116. Polar Questions

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1. Defining the values

This map shows the method a language uses to indicate that an utterance is a **polar question**. Polar questions are ones to which the expected answer is the equivalent of 'yes' or 'no' (and which are thus sometimes called yes-no questions). They contrast with **content questions**, which contain an interrogative word meaning something like 'who' or 'where', in which some more specific answer is expected; content questions in English are often called *wh-questions*. See Map 93 on content questions.

@	1.	Question particle	520
@	2.	Interrogative verb morphology	155
@	3.	Question particle and interrogative	12

		verb morphology		
@	4.	Interrogative word order		12
@	5.	Absence of declarative morphemes		4
@	6.	Interrogative intonation only		138
@	7.	No interrogative-declarative distinction		1
			total	842

The first strategy for forming polar questions is the use of a **question particle** which is added to a corresponding declarative sentence to indicate that it is a question. In Maybrat (West Papuan; Papua, Indonesia), the interrogative morpheme is a particle that is added to the end of the sentence, as in (1).

(1) Maybrat (Dol 1999: 200)

ana *m-amo* *Kumurkek* ***a***

3PL 3-go Kumurkek Q

'Are they going to Kumurkek?'

In Kiowa (Kiowa-Tanoan; Kansas and Oklahoma), the question particle occurs at the beginning of the sentence, as in (2).

(2) Kiowa (Watkins 1984: 211)

hɔ́	*á-k'í·*	*àn*	*dét-mɔ́nyáygóp* ...
Q	2.POSS-husband	HAB	2SG.OBJ-wave.IMPF

'Does your husband wave to you ... ?'

Map 92 shows the distribution of different positions in which question particles occur. Because chapter 92 provides more detailed discussion of question particles, discussion in this chapter is rather brief and the reader is referred to chapter 92 for further discussion of question particles.

Interrogative **clitics**, which attach to some word, but which exhibit freedom as to the category of word they attach to, are treated here as question particles. For example, in Fyem (Platoid, Niger-Congo; Nigeria), the question particle attaches phonologically as a clitic to whatever is otherwise the last word in the sentence, as illustrated in (3), in which the question

particle *=a* attaches to the object noun phrase *aré=n* 'the clothes'.

(3) Fyem (Nettle 1998: 50)

taa *won* *aré=n=**a***

3SG.PERF wash clothes=DEF=**Q**

'Did she wash the clothes?'

The second general strategy for signalling polar questions involves the use of distinct **interrogative verbal morphology**. Most commonly, the verbal morphology may involve an affix that specifically signals that the utterance is a question, as in (4a) from Hunzib (Daghestanian; Russia) and (4b) from Tunica (isolate; Mississippi).

(4) a. Hunzib (van den Berg 1995: 112)

*ẽƛ'e-čó-**y***

go-PRES.NONTHIRD-**Q**

'Are you going?'

b. Tunica (Haas 1940: 118)

lɔ́ta *wi-waˊnă-**n***

run 2SG-want-**Q**

'Do you want to run?'

In some languages, the verbal morphology involved in questions is more fusional and it is more difficult to isolate a specific morpheme as the interrogative morpheme. For example, in Gimira (Omotic, Afro-Asiatic; Ethiopia), there is a set of pronominal subject suffixes used in polar questions that are completely different from the subject affixes used in declarative sentences (Breeze 1990: 33). The distinction between separate question particles and interrogative affixes is not always clear. It is common in verb-final languages for question particles to immediately follow the verb, and they often loosely attach to the verb as clitics. Because it is difficult to distinguish verbal suffixes from clitics that can only attach to the verb, these are not distinguished here and morphemes which attach to the verb are all treated as instances of interrogative verb morphology, even if by some criteria they might be analysed as clitics.

The third type is languages that have **both question particles and interrogative verb morphology**, either as two separate constructions or occurring together in a single construction. For example, in Pirahã (Mura; Brazil), there is both a question particle, as in (5a), and an interrogative verbal suffix, as in (5b); it is also possible to use them together.

(5) Pirahã (Everett 1986: 236, 237)

a. *xií* *bait-áo-p-i* ***"híx***

cloth wash-TELIC-IMPF-PROX Q

'Are you going to wash clothes?'

b. *xísi* *ib-áo-p-**óxóí***

3.ANIMAL hit.arrow-TELIC-IMPF-**Q**

'Did you arrow fish?'

A fourth but fairly uncommon way to signal that an utterance is a question is by using a **different word order** from that used in corresponding declarative sentences. This method is used in a number of European languages, like German, in which the inflected verb is placed at the beginning of

the sentence. Compare the declarative sentence in (6a) with its corresponding interrogative sentence in (6b).

(6) German

a. *Der Lehrer* ***trink-t*** *das Wasser.*

the teacher **drink-3SG** the water

'The teacher is drinking the water.'

b. ***Trink-t*** *der Lehrer das Wasser?*

drink-3SG the teacher the water

'Is the teacher drinking the water?'

English employs a version of this method, except that it is only auxiliary verbs that occur initially, as in (7).

(7) ***Are*** *you planning to go to the beach?*

While this method of signalling polar questions is largely confined to Europe, it is also found in two Austronesian languages, Palauan (Austronesian; Palau, Pacific; Josephs 1975: 410) and Manggarai (Austronesian; Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia;

Semiun 1993: 25-26), and one Arawakan language, Warekena (Aikhenvald 1998: 261). In all three languages, polar questions employ verb-initial order.

