

Focused Constituent Interrogatives in Lete (Larteh)

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ABSTRACT

Lete is a South Guan (Kwa, Niger-Congo) language (Lewis, 2009) spoken in only one town: Larteh, located in the southeastern part of Ghana, West Africa. The language which is underdescribed is spoken by about 8,310 people (Ghana Population and Housing Census, 2000). Constituent interrogatives are one type of interrogatives Siemund (2001) identifies across the world's languages. Three types of constituent interrogatives are operational in Lete. These are focused constituent interrogatives, in-situ interrogatives, and discontinuous question-word interrogatives (Akrofi Ansah, 2009). In this paper, the formation of focused constituent interrogatives in Lete will be described. The formation of focused constituent interrogatives involves placing the focus marker *ne* after a clause-initial interrogative word/phrase. In Lete, constituents that are focused are put clause-initially and followed by the focus marker, *ne*. In Lete culture, the use of focused constituent questions is constrained by age and social status.

Keywords: *focus marker, constituent interrogative, interrogative word, interrogative phrase, clause-initial.*

1. PRELIMINARIES

Interrogatives constitute one of the three clause types identified cross-linguistically, the two others being imperatives and declaratives. Each of these clause types is associated with particular speech acts. Whilst declaratives are typically used for asserting, claiming, stating, accusing, criticizing, promising and guaranteeing, imperatives are largely employed in issuing commands for certain actions to be taken by the addressee (König & Siemund, 2007; Siemund, 2001). Interrogatives are “conventionally associated with the speech act of requesting information”. Based on their syntactic and semantic properties, interrogatives are put into two broad categories: polar interrogatives and constituent interrogatives (König & Siemund, 2007: 291).

In English, constituent questions are also known as wh-questions because such questions are mostly signaled by wh-words: who, what, where, when, etc. This type of questions demand answers that provide the kind of information indicated by the interrogative word or phrase that is used to ask the question. In (1) for instance, the constituent question is enquiring about location.

(1) Question: Where is the book?

Answer: The book is on the table.

Languages differ with the preferred position of *wh*-words or interrogative words (IW)/ phrases (IPH). Constituent words or phrases may be put obligatorily in clause-initial position; they may occupy the same position as the constituent questioned or they may occupy either of these two positions in which case the language accepts both positions. Siemund (2001) terms these languages as fronting, in-situ and optional fronting respectively. Following Siemund's categorization, Lete may be described as a predominantly optional fronting language. It must however be noted that when Lete constituent interrogatives have interrogative words/phrases placed in clause-initial position, these constructions are marked for focus. The morphosyntax of this construction is the subject of the present paper.

Similar to related Kwa languages like Akan (Saah, 2000) and Ga (Kotey, 2002), focus marking plays a significant role in constituent interrogative formation. The term focus construction "... denotes a type of sentence that serves to promote a specified constituent, its focus, to a position of particular prominence by setting it off from the rest of the sentence in one way or another" (Drubig and Schaffer, 2001: 1079). Thus in Lete focused interrogative structures, the interrogative word/phrase is set off from the rest of the sentence by placing it in clause-initial position. The interrogative word/phrase therefore occupies a position of prominence, and becomes the focus of the sentence. The type of focus which is employed in Lete focused interrogative structures is contrastive focus. This resembles what pertains in other African languages (Drubig and Schaffer, 2001: 1081). Drubig and Schaffer (2001: 1079) explain that contrastive focus "... denotes a constituent that identifies a subset within a set of contextually given alternatives". The present paper will discuss the structure and formation of focused constituent interrogatives in Lete. It will further comment on the socio-cultural constraints on the use of focused constituent interrogatives.

The paper is in six parts. In the second section, a brief socio-linguistic sketch of Lete is given. This is followed by an overview of the phenomenon of contrastive focus marking in Lete. In the fourth part, the form and meaning of focused interrogative words/phrases are dealt with. The subject of the fifth section is the formation of focused constituent interrogatives and their function in a communication situation. In the final part, the discussion is summarized and concluded.

2. SOCIO-LINGUISTIC INFORMATION ON LɛTɛ (LARTEH)

Lɛtɛ (Larteh) is a South Guan (Kwa, Niger-Congo) language (Lewis, 2009) spoken in southeastern Ghana, West Africa by about 8, 310 people (Population and Housing Census of Ghana, 2000). The language has not received much attention from language experts. Lɛtɛ does not have a standard orthography, therefore in available literature on Lɛtɛ, the Akan orthography has been used (Akrofi Ansah, 2009). Similar to most Niger-Congo languages, it is tonal with two level tones: high and low (Clements, 2000). It has AVO and SV order and syntax. Morphological case is not marked; grammatical relations are determined by constituent order. The morphology is agglutinating. Tense and aspectual distinctions are marked by tone and verbal prefixes.

