

Stratifications of alternativity: Functions of the word VÕI in the Southern Finnic language area

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Outline

- Etymology and variants of VÕI
- Research questions and data
- VÕI as an interrogative particle at the beginning of a sentence
- VÕI as an interrogative particle at the end of a sentence
- Observations on other functions
- Conclusion

Etymology and variants of VÕI

Estonian Etymological Dictionary (ETY: *või*):

- Disjunctive conjunction in Finnic languages
- The form varies: Estonian, Livonian *või*, in South Estonian, the Estonian coastal dialect and in most Finnic languages *vai*, also other variants.
- The function varies, e.g., in Livonian also an interrogative particle.
- Finnic stem. It has been suggested that it may be a shortened variant of another stem: *vahe* 'interval, gap' or *vaja* 'needed'.
- Here, we use VÕI as a general label for all variants.
- Of the functions of the word VÕI, its use as a conjunction is likely primary; it occurs, for example, in older written Estonian (*voi*, *või*) and Finnish (*vai*) (VAKK, Häkkinen 2011)

Similar words

- The word *vaid* ‘only; but’ in Estonian and *vain* ‘only’ in Finnish may also derive from the word *vaja*
- In Finnish dialects *vai* and *vain* are at times conflated.
- Interjections, such as Finnish *voi* ~ *voih*, Seto *võe(h)*, *võekõnõ*, etc., are likely derived from another stem. (Häkkinen 2011)

Research questions

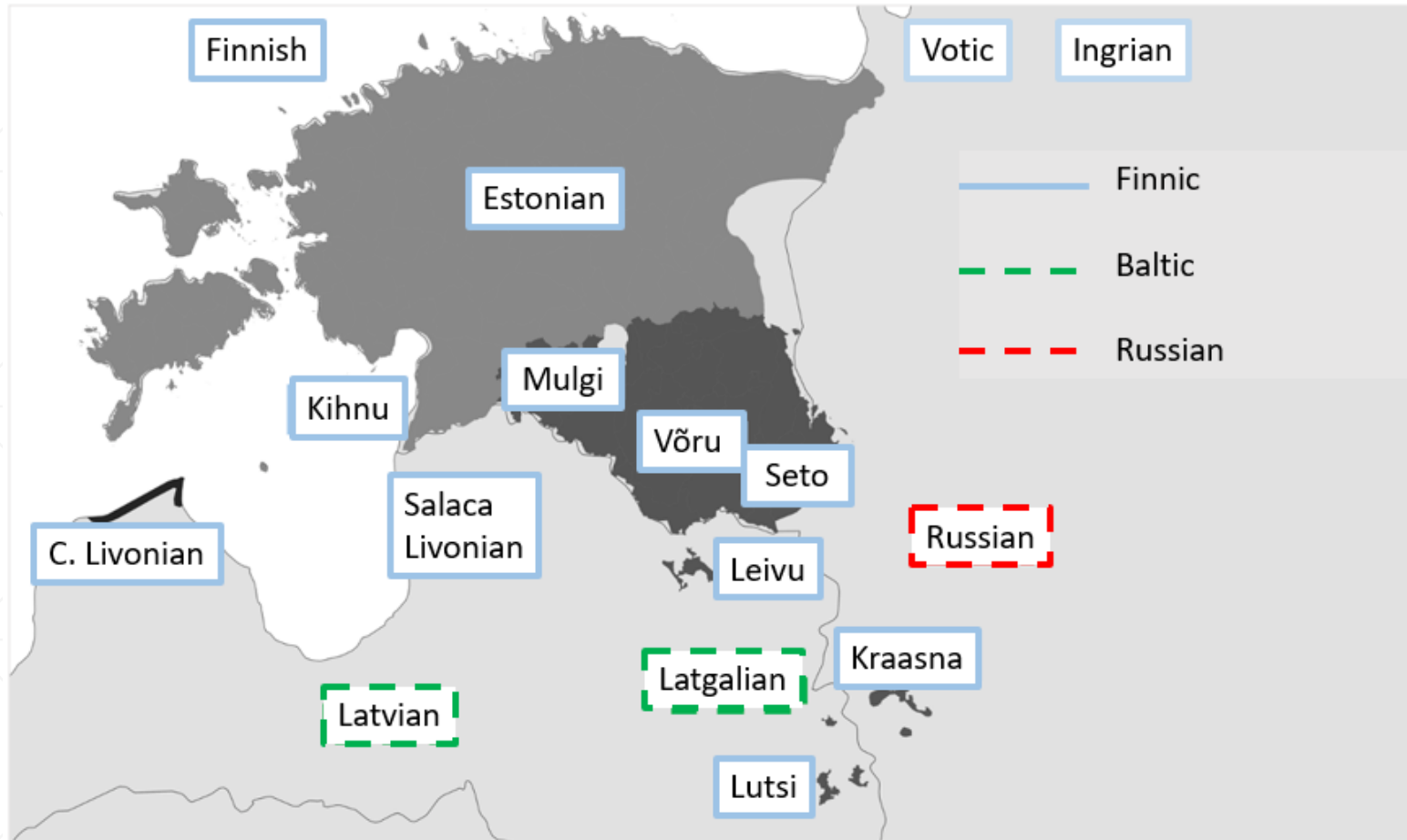
- What are the syntactic and pragmatic functions of the word VÕI in the Southern Finnic language area?
- What functional shifts have occurred in the usage of the word VÕI?
- Which types of usage of VÕI are widespread in the area, and what factors might have facilitated their spread?

