Yes-no Questions and Wh-questions in English and Albanian Spoken Discourse: Focus on Political Debates

Herolinda Bylykbashi[1]

[1] Department of English Language and Literature, University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", Prishtina, Kosovo

Correspondence: Herolinda Bylykbashi, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", Prishtina, Kosovo.

Abstract

This paper aims to draw reliable conclusions regarding yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian spoken discourse. The study outlines the differences and similarities in these question types between the two languages.

The corpus of the study includes seven Meet the Press (NBC News) interviews (totaling 2 hours and 51 minutes) with the former President of the USA, Donald Trump which contribute to the English spoken corpus. Additionally, there are two Rubikon (KTV) interviews (totaling 2 hours and 51 minutes) with Hashim Thaçi, the former President of the Republic of Kosovo that are part of the Albanian spoken corpus. A qualitative method is employed to compare, analyze, and draw conclusions based on the findings of the conducted research. The study finds that the English yes-no questions feature the inversion of auxiliary and modal verbs to the subject position. However, the Albanian yes-no questions are characterized by the interrogative particle *'a'*, which may be positioned as the initial or final element or be absent altogether. The results also offer compelling evidence of the differences in the number of wh-words used to ask wh-questions in English and Albanian. They also highlight the most frequently used wh-words and the respective functions of wh-questions in both English and Albanian.

Keywords: yes-no questions, wh-questions, English, Albanian, spoken discourse

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Semantics is a focal point of many linguistic studies. The importance of semantics lies in its interrelation with other linguistic fields and its contribution to derive authentic conclusions from solved problems. In order to be able to find a piece of information, a question needs to be asked and an answer is provided by the interlocutor or interlocutors. Questioning in teaching and learning process is considered as an important aspect to create the effective learning (Manek & Isu, 2023). The early years of the twenty-first century have seen an increased interest in questions, this is partly due to the rise of interest in interaction, where questions play a key role (Benthem & Meulen, 2011). As far as the term question is concerned, Huddleston et al. (2002) claim that its usage takes place at semantic and pragmatic levels, so a question is differentiated by the fact that it determines the number of logically possible answers at the semantic level. Question–answer paradigms typically involve cross-speaker dialogues, which makes the primary diagnostic available for the formal analysis of questions a particularly delicate tool to handle (Dayal, 2016). Benthem & Meulen (2011) point out that the word question is used in at least three different ways, hence, it is used to express a type of sentence which is indicated by word order, intonation, question mark as well as interrogative pronouns; the term is also used to express a speech act by uttering interrogative sentences in order to answer the question; and questions can be asked by other means not only by using interrogative sentences. Indicating a vast number of differences between English and Albanian grammar, the study's focus is to come up with conclusions regarding differences between both languages in yes-no questions and wh-questions structure and function in spoken discourse.

Spoken discourse (language) is usually seen as being more interactive in comparison to written language. Interlocutors in a dialogue address each other directly, grab their attention, ask questions, receive feedback, and answer each other's questions as needed. We know that an utterance is a question if it has one or more of these four markers: rising intonation; inverted word order; a question word: who, what, which, where, when, how, why, or the word or (Kreidler, 1998). Asher & Reese (2007) claim that intonation often discloses information regarding the content of discourse and intonation is essential to track focus not only in discourse but also in dialogue. Yes-no questions and wh-questions play a boundless role in everyday conversations to seek information, and to ask about time, people, ownership, reason, or places. The present study analyzes yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian language extracted from seven Meet the Press (NBC) interviews with the former President of the USA Donald Trump and two Rubikon (KTV) interviews with the former President of the Republic of Kosovo, Hashim Thaçi. Six out of seven interviews with the President of the USA were held in 2016 and one in 2019. The main topics discussed are related to healthcare, planned parenthood, immigration, tax returns, Muslim ban, citizenship, guns, mental illnesses, ISIS, elections, Hillary Clinton, and nuclear weapons. However, the first interview with the President

of the Republic of Kosovo was held in 2018, and the second one in 2019. The main topics regarding the Albanian corpus of the study include the association of municipalities, the sovereignty of Kosovo, visa liberalization, the Berlin summit, tax removal, territories exchange, the armed forces of Kosovo, Kosovo's army, and three northern municipalities of Kosovo.

