



Syntax of Wh in Mendriq

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ABSTRACT

Mendriq is one of the Austroasiatic stocks spoken by only 300 people who populated the small part of South East Kelantan. It is an endangered language. These people dwell in an area called Pos Kuala Lah. This article analyses the wh-question words, *naken* and *luk ai*, in Mendriq language using the Minimalist framework. 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-question words. We found out that the nature of these question words 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 found out that C (Complementizer) has a strong [uw] 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 (complementizer phrase) is attended by *Op* (empty category) in order to check the strong uninterpretable feature (uw) at C' (komplementizer bar). At the same time, the presence of *Op* prevents the movement of the question words to the scope position. We hope that this article will contribute to both the theoretical syntax and the preservation of an endangered language.

Keywords: Syntax, wh, Mendriq, Austroasiatic, endangered language, Malaysia, features

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of a question word in a sentence changes a particular sentence into an interrogative sentence, which can be further divided into two types; open-ended and close-ended question. The type of interrogative sentences can be easily identified because each type of sentence

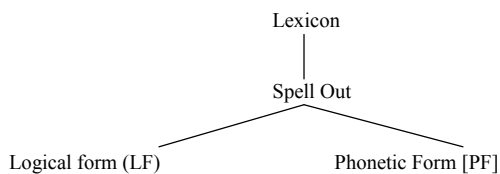
requires a different answer. A close-ended question only requires ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer, while an open-ended question requires its answer to be in at least a few words which can consist of various types of phrase. The open-ended question is an interesting scope to be studied as the wh question words can be divided into wh-argument or non-wh-argument words, in which the former is a wh-question word that occupies a complement position, while the latter occupies an adjunct position. Mendriq, one of the languages in the Austroasiatic family, has both the argument and non argument wh-question words. It is a SOV language (Fazal Mohamed Sultan, 2009b, p. 48). This paper is an attempt to study and analyze the wh-question words of Mendriq. This study focused on the wh-argument only due to data that are available at this moment. The wh- arguments in this language are *naken* ‘who’ and *luk ai* or *alow* ‘what’. These wh-question words were analyzed using the Minimalist Programme to clarify whether the inherent nature of these wh-question words are *in situ* or moved wh- words. This is due to the nature of Austroasiatic languages which have displayed both these phenomena. Therefore, we hope that this paper will try to clarify the differences that are displayed by these wh-words in Mendriq through a theoretical analysis.

MINIMALIST PROGRAMME

Minimalist Programme (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 determine the Phonetic Form (PF) and the Logical Form (LF), where the meaning of a sentence is 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 the features that can only be interpreted phonetically, while 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 meets

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 is 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 grammatical features); thirdly, after the spell out, phonetic and semantic features are processed separately. The phonetic features are processed by PF operations that subsequently produce PF representations, while the semantic features are processed by LF operations that subsequently produce LF representations. This process is summarized as below:



Naken 'who'

Mendriq language which is spoken by the aborigines residing in Kuala Lah, Kelantan, and it is from the Negrito stock. The base structure of this particular language is similar to the other Negrito languages such as Kensiu, Bateq, etc. (Fazal Mohamed

Mohamed Sultan, 2009b, p. 50; 2009c, p. 160). Interestingly enough, it has several question words which are similar to the Malay language like *apa* 'what' and *siapa* 'who'. The question words in Mendriq language are *naken* 'who' and *luk ai or alow* 'what'. In general, the question words may exist at the beginning as well as at the end of the interrogative sentence as in the Northern dialect of the Malay language (Fazal Mohamed Sultan, 2009a). The usage of the question word *naken* 'who' is exemplified in (3):

- (3) (a) **Naken** bek¹?
 who you
 'Who are you?'
 (b) Bek **naken**?
 you who
 'Who are you?'
 (c) **Naken** the?
 who this
 'Who is this?'
 (d) Bek teh **naken**?
 You this who
 'Who is this?'
 (e) **Naken** ton?
 Who that
 'Who is that?'
 (f) **Naken** bek bentek?
 who you married
 'Who did you marry?'
 (g) **Naken** saket?
 who sick
 'Who is sick?'

¹Sometimes *bek* can be represented as *bem*. This article will not discuss the differences.

- (h) Bek bekchip lo **naken**?
 you went with who
 You went with whom?
- (i) **Naken** meyen la hep tun?
 who came at out there
 Who is out there?

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 (4):

- (4) (a) Bek **naken**?
 you who
 ‘Who are you?’
- (b) Bek bentek **naken**?
 You married who
 Who did you married??
- (c) Kenmoh teh **naken**²?
 Name you who?
 What is your name?
- (d) Bek anak **naken**?
 you son who
 Whose son are you??
- (e) 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*.