Data

Languages covered: Standard Estonian, Northern Estonian dialects, Southern Estonian and language islands, Courland and Salaca Livonian, Votic, Ingrian (Soikkola dialect), Southern Finnish dialects, Standard Finnish

The aim is to obtain preliminary answers to the research questions, relying on existing data sources (corpora, grammars, dictionaries, text collections, previous studies, etc.).

(Southern) Finnic language area



VÕI as a sentence-initial question marker

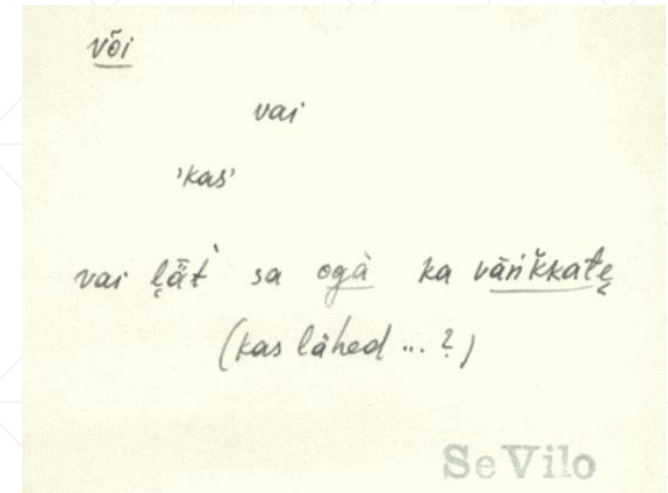
Livonian, South Estonian, Leivu, Votic, Ingrian

Või *sa tuoid ka leibõ?* (Courland Livonian, Setälä 1953)
'Did you bring bread too?'

vai *läät sa, Oga, ka Vaan'kalõ?* (Seto, EMSUKA)
'Are you going to Vaanka too, Oga?'

Võis *teil is ole külm ši kevaja?* (Leivu, EM IX)
'Weren't you cold this spring?'

merest kuuluu mörähüksiä, vai ken uvonnoo? (Ingrian, Nirvi 1971)
'There's shouting coming from the sea, could someone be drowning?'



The development of the interrogative VÕI at the beginning of a sentence: polysemy and functional shifts

- 1) a **conjunction** linking alternative elements (Est *kass või koer* ‘cat or dog’)
- 2) a **particle** at the beginning of a sentence offering an alternative to the preceding context
„*Oome tuleb tagasi.*“ „*Või saadab vanaisa.*“ (Estonian, FICT 1990)
““Tomorrow (he) will come back.” „Or he will send Grandpa.”
Voj mina ka tämd tagis saatup. (Salaca Livonian, Winkler ja Pajusalu 2016)
“Or I’ll send it back too’
- 3) **question marker** at the beginning of the sentence
Või ta saadab vanaisa?
‘Or s/he will send Grandpa?’

Some interrogative uses in written Estonian since the 18th century.

The development of the interrogative VÕI at the beginning of a sentence: polysemy and borrowing

- 1) The conjunction *vai* came to Latvian as a Finnic borrowing (MAT-borrowing, see Sakel 2007),
- 2) *vai* also began to function as a question marker,
- 3) the interrogative *vai* remained in sentence-initial position like Latvian's own question particle *ar*,
- 4) Livonian adopted the polysemy of *vai* from Latvian: Livonian *vai* is both a conjunction and a sentence-initial question marker (PAT-loan). (cf. Norvik et al. 2022)

VÕI as a sentence-final question marker

Standard Estonian, Estonian dialects, South Estonian, Lutsi, Leivu, Southwestern and Southern Finnish dialects, standard Finnish

ka maha putti vōh? (Mulgi, EMSUKA)

‘Did it fall down?’

rakentaaks se iten niitä vai (spoken Finnish, Arkisyn)

‘Is he building it himself?’

tekikös ne karjalle sit pahaa vai (Southwestern dialectal Finnish, LA)

‘Did they harm the herd?’