The present study also gives an insight into yes-no questions and wh-questions from a semantic perspective in Albanian since there are no studies concerned with this topic. Therefore, this study is going to provide the basis for the comparison of yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian political discourse taking into account the structure of yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian language, the wh-words usage in both languages, their frequency as well as the pragmatic function of wh-questions in English and Albanian political discourse (political debates).

1.2 Aims of the Study

The study aims at comparing yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian spoken discourse, more specifically taking into consideration political debates in both languages and determining differences and similarities between both languages in order to come up with reliable conclusions regarding these question types.

1.3 Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are the differences and similarities between English and Albanian at the semantic level analysis of yes-no questions and wh-questions? (2) What are the structural similarities and differences between English and Albanian yes-no questions? (3) What are the differences between English and Albanian wh-questions concerning their frequency? (4) What are the pragmatic functions (illocutionary forces) of wh-questions in English and Albanian political debates?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The major outcome of the conducted research is directly related to these grammatical structures in both languages since it's going to provide a basis for comparison in both languages, and it's going to represent differences and similarities concerning yes-no questions and wh-questions. The study delivers numerous contributions to yes-no questions and wh-questions in the Albanian language as well as to researchers who are interested in doing further research in this field of expertise.

2. Literature Review

When dealing with types of questions in English, many scholars have come up with different classifications. According to Quirk et al. (1985), questions are primarily divided into three major classes based on the expected reply, yes-no questions (*Have you finished the book?*), wh-questions (*What is your name?* or *How old are you?*), and alternative questions (*Would you like to go for a Walk or stay at HOME?*). We have two kinds of questions: alternative questions (e.g. *Does Mary like John or does Mary like Bill?*), which in their indirect form are prefixed with whether (or if), and so-called wh-questions, which begin with an interrogative noun phrase or adverb such as which girl, who, why, how, etc. so-called yes/no questions (e.g. *whether Mary likes Bill*) can be considered as syntactically "degenerate" alternative questions (*whether Mary likes Bill or Mary doesn't like Bill*) (Karttunen, 1977).

Semantically, a yes/no question is supposed to be a question that seeks yes or no in response; this might also be the basic reason for calling it a 'polarity question', with the two poles being yes and no (Mahmood, 2014). Greenbaum & Nelson (2013) claim that the structure of yes-no questions begins with a verb and subject-operator inversion is needed and they are called yes-no questions because a yes-no answer is expected from the interlocutor, e.g.: *Should (op) the government (S) cut income taxes?*; *Does (op) this shop (S) open 24 hours a day?*. Berk (1999) asserts that the structure of yes-no questions is formed by the operator that precedes the subject (*Is Danielle running that marathon?*), if there is no auxiliary in VP, the periphrastic performs the function of the operator (*Did Patrick give you the file?*).

On the other hand, Greenbaum & Nelson (2013) point out that most wh-questions begin with a wh-word or phrase that shows a missing piece of information the speaker intends the hearer to supply, e.g.: *Why should the government cut income taxes*?*;* On which days does this shop open 24 hours?. Carnie (2011) claims that wh-questions are answered by a constituent and they are called wh-questions based on the fact that they begin with questions words that start with the letters wh (*what, who, where, when, why, which*). However, Radford (2009) states that *how* in questions like *How are you?* is considered to be a wh-word since it performs all syntactic functions as other interrogative words beginning with *wh* letters. As far as the structure of wh-questions is concerned, Kim & Sells (2008) argue that each wh-question is composed of two parts, a wh-phrase (filler) as well as an inverted sentence consisting of a missing phrase (gap), the distance between the filler and the gap can be "long-distance" or "unbounded". Goodall (2006) asserted that wh-questions are normally formed by the movement of a wh-word or phrase to the initial position, and they also require subject-auxiliary inversion in non-subject wh-questions. WH questions are English components that are integrated through writing and speaking (Wacana, 2016). Wh-questions are also known as wh-interrogatives, information-seeking questions, and content questions (Addaiban, 2017).

In addition, Ciardelli, Groenedijk & Roelofse (2019) argue that wh-questions can consist of multiple wh-phrases that ask for the particularity of participants that are involved in a specific relation, as exemplified in the sentence *Who is married to whom?*, based on the fact that there are two wh-phrases, the relation must be specified in a binary relation.