3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE PHENOMENON OF CONTRASTIVE FOCUS MARKING IN LɛTɛ (LARTEH)

Languages employ various strategies to obtain prominence in contrastive focus constructions. Among strategies used are prosody, word order and special morphemes (Drubig and Schaffer, 2001). Similar to Akan and Ewe (Boadi, 1974, 1990; Saah, 1988; Ameka, 1992) focus in Lɛtɛ is expressed through word order change and the use of special morphemes. In a non-interrogative sentence, the constituent that has to be focused is fronted, and then followed by the focus marker *ne*. The focus construction terminates with the particle *a*. Interrogative words/phrases in a content interrogative may also be focused. This involves fronting a question word/phrase and following it with the focus marker, but without a terminal particle. It is expected that a focused question receives a focused answer where the constituent which represents the answer is also fronted and marked by the same focus marker *ne*. In this instance, the terminal particle occurs (2).

Focus is pragmatically controlled; this means that a speaker is at liberty to focus any of the constituents, depending on the meaning he wants to communicate to his listener. In the case of a focused answer, it is the information that the questioner wants. In the following question and answer adjacency pair (2), the answer to the question is focused to contrast or correct the wrong impression that the questioner had. The background of the dialogue is that after spending long hours in the kitchen, a man becomes curious and finds out from his wife what dish she is preparing.

- (2) Man: Mentɛ ne wo dé-dànkɛ?
 What FOC 2SG PROG-cook
 ‘What is it that you are cooking?’

Woman: Hu ne n-dé-dànkɛ a.
 Fufu FOC 1SG-PROG-cook TP
 ‘It is fufu that I am preparing.’

In Lete the focus domain is the constituent; nouns, nominalized verbs, predicative adjectives and time and place adverbials can be fronted and marked with *ne* (Akrofi Ansah, 2009). Interrogative words or interrogative phrases may also be focused in focused constituent interrogatives.

4. FORM AND MEANING OF LETE (LARTEH) FOCUSED INTERROGATIVE WORDS AND PHRASES

There are specific interrogative words and interrogative phrases (IW/IPH) which function in focused constituent interrogatives of Lete. In the present section, their form and meaning are discussed. To begin the discussion, their inventory is given in table 1. The table also illustrates the semantic distinctions made by the interrogative words and phrases.

Table 1. *Lete focused interrogative words/ phrases.*

Concept	Interrogative word/ phrase	Gloss
Person	ɛne sg./ɛmaade pl.	who
Object	mɛntɛ	what
Location	ɛnɔfa	where
Time	bere fene te/mankɛ	which time/which day
Enumerative	fɛne	how much/how many

Focused interrogative words/ phrases in Lete distinguish five domains. Out of the five interrogative words/phrases, it is only that which expresses the concept of person which makes a distinction between singular and plural forms; they are *ɛne* (singular) and *ɛmaade* (plural). The rest of the interrogative words/ phrases are invariant with regards to number. The concept of time is expressed in two ways; a distinction is made between specific period/time of the day and then the specific day (cf. table 1).

Available data indicate that the interrogative words/ phrases do not make gender/ noun class distinctions. A distinction can however be made between those that substitute for human referents (3a and 4a), and those that refer to non-human referents (5).

Mɛntɛ is invariant, and it is used to question a non-human entity (5) which could be a non-human subject, a direct or indirect object in a clause. In the folktale extract (5), it is employed in questioning the object (direct) that Frog is

having or carrying. In his answer to Chicken, Frog mentions the object, a handkerchief.

There are also focused constituent interrogative words and phrases that substitute for non-arguments. These inquire about the location of a situation/object (6); its temporal setting (7); and the quantity/price of an object (8 and 9). None of these interrogative words/phrases have number and gender/noun class distinctions.

5. FORMATION OF FOCUSED CONSTITUENT INTERROGATIVES

In forming a focused constituent interrogative, the interrogative word/ phrase is put in a focus position which is clause-initial, and followed by the focus marker, *ne*. Unlike the case of focus marking in declarative sentences, the focused constituent interrogative sentence does not have the clause-final particle. However, similar to focused declarative sentences, answers to focused interrogatives are focused and terminated with the particle *a*.

In Lete *ene*, *emaade* and *mentε* are interrogative words that substitute for the core arguments of a predication. The interrogative words occur clause-initially and are followed by the focus marker *ne*.

(3)a. Question

Εne	ne	bè-gyí	adube?
who.SG	FOC	FUT-eat	pawpaw?

‘Who will eat pawpaw?’

b. Answer

A-yirebi	a	ne	bè-gyí	adube	a.
SG-child	DEF	FOC	FUT-eat	pawpaw	TP

‘It is the child who will eat pawpaw’.

(4)a. Question

Εmaade	ne	bè-gyí	adube
who.PL	FOC	FUT-eat	pawpaw

‘Who will eat pawpaw?’

b. Answer

N-yirebi	a	ne	bè-gyí	adube	a.
PL-child	DEF	FOC	FUT-eat	pawpaw	TP

‘It is the children who will eat pawpaw’.

