THE ACQUISITION OF WH-QUESTIONS: A SIMPLE CASE IN INDONESIAN CHILDREN

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Abstract: In the first stage of language acquisition, children do not give any question word markers to their utterances. The questions without an interrogative word can be thought of *yes/no*- nucleus, where the *yes/no* marker is expressed as rising intonation. The most common *wh* question forms in children are some version of *What's that?* and *Where Nounphrase (go)?* and *What Nounphrase doing?* This study discusses the typical forms of WH-question construction in Bahasa Indonesia acquired by Indonesian children in the early stage of their language development.

Keywords: language acquisition, WH-questions, child language, psycho-linguistics.

A child learning a language is similar to a linguist in a field. Presented with an infinite set of examples, a child must form hypotheses about underlying rules and test these hypotheses in actual use. We might expect, therefore, to see very individualistic patterns of language development. Yet, there appear to be developmental similarities within and across languages. Children progress from single to multiword utterances and then to modification of these structures (Owens, 2008:37). From the simple illustration, we can see that the language developments are very similar across children and across languages as well.

The language universality and the developmental similarities across children are often assumed to be due to an innate or inborn language-acquisition mechanism. This is in line with Chomsky's (Owens, 2008) *language acquisition device* (LAD). The LAD contains the phrase-structure rules which are universal in the form of semantic or meaning class of words and the rules for generating sentences. This device functions to enable a child to pro-

cess incoming language and to form hypotheses based on the regularities found in that language. Based on the hypothesis testing, a child derives an accurate concept of the syntactic rules of his or her native language.

To deal with the language acquisition of Indonesian children, it is necessary to describe in brief what their development is like. In general, there is no difference among children in acquiring sounds as the first step of language acquisition. Processes of uttering sounds such as cooing and babbling also happen to an Indonesian child at the ages of six weeks to six months. However, an Indonesian child is able to utter words or the first-word utterance at the age 1;6. This is somewhat slower than children in western countries (Dardjowidjojo 2000). The argumentation to explain this delay is that an Indonesian child needs a longer time to decide which syllable should be uttered first to represent the word which needs to be uttered. In most English words where the lexical items are monosyllabic the children do not need to choose which syllable should

be uttered first. In contrast, most words in Bahasa Indonesia are polysyllabic which enable the children "to analyze" first which syllable should be easily uttered. For instance, the word *sepeda* (bike) which has three syllables whether the child takes *se*, *pe*, or *da*. For this case, most Indonesian child took the last syllable to utter first in the early age. This is also in line with what Slobin (1979) argued that universally children—wherever they are in this planet—tend to pay attention to the end of the form.

Then, in the acquisition of the lexical level an Indonesian child starts to use a word form somehow later than western children (Dardjowidjojo 2005). This is based on standardization made by Dromi (1987) who stated that a word form may be said to be mastered by a child when it should fulfill (i) phonetic similarity with adult words, and (ii) reliable correlation between form and referent or its meaning. Sound /tan/, for instance, is regarded to be mastered by an Indonesian child after this sound is really used to refer the word *ikan* (fish).

Furthermore, from the number of words acquired an Indonesian child consistently masters much more nouns than verbs. During the five years studied, Dardjowidjojo (2000) found nouns were the highest percent-

age acquired (49%), and the second rank was occupied by verbs (29%), while adjective was in the third rank (13%), and functional words (PREP, CONJ, etc.) occupied the last rank (10%). This is in contrast to some assumptions (Bloom 1993; and Tardif 1995) who state that children tend to master verbs earlier and more often than nouns.

Meanwhile, on syntactical level an Indonesian child starts to utter two-word utterance at the age 2;0. A sample of utterances is presented below.

The examples above shows that in two-word utterances an Indonesian child has apparently mastered 'case relations'. In example (1), for instance, the child has mastered case relations between action and object; in example (2), the child has mastered case relations between subject and object; and in example (3), the child has mastered case relations between subject and action. This phenomenon universally happens in which children at 2;0 years have already mastered such case relations (Brown 1973 in Aitchison 1998:120).

