

The Structure of Interrogatives in N̄swasə and its contribution to literacy activities in the community

Nkwame M. Quinta

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LINCOM GmbH
Hansjakobstr. 127a
D-81825 Muenchen

contact@lincom.eu
www.lincom.eu
webshop: www.lincom-shop.eu

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The Structure of Interrogatives in Ñswasò and its contribution to literacy activities in the community.

Nkwame M. Quinta

Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy

Abstract

This chapter focuses on the structure of interrogatives in the Ñswasò language and shows how a knowledge of such structural construction can contribute towards ongoing literacy activities in the language. It has as main focus to identify the different kinds of question types that exists in this language and also to investigate the basic structure of questions in Ñswasò. It also seeks to see how information gathered about the structure of questions can help literacy experts in the teaching/learning process of the language which will in turn lead to the development of the language. This search uses the secondary source of data collection and adopts the already existing writing system put in place by CABTAL for this language. Given the importance of interrogatives in language acquisition, development, and most importantly learning, we have looked at interrogatives broadly. Knowing that our main query is to see how an aspect of language studies can inherently lead to the development of a language, a careful exploration of almost all the possible ways in which a question can be asked have been put in place with the hope that; this elaboration will help us arrive at a reasonable conclusion.

Introduction:

Interrogatives often refer to specific words used in questioning someone (WH questions, Yes/No questions, Choice questions, Tag questions) and sometimes they can be whole phrases expressing a thought which demands an answer or even sentence(s) (Indirect questions/embedded questions, rhetorical questions). Questions generally serve two purposes: firstly, questions help someone in gathering valuable information and secondly, they serves as a means of transmitting vital information. Questions on the other hand can also help people develop their cognitive skills, communication skills and even their performance ability in the target language. Interrogatives is an aspect of communication which cuts across our daily lives, and as such an understanding of such structural constructions can enable anyone view the world from different angles and to a greater extent understand certain life principles, concepts, ideologies, his/her environment if well articulated. This chapter therefore deliberates on identifying question words in Ñswásó, understanding the basic structure of interrogatives in Ñswásó and appreciating how this study can contribute to ongoing literacy activities in the community.

1. The Ñswasò language

The Ñswásó language is a Bantu language spoken by the Basossi people of the South West Region of Cameroon. According to Ethnologue, Ñswásó is a stable indigeneous language of Cameroon which belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. This language is said to have less than ten thousand (10.000) speakers and it is considered endangered especially because it is dominantly used in informal settings like village markets, cultural meetings, but rarely at home (personal interview with the Ñswásó Bible translation team). To the Joshua project, Ñswásó has exactly nine thousand four hundred (9.400) speakers and has the ethnic code NAB57K. It is located in Kupe-Mwanenguba division, Central Nguti Subdivision, Nguti town, and East and South (Ethnologue 2016). To the Global Recording Listing, Ñswásò has the dialect code 7842 while Ethnologue listings gives Ñswásó the code BSI. Following the discussions

with speakers of the language (Bible translation team), there exists just two varieties of the language which are Kwè and Mbà with very minimal differences occurring at the level of the pronunciation/phonemes. The Ñswásó language is spoken in eleven (11) different villages which include; Babensi I, Babensi II, Ekita, Ediengoh, Ofrikpabi, Ekenge, Mboka, New Konye, Mungo Ndoa, Bombe Konye and Ntale.

1.1. The language situation of Ñswásó

The Ñswásó language is spoken along the road right up to the hinterlands but the search for greener pasture and white collar jobs has caused great movements of these speakers to different communities that are well developed. Since this land is also fertile and favours agricultural practices leading to bountiful yields, the land has also attracted strangers of different cultural and language backgrounds to seek their livelihood. A greater part of the youthful population is out of the villages while there is an influx of strangers occupying these villages, consequently leading to high rate of inter marriage with speakers of different languages. With the high rate of inter-marriage between Ñswásó speakers and speakers of other languages such as Akoose, Mbo, Oroko and even from different regions of the country, it is difficult to fully explore the usage of this language at home. As a result, most of the offsprings of such unions get mixed inbetween which language to fully comprehend and perform in. Such children end up picking patches of this language either in cultural gatherings for those who are even allowed to participate in or are interested in, while others can get it from elderly conversations and/or village markets. With the embrace of modernity and digitalisation, many parents prefer teaching their children the English language and for most of these parents, they have moved to urban settings which are very cosmopolitan in nature for a better life and exposure to wider economic opportunities. Very few go to the villages during holidays or events for the fear of witchcraft and all this has made learning of the language by the younger generation difficult. With constant contact of the Ñswásó speakers with speakers of different languages in these cosmopolitan cities, they too are not very fluent in the Ñswásó language as most of them rarely make use of the language. With all this, the Ñswásó language is gradually loosing its efficacy and one is right to say it is endangered.

