A grammar of Nchane: A Bantoid (Beboid) language of Cameroon
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Chapter 14

Questions

Nchane interrogative constructions may be categorized into two types: polar questions (sometimes referred to as yes-no questions) and content questions. Polar questions are formed by a low tone enclitic, while content questions utilize one of several question words, most of which behave like interrogative pronouns, taking the place of the constituent being questioned. The different types of interrogative constructions, and the question element associated with them, are summarized in Table 14.1.

Tone/word	Gloss	Type of interrogative
L tone enclitic	QP	polar
lá/-lá	Q	general
yɛ̄ŋ	who	person
fànɛ̂	where	place
-mɛ̂:	how.many	number
nɛ̂:	how	manner/quantity

Table 14.1 Summary of Nchane question types.

Section 14.1 describes polar questions, which also includes a short description of tag questions, a subtype of polar question. Section 14.2 treats content questions.

Note that rhetorical questions appear to be formally identical to non-rhetorical questions, with context indicating which type it is. These are therefore not covered explicitly in this chapter. Embedded questions also do not appear here, since they occur infrequently in the corpus and little is known about their form and function. See §7.6 for limited examples.

14.1 Polar Questions

Polar questions are those for which a 'yes' or 'no' response is appropriate. In Nchane, these clauses are differentiated from their declarative counterparts by a floating low tone enclitic "QP" (an abbreviation for Question-Polar), which is most often realized as a falling tone on the final syllable of the clause. This is illustrated in the example set given in (14.1), where a. is a declarative clause, and b. is its polar question counterpart.

(14.1)   a.   wɔ́   jí-í   Ø-bèlèkāŋ
                2SG   eat-PROG   c1-papaya

         'You are eating papaya.'

         b.   wɔ́   jí-í   Ø-bèlèkāŋ
                2SG   eat-PROG   c1-papaya.QP

         'Are you eating papaya?'

The falling realization of the enclitic can be mitigated or neutralized in some circumstances. Such appears to be the case in (14.2), where the length of the utterance is so long that downdrift and lack of air support results in the polar question enclitic being realized as low rather than falling. Note that the applicative marker usually has a mid tone.

(14.2)   ñsā   y-ē   bí: wù   lē,   lā: kì-nfɛ̀:
         c9.friend   c9-3SG.POSS   ask   3SG   APPL   Q.COMP   c7-blind.man

         kī-nē   tɔ́   kī   tɔ̀-ɔ̀   yànè   tɛ́   lè
         c7-PROX   HAB   c7   come-PROG   here   also   APPL.QP

         'Her friend asked her, "Is this blind man always coming here too?"'
                                                              What-goes-around.2.2

Example (14.3) shows further that the enclitic is neutralized when the word it cliticizes already has a falling tone. The word for "thing" normally is pronounced with a ML fall in utterance final position.

(14.3) wɔ́   jí   wā   fy-ɛ̄:
        2SG eat already c19-thing.QP

    'Have you already eaten something?'   What-goes-around.4.5

Note that this example also shows what appears to be question intonation, with the mid-toned 2SG pronoun having a SH tone and the word for "already", which normally has a HL tone, is realized with a M tone. Question intonation as seen here is sometimes observed in Content questions as well, but its realization appears to optional.

    Tag questions are a special type of polar question consisting of an assertive declarative statement, followed by a short polar question, requesting affirmation or disaffirmation of the assumption asserted in the declarative statement. Example (14.4) demonstrates that the tag in Nchane tag questions takes the form of the short phrase **lé ɲchɛ̰̄:** 'it is true', with the polar question tone enclitic realized on the final word of the tag. The form for 'true' without the L enclitic is normally **ɲchɛ̰́:**.