3. Method

The present study aims to analyze questions taking into account spoken discourse (political discourse). Therefore, seven Meet the Press

(NBC News) interviews (totaling 2 hours and 51 minutes) with the former President of the USA Donald Trump contribute to the English spoken corpus. Additionally, there are two Rubikon (KTV) interviews (totaling 2 hours and 51 minutes) with Hashim Thaçi, the former President of the Republic of Kosovo that are part of the Albanian spoken corpus. As far as data collection analysis of spoken corpus is concerned, first of all, the interviews are transcribed in both languages and then yes/no questions and wh-questions are identified and extracted. The English and Albanian interviews are transcribed based on Jefferson's system of transcription. A comparison regarding the dominant type of questions asked in English and Albanian spoken discourse is drawn. Yes-no questions as well as wh-questions are further analyzed based on the frequency of question words used to enquire about each type of question. A qualitative method is employed in order to come up with reliable conclusions concerning differences between yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian spoken discourse. The results of the study are presented in tabular form and by using figures, too.

4. Research Findings

The first step regarding questions analysis in both languages consists of a classification of them into two main categories yes-no questions and wh-questions. These types of questions are further analyzed based on the grammatical forms used to express them in the corpus of our study.

4.1 Yes-no questions and wh-questions in English

Based on the corpus of the study in hand, there are more wh-questions rather than yes-no questions in English spoken discourse.
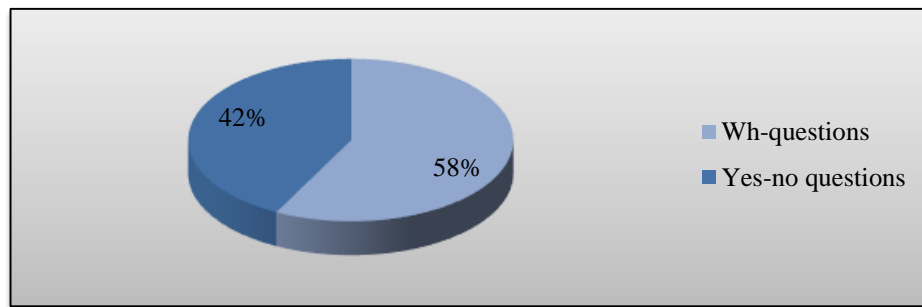

Figure 1. Percentage of wh-questions and yes-no questions in English spoken discourse

Yes-no questions of the spoken English corpus are expressed using auxiliary verbs and modal verbs. The auxiliary verbs used are: be, do, and have as well as the modal verbs: should, would, and will. Table 1 gives a detailed description of every auxiliary and modal verb used in the spoken discourse.

Table 1. Yes-no questions in English spoken discourse

Auxiliary verb	Question	Number of tokens	(%)
Do	Do you feel like you were being pushed into military action against Iran by any of your advice?	51	48%
Are	Are you willing to raise taxes on the point one percent?	19	18%
Is	Is it worth shutting down the government over?	5	5%
Did	Did you see John Stewart's pretty passionate plea on behalf of 9/11 response?	3	3%
Was	Was he subpoenaed by mister Muller?	3	3%
Have	Have you thought about traveling to him and seeing if you can sort of calm the waters with him at all?	2	2%
Does	You want to be in the nuclear umbrella, does it cost you money?	1	1%
Had	Had there been same-day voter registration?	1	1%
Were	Were you ever a donor?	1	1%
Modal verb			
Would	Would you support funding Planned Parenthood?	9	8%
Should	Should private companies be able to fire people because they're gay?	8	7%
Will	United Nations said they'd like the United States to order the FBI to investigate Jamal Cody's death and possibly MBA element in it, will you allow the FBI to do that?	3	3%

Wh-questions are expressed by eight wh-words in the English spoken corpus, the wh-words used are what, how, why, who, where, when, which, and whose. A more detailed analysis of each of the previously mentioned wh-words is going to be given in Table 2.