1.2. Ongoing activities towards the development of the Ñswásó language

Very little work has been done on the Ñswásó language. According to Peoplesawa.com (<https://peoplesawa.com> on the 8/06/2025), it examines a compilation of works done by SIL International 1996 and Atlas Linguistic du Cameroun 1983 where they did a linguistic description of different Cameroonian languages including Ñswásó. They classified Ñswásó with the code BSI and gave dialectal variations such as Basosi, Basossi, Sosi, Nswase, Nswose, swose and Ngen, following their linhuistic classification, Ñswásó can be calssified as Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Sothern Narrow Bantu, Northwest, A, Lundu-Balong (A10), Ngoe – related to Mbo.

On the other hand, the Joshua project (<https://joshuaproject.net> on 18/06/2025) gives insight on the population size of Ñswásó speakers (9.400), religious status (predominantly christians

74%), ethnicity and geography of the community. This project gives insight about the views of Ethnologue and Global Recordings listings in relation to Ñswásó language classification and categorisation.

Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL) on their part have carried out primary studies and documentation on the Ñswásó language. In their works, they have been able to establish a writing system for the language, carry out word collection exercises aimed at establishing a bilingual dictionary for the language, on-going analysis to understand and establish a grammar for the language and an on-going translation of the New Testament of the Bible in the Ñswásó language.

From the above, it is evident work still needs to be done in this language, thus this study will just be an addition to what has already been put down and will also serve as resource for more work in the future.

2. Methodology

The primary source of data collection is the main method used in gathering data for this work. The study further employs the secondary sources of data collection too and personal interviews in getting more formation about the language situation and related review on available literature on the language. The writing style used throughout this work is that which has been developed for the Ñswásó language by the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy n (CABTAL) with all the tones marked on vowels and syllabic nasals. Every data is presented in three phases; Ñswásó translation, interlinearised version and the English gloss. This has been

3. Data presentation and examination

Below, we shall be looking at different question types that exists in the Ñswásó language, thereafter analysing its structure and seeing how it can be viable towards the development of the language especially in the domain of literacy. Below are different kinds of questions and the structure in which they appear in Ñswásó.

3.1. Yes/No Question

This kind of questions demands either a yes or a no answer. It is also known as a polar question and can be answered by either an affirmative or negative. Yes/no questions are closed ended questions and in English they are typically formed by placing either an auxiliary or modal verb at the beginning of a sentence/infront of the subject,

- i. Wò ó kè éśàkí à pè?
You AM go dance INF come
Are you coming to the party?
- ii. Wò ó mà bínđyó àjàm?
You AM PT food cook
Have you finished cooking?
- iii. Ósò átí ó múnyàŋ?

Osoh Aux AM brother

Is Osoh your brother?

iv. Wò ó kè ápè á ndá' jũ?

You AM go come Loc. house die

Will you come for the funeral?

v. Wò ó dǎ kwòn?

You AM like beans

Do you like koki?

From the above in Ñswásó, the main verbs are always in the simple present tense and there is usually an associative marker (AM) between the pronoun occupying the subject position and the verb phrase carrying the question word. In some of the yes/no questions, Ñswásó makes use of the serial verb construction and it still works as a yes/no question in the language without necessarily introducing a question word. The case of Ñswásó in a yes/no question is similar to that of Bafut as discussed by Mfonyam (2023) where intonation plays a role at word boundary in such questions. In such question structures, the Ñswásó language makes use of a low tone at the end of the last word and this low tone can serve as a question marker. Ñswásó makes use of the super imposed intonation on a word to give a different intonation, which is in alignment with Downing and Rialland (2018) findings in which they discussed the effect of down drift, final boundary tones in the intonation of African languages. Hyman and Monaka (2011) discuss such phenomenon as an accommodation principle which highlights the effect on tones and intonation on different syllables. All these discussions resonate with the Ñswásó yes/no question format. Therefore, Ñswásó works like other African languages where intonation plays a role on a word at word final/boundary position.

