The structure of wh-question in Mendriq

Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan[1]

School Of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National
University of Malaysia

Abstract. Mendriq is an endangered language spoken by a small number of aborigines who dwell in a
relocated village at Kuala Lah in Kelantan, Malaysia. This article analyses the metadata of *naken* and *luk ai* ,
wh-question words of Mendriq, which were available through a fieldwork. These question words will be
analysed by utilizing the Minimalist framework. We found out that the nature of these question words in this
language are not influenced by any other words in their respective sentences. Therefore, syntactic analysis
will be the best analysis to explain these complex phenomena. This analysis claims that C has a strong [uwh]
feature but the strength does not require the word to move to the scope position. Instead, the scope position
Spec CP is attended by *Op* (empty category) in order to check the strong uninterpretive feature (uwh) at C'.
Therefore, the presence of *Op* prevents the movement of the question words to the scope position. This
explains the in situ behavior of the questions words.

Keywords: question words, Mendriq, endangered language, Malaysia, features

1. Introduction

Mendriq language which is spoken by the aborigines at Kuala Lah, Kelantan, is from the Negrito stock.
The base structure of this language is similar to other Negrito languages such as Kensiu, Kintak, Lanoh,
Jahai and Bateq. (Mohamed Sultan, 2009a:50, 2009b:160). Mendriq, one of the languages in the
Austroasiatic family, is a SOV language (Mohamed Sultan, 2009a:48). This paper will describe and analyze
the wh-question words of Mendriq. The wh-question words in this language are *naken* 'who' and *luk ai* or
alow 'what'. These wh-question words will be analyzed using the Minimalist Program to clarify whether the
inherent nature of these wh-question words are in situ or moved wh-words. Therefore, this paper will clarify
the differences that are displayed by these wh words in Mendriq through theoritical analysis.

2. Framework

Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995) assumes that the morpheme formation of a word is characterized
in the form of grammatical features and these features must be checked accordingly. The main assumption is
that the syntactic structure of a sentence is formed through a combination of a continued merge operations
and eventually mapped into two structural representations that determines the Phonetic Form (PF) and the
Logical Form (LF) where the meaning of a sentence will be determined. Therefore each sentence must
achieve the PF representation and LF representation. The assumption is that our grammar has two output
levels: PF and LF. Next, the derivation of a sentence formation is an operation that involves the formation
which entails a set of operations in the computation that generate syntactic structures, along with a set of
operations that change the structure of PF syntax representation to a set of PF and LF operations that change
the syntactic structure of representations of LF. LF and PF are said to be a two level intermediary in the
grammar because both are connectors to other systems outside the domain theory of a grammar, for example
the PF representation serves as an input to the articulatory-perceptual system, while LF representation serves
as an input to the conceptual-intentional system. Next, a phonetic content of a word is outlined in a set of
features. Hence, PF representation only consists of features that can only be interpreted phonetically while

---

[1] Tel: +0060133972398
Email address: fazal@ukm.my

LF representation comprises features that can only be interpreted in terms of its meaning only. This condition set by the constraints of universal grammar is known as Full Interpretation Principle (FIP). Therefore, if a derivation produces PF / LF that meet the FIP (must only contain features that can be interpreted), it is said to have converged. If the two representations for a PF and LF derivation meet FIP, then the derivation is said to converge. If the PF expression or LF expression violates the FIP, the derivation crashes. There is another level known as Spell out which divorces the PF and LF**.** The derivational process of a sentence goes through few steps. Firstly, through the operation of selection, each lexical will be taken from the lexicon (each lexical has a set of phonetic, semantic and grammar features); secondly, through a process of merging, constituents are combined in pairs to form tree structure diagram (each word in the tree diagram contains a set of phonetic, semantic and grammar features); thirdly, after the spell out, phonetic and semantic features are processed separately. Phonetic features are processed by PF operations that subsequently produce PF representations while semantic features are processed by LF operations that subsequently produce LF representations.

3. Question Words

There are numerous question words in Mendriq. However, this paper is only interested to analyse the question words of *who* and *what*. The question words *who* is recognized as *naken* while the question words *what* is recognized as *luk ai or alow*.

