

# 11 Epistemic dimensions of polar questions: sentence-final particles in comparative perspective

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## 11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we explore a domain of linguistic structure which highlights the epistemically textured nature of question-answer sequences.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of interest is the sentence-final particle (SFP for short), a type of word that marks various kinds of questions in many, perhaps most, or even all languages of the world. Our focal study of sentence-final particles in polar questions draws on a large-scale comparative study of question-response sequences across languages (Stivers *et al.* 2009, 2010); here we examine just three different languages and cultures: Dutch (Northern Europe), Lao (Southeast Asia), and Tzeltal Mayan (Mexico).

### 11.1.1 *Epistemic gradient*

Core speech act types can be in part defined by differences in the idealized psychological state of the two central speech act participants (Searle 1969). Assuming that a speaker codes a proposition of some kind – e.g., ‘It’s still snowing outside’ – it is reasonable to assume that a speaker and a hearer will have a different degree and kind of commitment to the truth of that proposition. A speaker might know for sure that it is still snowing outside because he has seen it, while a listener might be less certain of it because her only evidence is hearsay. We will use the term *epistemic gradient* to refer to this difference between interlocutors in degree and kind of epistemic commitment (Heritage and Raymond this volume).

Consider the epistemic gradient implied by the speech act of assertion. The pragmatic context of an assertion, as coded by a declarative sentence format, is that a speaker has, or claims to have, a relatively high commitment to the truth of the proposition (e.g., the speaker knows for sure that it is still snowing outside), while the hearer has little or no possibility to make this commitment.

<sup>1</sup> This analysis was first presented at the ‘Workshop on Questions’, Max Planck Institute, Nijmegen, March 2006.

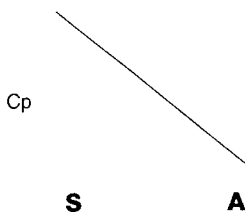


Figure 11.1 Epistemic gradient of 'assertion' ('S↑-A↓' gradient): Speaker (S) has a high commitment (Cp) to the truth of the proposition (p); Addressee (A) has a low commitment.

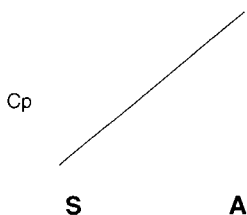


Figure 11.2 Epistemic gradient of 'information question' ('S↓-A↑' gradient): Speaker (S) has a low commitment (Cp) to the truth of the proposition (p); Addressee (A) has a high commitment.

This is what makes the utterance a piece of news. We represent this gradient as in Figure 11.1: speaker's commitment to the proposition (Cp) is high, addressee's is low.

By contrast, the epistemic gradient of a question, as coded by an interrogative sentence (*Is it still snowing outside?*), is that a speaker has a *low* commitment to the truth of the proposition (the speaker has no idea whether it is still snowing outside), and the hearer is presumed to have a higher commitment, perhaps even to know it for sure. We represent this as in Figure 11.2.

### 11.1.2 The 'tilting' function of epistemic semantics

In this chapter, we concentrate on one type of formal marker of information questions, the sentence-final particle or SFP. A language will typically have a closed set of SFPs, where the different particles are distinguished from each other in terms of their communicative functions, as determined by sometimes rather fine distinctions in semantic meaning. Sentence-final particles do not merely specify the 'information question' epistemic gradient as shown in Figure 11.2, but they contrast with each other in making finer distinctions within this gradient possibility space. They do this in two main ways: first, by

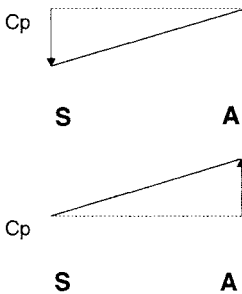


Figure 11.3 Information questions can be pragmatically invoked by lowering the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition (above), or by raising the addressee's (below), in each case beginning from a position of symmetry, and bringing about an interrogative gradient ( $S\downarrow$ - $A\uparrow$ ).

lowering the speaker's claim to knowing the truth of the proposition, or second, by raising the addressee's. These operations are schematized in Figure 11.3.

We want to show that these 'tilting' operations are not just a matter of degree. Sentence-final particles exert the forces illustrated in Figure 11.3 through conveying information about the *reasons* for such raising or lowering of epistemic commitment. For example, the semantics of a sentence-final particle may simply specify that a speaker is not fully certain of the truth of the proposition, or it may specify something about the source of information – whether it is in inference or in prior knowledge – which in turn has implications for how sure someone may be. Our comparative study of Dutch, Lao and Tzeltal SFPs reveals a range of ways in which questionhood comes about through details of semantic marking of epistemic features like evidence and relative certainty.

### 11.1.3 Polar questions and their marking

With a polar question – e.g., *Is it still snowing outside?* – a speaker makes reference to a complete proposition (in this case, 'It's still snowing outside'), and expresses a lack of knowledge as to the truth of this proposition. A typical communicative function of a question is to induce the addressee to state whether the proposition is true (*yes* or equivalent) or false (*no* or equivalent). Marking of polar questions can be done in a range of ways, including grammatical processes such as verb-subject inversion (as in English, but rare across languages), prosodic marking such as rising intonation or morpholexical resources such as sentence-final particles.

A strategy for asking polar questions that is surprisingly common across languages involves no formal marking at all. Recall the logic of the polar question: If a person asks a question, this person lacks (or claims to lack)

some desired piece of information, and presumes (or claims to presume) that their addressee can supply it. Accordingly, if such an asymmetry of knowledge is already obvious in the context, all a speaker has to do in order to effectively ask a question is to make a direct statement, as long as this 'statement' is about something which the addressee obviously knows better than the speaker (e.g. the desires or first-hand experiences of the addressee – *You take cream in your coffee*; cf. Labov and Fanshel 1977, Searle 1969, 1979). Statements which function as questions in this way are common in corpora of natural conversation in a range of different languages (Stivers *et al.* 2009, 2010). Such 'statement-questions' need not be marked prosodically. Often it appears that there is no special, marked (e.g., rising) intonation to such utterances. They can acquire their interrogative meaning by purely pragmatic means.

Questions marked by SFPs are formally similar to these 'statement-questions'. The difference is that with an SFP question an explicit marker is tacked on to the end of the proposition – *You take cream in your coffee, do you?* The question-marking element (*do you?* in this example) is heard by the addressee only after a complete proposition has already been articulated in the form of an assertion. The speaker's overt signal that the utterance is intended as a question is then maximally late, so late that it is vulnerable to being 'overlapped' by the other speaker beginning their turn. (This contrasts with inversion in English – *Do you take ...?* – which signals from the very beginning of the turn that the utterance is formally a question.) One possibility might be that the lateness of the SFP slot makes it possible for a speaker to convert a statement into an explicit question at the last moment. But, as we have seen, statements can function as questions with no overt marking at all, so they do not in principle need to be overtly marked as questions at any stage. This means that SFPs and similar final elements cannot be mere markers of questionhood. Our question becomes: if SFPs do not simply convert a statement into a question, what do they do?

We look for an answer in the lexical semantics of these SFPs, which we explore in three languages: Dutch (Germanic, Northern Europe), Lao (Tai, Southeast Asia) and Tzeltal (Mayan, Mesoamerica). We shall see that the semantics of SFP questions manipulate epistemic dimensions of question-answer sequences in different ways. SFPs can convey nuances of meaning concerning a speaker's epistemic stance toward the information being questioned, as well as evidential specifications concerning the source of a questioner's doubt. SFPs may also convey information of an interpersonal-affiliational kind, making reference to asymmetries between interlocutors in knowledge or experience, as well as a perceived likelihood that the answer will be 'yes' or 'no' (thus imposing a preferred type of response on the addressee). We provide a comparative analysis of SFPs in the three languages, looking at both

Table 11.1 *Commonly used SFPs in Dutch.*

Dutch	Rough translation
.... <i>hè?</i>	...., wouldn't you say?
.... <i>toch?</i>	...., isn't that right?
.... <i>nietwaar?</i>	...., isn't it true?
.... <i>niet?</i>	...., isn't it?
.... <i>ja?</i>	...., yes?
.... <i>OK?</i>	.... OK?
.... <i>zeker?</i>	.... if I'm not mistaken?
.... <i>wedden?</i>	...., wanna bet?
.... <i>wat?</i>	...., what?

within- and across-language contrasts. In order to make the task manageable within the scope of this chapter, we do not attempt to analyse the full set of sentence-final particles in each language, but rather focus in on an important distinction or set of distinctions within larger SFP systems.

