



Fronted or In-Situ? Wh-Question Strategies and Acceptability in Ibibemba: A Minimalist Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This article examines wh-question formation in Ibibemba, a Bantu language spoken in Zambia. Using a Minimalist framework, I investigate how locality constraints interact with speakers' acceptability judgments. The data come from elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgment tasks, and audio recordings collected in two secondary schools in Mungwi District. The results show that Ibibemba wh-questions follow systematic structural constraints rather than free variation. Fronted ni-based wh-questions are strongly preferred in formal contexts. In-situ and non-canonical order questions are only accepted in specific oral discourse settings. Participants' judgments reveal clear sensitivity to locality conditions, argument role identification, and the structural position of the wh-expression. These findings support Phase Theory and the Phase Impenetrability Condition as mechanisms that explain wh-dependencies in Bantu. At the same time, they reveal how formal syntactic constraints interact with discourse-pragmatic factors. Ibibemba offers useful evidence for the feature-driven nature of wh-movement and the role of locality in licensing interrogative dependencies.

Keywords: Ibibemba, Wh-Questions, Minimalism, Locality, Phase Theory, Acceptability Judgments, Bantu Syntax.

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Introduction

Wh-question formation has been central to generative syntactic theory because it reveals how clause structure, movement, and interpretive dependencies relate to one another. Since Chomsky's early work on wh-movement (Chomsky, 1977), questions have served as a diagnostic for understanding how languages organise sentence structure, how constituents are displaced from their base positions, and how locality constraints shape possible dependencies. In the Minimalist Programme (Chomsky, 1995, 2001, 2008), wh-questions are analysed through the interaction of feature-driven movement (internal Merge), Agree relations, and phase-based locality conditions that restrict how far a constituent can move and what positions are accessible for interpretation.

Bantu languages have been especially useful for testing these theoretical claims. Their rich agreement morphology, flexible word order patterns, and overt morphological markers of focus and interrogativity make syntactic dependencies visible (Carstens, 2005; Diercks, 2010; van der Wal, 2022). Yet many individual Bantu languages remain under-documented in formal generative terms. Ibibemba, spoken across Northern, Muchinga, Luapula, Central and parts of the Copperbelt Provinces of Zambia, has received attention in phonology and morphology (Kula, 2002; Katamba, 2003). However, formal syntactic studies of its question formation patterns remain scarce.

This article addresses that gap. We examine wh-question formation in Ibibemba within a Minimalist framework, with particular attention to how locality constraints interact with acceptability. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What wh-question strategies are available in Icibemba, and how do they differ in structural position and acceptability?
2. How do locality constraints, particularly phase boundaries, affect the formation and interpretation of wh-questions?
3. What do participant acceptability judgments reveal about the structural constraints governing Icibemba wh-dependencies?

The data are drawn from a larger study on Transformational Generative Grammar analysis of Icibemba sentence structures, conducted in two secondary schools in Mungwi District, Zambia. We used a qualitative case study design with 25 participants: 5 teachers and 20 learners. Methods included semi-structured interviews, elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgment tasks on a 7-point scale, and audio recordings to capture both produced forms and acceptability patterns.

The findings show that Icibemba wh-questions are governed by systematic structural constraints that align with Minimalist predictions. Fronted *ni*-based wh-questions are strongly preferred, particularly in formal written contexts. Alternative positions are accepted only in specific discourse contexts. Participants' judgments reveal sensitivity to locality conditions, argument structure, and the interpretive role of the wh-expression. These results add to the growing body of generative research on Bantu wh-syntax and show that Icibemba provides useful evidence for feature-driven movement and phase-based locality.

Theoretical Framework

Wh-Movement and Feature-Driven Dependencies

In Minimalist syntax, wh-question formation is a feature-driven dependency. A wh-expression moves to a clause-peripheral position, usually the specifier of CP or a higher functional projection associated with interrogative force (Chomsky, 1995, 2001). The wh-expression bears an interpretable [Q] feature or an uninterpretable [wh] feature that must be checked or valued through agreement with a probe on C (or a related head). This feature-driven approach explains why wh-expressions move to particular positions: a probe attracts them because they have matching features.

