

A sketch of content question formation in Eauripik Woleaian*

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1 Introduction

While many languages have content-based questions, they differ widely in terms of potential movement and extraction out of the relevant phrase. Research on content questions in Austronesian languages largely focuses on the usage of pseudoclefts in both predicate-initial languages, such as Malagasy (Potsdam 2006, 2009) and Fijian (Potsdam 2009), and subject-initial languages, such as Marshallese (Willson-Sturman 2014). I contribute novel data on Woleaian, a Chuukic language spoken in the Federated States of Micronesia, which appears to have a movement and non-movement strategy for content question formation. Crucially, I propose that one of these movement strategies involves clefting rather than pseudoclefting. In this paper, I present a description of content questions in the Eauripik dialect of the Woleaian language, challenging previous literature stating that there are only *in situ* content questions in the language.

2 Background literature

The Woleaian language (ISO 639-3: woe), also known as *kapetele faliuwash*, is spoken by approximately 2,000 native speakers in Yap State in the Federated States of Micronesia. Woleaian is an Austronesian language of the Chuukic subgroup that has been influenced by Japanese, English, and Spanish (Sohn 1975:1). Woleaian is related to neighboring languages such as Ulithian, Satawalese, and Chuukese (Sohn 1975:4).

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The primary documentation of this language was done by Ho-min Sohn and Anthony F. Tawerilmang. Data collection occurred from 1971–1975 (Sohn & Tawerilmang 2019:vii). These two scholars produced both a reference grammar (1975), an English-Woleaian dictionary (2019), and an orthography based on the dialect spoken in the Woleai atoll. The orthography used in the grammar and dictionary is currently outdated, as the orthography was modified after publication in the 1990s, but is still understandable to speakers today (Lenny Saumar, p.c.).

There are approximately six language varieties identified by Sohn (1975:5): Woleai, Eauripik, Faraulep, Elato, Lamotrek, and Ifaluk. The Woleai variety is further divided into the East and West dialect. The dialect under focus in this paper is the variety spoken in the Eauripik atoll by one speaker in his early 30s. While there is no comprehensive study of how these dialects differ from one another, there are syntactic or phonological differences between the data presented here and that in Sohn (1975), which could be licensed by language change, dialectal variation, or a combination of both.

Woleaian is a canonically SVO language for both transitive (1) and intransitive (2) contexts.

- (1) Ye mongo iige.
 3SG.A eat fish
 ‘S/he eats fish.’¹
- (2) Go tefale.
 2SG.A return
 ‘You return.’

A summary of attested agreement markers is reproduced in Table 1 from Mayer (in prep.). The agentive forms have both bound and unbound variants, though this variation seems likely due to orthography rather than the language grammar. Argument morphology appears to be predicate-dependent, as some predicates require both overt subject and object agreement, while others only require one or none.

¹ Data are presented using the current Woleaian orthography. Glosses used in this paper: A = agentive, ANA = anaphor, DEM = demonstrative, FOC = focus, MED = medial, P = patient, PFV = perfective, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, SG = singular, and VIS = visible. All language data were provided by Lenny Saumar unless otherwise noted.

Table 1: Argument marking in Woleaian, Eauripik dialect (Mayer, in prep.)

	Agentive	Patient	Emphatic
1SG	<i>ie/i=</i>	<i>yei</i>	<i>gaang</i>
2SG	<i>go/go=</i>	<i>=go</i>	<i>geelee</i>
3SG	<i>ye/ye=</i>	<i>=i, =we</i>	<i>ie</i>
1PL.INCL	<i>si/si=</i>	<i>geshe</i>	<i>gishe</i>
1PL.EXCL	<i>gai</i>	<i>gamem</i>	<i>gamem</i>
2PL	<i>gai</i>	<i>gami</i>	<i>gami</i>
3PL	<i>re/re=</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>ire</i>

Lastly, Woleaian has overt focus marking that can co-occur with other elements, such as demonstratives in (3). Capital letters in the English translation are used to mark the focussed element. This focus marker marks number by adding the plural morpheme *ka*, as in (4). These markers may also function as anaphors and are not limited to occurring only in focus constructions.

- (3) Gelaago we mene ye gangi.
 dog DEM FOC.SG 3SG.A eat
 ‘The DOG ate the food.’

- (4) Gelaago kawē meka re gangi.
 dog DEM.PL FOC.PL 3PL.A eat
 ‘The DOGS ate the food.’