There is no stable three-word utterance phase for Indonesian children after they acquire two-word utterance in syntactic level. After using two-word utterances for a long time, they also start to utter more than two words: three, four and more words. In fact,

Table 1: A sample of Indonesian children utterances

CHILD	ADULT	English Translation
/liat tuputupu/ "lihat kupu-kupu" ... (1) see butterfly	"ayo lihat kupu-kupu" come see butterfly	Let us see the butterfly
/etsa mimik/ "Echa mimik" ... (2) Echa drink	"Echa minta minum" Echa ask drink	Echa asks for a drink
/etsa nani/ "Echa nyanyi" ... (3) Echa sing	"Echa mau menyanyi" Echa want sing	Echa wants to sing

Source: Dardjowidjojo (2005)

there are some interesting cases revealed by children in first language acquisition of Bahasa Indonesia. However, one thing in which the writer is interested in is how the children formulate their grammar to form questions in their language. Some findings dealing with the way children acquire questions in their first language express meanings consistent with the child's level of cognitive development. For example, Melissa Bowerman (in Slobin, 2004), in her recent article on Finnish acquisition, reports that little Finnish children simply do not ask yes-no questions—at least not in any formally marked way.

In other cross-linguistic data, Deprez and Pierce (1993) studied the acquisition of French in which children do not include the construction of V-to-C movement, which is instantiated only in interrogative subject clitic inversion, among their early questions. Subject clitic inversion is admittedly rare in the spoken version of the adult language. Therefore, the children apparently provide a somewhat stronger indication of the lack of V-to-C movement in acquiring questions in French.

In English data, meanwhile, Stromswold (1990) reports that young children judge incorrectly inverted *how come* questions to be grammatical 50% of the time. Children sometimes overgeneralize Aux-subject order to a number of contexts in which the adult grammar does not permit it. Furthermore, Pierce (1992) reports that children also appear to overgeneralize inversion to declarative contexts in which Aux-subject word order is occurred in noninterrogative form.

The nature of first language acquisition, in specific way, children are becoming aware of grammatical functors, they are well along in developing two major kinds of knowledge which will help them in this task. Peters (1995) classified in which firstly the children are familiar with the prosodic structure of the knowledge they have been hearing. Secondly the children are aware to expand the sort of language functions that they can accomplish

in which it leads them to look for the linguistic means to express these functions for elaboration (cf. Slobin, 1982, 1985b). The question is how to arrive at this competence. Linguists did not give the exact way to determine which of the child's utterances are grammatically non-deviant in terms of his own grammar. And, Bellugi and Klima (2004), argue that even if the grammatically non-deviant utterances could be reliably determined, they could only give hints as to the total grammatical capacity of the child, which includes not only what has been produced (or understood) but also what could be produced (understood).

In the case of questions in children's speech, Bellugi and Klima (ibid) claim that in the first stage of acquisition children did not give any question word markers to their utterances. The questions without an interrogative word can be thought of *yes/no*-nucleus, where the *yes/no* marker is expressed as rising intonation. For the *wh* questions in children, according to both linguists, the most common forms in English are some version of *What's that?* and *Where Nounphrase (go)?* and *What Nounphrase doing?* Besides, they also argue that in the *wh* question, all interrogative words are in initial position; the auxiliaries are missing in all questions. This is contrast with Cole *et. al.* (2000) who claim that the question word *apa* in Bahasa Indonesia cannot occur initially because that function is usurped by *yes/no* question word from the other *apa*.

As we know that there are two forms of questions namely *yes/no questions* which seek the answer 'yes' or 'no' and *WH-questions* which are indicated by the words *what, who, where, when, which, why, and how*. More details, in Bahasa Indonesia *yes/no questions* are spoken with interrogative intonation, marked by a rise in final pitch, and written with a final question mark. Frequently intonation (a question mark in writing) is the only difference with a statement, marked by a fall in final pitch. Sneddon (1996) classified *yes/no questions* in Bahasa Indonesia as in the following.