Table 2. Wh-question in English spoken discourse

Wh- word	Question	Number of tokens	(%)	Function
What	What has candidate Trump said about that?	75	52%	seeking information
How	How do you put this toothpaste back in the tube?	28	19%	asking about manner
Why	Why do you have to say it?	26	18%	asking for reason
Who	Who do you believe was before her?	6	4%	asking about people
Where	Where is the evidence of this?	6	4%	asking about places
Whose	Whose constitutional rights matter more?	1	1%	asking about ownership
When	When was the last time America was great?	1	1%	asking about time
Which	Which is?	1	1%	asking about choice

4.2 Yes-no questions and wh-questions in Albanian

Similar to the previous part of the study concerning questions in English spoken discourse, questions extracted from the Albanian spoken discourse are going to be categorized into two main categories based on traditional grammar, yes-no questions and wh-questions. Based on the corpus of the study, the number of wh-questions prevails in comparison to yes-no questions in the Albanian language.
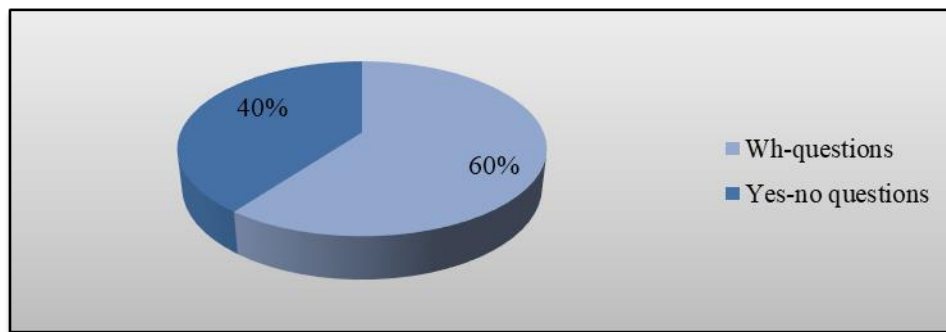

Figure 2. Percentage of wh-questions and yes-no questions in Albanian spoken discourse

Yes- no questions in Albanian language are expressed by the interrogative particle '*a*' which is located at the beginning of the interrogative clause or the end of the interrogative clause. Yes-no questions in Albanian language can be expressed with the omission of the interrogative particle '*a*' as well.

Table 3. Yes-no questions in Albanian spoken discourse

Interrogative particle	Question	Number of tokens	(%)
A	**A** po përzihet nganjëherë pak si tepër zoti Rama në çështjet e Kosovës? (Is Mr. Rama sometimes meddling a little too much in the affairs of Kosovo?) Une jam definitivisht n'rregull, nëse jom gabim, dërgom n'Gjykatë Kushtetuse. Po meno nuk um kishin dërgu n'Gjykatë Kushtetuse deri tash **a**? (I am definitely okay, if I am wrong, send me to the Constitutional Court. Do you think they didn't send me to the Constitutional Court until now?)	48	49%
No particle	Jeni takuar në Vjenë, n'fillim t'korrikut para se t'shkoni në takim me Presidentin Erdoan në Turqi? (Did you meet in Vienna at the beginning of July before you went to meet with President Erdogan in Turkey?)	49	51%

Wh-questions of the Albanian spoken corpus are expressed by twelve wh-words: *cili (what/who), si (how), çka (what), kush (who), çfarë (what), pse (why), sa (how much/how many), kur (when), ku (where), kujt (whose), për kë (for who), and kënd (who).*

Table 4. Wh-questions in Albanian spoken discourse

Wh-word	Question	Number of tokens	(%)	Function
Pse (why)	Jo, po t'pys unë ty, pse po rren? Pse po shpif? (No, I'm asking you, why are you laughing? Why are you slandering?)	45	31%	asking for reason
Çka (what)	Çka quani korigjim na e sqaroni njëherë? (What do you call a correction, can you explain it to us?)	33	23%	seeking information
Si (how)	Si vazhdoni t'jeni President i Republikës kur dikush arreston në Republikën tuaj, i qon ata në një shtet tjeter t'lidhur, pa asnjë procedurë ligjore dhe ju mjaftoheni me një deklaratë të tillë? (How do you continue to be the President of the Republic when you arrest someone in your Republic, take them to another country in handcuffs, without any legal procedure and you are satisfied with such a	24	16%	asking about manner