In Estonian language corpora, VÕI has been used as an interrogative particle since the 19th century and is widespread. (Cf. Lindström 2001)

The development of the interrogative VÕI at the end of a sentence: polysemy and functional shifts

- Source structure: offering an alternative to the content of the sentence : *või ei* ‘or not’, *või midagi muud* ‘or something else’, etc.
- Technique for organizing text and dialogue: leaving the list of alternatives incomplete or implicit.
*Aga ega sellel kõigel ei olnud siis mingisugust tähtsust. Hõbedal või riietel **või**...* (Estonian, FICT 1990)
‘But none of that mattered at the time. Silver or clothes **or**...’
*syss nuuq tälle anniq midä, leibä **vai*** (Seto, SESS)
‘then they gave him something, bread **or**...’
- Often there is another question marker in the same sentence – the new marker is far away and still needs support (***kas** sa tuled **või**?* ‘are you coming?’ (Estonian))

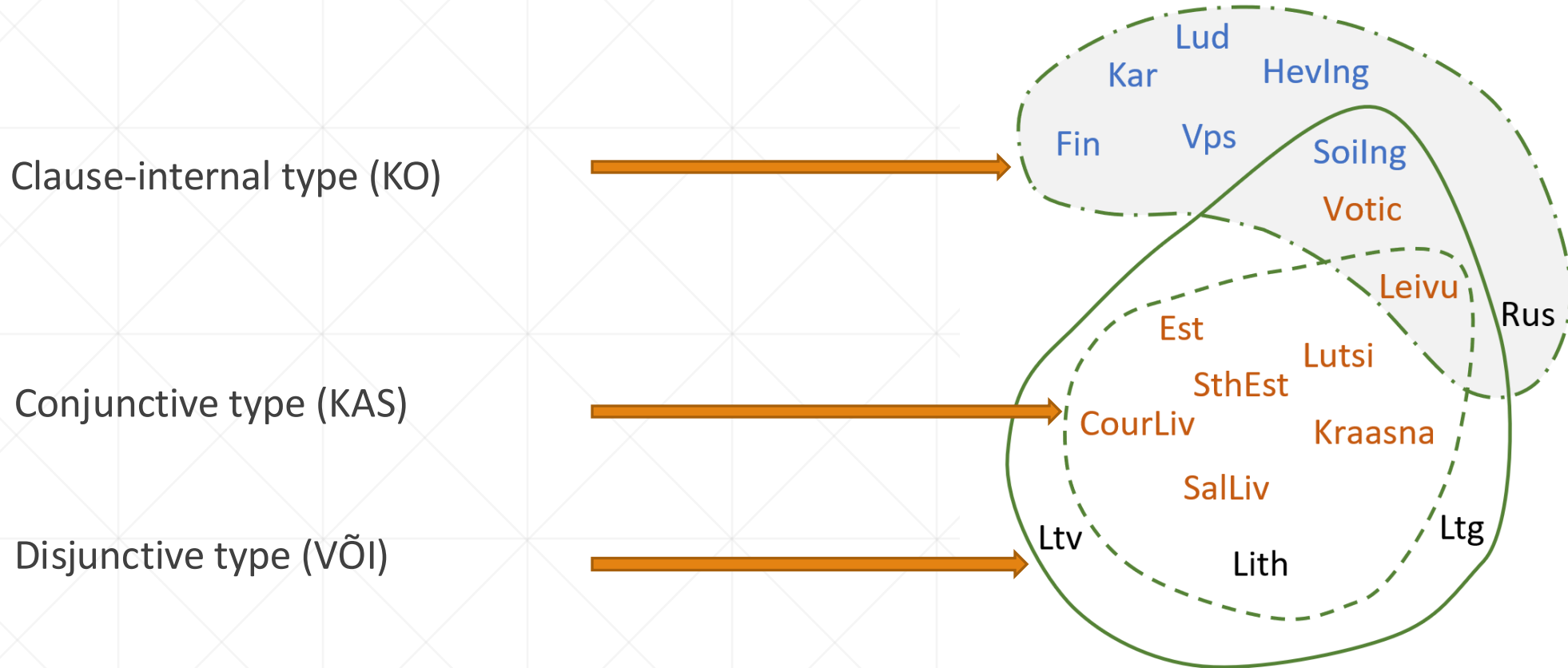
VÕI as polar question marker

(Norvik et al. 2022: 135; Pajusalu et al. 2024; EstTyp).