◆ A *yes/no question* do not usually have a different word order from the corresponding statement. However, if *boleh* (may) occurs it usually precedes the subject.

(1) *Boleh saya masuk?*

May I come in?

◆ A *yes/no question* can be made overtly interrogative by placing *apa* or *apakah* before it. In this context *apa(kah)*, which is here called a question marker, has no lexical function but simply signals that what follows is a question.

(2) *Apa dia sudah makan?*

Has she eaten?

(3) *Dia sudah makan apa?*

What has she eaten?

The sentence (2) above contains the question marker *apa*, which can be omitted:

(4) *Dia sudah makan?*

Has she eaten?

In sentence (3) *apa* (what) is the object of the verb and cannot be omitted.

◆ A *yes/no question* with *bukan* can be attached to a statement to turn it into a question. *Bukan* then corresponds to a sentence tag with 'be', 'have' or 'do' in English. This is usually used either when the speaker, uncertain as to the truth of the statement, seeks confirmation or, when knowing the statement to be correct, seeks agreement from the addressee.

(5) *Saudara mahasiswa, bukan?*

You are a student, aren't you?

<i>Apa?</i> (what)	is used for asking non-personal nouns, either as head of a nominal expansion or as a noun modifier in such an expansion. The nominal expansion may be governed by a preposition as in <i>buat apa?</i> , <i>dengan apa?</i> etc.
<i>Siapa?</i> (who)	is used for asking personal nouns.
<i>Mana?</i> (which)	is used for asking adjectives and any nominalization introduced by <i>yang</i> ; usually with <i>yang</i> proposed, but <i>yang</i> may not occur if another <i>yang</i> follows.
<i>Di mana?</i> (where)	is used for asking locational adverbs denoting rest.
<i>Ke mana?</i> (where)	is used for asking locational adverbs denoting motion towards a place.
<i>Dari mana?</i> (from where)	is used for asking locational adverbs denoting motion from a place.
<i>Kapan?</i> (when)	is used for asking point of time.
<i>Bagaimana?</i> (how)	is used for asking adverbs of manner.
<i>Mengapa?</i> (why)	is used for asking reason or cause.
<i>Berapa?</i> (how much)	is used for asking numeratives.
<i>Berapa lama?</i> (how long)	is used for asking duration of time.

(6) *Pesawat berangkat jam lima, bukan?*

The plane leaves at five, doesn't it?

(7) *Dia sudah makan, bukan?*

She has eaten, hasn't she?

◆ A *yes/no* question with 'ya' as a sentence tag. In informal speech 'ya' can occur as a sentence tag. Like *bukan*, it turns a statement into a question, which invites confirmation or agreement from the listener. This also allows the speaker to avoid the impression of making a firm assertion.

(8) *Dia cantik, ya?*

She's pretty, isn't she?

(9) *Film itu bagus, ya?*

That movie was great, eh?

The other form of question formation is by means of *WH*-questions. Macdonald (1976) list them together below.

Those *WH*-questions above are prominently used by adult Indonesians even by older children who have reached the end stage in their language acquisition.

METHOD

The data examined in this study come from the study findings of Gil (2002) studying the acquisition of syntactic categories in Malay/Indonesian, and from Cole *et. al.*, (2000) who investigated the acquisition of in-situ *WH*-questions in Jakarta Indonesian. Both studies used the data from the Max Planck Institute (MPI) Jakarta Corpus sampled by eight children (four boys and four girls) at ages between 1;06 and 4;04. The data consist of 55,200 utterances made by those children and contain 7664 *WH*-question forms. Unfortunately, I did not get all forms of such questions data, and only partially interrogative utterances support the data of this study.

In processing the data, the writer took the data which are suitable with the aim of this study. In this case, the utterances first must contain *WH*-questions. Then, the data base is

scanned for target-deviant questions, and the deviants are distinguished.

In analyzing the data, the writer found the deviance of *WH*-questions made by Indonesian child (CHD). Then, the result were discussed and summarized by referring to the theory of first language acquisition.