²Even though the translation of *naken* is what in this sentence but the speaker refer to this *naken* as who.

Hence, the question word *naken* in Mendriq is claimed as *in situ*. This type of behaviour is not only obvious in the Austroasiatic languages such as Kensiu, Bateq and other languages of the aborigines in Malaysia but it can also be observed in other languages in the Austronesia family such as Malay and Indonesia.

This phenomenon as discussed is not only demonstrated by *naken* which is questioning the object position but it is also apparent in *naken*, which is questioning the subject position as in (5) below:

- (5) (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 similar all the time. If *naken* questions object position, it occupies the object position, but if it questions the subject position, it occupies the subject position. This proves that *naken* has the *in situ* phenomenon. The intriguing question that has begun to surface is whether this phenomenon exists for all the languages in Austroasiatic. This question will be left unanswered and hopefully be reserved as a subject for further studies as this paper only concentrates on the study the syntax of Mendriq’s question words.

However, the nature of *in situ* in this language is not constant. Data on Mendriq 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 (3) are renumbered as in (6):

- (6) (a) **Naken** bek?
 who you
 Who are you?
- (b) **Naken** the?
 who this
 Who is this?
- (c) **Naken** ton?
 who that
 Who is that?
- (d) **Naken** bek bentek?
 who you married
 Who did you marry?

The position of the question words in (6) shows that the question words which question the object position are at the initial position now. This is the new position after the movement. This position displays a phenomenon, as opposed to (4), where *naken* does not move and is known as *in-situ*. One conclusion that can be made 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 they are already in the subject position. Nonetheless, there will not be any discussion on the question word in the subject position. Hence, it is claimed that question word *naken* is free. Moving on is the discussion about the position of another question word which is *luk ai* ‘what’.

LUK AI OR ALOW ‘WHAT’

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, this question word is known as an argument question (Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan, 2011). From the discussion above, we are aware that the question word that questions the subject position is not appealing in this SVO language due to the nature of movements or the *in situ* cannot be proven in this case (Haegeman, 1994, p. 239). Therefore, the question words like *luk ai* or *alow* which question the object position are discussed here. In order to facilitate the discussion, the question words will be divided into two parts as in (7) and (8):

- (7) *luk ai*:
- (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?

- (8) *alow*:
- (a) Bem dike **alow** key the?
You(sing) do what in here
Why did you come here?
 - (b) Bek carjack **alow**?
you work what
What is your occupation?
 - (c) **Alow** bek kerjak?
what you work
What is your occupation?
 - (d) **Alow** the?
what this
What is this?
 - (e) Becew badai **alow** bem dik?
to here what you do
What do you do here?

Both these argument questions have the same properties. In particular, both characterize *in-situ* (7a-b; 8a-b) and movement (7c-d; 8c-e) simultaneously. Meanwhile, the interrogative sentences in 7a-7d; 8a-e demonstrate that these question words, *luk ai* and *alow* can question the object position in a sentence. Nonetheless, it is quite interesting when (8b-c) 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 the data (7c-d) that portray 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* is analysed using the Minimalist programme.

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 do not necessarily stay in the object position. Instead, they can also move to the 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 phenomena were not influenced by any word that follows or precedes the question words, as has been discussed in sub-sections 4 and 5. As a mean to ease the discussion, the *in situ* phenomena are analyzed using the syntactic analysis. Therefore, the question of sentence as in (6d) is repeated as (9):

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

The syntactic structure of question sentence (9) is illustrated in (10)³.

Bentek is a transitive verb that is also known as a two-argument verb. Both arguments of the verb have been filled

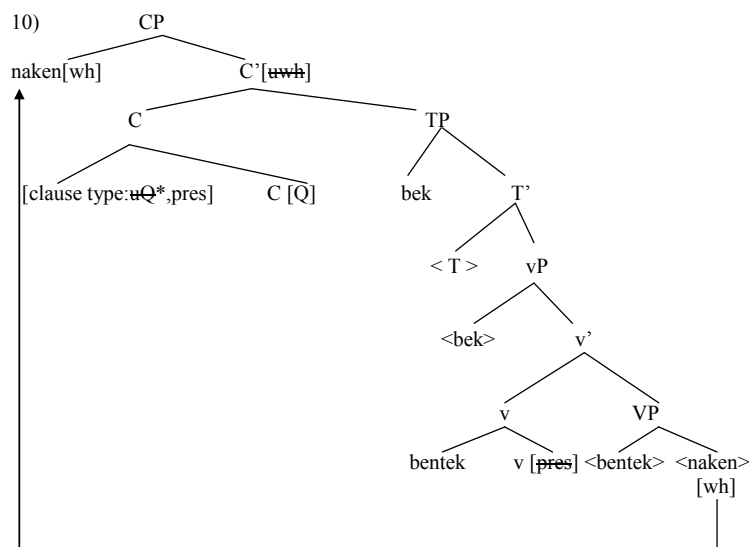
³CP(for Complementizer Phrase), C'(for Complementizer bar), C(for Complementizer), TP(for Tense Phrase), T'(for Tense bar), T(for Tense), vP(for small verb Phrase), v'(for small verb bar), v(for small verb), VP(for Verb Phrase).