- (5) Okireni: Mente ne wo-dé dé mɔ?
- Chicken What FOC 2SG-PROG hold DEM.PROX
- ‘What is this that you are holding?’
- Akpotrobi: Miredukuu ne me-dé dé a.
- Frog handkerchief FOC 1SG-PROG hold TP
- ‘It is a handkerchief that I am holding.’

Examples 3–5 illustrate that *ene/emaade* refer to human concepts whereas *mente* makes reference to non-human concepts. The core arguments they substitute are ‘child’, ‘children’ and ‘handkerchief’ respectively (examples 3–5)

The answer in (3b) to the question in (3a) brings out morphological and semantic properties of *ene*. The answer illustrates that *ene* refers to a single and a human entity. In examples (4a & 4b), the plural form *emaade*, is used.

There are also focused interrogative words/phrases that occur in “... non-argument slots which seek circumstantial information of the situation in question, and which can be considered syntactically as adjuncts” (Siemund, 2001: 1021). In constructing focused constituent interrogatives, these interrogative words/phrases are likewise placed clause-initially and followed by the focus marker, *ne*. See examples 6–8.

(6)a. Question

Enɔfa ne o-wure a bò ?

where FOC SG-book DEF PRES.be at

‘Where is the book?’

b. Answer

Ɔ-kpono a ase ne o-wure a bò a.

SG-table DEF under FOC SG-book DEF PRES.be at TP

‘It is under the table that the book is ’.

In example (6a), the interrogative word *enɔfa* inquires about the location of ‘the book’. The answer in (6b) gives information about the location: under the table. In example (7a), the question phrase, *bere fene te* (in how much time) probes the time the activity of ‘going to school’ will take place. In normal speech, this is shortened to *berefente*.

Manke on the other hand enquires about the specific day an event will take place. In (7b), information about the time and day are given: ‘in the afternoon’ and ‘Monday’ respectively. It is interesting to note that in related languages like

Akan (Saah, 2000) and Ga (Kotey, 2002) also the interrogative device for eliciting information about temporal setting is a phrase, and not a word.

(7)a. Question

Bere	fene	te/ manke	ne	a	bè-yó	sukuu?
time	how much	in (time of day) /	FOC	3SG	FUT-go	School
		when (which day)				

‘When will he/she go to school?’

b. Answer

Ahe	te/ Du	ne	a	bè-yó	sukuu	a.
afternoon	in/ Monday	FOC	3SG	FUT-go	school	TP

‘It is in the afternoon/on Monday that he/she will go to school’.

Finally in example (8a), the interrogative word *fene* is used in the focus slot to inquire about the price of an item, and (8b) provides the solicited information.

(8)a. Question

Fene	ne	wo-sò	atade	mò?
How much	FOC	2SG-PST.buy	dress	DEM.PROX

‘How much did you buy this dress?’

b. Answer

Sidi	ɔɛɛ	ne	me	n-sò	atade	mò	a.
cedi	hundred	FOC	1SG	PST.buy	dress	DEM.PROX	TP

‘It was for a hundred cedis that I bought this dress’.

The interrogative word *fene* can also receive focus marking to enquire about the quantity of an item as demonstrated in (9a).

(9)a. Question

E-wure	fene	ne	wo	n-sò?
PL-book	how many	FOC	2SG	PST-buy

‘How many books did you buy?’

b. Answer

E-wure	sa	ne	me	n-sò	a.
PL-book	three	FOC	1SG	PST-buy	TP

‘It was three books that I bought’.

Focused constituent interrogatives are more emphatic than other types of constituent interrogatives that function in Lete (Akrofi Ansah, 2009). There are some socio-cultural constraints on the use of focused interrogatives: social status and age. A speaker who has a lower social status is not expected to use the focused structure when speaking to someone of a higher social status. With regards to age constraints, it is considered rude if a child uses focused interrogatives structures when addressing an adult. An adult on the other hand, is at liberty to use the focused structure when addressing a child. This is to say that where status superiority is assumed in a speech situation, speakers of a higher social status have the choice of using focused constituent interrogatives whereas speakers of a lower social status use other constituent interrogative types. However, where no superiority is assumed and there is no age difference, the only motivation for the use of focused constituent interrogatives remains emphasis.

6. CONCLUSION

Focused constituent interrogatives constitute a sub-class of constituent interrogatives in Lete. Generally, the construction of constituent questions involves the use WH-words or interrogative words. In the formation of Lete focused constituent interrogatives, the question word or phrase is placed in focus position which is clause-initial, and followed by the focus marker, *ne*. Focused constituent interrogatives are more emphatic than other types of constituent interrogatives. The use of focused constituent interrogatives is constrained by socio-cultural norms of the Lete community.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DEF.	definite
DEM.PROX.	proximal demonstrative pronoun
FOC.	focus
FUT.	Future
IW	interrogative word
IPH.	interrogative phrase
PL.	plural
PRES.	present
PROG.	progressive
PST.	past
SG.	singular
TP	terminal particle
1SG.	1 st person singular pronoun
2SG.	2 nd person singular pronoun
3SG.	3 rd person singular pronoun.

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