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Particle and conjunction VAI in Latvian: origins, semantics and functions

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VAI

Vai – an indeclinable polysemantic (function) word and also a discourse element that unites Latvian, Estonian (*või*) and Livonian (*või*) languages.

Previous studies have focused more on the use of or in polar questions in the material of Baltic and Finno-Ugric languages (e.g., Metslang, Habicht, Pajusalu 2017; Norvik, Metslang, Pajusalu, Saar 2022), but other or functions have not been examined in more detail, neither in the Latvian language itself, nor in comparison with other languages.

However, in Latvian, the origin and function is a complex issue, as the use of this word is very diverse and is associated with the homonymy of three parts of speech – it can be an interjection (1a), a particle (1b), and a conjunction (1c):

(1)

a. *Ā, vai, es tiešām nezināju...*
oh INTJ 1.NOM.SG really not_know.PST.1SG

‘Oh, I really didn’t know...’ (LVK2022)

b. ***Vai** tev patīk Rīga?*
Q 2.DAT.SG like.PRS.3 Riga.NOM.SG

‘Do you like Riga?’ (LVK2022)

c. *Katras klases vai mācību grupas*
each.GEN.SG class.GEN.SG or study.GEN.PL group.GEN.SG

potenciāls ir atšķirīgs [..]

‘The potential of each class or study group is different.’ (LVK2022)

To make a typological and contrastive comparison with Finno-Ugric language material, especially Estonian, it is necessary to take a closer look at the semantics and functions of the Latvian language.

The **aim** of this paper is to analyze and classify all possible VAI particle and conjunction functions Latvian, based on the data of the *Latvian National Corpus Collection* (LNCC) (<https://korpuss.lv/>). Currently, 42 corpora with approximately 2.8 billion tokens are available in the LNCC.

Current data – *Latvian Treebank* (LVTB),
<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12574/112>

VAI as an interjection – in further studies.

VAI in *Latvian Treebank* (LVTB)

Total – 1401

- Conjunction – 1064, of which:
 - a) coordinating conjunction – 918
 - b) subordinating conjunction – 148

- Particle – 301
- Interjection – 2

(34 examples should be checked)

VAI etymology in Latvian

VAI (with the stretched intonation *vaĩ!*, also with the falling intonation *vài!*) as **interjection** has been inherited from the Indo-European proto-language (cf. Lith. *vaĩ*, Goth. *wai*, OHG. *wē*, Lat. *vae*, Middle Irish *fáe* 'weh!' in Mīlenbahs, Endzelīns 1932, 433, see also Smoczyński 2018, 1583).

VAI (with the falling intonation *vàì*) as a particle and conjunction is considered a borrowing from Finno-Ugric (e.g., Mīlenbahs, Endzelīns 1932, 432–433; Endzelīns 1951, 689; Pokrotniece 2007, 338).

Või / vai etymology in Estonian

Eesti etümoloogiasõnaraamat, 2012,
<https://arhiiv.eki.ee/dict/ety/index.cgi?Q=v%C3%B5i&F=M&C06=et>

Estonian *või*, also known as *vai* in the South Estonian and North Eastern dialects, is also found in other Baltic Sea Finnic languages – both as a particle and as a conjunction.

Või / vai is considered an abbreviation of the root *vaja* ‘necessary, necessary’ or *vahe* ‘difference, distance’.

Metslang, Habicht, Pajusalu 2011, 27–31:

- In Estonian, the original function of *või* is a coordinating conjunction with a disjunctive meaning, from which the function of the interrogative particle and the modal particle developed.
- In Estonian texts of the 16th and 17th centuries, the use of the conjunction *või* dominates, but the function of the interrogative particle and the modal particle is also found.
- Interrogative particle (*wõi, woi, wai*) – mainly in rhetorical questions at the beginning of a sentence.
- In modern Estonian, the interrogative particle *või* is usually at the end of a sentence, but when indicating a choice or expressing irony, it can also be at the beginning of a sentence.