(14.4) wɔ̀   ké-é   lɛ̄   mw-ɛ̄:   mū-nē
        2SG know-PROG COMP c18a-thing c18a-PROX

        sān-é   mɛ̀   nē,   lé   ɲchɛ̰̄:
        smell-PROG 1SG.PRO like.this COP true.QP

    'You know that these things are offensive to me (lit. smelling me), right?'   Inheritance.4

    An important aspect of tag question formation to typological studies is whether the assertion and the tag have the same polarity. The assertion and tag have opposite polarity in many languages. This is not the case for Nchane; the tag is invariably positive, regardless of the polarity of the assertive statement, as illustrated in (14.5). The polarity of the assertive statement is positive in a. and negative in b. Nevertheless, the tag portion of the question remains positive in each case.

(14.5) a. ǹjì   gɛ̄n-é   ā-bèŋ,   **lé**   **ɲchɛ̰̄:**
        N.   go-PROG   c18-B.   COP   true.QP

        'Nji is going to Bem, true?

     b. á   ɲ̀jì   gɛ̄n-è   ā-bèŋ   gɛ̀,   **lé**   **ɲchɛ̰̄:**
        NEG1 N.   go-PROG   c18-B. NEG2 COP   true.QP

        'Nji is not going to Bem, true?'

14.2 Content questions

Content questions are those which seek the identity of some unknown constituent. These questions in Nchane utilize one of several question words, which correspond to the type of constituent that is unknown by the questioner. The question word typically is coreferential with the unknown constituent (i.e., they are interrogative pronouns), occurring in the same clausal position as that constituent in a declarative clause.

The question word **mɛ̌:** 'how.many' is an interrogative nominal modifier which follows a noun. It stands in the place of the number in declarative sentences and is appropriately marked with an agreement prefix. So, although it is not itself pronominal, it is replacive.

Although question words are considered as inherently focused, the interrogative clause may explicitly mark the question word as in focus, either through a cleft construction or postverbal focus. Each of the interrogative words is treated in the following sections, where they appear bolded.

14.2.1 The interrogative pronoun lá 'Q'

The form **lá** is productive as an interrogative marker and is observed in three different types of syntactic constructions. In the first, **lá** takes the place of the constituent in question. The resulting question can often be translated with the question word 'what'. The examples presented in (14.6) represent two different syntactic strategies for the common question, "What is this?".

(14.6) a. fī-nē lé **lá**
     c19-PROX COP Q

    'What is this?'

   b. lé **lá̋** fī-nè
     COP Q c19-PROX

    *'What is this?' (*lit. *it is what, this)*

Note that non clause-final occurrences of **lá** are usually realized with a super high tone when preceded by the copula, as in (14.6)b. This super high tone is likely the result of question intonation associated with this particular type of question construction.

In both examples, the interrogative pronoun occurs in the postverbal focus position. But example (14.6)b is a copula clause with a right-dislocated subject, marking it explicitly as Topic.

Examples (14.7) and (14.8) illustrate questions with an object and subject interrogative respectively. Example (14.7) utilizes a cleft construction to mark the

questioned constituent as in focus. In addition, it demonstrates that **lá** is treated as belonging to class 19, as evidenced by the corresponding class 19 relativizer.

(14.7) wù   bí: bɔ̰̄:   bā-ā   lé   là:
        3SG   ask   c2.child   c2-ANA2   APPL   Q.COMP

        lé   **lǎ**   fĩ   bɛ̰̄ŋ   bé   jî
        COP   Q   c19REL   2PL   P1   eat

        '...he asked those children, "What is it that you ate?".'

                                                What-goes-around.9.8

The syntactic analysis of example (14.8) is unclear, but it demonstrates that the interrogative pronoun can occur clause initially. The high tone on the subject marker suggests that it is really a relativizer, which then hints at this clause being a type of cleft construction (but lacking a copula). Another possibility is that the tone reflects pragmatic concerns. Regardless, this example is important for establishing the different clausal positions available for the interrogative pronoun.

(14.8) **lá**   fí   yí   wɔ̀
        Q   c19REL   pain   2SG

        'What is hurting you?'

The question word **lá** can sometimes be used to elicit the reason for an action or state, with the translation appropriately using the word "why", as illustrated in example (14.9). In the sentence which follows this example, the wife explains the reason for her crying.