Position	Est	Khn	Mul	Vro	Set	Lut	Lei	SLiv	CLiv	Votic	Soilng	Fin	FinSth
Initial			<i>või,</i> <i>võ</i>	<i>vai</i>	<i>vai</i>		<i>vai,</i> <i>võis,</i> <i>veis,</i> <i>vais</i>	<i>voj,</i> <i>vej</i>	<i>või,</i> <i>võ,</i> <i>u</i>	<i>vai,</i> <i>või</i>	<i>vai</i>		
Final	<i>või,</i> <i>vä</i>	<i>ve, vä,</i> <i>või</i>	<i>või,</i> <i>võh</i>	<i>vai</i>	<i>vai,</i> <i>vaih,</i> <i>vah</i>	<i>va</i>							
Doubling final	<i>kas</i> + <i>või,</i> <i>vä</i>	<i>kas</i> + <i>ve, vä,</i> <i>või</i>	<i>ka</i> + <i>võh</i>	<i>kas</i> + <i>vai</i>	<i>kas</i> + <i>vai,</i> <i>vaih</i>	<i>kas</i> + <i>vai</i>	<i>veis</i> + <i>vai</i>					<i>-ko(s)</i> + <i>vai</i>	<i>-ko(s)</i> + <i>vai</i>

Distribution of types of question markers

(Pajusalu et al. 2024)



Observations on other functions: (Inter)subjective boundary particle 1

Left periphery, related to the preceding context.

- **Statement**, may be accompanied by a hint of surprise or amazement

*Olen minäkin käynyt luostarissa, Hanna sanoo uhmakkaasti. – **Vai** olet, Lys nauraa.* (Finnish, VISK)

‘I’ve been to a monastery too, Hanna says defiantly. – **Oh**, you have, Lys laughs.’

- **Doubt**

võ ta säälgi oleme jääss! (Mulgi, MS)

"**As if** he’d stay there!”

- **Ironical denial**

*"Hän on aivan viaton." — "**Vai viaton!"*** (Finnish, SES)

"He is completely innocent." — „Innocent, **really!**"

(Inter)subjective boundary particle 2

Reproach

vai sia, ran'ts, võit sedäsi kõnelde! (Mulgi, MS)

‘So you, mutt, can talk like that!’

Directivity (assertion > disparagement > directivity)

vai hää ei mää! (Ingrian, Nirvi 1971)

‘Or he won’t go!’

VÕI as uncertainty and correction marker

(Rass 2021, EG 2023)

Uncertainty through weighing alternatives – the most common function of **VÕI** in Estonian dialects

- *ol'i midagi (.) tuhande üheksa+saea (.) kahe+`gümne (.) nel'landal viijendal või selle `ümbruses (...)* (Central dialect of Estonian)
- ‘it was sometime in nineteen hundred twenty forth, fifth **or** around then’

Self-correction in dialogue

- **ikke juo kevade (.) juoo = s *ninda (.) mai vai se *apri·lli+guu = ses (.) õli = sie *tienijade *kauplemine* (Alutaguse dialect of Estonian)
- ‘in spring already so in May, **or** in the month April was that servants’ bargaining’

Clause-internal particle VÕI

Concessive phrase marker (*kas*) *või*

- *vanast võeti tark nõi*d* vai saa versta takast pulmavanõmbast* (Seto, SESS)

‘in the old days, a wise witch would be fetched **even** from a hundred versts away to be a wedding leader’

Focus particle ‘only, just’ (possibly merged with the word *vaid/vain*)

- *täll õli vai üφs katti* (Votic, VKS)

‘s/he had **only** one cat’

Functional shifts of the conjunction VÕI

- **Main function:** disjunctive relation between sentence constituents

tulittõko maittsõ vai meritse, vai tulittõ põltojee perittse (Votic, VKS)

‘did you come by land **or** by sea, **or** did you come from beyond the fields?’

- **Disjunctive–adversative relation** ‘or (else)’

Kas võtate hinda alla, või jääb kaup katki. (Estonian, EG 2023)

‘Will you lower the price, **or** the deal will fall through.’