3.2. WH questions

These are questions that start with a WH word and are used to demand a specific information. WH questions are open-ended questions and they demand a detailed response. Most often, WH questions begin with a WH word but “how” has been included in the list of WH questions because it too is open-ended and demands a detailed response.

i. Jǎ wò ó bwònè ènígè?

What you AM do Cont. today

What are you doing today

ii. Nhǎ nhò jǎ wò ó pèní

Which time PT you AM come PT

When did you arrive

iii. Bó ó tí bà' nzé

They AM Aux people who

Who are they

iv. Hǎ yò ndá' étí?

Where your house Aux.

Where is your house

- v. Jâ wò ó hě a kyè ébùyà
Why you AM where INF go outside
Why do you want to go outside?
- vi. Jánkà nì wò
How Conj. you
How are you?

In such question types, the *wh*-question word in Ñswásó mostly comes at the beginning of the question. Yet, there are instances where the question word comes at the end of the question. This movement of *wh*-question words to either the beginning of a question (left clefting) or at the end of a question (*wh*-in-situ) can be as a result of either changing the question type, being more focal or even as a result of the language structure in question. In some languages just like Ñswásó, *wh*-questions experience movement which is mostly partial *wh*-movement (Fanselow 2017), or sometimes relativization. The case of Ñswásó is complete *wh*-question movement (*wh*-question words being left-clefted) and also *wh*-in-situ. The most dominant movement strategy for *wh*-questions in Ñswásó is left-clefting but in a situation where the speaker wants to emphasize on focus, he makes use of *wh*-in-situ; a situation that changes the question structure from a *wh*-question to an echo question. The interesting thing about the Ñswásó language is that an echo question can be formed with only one *wh*-question word “who” and an attempt to try this with other question words in the language renders the construction ungrammatical.

3.3. Choice questions

Choice questions are commonly known as multiple choice questions (MCQs). These are questions that presents the listener with options to select from as a response. Often, choice questions consist of a stem and alternatives to choose from. Choice questions help in assessing broad contents and are less time consuming since they do not warrant any explanation.

- i. Wò ó kè á dīj nì à kyè ébùtè ángè nì á d̄yè á ndá’
You AM go INF like Conj INF go outside or Conj INF sit Loc house
Would you like to go out or stay at home?
- ii. Wò ó dètí èsúbó ángè kwón?
You AM like fufu or beans?
Do you prefer fufu or koki?
- iii. Íyó ábá’ ĩ wò ó dījí àtì kábà ángè mkpèn
Your cloth Poss. You AM like Aux kaba or skirt
Is your favourite dress kaba or skirt?

Choice questions in Ñswásó always carry a choice word which gives the respondent the opportunity to choose from the options presented. This way of asking questions limits the respondents response and helps save time for further activities. In Ñswásó, when asking choice

questions, there is often the introduction of an associative marker (AM) that comes inbetween the pronoun and the verb. It is this marker that helps link the subject pronoun to the verb as a way of showing subject-verb agreement. Choice questions in Ñswásó are a bit different from other question types in this language in that the intonation pattern where every last vowel of the last word carries a low tone does not apply here. This is because the usage of the choice word already signals that a response is needed and as such the last words carry their original tone as they would be in isolation.

3.4. Tag questions

These are short interrogative phrases attached to the end of a statement to request agreement or disagreement. In English, tag questions generally consist of an auxiliary verb and a pronoun. Tag questions are paired with either a positive or negative tag depending on the preceding statement. That is to say, a positive statement is paired with a negative tag and vice versa.

- i. Wò ó kà à pò nì sí; wò ó ní á kyó à pò
 You AM go INF come Conj us; you AM Neg INF go INF come
 You are coming with us, aren't you
- ii. Mò àpwòlè Ñswásó àyàm, àpwólèkè?
 Her can Ñswásó speak, can Neg
 She can speak Ñswásó, can't she?
- iii. Mbù éjwákó à pò, éjwǎ?
 Rain fall Neg INF come, fall
 It is not still raining, is it?

Tag questions in Ñswásó follow the common conventional rule of positive statement, negative tag and vice versa. The negation in the tag is explicitly spelt out in Ñswásó and not embedded like in other languages. In Ñswásó, tag questions function as discourse markers because they help to direct the line of discussion and even usher in an interlocutor in a conversation. Question tags in Ñswásó do not just serve these two purposes but also help the speaker emphasize his point of view. This is in line with Kimps (2018) stance where question tags are seen to perform several pragmatic functions. The structure of question tags in Ñswásó are largely variant in nature and still employ the intonation rule as all the words ending the tag question carry a low tone. Therefore, it is safe to say Ñswásó makes use of two strategies in the formulation of tag questions: intonation and discourse markers and all these strategies are visible in the question tag section.