The movement operation, internal Merge, creates a dependency between the moved constituent and its original position, where it receives thematic interpretation. This dependency is subject to locality conditions. The wh-expression cannot move arbitrarily far or across certain structural boundaries without violating grammatical constraints. The position to which the wh-expression moves — the specifier of CP or a focus-related projection — is an edge position where the interpretive feature can be checked

and where the question can be interpreted at the semantic interface.

For Bantu languages, wh-movement often interacts with focus marking. Many Bantu languages use morphological focus markers or particular word orders to signal the interrogative status of a constituent (Diercks, 2010; van der Wal, 2022). In Icibemba, the focus particle *ni* appears with many fronted wh-expressions, which suggests that wh-question formation is closely linked to focus structure. This interaction provides additional evidence for the feature-driven nature of the dependency.

Phase Theory and Locality Constraints

Phase Theory (Chomsky, 2001, 2008) provides an explicit account of why movement is constrained. According to this theory, syntactic derivation proceeds in phases, with vP and CP serving as phases — units of structure that are transferred to the phonological and semantic interfaces upon completion. The Phase Impenetrability Condition (PIC) states that once a phase is complete, its domain becomes inaccessible to further syntactic operations. Only the edge of the phase — its specifier and head — remains accessible for movement into higher positions.

The PIC has important implications for wh-question formation. When a wh-expression is extracted from a clause, it must first move to the edge of each intermediate phase (vP and CP) before moving to its final position. This stepwise movement ensures that the dependency is built through successive cyclic movement, with each intermediate landing site serving as a stepping stone. If a wh-expression tries to move across a phase boundary without first moving to the phase edge, the derivation crashes because the material inside the phase becomes inaccessible after Spell-Out.

Phase Theory has been used to explain patterns of long-distance wh-movement, complementiser agreement, and the distribution of resumptive pronouns in Bantu (Diercks, 2013; Carstens, 2005). The theory predicts that wh-movement should be constrained by phase boundaries, with intermediate movement required at each phase edge. This prediction is particularly testable in languages with overt complementiser morphology or visible agreement patterns that reveal the presence of phase heads.

In Icibemba, phase boundaries may explain why certain wh-questions are unacceptable and why participants show sensitivity to the structural position of the wh-expression. If a wh-expression is not properly positioned at the edge of the relevant phase, the resulting question may be judged unnatural or ungrammatical. We examine whether Icibemba participant judgments reflect sensitivity to such phase-based locality conditions.

Locality and Acceptability

The relationship between locality constraints and acceptability judgments is central to generative syntax.

Theoretical models predict that certain structures should be unacceptable if they violate locality conditions, but the exact nature of the violation and the degree of unacceptability can vary across languages and constructions. Schütze and Sprouse (2014) stress the importance of carefully collecting and interpreting acceptability judgments, since they provide evidence for speakers' grammatical competence.

In wh-questions, locality violations can arise in several ways. The wh-expression may be extracted from a position that is too deeply embedded — for instance, across multiple phase boundaries without intermediate movement. Or it may be moved to a position that is not licensed by the relevant probe. Intervention effects may also arise when an intervening element blocks the dependency between the probe and the goal (Rizzi, 1990; Starke, 2001). In Bantu languages, object marking and agreement may interact with locality conditions, creating complex acceptability patterns.

We examine Ibibemba wh-questions across different structural positions and discourse contexts to determine whether participant acceptability judgments reflect sensitivity to locality conditions. If Ibibemba speakers distinguish between natural and unnatural wh-questions based on structural position, this would support the claim that locality constraints are part of the grammatical competence that governs wh-question formation.

