

**Interrogative verb inflection:
Why rare, though easily grammaticalised?**

Frans Plank
Somerville College, University of Oxford

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Why are typological distributions (often) so unequal?

⇐ DIACHRONY

What is **rare** across languages is (often) the result of more complex and slower processes of gestation (across generations, over individual life-spans, and/or in diffusing through populations) and/or is (often) more prone to restructuring or loss than what is more **common**.

And why are diachronic profiles themselves (often) so unequal?

⇐ differences in formal-structural or cognitive COMPLEXITY
do not only account for states of mental lexicons-and-grammars,
but also for transitions from one state to another

Is this line of reasoning plausible?

Yes, but ...

There are things grammatical and lexical that would be child's play to create,
given the right ingredients and circumstances

– except that children of few speech communities
seem to have gone to the small trouble of actually creating and re-creating them

Take **interrogative verb inflection**

– a rar(issim)um in the world's languages,
but couldn't one, on diachronic grounds, expect it to occur as frequently as
other ways of marking interrogatives or as other epistemic moods?

The moral, perhaps: In grammar as in life, what would be easy to get and keep
may yet not be the most indispensable and desireable of
possessions

Unequal typological distributions

- I. Ways of marking interrogatives, from most to least common:
 1. **intonation**, variously shaped, final rise or other – arguably universal
 2. **particles**, taking this term in a wide sense, to include “tags”, i.e., complex structures, though no longer live syntax
 3. **disjunction-negation** (‘Squirrels hibernate or squirrels do not hibernate?’)
 4. (and a very distant fourth, at that) **verbal morphology**
 5. **verb inversion** and other constituent reordering

Owing to its not drawing a sharp line between morphology and cliticisation, the relevant WALS map has a misleadingly high figure of 164 languages with interrogative inflection, among 954 languages examined; still, particles were found in no less than 584.

Crosslinguistic surveys: Moravcsik (1971), Ultan (1978), Chisholm (1984), Sadock & Zwicky (1985), Palmer (1986: 30-31, 78-81), Dryer (2011), Siemund (2001), König & Siemund (2011), Miestamo (2011), Dixon (2012), Luo (2016).

The record of languages with interrogative verb inflection, as recognised with some confidence by language experts as well as typologists, includes these:

- northern regional varieties of Italian (Italic, Indo-European);
- Irish and Scottish Gaelic and Welsh (Celtic, Indo-European);
- Enets and Nenets (Samoyedic, Uralic);
- Hunzib (Daghestanian, Northeast Caucasian);
- Turkish (Turkic, Altaic);
- Korean (isolate, or Altaic);
- several Sino-Tibetan languages;
- West Greenlandic and Yup'ik (Eskimo, Eskimo-Aleut);
- Menomini, Blackfoot, and further Algonquian languages;
- Tonkawa and Tunica (isolates, North America);
- Tariana (Arawakan);
- Jarawara (Amazonia);
- ...

See surveys above, and Rohlf (1968), Fava (1993, 2014, 2015), Loporcaro (2003), Lusini (2012), Marchesini (2016), Zwicky (1985), Siegl (2012), as well as grammars of the relevant languages.

- II. Verb-bound interrogative inflection is more common in **polar** (aka YES/NO) questions than in **information** (aka constituent or WH) questions, with the latter typically flagged as such by interrogative pronouns anyhow.

Perhaps an implicational universal: If interrogative inflection in information questions, then also in polar questions.

Against this typological backdrop it is instructive to have a well-studied language (or two) which show how such a typological rarity can come about – and come about quick and easy

The language: **Conversational Modern German**

DISCOURSE PARTICLE *denn* and its enclitic variants *=n*, *=ən*, or *=dn*

- historically derived from a CAUSAL CONJUNCTION *denn* and ultimately from the TEMPORAL-CONSECUTIVE and CONDITIONAL ADVERB *dann*
- occurring with remarkable **frequency** in questions
- in fact specialising in interrogatives, being rare/archaic in declaratives or imperatives

So lebte er denn hin.

