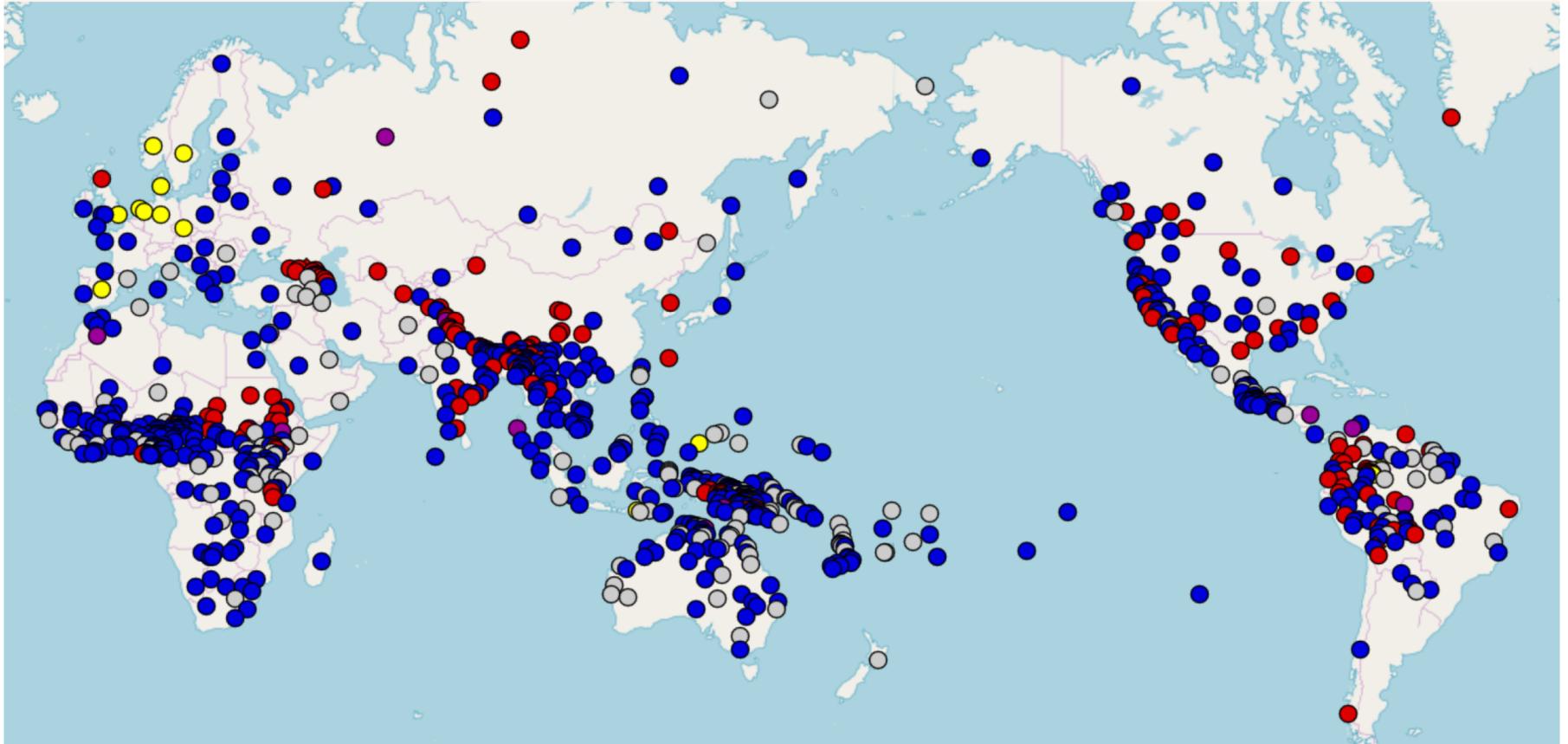


# Sources for question particles

George Walkden



# Background



**Most common strategy for marking polar questions in the world's languages is a particle (WALS, Dryer 2013)**

# State of the art

- Several typological surveys of question particles exist  
(Moravcsik 1971, Ultan 1978, Sadock and Zwicky 1985, König and Siemund 2007, Dryer 2013)
- There are also many detailed historical treatments of particular question particles in particular languages  
(e.g. Metslang et al. 2011 on Estonian)
- **However**, there has been very little work attempting to bridge the gap by identifying cross-linguistically **common pathways** for the development of such particles.  
(exceptions: Metslang, Habicht & Pajusalu 2017; Aigro 2020)
  - Methods needed: bridging shallow **typological** and deep **historical** inquiry