## 11.2 Two sentence-final particles in Dutch

Dutch is a west Germanic language spoken by approximately 22 million people, most of these living in the Netherlands (standard Dutch), Surinam and in the northern part of Belgium (where the Flemish dialect is spoken). While the word order (SOV, with V2 in main clauses) and lexicon of Dutch are similar to those of standard German, the morphosyntax of Dutch is less complex, though not as simple as in English. In contrast to German, Dutch has no morphosyntactic case marking on articles, and only very limited case marking of pronouns, which naturally leads to a slightly more restricted word order in Dutch.

### 11.2.1 *General properties of Dutch SFPs*

The most commonly used Dutch SFPs are shown in Table 11.1 above.

Here, we focus on two extremely common SFPs, *hè* and *toch*, whose meanings are subtly different.<sup>2</sup> Like other SFPs, they are only used in the spoken language. (When they appear in written form it is in quotations of spoken Dutch.)

<sup>2</sup> All examples and the materials for this study are drawn from a corpus of two hours of natural spoken Dutch telephone conversation between friends (De Ruiter, Mitterer and Enfield 2006), a corpus of living-room conversations between student housemates (one hour) and another two-hour corpus of face-to-face conversations between hairdressers and their customers, collected at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics by Tanya Stivers and J. P. de Ruiter in 2005.

Table 11.2 *Relative frequency of h  and toch in different communicative contexts.*

	Hairdresser/Customer	Friends (Telephone)
..., <i>h�</i> ?	152	95
..., <i>toch</i> ?	6	12

This is because they require one or more interlocutors who potentially can (but are not obliged to) respond to them.

### 11.2.2 *The SFPs h  and toch*

By far the most frequent SFP in Dutch is *h *. The token *h * can also be used for initiation of other-repair, to indicate that one did not understand something or to express general surprise about a state of affairs. In this study, *h * is compared with the SFP *toch*. When *toch* is not used as an SFP, it is an adverb with many different dictionary meanings, among which are ‘nevertheless’, ‘rather’, ‘indeed’, ‘anyway’ and ‘after all’ (Van Dale Dutch–English electronic dictionary, version 5.0, 2009, version 1.04).

In our corpus of Dutch conversation, *h * occurred about 14 times as often as *toch* (247 vs. 18 times). Interestingly, this frequency difference was more marked in the hairdresser conversations than in the telephone conversations between friends (see Table 11.2). This is perhaps due to the fact that the use of *toch* presupposes some ‘common ground’ between the participants. It is plausible that two friends have more common ground than a hairdresser and his or her customer.

### 11.2.3 *The SFP h *

Foreigners learning Dutch quickly notice the pervasive frequency of this particle in spoken Dutch conversation. In fact, native speakers of Dutch who are relatively fluent in English often use *h * as an SFP in English, sometimes to the surprise of native listeners, who may be puzzled about this short, prosodically emphasized sound at the end of otherwise grammatically correct English utterances. For example, a Dutch sports reporter interviewing Canadian ice skater Cindy Klassen about her speed skating race at the 2006 winter Olympics asked her, *It was a bit boring h ?* The question resulted in a brief puzzled look from Klassen, followed by a response that just described the race, and therefore did not reveal whether or not she had understood that the utterance was intended to be a provocative question and not a statement.

The frequent use of *hè* by speakers of Dutch in second languages suggests that they assume that the SFP *hè* has a transparent or language-independent meaning, even though they are perhaps not consciously aware of this assumption. In combination with the lack of standard grammatical properties of SFPs, this suggests that this SFP has a communicative function comparable to nonverbal (visual) signals like eyebrow raises or nods (see also Clark this volume). In this respect, *hè* differs from the SFP *toch*, which has not been reported to be used by Dutch speakers when speaking second languages. This may be because *toch* – unlike *hè* – has a broader range of meanings, and appears in other grammatical environments than the final particle slot.

The communicative function of the SFP *hè* is to solicit agreement with the view or sentiment of what is being said. It functions as an agreement-seeker, as if to say ‘I think you would say the same thing, please confirm this’. See extract 1, lines 1 and 6.

(1) [RME 2006, phone conversation #05]

- 1 B *Ja (.) kan je beter dezelfde kopen dan hè?*  
Yes can you better the-same buy then hè?  
‘Yes, you’d better buy the same one then, right?’
- 2 R *Ja.*  
Yes.
- 3 B *nie? anders heeft ze echt zes verschillende kleuren of=*  
not? otherwise have she really six different colors or  
‘Isn’t it? Otherwise she really has six different colors or’
- 4 *=zo of ja (.) ik weet niet moe je maar kijken wat*  
something yes I don’t know must you but see what  
*ze hebben=*  
they have  
‘something yes, I don’t know, just see what they have’
- 5 *=of anders nog andere dingen maar van die standaard dingen=*  
or else yet other things but those standard things  
‘or else other things, but she’ll probably already have those’
- 6 *=zal ze wel al hebben hè?*  
will she already have hè?  
‘standard things, right?’
- 7 R *Ja.*  
Yes.

*Hè* strongly prefers a confirming response. In extract 1, both occurrences of *hè* elicit confirming (preference-confirming) responses. If a *hè* is followed by a non-confirming response, this response is either followed by an account (extract 2) or it is delayed (extract 3).

(2) [Housemates corpus] (Context: F and A discuss which party they will vote for in the upcoming elections; ‘D66’ is a Dutch political party.)

- 8 F *Jij op D66 ofzo hè?*  
You for D66 or something hè?  
'You for D66 or something, right?'
- 9 A *Nee*  
No
- 10 F *Oh*  
Ah
- 11 A *Dat was Johan*  
That was Johan  
'That was Johan'
- (3)
- 12 B *dan doen we dat wel gewoon want hoe laat gaan wij*  
then do we that simply because how late go we  
*dan=*  
then  
'then we'll just do that, because what time do we go'
- 13 *=Toch wel tegen een uur of tien of zo hè?*  
rather yet around ten-ish or something hè?  
probably around ten-ish, right?
- 14 (0.5 s)
- 15 R *[tien?]*  
ten?
- 16 B *[wa.. wa]nt k bedoel 't begin om zeven uur dat*  
be.. because I mean it starts at seven hours that  
*j..diner*  
j..dinner  
'because I mean it starts at seven, that dinner'
- 17 (1s)
- 18 R *ja?*  
yes?
- 19 B *ja da's toch wel een beetje op tijd hè?*  
yes that's rather somewhat on time hè?  
'yes, that's sort of on time, right?'
- 20 (0.5s)
- 21 R *ja maar dan gaan we toch niet pas om tien uur*  
yes but then go we toch not only at ten hours  
*hoor?*  
you.hear?  
'Yes, but then we won't go only at ten, mind you!'

#### 11.2.4 The SFP *toch*

*Toch* is used in similar situations as *hè*, and also solicits agreement. However, this agreement is more about a factual state of affairs than about stances or opinions. The sequence <statement expressing proposition>, *toch?* can be paraphrased as: 'I am presently entertaining the belief that P. Please confirm



that I am correct in assuming P'. A canonical example of *toch* is shown in extract 4.