	statement?)			
Kush (who)	Kush e ka pergjegjёsin ё pёr viza? (Who is responsible for visas?)	13	9%	asking about people
Cili (what/who)	Cili ёshtё qёndrimi juaj pёr taksёn se edhe pёr kёtё keni pasur disa deklarime? (What is your position on the tax, as you have made several statements about this as well?)	9	6%	seeking information
Kur (when)	Kur i prishet raportet me zotin Berisha? (When did the relationship with Mr. Berisha break?)	6	4%	asking about time
Sa (how much/how many)	Sa persona mendoni se i takon pensioni nga ky numёr qё ta pёrkufizojm ё m ё qart ё pyetjen? (How many people do you think are entitled to the pension from this number to define the question more clearly?)	5	3%	asking about the quantity
Ku (where)	Ku e kan ёdh ёn ё at ё garancion? (Where did they give that guarantee?)	5	3%	asking about places
Çfar ё (what)	Cfar ё kёrcnimi zotni? (What threat, sir?)	3	2%	seeking information
Pёr kё (for who)	Për kë ka qenë nëse s'ka qenë për Sali Berishen? (Who was it for if not for Sali Berisha?)	2	1%	asking about people
Kujt (whose)	Kujt i juaji? (Whose yours?)	1	1%	asking about people
Kёnd (who)	Kёnd e kam shef q ёta di? (Who is my boss just to know?)	1	1%	asking about people

As far as research findings are concerned, a detailed explanation of yes-no questions and wh-questions regarding their structure, frequency, and pragmatic function is going to be provided in the forthcoming section of the study.

5. Discussion

English and Albanian share differences regarding the semantics of questions taking into consideration the traditional classification of questions into yes-no questions and wh-questions. Taking into account the traditional doctrine of questions' classification, there are more wh-questions in the spoken corpus rather than yes-no questions in both languages. The differences rely on the fact that yes-no questions in the English spoken discourse are expressed by a variety of auxiliary verbs and modal verbs, on the other hand, yes-no questions of the Albanian spoken corpus are expressed by the interrogative particle *'a'* and without the interrogative particle *'a'*. When it comes to the frequency of verbs used to ask yes-no questions in English, the auxiliary *do* prevails being used in 48% of the questions in our corpus, 18% of the questions of the corpus of the study start with the auxiliary verb *are*, 9% of the questions start with the modal verb *would* followed by *should* (8%), *is* (5%), *did*, *was* and *will* (3%), *have* (2%), and *does*, *had*, and *were* are used in only 1% of the questions extracted from the spoken corpus. However, yes-no questions extracted from the Albanian spoken corpus start with the interrogative particle '*a'*, the interrogative particle *'a'* is placed last in the yes-no question structure (49%), or yes-no questions in Albanian are asked without any particle (51%).

The differences are also related to wh-questions of both languages, there is a larger number of interrogative words used to ask wh-questions in Albanian (12 interrogative words) in comparison to wh-questions in English (8 interrogative words). The interrogative words used to ask wh-questions in Albanian include interrogative words such as*: pse (why), ҫka (what), si (how), kush (who), cili (what/who), kur (when), sa (how much/how many), ku (where), ҫfarё (what), p ёr k ё (for who), kujt (whose), kёnd (who)*, whereas the interrogative words used to ask wh-questions in English are: *what, how, why, who, where, whose, when, which*. The most frequently used interrogative word (wh-word) to ask wh-questions in the English spoken discourse is the interrogative word *what* (52%), followed by *how* (19%), and *why* (18%), whereas the most frequently used interrogative word (wh-word) in Albanian spoken discourse is the interrogative word *pse- why* (31%), followed by *ҫka- what* (23%), and *si- how* (16%).

Furthermore, other differences between English and Albanian wh-questions rely on the fact that the majority of wh-questions of the English spoken corpus (52%) are inquired to seek information from the hearer, 19% of wh-questions of this part of the study are used to ask about manner, 18% are used to ask for reason, 4% of wh-questions are used to ask about people and places, whereas, only 1% of them are used to ask about ownership, time, and choice. In contrast, the majority of wh-questions of the Albanian spoken corpus are used to ask about reason (31%), 23% are used to seek information by using the wh-word *ҫka (what)*, 16% are used to ask about manner, 9% to ask about people, 6% are used to seek information by using the wh-word *cili (what/who)*, 4% are used to ask about time, 3% are used to ask about the quantity and places, 2% to seek information by using the wh-word *ҫfarё (what)*, and only 1% of wh-questions are used to ask about people.

