Asking Questions in English

R (Chandra) Chandrasekhar

2012-09-15 | 2020-12-09

A tale of two tongues

This blog is devoted to the art of asking questions correctly in English. This seemingly undemanding task often trips up the aspiring learner of English, especially one who is studying it as a second or third language.

My mother tongue is Tamil, written தமிழ் (tamiḻ), in its markedly curly script.[1] Tamil is an alphabetic, syllabic, inflected Indic language with ancient roots. Asking questions in Tamil and English require two very different ways of thinking and speaking. Knowing about these can be instructive to many non-native speakers of English. Let me elaborate.

Word order in English and Tamil

A friend, fairly proficient in English, but not so much in Tamil, translated the question "Can I come to your house now?" into the Tamil "முடியுமா நான் வருவதற்கு உங்கள் வீட்டுக்கு இப்பொழுது?" (muḍiyumā nān varuvadaṟku uṅgaḷ vīṭṭukku ippoḻudu?). This sentence replicates the English word sequence faithfully, and while certainly not the best of Tamil in elegance or usage, it is at least intelligible *and* grammatical. That is because Tamil is more of an inflected language than English, and is therefore less sensitive to change in meaning due to change in word order.

But the reverse translation from Tamil into English, especially when applied to asking questions, is infelicitous. Following Tamil word order to phrase English questions often leads to ungrammatical and discordant results. Let me give you two examples.

"Where are you going?"

Suppose you see someone and want to ask in Tamil where that person was going. You would ask, in the less respectful mode of address used between equals, "நீ எங்கே போகிறாய்?" (nī engē pōgiṟāi?). Translated into English, these words literally become "You where going?" and that is often how a newcomer to English, with a Tamil language background, will at first speak.

[1] If you see rectangular boxes where you would expect to see letters, please ensure that you have a font on your device capable of displaying Tamil script.

“What is your name?”

Now, for another example. When asking someone for his or her name, a Tamil speaker says “உன் பெயர் என்ன?” (un peyar enna?). In English, this word order would be rendered as “Your name what?” Horror of horrors! Where has the verb gone?

Implicit verbs and nouns

We have all been taught that a complete sentence must have a verb. The simplest sentence is an imperative “Come!”. So, how did the Tamil sentence dispense with the verb?

The Tamil speaker can likewise ask, “Where is the subject in the sentence ‘Come!’?”.

The answer to both questions is that usage has tacitly approved the omission of the verb on the one hand, and the noun on the other. They have become *implicit*.

In Tamil, it is customary to omit the verb “to be” in its various forms. Likewise, in English, the second person nominative singular pronoun “You”[2] has been omitted from the start of the sentence “Come!” and its inclusion, rather than omission, will raise eyebrows.

Word order in English

Because it is a less inflected language, word order matters more in English than in Tamil. *And word order is different for questions in the two languages*. You should try to think in English before asking a question in English. And likewise for Tamil.

Ancient languages tend to be inflected. Latin—once the bastion of scholarly knowledge in Europe—is inflected. So too is Sanskrit which served a similar historical role for the sacred and secular literature of India. Ditto for Tamil, which of the three, is the only language that is still widely spoken—by about 70 million people.

Unlike the more ancient tongues, English is less inflected. *Word order matters.* Meaning can and does change if word order is changed. And many common mistakes in word order convey unintended humour or absurdity.

The Latin sentence “Amor vincit omnia” meaning “Love conquers all” does not become “All conquers love” (whatever that may mean) if rewritten as “Omnia vincit amor”; it still carries the same meaning as before.

English, however, is not immune to change of meaning with change of word order. “The cat ate the rat” is believable, whereas, “The rat ate the cat” is both unusual and incredible. Although I can see an enormous rat polishing off a cat in my mind’s eye, logic and experience tell me that it is unlikely and runs against the grain of Nature.

Wrong word order in English, especially in questions, grates on the ears. But before we progress to questions, we must peek at sentence types and delve, however lightly, into some grammar.

[2]Originally, this was “Thou” but the plural form “You” has supplanted it now.

Parts of speech in English

I profess to be neither a grammarian nor a linguist. And both fields are alive and growing. Take what I say below with this disclaimer in mind.

When I was taught English grammar, we were told that there were eight parts of speech:

1. Noun
2. Pronoun
3. Verb
4. Adjective
5. Adverb
6. Preposition
7. Conjunction
8. Interjection

The infusion of modern linguistics into English grammar has led to new superclasses in parts of speech. An adposition is a word that can be either a *preposition* or a *postposition*.

Likewise, while we were taught about the indefinite articles *a* and *an* and the definite article *the*, these are nowadays classified, along with a host of other miscellaneous language fragments, as part of the superset called determiners.[3]

Because our primary focus is on questions and word order in correctly phrased questions, I will use the term *interrogative* to apply to any word, like *what*, which signals a question in English. Such interrogatives could actually be functioning as pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, etc., depending on their place and meaning in a sentence.