in (9). 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, p. 341) claims 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 the feature [uclause type] on T is assessed as [INTERROGATIVE], 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. In the structure given in (10), the T node has an uninterpretable [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 (9) is a interrogative sentence. Therefore, we proposed that the C in (10) would have a strong but uninterpretable [uwh] feature. Hence, these features must be checked. However, a strong feature can only be checked locally according to Adger (2004, p. 179). In order to achieve locality, the feature [uwh] needs to be moved to the C ' position, as in (10). This forces *naken* to move to Spec CP in order to check the uninterpretable feature [uwh] feature. All the processes of feature checking take place before Spell out. Eventually, this sentence is marked as grammatical. Therefore, the Minimalist Programme has successfully analyzed the movement of the wh-question in Mendriq.

However, this is not really highlighted by this language. Instead, this language has the option of not moving the question word

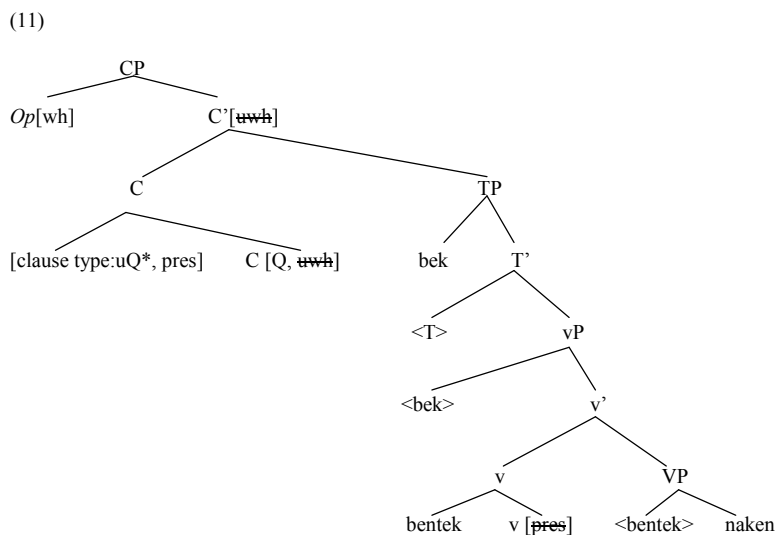


to the scope position. This clearly illustrates that this question word is *in situ*, as in (6d). However, this phenomenon causes the uninterpretable [uwh] not to be checked before Spell Out. Thus, this sentence should be marked as ungrammatical because the sentence crashes at LF. Instead, the sentence is acceptable to the native speakers of Mendriq. In order to solve this problem, we proposed that (4b) be marked, as in (11).

(10) and (11) explain why *naken* can stay *in situ* or move to the initial position. However, we need to solve the uninterpretable feature [uwh] on C. For this reason, we adopted Adger’s analysis (2004, p. 354), in which it is claimed that there is an empty operator *Op* on the Spec CP for yes/no question. Therefore, we prolonged this analysis on the wh-questions of Mendriq. This is important because we need to fulfil the nature of a strong uninterpretable feature which requires a 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 in *naken* to stay *in situ*. We also proposed 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 uninterpretable features [uwh] to be checked before Spell Out and a strong full interpretation can be obtained, as in (11).

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. Otherwise, this sentence will crash because the feature [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 remains *in situ*. This phenomenon can be



observed in the northern dialect of Malay language (Asmah Haji Omar, 1986; Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan, 2009d, p. 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 illustrates that both these question forms have two properties, namely, *in-situ* and movement. These properties can be seen below:

- (12) Bem dik **alow**?
 you do what
 What did you do?
- (13) **Alow** bem dik?
 what you do
 What did you do?