3.1.   Naken
The usage of the question word *naken* 'who' is exemplified in (1):

(1)	(a) **Naken** bek[2]? who you 'Who are you?'	(b)Bek **naken?** you who 'Who are you?'	(c) Bek teh **naken**? You this who 'Who is this ?'	(e) **Naken** ton? Who that 'Who is that?'

The occurrence of *naken* shows that the word can be present at the beginning or at the end of a sentence. The position of *naken* depends on the NP which is being questioned. If a sentence questions the NP in the object position then, *naken* will be in the object position as in (2):

(2)	(a) Kenmoh teh **naken**? name you who? 'What is your name?'	(b) Bek anok **naken**? you son who? 'Whose son are you?'	(c) Bek bekchip lo **naken**? you went with who 'You went with whom?'

Every *naken* as illustrated in the instances above is in the final position because it is questioning the object position. This phenomenon is often known as in situ. Hence, the question word *naken* in Mendriq is claimed as in situ. This phenomenon as discussed is not only demonstrated by *naken* which is questioning the object position but it is also demonstrated by *naken* which is questioning the subject position as in (3):

(3)	(a) **Naken** saket? who sick 'Who is sick?'	(b) **Naken** meyen la hep tun? who came at out there 'Who is out there?'

The phenomenon of in situ is consistence in Mendriq question sentences. If *naken* questions object position it will occupy the object position, but if it questions the subject position, it will occupy the subject position. This proves that *naken* has the in situ phenomenon. The intriguing question that had begun to surface is whether this phenomenon exists for all the languages in Austroasiatic. This question will be left unanswered and hopefully be reserved for further studies as this paper only concentrates on the structure of Mendriq's question words.

However, the nature of in situ in this language is not constant. Mendriq data show that there are variations in the use of question words because the question word *naken* can also move to the initial position. Some of the data in (1) are renumbered as in (4):

(4)	(a) **Naken** bek? who you Who are you?	(b) **Naken** ton? who that Who is that?

---

[2] Sometimes *bek* can be represented as *bem*. This article will not discuss the differences.

The position of question words in (4) shows that the question words which question the object position is at the initial position now. This is the new position after the movement. This position displays a phenomenon as opposed to (2) where *naken* does not move and is known as *in-situ*. One conclusion that we can make about *naken* is that this question word has two properties, namely in situ and movement. However, this situation does not exist for the question words that question the subject because it is already in the subject position. Therefore, there will not be any discussion on the question word in the subject position. Hence, we claim that question word *naken* is free. Moving on is the discussion about the position of another question word which is *luk ai* /alow 'what'.

3.2. Luk ai or alow

The question word *what* in this language is represented by two words, namely *ai luk* or *alow*. Both are free in a sense that they can question the position of a complement in a transitive verb or the subject position. Therefore these question words are known as an argument question (Mohamed Sultan, 2011). From the discussion above, we are aware that question word that questions the subject position is not appealing in this SVO language because their nature of movements or in situ cannot be proved in this case (Haegeman, 1994:239). Therefore, the question words like *luk ai* or *alow* which question the object position will be discussed here. In order to facilitate the discussion, the question words will be divided into two parts as in (5) and (6):

luk ai:

(5)	(a) Muk chitoh **luk ai**? you cook what What did you cook?	(b) Bek tanem **luk ai**? you plant what What did you plant?	(c) **Luk ai** tun? what that What is that?	(d) **Luk ai** bedik? what do What did you do?

alow :

(6)	(a)Bek kejak **alow?** you work what What is your job?	(b)**Alow** bek kerjak? what you work What is your job?	(c)**Alow** teh? what this What is this?	(d)Becew badai **alow** bem dik? to here what you do What do you do here?

Both of these argument questions have the same properties. Both characterize in-situ (5a-b; 6a-b) and movement (5c-d; 6c-e) simultaneously. Interrogative sentences in 5(a-d); 6(a-e) demonstrate that these question words, *luk ai* and *alow* can question the object position in a sentence. Nonetheless, it is quite interesting when (6a-b) illustrate that the question word *alow* has the freedom to be in the final or initial position of a sentence. This phenomenon is also supported by data (5c-d) which portrays the nature of *luk ai* in which it has the freedom to move to the initial position or stay in-situ. Therefore, the syntactic structure of *luk ai* or *alow* will be analysed using the Minimalist program.

