

Toward a typology of question particles in the languages of China



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Abstract

Having surveyed 138 languages spoken in China, this paper attempts to provide a unified account of question particles from a typological perspective. Based on the characteristic structural features of individual interrogatives in these languages, we particularly take issue with Dryer (2013a,b) on two points: (i) some languages he labeled as “no question particles” in fact employ question particles in forming polar interrogatives; (ii) the positions of question particles in the languages of China are different from his findings in that most languages of China prefer sentence-final positions, whereas Dryer reports a much smaller proportion. Moreover, it is found that in many languages of China final particles are also used in *wh*-questions, including *wh*-question particles and particles in *wh*-questions. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

A question particle is an invariable item which serves the function of forming interrogatives and does not carry any referential meaning. In other words, it signals that a sentence is in the form of an interrogative. Apart from question particles, there are declarative, exclamative as well as imperative particles. The particles dedicated to signaling sentence types are appropriately labeled as particles of illocutionary force. Final particle is a general label for the particles that occur at the end of a sentence or an utterance. Similarly, there are interrogative, declarative, exclamative, and imperative final particles (see, e.g., Li, 2006: chapter 2; Bailey, 2013; Hancil et al., 2015). The purpose of this study is to provide a unified account of question particles from a typological perspective. Therefore, we shall limit our discussion to interrogatives, with a focus on those in the languages spoken in China. In particular, two types of final particles are addressed, namely, those forming interrogatives and those occurring in interrogatives.

In many languages spoken in China, notably in Sinitic languages, sentence types are signaled by sentence-final particles of illocutionary force. For instance, in Standard Chinese the declarative sentences are signaled by particles *de* and *bale*, imperative and exclamative sentences are signaled by *a* (and its variants *ya* and *na*), and interrogative sentences are signaled by *ba*, *ma*, and *ne*. In particular, polar questions use *ma* (and sometimes *ba* and *a*), alternative questions, X-neg-X questions (also known as A-not-A questions and disjunctive-negative questions), and *wh*-questions

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have *ne* (and sometimes *a*; see, e.g., Li and Thompson, 1981:300–318, 547–548; Pan and Paul, 2016). Nevertheless, some particles are multi-functional and can be employed in more than one sentence type, and individual sentence types may also employ more than one final particle, albeit *ma* seems to be used only in polar questions and *ne* overwhelmingly in alternative questions and X-neg-X questions.

In a typological survey of 884 languages, Dryer (2013a) includes 35 languages of China, among which 16 are claimed to be “no polar question particles”. Dryer also provides the syntactic position of interrogative particles in polar questions. He reports that of the 884 languages surveyed, 335 languages take no particles, whereas the rest of them take particles. Specifically, 314 languages have question particles in sentence-final position, 129 in sentence-initial position, 52 in sentence-second position, 26 in sentence-final, -initial or -second positions, and 8 in other positions.

In this study we surveyed 138 languages (10 Sinitic and 128 ethnic languages) spoken in China and found two major differences from Dryer’s findings. First, among the 16 “no question particle” languages, 12 actually employ question particles. Second, most languages of China (119/138) prefer sentence-final question particles, whereas Dryer’s data reports a much smaller proportion (314/884).

This paper is, therefore, an attempt to present a unified account for the differences. In particular, the structural features of particle questions used in the languages of China are discussed, covering the form, function and position of question particles in polar questions and *wh*-questions, with a view to offering a comprehensive view of the mechanism of the interrogatives system in these languages.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 addresses the 12 languages coded as “no (polar) question particles”, demonstrating that these languages in fact employ polar question particles. Section 3 compares the position of polar question particles in the languages of China and Dryer’s (2013a) data. Section 4 discusses final particles in *wh*-questions and reduced *wh*-questions. A summary is made in section 5.

2. Languages with polar question particles

In his typological survey of world languages, Dryer (2013a) includes 35 languages spoken in China, claiming that 19 of them use sentence-final question particles and the rest 16 do not use question particle at all, as shown in Table 1.

However, a survey of the relevant literature on the 16 “no question particle” languages in Table 1 shows that only 2 of them, Paiwan and Rukai (both Formosan), do not employ polar question particles, and the other 12 languages actually use such particles (and we do not find the relevant data on 2 languages, namely Kalmyk, a Mongolic language, and Modern Literary Tibetan). In what follows, we will address these particle languages one by one.

In Anong (Tibeto-Burman), final question particles (e.g., $m\epsilon^{53}$, $q\alpha^{53}$) are frequently used to form polar interrogatives (Sun and Liu, 2005:118–119, 127–128).

- (1) Anong (Sun and Liu, 2005:119)
 ηa^{31} a^{55} $a^{31}nuj^{31}$ $t\varsigma^{55}$ ηu^{31} $i\epsilon^{33}$ $m\epsilon^{53}?$
 2SG DEF Anong nationality 2 be QP
 ‘Are you Anong?’

Bao’an (Mongolic) is reported to use three terminal question particles, *u*, *sa*, and *ba* (see, e.g., Buhe and Liu, 1982: 61–62).

- (2) Bao’an (Buhe and Liu, 1982:61)
 $t\check{c}i$ $gat\check{c}i\check{n}\epsilon$ $samog\check{a}d\check{z}i$ $kal(o)$ $u?$
 2SG word clear say QP
 ‘Did you hear the words clearly?’

Table 1
 Data of 35 languages spoken in China (Dryer, 2013a).

Question particles	Languages
Sentence-final question particle (19)	Achang, Akha, Atayal, Bai, Dagur, Dong, Dulong, Evenki, Jingpho, Kirgiz, Lahu, Lalo, Mandarin, Hmong (Miao), Mien, Mongol, Tajik, Tibetan (Standard Spoken), Zhuang
No question particle (16)	Anong, Bao’an, Bisu, Gyarong, Idu (Yidu), Kalmyk, Korean, Lisu, Manchu, Mangghuer, Paiwan, Qiang, Rukai, Santa, Tibetan (Modern Literary), Uzbek

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