Nimm sie hin denn, diese Lieder!

- signalling that the questioner assumes relevant information as **common ground** with the addressee (discourse cohesion)

König (1977), Hentschel & Weydt (1983), Thurmair (1989, 1991), Wegener (2002), Csipak & Zobel (2014), Theiler (2017)

-ky & Mohr, *Schau nicht hin, schau nicht her* (Halle & Leipzig: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 1990)

(1) *Was willst***en** *von dem?* (p. 205)

(2) A. **'n** directly after finite verb:

Was heißt **'n** *FFB?* (p. 62)

Warum sind **'n** *wir nicht mit 'n Autos, Mami?* (p. 17)

Warum heißt **'n** *Papa nich Bartuck wie wir? Warum heißt* **'n** *der Merks?* (p. 18)

(followed by, **without 'n**: *Warum?!!*, *brüllte das Kind, heißt der Papa Klaus Merks?*)

Wonach sucht **'n** *der ...?* (p. 69)

Wie soll **'n** *der hier wohnen ...!?* (p. 124)

B. **'n** at a distance from finite verb or without finite verb:

Warum sollen wir **'n** *euerem Staat das schenken ...?* (p. 117)

Warum **'n** *nicht ...?* (p. 103)

Wozu **'n** *das?* (p. 75)

(3) A. *denn* directly after finite verb:

Denn wer war denn der wirklich Schuldige? (p. 175)

Wer war denn Nico? (p. 236)

Wessen Auto ist denn das, wer bestimmt denn hier? (p. 56)

Wer ist denn da? (p. 206)

Was ist denn, was hast du denn!? (p. 106)

Mutti, was ist denn los mit dir ...!? (p. 140)

Was ist denn, was hast du denn!? (p. 106)

Warum geht denn die Scheiße hier nicht rein in diesen Hundearsch? (p. 6)

Wo ist denn nun diese komische Villa? (p. 61)

Wo tut's denn weh? (p. 166)

Wo ist denn die Heimbürgerin? (p. 218)

Wo issa denn hin? (p. 205)

Worauf hat denn mein Kindchen Appetit? (p. 19)

B. *denn* at a distance from finite verb or without finite verb:

Was ist denn, was hast du denn!? (p. 106)

Was denn – nicht mal ein Pfarrer? (p. 221)

Was sahen Sie denn, Gnädigste? (p. 92)

*Was gibt's **denn** Neues? (p. 112)*

*Warum **denn** Geld verschenken? (p. 232)*

*doch warum **denn** nicht? (p. 244)*

*Woher soll ich **denn** so schnell Ersatz nehmen? (p. 163)*

*Wie meinen Sie **denn** das? (p. 193)*

*Wie soll das Opfer **denn** heißen ...? (p. 245)*

Other, less frequent interrogative discourse particles

(7) *Wie spät ist es **eigentlich**?*

*Wer bringt dir **nur** so häßliche Wörter bei?*

*Was könnte diese kleine Rinne **wohl** bedeuten?*

*Warum hatte er den alten Draufgänger **bloß** nicht von seinem Vorhaben abgehalten?*

denn et al. also in **polar** interrogatives

(12) A. *denn* directly after finite verb:

[*Können denn diese Idioten nicht den Fahrstuhl schließen, wenn ...?*]

B. *denn* at a distance from finite verb:

Können diese Idioten denn nicht den Fahrstuhl schließen, wenn ...? (p. 25)

Nehmen Sie beide denn auch Urlaub, Stani? (p. 166)

Würden sie dieses Jahr denn fahren? (p. 177)

Würde er denn je wieder mit ihr ...? (p. 192)

War es denn eine – Abrechnung? (p. 198)

Hat sie denn einen Passierscheinantrag gestellt ...? (p. 202)

War es denn wirklich dieser Zeiske gewesen ...? (p. 236)

Kennen Sie eigentlich Venedig?

Kann ich vielleicht was dafür, daß du noch keinen gefunden hast?