4. The syntax of *naken* and *luk ai / alow*

Up to this point of discussion, it is rather clear that both argument question words are free to move either to the initial position or stay in situ in the object position. Hence , the question words that question the object will not necessarily stay in the object position. Instead, it can also move to initial position of an interrogative sentence. This free state of movement could be done by a special feature, which will be discussed below, that comes available with the question words.

Earlier discussions have explained that the question word *naken* is in situ or move to initial position in a question sentence. Both phenomenon were not influenced by any words that follows or precedes the question words as we have discussed in section 3. As a mean to ease the discussion, the in situ phenomena will be analyzed using the syntactic analysis using the sentence below:

(7)   **Naken** bek bentek?
        who you married
        Who did you married?

Bentek is a transitive verb which is also known as a two-argument verb. Both arguments of the verb have been filled in (7). The arguments have been met by *naken,* while the second argument is occupied by the pronoun *bek* in the subject position. This shows that this sentence is grammatical. However, the question

word *naken* has moved to the scope position [Spec CP]. Adger (2004:341) claimed that if the feature of [uclause] on Tense (T) is assessed as [DECLARATIVE], the Tense is weak. Therefore, T will not move to the position and merge with C. Instead, if feature [uclause type] on T is assessed as [INTEROGATIVE], T is strong. Therefore, T must move to the C position and the uninterpretable feature [uclause type] will be checked locally. This is because a strong feature can only be checked at a local position (Adger, 2004). This signifies that the feature will be checked by T through C-command. The T node has an uninterpretative [uQ] which is strong. Therefore, in order to check this strong feature, it needs to move and merge with C. As a result, the feature is checked locally.

Chomsky (1986) stated that C has a feature that gives an indication that a sentence is a statement sentence or interrogative sentence. Sentence (7) is an interrogative sentence. Therefore, we propose that the C will have a strong but uninterpretive [uwh] feature. Hence, these features must be checked. However, a strong feature can only be checked locally according to Adger (2004:179). In order to achieve locality, the feature [uwh] needs to be moved to C ' position. This forces *naken* move to Spec CP in order to check the uninterpretive feature [uwh] feature. All this process of feature checking take place before Spell out. Eventually this sentence is marked grammatical. Therefore, Minimalist Program has successfully analyzed the movement of wh-question in Mendriq.

However, this is not really highlighted by this language. Instead, this language has the option of not to move the question word to the scope position. This clearly illustrates that this question word is in situ as in (7). However, this phenomenon will cause the uninterpretative [uwh] not to be checked before Spell Out. Thus, this sentence should be marked ungrammatical because the sentence will crash at LF. Instead, the sentence is acceptable to native speakers of Mendriq. However to solve this problem, we propose that *naken* can either stay in situ or move to the initial position. However, we need to solve the uninterpretive feature [uwh] on C. Therefore, we have adopted Adger's analysis (2004:354). He claimed that there is an empty operator *Op* on the Spec CP for yes / no question. Therefore, we prolong this analysis on the wh-questions of Mendriq. This is important because we need to fulfill the nature of a strong uninterpretive feature which requires local position in order to check the feature. It is because there is an empty operator OP in the CP spec checking the [wh], resulting *naken* can stay in situ. We propose that the empty category *Op* is covertly presented at Spec CP in this language at all time but it only becomes overt when the question word does not move to Spec CP. Therefore, the presence of *Op* provides the place for the uninterpretive features [uwh] to be checked before Spell Out and a strong full interpretation can be obtained.

We claim that this language has a unique nature where the arguments do not need to move to the scope position. If a speaker chooses to move the question word, then the empty operator *Op* does not exist. Therefore, *Op* is at the CP to meet the checking criteria. If not, this sentence will crash because the features [uwh] is not checked and the structure cannot be interpreted at LF. In fact, this analysis also claims that this language has an *Op*. The presence of *Op* in this language has led to an alternative movement either in the scope position or remain in situ. This phenomenon can be observed in the northern dialect of Malay language (Asmah Haji Omar, 1986; Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan, 2009c:239,).