(4) [RME 2006, phone conversation #01]

- 22 A *En dan d..maandag hebben we vrij toch?*  
 And then t..Monday have we off toch?  
 'And then Monday we're off, right?'
- 23 B *Ehhh (.) Ja. (.) Ja, maandag hebben we vrij ja.*  
 Ehhh (.) Yes. (.). Yes, Monday have we off yes.  
 'Er, yes, yes, Monday we are off yes.'

*Toch*, like *hè*, prefers a confirming response. However, while rejecting a statement followed by *hè* implies disagreement with a certain opinion, rejecting a statement followed by *toch* indicates an unexpected lack or failure of common ground (Clark and Marshall 1981). The four hours of conversation that we studied contained a total of eighteen cases of *toch* but we could find only one (implicit) rejection, which is shown in extract 5, where A's responsive turn does not so much disconfirm, but rather avoids confirming B's statement by adding a 'but' to the 'yes' without then elaborating on the nature of the 'but'. Interestingly and typically, the implicit failure of common ground indicated by the vague response of A is followed by another account for the common ground failure by B. The reason why dispreferred responses to *toch* are so rare might well be the threat to face involved in an apparent breakdown of common ground (see also Enfield 2006).

(5) [RME 2006, phone conversation #01]

- B: *maar het Valkhof dan moet je naar beneden lopen*  
 but the Valkhof then must you toward down walk  
*toch?, (0.5)*  
*toch?*  
 'But, the Valkhof, then you must walk downwards, right?'  
*[uiteindelijk]*  
*[eventually]*
- A: *[ja maar .h] ik bedoel alleen maar? (0.3) e:hm (0.2)*  
 [yes but .h] I mean just (0.0) e:hm (0.2)  
 'yes but I just mean'  
 (0.4)
- B: *ja ik ken Nijmegen helemaal niet zo goed hoor?*  
 Yes i know Nijmegen altogether not that well you-hear?  
 'Yes, I don't know Nijmegen that well, you know?'

If a *toch* gets a preferred (confirming) response, it is rarely a simple agreement token. The statement itself is often repeated, as shown in extracts 4 and 6. However, a more subtle way of disconfirming-while-confirming is when the agreement token is followed by additional qualifications, like in extract 7. Note that the qualification in line 5 is followed by a *hè*, which is confirmed.

This extract is a good illustration of how *hè* and *toch* are used to negotiate stances.

(6) [RME 2006, conversation #05]

- 24 B *we moeten (.) ja anders geven we (.) oh maar je was*  
 we must yes otherwise give we oh but one was  
*ook=*  
 also  
 'we must, yes, otherwise we can give (.) oh but one was also'
- 25 B *=welkom zonder cadeau of zo toch?*  
 welcome without present or something toch?  
 'welcome without bringing a present, right?'
- 26 R *ja je was ook welkom zonder cadeau.*  
 yes one was also welcome without present

(7) [Hairdresser corpus, 'male-female.doc']

- 1 HAI: *a:h dat vin'k ook niet erg, ik zeg ook altijd maar (.) het is ons huis, wij hebben het gekocht, en dan draaien we er ook zelf voor op denk ik altijd maar.*  
 'ah, but I don't mind, I always say, it is our house, we bought it, so then we are responsible for it, I always think'
- 2 CUS: *hmm.*
- 3 HAI: *toch?*
- 4 CUS: *ja in principe wel. maar af en toe e:h – nou*  
 Yes in principle indeed. But now and then eh – well  
*hulp is*  
 help is  
 'Yes I guess so. But sometimes, er, well, help is'
- 5 *natuurlijk altijd [toch] wel wel-welkom hè?*  
 of course always [nevertheless] wel wel-welcome hè?  
 'nevertheless of course always welcome, right?'
- 6 HAI: *[ja. ]*  
 [yes. ]  
*zeker.*  
 certainly

### 11.2.5 *Hè and toch compared*

It is difficult to pinpoint the difference between the SFPs *hè* and *toch*. Since affiliating with a factual statement is effectively confirming the truth of that statement, *hè* can be used instead of *toch* with only subtle changes in meaning. This is illustrated in extracts 8 and 9 below. The meaning is near-identical, even though it is still the case that the use of a *toch* in 9 appears to be more enquiring about facts than about an opinion or stance toward a fact in the original (using *hè*).

- (8) [Housemates corpus] (about a presumed fact)  
*de vorige keer was het juist tegenovergesteld hè?*  
 the previous time was it exactly the opposite hè?  
 'the last time it was just the opposite, right?'
- (9) <same as 8, but modified by author for explanatory purposes>  
*de vorige keer was het juist tegenovergesteld toch?*

Interestingly, the opposite does *not* work. *Toch* cannot generally be used instead of *hè?* (unless the *hè?* refers to a fact, as in the previous example). So in extract 10, which features a subjective assessment, replacing *hè* with *toch* is very marked to native ears (perhaps even unacceptable), and if it is nevertheless interpreted, has a different meaning. Ignoring the fact that it sounds very odd, the *toch* in 11 enquires whether the weather is indeed factually bad, whereas the original in 10 enquires whether the interlocutor agrees with the speaker's assessment that the weather is bad.

- (10) [RME 2006, phone conversation #08]  
*wat een rotweer hè?*  
 what (a) shitty weather hè?
- (11) <same as 10, but intentionally modified by author for explanatory purposes>  
*wat een rotweer toch?*  
 (something like: 'What shitty weather, correct?')

### 11.2.6 Summary

In this comparison of two members of the set of sentence-final particles in Dutch – *toch* and *hè* – we have seen one kind of subtle distinction that can be made in the semantics of these polar question markers. While the two markers appear to overlap in their functions of eliciting 'agreement', the nature of that agreement is not quite the same. In the case of *hè*, the agreement sets up a commonality in evaluative stance, while in the case of *toch* the focus is more on agreeing about a matter of fact rather than opinion.

## 11.3 Four sentence-final polar question particles in Lao

Lao is a South-western Tai language spoken in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia (Enfield 2007). The language has a rich system of sentence-final and phrase-final particles (Enfield 2007: Chapter 4), with three major classes: interrogative, factive and imperative. Of the eight interrogative particles described in Enfield (2007), we are concerned here with the four most common: *bòð³* (QPLR = polar question, unmarked), *vaa³* (QPLR.INFER = polar question, proposition newly inferred), *tii⁴* (QPLR.PRESM = polar question, proposition independently presumed) and *nòq¹* (QPLR.AGREE = polar question, seeks agreement).

Table 11.3 *Four Lao sentence-final particles and their meanings.*<sup>3</sup>

Form	Cases	Meaning
<i>bòð3</i>	24	I want to know if p is the case
<i>vaa3</i>	70	I want to know if p is the case; I'd say it is, based on current evidence
<i>tii4</i>	10	Maybe NOT-p is the case, I don't know; I'd say p is the case, based on independent evidence
<i>nòq1</i>	79	I'm saying p is the case; I think you'd say this as well

### 11.3.1 *The SFP bòð3*

The SFP *bòð3* can be regarded as an unmarked way of forming a polar question. It is unmarked in the sense that it is semantically more general than other options (see Table 11.3). The use of this particle transforms a statement into a polar question. In the following example, two women are talking about their former boss. Speaker N is talking about the boss's boyfriend, saying how ugly he was. In line 387 she asks whether her addressee had ever seen him. N's use of the particle *bòð3* signals that she has no expectation one way or the other as to what the answer will be.

