

140. Question Particles in Sign Languages

Ulrike Zeshan

1. Defining the values

For the purposes of this chapter, question particles are defined as signs whose main function is to indicate that an utterance is a question. Question particles are distinct from tag questions in that the latter involve an intervening intonational break, with only the tag marked by an interrogative facial expression (example 1). They are also distinct from question introducers and pragmatic question markers. The latter mainly have a pragmatic function, carrying a more specific meaning such as expressing the speaker's attitude towards the content of the utterance, and they may also be prosodically detached from the rest of the utterance (example 2).

(1) Auslan (T. Johnston, p.c.)

pol-q

CLASS CANCEL TODAY, RIGHT

'The class has been cancelled today, right?'

(2) Lingua Italiana dei Segni (Celo 1996:143f.)

eyebrows up

body forward

body back

ALWAYS (pause) QUESTION-MARK

'Will it be forever? (I don't know/I'm not sure/I don't believe it)'

To the extent that question particles may preferentially occur in particular sub-types of questions, such as confirmation questions, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish them from pragmatic markers. Finally, question introducers are signs such as 'I ask you', 'do you mind if I ask', and the like, with a lexical rather than a grammatical meaning. Question particles, by contrast, have undergone a grammaticalization process and are thus more or less bleached of any original lexical meaning they may have had. It is not essential for the purposes of this chapter that a question particle should be obligatory in all questions, and indeed this is not the case in any of the sign languages in the sample.

The distribution of question particles is represented on the map by the following three categories:

| | | | |
|---|----|---------------------------------|----|
| @ | 1. | No question particle | 25 |
| @ | 2. | One question particle | 9 |
| @ | 3. | More than one question particle | 4 |
| | | total | 38 |

The first category (no question particles) also includes sign languages for which no clear evidence for question particles has been found so far. In particular, in some sign languages there may be a process of incipient grammaticalization of question particles, but the evidence is not conclusive to speak of bona fide question particles. Similarly, the second category also includes sign languages for which no clear evidence of more than one question particle has been found so far.

Question particles in most sign languages are used in polar questions (or “yes/no-questions”) only, with very few sign languages (e.g. Finnish Sign Language) allowing question particles to occur in content questions (or “wh-questions”) as well. No question particle is used in content questions only, and no sign language has a distinction between a separate polar question particle and a separate content question particle. However, several sign languages do have more than one polar question particle. For example, Hong Kong Sign Language distinguishes between an existential question particle (also used with stative predicates) and a non-existential question particle (used elsewhere, see example 6). In Taiwanese Sign Language, one question particle has arisen because of influence from the surrounding spoken language while another one (see example 5) is a form native to the sign language.

Examples (3) to (6), and the associated Figures (1) to (3), show examples of question particles in several unrelated sign languages. Question particles are almost always clause-final; in a few cases they occur either clause-initially or both initially and finally. They may be monomorphemic, like PALM-UP in Finnish Sign Language (example 4), or morphologically complex, like the existential question particle in Hong Kong Sign Language, a compound of the signs HAVE and NOT-HAVE (see Figure 4).

- (3) Lengua de Señas Española (Grupo de Investigación sobre Lengua de Señas, p.c.)

_____ pol-q
 _____ nod

INDEX-2 IN SCHOOL DEAF YES-NO

'Do you go to a deaf school?'

- (4) Finnish Sign Language (L. Savolainen, p.c.)

_____ lowered brows
 _____ head tilt

PAPER WHERE PALM-UP

'Where can I find some paper? /Where is the paper?'

- (5) Taiwanese Sign Language (W. Smith, p.c.)

_____ pol-q

EAT FINISH HAVE-NOT-HAVE

'Have (you) eaten?'

- (6) Hong Kong Sign Language (G. Tang, p.c.)

_____ q
 NOW TAKE-PHOTO GOOD-BAD

'Shall we take photos now?'



Figure 1: YES-NO
 (Lengua de Señas Española)



Figure 2: PALM-UP
 (Finnish Sign Language)



Figure 3: GOOD-BAD
(Hong Kong Sign Language)



Figure 4: HAVE+NOT-HAVE

2. Geographical distribution

The most striking areal pattern is the very high incidence of question particles in East Asia. In fact, all sign languages in this region have question particles. In addition, the four sign languages where the existence of more than one question particle could clearly be established are also in this region (Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, South Korea). All sign languages in the region use question particles in polar questions only. The sign languages used in South-East Asia and in the South Asian subcontinent do not have any question particles.

