(Non-)canonical questions and grammaticalization: Rhaetoromance *pa* and beyond

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1. Introduction

Here I will sketch a comparative survey of the distributional and interpretive properties of the particles *po/pa* across the Dolomitic region; these particles derive etymologically from the (grammaticalization of the) Latin locative/temporal adverb *post* (cf. Pellegrini 1972).

The semantic bleaching of a lexical item is generally linked to the subsequent development of a functional usage along a well-attested diachronic path (Roberts & Roussou 2003, van Gelderen 2004); in this particular case an erstwhile temporal adverb takes up a discourse-related functional value, turning eventually into a marker of (canonical or non-canonical) interrogative force.

My underlying assumption here will be that the grammaticalization of Latin *post* in the dialects under study corresponds to the upward reanalysis of this lexical item into a functional element lexicalizing dedicated functional heads that encode the relevant formal features (cf. Roberts 2012), along the highest portion of the functional hierarchy identified by Cinque (1999):

(1)   Speech Act >>> Evaluative >>> Evidential >>> Epistemic >>> … >>> T (future)

We can surmise that Latin *post* has been gradually reanalyzed upwards as a lexical exponent of each of the functional projections reported in (1).

A comparative survey of the distributional and interpretive properties of the particle *po/pa* reveals that its grammaticalization as an interrogative marker can be more precisely characterized as the loss of the capacity to codify the epistemic state of the discourse participants, or rather, to quantify the degree of overlap between the speaker's and the addressee's background knowledge (or the clash between the speaker's expectation/presupposition and the real state of affairs).

2. The usage of the particle in the Northern Veneto area

2.1 Clause final *pa/po* in Fodom and Pagotto interrogatives

In Fodom, a Rhaetoromance variety spoken in the North-Western part of the province of Belluno, the particle *pa* can still have a "connecting function" (Hack 2014: 54), where the speaker refers to a previous context shared with the addressee, which leads to the question containing the particle:

(2) a. Olà vas-to?

    where go=you

    'Where are you going?'

  b. Olà vas-to *pa*?

    where go=you pa

    'Where are you going (now) (since x has happened)?' (Hack 2011: 65-66)

Similarly, in the Bellunese area in interrogatives *po* can have the 'connecting function' identified by Hack (2014) if it appears clause final, like in (3), where it rather conveys a prosecutive flavour:

(3) a. E-la partida *po*?

    is-she left po

    'Has she left then?'

  b. Quando é-la partida *po*?

    when is-she left po

    'When has she left then?'

It is extremely tempting to locate *po* in these contexts in *T(future)*, as the particle signals here explicit reference to some common ground between speaker and hearer, and the speaker assumes that the hearer has gained afterwards some knowledge enabling him/her to provide a relevant answer (see Bayer & Obenauer 2011 for very similar remarks on the role of *denn* in German interrogatives).

2.2 Non interrogative contexts in Pagotto and Ampezzano

A very peculiar function is performed by *po* in answers, where the speaker underlines the obviousness of the answer and consequently the uselessness of the question, signalling the complete overlapping between the speaker's and the hearer's epistemic state:

(4)   A: A-tu comprà che?   B: Al pan *po*!

           have-you bought what   the bread po

           'What have you bought?'   'Obviously the bread!'

(5)   A: E Maria?   B: *Po*, la é partida! / La é partida *po*!

           and Maria   po, she-is left / she-is left po

           'And Mary?'   'She has left, of course!'

(6)   A: Ce fès-to?   B: Son dàos magnà *po*!

           what do-you   am behind eat po

           'What are you doing?'   'I'm having lunch, of course!'

In the dialects of the Bellunese area *po* can also be used in imperatives, where it conveys a substantial reinforcement of the order; this exhortative shade derives presumably from the fact that speaker and hearer share common knowledge of a situation which should lead to unavoidable performing of the relevant action:

(7)   a.   *Po*, vèrdi la finestra!

          po open the window

      b.   Vèrdi la finestra *po*!

          open the window po

          'Come on, open the window!'

In all these contexts the function of *po* seems to be the one of evaluating the epistemic state of the discourse participants, signalling that there is a complete overlapping of the background knowledge shared by speaker and hearer. This suggests that in these cases *po* might lexicalize the *Epistemic* head identified by Cinque (1999) in the functional sequence reported in (1).

2.3 Other interrogative contexts

As pointed out by Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2015), in *wh*-interrogatives *po* can express different degrees of surprise, depending on the position it occupies in the sentence, which corresponds to different degrees of shared knowledge between speaker and hearer; in particular, the higher the position occupied by the particle, the greater the degree of the speaker's surprise, so that (8) has a strongly counter-expectational character (cf. Giorgi 2018):

(8)   a.   *Po*, quando é-la partida?!

            po when is-she left

       b.   Quando *po* é-la partida?!

            when po is-she left

            'When has she left?!'