Sentence types

Classic textbooks on English grammar identify *four* kinds of sentences:

1. Declarative: "Today is Thursday." These types of sentences simply state facts. They are also called statements or assertions.
2. Interrogative: "What is your name? Sentences of this type are questions.
3. Imperative: "Come here." This is a command .[4]
4. Exclamatory: "How nice!" This type of sentence carries strong emotional overtones which distinguish it from a plain assertion.

Suppose, I said "Thank you!" with all sincerity and gratitude, that would also count as an exclamatory sentence.

[3] Visit the website of St Thomas C of E Primary School to watch and listen to two delightful videos on determiners and prepositions, if you feel so inclined.

[4] As we have already seen, the *implicit subject* of this sentence is the pronoun "You" which should rightly have come first, so that the sentence reads "You come here." Leaving out the understood second person pronoun has become established usage; so we omit it.

But wait a moment: who or what is the subject here? We encounter the implicit subject once again: only here it is the first person nominative singular pronoun "I". So, the sentence should rightfully read "I thank you!" but it would be hard to exclaim it convincingly without sounding theatrical.

The addition of the pronoun "I" thus converts the sentence from an exclamatory into a declarative one (work out why, and whether the exclamation mark is appropriate).

Although grammarians recognize four sentence types, we have already seen from the last example that an exclamatory sentence may be transformed with ease into a declarative sentence simply by including an omitted pronoun. Perhaps there are only three sentence types.

In one sense, all such classifications are artificial analytical superimpositions on the body of a living language. Hence, it is more important to master the language and its usage than to parrot out classifications like the above.

Statements versus Questions

It is important, however, to distinguish between a statement and a question. They are two very different types of sentence, almost antithetical in nature. Their word order is accordingly different: something that is not often grasped by speakers whose first language is not English.

A *statement* in English usually has the abstract structure:

```
[Noun/Pronoun] [Verb] [Noun/Pronoun]
```

where the first noun/pronoun is the *subject* and the second noun/pronoun, if it exists, is the *object.* An example is "He kicked the ball". This is in *active voice.* In *passive voice* though, we say, "The ball was kicked by him", and the order of the nouns/pronouns is changed.

A *question* on the other hand has a different structure:

```
[Interrogative] [Verb] [Noun/Pronoun]
```

The *interrogative* is a word like "what" or "why" or "where" or "how" which is used to indicate that a question is being asked. Having it at the beginning is handy because it alerts the listener to the fact that a question is being asked, for which an answer would most likely be required in response.

Note carefully that the verb comes *before* the subject which is the noun/pronoun at the end.[5]

[5] If you consider the noun/pronoun at the end as the object, feel free to do so. We are talking correct usage here rather than grammar.

Inversion of a statement into a question

A statement and a question are therefore different in structure. Many speakers learning English invert a statement into a question by simply raising the pitch at the end. So, they say "You are well?" raising the pitch of the last word instead of asking "Are you well?". This is wrong, although it happens a great deal in casual conversation. It will never do for written English. To avoid falling into this trap, think:

```
Statement → [Noun/Pronoun] before [Verb]
Question  → [Verb] before [Noun/Pronoun]
```

A very simple first question

The simplest question in English is something like "How are you?" or "What is this?". Each consists of three words and the word order is `[Interrogative] [Verb] [Noun/Pronoun]` exactly as in our paradigm above.

A second less simple question

The question "What is your name?" follows the above pattern too, but it is complicated by the word "your". What does it do? It *qualifies* the noun "name" and is therefore an adjective.[6] In English the adjective *precedes* or comes *before* the noun.[7] This word order is not altered in questions. Analytically, we may say:

Word	Part of Speech
What	interrogative (strictly interrogative pronoun)
is	verb
your	adjective; possessive case of pronoun "you"; qualifies noun "name"
name	noun

Mangled questions

When the word order in a properly constituted English question is changed, it becomes what I call a *mangled question.* Let us start off with our last example and jumble it up to yield different mangled questions.

"What is your name?"

With four unique words, we have a total of $4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 24$ different possible word orders and thus sentences.

[6] Also called a *possessive determiner* in modern grammatical usage.
[7] In Bahasa Malaysia, the adjective *succeeds* or *comes after* the noun that it qualifies. Languages vary as do people.

Rather than crunch our mind-numbing way through them all, let us look at some more promising entries for the "mangled question competition". We will use one guiding principle. The adjective "your" will always come *before* "name" *if it appears at all* in the mangled question.

```
What name?
What your name?
What your name is?
What is your name?
Name what?
Name is what?
Name what is?
Your name what?
Your name is what?
Your name what is?
```

By now you should have got the drift. Once the interrogative has been migrated to the beginning of the sentence and the verb placed to immediately follow it, we have left as possibilities only:

a. the correct "What is your name?"; and
b. the patently absurd "What is name your?" which we have already excluded from consideration.

Voila!