One cannot fail to notice that the high incidence of question particles in East Asia corresponds to a prevalence of question particles in the spoken languages in the region, such as Japanese *ka* or Mandarin *ma* (see chapter 116). Although the sign language particles have quite a different status by virtue of being non-obligatory or even rare in the language, this distribution raises the question of a possible structural influence from the spoken languages on the sign languages. In fact, two question particles are known to have arisen through spoken-language influence via a signed representation of the spoken language (see introduction to the sign language chapters about such sign systems). Thus the question particle in Nihon Shuwa and one of the question particles in Taiwanese Sign Language first arose via Signed Japanese and Signed Mandarin. On a continuum of registers between Signed Japanese and Nihon Shuwa on the one hand, and Signed Mandarin and Taiwanese Sign Language on the other hand, these question particles are still mainly used in registers closer to Signed Japanese/Signed Mandarin, but seem to be spreading into the native sign languages as well.

Taiwanese Sign Language has another question particle which is native to the sign language and is a grammaticalized contraction of the sign HAVE and its

suppletive negative NOT-HAVE (see chapter 139 for negative suppletion). In fact, this has effectively become a single sign in the present-day language. Moreover, there is a less grammaticalized layer of constructions used for forming polar questions that employ the same structure of positive and suppletive negative forms, such as CAN+CANNOT, KNOW+NOT-KNOW, and WANT+NOT-WANT. However, these are not fused to the same extent as HAVE-NOT-HAVE. Similarly, Hong Kong Sign Language also has a question particle HAVE+NOT-HAVE (see Figure 4), but with a lesser degree of fusion and the two signs clearly distinct at present. All these constructions are strikingly similar to the Sinitic so-called “A-not-A construction”, which is used in questions in the same way. In fact, we even find constructions that are exactly parallel to what we find in the sign languages, including the use of suppletive negatives. For example, spoken Cantonese uses an A-not-A construction consisting of a positive ‘have’ and a suppletive negative ‘not-have’. Since we do not find such constructions and question particles in sign languages in other parts of the world, there is a strong possibility of a shared areal feature in this region.

Another strong argument in favour of spoken-language influence on the use of question particles in this region comes from three related sign languages in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Despite this relationship, the question particles in these three sign languages are different from each other and show a different kind of spoken-language influence in each case. The signed equivalent of the Japanese interrogative *ka* has been entering Nihon Shuwa via Signed Japanese, while in Taiwanese Sign Language the use of forms following the Sinitic A-not-A construction patterns with its mainland Chinese counterparts rather than with its Japanese relative. Finally, the use of question particles in South Korean Sign Language correlates with three distinct formality levels. At the least formal level, no question particle is used, but a slightly more formal level includes a question particle. In very formal situations, a different, honorific particle is sometimes used which corresponds to the Korean politeness particle *yŏ*. Korean is known for its complex system of honorifics and speech levels, and the sign language partly follows this pattern with regard to question particles. No other sign language in the sample has a distinction in question particles that makes reference to an honorific category.

There is of course no necessary link between the occurrence of question particles in signed and spoken languages in the same region, as is evidenced by examples such as Thailand (question particle in spoken Thai, but no clear evidence

for a question particle in Thai Sign Language) and the United States (question particle in American Sign Language, but not in spoken English).

European sign languages and their derivatives in the Americas and Australasia are generally poor in question particles, with only a few exceptions in Finland, Spain and the United States. Unless more instances of question particles are discovered in the future, it is hard to see any regional or genetic patterns here. Finnish Sign Language uses a sign with one or two open hands turned so that the palm faces upwards (see fig. 2), while Lengua de Señas Española (Spanish Sign Language) has an entirely different form (Figure 1). American Sign Language uses a sign that is derived from the shape of a question mark, a source that is also exploited in Türk İşaret Dili and Tanzania Sign Language. The PALM-UP sign corresponds to a gesture that is widely used in parts of Europe, especially in combination with a shoulder shrug, and whose core meaning seems to be an expression of uncertainty, translatable as ‘I don’t know’, ‘no idea’, and the like. More or less grammaticalized forms of this gesture turn up as question words, question particles, and negators in various European sign languages, as well as in eastern Africa (Tanzania, Kenya) and in International Sign (a sign pidgin used in international settings; see the introduction to the sign language chapters). It is often difficult to pin down the function of a given instance of PALM-UP, or even to establish whether it should be classified as a sign or a gesture. Sign languages where PALM-UP occurs, but is not clearly identifiable as a question particle, include Tanzania Sign Language, British Sign Language and Nederlandse Gebarentaal.

We do find more question particles in the Americas occurring outside the category of sign languages used in urban deaf communities. In Plains Indians Sign Language, a question particle is used in both polar and content questions and also has the semantics of a general interrogative in content questions, meaning ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘why’, and so on, according to the context. Urubú Sign Language uses a question particle in polar questions, unlike the spoken language of the tribe, which marks polar questions by intonation only. The two other village sign languages in the sample, from Bali and Ghana, do not have any question particles.

3. Theoretical issues

Typological studies on sign languages are of great theoretical interest to linguistic typology (see the introduction to the sign language chapters). With respect to

question particles, the relationship between signed and spoken languages and the grammaticalization of gesture are particularly interesting from a theoretical point of view (Zeshan 2004a).