# Theoretical perspective: position of question particles

## Three stances (see Monforte 2018b):

1. Question particles are **in the CP-domain**  
(Rizzi 2001, Li 2006, Prieto & Rigau 2007, Kuong 2008, Bailey 2013, Kuwabara 2013, Pan & Paul 2017)
2. Question particles are **in the TP-domain** or lower  
(Hagstrom 1998, Duffield 2004, Bayer & Obenauer 2011, Egg & Mursell 2016, Scherf 2017)
3. Question particles can in principle occur in **either** position  
(Monforte 2018b)

Possible that all authors are correct; here I'll assume that they're usually in the CP-domain, as this accounts for their general peripheral position.

# Theoretical perspective: formal approaches to grammaticalization

Roberts & Roussou (2003): grammaticalization is the creation of new functional material involving ‘[s]uccessive upward reanalysis along the functional hierarchy’ (2003: 202), leading to ‘structural simplification’ (2003: 2).

**Markedness hierarchy:**  $F^*_{\text{Move/Merge}} > F^*_{\text{Move}} > F^*_{\text{Merge}} > F$

Almost all cases of grammaticalization discussed can be reduced to three basic patterns (2003: 198–199):

$[_{XP} Y+X [_{YP} \dots t_Y \dots]] > [_{XP} Y=X [_{YP} \dots Y \dots]]$  i.e. reanalysis of head-movement as first Merge  
 $[_{XP} X_F \dots [_{YP} \dots Y_F \dots]] > [_{XP} X_F \dots [_{YP} \dots Y \dots]]$  i.e. feature only expressed on higher head  
 $[_{XP} YP X \dots [\dots t_{YP} \dots]] > [_{XP} Y=X \dots [ \dots ]]$  i.e. phrase in specifier is reanalysed as head

van Gelderen (2004): Be a Head rather than a Phrase; Merge over Move; Late Merge

# Today's talk

## What historical pathways lead to the development of question particles?

- Spoiler: these are consistent with (and explained by) established **formal** approaches to **grammaticalization**

(Roberts & Roussou 2003, van Gelderen 2004)

Work in progress on a typological study of question particles and their origins cross-linguistically.

At present: 55 particles from 41 languages.

Thanks to research assistant Laura Weißhaar.

# The sample

At present: 55 particles from 41 languages.

Languages per family:

- Afro-Asiatic: 3
- Turkic: 1
- Austronesian: 3
- Basque: 1
- Dravidian: 1
- Indo-European: 20
- Japanese: 1
- Mayan: 1
- Na-Dene: 1

- Quechua: 1
- Sino-Tibetan: 2
- Tai-Kadai: 1
- Uralic: 3
- Uto-Aztecan: 1

Some families and areas are over/underrepresented.

# Sources

Four types of source, all compatible with Roberts & Roussou (2003) and van Gelderen (2004):

- a) Disjunction (Bencini 2003, Bailey 2013)
- b) Markers of epistemic modality
- c) Wh-words
- d) Subordinators

# a) Disjunction (x18)

**Aldridge (2011): Chinese *ma* derives from disjunctive question with negative existential**

- (1) 秋          寒          有          酒          無?  
Qiu        han        you        jiu        wu?  
autumn    cold      have      liquor    not.have  
'In the autumn cold, is there any liquor?' (*Bai Juyi*, 9<sup>th</sup> century)

**Metslang, Habicht & Pajusalu (2017): Estonian disjunctive *või* can function as a question particle clause-finally – recent development**

- (2) “Sa          oled          pogrís          olnud          või?”          [uuris taksojuht ettevaatlikult.]  
you.SG    be:2SG    jail:IN    be:PTCP    Q  
“‘You’ve been in jail?’ inquired the taxi driver cautiously.’ (CSE, 1990)

# a) Disjunction

## Niuean *nakai* (Starks & Massam 2015): negation

- (3)            Kua            kai            nakai            e            Moka            e            apala.  
                  PERF            eat            Q            ERG.P            Moka            ABS.C            apple  
                  ‘Did Moka eat the apple?’ (Massam 2003: ex. 1)