(12) [ref. 010707]

- 385 N *bak2 qamø nanø khiø-laaj4 siø taaj3*  
 m clf dem\_nonprox ugly irr die  
 'That guy's incredibly ugly.'
- 386 (2.7) ((N laughs and covers mouth, S laughs))
- 387 N *thèè4 tuaø caw4 hèn3 bòð3*  
 true pcl 2sg see qplr  
 'It's true!, Did you see (him)?'
- 388 (0.5)
- 389 S *m2* ((head shake))  
 'Nope.'
- 390 (0.6)
- 391 N *khòðj5 hèn3 déj2*  
 1sgp see fac.news  
 'I saw (him) you know.'

### 11.3.2 *The SFP vaa3*

By contrast with *bòð3*, the other three SFPs add further semantic content to the basic interrogative meaning. Let us first consider the particle *vaa3*. This

<sup>3</sup> Data are drawn from eight segments of video-recorded conversational interaction recorded in village and home settings around the city of Vientiane, Laos. Three segments were dyadic, five were multi-party. Interactants included men and women ranging in age from twenty to seventy-five. All were well known to each other, and were interacting in maximally informal, everyday contexts.

particle is used when a speaker wants to convey that they have just inferred that something is the case, and they are asking for confirmation. It builds in an expectation that the answer will be 'yes', and it supplies an evidential component, the notion that the proposition being entertained is an inference, and not something that the speaker knows for sure. In terms of the notion of epistemic gradient introduced above, the meaning of *vaa3* specifies a 'shallow gradient' in which the speaker's commitment to the proposition has just been raised but is still low relative to the addressee.

In the following example, a woman is reaching for a basket that holds various paraphernalia for chewing betel nut. It is an occasion in which chewing betel is socially appropriate and it seems obvious that the woman's intention in reaching for the basket is in order to prepare a betel package and chew it. Seeing this, the speaker uses *vaa3* to ask for confirmation of this inference.

(13) [ref. 020727a]

534 K *caw4 khiaw4 vaa3*  
 2sgp chew qplr.infer  
 'You'll chew, will you?'

535 (.)

536 M *m4*  
 intj  
 'Yeah.'

In another example, the researcher is video-recording a group of women as they are eating papaya salad during a break from a reed-mat weaving session. The main focus of the video-recording has up to this point been to capture the methods of weaving reed mats, and as the recording continues, one of the women surmises that the researcher is also interested in recording the women as they eat. She uses *vaa3* to mark this inference as she asks for confirmation.

(14) [ref. 030806k]

23 V *qaw2, thaaj1 qaw3 kin3 tam1-makø+hung1 niø vaa3*  
 intj shoot take eat papaya-salad tpc qplr.infer  
 'Oh!, (you're) videoing (us) eating papaya salad, are you?'

24 Ni *mm5*  
 yeah

As shown in Table 11.3, the particle *vaa3* is a lot more frequent than its unmarked counterpart *bòð3*. The next example illustrates a common use of *vaa3*: request for confirmation of (some aspect of) what someone has just said. In line 568, Speaker S asks who has been out collecting bamboo shoots. As he says it, he is looking in the direction of a filled sack which is leaning against the house. Speaker K appears to know that there are bamboo shoots in the sack, and he infers that these are the shoots Speaker S is talking about. He uses *vaa3* in marking that he has made this inference, and requesting confirmation.

Accordingly, in line 571, Speaker S confirms, giving Speaker K the go-ahead to respond to the question posed in line 568.

- (15) [ref. 030806a]  
 568 S *mèèn1 phaj3 paj3 haa3 nòò1-maj4 khüü2 mau2 vaj2 thèè4*  
 be who go seek shoots like come fast real  
*niø*  
*tpc*  
 ‘Who’s been collecting bamboo shoots, why back so fast?’  
 569 (1.5)  
 570 K *juu1 naj2 thaj1 hanø vaa3=*  
 be.at in sack there qplr.infer  
 ‘In the sack there, you mean?’  
 571 S *=qee5*  
*qee5*  
 ‘Yeah.’  
 572 K *muat5 qiø-pòk2 hanø*  
 group f-P tpc.far  
 ‘Pok’s lot.’

The next example shows two instances of *vaa3*. The conversation is centering on gossip about childhood friends of one of the speakers. Speaker N has just asked where a certain woman is now living, and has been told the woman is living ‘with her husband’. In line 5, Speaker N asks ‘Which village is that?’ In lines 7–10, she is told the name of the village, as well as further information about where it is. Speaker N’s receipt of this information is marked by the use of *vaa3* as a single unit, here a kind of interjection functionally similar to English *Really?*, *Is that so?*, or *Oh I see*. In line 13, Speaker S expresses some surprise at this news. She says ‘I thought they came to live together’ – meaning here in this village – then adding ‘Is that not so?’ By marking this addition with *vaa3*, Speaker N is conveying that she now surmises from what has been said that it is indeed not the case, and that she is now pursuing confirmation, which is supplied by Speaker V in the next line.

- (16) [ref. 030806k]  
 5 N *baan4 daj3 laø*  
 village which prf  
 ‘Which village?’  
 6 (0.6)  
 7 V *hua3 naa2*  
 Hua Naa  
 ‘Hua Naa.’  
 8 T *hua3 naa2 khan2 thong1*  
 ‘Hua Naa Khan Thong.’  
 9 .... (aside line omitted)  
 10 V *hua3 naa2 taa3 baan4- pèq2 baan4 paø-teng1*  
 Hua Naa corner village next\_to village Aunt-Teng  
 ‘Hua Naa, at the corner of the village- next to the village of Aunt Teng.’

- 11 N *vaa3*  
qplr.infer  
'Oh?'
- 12 V *pèq2 naa2 khaaj2 naa2 ngoom1*  
next\_to Na Khaay Na Ngom  
'Next to Na Khaay, Na Ngom.'
- 13 N *kadiaw3 khacaw4 maø juul nam2 kan3, bðø mèèn1 vaa3*  
thought 3pl come live together neg be qplr.infer  
'(I) thought they came to live together, is that not so?'
- 14 V *mq2*  
'Nope'

### 11.3.3 The SFP *tii4*

The sentence-final particle *tii4* is less frequent, as shown in Table 11.3. Like *vaa3*, it adds to the basic interrogative meaning an idea that the speaker expects that the presupposition is true, but requires confirmation. While *vaa3* specifies that the source of this expectation is a current inference, *tii4* specifies that the expectation is based on prior, independent information. Typically, *tii4* is used when something different to this expectation has just been implied. The idea behind *tii4*, then, is in a sense complementary to that of *vaa3*. While in the case of *vaa3*, the speaker's low commitment to a proposition has just been raised (but not all the way), in this case, a speaker's existing *high* commitment has just been lowered.

In the following example, Speaker K is discussing his plan to locate a special kind of fish trap in a nearby village and, if possible, buy one and donate it as a display piece in the local fisheries office. He uses the word *kudang3*, a low-frequency borrowing from Malay meaning 'storage house', when it appears he means to say 'souvenir' or 'exhibit'. Speaker M displays this analysis in line 137, offering the word *thilanük2* 'souvenir' marked with *tii4*. In this way he conveys the idea 'I'm pretty sure you meant *thilanük2*, since that appeared from the context to be what you wanted to say, but you didn't; please confirm that *thilanük2* is indeed what you meant'. This confirmation is forthcoming in the following line.

(17) [ref. 030806b]

- 129 K *sio süü4 qaw3 paj3 vaj4*  
irr buy take go keep  
'Will buy and go and keep [it]'
- 130 (0.7)
- 131 *kudang3 (phen1 vaal)*  
godown 3sgp say  
'godown (they say)' ((from Malay *gudang* 'storehouse'))
- 132 (1.3)
- 133 *qaw3 paj3 vaj4 pèn3-*  
take go keep be  
'Take and go and keep [it] as-'

- 134 (1.6)  
 135 *juu1* (.) *kom3* *pamong4* *hanø* *lèq5*  
 be.at department fishery dem.adv.nonprox fac.prf  
 'At the Fishery Department there.'
- 136 (0.4)  
 137 M *thilanùk1* *tii4*  
 souvenir qplr.presm  
 'A souvenir, you surely mean?'
- 138 (0.1)  
 139 K *mm4*  
 mm  
 'Yeah.'