Methodology

Research Context and Participants

We conducted the study in two secondary schools in Mungwi District, Zambia, a predominantly Ibibemba-speaking area. The participants were 25 individuals: 5 Ibibemba language teachers (coded T1–T5) and 20 learners (coded L1–L20) who could speak, read, and understand Ibibemba well enough to complete structured syntactic tasks. The teachers had direct experience teaching Ibibemba grammar and could provide reflective explanations of wh-question formation. The learners provided classroom-based competence data through production and judgment tasks.

Data Collection Instruments

We collected data through four complementary instruments:

Elicitation tasks. Participants responded to structured prompts designed to elicit wh-questions in Ibibemba. Prompts required participants to convert declarative sentences into questions using forms corresponding to *who* (*nibani*), *what* (*nicinshi/cinshi*), and *where* (*kwi*). Some prompts also required questions targeting different grammatical roles: subject, object, and location.

Grammaticality judgment tasks. Participants rated 15–20 wh-question items on a 7-point scale, where 1 meant completely unacceptable, 4 meant uncertain or borderline, and 7 meant fully natural. Items included well-formed fronted wh-questions (e.g., *Ni bani alelima ibala?*), less natural or

unusual-order questions (e.g., *Ifisabo aleelanga bani?*), and questions with potential agreement or structural issues.

Semi-structured teacher interviews. Teachers were interviewed about their observations of wh-question formation in classroom contexts, including common learner errors and effective teaching strategies.

Audio recordings. All spoken responses were digitally recorded to preserve pronunciation, self-corrections, and hesitation patterns, which provided additional evidence for analysing structural sensitivity.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through several stages. First, we transcribed audio recordings and written responses and organised them by participant codes. Second, we categorised elicited wh-questions by question type (subject, object, location), structural position (fronted, in-situ), and the presence of focus markers (*ni*). Third, we analysed judgment task responses by comparing ratings across item types and participant groups, treating borderline items cautiously. Fourth, we compared patterns across instruments to identify consistent findings.

The analysis was guided by Minimalist concepts — feature-driven movement, Phase Theory, and the Phase Impenetrability Condition — but the interpretation of participant responses remained grounded in the actual patterns observed in the data.

Findings

Wh-Question Strategies in Ibibemba

The elicitation tasks revealed several strategies for forming wh-questions in Ibibemba. The most common and consistently accepted strategy involved fronting the wh-expression with the focus particle *ni*. For subject questions, participants produced forms such as *Ni bani alelima icibala?* ('Who is cultivating the field?'), where the subject wh-expression appears clause-initially with the focus marker. For object questions, they produced forms such as *Nicinshi umwana aleesoma?* ('What is the child reading?'), where the object wh-expression is fronted.

For location questions, the pattern was more variable. Some participants produced in-situ forms such as *Abanabalikwi?* ('Where are the children?'), where the wh-expression appears in the position associated with the location phrase. Others produced fronted forms such as *Kwi abanabali?* ('Where are the children?'), though this was less common. The variation suggests that location questions may allow more flexibility than subject or object questions, possibly because the locative element is less integrated into the argument structure.

A few participants produced questions in which the wh-expression did not appear in canonical position. For example,

some produced a form such as *Ifisabo aleelanga bani?* but later corrected it or noted it as less natural. Teacher comments confirmed that such non-canonical orders sometimes appear

in informal conversation but are generally not preferred in formal written grammar tasks.

Table 1: Elicited wh-question forms and questioned elements

Declarative base	Common wh-question produced	Questioned element	Finding
Umulimi alelima ibala	<i>Ni bani alelima ibala?</i>	Subject	Fronted wh-form strongly accepted
Umwana aleesoma icitabo	<i>Nicinshi umwana aleesoma?</i>	Object	Fronted object wh-form accepted in formal tasks
Abanaba balikus ukulu	<i>Abanabalikwi?</i>	Location	In-situ location question accepted orally
Teacher gives book to learner	<i>Ninani umusambishi apelwa icitabo?</i>	Recipient	Longer questions created more hesitation

Acceptability Patterns for Wh-Questions

The grammaticality judgment task provided systematic evidence of how Ibibemba speakers evaluate different wh-question forms. The ratings revealed a clear hierarchy of acceptability. Fronted *ni*-based wh-questions received the highest ratings; non-canonical order questions received lower ratings.