Even in polar questions, in clause initial position *po* has a counter-expectational flavour, and expresses a remarkable surprise of the speaker on the actual state of affairs:

(9)   *Po*, é-la partida?!

      po is-she left

      'Has she really left?!'

In this sense, we can say that in this case *po* can still work as a modal particle providing information about the relationship between the speaker's expectations and the evidence available in the speech situation. The function of *po* in these interrogative contexts seems to be the one of updating the epistemic state of the speaker, whose background knowledge is related to the contextual evidence present in the speech situation; such evidence may be in contrast with the speaker's expectations, giving rise to the surprise effect described above. Following Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2015), I submit that the particle *po* in these cases is generated as a functional head encoding an evidential feature, most likely the *Evidential* node in the sequence in (1), thereby witnessing a further step upwards in the grammaticalization process.

3. The particle *pa* in Central Rhaetoromance

3.1 Badiotto
3.1.1 Interrogatives

According to Hack (2014), in Badiotto the presence of *pa* in polar questions triggers a non-canonical interpretation, so that in (10a) it expresses the speaker's surprise and in (10b) it conveys the speaker's skepticism:

(10)   a.   El *pa* bel mort?!

            Is pa already dead

            'Is he already dead?'

     b.   Est *pa* bun?!

             Are pa capable

             'Are you capable?'

Also Poletto (2000) points out that in Badiotto polar questions the non-canonical interpretation is associated with the presence of *pa*, like in (11a), which conveys the speaker's dismay about the fact that the addressee is going to Venice, while the absence of *pa* triggers a canonical interpretation, like in (11b):

(11)   a.   Vas-t *pa* a Venezia?!

             go-you pa to Venice

             'Are you going to Venice?!'

      b.   Vas-t a Venezia?

             go-you to Venice

             'Are you going to Venice?'

Conversely, *pa* appears obligatorily in the canonical *wh*-question in (12a), while its absence triggers a non-canonical interpretation, like in (12b), where the speaker expresses his/her surprise/disapproval/disagreement (cf. the distinction between different classes of non-canonical questions proposed by Obenauer 2004):

(12)   a.   Ulà vas-t *pa*?

             where go=you pa

             'Where are you going?'

      b.   Ulà vas-t?!

             where go=you

             'Where are you going?!'

Following the line of reasoning sketched above, and considering the strong evaluative entailment associated to non-canonical questions (cf. Giorgi 2018), one can reasonably hypothesize that in Badiotto non-canonical polar questions *pa* undergoes a further step upwards in its grammaticalization process and is reanalyzed by the speakers as the lexicalization of the *Evaluative* head in the sequence in (1).

3.1.2 Other clause types

Poletto & Zanuttini (2003) propose that the function of *pa* in Badiotto is to signal that the entire sentence is focused. *Pa* can appear in every basic clause type, namely it appears obligatorily in canonical *wh*-interrogatives; moreover, it can appear in imperatives, triggering a 'stronger order':

(13)   a.   Fàl *pa* ch'al é na buna idea!
            do-it pa that it is a good idea
            'Do it, it's a good idea!'

       b.   Va *pa* tres adërta fora!
            go pa always straight ahead
            'Always go straight ahead!'

As noted by Poletto (2000), *pa* can appear also in declaratives/statements, turning them into total exclamatives, or even in *wh*-exclamative contexts, emphasizing the exclamatory effect:

(14)   a.   Al é *pa* bun!
            it is pa good
            'It is good indeed!'

       b.   Ci bel ca l'é *pa*!
            how nice that it-is pa
            'How nice it is!'

In these contexts *pa* seems to be a semantically empty dummy element marking a reinforcement of the illocutionary force of the clause (type) in which it appears, with broad focus on the whole propositional content; I interpret this as showing that in these contexts it occupies the highest position where the illocutionary force of the utterance is codified, namely *Speech Act*.

3.2 Gardenese

Hack (2014) observes that in Gardenese the interrogative reading is codified by the obligatory occurrence of the sentential particle *pa*, which has become compulsory in all canonical questions. Hence, unlike in Badiotto, in Gardenese the presence of the particle *pa* is compulsory also in canonical polar questions (Hack 2011, 2014), so that its absence produces ungrammaticality, as witnessed by (15b):

(15)   a.   Vëni-el *pa* nce Tone?
            comes=he pa also Tone
            'Is Tone also coming?'

b.   *Vëni-el nce Tone?

          comes=he also Tone

In Gardenese *wh*-questions *pa* works like in Badiotto, as it is used obligatorily to obtain the canonical interpretation, while its absence triggers a prosodic prominence of the *wh*-operator (Hack 2014):

(16)   a.   Can compr-i *pa* n liber?

                  when buy=they pa a book

                  'When do they buy a book?'

         b.   CAN compr-i n liber?

                  WHEN buy=they a book

                  'WHEN do they buy a book?'