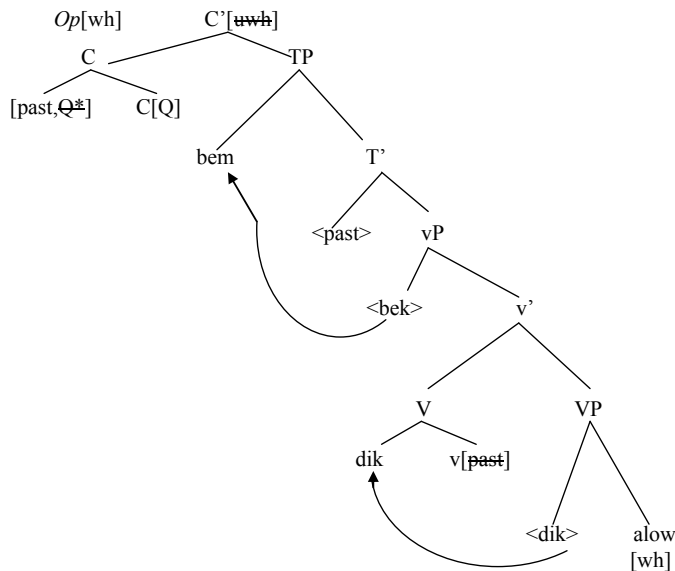
Based on the discussions above, the question word *alow* in (12) can be marked as (14), while the interrogative sentence in

(13) is indicated in (15).

The structure in (14) shows the presence of an uninterpretable feature [uw] that requires local checking. However, the question word does not move and merge to Spec CP in order to check the uninterpretable feature at C' CP. Nevertheless, this sentence is still marked as grammatical because it is saved by the presence of an empty operator [*op*]. This analysis is akin with the structure in (11). The next sentence (13) shows that there is a movement, which is marked as (15).

The structure in (15) is the same as the structure in (10). 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 uninterpretable feature [uw] is strong but its strength does

(14) CP

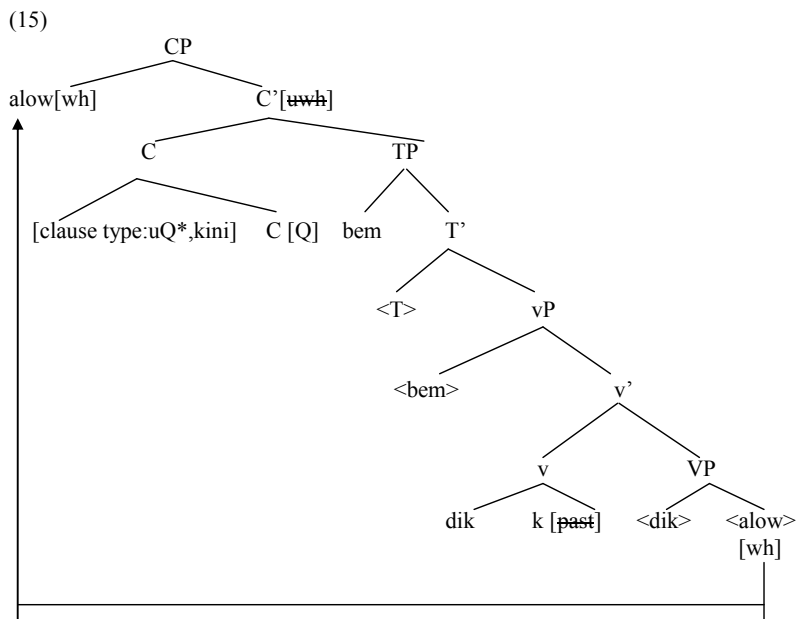


not require the movement of the question due to the presence of *Op*. This claim is parallel with Chomsky's claim which suggests that the uninterpretable feature [uwh] is universally strong. However, we argued that the movement of wh-question to the scope position is due to the lack of *Op*, as this causes the question word to move to the scope position. Meanwhile, 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 is able to fulfil the *in situ* or movement requirement. We also claim that *Op* does as well possess strength. The strength of *Op* is rather weak in this language. This particular weakness contributes to the optionality of movement to the scope position in order to fulfil the strong uninterpretable feature to be checked before the spell out. This is deemed as a

comprehensive analysis on all the question words in the Mendriq language.

CONCLUSION

This article has analyzed the argument question words *naken*, *alow* and *lok ai* and the analysis is divided into two different aspects; 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 found out that the nature of these question words, being *in situ* or moved, is not influenced by any other word in their respective sentences. Therefore, a syntactic analysis is the best analysis to explain these complex phenomena. The syntactic analysis revealed 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 uninterpretable feature (uw_h) 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 particular 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 uninterpretable feature before the 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 uninterpretable features before the spell out in order to indicate that an interrogative sentence is grammatical.

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