

Two strategies for deriving negatively biased questions in Bamileke Medumba

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In English, polar questions can be negated and if they are, the result is a biased question. Ladd (1981) observes that a negative polar question can have two readings (1) (see also Buring and Gunlogson 2000, Romero and Han 2004, Asher and Reese 2007). Under one reading, the question is whether it is the case that he does not drink beer; under the second reading, the question is whether it isn't the case that he drinks beer. The first reading is characterized by low scope of negation (hence this is known as the “inside negation reading”). It introduces a negative bias and can be forced by adding the negative polarity item *either* as in (1i). The second reading is characterized by high scope of negation (hence it is known as the “outside negation reading”). It introduces a positive bias and can be forced by adding the positive polarity item *too* as in (1ii).

(1) Doesn't he drink beer?

- i) Doesn't he drink beer (either)? [Inside Negation reading – negative bias]
ii) Doesn't he drink beer (too)? [Outside Negation reading – positive bias]

In this talk we explore ways of expressing negative bias in Medumba (Grassfields Bamileke– Bantu language, Western Cameroon).

Polar questions cannot be negated. In Medumba unbiased polar questions, are formed by means of the sentence-final particle *kí* as in (3). However, unlike in English, a negative bias cannot be introduced by means of negation. As shown in (4), negating a polar question with the negative marker *kú?* results in ungrammaticality.

- (3) *ú yùú mbhú kí* [Unbiased question] (4) **ú kú? yùú mbhú kí*
2SG have dog Prt 2SG.S Neg have dog Prt
“Do you have a dog?” [intended: Don't you have dog?]

To introduce a negative bias, Medumba makes available two strategies. We discuss each of them in turn.

Strategy 1: a dedicated particle for negative bias. Medumba has a dedicated sentence-final particle (*áá*) that serves to derive a negatively biased question, as shown in (5).

- (5) *ú yùú mbhú áá* [The [...]s **aa** strategy]
2SG.S have dog Prt
“Do you have a dog?”

The particle that derives negatively biased questions is not related to the particle that derives unbiased polar questions (*kí*). And crucially the two particles cannot co-occur.

Strategy 2: positive bias particles can combine with negation. Medumba has five distinct strategies to express a positively biased polar question. These strategies are given in (6). We show that these particles differ according to their context of use. In particular, 3 variables are being manipulated: *source, timing and strength* of the bias. That bias can be based either on a previous conversation with the Addressee or on some other type of situation. As for a bias that is based on a previous conversation, the Speaker can have a weak (6a. [the *kù* [...]s **-á strategy**]) or strong bias (6b. [the [...]s **-á strategy**]). As for a bias that is based on some other situation, we observe a different strategy depending whether the bias is based on a past situation (6c. [the *kùlá* [...]s **-á strategy**]) or on a present situation. If the bias is based on a present situation, the bias can either be direct and hence strong (6d. [the *kùlá* [...]s **strategy**]) or indirect and hence weak (6e. [the [...]s **-kō strategy**]).

(6) a. kù [...] _s -á	(b) [...]_s -á	(c) kùlá [...] _s -á
<i>kù</i> <i>ú</i> <i>γùú</i> <i>mbhú</i> <i>á</i> Prt 2SG.S have dog Prt “Do you have a dog?”	<i>ú</i> <i>γùú</i> <i>mbhú</i> <i>á</i> 2SG.S have dog Prt “Do you have a dog?”	<i>kùlá</i> <i>ú</i> <i>γùú</i> <i>mbhú</i> <i>á</i> Prt 2SG.S have dog Prt “Do you have a dog?”
(d) kùlá [...] _s	(e) [...]_s -k̄	
<i>kùlá</i> <i>ú</i> <i>γùú</i> <i>mbhú</i> Prt 2SG.S have dog “Do you have a dog?”	<i>ú</i> <i>γùú</i> <i>mbhú</i> <i>k̄</i> 2SG.S have dog Prt “Do you have a dog?”	

Unlike unbiased polar questions, positively biased polar questions can be negated, and by negating a positively biased polar question, the bias is reversed because negation turns [p] into [not p]. This is shown in (7) for the **kù [...]_s -á strategy**.

(7) *kù* *ú* *kú?* *γùú* *mbhú* *á* → *kù* + *á* strategy(positive bias) + negation = **negative bias**
Prt 2SG.S Neg have dog Prt
“Don’t you have a dog?”

The same facts hold for all other strategies that introduce a positive bias: negation turns the positive bias into a negative bias but preserves the differences in context of use (i.e., the source, timing and strength of the bias).

Given that the particles that derive a positive bias can co-occur with negation to derive negatively biased questions, we might expect that the negatively biased particle introduced in (5) can co-occur with negation. We show that this is indeed the case.

Negative bias particles can combine with negation to derive a positive bias. Just like negation reverses a positive bias into a negative bias, it also reverses a negative bias (derived by the particle *áá*) into a positive bias, i.e., a negative bias towards [not p] equals a positive bias towards p. This is illustrated in (8).

(8) *ú* *kú?* *γùú* *mbhú* *áá* → *aa* strategy + negation = **positive bias**
2SG.S Neg have dog Prt
“Don’t you have a dog?”

Conclusion. Based on the fact that negation cannot introduce a negative bias in an unbiased question we conclude that Medumba negation always has low scope (it is only compatible with the inside negation reading). High scope negation (outside negation readings) must be derived via dedicated particles. And indeed Medumba has a plethora of such particles.

References

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