3.5. Indirect/Embedded questions

This is a polite and more formal way of asking a question. Indirect/embedded questions often carry a question within a phrase or statement. Most often, in asking indirect/embedded questions, there is always an introductory phrase that helps the speaker usher in the question and also draws the attention to what that speaker is saying. When the basic order of an indirect question is changed, the whole question changes from an indirect question to a direct question.

- i. Wò ó pwòlè mì à hòkí ábù í ntwòm ntí

You AM can me INF tell place Ass.M. lantrine Aux
 Can you tell me where the restroom is?

- ii. Já ñ kàntè nzó sí èpwòlè à kyè àbú mĩm mbí î kwá' nkwè nà
 PT I think if we can INF go place mimbo palm AM. new night this
 I was wondering if we should go to that new palmwine joint tonight
- iii. Sí ékè à díŋ à bí nzó wò ó hò à nă á ndápá nkwè nà
 We FUT INF like INF know if you AM want INF sleep LOC house night this
 We would like to know if you want to sleep over at the house tonight

From the above observation, indirect and embedded questions in Ñswásó are often asked with the introduction of a polite phrase or word before being followed by the question clause. It is interesting to know that, Ñswásó can structure indirect questions by just inverting the order of words in a direct question to have the desired outcome. Embedded questions on their part carry embedding verbs which are also followed by an embedded clause. When we closely look at the structure of embedded questions in Ñswásó, we realise that the embedded clause which serves as the embedded question section serves as the compliment of the main verb in the polite phrase. This phenomenon is not particular only to Ñswásó but also noticed in other languages as discussed by Biloa (2013). Ñswásó embedded questions make use of an embedded marker which also serves as a complimentizer when structuring embedded questions in this language. When we look at the Muyang language as illustrated by Bebey (2025), we notice that Muyang also employs this strategy of using an embedded marker/complimentizer like Ñswásó. What is note taking is that, Ñswásó will use just a single embedded marker/complimentizer in an embedded question while some languages will make use of several complimentizers in an embedded question.

3.6. Rhetorical questions

This is a question asked mainly when someone wants to make a point rather than eliciting an answer. Rhetorical questions help seek attention, ignite thought, lay emphasis on an opinion, or even persuade the listeners ideology. Rhetorical questions do not necessarily demand a verbal response but drive home the speaker's thought to the listener.

- i. Nimbó sí éwòŋè nzè twòpè. Jě sí èpwólá àbwòn?
 True we have Neg road else. What we can do
 We really have no choice. What else can we do?
- ii. Nzé já à bí bá tyèni mĩ na ntwòmpi agwétó
 Who PT INF know Comp. thing this plenty strong
 Who knew this process was so complicated
- iii. Èhě ètwá' ewá' sínè éhè á jò ní bǎn óbi ó hwè?
 What kind language we want INF leave Conj children whose AM come
 What kind of language do we want to leave for the next generation?

In N̄swásó, the rhetorical question functions like an assertion used to express an assumption made by the speaker or to lay emphasis on the speaker's point of view. Just like direct and embedded questions in N̄swásó, rhetorical questions can also be seen as a politeness strategy where the speaker tries to convey an information by making his stance clear yet, does not want to act like he is being imposing. This strategy is not peculiar only to N̄swásó but also exist in many other languages; where rhetorical questions are seen as an off-record politeness strategy (Neyole et al 2021). From the way rhetorical questions are structured in N̄swásó, it is clear that even if the respondent has to give an answer to such question, his/her answer is already predominated by the speaker's view point. Biezma and Rawlins (2017) say the interlocutors response in a rhetorical question are often an extraction of the speaker's commitment from a particular stance. When it comes to the intonation pattern, rhetorical questions in N̄swásó follow the same tonal pattern (low tone on last word) that applies to all question types in the language.