Pokrotniece 2007:

In the Latvian written language, *vai* has been found since its beginnings in the **16th century** as an **interjection** *wehe, weh, væ, wai, also vai, vaj*.

Since the **17th century** – the **interrogative particle** *wai, woi, vai, vaj, vuj*.

Since the **17th century** – also a **coordinating conjunction**, although less common than the interrogative particle.

Since the **17th century** texts, a process has also been observed where, alongside the oldest Latvian question particles *ar*, *ārī*, *ārīg*, *ārīdzan*, *neg*, *ārī* is increasingly used, almost completely replacing the inherited particles in this function in modern language (Pokrotniece *ibid.*).

Since the end of the **18th century**, Latvian texts have also observed a competition between the VAI and inherited disjunctive / explanatory conjunction *jeb* ‘or’.

In modern Latvian, both are used, but in different meanings (e.g., Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021, 371).

VAI has a disjunctive meaning (*rīts **vai** vakars* ‘morning or evening’), *jeb* – an explanatory meaning (*kadikis **jeb** paeglis* ‘Juniperus communis, or common juniper’).

VAI – particle and conjunction

In Latvian, the particle and conjunction VAI, alone or in combination with other function words, can perform a variety of functions.

VAI as a particle

As a particle, VAI is multifunctional and, depending on its place in the sentence and context, expresses various semantic nuances.

At the beginning of a sentence VAI performs the function of an **interrogative particle**:

- (2) **Vai** *viņš* *ir* *greizsirdīgs?*
 Q 3.NOM.SG be.AUX.PRS.3 jealous.NOM.SG
 ‘Is he jealous?’ (LVK2018)

The interrogative particle can also be located at the end of the sentence, conveying **doubts** or **dissatisfaction** of the speaker (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013):

- (3) *Viņš* *dzimteni* *pārdod,* **vai?!**
 3.NOM.SG motherland.ACC.SG sell.PRS.3 **Q**
 ‘He is selling his motherland, **is he?!**’ (LVK2018)

VAI at both the beginning and the end of a sentence:

(4) ***Vai** no mēness kāds nostūma, vai?*

Q from moon.GEN.SG someone.NOM.SG push.PST.3 Q

‘Did someone push you from the moon, **did he?**’ (Karogs)

VAI expresses **doubt, uncertainty** about the truth of what is said also in an affirmative sentence:

- (5) *Varēja dēliņu sūtīt par mācekli kādā kompjūteru firmā, lai programmē tās pašas datorspēles, **vai**.*

‘You could send your son as an apprentice at a computer company to program the same computer games, **could you.**’
(LVK2022)

VAI expresses **doubt about whether the right words have been found** to describe something:

(6) a. *Vējš vai krūtis plēš pušu.*

windNOM.SG PTCL chestACC.PL tear.PST.3 apart

‘The wind almost tears my chest apart.’ (LVK2022)

b. *Pārvārīti cannelloni izskatīsies ne tik daudz pēc stropa
šūnām kā pēc... pēc... pēc lapseņu pūžņa, vai.*

‘Overcooked cannelloni will look less like a beehive than
like... like... like a wasp nest, **will they?**’ (LVK2022)

If the speaker wishes to ascertain whether his or her thoughts are correct and expects an **acknowledgment from the addressee**, the combination *vai ne*, more seldom, *vai jā* can be used at the end of the declarative sentence (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021, 471):

(7) a. *Dzīve* *ir* *skaista,* ***vai ne?***
life.NOM.SG be.AUX.PRS.3 beautiful.NOM.SG **or** **no**
‘Life is beautiful, **isn’t it?**’ (Karogs)

b. *Klusi* *stāvēšu* *blakus,* ***vai jā?***
quietly stand.FUT.1SG by **or** **yes**
‘I’ll just stand by quietly, **okay?**’ (Karogs)

VAI also performs the function of an **indefinite particle function**, most often in the phrases *diez vai*, *diezin vai* ‘hardly’, *nez vai*, *nezin vai* ‘I wonder if’ (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013, 672):