War er nun Bremer, also Bürger der BRD, oder Westberliner Bürger?

Willst du nicht zu mir in die Buchhandlung kommen?

– though no enclitic(ally spelled) variants of *denn* with polar interrogatives in *Schau nicht hin, schau nicht her* (wouldn't be ungrammatical, but are indeed rarer)

(14) A.

Mach-st denn du morgen blau?

Mach-st=n du morgen blau?

(Mach-st=t=n morgen blau?)

B.

Mach-st du denn morgen blau?

Mach-st du=n morgen blau?

Also lacking: *denn/=n* in insubordinated interrogatives

(15) *Ob (denn/=n) Nico (denn/=n) krank ist?*

Wer (denn/=n) Nico (denn/=n) war?

Wie (denn/=n) ich (denn/=n) das (denn/=n) meine?

Bavarian (ISO 639-3, 3-letter code *bar*, **endangered**), a dialect of Upper German spoken in Bavaria (excl. Franconia) and Austria (excl. Vorarlberg), plus a few *Sprachinseln*, internally differentiated as North, Central, South Bav.

(There are certain relevant differences, which we can't go into here. Also, some other varieties of Upper German seem to be going the same way as Bavarian concerning this question marker.)

How does Bavarian differ from Conversational German?

- (i) link between full and reduced form severed: only the latter, =*n*, in common use
(*Ja, is' denn heut schon Weihnachten?* [Franz Beckenbauer, E-Plus ad] – Bavarian?)
- (ii) =*n* so frequent, in particular in information questions, as to be **quasi-obligatory**
- (iii) assumption of **common-ground** with addressee not assumed by questioner,
hence =*n* also in discourse-introducing out-of-the-blue questions
- (iv) =*n* **verb-bound**

thus, =*n* > dedicated pure question marker;

but arguable whether the line from clitic-hood to affix-hood has been crossed fully,
because =*n* positioned **outside all other** verb-bound enclitics (see examples below)

- (v) in a new cycle of grammaticalisation, yet another temporal-consecutive particle is being fixed up to serve as a next-generation verb-bound interrogative marker, often heard to strengthen *denn*-derived *=n/-n*:

nachv(d) (German *nachher* ‘afterwards’) shortened to *=nv*

Wo war-st-n=nv (du) gestern?

where were-2SG-Q=Q thou yesterday?

Note verb-boundedness: **Wo war-st du-n=nv gestern?*

**Wo war t'=Oma-n=nv gestern?*

(these are possible position of *((d)e)nn* in Conversational German)

(19) EBERHARD *Was? Wer hat 'n da Sau gsagt?! Hast du Sau gsagt?! [...] Hast du vielleicht Sau gsagt, Opa?*

OTTO *Nanaa, ich hab gar nix gsagt, ich hab nur jemand zitiert.*

EBERHARD *Wer hat 'n nachert Sau gsagt?!*

(Gerhard Polt, *Circus Maximus: Das gesammelte Werk*, p135. Zürich: Kein & Aber, 2002)

Only **confirmation-seeking questions**, with no need to establish discourse cohesion, prohibit =*n*

(20) – *Wos mach-sd=**n** mid dein-m Bier?*

– *I wärm=s=ma.*

– *WOS mach-sd(*=**n**)? / Du mach-sd(*=**n**) WOS?*

(25) Subject-Pro non-clitic

2SG *Wo mach-sd=**n** du morgn?*

2PL *Wo mach-ds=**n** es morgn?*

3SG *Wo mach-d=**n** er/sie morgn?*

3PL *Wo mach-n=**n** sie morgn?*

(allomorph /a/ after nasal)

1SG *Wo mach=**n** i morgn?*

1PL *Wo mach-n=**n** miɐ morgn?*

(allomorph /a/ after nasal)

clitic

*Wo mach-sd=d=**n** morgn?*

*Wo mach-ds=s=**n** morgn?*

(no pro-drop, but clitic =s from *es*,
after 2PL suffix -ds inaudible)