Naken is not the only argument question word in the language. In fact, two more questions, known as *lok ain* and *alow* do exist in the language. Discussion in the early part of this part illustrates that both of these question forms have two properties, namely in-situ and movement. These properties can be seen as below:

(8) Bem dik **alow**?	(9) **Alow** bem dik?
you do what	what you do
What did you do?	What did you do?

We propose the presence of an uninterpretive feature [uwh] for requires local checking. However, the question word does not move and merge to Spec CP in order to check the uninterpretive feature at C' CP. Nevertheless, this sentence is still marked grammatical because it is saved by the presence of an empty operator [*op*].

The question word *alow* also has the advantage of moving to the scope position: Spec CP. The presence of a question word leads to the disappearance of *Op* at the scope position. This has further strengthened the claim that the uninterpretive feature [uwh] is strong but its strength does not require the movement of the

question due to the presence of *Op*. This claim is parallel with Chomsky' claim who suggested that the uninterpretive feature [uwh] is universally strong. However, we have argued that the movement of wh-question to the scope position is due to the lack of *Op* as this causes the question word to move to the scope position. The presence of *Op* causes the wh-question to remain in situ. This analysis claims that languages which observe optional movement have an optional empty operator which will be able to fulfill the in situ or movement requirement. We also claim that *Op* does as well possess strength. The strength of *Op* is weak in this language. This weakness contributes to the optionality of movement to the scope position in order to fulfill the strong uninterpretive feature to be checked before spell out. This is deemed as a comprehensive analysis on all the question words in Mendriq language.

5. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the argument question words such as *naken*, *alow* and *lok ai* and such analysis has been divided into two different aspects in which the first aspect deals with the descriptive analysis. This analysis has debated that these three question words have an alternative choices either in situ, which means staying in the position of the answer, or moving to a different position. We have found out that the nature of these question words being in situ or moved are not influenced by any other words in their respective sentences. Therefore, syntactic analysis will be the best analysis to explain these complex phenomena. Syntactic analysis has found out that C has a strong [uwh] feature but the strength does not require the word to move to the scope position. Instead, this analysis claims that the scope position Spec CP is attended by *Op* (empty category) in order to check the strong uninterpretive feature (uwh) at C'. At the same time, the presence of *Op* prevents the movement of the question words to the scope position. On the other hand, the absent of *Op* requires the movement of the question words. The presence and absence of this operator, *Op,* are due to its strength. When the *Op* is strong the wh-question will remain in situ but when the *Op* is weak the wh-question will move to check the strong uninterpretive feature before spell out. This analysis suggests that the question words that are in situ or moved are not a problem for this language. The main objective is to check all the uninterpretive features before spell out in order to indicate that a interrogative sentence is grammatical.

6. Acknowledgement

7. References

[1] D. Adger. *Core Syntax: A Minimalist Approach*. Oxford University Press, 2004.

[2] A. Omar. *Nahu Melayu Mutakhir.* Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka &dan Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 1986.

[3] N. Chomsky. *The Minimalist Program*. MIT Press, 1995.

[4] N. Chomsky. *Knowledge of Language. Its Nature, Origin, and Use*. Praeger Press, 1986.

[5] L. Haegeman. *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. Blackwell Press, 1994.

[6] F. M. Mohamed Sultan. *Analisis sintaksis ke atas enklitik '-nya' dalam bahasa Melayu*. PhD Disertation. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, (2005).

[7] F. M. Mohamed Sultan. Struktur sintaksis frasa nama bahasa Bateq. *GEMA Online^{TM} Journal of Language Studies*. 2009a, **9** (1): 47-61.

[8] F. M. Mohamed Sultan. Sintaksis frasa nama bahasa Kensiu. *Jurnal Bahasa*. 2009b, **9** (2): 155-172.

[9] F. M. Mohamed Sultan, N. H. Jalaluddin, Z. Ahmad, A. Che Kob, and H. Radzi. Sintaksis kata soal argumen dialek utara bahasa Melayu. *Proc. of Persidangan Antarabangsa Bahasa Melayu Bahasa Dunia*. 2009c, pp. 235 – 242.

[10] F. M. Mohamed Sultan. The syntactic structure of a Noun Phrase: Austroasiatic vs. Austronesia. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. 2011, **19** (1): 263-271.