"Where are you going?"

The second question, "Where are you going?" offers more scope for creative misplacement of the verb because the verb itself consists of two words rather than one, indicating the present continuous tense.

Again, I will not agonize over all 24 possibilities but will once more restrict myself to "promising mangled questions". Almost instinctively we will shirk from ever using that word-pair "going are" whereas the alternative "are going", whole or split, is featured in full glory in our entries to the mangled question contest.


```
You where going?
You where are going?
You going where?
You are where going?
You are going where?
Are going where?
Are you going where?
Are going where you?
Where going?
Where are going?
Where are going you?
Where you are going?
Where are you going?
Going where?
Going where you?
```

Choosing the correct version, though, is not as open and shut as before. The strict but mindless application of the question paradigm `[Interrogative] [Verb] [Noun/Pronoun]` to the present continuous verb word-pair "are going" will lead to the mangled sentence "Where are going you?".

In the correct version, "Where are you going?", we have the pronoun juxtaposed between the two parts of the verb word-pair as "are you going". It appears that the abstract structure for a question needs to be modified somewhat.

A more complicated question

In the previous example, the verb was in two parts as "are going" and the noun was placed between them, which is easy enough. But English verbs may have three parts as well, in the perfect tenses. Where would we then put the noun or pronoun?

One easy way to work toward a solution is to *start with a statement and then convert it to a question*. Try this always when you are stuck.

Suppose the statement is "He has been recognized with a medal." One could frame many questions from this one statement. Here are a few grammatically correct examples:

```
Has he been recognized?
How has he been recognized?
Why has he been recognized?
With what has he been recognized?
```

Note the following points:

- The first question has no interrogative as the first word, but rather starts off with the verb. Nevertheless it is a properly formed question. Here we have to grapple with the placement of the pronoun "he" within the triple-barrelled verb. The correct placement, shown here, applies to all the questions.
- The second question might lay legitimate claim to being the closest in sense to an inversion of the original statement, "He has been recognized with a medal.".
- The third and fourth questions are allied to the statement but are not really inversions of the original statement into a question. Their foci are different.

Suppose for a moment that we did not know where to place the pronoun within the verb-triple. We know that the pronoun must be preceded by one or more members of a verb-triple. We have only three choices:

```
How has he been recognized?
How has been he recognized?
How has been recognized he?
```

Of these, only the first is correct as deemed by usage. Again, if you are attuned to usage, you would pick the first and reject the other two, as easily as you would detect and discard two bad eggs out of a clutch of three. Where to split the verb and insert the noun becomes an art that you acquire with increasing facility in and exposure to English. Familiarity with usage is more important than rule-based knowledge of grammar.

The two lessons from this example are that:

1. A question *can* begin without an interrogative.
2. The verb comes first followed by the noun/pronoun succeeded by the rest of the verb if applicable.

Usage changes

Usage changes in verb tenses, and their quirks, pose yet another burden to the student of English, especially when framing questions. Consider the statement "He ran fast." To invert it to a question, we may ask, "How did he run?".

Now, where was the "did" in the original statement? We could have correctly said "He *did* run fast," but that would sound either archaic or convey a specific emphatic sense, as if to refute a statement that he did not run fast, or to emphasize that he ran very fast. But these are different from the bland but neutral statement, "He ran fast," that we started out with.

If "He ran fast," is all we have, simple application of the structure we have derived would give us the question "How ran he?" which, although correct, sounds decidedly poetic or archaic. Such expressions are not in contemporary use.

Heaven forbid, if we said, "How did he *ran*?" We would then be committing a grammatical offense common to learners of English. Perhaps the only way to avoid such errors is to listen, read, write, and speak, until we become inwardly attuned to the language.

So, splitting a verb to insert a noun or pronoun to generate a question is not simply a matter of rules but also of usage. By exposure to correct spoken and written English, you should develop your own inner sense of what is right and wrong. Rules, although helpful, are not a reliable rescue when faced with changing patterns of usage.

Closing comments

English usage is variable and not wholly rule-bound. The large variety of ways in which questions may be phrased precludes a simple abstract formulation for the structure of a question along the lines of the Backus-Naur form for the syntax of computer languages.

The facts we have here divined so far are:

1. The interrogative, if it exists, comes first.
2. The whole or part of the verb comes next.
3. The noun or pronoun follows.
4. The rest of the verb, if applicable, follows the noun or pronoun.
5. Adjectives and adverbs keep their relative word order.

The abstract structure of a question, taken more as a flexible guide than a rule cast in stone, is:

```
[Optional Interrogative] [First part of Verb] [Noun/Pronoun] [Rest of
Verb if applicable]
```

Hopefully, this blog will help ensure that when you ask questions in English you neither embarrass yourself by wrong or inelegant usage nor confuse your interlocutor with a mangled question.

Happy questioning! ☺

Feedback

Please email me your comments and corrections.

A PDF version of this article is available for download here.