Sohn (1975) describes a similar word *mele* as a ‘selective emphasis marker’ (1975:175), as in (5). This word is derived from the base *mel-*, an anaphoric referent marker. This marker can take *-le*, the third person singular possessive marker, to derive *mene*, the focus marker.²

- (5) Metta mele go weri?
 What FOC 2SG.A see
 ‘What did you see?’ (Sohn 1975:176)

² I have added interlinear glosses to all examples from Sohn (1975) in accordance with definitions from Sohn and Tawerilmang (2019) and my own analysis of the data; all errors in glossing are mine.

Sohn (1975) has a short description dedicated to questions in the language. Polar questions are described as structurally equivalent to their declarative counterparts, as (6), a question, and (7), a statement, have completely identical lexemes and morphemes. They differ only in intonation. Whereas declarative sentences have a flat mid-high to low pitch, polar questions have a very high to mid-low pitch sentence-finally (Sohn 1975:39, 41). Content questions have a similar pitch contour to declarative sentences (Sohn 1975:40).

(6) Ye sa lag?
 3SG.A PFV go
 ‘Did he go?’ (Sohn 1975:154)

(7) Ye sa lag.
 3SG.A PFV go
 ‘He went.’ (Sohn 1975:91)

Content questions, also known as *wh*-questions, are formed through the use of a content question word in an interrogative context. They are described as only occurring *in situ*, along with other information about their restrictions in equational constructions. This conclusion does not appear to be supported in Eauripik Woleaian, where content question phrases are not limited to only occurring in their base-generated position.

Examples of the content question word’s *in situ* status are presented in the following sentences including the words *iteiu* ‘who’, *ileet* ‘when’, and *iiya* ‘where’ (8a–c). Sohn (1975) includes examples of content questions with the focus marker *mele* but does not explain its occurrence or distribution.

(8) a. Iteiu mele ye weri?
 who FOC 3SG.A see
 ‘Who is the one who saw it?’ (Sohn 1975:169)

b. Re sa lag ileet?
 3PL.A PFV go when
 ‘When did they go?’ (Sohn 1975:169)

c. John ye bel lag iiya?
 John 3SG.A will go where
 ‘Where will John go?’ (Sohn 1975:169)

In Eauripik Woleaian, polar questions are also structurally equivalent to content questions and differ primarily in prosody. Polar and content questions may optionally occur with the question particle *go*, which causes a rising intonation. Examples (9a) and (9b) show no difference in morphology, apart from the optional question particle. Both (9b) and (9c) may occur with *go* without any change in grammaticality.

- (9) a. Go gabiungiu kapete-le faliu-wash.
 2SG.A teach language-3SG.POSS island-1PL.POSS
 ‘You teach Woleaian.’
 (Lit. ‘You teach the language of our island.’)
- b. Go gabiungiu kapete-le faliu-wash (go)?
 2SG.A teach language-3SG.POSS island-1PL.POSS (QP)
 ‘Do you teach Woleaian?’
 (Lit. ‘Do you teach the language of our island?’)
- c. Iteoiu ye gabiungiu kapete-le
 who 3SG.A teach language-3SG.POSS
 faliu-wash (go)?
 island-1PL.POSS (QP)
 ‘Who teaches Woleaian?’

3 Methodology

These data were collected through elicitations with a consultant, Lenny Saumar, in a field methods class from September 2021 to May 2022 at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and in follow-up online elicitations afterwards in late 2022.³ Lenny is a 34-year-old native speaker of the Eauripik variety of Woleaian and an L2 speaker of English and Chuukese. He spent his childhood on the Eauripik atoll, where approximately 100 people reside. He currently resides in O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, where he uses the language daily with friends and family.

Two main tasks were conducted during elicitations. The consultant was either presented with an English sentence and context and asked to translate from English to Woleaian or given an English context and Woleaian sentence and asked to judge the felicity of the sentence in the

³ The IRB proposal for this project is 2021-00641 through the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa and has an expiry date of September 12, 2021. Any questions about the protocol may be directed to Dr. Bradley McDonnell, the principal investigator of the project.

provided context. Additional tasks included verifying the grammaticality of sentences from Sohn (1975), recounting a traditional narrative, and identifying images of plants and animals to create a variety of naturally occurring to more controlled speech.

4 Data

Eight primary content question words were identified throughout the course of elicitations. Table 2 presents a brief overview of each word in Woleaian, presented in the orthography, and an approximate English translation. I will next focus on the distribution of two content question words, *meta* ‘what, how’ and *iteoiu* ‘who’ as examples of question formation strategies in Eauripik Woleaian.

Table 2: Content question words in Woleaian, Eauripik dialect

WH Word	English Gloss	WH Word	English Gloss
<i>Meta</i>	‘what, how’	<i>Fitou</i>	‘how many’
<i>Iteoiu</i>	‘who’	<i>Ifa/Ikefa</i>	‘which’
<i>Ileete</i>	‘when’	<i>Fasengale</i>	‘how’
<i>Iya/iiya</i>	‘where’	<i>Meta faale</i>	‘why’

Based on the data collected, there appear to be three strategies used to form questions: *in situ*, cleft movement, and focus movement. These strategies are syntactically and pragmatically restricted, depending on the type of extraction and on the surprise of the speaker.