The highest-rated items were those in which the wh-expression appeared clause-initially with the *ni* focus marker. Participants consistently rated these items as fully natural, and their comments focused on the clarity of the question. Learner L12 explained: "When I ask who is cultivating, I say *Ni bani alelima ibala?* It sounds direct."

Items with non-canonical word order, such as *Ifisabo aleelanga bani?*, received lower ratings. Participants

identified several problems with such forms. Some noted that the verb form *aleelanga* was unfamiliar or unclear in the context — possibly confusing *eating* with *reading*. Others commented that the position of the wh-expression made the question harder to interpret. The ratings were not uniformly low, however. A few participants found the form interpretable, which suggests that non-canonical orders may be marginally acceptable in some contexts.

Teacher T3 observed: "The learner must know what is being asked. If the question is about the doer, the form is different from asking about the thing. The learners make mistakes when they just put *nani* or *cinshi* anywhere without checking the sentence." This comment indicates that well-formed wh-questions require knowledge of the argument role being questioned and the appropriate structural position for the wh-expression.

Table 2: Grammaticality judgment patterns for wh-question items

Wh-question item	Dominant judgment	Main explanation given
<i>Ni bani alelima ibala?</i>	High acceptance (6–7)	Clear subject question
<i>Nicinshi umwana aleesoma?</i>	High acceptance (6–7)	Clear object question
<i>Abanabalikwi?</i>	Moderate to high (5–6)	Natural spoken location question
<i>Ifisabo aleelanga bani?</i>	Low to borderline (2–4)	Unclear verb form and strange word order
<i>Nani umwana aleesoma icitabo?</i>	Borderline (3–5)	Interpretable but less natural than <i>ni</i> -based form

Locality Effects in Participant Judgments

The judgment data also revealed sensitivity to locality conditions, particularly in questions involving more complex structures. When participants judged questions with multiple clauses or wh-expressions that appeared to be extracted from embedded positions, ratings were often lower than for simple matrix questions.

In cases where a wh-expression was placed in a position that did not clearly connect to its interpretive role, participants showed hesitation. For example, many participants rated *Nani umwana aleesoma icitabo?* (roughly 'Who the child is

reading the book?') as borderline. Although the question was interpretable, it was judged less natural than the *ni*-based fronted form. This suggests that participants are sensitive to whether the wh-expression is properly related to the predicate structure. In Minimalist terms, this corresponds to whether the wh-expression has moved to the appropriate phase edge.

The audio recordings provided additional evidence of locality sensitivity. Several learners orally corrected prompted forms that sounded unnatural or that seemed to violate expected structural patterns. In one recorded exchange, a learner began to produce a literal word-by-word transformation of a declarative sentence, paused, and then changed it into a more

natural *ni*-based question. This self-correction suggests that participants actively monitor structural well-formedness during production, rather than merely reproducing memorised patterns.

Discourse Context and Acceptability

The findings also showed that acceptability judgments are influenced by discourse context. Some question forms that were judged less acceptable in the formal written judgment task were accepted when participants were told the question was being used in oral conversation. Teacher T3 explained: "In everyday talk, people may not always put the question word first, but in written grammar we prefer the proper structure."

This distinction was particularly clear for in-situ wh-questions. In the elicitation tasks, some participants produced in-situ forms for location and object questions, especially when the prompting context was conversational. These forms were not consistently rejected. Instead, they were considered acceptable in some contexts but less appropriate in formal written grammar. This suggests that Ibibemba wh-question formation is sensitive to register and discourse context, with formal written contexts favouring more canonical fronted structures.

The interaction between discourse context and acceptability has implications for Phase Theory and the nature of wh-dependencies. If in-situ questions are interpreted through alternative mechanisms — such as unselective binding or focus association rather than movement — then the locality

constraints that apply to moved wh-expressions may not apply in the same way. This would explain why participants can accept in-situ forms in oral contexts while still recognising that fronted forms are more appropriate for formal grammar.