Hence, in Gardenese *pa* marks obligatorily all canonical interrogatives:

(17)   a.   Ciant-el *pa*?

                  sings=he pa

                  'Is he singing?'

         b.   Ciuldì ciant-el *pa*?

                  why sings=he pa

                  'Why is he singing?'

In a variety like Gardenese, as a neutral interrogative marker *pa* has reached the highest degree of grammaticalization and simply marks a default (or conventionalized) degree of matching between the common ground shared by the two discourse participants. In particular, we can analyze the fully grammaticalized version of *pa* as a canonical question marker signalling that the common ground knowledge of speaker and hearer crucially do not coincide, unlike what happens in other varieties where the particle has not reached this extreme stage of grammaticalization. In cartographic terms, one can surmise that in Gardenese *pa* has been reanalyzed by the speakers as the highest functional head of the sequence in (1), namely the *Speech Act* head, encoding the canonical interrogative reading.

3.3 Fassano

Benincà (1996) reports the following examples from Fassano, where *pa* either follows the cluster formed by inflected verb and inverted subject pronoun (18a), or precedes the pronominal subject and the inflected verb (18b):

(18)   a.   Olà as-to *pa* magnat?

              where have=you pa eaten

       b.   Olà *pa* tu as magnat?

              where pa you=have eaten

              'Where have you eaten?'

According to Hack (2011), the particle *pa* appearing in Fassano *wh*-questions does not seem to perform a particular function from the interpretive point of view:

(19)   a.   Che as-te *pa* fat?

              what have=you pa done

       b.   Che as-te fat?

              what have=you done

              'What have you done?'

As discussed by Dohi (2020), in Fassano the particle *pa* can also optionally appear in polar questions; so, in Fassano *pa* can be optionally added to an interrogative clause, apparently without contributing a significant interpretive import to the utterance.

For Fassano further investigation is certainly needed, as the situation is further complicated by the microvariation between the three subvarieties of Cazet, Brach and Moenat (cf. Dohi 2020 for extensive discussion).

4. Reintepreting the grammaticalization path of Latin *post*

Hack (2011, 2014) shows that the dialectal varieties of Dolomitic Rhaetoromance can be subdivided into four groups depending on the use of *pa* in interrogative clauses; she claims that the different functions performed by *pa* in the different varieties suggest the existence of a grammaticalization process with different intermediate stages and that every variety of Dolomitic Rhaetoromance instantiates a stage of this diachronic process.

According to this analysis *pa*, deriving from Latin *pos(t)*, had initially only local, temporal, and logical functions; at a certain point it has taken up a modal/discourse-functional value through

which the speaker could express his/her attitude towards the relevant event. While Fodom and Ampezzano remain by now in this stage, Fassano has developed the conventionalized use where the particle lost its semantic-pragmatic contribution, but it is not obligatory yet. Eventually *pa* becomes obligatory in *wh*-questions in Badiotto and in all interrogative contexts in Gardenese.

Hack (2014), building on Abraham (1991), proposes for the particle *pa/po* the following grammaticalization path, very similar to what Bayer (2012) observes for *denn* in Bavarian:

(20)   Localistic > temporal > logical >
       illocutive /discourse functional > *wh*-question marker >   general question marker
       Fodom   Fascian, Nònes   Badiot/Mareo(Bavarian) Gherdëina

Dohi (2020) checks the validity of this scheme against a more detailed diachronic survey of the different Central Rhaetoromance varieties, and represents the grammaticalization path of the particle *pa* through the following synoptic table (adapted from Dohi 2020):

(21)	Loss of modal value	Obligatoriness in *wh*-questions	Extension to polar questions
Fodom/Ampezzano	-	-	-
Fassano	+	-	-
Badiotto	+	+	-
Gardenese	+	+	+

Summing up, the loss of modal value in *wh*-questions takes place in all the three investigated varieties, while the extension of obligatory *pa* to polar questions does not take place in all dialects.

It is extremely tempting to formalize this grammaticalization path as a process of successive upward reanalysis along the functional hierarchy (cf. Roberts & Roussou 2003:202; see also Roberts 2012); in particular, we can surmise that *pa* has been reanalyzed as a lexical exponent of each of the heads forming the highest cluster of the functional sequence identified by Cinque (1999). More precisely, we can analyze the fully grammaticalized version of *pa* as a lexicalization of the highest *Speech Act* head; as such, it develops into a canonical question marker (signalling that the common ground knowledge of speaker and hearer do not coincide), unlike what happens in other neighbouring varieties where the cognate particle *po* has not reached this extreme stage of grammaticalization and rather marks information managing between discourse participants.

5. Conclusion

By comparing the syntactic behaviour and semantic contribution of the particles *po/pa* in different but closely related dialects of the Dolomitic area, I have tried to better characterize the process of grammaticalization Latin *post* has undergone in some Central Rhaetoromance varieties, which can be more precisely identified as the loss of the capacity to codify the epistemic state of the discourse participants, or rather, to quantify the degree of overlap between the speaker's and the addressee's background knowledge.

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