Another uncommon method for coding a sentence as a polar question is by **the absence of morphemes used in declarative sentences**. In Zayse (Omotic, Afro-Asiatic; Ethiopia), the forms of verbs used in declarative sentences contain a morpheme *-tt(e)-* that is absent from corresponding interrogative forms (e.g. *hamá-tte-ten* 'I will go', *háma-ten* 'will I go?', *hamá-tt-isen* 'she will go', *háma-ysen* 'will she go?'; Hayward 1990b: 307). Three other languages of this sort that are shown on the map are Kabardian (Northwest Caucasian; Russia; Colarusso 1992: 125-126), Puquina (isolate; Bolivia; Adelaar 2004: 354), and Dinka (Nilotic; Sudan; Nebel 1948: 58-61).

Burunge (Cushitic, Afro-Asiatic; Tanzania) employs a method for signalling polar questions that is difficult to classify, which might be treated as an instance of coding by the absence of a declarative morpheme, but which is treated here as an instance of interrogative verbal morphology. Burunge has a process whereby the final vowel in a declarative sentence is

pronounced as a whispered vowel, rather than voiced. This process does not apply, however, in polar questions, so that the polar question differs from the corresponding declarative sentence only in that the final vowel in the sentence is whispered in the declarative sentence, as in (8a), but voiced in the interrogative sentence, as in (8b).

(8) Burunge (Kießling 1994: 213)

a. *'ugu* *qaymo-d-osi*

2SG.M field-F-3SG.POSS

ha-ga *doosl-id*ɨ

NON3.SUBJ-3SG.F.OBJ cultivate-2SG.IMPF.**DECL**

'You are cultivating his field.'

b. *'ugu* *qaymo-d-osi*

2SG.M field-F-3SG.POSS

ha-ga *doosl-ida*

NON3.SUBJ-3SG.F.OBJ cultivate-2SG.IMPF.**Q**

'Are you cultivating his field?'

One might view this contrast as involving a morpheme in declarative sentences whose realization is the whispering of the final vowel in the sentence, and then analyse interrogative sentences as lacking this morpheme, in which case Burunge would be a fourth instance of a language in which polar questions involve the absence of a morpheme that is present in declarative sentences. On the other hand, one might argue that polar questions involve more phonetic material than the corresponding declarative sentence in so far as a voiced vowel has more phonetic content than a whispered vowel. I have somewhat arbitrarily opted for the latter view in classifying Burunge for this map. A very similar contrast between whispered vowels in the last syllable of declarative sentences and voiced vowels in interrogative sentences is found in Nkore-Kiga (Bantu; Uganda; Taylor 1985: 6). However, because Burunge is verb-final, this contrast always occurs on the verb, and thus can be interpreted as part of the verb morphology. In contrast, Nkore-Kiga is SVO and the implication of Taylor's discussion is that the whispered-voiced contrast occurs on the last syllable of the sentence, regardless of the category of the

word. The contrast in Nkore-Kiga is thus somewhat analogous to a clitic that attaches to the last word in a sentence (as in the Fyem example in (3) above), and is treated here as an instance of a sentence-final question particle, though again this is subject to alternative analyses.

The sixth type shown on the map involves the same words, morphemes and word order as the corresponding declarative sentence, but with a distinct **intonation pattern** as the sole indication that it is a question. An example of such a language is colloquial Italian (Maiden and Robustelli 2000: 147). Languages of this type are proportionally underrepresented on the map: there are more languages that employ only interrogative intonation than the map suggests.

Many if not most languages of the first five types also employ a distinct intonation, though some, such as Imbabura Quechua (Ecuador; Cole 1982: 15), do not. And languages in which intonation is the sole indication of a polar question differ as to the nature of the intonational differences. For example, while many languages employ rising intonation at the end of questions, Sesotho (Bantu; South Africa and Lesotho) employs

lowered pitch on the final syllable of the sentence (Paroz 1946: 208).

If there is no evidence of any grammatical device other than intonation being used to indicate a neutral polar question in a language, the language is shown on the map as having interrogative intonation only. In some languages, intonation may be the most common means of indicating a polar question, but if some other method is used a minority of the time, then the language is shown on the map according to that method. For example, in Ocuilteco (Otomian, Oto-Manguean; Mexico), the description by Muntzel (1986: 145) suggests that intonation is the normal means but that occasionally polar questions are marked by a sentence-initial particle; hence this language is shown on the map as a language employing a question particle.

The final type shown on the map is languages in which there is **no formal marking of polar questions**, by any of the means represented by the first six types. Only one language in the sample is of this type, Chalcatongo Mixtec (Oto-Manguean; Mexico). The example in (9) could be either a

declarative sentence or an interrogative sentence, with no difference in intonation associated with the two meanings.

(9) Chalcatongo Mixtec (Macaulay 1996: 126)

xakú=ro

laugh=2

'You're laughing. / Are you laughing?'

The map restricts attention to ways of signalling unbiased questions, in contrast to leading questions, which signal that the speaker has an expectation as to what the answer to the question will be. See chapter 92 for further discussion. See also chapter 140 on question marking in sign languages.

2. Geographical distribution

The map shows that the use of morphemes to signal polar questions, either question particles or interrogative verb morphology, is very widespread. Separate question particles are more common than interrogative verb morphology and are

found throughout the world. Interrogative verb morphology is somewhat less widespread: it is not found in Australia or in an area stretching from Southeast Asia through the Pacific, except in New Guinea. It is somewhat more frequent in an area in Asia stretching from the Caucasus to Myanmar. Languages employing intonation only are also widespread, though more common in South America, Africa, the Middle East, Australia and New Guinea than in Europe, much of Asia, and North America. Interrogative word order is largely restricted to western Europe, but the map shows one instance in Indonesia, one in the western Pacific, and one in South America.