Agreement and Argument Role Identification

A further finding was that wh-question acceptability depends on the relationship between the wh-expression and the argument role being questioned. Participants distinguished clearly between questions targeting the subject, object, and location. Subject questions were generally judged as most natural, probably because the subject position is structurally prominent and easily identified. Object questions were also accepted when the wh-expression was appropriately positioned, though some participants commented on spelling and spacing in expressions such as *cinshi*. Location questions were the most variable, with both fronted and in-situ forms appearing in the data.

Teacher comments confirmed that learners often struggle when the questioned element is less clearly identified by the surface structure. One teacher noted that learners sometimes form questions by inserting question words without considering whether they are asking about the doer, the object of the action, or the location. This suggests that classroom grammar must help learners identify argument roles before forming questions. The finding aligns with the theoretical claim that wh-questions involve dependencies between interrogative expressions and syntactic positions.

Table 3: Acceptability by questioned element

Questioned element	Preferred form	Acceptability	Comments
Subject	<i>Ni bani</i> + V + O?	High	Clear structural prominence
Object	<i>Nicinshi</i> + S + V?	High	Clear with proper wh-form
Location	S + V + <i>kwi</i> ?	Variable	In-situ accepted orally
Recipient	<i>Ninani</i> + passive?	Moderate	More complex structure

Discussion

Wh-Question Formation as Feature-Driven Dependency

The findings support the analysis of Ibibemba wh-question formation as a feature-driven dependency between an interrogative expression and a position of interpretation. Participants consistently produced and accepted wh-questions in which the wh-expression was linked to a specific argument role. They rejected or hesitated when the connection was unclear. This pattern aligns with the Minimalist view that wh-questions are governed by feature-driven movement or Agree relations, not merely by the presence of a question word.

The *ni* focus marker that appears with many fronted wh-expressions in Ibibemba is particularly revealing. In

Minimalist terms, *ni* may be a morphological realisation of the focus feature associated with the wh-expression, or it may be the spell-out of the probe on C that attracts the wh-expression. The strong preference for *ni*-based fronted questions suggests that this marker is part of the structural licensing mechanism for wh-dependencies in formal contexts.

This finding is consistent with the broader Bantu literature. Diercks (2010, 2013) has shown that focus marking and complementiser agreement in Bantu languages interact with wh-movement. Van der Wal (2022) discusses the featural basis of Bantu agreement systems. The present study extends this line of research by showing that Ibibemba participant judgments reflect sensitivity to the feature-driven nature of wh-questions, even when participants cannot articulate the theoretical principles involved.

Locality, Phase Boundaries, and Acceptability

The findings also support the relevance of locality constraints, particularly phase-based locality, in shaping Ibibemba wh-question acceptability. Participants consistently preferred fronted wh-questions in which the wh-expression appeared to be licensed by a clause-peripheral position. Non-canonical orders, particularly those in which the wh-expression appeared in a position that did not align with its interpretive role, were judged less acceptable.

From a Phase Theory perspective, the acceptability patterns can be understood as follows. The fronted wh-expression occupies the specifier of CP (or a related focus projection), which is the edge position of the CP phase. This position is accessible for feature checking and interpretation, and the wh-expression can enter into a dependency with the probe on C. When the wh-expression appears in a non-canonical position, it may not be at the phase edge, meaning that it cannot be properly licensed by the interrogative probe. The resulting question may be interpretable through other mechanisms, particularly in oral contexts, but it is judged less acceptable in formal grammar because it does not satisfy the structural licensing requirements.

The distinction between formal written and oral contexts matters here. The fact that in-situ questions are sometimes accepted in oral contexts suggests that Ibibemba may employ multiple strategies for forming wh-questions, with the preferred strategy depending on register and discourse conditions. This is not unusual. Many languages allow both movement and in-situ strategies, with the choice determined by factors such as discourse context, information structure, or the nature of the wh-expression.