#### 11.3.4 *The SFP nòq1*

The fourth of the SFPs shown in Table 11.3 – *nòq1* – is a high-frequency device for requesting agreement. It is not a straightforward interrogative marker, since its normal usage does not necessarily imply that the speaker is unsure of the truth of a proposition. If a speaker says 'It's cold, *nòq1*', this may be translated as 'It's cold, isn't it!' It is not that the speaker does not know whether it is cold or not, but rather they are seeking agreement from their addressee that this assessment is shared. In this way, the communicative import of *nòq1* appears to be identical to that of Dutch *hè*, described above. The main commonality that *nòq1*-marked expressions have with neutral questions (say, of the type marked by *bòò3*) is that a 'yes or no' response is due.

In the following example, Speaker S is talking about a co-worker. In lines 1–5, she describes the girl's appearance, implying that it is inappropriate in the working environment to be constantly changing the colour of her hair and fingernails. In line 6, Speaker N assesses this as 'strange', using the sentence-final particle *nòq1* to elicit an agreement in response, which comes in the following line.

- (18) [ref. 010707]  
 1 S *phom3* *laaw2* *hanø*  
 hair 3sg tpc.far  
 'Her hair'
- 2 (0.3)  
 3 S *sii3* *daj3* *sii3* *daj3* *mii2* *met2* *lèp1* *mùù4* *niø* *sii3*  
 color INDEF color INDEF have all nail hand tpc color  
*nùng1*  
 one  
 'Any and every colour, the fingernails another colour.'
- 4 (0.3)  
 5 S *mùù4-qùùn1* *sii3* *nùng1* ((laugh))  
 tomorrow color one  
 'Tomorrow another colour.'



- 6 N *pèèk5 nòq1*  
weird qplr.agree  
'Weird, huh?'
- 7 S *qee5*  
'Yeah'

In the following example, Speaker N makes an assessment of her former boss, saying that she is beautiful. This is done in lines 339–340. There is a brief pause after this, in which Speaker N does not receive any response or agreement from her addressee. Here we see the function of *nòq1* as a dedicated 'response mobilizer' (cf. Stivers and Rossano 2009): by incrementing just this particle, Speaker N secures a positive response, agreeing with her assessment. In this case, unlike in the prior example, the addition of the sentence-final particle *nòq1* is interactionally generated (i.e., it is occasioned by a lack of response from the hearer).

- (19) [ref. 010707]
- 339 N *phuu5 khòòj5 hêt1 viak4 nam2 laaw2*  
person 1sgp do work with 3sg  
'The person who I worked with her.'
- 340 *khòòj5 vaa1 laaw2 ngaam2 dêj2*  
1sgp say 3sg beautiful fac.news  
'I say she's beautiful, you know.'
- 341 (0.1)
- 342 *nòq2*  
qplr.agree  
'Don't you think?' ((with head toss))
- 343 (0.2)
- 344 S *mm5*  
'Yeah.' ((with head toss))

### 11.3.5 Summary

These examples demonstrate a few of the more frequent choices that Lao speakers make in adding SFPs to utterances in order to secure 'yes-or-no' type responses. Beyond the unmarked interrogative marker *bòò3*, we see how other particles can add information about a speaker's expectation of the truth of a proposition, their reason for that expectation and their expectation of eliciting their addressee's agreement. In these ways, Lao speakers effectively tilt the epistemic gradient, making it clear that questions are being asked.

## 11.4 Five sentence-final polar question particles in Tzeltal

The Mayan language Tzeltal has a number of sentence-final particles that are broadly evidential, hedging or qualifying the speaker's commitment to the

proposition expressed in the utterance.<sup>4</sup> Many of these play a role in creating questions (see Brown 2010). Here we will focus on just five of these SFPs.

From the Tzeltal data (see footnote 4) a collection of 607 questions was made, and these were coded for ways in which questionhood was lexically or morphologically marked, including, among other things, sentence-final particles. The questions were also coded for interactional function and nature of the response. In the total coded data, 74% of the questions were polar, and of these, 43% were morphologically marked with SFPs. This contrasts with only 16% that were marked with the dedicated polar question marker, the second-slot particle *bal* (see Brown 2010). This gives a sense of the central role that SFPs play in asking questions in this language.

#### 11.4.1 The grammar of Tzeltal SFPs

Tzeltal is a verb-initial language with a relatively small number of roots and very productive derivational morphology for changing the form class of roots. There is a large set of stance and evidentiality-marking particles, of three syntactically distinguished kinds, occurring in distinct slots in the sentence: initial, 'second-slot' or final. The latter are the ones that concern us here. All SFPs are prosodically integrated into the sentence, so they are not to be regarded as 'add-ons'. Furthermore, they can never occur alone (unlike some of the particles in Dutch and Lao discussed above). Hence they cannot be used alone to formulate a query. Instead, one would have to repeat the proposition being queried or use *ja* 'it's the case' or *jich* 'thus' as a kind of pro-sentence which the particle can then be tacked onto (*ja'bi*, *ja'ma*, *ja'ch'e*).

Tzeltal SFPs perform a range of functions. They can modify illocutionary force, modify epistemic stance by hedging or emphasizing a speaker's commitment to the proposition expressed in the utterance, express surprise or doubt of the truth of newly introduced information, or indicate an inferential leap (the speaker's basis for the claimed knowledge). Their location in the Tzeltal basic sentence template is shown in (20).

(20) ASPECT + verb + (NP)<sub>o</sub> + (NP)<sub>s</sub> + SFP

None of these SFPs is a 'dedicated marker' of illocutionary force (Sadock and Zwicky 1985). In the full contrast set of Tzeltal SFPs, there is no syntactic distinction between 'real questions' and hedged declarative utterances.

<sup>4</sup> Tzeltal is spoken in southern Mexico by some 250,000 speakers. Many speakers over the age of thirty are essentially monolingual, and Tzeltal remains the primary language in the home. Speakers under thirty tend to be at least partially bilingual in Tzeltal and Spanish. The data on which this analysis is based consist of video-taped naturally occurring informal Tzeltal conversations in Tenejapa, a Mayan community in highland Chiapas, Mexico, totaling twenty-five conversations with twenty different participants, of both sexes, whose ages ranged from the twenties to the seventies. The data drawn on for this chapter are a larger set of questions than the restricted set that was used for the comparative study which motivated this collection (Brown 2010).

Table 11.4 *Data summary, Tzeltal SFPs.*

	Rough gloss	No. in data (of 607 polar Qs)	% in data
<i>bi</i>	'what?', 'is it?'	146	24%
<i>ma(k)</i>	'maybe'	58	10%
<i>ch'e</i>	'oh!?'	36	6%
<i>xkal</i>	'I wonder'	16	3%
<i>xa'wal</i>	'you'd say'	6	1%

#### 11.4.2 Five Tzeltal SFPs

Five Tzeltal SFPs occur prominently in utterances that are functionally questions.<sup>5</sup> These are *bi*, *ma(k)*, *ch'e*, *xkal* and *xa'wal*. Their frequency in the data and their (rough) glosses are shown in Table 11.4.

To understand the functions of these particles you have to see them in their sequential context, including both the prior turn and the following turn; more often than not they are part of a (minimally) three-turn sequence. We give examples of each particle in context, and try to spell out the semantic distinctions that each attends to.<sup>6</sup>

##### 11.4.2.1 The SFP *bi*

*Bi* is the closest thing Tzeltal has to a 'tag question' marker. It glosses most naturally as '...., eh?', '...., does he?', '...., will they?', '...., I figure', '...., I infer'. The semantics of *bi* has the following properties (S stands for 'speaker', P stands for 'proposition', A stands for 'addressee'):

##### (21) *Semantics of bi*

- S does not know that P is true
- S has some reason to think that P
- S thinks that A knows the truth about P
- S wants A to confirm whether P is the case

<sup>5</sup> We disregard several other SFPs used only or primarily in declarative utterances (*tz'in*, *ch'i*), and one used to hedge imperatives (*sch'uj*).

