

# Some thoughts on the derivation of polar questions

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My starting point is what can be considered, from a syntactician's viewpoint, the "best" possible derivation of polar questions (PQs): namely, a derivation universally involving wh-movement of a covert polarity operator from within the sentence radical, parallel to the movement of a wh-phrase in wh-questions (WHQs). A proposal along these lines has been recently advanced by Holmberg (2013).

I will discuss three empirical problems for this view, and conclude that the 'open polarity' of PQs cannot universally obtain via movement of a polarity operator, but rather, it is yielded by a Question operator inserted directly on top of the sentence radical.

I will then look for another potential parallelism between PQs and WHQs, concerning the distribution of Q(uestion)-particles, whose importance has been recently highlighted by Bruening (2007) and Bailey (2013), among others. I will focus in particular on Q-particles that are etymologically related to disjunction (Jayaseelan 2008). I will add to Jayaseelan's case studies – Malayalam, Japanese, Sinhala – some preliminary data on Mongsen Ao (Tibeto-Burman), Lithuanian (Baltic), Farsi (Indo-Aryan), Latin (Italic).

I will then discuss Bailey's (2013) analysis of such Q-particles (when they appear clause finally in a VO language) in terms of a disjunction structure with an elliptical second disjunct. I will argue that this analysis, though tenable for some languages, cannot account for

- (a) the Latin particle *an*, which appears clause-initially as a Q-particle, yet can only introduce the second disjunct in its disjunction use;
- (b) Jayaseelan's case studies, where the disjunctive Q-particle also appears in WHQs.

Jayaseelan's insight was that the semantics of both PQs and WHQs is inherently disjunctive. I will briefly discuss a possible implementation of this insight in the framework of inquisitive semantics (Groenendijk & Roelofsen 2009): here, disjunctive Q-particles may be taken to have evolved from the spellout of disjunction to the spellout of ?-closure (non-informative closure operator), applying in both types of questions. But note that this would be appropriate for Q-particles appearing in PQs and WHQs and nowhere else. However, in my limited crosslinguistic search, I found that whenever the disjunctive Q-particle occurs in both types of questions, it also occurs within indefinite and/or wh-pronouns (as is the case in Japanese and Sinhala).

Thus, my quest for another parallelism between PQs and WHQs remains unsuccessful: disjunctive Q-particles do not seem to spell out a topmost operator restricted to these interrogative clauses. (See Slade 2011 for a proposal on these particles).

## Selected references

- Bailey, Laura R. 2013. *The syntax of question particles*. PhD thesis, Newcastle University.
- Bruening, Benjamin. 2007. Wh-in-situ does not correlate with wh-indefinites or question particles. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38, 139-166.
- Holmberg, Anders. 2013. The syntax of answers to polar questions in English and Swedish. *Lingua* 128: 31–50.
- Jayaseelan, K. 2008. Question particles and disjunction. Ms., University of Hyderabad.