For theoretical purposes, the existence of multiple strategies does not undermine the locality-based analysis of the primary movement strategy. Rather, it suggests that languages may have alternative mechanisms for licensing wh-dependencies, and that the Phase Impenetrability Condition applies primarily to the movement-based strategy. The present study therefore contributes to the broader understanding of wh-variation by showing that Ibibemba speakers distinguish between formal and informal contexts in their acceptability judgments.

The Role of Argument Structure in Wh-Questions

The findings also revealed that wh-question acceptability depends on the participant's ability to identify the argument role being questioned. Participants more readily accepted subject questions than object questions, and location questions showed the most variation. This pattern suggests that argument structure and thematic roles play a role in the acceptability of wh-questions, even when the surface position of the wh-expression is the same.

In Minimalist terms, the dependency between the wh-expression and its interpreted position must be established through Agree or movement, and this dependency is constrained by the argument structure of the predicate. A subject wh-expression must be related to the external argument position; an object wh-expression must be related to the internal argument position. If the wh-expression is not properly matched to the argument role, the dependency is not fully licensed, and the question is judged less acceptable.

This finding has implications for classroom teaching. Teachers must help learners identify the role of the questioned constituent before forming the question. It also has theoretical implications: argument structure is part of the grammatical information that shapes wh-dependencies.

Participant Judgments as Evidence for Grammatical Competence

This study demonstrates that carefully collected participant acceptability judgments can provide valuable evidence for grammatical competence in under-documented languages. The Ibibemba speakers in this study could distinguish between natural and unnatural wh-questions, even when they could not articulate the theoretical principles involved. Their judgments revealed sensitivity to structural position, argument role, and discourse context — all of which are relevant to theoretical models of wh-question formation.

The 7-point scale allowed participants to make finer distinctions than a simple binary judgment. The space for comments enabled me to interpret the numerical ratings in relation to qualitative explanations. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data is particularly valuable in fieldwork contexts, where participants may not have formal training in syntactic analysis.

The findings also highlight the importance of considering discourse context in syntactic research. Some wh-questions that were judged less acceptable in formal written contexts were more acceptable in oral contexts. This suggests that grammar is not monolithic but varies according to register and discourse conditions. This does not mean grammar is unconstrained. Rather, different contexts may license different structural options.

Conclusion

This article has examined wh-question formation in Ibibemba from a Minimalist perspective, focusing on how locality constraints interact with acceptability. The findings show that Ibibemba wh-questions are governed by systematic structural constraints that align with theoretical predictions. Fronted *ni*-based wh-questions are strongly preferred in formal contexts. In-situ and non-canonical order questions are accepted only in specific oral discourse contexts. Participant judgments reveal sensitivity to locality conditions, argument role identification, and the structural position of the wh-expression.

The study contributes to generative research on Bantu wh-syntax by providing evidence from Ibibemba, a language that has received less attention in formal syntactic scholarship. The findings support Phase Theory and the Phase Impenetrability Condition as explanatory mechanisms for wh-dependencies, while also revealing how formal syntactic constraints interact with discourse-pragmatic factors. The study demonstrates the value of combining elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgment tasks, and audio recordings in syntactic fieldwork, particularly for under-documented languages.

Future research should extend this analysis to more complex wh-question structures, including embedded wh-questions, multiple wh-questions, and long-distance dependencies. Such research would provide stronger evidence for the role of phase boundaries in constraining wh-movement in Ibibemba and would contribute to the broader understanding of Bantu wh-syntax. Future research could also examine the relationship between wh-question formation and other focus-related constructions in Ibibemba, such as clefts and topicalisation, to determine whether similar locality constraints apply across constructions.

The pedagogical implications of this research are also significant. For Ibibemba language teaching, the findings suggest that grammar instruction should help learners understand the structural relationship between the wh-expression and its interpretive role. Teachers should also distinguish between formal and informal question strategies. By providing teachers with clearer explanations of wh-question formation, this study contributes to improved Ibibemba grammar instruction in Zambian secondary schools.

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