FINDINGS

First, *WH*-questions (*WH*-Q) acquired with major uses. In the following some data are described on how Indonesian children acquire *WH*-questions in major forms. The notification in the square brackets [...] described in which situation the children uttered their sentence.

(1) *Minum apa ya?* CHD-27 months

drink what yes

[*Experimenter asks child what he wants to drink; child reflects*]

"What will I drink?"

(2) *Bikin apa ya?* CHD-32 months

make what yes

[*Child playing with crayons, wonders what to draw*]

"What should I make?"

(3) *Mana taronya?* CHD-31 months

where put-ASSOC

[*Child carrying a chair, wondering where to put it*]

"Where should I put it?"

(4) *Mau bikin apa?* CHD-29 months

want make what

[*Playing with crayons, child asks adult*]

"What are you making?"

As can be seen from the utterances exemplified above, the young children seem to have most frequent forms of verbal expression at least seven different verbs: *makan* 'eat', *mimik* 'drink', *masak* 'cook', *maem* 'eat', *ndengerin* 'listen', *pake* 'use/wear', *setel* 'turn on'. This is in line with Bloom *et.al.*, (1982) who stated that children prefer to use descriptive verbs. In addition, children's question forms tend to put

"*ya*" at the end of their utterance which is in turn impressed a yes/no expression.

Second, WH-words with low frequency form. Some data are described on how Indonesian children acquire WH-questions by using the other productive forms. However, these forms are apparently rarely found in adult utterances.

- (5) *Kok ininya hilang?* CHD-34 months
how.come DEM:PROX-ASSOC disappear

[Looking at an empty box which should contain one of her books]

"How come this one's thing is missing?"

- (6) *Oh suster kok pakenya ...* CHD-34 months
EXCL nurse how come use-ASSOC

[Looking at a picture book (unfinished utterance)]

"How come the nurse is wearing...?"

- (7) *Apa...lagi ngapain?* CHD-24 months
what more AG-what-APPL

[Looking at a picture of a man praying]

"What's he doing?"

From the utterances exemplified above, it can be inferred that the older children seem to have different WH words. They use *kok* instead of using *bagaimana* (how come) in many productive structures. It is in contrast with the younger child which did not use such kind of word. From these data, the younger child seems to be delayed in acquiring the word *kok*. He tends to use two WH-words *ngapain* in asking 'what is anyone doing'. However, these fairly low frequency WH-words (such as *kok* and *ngapain*) are picked up by the children productively.

Last, WH-Questions in various clause types. In the following some data are described on how Indonesian children acquire WH-questions in various clause types, such as WH-word in isolation, with demonstrative anchor, with NP and VP anchors.

- (8) *Siapa, sih Bu?* [WH word in isolation]
who EXCL FAM-mother (CHD 1;11 years)

[about a picture she is being shown]

'Who is she, Mum?'

- (9) (a) *Siapa tuh?* [WH word with demonstrative anchor]

who DEM:DIST (CHD 3;4 years)

[about a man who just came into the house]

'Who's that?'

- (b) *Ini apa, tapi* (CHD 3;5 years)

DEM:PROX what but

[about the experimenter's drink]

'But what is it?'

- (10) (a) *Namanya apa?* [WH word with thing phrase (NP) anchor]
name-ASSOC

what (CHD 3;6 years)

[about some food]

'What it called?'

- (b) *Mana ayah?* (CHD 2;0 years)

where father

[wondering where her father is]

'Where's father?'

- (11) (a) *Makan apa?* [WH word with activity phrase (VP) anchor]

eat what (CHD 2;0 years)

[about a mouse in a picture book]

'What's it eating?'

- (b) *Ini naik apa?* (CHD 3;5 years)

DEM:PROX go.up what

[about a picture of Mickey Mouse riding a pig]

'What is he riding?'