- **Metalinguistic disjunction**

nisu vai rüis ku tapõttii, heeno õlki jutõltii sasi vai sosituz (Votic, VKS)

‘when wheat or rye was threshed, fine straw was called *sasi*, **or** *sositu* (i.e., chaff)’

- **Derived concessive conjunction** *vaikka~vaikko* (Finnish, Votic, Ingrian)

tulõn, vaikka õlõisi tuisku (Votic, VKS)

‘I’ll come, **even if** there is a snowstorm.’

Fixed expressions

Response formulas

Realisation: *või nii*, *vai nii* (Votic), *vai niin* (Finnish)

vai nii, *siä õikõi mehelee mened* (Votic, VKS)

‘oh really, are you actually getting married?’

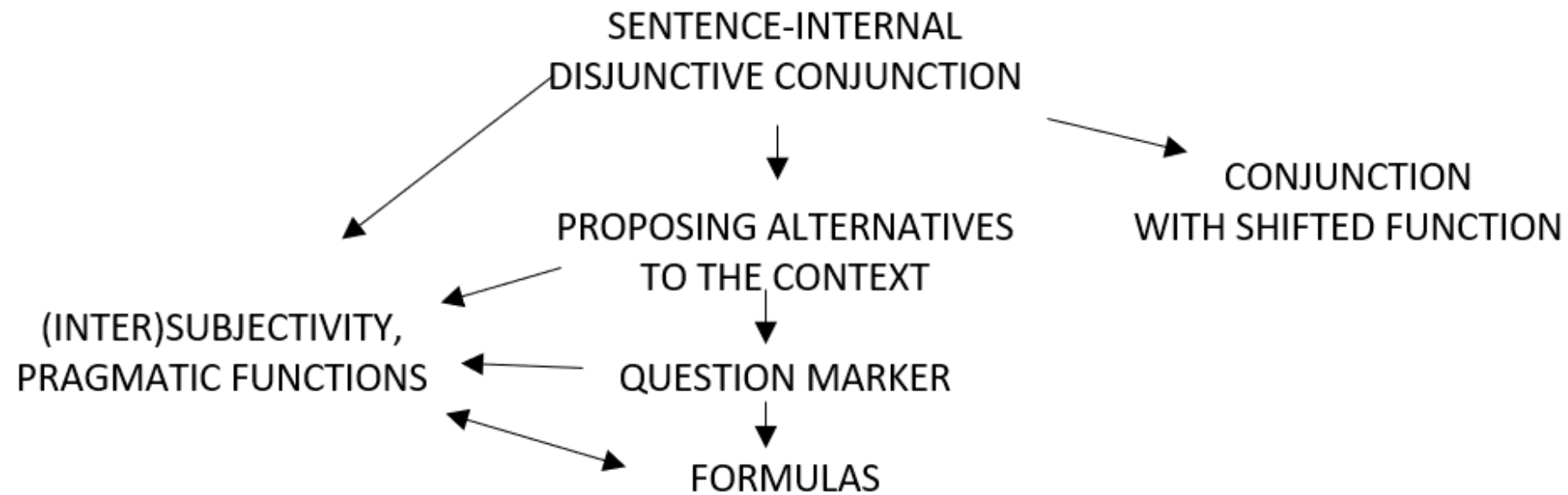
Disbelief: *ongi nii vä* ‘is that really so?’ (Estonian)

Addition formulas: *vai mitä* ‘or what’, *vai kuinka* ‘or how’ (Finnish, VISK), *või mis*, *või kuidas*, *tee või tina* (Estonian), *kas vai* (Võru), *vai miä* (Seto), *tii vai tina* (Mulgi)

*tõnõ ei jätä `perrä **kas vai*** (Võru Har, EMS)

‘the other won’t give in, **whatever** you do’

Conclusion: functional shifts of VÕI



Overview of functional shifts of VÕI

- VÕI functions both as a disjunctive **conjunction** and as a **particle** with multiple functions.
- At the **beginning** of a sentence, VÕI offers an **alternative to the preceding context**. This position supports shifts into an interrogative marker and into expressing various attitudes.
- At the **end** of a sentence, VÕI allows offering **alternatives to the sentence's own content**. This position also supports a shift into an interrogative marker, as well as marking self-corrections and uncertainty.
- Shifts also occur in the intra-sentential use of VÕI as a **conjunction**.
- The **question marker** VÕI varies across areal distribution.
- **Sentence-initial** interrogative VÕI is more common in the **southernmost** Finnic languages (similarly to Latvian), but also occurs in **Ingrian**.
- In the more **northern** languages, a **sentence-final** interrogative marker VÕI has begun to develop.
- Sentence-final interrogative VÕI often requires the support of **another** interrogative particle.
- The distribution of other usage variants requires further study.

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Thank you!