## Colloquial English *innit* (Sailor 2011: 9): < ‘isn’t it’                    (NB: not in sample)

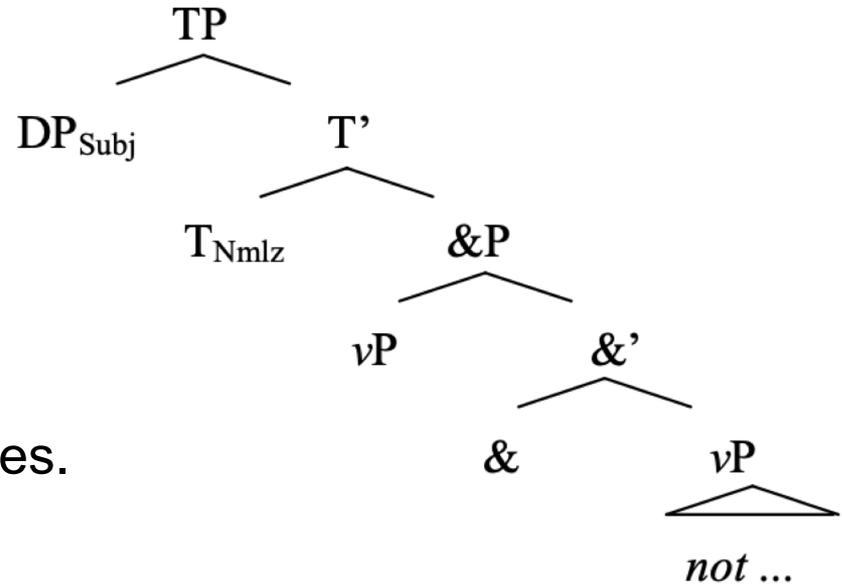
- (4)            Tom’s the one who likes that Swedish death-metal shite, innit?

Particles that arise through this pathway are typically clause-final, but not always.

## Latvian *vai* (Raukko & Östman 1994: 48): from disjunction *vai*

- (5)            Vai            jūs            runājat                    angliski?  
                  Q            you.PL            speak:2PL            English  
                  ‘Do you speak English?’

# Pathways to question particles: a)



From the source structures “X or Y?”,  
“X or no?”, etc. Give rise to final particles.

Aldridge’s (2011) proposal:

Material in the second conjunct is reanalysed as the head of &P.

(Via a movement step.) Later, low & is reanalysed as high C particle.

(Upward reanalysis.)

Tag questions: Disjunctions, initially with null &? (cf. McCawley 1988)

## b) Markers of epistemic modality (x5)

(Central) Basque *al* (Monforte 2018a): < modal particle *ahal* < modal verb

- (6) Inor ikusi al dezu?  
anybody see Q AUX  
'Did you see anybody?' (Central Basque; Monforte 2018b: 31)

Niuean *ka* (Starks & Massam 2015): < discourse particle *kaha* < 'that's it/that's right'

- (7) ne mukamuka a koe kaha?  
PST easy ABS.P 3SG right  
'because it is easy for you, is that right?' (Massam et al. 2011: ex. 25)

This is the putative input structure; *kaha* can occur together with *ka*.

# Pathways to question particles: b)

## b) Markers of epistemic modality

Epistemic modal elements occupy the high T-domain (Cinque 1999).

Formal account of their grammaticalization is very straightforward:

1. Modal element is reanalysed from spec-to-head (if needed)
2. T-domain head undergoes movement to C-domain  
(questions with a particular epistemic “flavour”)
3. C-domain head is reanalysed as first Merged there rather than moved

# c) Semantically bleached *wh*-word (x13)

Shoshone second position *ha* (Dayley 1989): < *haka* ‘what/who’ (?)

- (8) Usu ha tokwi?  
‘Is that right?’ (Dayley 1989: 15)

Urdu/Hindi *kya* (Butt, Bögel & Jabeen 2017): < *kya* ‘what’ (?)

- (9) kya Anu=ne uma=ko kitab d-i?  
Q Anu.F=ERG Uma.F=DAT book.F.SG.NOM give-PERF.F.SG  
‘Did Anu give a/the book to Uma?’