4.1 In situ questions

In situ questions are the primary content-question formation strategy described by Sohn for the Woleai dialect of Woleaian. These questions involve no overt movement of the relevant phrase from where it was base-generated, as in (10) and (11). This strategy can be used for subject, object, and adjunct positions for *iteoiu* ‘who’, as in examples (10a–c), and for object and adjunct positions for *meta* ‘what, how’, as in (11a–b), but this strategy is ungrammatical for *meta* in subject position, as in (11c).

- (10) a. Iteoiu gangi mongo?
 who eat food
 ‘Who eats food?’

- b. Go shungali iteoiu?
 2SG.A meet who
 ‘Who do you meet?’
- c. Go mongo fituge re-li iteoiu?
 2SG.A eat meat with-3SG who
 ‘Who do you eat meat with?’
- (11) a. Ye gangi meta?
 3SG.A eat what
 ‘What did s/he eat?’⁴
- b. Go gangi ngali meta?
 2SG.A eat with what
 ‘What are you eating with?’
- c. *Meta pwule?
 what burn
 Intended: ‘What burns?’

4.2 Cleft constructions

The first of the two movement options involves creating a cleft construction as part of the content question. To diagnose these constructions, I follow diagnostics put forth in Potsdam and Polinsky (2011). Displacement or true movement structures have content question phrases that lack predicative properties, are monoclausal, and have an “activated left periphery” that allows for multiple constituents (Potsdam & Polinsky 2011:119, 121). In contrast, pseudoclefts and clefts have a content question phrase as their main predicate and a relative clause as the remainder of the construction, two hallmarks of this biclausal construction (Potsdam & Polinsky 2011:113). Pseudoclefts and clefts differ in their treatment of the construction’s remainder, where in pseudoclefts they exhibit nominal and subject properties similar to those in relative clauses. In addition, pseudoclefts may have a ‘dummy’ or expletive head present in the remainder clause, whereas clefts do not.

⁴ Woleaian does not have overt tense marking (Sohn 1975:233) and instead marks temporal reference through aspect. The tense provided in translations is largely based on context.

Clefts allow pied-piping in the content question phrase, but pseudoclefts do not.

Examples of a cleft question are given for both *iteoiu* ‘who’ in (12a) and *meta* ‘what, how’ in (12b). These constructions involve the content question word occurring on the left periphery, regardless of where it was base generated, followed by a demonstrative marker and then the rest of the predicate.

- (12) a. Iteoiu i-ka ie shungi-re?
 who ANA-PL 1SG.A meet.PL
 ‘Who (pl.) is it that I met?’
- b. Meta uru ye go rongi?
 what song DEM 2SG.A sing
 ‘What is the song that you sang?’

Firstly, dummy heads are possible in headless relative clauses. The dummy head *gena* ‘person’ can serve as the head for (13), replacing the demonstrative *ye*. This suggests that demonstratives can behave as a dummy head that lacks semantic value but satisfies markedness constraints.

- (13) Re-li iteoiu gena go mongo fituge la?
 with-3SG who person 2SG eat meat MED.VIS.DEM
 ‘With which person did you eat meat?’

Secondly, content questions that are extracted out of adjunct position allow for pied-piping, as in (14a). The content question word and its preposition may also be separated, as in (14b). Potsdam and Polinsky (2011) argue that PPs are generally not pied-piped in Austronesian languages, which is evidence for a pseudocleft construction. However, in (13), both pied-piping and a dummy head can co-occur. Based on the presence of the dummy head, I propose that Eauripik Woleaian has content question pseudoclefts rather than clefts.

- (14) a. Re-li iteoiu ye go mongo fituge?
 with-3SG who DEM 2SG.A eat meat
 ‘With whom did you eat meat?’
- b. Iteoiu ye go mongo fituge re-li?
 who DEM 2SG.A eat meat with-3SG

‘Who did you eat meat with?’

Pseudocleft constructions are attested for subject, object, and adjunct extraction for *iteoiu* ‘who’, as in (15a–c) and subject, object, and adjunct extraction for *meta* ‘what, how’, as in (16a–c).