<sup>6</sup> The following abbreviations are used in interlinear morpheme glosses: 1/2/3 - first/second/third person; E - ergative, possessor; A - absolutive; ACS - achieved change of state particle; ANAPH - anaphoric particle; ASP - neutral aspect; CLA - numeral classifier; CL - clause-final clitic; CMP - completive aspect; CNT - continuative; COMPL - complementizer; DEIC - deictic; DET - definite determiner; DIM - diminutive; DIR - directional adverb; DIT - ditransitive derivation; DIS - dispositional stative; DIT - ditransitive; EXCL - exclamatory particle; EXIST - existential predicated; HON = honorific prefix; IMP - imperative; INC - incomplete aspect; INCH - inchoative; NEG - negative particle; NOM - nominalizer; PERF - perfect derivation; PLI - inclusive plural; PLE - exclusive plural; PREP - generic preposition; PT - discourse/evidential particle; Q - polar question particle *bal*; QUOT - quotative; REL - relational noun; REPET - repetitive action; RES - resultative; SFP - sentence-final particle; SUBJ - subjunctive; WH - Wh-question particle, ! - proposition affirmation ('it is the case that')

The preferred response to *bi*-marked utterances is confirmation. Here is an example where *bi* marks a query out of the blue, raising a new topic and indicating ‘this is what I’m assuming, am I wrong?’:

(22) T033018 XmO, 7:39:, Lus visiting XmO, raises the topic of a bag of fruit (*ja’as*) sitting on the patio.

- (.3) [Lus gazes at sack of fruit]  
 LUS: *joo, la* ‘-kok’-ik *tz’i a’w-ala ja’as-ik bi?*  
 hm, CMP 2E-pluck-PL PT 2E-DIM FRUIT-PL tag  
 ‘Hm, you picked your ja’as fruit did you?’  
 XMO: *la ye*  
 CMP PT  
 ‘(I) did.’  
 LUS: *la*  
 CMP  
 ‘(You) did.’  
 XMO: *la*  
 CMP  
 ‘(I) did.’

The SFP *bi* is also good for offering a candidate understanding of a prior utterance. It is well suited to other-initiation of repair, and to checking whether the interlocutor meant P when he said something else related. Reason to think that P is the case can occur in the immediately prior turn, can be implicit in preceding talk or can be simply claimed as information inferred from the talk.

Example 23 shows how *bi* prods for confirmation of a just-produced statement or opinion:

(23) T002020chanit,12:08:, talking about people who came to the meeting AMT is reporting on.

- AMT: *jich bayel j-me’tik j-tatik a y-a’y (.5) y-a’y*  
 thus lots HON-Mrs. HON-Mr. CMP 3E-hear 3E-hear  
*tal koel li’ tz’in=e*  
 DIRcome DIRdescend here PT=CL  
 ‘Thus, there were lots of people who heard this then.’  
 CH: *bayel stukel tz’i bi:*  
 lots 3E-self PT tag  
 ‘There were just lots then were there?’  
 AMT: *[bayel*  
 ‘Lots.’

Almost all *bi*-marked utterances in the data set are like this, responses to a just-produced prior claim, usually about a B-event. A *bi*-marked utterance checks that the prior speaker really holds to the claim, or else adds an inference drawn from it and asks for confirmation. Utterances marked with final *bi* much more rarely start a new topic, as in (22) above. An exception is when *bi* occurs with a statement of self-knowledge, in which case it contributes a noncommittal

'I guess'. Utterances with *bi* are well suited to news receipts, other-initiations of repair and requests for clarification, as in (24).

(24) T027005 coc1, 15:38: talking about a family who were in a car accident:

- XU: *ja' ja' jich oxeb-ik sok alal in te'ye*  
 ! ! thus 3-PL with child DEIC ANAPH  
 'It is. It's three of them including a child.'
- AN: *ja' ej- ijtz'inal ala kerem tukut bi ? =* GENUINE Q  
 ! PT younger.brother DIM boy Name SFP1  
 'It is ej- the younger brother of the little Tukut boy, eh?'  
 = *ju'uk ja' i bankil*  
 no ! DEIC elder.brother  
 '(or) no, it's the elder brother?'
- XU: [*ju'uk ja' tz'i ala bankilal i mak* ANSWER  
 no ! PT DIM elder.brother DEIC SFP2  
 'No, it's the elder brother I guess.'
- AN: *aa:j*  
 'Ah.'

*Bi* is also used to indicate that the speaker has drawn an inference from what has been said already, as in (25):

- (25) T013058nail53, 40:20:, summing up talk about a cave worth exploring in the neighborhood of NA's house.
- NA: *t'ujbil nix t'ujbil nix tz'i ma*  
 beautiful PT beautiful PT PT SFP2  
 'So it's just beautiful, just beautiful, I guess.'  
 (3.4)
- AO: *ma ba y-ejtal joko ya s-k'an tz'i bi* QUESTION  
 NEG 3E-bottom flashlight ICP 3E-needs PT eh?  
 'So it doesn't need a flashlight deep inside then, does it?'
- NA: *ju'u:k* ANSWER  
 'No.'

*Bi* is compatible with the second-slot polar question particle *bal*, and also with Wh-question markers. Although such combinations are rare in the data (Brown 2010), they show that *bi* is not a dedicated question marker.

#### 11.4.2.2 *ma(k)*, 'maybe', 'I guess', 'I suggest'

The SFP *ma(k)* hedges the speaker's commitment to the truth of a declaratively phrased proposition.

- (26) *Semantics of ma(k)*  
 S does not know if P is true  
 S does not presume the addressee knows P is true

The preferred response to an utterance marked by *ma(k)* is confirmation. Like *bi*, *ma(k)* is not a dedicated question marker. It is frequent in declarative utterances too, and it does not force a confirming response. It is a hedge,

attenuating the speaker's degree of commitment to the proposition; it is normally uttered with falling intonation. The pragmatic mechanism here is as follows: by saying effectively 'maybe P', the speaker tilts the epistemic gradient into a questioning stance through a lowering of his or her epistemic commitment (cf. Figure 11.3, above), especially if the interlocutor can be expected to be more confident about knowledge relating to P.

(27) T002013chanit, 7:59:, talking about yesterday's political meeting which AMT attended and has been telling CH about.

- AMT: *ak'-be-t-ik*  
give-DIT-PASS-PL  
'They were given it (money for new roads).'
- CH: *ora a s-ta-ik mak* QUESTION  
right.away CMP 3E-encounter-PL SFP2  
'Right away they got it, I suppose.'
- AMT: *ora* CONFIRMING REPEAT  
'Right away.'

Note that there is a related but distinct word *mak* which is sentence-initial, with a very similar meaning. It indicates that the speaker is not sure of the truth of the utterance, but is supposing it to be true.

The SFP *mak* can mark one alternative in an alternative question, with the question-marker *bal* marking the other, as in example (28):

- (28) T002037chanit, 15:48: talking about AMT's ex-wife
- CH: *jal tʰi ulale-tik i- y-ik'-tikla-yej ya'tik tʰi mak,*  
as.for child-PL DEIC 3E-fetch-REPET-PERF now PT SFP2  
*a'w-ik'-oj-la bal?*  
2E-fetch-PERF-REP SFP1  
'As for the children, she has taken them now I guess, (or) have you taken them?'
- AMT: *jo'o, y-ik'-tikla* CONFIRMS 1st alternative  
no 3E-fetch-REPET  
'No, she's taken them.'

