

Content Questions in Mende
Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 6

In this talk I provide a comprehensive description and syntactic analysis of content interrogatives (“wh-questions”) in Mende, a Mande language of Sierra Leone with basic SOVX word order. This work represents the first systematic investigation of content questions in any Mande language, even those with detailed grammars available (Bambara/Bamanekan: Fofana and Traoré 2003; Vai: Welmers 1976; Lorma: Dwyer 1981).

First, I describe and analyze the three strategies that Mende uses in question formation: in-situ questions (1), full wh-movement (3), and partial wh-movement (2). When partially or fully moved, a resumptive pronoun (RP) is obligatory in argument position (*ngi*). I examine both matrix and embedded questions.

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| (1) | Mary lilo-i-lɔ kɛ Peter yɔ-ɔ male-ni / nyapo-i male-i-lɔ
Mary hope-PST-ASP C Peter who-FOC meet-PST / girl-DEF.SG meet-PST-ASP
‘Mary hoped that Peter met the girl’ ‘Who did Mary hope that Peter met?’ | In-Situ |
| (2) | yɛ-mia Mary lilo-ni kɛ Peter <i>ngi</i> male-i-lɔ
who-FOC Mary hope-PST C Peter 3SG meet-PST
‘Who did Mary hope that Peter met?’ | Full Movement |
| (3) | Mary lilo-i-lɔ kɛ yɛ-mia Peter <i>ngi</i> male-ni
Mary hope-PST-ASP C who-FOC Peter 3SG meet-PST
‘Who did Mary hope that Peter met?’ | Partial Movement |

The description of Mende that I provide contributes to the typology of partial movement broadly (Fanselow 2006), as well as Niger-Congo(Bantu languages: Zentz 2016; and Kwa: Torrence and Kandybowicz 2015). This paper presents the first description and discussion of partial movement from the Mande language family.

Second, I show that wh-words do not pattern identically. While means and manner adjuncts appear in a post-verbal position (4), *ye* ‘how’ cannot appear in a post-verbal position, nor can it appear in a focus-fronted position (Rizzi 1997). This paper therefore contributes to the understanding of cross-linguistic differences between types of wh-expressions (Rizzi 2001).

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| (4) | a. | Peter lɛ-i-lɔ nguli-i hun lɛɛɛ / a kpakpawuli-i
Peter climb-PST-LO tree-DEF-SG on slowly with ladder-DEF.SG
‘Peter climbed the tree slowly / with the ladder’ | |
| | b. | {*ye mia} Peter {ye} lɛ-ni nguli-i hun {*ye}
how FOC Peter how climb-PST tree-DEF-SG on how
‘how did Peter climb the tree?’ | |

Third, I investigate the behavior of RPs, a topic of considerable theoretical interest (Sells 1984, Schlonsky 1992, Adger and Ramchand 2005). Surprisingly, even though RPs are obligatory, they cannot amnesty island violations, perhaps the most well-known property of RPs cross-linguistically (McCloskey 2017). (5) shows that the wh-phrase cannot surface outside of the bracketed relative clause island, even with an RP (*ti*). (Relative clauses are extraposed in Mende). That is, the resumptive patterns like a trace of movement.

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| (5) | *gbɛ-nga-mia Peter nyapo-i tato-i-lɔ [i <i>ti</i> yeya-ni njopowahun]
what-PL-FOC Peter girl-DEF.SG praise-PST-ASP 3SG 3PL buy-PST market.at
‘What did Peter praise the girl that bought ___ at the market?’ |
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This paper contributes to the broader typological and theoretical understanding of wh-interrogatives cross-linguistically, specifically in regard to resumptive pronouns, (partial) wh-movement, and islandhood. This research also provides a base-line description of Mende wh-interrogatives, useful for describing, documenting, and analyzing other languages of the Mande language family.