The utterances above illustrate that children exhibit a strong preference for WH words after demonstratives; also children exhibit strict ordering of *apa* after NP and VP, and strong preference for *siapa* and *mana* before NP. Adults allow WH before and after NP. This relative preference in adults depends on the type of WH word. From this case, Indonesian children actually make use of the same constructions as adults, but children tend to use the canonical non-interrogative order more than adults.

DISCUSSION

There are three forms of WH-questions that the writer was able to catch from the data obtained. Those forms are (1) WH-questions illustrating major uses; (2) WH-questions illustrating low frequency forms; (3) WH-questions illustrating various clause types. Those three forms are discussed in the following.

(1) WH-questions illustrating major uses

In this kind of question forms, Indonesian children have a special construction. According to Klima and Bellugi (2004) the rules for questions in children's speech in the first stage are:

→ Q^{WHAT} - NP - (doing)

→ Q^{WHERE} - NP - (go)

As for this construction (in English children) both authors argue that all *wh*-interrogative words are in initial position; the auxiliaries are missing in all questions. Then, in the initial stage of illustrating major uses of *wh*-questions the child might want to express: *I want to know the name of that thing; I want to know what you call that action; and I want to know the location of that object.*

Let us consider the data in sentences (1), (2), and (4), the *wh*-interrogative words are placed in the final position and there is no NP in the questions. Therefore, it seems that Indonesian children in acquiring questions did not follow Klima and Bellugi (2004) in which the construction of questions made might be proposed as follows.

→ VP - Q^{WHAT}

The construction above is contrast to adult Indonesians who really follow the English child construction. In sentence (3), there is no difference between Indonesian and English children to acquire question word "where" since the Q-word is in initial position and is followed by NP as in the following construction.

→ Q^{WHERE} - NP

(2) WH-questions with low frequency form

Question word with a low fre-

quency form is a way for children to anticipate question words that they do not acquire yet. In this sense, the children seem to be delayed to acquire the question word *bagaimana* (how come). This is proved by the fact that another low frequency word form such as *kok* and *ngapain* emerged. From this case, though children have already used a variety of WH forms in various productive ways such as *apa*, *siapa*, and *mana*, low frequency words (such as *kok* and *ngapain*) are picked up by the children productively instead of saying *bagaimana* (how come) and *sedang apa* (what's person doing).

(3) WH-questions in various clause types

Question words in various clause types describe the way how children typically place *wh*-questions based on clause made. For instance, in sentences (8), (9a) and (10b) question words *siapa* (who) and *mana* (where) come initially in the clause with noun and demonstrative pronoun. If these question words are put afterward later in the utterance, there will be also an acceptable sentence. However, the children do not prefer to do that. Here the construction they made in their utterances.

→ Q^{SIAPA} - N/DEM

→ Q^{MANA} - N

It is in contrast with the question word *apa* (what) in sentences (9b), (10a), (11a), and (11b) where it is always put to follow demonstrative pronoun, noun, and verb. *Apa* does not precede these word classes in the clause. In this sense, the children prefer to use question word *apa* in the final position, unlike adults who use *apa* in initial and final position. The following is the construction of question word with *apa* in Indonesian children.

→ N/V/DEM - Q^{APA}

Nevertheless, there is no use of *apa* in the initial position uttered by Indonesian children which differ noticeably from what Bellugi and Klima (2004) proposed.

CONCLUSION

To sum up this study, I would like to state here that:

- (1) In the early stage of acquiring questions, Indonesian children typically start to acquire wh-words such as *siapa*, *apa*, *mana*, and *ngapain*.
- (2) In the major uses of question words, especially for *apa* (what), Indonesian children prefer to use descriptive verbs to know what anyone's doing.
- (3) In the other form of question word like *bagaimana* (how come), Indonesian children seem to be delayed in acquiring this question word. However, they anticipate this with other productive low question words such as *kok* or *ngapain*.
- (4) The positions of question words placed by Indonesian children are very typical. Question words *siapa* (who) and *mana* (where) are in initial position or precede noun and demonstrative pronoun. Meanwhile, the question word *apa* (what) is the other way round.

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