4. Overview

Haven presented and examined the data of different kinds of question structures in N̄swásó, there are three main things to note;

- a. *Intonation*: the N̄swásó intonation pattern for all question types is the same. Irrespective of the type of question being asked, it is necessary to note that the last vowel of the last word in a question will always carry a low tone. This is to say, when asking questions in N̄swásó, to mark that distinction from a statement, there must be a low tone present on the last tone bearing unit of the last word. Although there exist question words in some question types, a different kind of intonation would not show that the speaker is actually asking a question.
- b. *Verb form*: the predominant form that verbs in a question structure in N̄swásó take is the simple present tense. It is true there are instances where the verb can be in the past tense but even in such instance, there would be a distinct tense marker which will be a separate morpheme that is not superimposed on the verb form. Meaning, verbs in question structures will always appear in the simple present tense in N̄swásó irrespective of the existence of different markers present.
- c. *Basic structure*: the basic structure of questions in N̄swásó is similar to that of the English language where the subject is most often followed by the verb. Question structures in N̄swásó appear like statements but with the right intonation and certain phrases or words added to these statements, it changes its form from a statement to a question.

Having the above in mind, it is easy to formulate different kinds of questions in N̄swásó which makes teaching/learning easy and even help in other language development goals.

5. Contribution to ongoing literacy activities in the community

Most often, when the subject of literacy is being talked about, many understand it from the stand point of the ability to know how to read and write (UNESCO 2017). Tyner (1998) sees

literacy as the ability to encode and decode information between written symbols and sounds. Being more specific, Vlieghe (2015) says literacy is the ability to understand the relationship between sounds and written words such that one may read, say and even understand them. From all the above definitions, literacy entails ability, reading, writing and understanding. But, a further look at literacy shows that it is not just limited to reading and writing but it encompasses aspects of our daily lives which entails effective communication. Everything that enables someone to make sense out of an information is considered an act of literacy. In essence, what we are saying is that literacy activities is so broad that it serves as a tool for meaningful engagement within communities and the society at large. A good literacy has the ability to breakdown certain barriers (economic, cultural, social, etc) between individuals and communities. With an effective literacy (functional literacy) put in place, some goals can be effectively achieved, language development initiatives can be easily arrived at and subsequently involvement in other societal activities is possible. Following Saha (2006) and Zimmerman et al (2018), we realise that access to education significantly contributes to an extended life span as compared to those with limited or no education. This is to say, literacy will enable anyone who is interested in knowledge to be able to identify, understand, interpret, create and even communicate a need which will lead to a possible solution.

In the Basossi community, most of the literacy activities that have been carried out so far is geared at developing the Ñswásó language for the sole purpose of understanding the written word of God (Bible in Ñswásó). Just like we mentioned above, literacy entails more than that. Reason why literacy today ranges from media literacy, digital literacy, health literacy, computer literacy, financial literacy, etc. For one to be able to break all these barriers of the various domains of literacy, he/she must be able to ask vital questions which will enable him have the right information needed. An understanding of question structure can serve as a fundamental building block for empowerment, critical thinking, foster socio-economic development and why not improve health outcomes. Since the Basossi community already has a writing system for the Ñswásó language, it is advisable for this community to establish classes not just for the teaching of knowing how to read the language but also exploring several aspects of language development and why not cut accross domains such as agriculture (which is the main source of livelihood amongst the Ñswásó people), health education (which the Ñswásó people especially those in the hinterland have limited access to because of proximity), formal education (because findings show that children who are knowledgeable in their mother tongue perform better in academics than those who are not knowledgeable in their mother tongue), etc. With the right questions put in place a good survey can be carried out and the desired information of the areas of need can be easily identified amongst the Ñswásó people which will greatly contribute not just to their language development efforts but also to their overall wellbeing.

Conclusion

Haven understood that structure entails organisation and interrogatives consists of using words that demand an answer, the structure of interrogatives therefore implies an analysis of the way in which different kinds of questions in the Ñswásó language are organised following the natural

grammar of its native speakers. Just like English where there exist different question words and types, N̄swásó too has several question words and types with its unique structure. N̄swásó being a tonal language like many other Bantu languages makes use of intonation strategies in question structure and formation. The organisation of these words encompasses various levels ranging from phonology to pragmatics. An understanding of such structure eases both language production and comprehension, which can serve as a crucial tool for language development. From what we have seen so far, N̄swásó has a specific language structure which is similar to that of the English language and many other Bantu languages. With this finding, it is comforting to know that such outcomes can greatly contribute to developmental initiatives in several domains in the future within the Basossi community. Our hope is that, this work serves as a stepping stone for more meaningful research in the future.

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