- (15) a. Iteoiu ye gangi mongo?
 who 3SG.A eat food
 ‘Who is it that eats food?’
- b. Iteoiu ye go shungali?
 who 3SG.A 2SG.A meet
 ‘Who is it that you meet?’
- c. Iteoiu iye go kauru-re movie we reli?
 who DEM 2SG.A watch-3PL.P movie DEM with
 ‘Who did you see the movie with?’
- (16) a. Meta ye pwule?
 what 3SG.A burns
 ‘What is it that burns?’
- b. Meta ye gangi?
 what 3SG.A eat
 ‘What is it that s/he eats?’
- c. Meta iye go gangi ngali?
 what DEM 2SG.A eat with
 ‘What is it that you eat with?’

4.3 Focus movement

The last movement strategy available for content question formation involves focus movement. There are two focus markers, *mene* for singular constituents and *meka* for plural constituents. These constructions involve the content question word or phrase occurring on the left periphery, again regardless of where it was base generated, followed by the focus marker and then the rest of the predicate. Content questions with focus movement are attested for subject, object, and adjunct extraction for *iteoiu* ‘who’ and subject, object, and adjunct extraction for *meta* ‘what, how’. For the subject extraction cases in (17a)

and (18a), focus movement triggers a subject pronoun to occur in the predicate, following the focus marker and preceding the verb. I leave this for future investigation to determine whether focus-marking in subject extraction cases triggers a dummy subject or whether focus-marking co-occurs with cleft constructions.

- (17) a. Iteoiu mene ye gangi mongo?
who FOC.SG 3SG.A eat food
'Who is eating food?'
- b. Iteoiu mene go tuguwe?
who FOC.SG 2SG.A punch
'Who did you punch?'
- c. Iteoiu mene go mongo fituge re-li?
who FOC.SG 2SG.A eat meat with-3SG
'Who do you eat meat with?'
- (18) a. Meta mene ye pwule?
what FOC.SG 3SG.A burn
'What is it that burns?'
- b. Meta mene ie gangi?
what FOC.SG 1SG.A eat
'What did I eat?'
- c. Meta mene ie mongo fituge ngali?
what FOC.SG 1SG.A eat meat with
'What did I eat the meat with?'

The focus markers *mene* and *meka* appear to mark contrastive focus rather than informational focus: instead of introducing new information, the markers highlight that one option rather than another has been selected. Focus markers are subject to markedness restrictions: they cannot occur sentence-finally, as in (19b) and (20b), for both interrogative and declarative contexts.

- (19) a. Meta mene ye gangi?
what FOC.SG 3SG.A eat
'What did s/he eat?'

- b. * Ye gangi meta mene?
 3SG.A eat what FOC.SG
- (20) a. Iige mene ye mingo.
 fish FOC.SG 3SG.A eat
 ‘S/he ate fish.’
- b. *Ye mingo iige mene.
 3SG.A eat fish FOC.SG

The focus markers also cannot remain *in situ* even if they do not occur sentence-finally, as in (21b). Due to these restrictions, it appears that these focus markers license movement to the left periphery of the phrase.

- (21) a. Meta meka go chuwai me stowa?
 what FOC.PL 2SG.A buy from store
 ‘What (pl.) did you buy at the store?’
- b. *Go chuwai meta meka me stowa?
 2SG.A buy what FOC.PL from store

5 Pragmatic implications

The three content question-forming strategies (*in situ*, pseudoclefted, and focused) not only differ in their syntax, but also in their pragmatics.

- (22) a. Meta ye gangi?
 what 3SG.A eat
 ‘What is it that s/he ate?’
- b. Meta mene ye gangi?
 what FOC.SG 3SG.A eat
 ‘What did s/he eat?’
- c. Ye gangi meta?
 3SG.A eat what
 ‘What did s/he eat?’

This set of data is organized from most to least pragmatically neutral. The first sentence with the pseudocleft construction, (22a), is the most neutral reading, where the speaker has full knowledge of all foods

available. The second sentence with focus movement, (22b), has a slight reading of surprise, where the speaker did not know all foods that were available. The last sentence, (22c), has a strong surprise interpretation, where everything is new information. This sentence can also have an echo question reading, such as asking for clarification, but does not have an intensification interpretation, such as a ‘What the hell?’ reading.

6 Conclusion

Euaripik Woleaian appears to have two main strategies to create content questions, one that involves the content question word remaining *in situ* and one that involves movement. This differs from previous literature, which did not include movement as a possible strategy. I propose that the movement strategy is decomposable to two main constructions involving focus movement and pseudoclefting constructions. These data supplement existing documentation, providing a new analysis of interrogative formation that can be used as a stepping point for future work. This description lends itself to supporting future investigations into island effects, resumption, and relative clauses, as well as the relationship between focus and demonstrative marking in both interrogative and declarative sentences. Overall, this research adds to the growing body of literature on question-formation strategies in subject-initial Austronesian languages.

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