*Wo mach-d=ɐ/s=**n** morgn?*

*Wo mach-n=s=**n** morgn?*

*Wo mach=e=**n** morgn?*

*Wo mach=mɐ=**n** morgn?*

(reduced from /mach-n=mɐ=n/)

Adding object clitics:

(26) *Wo hos-d=d=**n** miɐ de hinglegd?*

*Warum gib-d=**n** der miɐ des ned?*

*Wo hos-d=d=mɐ=s=**n** hinglegd?*

*Warum gib-d=ɐ=mɐ=s=**n** ned?*

Weiß (2002), Grosz (2005), Bayer (2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014), Pankau (2017)

A very similar story could be told about the interrogative marker *=a* in Dolomitic **Ladin**, a Raeto-Romance language in close contact with Bavarian:

=a < *po/pa* < *poi* < Latin *post*

Hack (2011, 2012, 2014)

To typologically contextualise the verb-bound interrogative marker of Bavarian (and its equivalent in Ladin):

- (a) They are particle-derived as in typical **grammaticalisation** scenarios, but the **source** particles are not the classic material for question particles (namely (i) fragments of negative disjuncts: ‘or’, ‘not’; (ii) truth-value designations: ‘(not) valid’/ ‘true’; (iii) non-specific interrogative pronouns: ‘what’, ‘how’; (iv) anticipated answers: ‘yes’/‘no’, ‘huh’/‘eh’; (v) phatic safeguards of communicative interaction: ‘listen’, ‘tell me’; (vi) complementisers or interrogative pronouns of insubordinated clauses: ‘whether’, ‘why’; (vii) epistemic adverbs or particles expressing uncertainty: ‘perhaps’).

The unusual, perhaps unique sources in Bavarian (and Ladin) are **common-ground DISCOURSE PARTICLES** originally of a temporal and causal-conditional nature. Discourse particles themselves are not typologically widespread; but the diachronic extension of the semantic-pragmatic function of such forms from designating causal and consecutive relations to designating the relation between states-of-affairs assumed as common ground between speaker and addressee and what has ensued from them, not yet known to the speaker, would seem a natural one.

- (b) These interrogative markers do not result from reanalyses of existing morphology, either, unlike in some languages where the sources of interrogative inflection are not question particles but **verb inflection** (i) for **PERSON/NUMBER/GENDER agreement** (trapped when verb and cliticised subject pronouns are inverted in question formation), (ii) for **PAST tense**, or (iii) for **IGNORATIVE** and **DUBITATIVE epistemic moods**.
- (c) They especially flourish in **information** rather than in **polar** questions.

Thus, Bavarian (and Ladin) verb-bound question marking, be it affixal or clitic, serves to enrich the panorama of diachronic scenarios (a, b) and to throw doubt on what seemed a robust typological generalisation (c).

Known historical origins of interrogative PARTICLES (illustrating from German where possible):

- (i) They can be salient fragments of second clauses of the disjunction-negation strategy of questioning: cf. German *Sie haben gewonnen, oder nicht/oder/nicht?* ‘they have won, or not/or/not?’; English question “tags” are also of this kind, *They won [or] didn’t they [win]?*, and *innit* is a reduced form approaching particlehood; French *n’est-ce pas* is no longer live syntax, and has therefore sometimes been called a particle rather than a tag.
- (ii) More rarely the fragments are ones of coordinative (‘and (not) also’) or adversative second conjuncts (‘but’).
- (iii) They can be truth-value designations: cf. German *Sie haben gewonnen, richtig?* ‘they won, right?’, *gell* (< *gelten*) ‘valid’, *einverstanden* ‘agreed’, *wirklich* ‘really’, *OK* ‘ok’, *so* ‘so, thus’, all occurring finally as well as initially, e.g., *So, sie haben gewonnen?*; French *est-ce que* ‘is it [the case] that’ is complex, but is not live syntax.
- (iv) They can be anticipated answers: cf. German *ja* ‘yes’, *nein* ‘no’, *(viel)leicht* ‘perhaps’, vocal gesture *hm* ‘uh’, with rising intonation, to be answered by *m-hm* ‘uh-huh’ or *hm-hm* ‘uh-uh’, bisyllabic and with falling intonation, all more commonly final than initial, *Sie haben gewonnen, hm?* – *Mhm/Ja, Hmhm/Nein*.
- (v) Propositional and other not-so-specific interrogative pronouns (German *was* ‘what’, *wie* ‘how’) can be borrowed from information questions to serve as interrogative particles in

polar questions: *Was/Wie, sie haben gewonnen?* ‘what/how come, they won?’, with initial position perhaps more common than final.