(14.9) Ø-jwɛ̰̄:   bí: là: lé   **lá**
        c1-husband.3SG.POSS   ask   Q.COMP   COP   Q

        fì   wɔ̀   bēd-é   là
        c19REL   2SG   cry-PROG   CE

        *'Her husband asked, "So, why are you crying?".' (*lit. *it is what that you are crying)*
                                    What-goes-around.9.12

As was stated in §9.5, this example might actually present a type of rhetorical question, where the presence of the Counter-expectation adverb indicates that the speaker somehow does not believe that there is a valid reason for her crying.

The second type of syntactic construction involves **lá** and an adverbial word of some kind. In (14.10) and (14.11) **lá** follows the time word **ségé** and the reason clause introducer **ɲ̄jē** respectively. In both cases, the interrogative pronoun is replacing the elements given in the response, which follow the adverb. For example,

the response to the question in (14.11) could be **ɲ̄jē n̄-tɛ̄mɛ̀ gɛ̀** 'because I am not well (lit. strong)'. The adverbial introducer is maintained in the response.

(14.10)   Ø-m̀fɔ̀ŋ   tɔ́   ségé   **lá**
           c1-chief   come   when   Q

          'When will the chief come?'

(14.11)   wɔ̀   bá̰:   jɔ̄   kɔ̄-dɛ̄   gɛ̄   ɲ̄jē   **lá**
           2SG   still   c9.water   catch-COMPL   NEG2   reason   Q

          'Why have you not carried water?'

       Finally, **lá** can appear in a noun phrase, where it takes an agreement prefix corresponding to the head noun. The resulting form can be translated as "which". The agreement prefix is realized with a H tone. Examples (14.12) and (14.13) are given to illustrate.

(14.12)   lé   Ø-mwā   **wú-lá**   wú   jí   bvù-lɛ̰̀:
           COP   c1-child   c1-Q   c1REL   eat   c14-fufu

          'Which child ate fufu?'

(14.13)   Ø-m̀fɔ̀ŋ   tɔ́   Ø-jú   **chí-lá**
           c1-chief   come   c5-day   c5-Q

          'When will the chief come?' (lit. *the chief comes which day*)

14.2.2 The interrogative pronoun yɛ̄ŋ 'who'

The interrogative word **yɛ̄ŋ** 'who' is pronominal, taking the place of the unknown referent, which is usually a human, as in (14.14).

(14.14)   wū-nē   lé   **yɛ̀ŋ**
           c1-PROX   COP   who

          'Who is this?'

       Unknown possessors are usually encoded with **yɛ̄ŋ**, with the accompanying translation of "whose", as illustrated in (14.15). The pronoun **yɛ̄ŋ** is coreferential with the possessor, whether expressed as a possessive pronoun or the N_2 of an associative noun phrase. (As stated in §5.3, omission of the associative noun marker for class 1 and class 9 head nominals has been reported for Noni and is likely for Nchane as well. Thus, the syntax of this interrogative could be comparable to either type of genitive construction.)

(14.15) lé   Ø-mwā   **yɛ̄ŋ**   wú   jǐ   bvù-lɛ̀:
         COP   c1-child who   c1REL   eat   c14-fufu

'*Whose child ate fufu?*'

Example (14.16) shows **yɛ́ŋ** again appearing in an associative noun phrase. But in this case, it is not expressing the notion of possession, but is best translated as "which". This question could be asked in the context of buying a hoe from a vendor at the market who has several hoes to choose from.

(14.16) wɔ̀   gón-ɛ̋   jì   yī   **yɛ́ŋ**
         2SG   want-PROG   c9.hoe c9AM   who

'*Which hoe do you want?*'

14.2.3 The interrogative pronoun **fànɛ̀** 'where'

'Where' questions utilize the interrogative pronoun **fànɛ̀**, as in (14.17) and (14.18).