(8) a. *Tas nu diez vai tā iznāk.*
that.NOM.SG PTCL **hardly** so happen.PRS.3
‘That’s hardly to happen.’ (Saeima)

b. *Nezin vai lopus būs paguvuši*
PTCL livestock.ACC.PL be.AUX.FUT.3 catch_up.PTCP
sadzīt?
heal.INF
‘**I wonder if** they will have time to heal the livestock?’ (Karogs)

- (9) ***Diezin vai** aicināt jūs šonakt pie sevis uz mājām ir laba ideja.*
.. ***Nezinu vai, nezinu vai!** Beigu beigās viņa vēl jūs ievilks savā spēlītēs un liks mani pierunāt, lai es vēlreiz pārdomāju to divu citu benzīntanku iegādāšanos.*
‘It's probably not a good idea to invite you to my house tonight... **I don't know, I don't know!** In the end, she'll drag you into her games and make me think twice about buying those two other gas stations.’ (LVK2022)

In the function of an **emphatic particle** VAI is used with adverbs expressing measure or extent, e.g., *gluži vai* ‘quite or’, *gandrīz vai* ‘almost or’ (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013, 677):

(10) a. *Apkalpotāji gluži vai sacentās laipnībā.*
waiter.NOM.PL **almost** compete.PST.3 kindness.LOC.SG
‘The waiters **almost** competed in kindness.’ (LVK2018)

b. *Gandrīz vai pagību,*
almost faint.PST.1SG
kad ieraudzīju savas jaunās lomas garderobi.
‘I almost fainted when I saw the wardrobe for my new role.’
(LVK2022)

VAI in combination with the particle *kaut* ‘if only; even though’, i.e., *kaut vai* ‘if only; at least; even’ expresses the meaning of concession (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013, 672):

(11) *Un es baidījos viņu satraukt,*

***kaut vai** praktisku apsvērumu dēļ.*

if only practical.GEN.PL reason.GEN.PL for

‘And I was afraid to upset him, **if only** for practical reasons.’

(LVK2022)

VAI as a coordinating conjunction

VAI is also a coordinating conjunction with a disjunctive meaning, which alone or in combination with particles can link both coordinated words and phrases within a clause and independent clauses within a compound sentence (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021, 369–370).

VAI, VAI ARĪ ‘or’ links coordinated phrases within a clause:

(12) *Jēdzieni* *var* *tikt* *saprasti* *dažādi*

concept.NOM.SG can.PRS.3 be.INF understand.PTCP differently

vai ***arī*** *vispār* *nesaprasti*.

or also at_all not_understand.PTCP

‘Concepts can be understood differently **or** not understood at all.’(LVK2022)

Disjunctive relations in a compound sentence between independent clauses are expressed by *vai arī* ‘or’, *vai nu – vai (arī)* ‘either – or’.

- (13) ***Vai** nu zivju toreiz bijis vairāk,*
either PTCL fish.GEN.PL then be.AUX.PTCP.NOM.SG more
***vai** līvu vīri bijuši stiprāki.*
or Livonian.GEN.PL man.NOM.PL be.AUX.PTCP strong.NOM.PL
‘**Either** there were more fish back then, **or** the Livonian men
were stronger.’ (LVK2018)

Cases where coordination was made using the coordinating (combined) conjunctions *vai – vai* ‘either – or’ or *vai – vai arī* ‘either – or’ were not found, because in such cases, the first *vai* in each combination corresponds either to a subordinating conjunction or to the interrogative particle (Kalnača, Lokmane 2021, 506).

