The syntax of question particles: a cross-linguistic investigation.

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Question particles are the most common way to form a polar (yes/no) question cross-linguistically (Dryer 2008), illustrated by the example in (1).

0. *Tzotzil (Mayan, Mexico):*

La	k'ol	Aa	Teeko	chjaay? = 'Is Diego at home?'
q	be	youth	Diego	at.home (Aissen 1987: 330)

However, question particles are not well understood, particularly with regard to their syntax. A large number of them violate a constraint that is otherwise argued to be universal, the Final-Over-Final Constraint (FOFC) (Holmberg 2000, Biberauer, Holmberg & Roberts 2008, Sheehan 2009, i.a.). FOFC in its simplest formulation states that a head-final phrase cannot immediately dominate a head-initial phrase, the structure shown in (2).

. $[_{XP}\ [_{YP}\ Y\ ZP\ ]\ X\ ]$

Previous analyses of question particles place the particle in a functional projection in CP (e.g. Rizzi 2001). Where a language has verb-object order (that is, a head-initial VP) and a final question particle (that is, a head-final QP, generally supposed to be located in CP), FOFC is violated by transitivity at some point in the derivation of the sentence: at some stage, a head-final phrase will immediately dominate a head-initial phrase:

0. $*[_{CP}\ [_{TP}\ \mathbf{T}\ [_{vP}\ v\ [_{VP}\ VO\ ]\ ]\ ]_i\ \mathbf{C}\ t_i\ ]$
   $*[_{CP}\ [_{TP}\ [_{vP}\ \mathbf{v}\ [_{VP}\ VO\ ]\ ]_j\ \mathbf{T}\ t_j\ ]_i\ C\ t_i\ ]$
   $*[_{CP}\ [_{TP}\ [_{vP}\ [_{VP}\ \mathbf{V}O\ ]_k\ \mathbf{v}\ t_k\ ]_j\ T\ t_j\ ]_i\ C\ t_i\ ]$

If, on the other hand, these particles are not located in C (and therefore head final) but are rather instances of some other projection, the FOFC-violation might be avoided. Many of the particles resemble the disjunction marker ('or') used in the language. The particle is suggested to be a clause-initial disjunction, with the second clause elided, as in (4):

0. Lucy is at home or ~~Lucy is not at home~~?

Following Aldridge (2009) and Jayaseelan (2008), this paper presents a promising analysis based on the observation above that accounts for the FOFC-violating particles and allows FOFC, a useful explanatory principle, to be retained. Tests for this

hypothesis and predictions made by it are discussed: for example, that initial question particles should differ from final question particles as regards their historical source, their function as embedded clause-introducer, and their scopal properties. Findings from 113 languages indicate that these predictions are borne out.

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