6. Conclusion

The research method used met the expectation set to come up with a reliable conclusion regarding differences and similarities between yes-no questions and wh-questions in English and Albanian spoken discourse. These languages share more differences rather than similarities taking into account these question types in English and Albanian. The number of wh-questions in comparison to yes-no questions dominates in both languages. The most remarkable result to emerge from the data is that the structure of English yes-no questions is formed with the inversion of auxiliary and modal verbs to the subject position, whereas, the structure of yes-no questions of the Albanian spoken corpus consists of an interrogative particle '*a'* that is positioned the first or the last element in the yes-no question structure or there

is no particle. The results also offer compelling evidence of the number of wh-words used to ask wh-questions in English and Albanian. There are more wh-words used to ask wh-questions in Albanian spoken discourse rather than in English. Moreover, the frequency of the wh-words used to ask wh-questions in both languages differs, too. The most frequently used wh-word in English spoken discourse is *what*, followed by *how* and *why*, whereas, the most frequently used wh-word in Albanian spoken discourse is the wh-word *pse (why)*, followed by *ҫka (what)* and *si (how)*. Differences between these two languages also rely on the function of wh-questions, English wh-questions are mainly used to seek information, to ask about manner and reason, on the other hand, Albanian wh-questions are mainly used to ask about reason, to seek information, and to ask about manner. Due to a lack of studies in this field of expertise in Albanian, this study couldn't be based on reliable theoretical and quantitative data pertaining to yes-no questions and wh-questions in Albanian language. Therefore, further research is needed to validate the results of this study to a larger sample in the Albanian language.

References

Addaiban, A. A. (2017). Acquisition of Wh-questions in English by Saudi English Majors in Najran University. *British Journal of English Linguistics, 5*(4), 17-28. Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK.

Asher, N., & Reese, B. (2007). Intonation and Discourse: Biased Questions. *Interdisciplinary Studies on Information Structure, 8,* 1-38,

Benthem, J. V., & Meulen, A. (2011). *Handbook of Logic and Language* (2nd ed.) Elsevier B.V.

Berk, L. M. (1999). *English Syntax, From Word to Discourse*. Oxford University Press.

Carnie, A. (2011). *Modern Syntax: A Coursebook*, Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511780738

Ciardelli, I., Groenendijk, J., & Roelofse, F. (2019). *Inquisitive Semantics*, Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198814788.001.0001

Dayal, V. (2016). *Questions*. Oxford University Press, Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199281268.001.0001

Goodall, G. (2006). *Inversion in wh-questions in child Romance and child English*. In Proceedings of the Chicago Linguistic Society 41.

Greenbaum, N., & Nelson, G. (2013). *An Introduction to English Grammar* (3rd ed.). Routledge London and New York.

Huddleston, et al. (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316423530

Karttunen, L. (1977). *Syntax and Semantics of Questions*, Article in Linguistics and Philosophy ·January 1977. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9509-3_6

Kim, J., & Sells, K. (2008). *English Syntax: An Introduction*. Center for the Study of Language and Information.

Kreidler, C. W. (1998). *Introducing English Semantics*. Routledge, London and New York. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203265574

Mahmood, R. K. (2014). A Pragmatic Analysis of Yes/No Questions in English with Reference to Press Conferences. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 136,* 36-40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.05.283

Manek, A. O., & Isu, R. J. (2023). *The Ability in Constructing WH-Questions by the First Year Students of SMP Negeri 10 Kupang in the Academic Year 2022/2023. JELTEC: Journal of English Language Teaching, Literature and Culture.* https://doi.org/10.2503/jeltec.v1i2.5679

Quirk, et al. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman, London and New York.

Radford, A. (2009). *An Introduction to English Sentence Structure*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511800924

Wacana, G. I. P. (2016). Patterns of wh-questions in English used by EFL students. *Sintuwu Maroso Journal of English Teaching, 2*(1).