VAI often links coordinated subclauses in a complex sentence:

(14) *Kāpēc viņš nevarētu runāt par to, kas ir cilvēks **vai** kas ir pasaule un kā tā radusies?*

‘Why couldn't he talk about what a person is **or** what the world is and how it came into being?’ (LVTB)

The conjunction *jeb vai* ‘or’ can function as a coordinating conjunction in cases where the whole sentence (15a) or the preceding part (15b) of the sentence is introduced by the interrogative particle *VAI* or the subordinating conjunction *VAI*:

- (15) a. ***Vai*** *tu darīsi brīnumus mirušo vidū, **jeb vai** palikušie celsies tevi godāt?*
‘Will you perform miracles among the dead, **or** will the living rise up to honour you?’ (LVK2018)
- b. ***Vai*** *tā ir nepieciešamība **jeb vai** tikai patiesības šķitums?*
‘Is this a necessity **or** just the appearance of truth?’ (LVK2022)

(16) *Kad es sev tagad jautāju, **vai** viņa bija cēlonis **jeb vai** sekas, upuris **jeb vai** pazudinātāja, tad nezinu viennozīmīgu atbildi.*

‘When I ask myself now **whether** she was the cause **or** the effect, the victim **or** the destroyer, I don't know a clear answer.’ (LVK2022)

VAI as a subordinating conjunction

Subordinating conjunction VAI is semantically neutral when used to introduce subject or object clauses (Kalnača, Lokmane 2021, 374):

(17) *Viņš domā, **vai** viņa prāts un jūtas ir spējīgi radīt kaut ko lielu.*

‘He wonders **if** his mind and feelings are capable of creating something great.’ (LVK2018)

LAI VAI ‘whatever’ may introduce a concession clause.

Concession clauses give information that contrasts with or opposes the facts in the main clause in an unexpected way:

(18) a. ***Lai vai** ko es darītu, tas nedrīkst sāpināt viņu, jo es viņu cīenu.*

‘**Whatever** I do, it must not hurt him because I respect him’. (LVK2022)

b. *Visiem cilvēkiem, **lai vai** kādi būtu mūsu politiskie uzskati, vairāk ir kopīgā, nevis atšķirīgā.*

‘All people, **no matter** what our political views, have more in common than differences.’ (LVK2022)

As can be seen in the examples (18), *lai vai* ‘whatever’ is always followed by a pronoun or adverb in the function of subordinating words – *kas* ‘who, what, which’, *kāds* ‘which what kind’, *cik* ‘how many, how much’, *kur* ‘where’ etc.

This should be considered a special subtype of concession clauses, which differ not only formally but also semantically from ordinary concession clauses.

The concession clause, which is introduced by *lai vai*, has the meaning of an intensified contradiction in expressive expressions (Ahero et al. 1962, 758).

Syncretic functions of VAI

1. Coordinating and subordinating conjunction

(19) *[..] uz kādu pavisam īsu mirkli viņu pārņēma šaubas par to, **vai** jautātāja bija viņa pati **vai** varbūt meitene spogulī.*

[..] for a very brief moment she was overcome with doubt about **whether** the questioner was herself **or** perhaps the girl in the mirror. (LVTB)

The first VAI introduces a subclause, but also has disjunctive semantics, as it is followed by another coordinating VAI.

2. Coordinating conjunction and interrogative particle

(20) ***Vai** tu nāksi ēst, **vai** ko tu darīsi?*

Are you coming to eat, **or** what are you going to do? (LVTB)

“The first *vai* simultaneously has the function of both a particle and a disjunctive conjunction, since it not only expresses a question, but also unites two components between which there is a disjunctive relation.” (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013, 660)

Conclusions

1. *VAI* is widely used as a particle, as well as a coordinating and subordinating conjunction, alone or in combination with other function words, in some cases syncretism of functions is observed.
2. The semantic core of the various uses of *VAI* seems to be disjunctive meaning.

3. Contrastive analysis of the semantics and functions of Latvian *vai* and Estonian *või* should be continued. The coincidence is partial, but not complete. Šis vēl nav labi noformulēts.

4. Funkciju daudzveidīgums un sinkrētisms tomēr liek jautāt, vai *vai* latviešu valodā partikulas un saikļa funkcijā vispār ir aizgūts. Hipotēze – var būt kontaktvalodu (igauņu un lībiešu) iespaidā ir paplašinājušās mantotās interjekcijas *vai* funkcijas? Kas mums liek par to domāt? Ja nozīmes ir daļēji līdzīgas, vai tad tas tomēr nerunā par labu aizgūšanai???

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THANK YOU!

PALDIES!

AITÄH!