#### 11.4.2.3 *ch'e* 'oh!?', 'news, surprise'

The SFP *ch'e* indicates that the proposition expressed has just occurred to, or is news to, the speaker, and the addressee is being asked to confirm that it is true.

- (29) *Semantics of ch'e*  
S has just come to realize that P might be the case  
S thinks the addressee knows  
S wants the addressee to confirm

The preferred response to utterances marked with the SFP *ch'e* is confirmation. Here is an example:

(30) T032023xantmex6B, 2:39: Lus is trying to figure out why Xme did not see a bull-seller go by earlier:

XME: *ma'yuk k-il-0*

not.at.all 1E-see-3A

'I didn't see (him).'

(.9)

LUS: *aj ma to mati x-jul-at a*  
ah NEG yet perhaps ASP-arrive-2A ANAPH

*ch'e*

SFP3

'Ah maybe you hadn't got home yet eh?'

Q → INFERENCE

XME: *jul-em-on=ix a*  
arrive-PERF-1A=ACS ANAPH

'I'd already gotten home.'

DISCONFIRMS

LUS: *yu' wan ay-at ta y-ut na*  
because perhaps EXIST-2A PREP 3E-inside house

'Because maybe you were inside the house.'

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

XME: *yu' niwan*  
because perhaps  
'Because maybe.'

Here we see *ch'e* indicates a freshly inferred idea. This is also the case in the following example, in which *ch'e* might be glossed as 'for sure?!' or 'it must be the case that ...':

(31) T027003coc1. 14:55:, talking about a car accident Xu has been telling An about.

XU: *ta Yochib me te'ye*  
PREP PLACE PT ANAPH

'(it was) at Yochib according to them.'

(.2)

AN: *ta Yochib*  
PREP PLACE

'at Yochib.'

NTRI

XU: *ta Yochib laj*  
PREP PLACE QUOT

'It was at Yochib they say.'

AN: *Yochib wan x-k'ot-ik-uk in te(.) [mach'a(.)]*  
PLACE maybe ASP-go.and.return.PL-SUBJ DEIC ART who

*ejch'in-[ot ch'e]*  
cut-PASS SFP3

'Oh it was coming back from Yochib maybe the ones who got hurt were?'

XU: [*Yo-* [*Yochib in*  
PLACE PLACE this

*beel-ik laj ta sujt-el-ik=ix laj i*  
walker-PL QUOT PREP return-NOM-PL=ACS QUOT DEIC

'They were returning they say on the Yochib road.'

CONFIRMS

Some *ch'e*-marked sentences also feature the particle *mak* in initial position. This marking with *mak* forces an interrogative reading of *ch'e*, as in the following example:

- (32) T002043chanit, 18:16:, talking about AMT's ex-wife  
 AMT: *melel la k-al jilel te ma*  
 truly CMP 1E-say DIRremain.behind COMPL NEG  
*x-sujt-on=ix tal tz'in=e*  
 ASP-return-1A=ACS DIRcome PT=CL  
 'Really I'd said I wasn't coming back then.'  
 AO: *ej jich mak ma puersa-uk ay-0 la*  
 eh thus PT NEG for.sure-SUBJ EXIST CMP  
*s-k'an-be-t tak'in in te antz ch'e?*  
 1E-ask.for-DIT-2A money DEIC ART woman SFP3  
 'Eh so maybe the woman didn't demand money from you eh?'  
 AMT: *ma nix ya s-k'an... //* [cut in film]  
 NEG PT ICP 3E-want  
 'She just didn't want to...'

#### 11.4.2.4 *Xkal* 'I'd say?', 'I wonder'

*Xkal* is used to make a suggestion or proposal about a state of affairs that the speaker does not know for sure about, and does not necessarily expect the addressee to know either.

- (33) *Semantics of xkal*  
 S does not know if P is true  
 S does not expect A to necessarily know either

The preferred response to an utterance marked by the SFP *xkal* is an answer, if possible, or an expression of an opinion about P. *Xkal* derives from the inflected verb *x-k-al* (*lit.* 'I should say'), and indicates 'I don't know, maybe you don't either'. It often occurs with Wh-questions, as in (34):

- (34) T013025nail53, 30:25:  
 NA: *bajt-0 ta p'is k'inal j-tajun*  
 go-3A PREP measure land HON-uncle  
 'My uncle has gone to measure land.'  
 AO: *banti xkal?* Wh Q  
 where SFP4  
 'Where, I wonder.'  
 NA: *ta (.) xixintonil laj sk'inal laj eskwuela* ANSWER  
 PREP PLACE.NAME QUOT 3E-land QUOT school  
 'In Xixintonil reportedly, on the school's land.'

*Xkal* in this kind of usage is an epistemic modifier, and is likely to get rising intonation.



(35) T013037nail53, 33:10:

AO: *jich k-il-0 j-ba-tik ta k'in me ay-0 mati*  
 thus 1E-see-3A 1E-REFL-1Pli PREP fiesta if EXIST-3A perhaps  
*ju'-0 k-u'un k-a'y-tik paxial ek=e*  
 be.able-3A 1E-RELN 1E-experience-Pli going.around too=CL

'So we'll see one another at the fiesta if perhaps we manage to get there too.'

NA: *ma ba x-ju' xkal?* QUESTION  
 NEG ASP-be.able SFP4

'You won't be able to should I say?'

AO: *ba:: x-a'w-il tz'i* NONCOMMITTAL A  
 where ASP-2E-see PT

'Who:: knows!?' [lit. 'where would one see it']

*Xkal* can also hedge a request by emphasizing the speaker's uncertainty of success, as in the following example:

(36) T030108 chelap, 38:59:

CH: *yan tz'i me ay-0 mati ay-0 (.8) ay-0 ba*  
 but PT if EXIST-3A perhaps EXIST-3A EXIST-3A where  
*ay-0 jak'al tey to a' k'ax xan k'al k-u'un*  
 EXIST-3A far there still CMP pass again day 1E-RELN  
*li' ta yan ja'wil ay-0 kuxul-on to, ma*  
 here PREP another year EXIST-3A alive-1A still, NEG  
*yak-uk to nix ya a'w-ala ak'-be-n xkal jeje?*  
 yes-SUBJ still PT ICP 2E-DIM give-DIT-1A SFP4 [hehe]

'But if time passes and again in a year I'm still alive, won't you just lend it (land) to me again I'd say, hehe?'

AN: *ya k-il-tik bel tz'i me ay-0 to bi*  
 ICP 1E-see-PLi DIRaway PT if EXIST-3A still what  
*x-ch'i-0 tal, ja' wokol tz'i me ay-0*  
 ASP-grow-3A DIRcome! difficult PT if EXIST-3A  
*j-mel ma bi ch'i-0=ix tal*  
 CL-permanently NEG what grow-3A=ACS DIRcome  
*a tz'in=e*  
 ANAPH PT=CL

'We'll see if something grows (on the land you are borrowing), it's hard if nothing grows there.'

We note that these three examples each involve propositions about the addressee's knowledge. We are as yet unable to say whether this is always the case.

11.4.2.5 *Xa'wal* (lit. 'you should say') 'I don't know, maybe you don't either'  
 The SFP *xa'wal* derives from the inflected verb *x-a'w-al* 'you should/might say' and, like *xkal* but more strongly, asks the addressee to express a confirming opinion about the expressed state of affairs.

(37) *Semantics of xa'wal*

S does not know if P is true

P is a 'B-event' (something in A's knowledge domain), so possibly A knows

S wants A to confirm

The preferred response to utterances marked by *xa'wal* is confirmation. This marker usually occurs on propositions that are in the addressee's domain of knowledge or authority, and it is expected that B should know or should or might be expected to have an opinion about the matter.