- (vi) They can be expressions whose function is primarily “phatic”, namely the safeguarding of communicative interaction, rather than the conveying of meaning, through attracting attention, ascertaining understanding, requesting response: e.g., ‘hey’, ‘you’, ‘listen’; ‘got it’; ‘tell me’.
- (vii) They can be complementisers and interrogative pronouns in subordinate clauses which are (to some extent) “insubordinated” through the omission of the main clause: cf. German [*Ich frage mich*] *ob/warum/was sie verloren haben?* ‘[I ask myself] whether/why/what they have lost?’)
- (viii) Any adverbs and (modal/discourse) particles with appropriate epistemic or evidential semantics, serving to express speakers’ lack of firm knowledge or uncertainty given their sources of information, may be interpreted as interrogative markers; cf. German *Sie haben wohl/vielleicht/scheint’s verloren?* ‘they must have lost? they perhaps/it seems lost?’.

Other than the general surveys, relevant specialist literature includes Zwicky (1985), Meyerhoff (1994), Plank (1999), Amritavalli (2003), Bencini (2003), Munaro & Poletto (2005), Evans (2007), Mulder & Thompson (2008), Tan (2010), Aldridge (2011), Metslang et al. (2011, 2017), Jayaseelan (2012), Bailey (2013a, 2013b), Lusini (2012), Luo (2016).

But: We haven't quite answered the question **why** interrogative verb-bound morphology is so exceedingly **rare**.

After all, in creating it one would be able to draw on a considerable variety of sources (one so far only attested in Bavarian and Ladin) and requiring none-too-implausible semantic and phonological adaptations and morphosyntactic re-attachments!

My theory (well, hunch):

- DEDICATED SEGMENTAL question marking – particles, morphology, disjunction-negation (also verb-inversion) – is even rarer than is commonly assumed. Dedicatedness is critical: such marking is rarely dedicated to just this function.
- Other than intonation, there are (I believe) NO forms and NO grammar INHERENTLY DEDICATED to “typing” sentences as questions – as long as their sources are as sketched in (i)–(viii). Relevant forms and constructions always (same proviso as to sources) also do something else, and this “something else” is their continuingly primary business.
- So, where does the illocutionary force of questions come from? The answer (I believe) is that it universally comes from INTONATION, and is otherwise due to CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES of expressions of IGNORANCE and UNCERTAINTY/DOUBT. All languages have such expressions, and they can be of various kinds, ranging from ignorative and dubitative mood inflection to verbal or adverbial vocabulary and to the setting out of alternatives; but they are not THEMSELVES conveyors of interrogative illocutionary force.

‘I don’t know whether squirrels hibernate’,
‘I’m in doubt as to whether squirrels hibernate’,
‘Squirrels may hibernate’,
‘Perhaps squirrels hibernate’,
‘Squirrels hibernate or squirrels don’t hibernate’

– these are all STATEMENTS,
but in normal communicative circumstances they invite statements (“answers”)
from an interlocutor, who will hopefully be less ignorant/dubious about the state
of affairs at issue.

This in essence is the archetypal lexicon and grammar of questions and answers.
And why go to the trouble of correcting a design that is perfect and durable?

Well, Bavarians and South Tyrolian Ladins gave it a try, creating question
markers from a different source (common-ground discourse markers, derived
from temporal-consecutive and causal-conditional adverbs), which already
showed an affinity to interrogatives even before the onset of grammaticalisation.