Old English *hu* (Mitchell 1985) in “Isn’t it the case” questions: < *hu* ‘how’ (not in sample)

- (10) Hu ne hatte hys modor Maria ...?  
Q NEG called his mother Mary  
‘Was his mother not called Mary?’ (Matthew (WSCp) 13:55)

Doesn’t seem likely to have a tag question or paratactic origin.

# Pathways to question particles: c)

## c) Bleached *wh*-words

As for epistemic elements, the diachronic analysis is straightforward:

1. The *wh*-word is reanalysed as first Merged high rather than moved to Spec,CP (with concomitant semantic bleaching; Walkden 2013)

(11) Was    rennst   du       denn   so       schnell?  
      what   run     you     DENN   so       fast  
      ‘Why are you running so fast?’ (Munaro & Obenauer 1999)

2. (optional, for true particle status)  
The *wh*-word is reanalysed from spec to head

# d) Subordinators (x14)

## Rapanui *hoki* (Du Feu 1996): general subordinator

(12) Hoki ko rohi rohi 'a koe?  
Q PFT tired DUP RES 2SG  
'You must be tired?'

## Japanese *no* (e.g. Hayashi 2010): nominalizer

(13) insatsu shitokeba ii no  
print have.done:if good Q  
'Should (I) just print (it) out in advance?'

# d) Subordinators

**Biclausal source: French /ɛskə/ (Harris 1988: 237): < est-ce que ‘is it (the case) that’ (Druetta 2003, Elsig 2009)**

- (14) Est-ce que            tu            m'aimes  
Q                            2SG            1SG=OBJ-love.2SG  
'Do you love me?' (Gims 2015)

**Cairene Arabic pronominal copula *huwwa* ‘he’, *hijja* ‘she’, *humma* ‘they’ can introduce questions (Gary & Gamal-Eldin 1982: 4, Eid 1991, Soltan 2011: 219).**

- (15) huwwa    ?inti            gaaja            ?innaharda  
Q:3SG    YOU.F.SG    coming            today  
'Are you coming today?'

# Pathways to question particles: d)

## d) Subordinators

Lower C head is reanalysed as a higher (matrix) C head.

Part – but not all – of the structure of elements like French *est-ce que* is a verb moved to C; hence this change involves a switch from Move to Merge, but also a reduction of structure from biclausal to monoclausal.

Biclausal > monoclausal is characteristic of many of the changes addressed in Roberts & Roussou (2003).

**This is insubordination (Evans 2007) – cf. Corr (2018).**

# Unaccounted for (x5)

Particles that appear to have their origin in coordinators (x4; as in Estonian below) don't obviously fit. Same story as for disjunction?

- 16)        kas            sa            tahad        kommi?  
          Q            2SG        want.2SG candy.prt  
          'Do you want candy?' (Aigro 2020)

In some varieties of colloquial French there's the particle *ti*, which supposedly arises through the reanalysis of a liaison consonant plus third person singular pronoun in inversion, e.g. *joue-t-il* (plays-T-he) > *joue ti* (plays Q).

Also *tu* in Quebec French (Morin 2017).

# Empirical interim summary

**Most but not all question particles in the sample (50/55) plausibly arise from one of the four sources mentioned.**

Caveats:

- Small sample, I-E bias
- Are all examples really question particles?
- Uncertainty in many cases

Feedback welcomed!

# The role of meaning

On closer inspection, question particles often do not introduce *canonical* (information-seeking) questions.

Old English *hwæþer* (Eckardt & Walkden 2022):

17) Hwæðer nu      gimma      wlite      eowre      eagan to him      getio  
Q      now      jewels.GEN beauty      your      eyes      to them      attract.SBJV  
“Does the beauty of jewels attract your eyes?”

These are ‘pedagogical questions’ – they aren’t requests for information.

Hindi-Urdu *kya* is also not a canonical question particle (Biezma et al. to appear).

Is this non-canonical stage a normal part of the grammaticalization trajectory?  
How can it be modelled (synchronically or diachronically?)

# Summary and conclusion

**Question particles seem to arise diachronically from one of 4 sources:**

- a) Disjunction (x18)
- b) Markers of epistemic modality (x5)
- c) Wh-words (x13)
- d) Subordinators (x14)
- ??? (x5)

**All of these submit to an analysis in terms of formal approaches to grammaticalization.**

**More fine-grained work is needed to tease out semantic-pragmatic types of question use and understand their syntactic correlates.**

**Thanks for your attention – feedback welcomed!**

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