Question Formation in the English Language

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Literature Review

Contemporary English can hardly be imagined without questions as they constitute an integral part of communication. Although some basic grammar books state that the primary use of questions is inquiry of information, their pragmatic scope is much broader and can include such communicative intentions as requests, suggestions, emphasis, offers, etc. (Eastwood, 2002). Question formation seems to be a subconscious automatic process for native speakers as children acquire basic principles of question formation in the process of natural adoption of language skills. However, this process is not flawless and often requires care and guidance on behalf of parents and teachers. Inversion and the use of auxiliary words may be a bit complicated for little children who learn to form correct grammatical structures through practice. Nevertheless, this process may be not so easy for ESL learners. Questions have undergone a long process of evolution in terms of formation since the times of Old English period, coming from the use of rising intonation through simple inversion in Middle English to the current use of auxiliaries and inversion in Modern English. The current paper presents a brief literature review of several sources relating to the issue of question formation in the English language, including general overview of the issue as presented in the contemporary grammar book, historical perspective of the issue, and some research articles pertaining to the question under consideration.

Different scholars may give different names to different types of questions, but the main classification divides them into the following two: yes/no questions and wh-questions (Eastwood, 2002). Pragmatically, there is also distinguished a peculiar type of questions that does not require an answer and is used to emphasize some idea or express some emotional tone. Such questions are called rhetorical questions and are often employed as an emphatic stylistic device with a view to reaching a wide range of communicative intentions. Wh-

question are sometimes referred to as special questions and they always start with a question word. The latter may be deemed an adverbial, an object, a subject, or a complement in the sentence (Eastwood, 2002). In general, grammarians distinguish nine question words, including "who, whom, what, which, whose, where, when, why and how" (Eastwood, 2002). In addition to that, various question phrases may be created with the help of such question words as what and how. There are also alternative questions or questions with 'or' (Eastwood, 2002). A special type of questions is indirect ones when the question is implicitly integrated into a statement. On the whole, all questions but who questions to the subject are formed with the help of inversion and auxiliaries if necessary with do in various forms being the most common one. However, some questions may be put without inversion, thus having the same word order as statement, but this is possible only in informal oral communication, otherwise being regarded as a grammar mistake. Ideally, yes/no questions require a simple answer of yes or no, but this is rarely so in the real world when questions often require a much broader answer to fit the context properly. Intonation is essential for question formation as different types of questions may require different intonation patterns depending on communication intention and common use. It may range from low fall to fall-rise, depending on the type of a question, speaker, his/her communicative intention, as well as informative and emotional load of the question itself.

The issue of syntax in Old English is quite complicated from the perspective of research, especially when it comes to questions and question-answer sequences. The scope of literature devoted to this question is quite limited, which may be partially explained by the lack of empirical data for the research and partially by the structure of questions in Old English that simply resembled statements and were distinguished as inquiries only with the help of intonation. Thus, some researchers who have covered question formation and question-answer sequences in Old English include Bruce Mitchell, Udo Fries, Jespersen,

Nagucka, Charles C. Fries, Van der Meij, Sinclair, Lakoff, Bock, and some others, but they mostly cover this issue rather briefly and descriptively rather than distinguishing some generalizations and patterns of question formation. Hence, Udo Fries emphasized the importance of studying questions in conjunction with answers in Old English and points out that this is obviously a syntactical question contrary to opposite opinions of some linguists. Thus, this researchers claims that answers should "be analysed according to the way and degree they correspond to their questions" and that they "do not necessarily appear as declarative sentences, they may be questions or commands" (Fries, 1991). When studying this issue in Old English, questions should be analyzed in terms of their style, register, region of origin, and social differences (Fries, 1991). Having analyzed several Old English texts, Fries comes to the conclusion that a lot of questions begin with "Saga me…" and the subsequent word order is similar to that of a statement (Fries, 1991). Besides, in long Old English texts "semantically related questions … tend to occur next to one another" (Fries, 1991). Moreover, the author points out that there "are clear examples of requests for information, which show that the formulation of a question was no absolute necessity" (Fries, 1991). However, the majority of questions in Old English do not have any introductory phrases and do not employ auxiliaries that were introduced in Middle English, hence posing a difficulty for linguists in terms of studying their syntax and the process of their formation.

In Modern English, the auxiliary do "is required in yes-no questions, non-subject wh-questions, negative declaratives (i.e., those containing not) and in negative imperatives" (Han & Kroch, 2000). The frequency of the usage of do as auxiliary has been studied by Ellegard who has used more than 10,000 tokens for the quantitative research. Thus, do was not obligatory in early Modern English and was almost absent, at least as a persistent element, in the Middle English period (Han & Kroch, 2000). Based on the quantitative study of Ellegard, Han and Kroch come to the conclusion that "the frequency of do in negative declaratives and

in both affirmative and negative questions rises continuously until sometime after the 18th

century, do becomes obligatory in these environments" (Han & Krock, 2000). In Middle

English, questions followed a pattern of V-I-C movement and the verb often preceded the

subject (Han & Kroch, 2000). The rise of do as auxiliary in questions in the late Middle

English period is connected with the rise of peculiar English variants and the spread of

literary English variant through literary works. Besides, poets often employed do as it

facilitated creation of rhyme and rhythm, which was then borrowed into prosaic works to

become later a standard formula for creation of questions.

A peculiar type of questions that are formed without inversion and syntactically

resemble statements is called embedded or indirect questions. Such questions "occur as

subordinate clauses under a matrix verb" that may the one of "wondering, doubting, or

wondering", for instance, wonder, know, or ask (Eckardt, 2007). These matrix verbs

introduce extensional question embedding. This type of embedded questions is opposite to

the one where the subject either has a certain attitude to the implied answer or definitely

knows the correct answer, with the latter type being introduced with the help of such matrix

verbs as tell, discover, know, etc. (Eckardt, 2007). Embedded questions are introduced with

the help of certain pronouns, conjunction that, or complementizers whether and if. Previously,

it has been supposed that complementizers if and whether have different pragmatic meanings,

but the recent study by Regine Eckardt focused on syntax and pragmatics of embedded

yes/no questions proves that the difference between them is gradually vanishing. Thus, "the

current preference for whether in veridical, non-quantificational contexts is a remnant pattern

from an older…more specific difference between if and whether" (Eckardt, 2007). The author

concludes that this statement may be a bit unclear from the viewpoint of the synchronic

theory, but it is a promising field for future researchers from the perspective of the diachronic

linguistic theory.

Withal, the issue of question formation in the English language is a broad field that can be studied from various perspectives. Syntax and pragmatics of different types of questions have evolved over time, having undergone a significant transformation since the Old English period till the present times. Today, linguists mainly focus on researching the issue of question formation from the synchronic perspective, but review of relevant literature displays obvious gaps in the study of the issue from the diachronic perspective, which should be covered in the future with the help of promising linguistic researches.

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