(14.17) wɔ̀   gēn-é   **fànɛ̀**
         2SG   go-PROG   where

'*Where are you going?*'

(14.18) Ø-chíjɔ̀   lé   **fànɛ̀**
         c1-father.2SG.POSS   COP   where

'*Where is your father?*'

Example (14.19) presents the locative interrogative pronoun co-occurring with an Object. The interrogative pronoun appears in the immediately-after-verb Focus position, with the Object following, suggesting that this is normative for the interrogative locative pronoun. This is particularly noteworthy since focus-marked Locative Obliques are unattested in the immediately-after-verb position.

(14.19) nɔ̀   Ø-jwɛ̱̄:   shìl-é   fɛ̀-kū:,
         like.that c1-husband.3SG.POSS sit-PROG   c16-down

         wù   mɔ̄   wù   bí: lɛ̄   wɔ̄   jɔ́   **fànɛ̄**   m̄-bä
         3SG   RES   3SG   ask   COMP   2SG   take   where   c6a-soup

'*As her husband was sitting down, then he asked "Where will you get soup?"*'   Jealous Husband.10

14.2.4 The interrogative nominal modifier mɛ̃: 'how.many'

The unknown quantity of countable items is expressed through the interrogative nominal modifier **mɛ̃:**, which is marked by a noun class agreement prefix corresponding to the item in question. It follows the noun that it modifies, as illustrated in (14.20) and (14.21).

(14.20) wɔ́   lé   bɛ́   bɔ̰̃:   **bā-mɛ̃:**
         2SG   COP   with   c2.child   c2-how.many

   'How many children do you have?'

(14.21) lé   bī-gè   **bī-mɛ̃:**
         COP   c8-teeth   c8-how.many

   'How much does it cost?'

14.2.5 The interrogative adverbial pronoun nɛ̃: 'how'

The interrogative adverbial pronoun **nɛ̃:** is utilized in forming manner questions, as demonstrated in example (14.22). The pronoun occurs at the right edge of the clause and is coreferential with the propositional response.

(14.22) bā   fɛ̀-dɛ̄   Ø-ŋ̄kāŋ   **nɛ̃:**
         they   make-COMPL   c1-beer   how

   'How do they make corn beer?'

A second function of **nɛ̃:** is in forming questions seeking the unknown quantity of uncountable (or mass) nouns. In (14.23) the interrogative pronoun follows the uncountable noun in question, while in (14.24) it follows the main verb.

(14.23) wɔ̀   kɛ̄m-é   Ø-ŋ́kāŋ   **nɛ̃:**
         2SG   have-PROG   c1-sha   how

   'How much sha (i.e., corn beer) do you have?'

(14.24) jɔ̀   lé   yī   shɛ̄   **nɛ̃:**   ā   shā̰   lē
         c9.water   COP   c9   remain   how   in   c9.pot   APPL

   'How much water is remaining in the pot?' (lit. *the water remains how in the pot*)

In this second example, the uncountable noun appears to be topical, as it occurs in the preverbal position associated with Topics. It is possible then that this accounts for the differing clause position of the interrogative pronoun.

This interrogative pronoun also appears in questions requesting the degree of certain quality nouns attributed to some nominal constituent. In this context, the interrogative pronoun follows a prepositional phrase in which the quality noun is the prepositional complement, as (14.25) and (14.26) illustrate.

(14.25)   bī   y-ɔ̀   lé   yē   bvū-tādɛ̄   lē   **nɛ̃:**
          c9.goat   c9-2SG.POSS   COP   on   c14-grow   APPL   how

        *'How big is your goat?' (*lit. *your goat is on growth how)*

(14.26)   Ø-mwā   w-ɔ̀   lé   yē   bvū-jūnē   lē   **nɛ̃:**
          c1-child   c1-2SG.POSS   COP   on   c14-be.old   APPL   how

        *'How old is your child?' (*lit. *your child is on oldness how)*

It can be observed that the interrogative adverbial pronoun **nɛ̃:** is similar in form to the interrogative nominal modifier **mɛ̃:** treated in §14.2.4. Both have the shape **Nɛ:** and are marked with a ML falling tone. Furthermore, there is partial overlap in the semantics expressed by both words—both encoding measurement of quantity. Therefore, it is possible that they share a common source. One candidate for that source is the **nɛ́** 'GEST' treated in §8.5.