The particle *ni* cannot occur with any other aspectual markers. It can occur in an embedded clause. In indirect speech (26) *ni* occurs with third person subject of a subordinate clause. In sentence (26) the subordinate clause is introduced by the complementizer *ta*.

25. narola-i asuŋtaŋ, “ni-i pa səm-taktsə ti ni
 Narola-AGT asked “I 3sg run- CAUS IMMT FUT Q MRK
 ‘Narola asks, “shall I make him run.”

26. narola-i [pa nəm səm-taktsə- ti ni ta] asuŋtaŋ
 Narola-AGT 3sg DAT run- CAUS- IMMT FUT Q MRK COMP asked
 ‘Narola asks, “shall I make him run.”

The question *ni* can occur with the second person as the subject when the verb is inflected with the imperative mood.

27. na-i ki ok- aŋ ni?
 3/2sg-AGT house sweep IMP Y/N QMRK
 ‘Can you sweep the floor?’

28. * na-i ki ok- ni?
 3/2sg-AGT house sweep Y/N QMRK
 ‘Shall I sweep the floor?’

The relation between second person subject, imperative mood and the question particle *ni* is interesting. In English the imperative subjects are different from declarative sentence. The imperative subject is often represented by a null element and hence not overtly seen in the sentence. But it is understood that it is the addressee, the agent of the activity denoted by the verb and the null element occurs in the subject position. Typologically, it has been pointed out by Mauck, et al. 2004 that in languages like Sanskrit and Bhojpuri the addressee and subject may not coincide but there are languages like English and Korean where the addressee and the subject coincide. See Mauck, et.al (2004) in which the authors discuss imperative subject across-linguistic perspective and point out the the relationships of subjecthood, addressee-reference and agenthood in imperatives. In Bhojpuri third person referential subject and a verb from the imperative paradigm are inflected for third person. The simple imperative sentence in Ao is more like English and Korean where the addressee and the subject coincide and the subject is null marked. The subject is derived from the context.

29. Ø o-aŋ
 (Subject) go-IMP
 ‘Go’

Therefore, in the sentence when the imperative marker occurs and the *ni* occurs as the Y/N question particle the addressee and the subject is the second person. The subject can be dropped.

30. na-i ki ok aŋ, ni
 you-AGT house sweep IMP, Q
 Lit: ‘sweep the house, will you’
 ‘can you sweep the house.’

31. tsə tera juk- aŋ, ni
 water little send IMP, Q

‘will you send some water?’

33. (ni-i) pa nəm sem-taktsə ti ni?
 (I-AGT) 3sg run- CAUS IMMT FUT Q MRK
 “shall(I) make him run?”

Ao has three tenses, five aspectual markers and seven mood markers (Pangarsenla 2009). All these are suffixed to the verbs. The question particle *ni* can occur only affirmative future and imperative mood. The pragmatically neutral yes-no question particle *na* occurs with all aspect markers. The marker *asə* can occur with the aspect markers. The other particle *tu* cannot occur with the aspect marker.

34. pa ki ok-a liasə na/tu
 3SG house sweep- PROG EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Was he sweeping the house?’

35. pai ki ok- ʃia liasə na/tu
 3SG house sweep- REPT EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Was he sweeping the house (again)?’

36. pai ki ok-maʔ-er liasə na/tu
 3SG house sweep- COMP-CP EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Has he already swept the house (completed)?’

37. pai ki ok-tok - er liasə na/tu
 3SG house sweep- PERF -CP EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Has he already swept the house?’

In the earlier section we saw no difference pragmatically between *ma* and *no*; both are used when an activity does not normally happen and wants confirmation in disbelief. However, the two markers vary in its interaction with aspectual markers. The particle *ma* can occur only with the past perfect aspect *ogo* while *no* appears to occur with aspect markers.

38. pai ki ok- ja liasə no/*ma
 3SG house sweep- PROG EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Was he sweeping the house?’
39. pai ki ok- ɟia liasə no/*ma
 3SG house sweep- REPT EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Was he sweeping the house (again)?’
40. pai ki ok- tuk- er liasə no/*ma
 3SG house sweep- PERF- CP EXIST Y/N Q
 ‘Has he already swept the house?’

As shown earlier, *asə* is a yes-no question particle occurring sentence finally. However, *asə* can occur in alternative question. This is interesting because of the difference between a yes-no question and an alternative question: a yes/no question seeks for affirmation of a preceding assertion (41) whereas an alternative question presents two or more possible answer and presupposes that only one is true (42).

41. nai ki aok-tsə asə
 2SG house sweep- FUT Q
 ‘Will you sweep the house’
42. na arutsə asə ma-rutsə
 3SG come or NEG-come
 “Will you come or not”

The fact that *asə* occurring as an alternative question marker can also suggests that it is a question maker rather than a yes-no question tag. The marker *asə* is optional or can be dropped if there is a serial of two verbs where one of the verbs is negated. However, it is obligatory if the verbs denoted different events or activity.

44. na arutsə ma-rutsə
 3SG come NEG-come

“Will you come or not”

45. *na* *arutsə* *asə məjaŋtsə*

3SG come-FUT Q sleep-FUT

“Will you come or sleep”

The Y/N questions can be answered in three ways: (i) A minimal answer by using either Yes or No (*hai?*/ *ma?*) (ii) A minimal answer can be given by either agreeing, confirming or negating (*hau?*/ *masə*) and (iii) by echoing or repeating the verb. All the questions can be answered by echoing or confirming the verb. A basic answering type to Y/N question is given below:

Y/N question	Intention of the speaker	Minimal answer	
<i>na</i>	seeking confirmation	Agree-Confirm/Negate	<i>hau?</i> / <i>masə</i>
<i>asə</i>	Request	Yes/No	<i>hai?</i> / <i>ma?</i>
<i>ni</i>	permission/	Yes/No	<i>hai?</i> / <i>ma?</i>
<i>tu</i>	Affirmation	Agree-Confirm/negate	<i>hau?</i> / <i>masə</i>
<i>ma/no</i>	Disbelief	Agree-Confirm/negate	<i>hau?</i> / <i>masə</i>

4. Conclusion

The interpretation of Y/N question in Ao requires all syntactic, pragmatic and semantic analyses; only then all the five markers can be distinguished. Pragmatically, all the five markers show major difference. The pragmatically neutral yes-no question particle *na* occurs with all aspect markers in a sentence. The marker *ma/no* which appears to be dialectal in the beginning and with no pragmatic difference showed a difference in the aspectual markers it occurs with. The marker *asə* is seen to have dual role as a T/N question and as an alternative question marker. Unlike many languages, the use of interrogative marker as optional to an intonation means is very limited in Ao. In Ao, the only optional interrogative with intonation is *na* and *asə*. This not only suggests that the other markers are associated with some pragmatic or semantic factors rather all Y/N particles in Ao are associated with a pragmatic and semantic factor and syntactically distinct.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED:

AFF-FUT	:	AFFIRMATIVE FUTURE
AGT	:	AGENTIVE
CAUS	:	CAUSATIVE
CP	:	CONJUNCTIVE PARTICIPLE
COM	:	COMPLETIVE
COMP	:	COMPLEMENTIZER
DAT	:	DATIVE
DEF	:	DEFINITE
HAB	:	HABITUAL
III	:	THIRD PERSON
PAT	:	PATIENTIVE
PERF	:	PERFECTIVE
PROG	:	PROGRESSIVE
PRS	:	PRESENT
PROG	:	PROGRESSIVE
PST	:	PAST
SG/S	:	SINGULAR
VREC	:	VERBAL RECIPROCAL

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Colophon:

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