(38) T012089 bot50, 45:38:, talking about a patient of Bot, who is a traditional curer

(1.1)

AO: *ma yu'un nix ay-0 a (1.0) ala utz'ub-3A*  
 NEG because PT EXIST-3A CMP DIM get.well-3A  
*j-tebuk xa'wal*  
 CLA-a.bit SFP5

'She didn't just get a bit better would you say?'

BOT: *ej yu'n tz'i bi wa'y ya x-ben-0 tz'in ch'e.*  
 eh because PT SFP1 you.see ICP ASP-walk-3A PT SFP3  
 'Eh she did eh? you see she's walking around a bit?!'

Like *bi*, *xa'wal* is compatible with the dedicated polar question-marker *bal* in the same clause:

(39) T022033aperezv28, 6:43:, talking about a land transaction

ALP: *ma x-kil bi xan ut'il a bajt-0*  
 NEG ASP-1E-see how again how CMP go-3A  
 'Who knows how it went.' [the land transaction]

(1.0)

AO: *jich ya 'w-a'y-0 (1.2) yu' bal la x-chon-an-ik*  
 thus ICP 2E-feel-3A because Q CMP ASP-sell-ITER-PL  
*xa'wal*  
 SFP5

'That's right, you know. (1.2) Because were they selling it off would you say?'

ALP: *la nax x-chon-an-ik*  
 CMP PT ASP-sell-ITER-PL  
 'They were selling it off.'

### 11.4.3 Discussion

The semantic parameters relevant to distinguishing the meanings of these Tzeltal SFPs are shown in Table 11.5, along with how the five SFPs we have examined encode these parameters. These parameters include degree of speaker commitment to knowledge about the proposition expressed, speaker's

Table 11.5 *Schematic summary of semantics of Tzeltal SFPs.*

	Sp commitment to P	Addr knowledge of P	Sp has reason to think P	Change of state of Sp's knowledge	Expected/ preferred response
<i>bi</i>	-	+	+	-	solicit confirmation
<i>ma</i>	-	-	-	-	neutral 'maybe'
<i>ch'e</i>	-	+	+	+	solicit confirmation
<i>xkal</i>	-	-	-	-	solicit answer or opinion
<i>xa'wal</i>	-	+	-	-	solicit agreement

expectation that the addressee knows the truth about the proposition expressed, the reason for/source of supposing that P is the case (including newness of this information), and attitude/opinion about P.

These five sentence-final particles with their subtly differing semantics are a major resource for securing responses in Tzeltal. All are question-like in that they lessen the speaker's commitment to P and project an expectation of an answering or confirming reply, with different strengths. But they are **more** than just question particles, and all of them contrast with unmarked declarative questions (or those marked only with intonation) as well as with those marked more neutrally with the polar question marker *bal*. By saying that they are more than just question markers we mean that they make subtle distinctions in relative strengths of knowledge or commitment to a proposition, of both speaker and addressee, manipulating the local epistemic gradient in similar ways to those suggested for Dutch and Lao, above. In each case, the outcome is that the epistemic gradient is tilted toward the angle that fits for asking a question (lack of speaker knowledge, presence of addressee knowledge; Figure 11.2, above). This tilting is achieved by the use of SFPs that make semantic specifications that either lower the speaker's commitment in some way, or raise that of the addressee (Figure 11.3, above). Yet they are also less than fully grammaticalized question markers, since they are not dedicated modifiers of illocutionary force.

There is a clear preference for agreeing/aligning responses to utterances formulated with these particles. Genuine information questions – asking for information that A has and S does not – are rare in the Tzeltal data, compared with these agreement-seeking functions. And none of these Tzeltal particles can be tagged on as an afterthought, so none are interactionally generated by lack of recipient response. Indeed, as example (23) showed, they are in the vulnerable final slot subject to obliteration by the next speaker's overlapping speech.

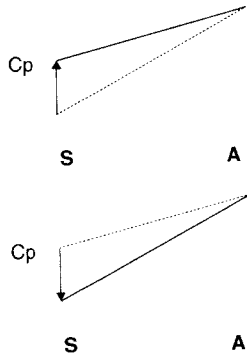


Figure 11.4 Schematic diagram of how SFPs can lower speaker's commitment, either by raising it from an existing state of unknowing (above) or lowering it from a prior state of greater certainty (below).

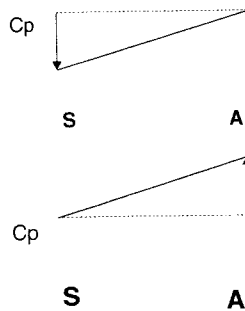


Figure 11.5 Schematic diagram of how SFPs can create interrogative gradient 'S↓-A↑' either by lowering speaker's commitment (above), or raising addressee's (below).

### 11.5 Conclusion

The systems of marking polar interrogatives with sentence-final markers in Dutch, Tzeltal and Lao can be called grammatical systems in the sense that they constitute closed sets of formal and semantic oppositions. Each marker has specified semantic content, but like all semantic content, has its meaning modulated by pragmatic context (including 'cotext'). The pragmatics matter a lot in this domain, because the very matter of asking a question is rooted in the epistemic asymmetry between the two central speech act participants, something that is only accessible with reference to the speech event, and therefore by definition something that falls within the domain of deixis.

None of the SFPs we have examined is literally a mere ‘question mark’. There is always some kind of expectation as to the truth of the proposition, or some kind of preference as to how the question will or should be answered. But there is clearly the possibility for one SFP in each set to be relatively unmarked. This, for example, is the case in the Lao set, where *bòð3* does not include reference to prior knowledge or current change of state, while *vaa3* and *tii4* do.

These markers in each language code a range of gradient-tilting distinctions. These include an attitude or opinion about the proposition itself (e.g., Lao *nòq1*, Dutch *hé*); basis for entertaining the proposition (Tzeltal *bi*, Lao *vaa3*, *tii4*); degree of commitment to the proposition; newness of the thought (Tzeltal *ch'e*, Lao *vaa3*).

A proposition that is not yet grammatically ‘clothed’ can go either way in terms of epistemic gradient. A proposition can be transformed into a question in different ways. One way is for the ‘S↓-A↑’ gradient to already be present in the common ground of the speech event, and it need not be marked at all. These are so-called B-event statements, where it is clear to both parties that the speaker does not know whether the proposition is true, and the addressee should know. Or one can explicitly code the ‘S↓-A↑’ epistemic gradient in morpho-syntax, as we have seen with the Lao SFP *bòð3*, the Tzeltal second-slot polar question particle *bal* or the Dutch verb-subject inversion construction. Another way to bring that gradient about is to attenuate the speaker’s commitment to the proposition. Figure 11.4 shows the speaker’s commitment lower than the addressee’s, either where the speaker’s commitment is somewhat raised from an existing state of unknowing (i.e., ‘I am slightly more certain than before, but still want confirmation’, as in Tzeltal *bi*, *ch'e*, Dutch *toch*, Lao *vaa3*, above) or somewhat lowered from a prior state of greater certainty (i.e., ‘I already needed confirmation but now am slightly less certain’, as in Lao *tii4*, below).

A further strategy for coding the ‘S↓-A↑’ gradient is to explicitly code just one of the two components: either just the ‘S↓’ component (shown on the upper part of Figure 11.5, as in Tzeltal *xkal*, *mak*, Lao *nòð4*, Dutch *misschien* ‘maybe’), or just the ‘A↑’ component (shown on the lower part of Figure 11.5, as in Tzeltal *xa'wal*).

With this study of three languages from distinct corners of the world, we hope to have shown that SFPs are an important semantic-pragmatic resource with similar syntactic and semantic properties in grammatical systems that are typologically otherwise very different. SFPs function in similar ways across these languages, making subtle semantic distinctions that interact with the pragmatics of the speech event and its inherent epistemic asymmetries.