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

Latvian and Finno-Ugric languages (e.g., Estonian and Livonian) share a discourse element – the indeclinable polyfunctional (auxiliary) word *vai* (Latv.), *või* (Est.) and *või* (Liv.). In Latvian, *vai* (with the falling intonation *vài*) as a particle and conjunction is considered a borrowing from Finno-Ugric (e.g., ME IV; Endzelīns 1951; Pokrotniece 2007). On the other hand, *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!' ME IV, see also Smoczyński 2018). It is undisputed that since its beginnings, the Latvian written language has been using *vai* both as an interrogative/emphasis particle and as an interjection, moreover, until the second half of the 19th century, with a lot of variation as to its written form *wai, waj, way, vai, vaj, woi, voi, wuj* (Pokrotniece 2007). Since the 17th century texts, a process can be noted that, besides to the oldest Latvian interrogative particles *ar, arī, arīg, arīdzan, neg,* there is a more and more frequent use of *vai,* the latter almost completely displacing the inherited interrogative particles in modern language. Since the end of the 18th century, Latvian texts show a competition between *vai* and the inherited disjunctive conjunction *jeb* 'or'; in modern language, both are used, but in different senses (e.g., Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021).

For a typological and contrastive comparison with Finno-Ugric material, especially Estonian *või,* a closer look at the semantics and functions of the Latvian particle and conjunction *vai* is necessary. Therefore, in our paper we will focus on *vai* solely as a particle and conjunction, while *vai* as an interjection is left outside the scope of this study.

In Latvian, the particle and conjunction *vai* alone or in combination with other lexical items can perform a variety of functions. Firstly, as a particle *vai* is multifunctional and expresses different semantic nuances depending on place in the phrase and its adjacent environment. E.g. at the beginning of a sentence *vai* performs the function of an interrogative particle:

(1) ***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):

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

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

(3) *Dzīve*   *ir*   *skaista,*   **vai**   **ne***?*
    life.NOM.SG   be.AUX.PRS.3   beautiful.NOM.SG   **or**   **not**
    'Life is beautiful, **isn't it**?' (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), while 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 op. cit.).

   Secondly, *vai* is also a coordinating conjunction with a disjunctive meaning, which alone or in combination with particles can link both equal parts of a simple sentence and parts of a compound sentence (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021):

(4) ***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.SG   be.AUX.PTCP.NOM.PL   strong.NOM.PL
    '**Either** there were more fish back then, **or** the Livonian men were stronger.'
    (LVK2018)

Vai is widely used in the function of a semantically neutral subordinating conjunction introducing subject or object clauses (Nītiņa, Grigorjevs 2013; Kalnača, Lokmane 2021):

(5) *Viņš domā,*
    vai   *viņa*   *prāts*   *un*   *jūtas*
    if   3.GEN.SG   mind.NOM.SG   and   feeling.NOM.PL
    ir   *spējīgi*   *radīt*   *kaut ko*   *lielu.*
    be.AUX.PRS.3   capable.NOM.SG   create.INF   something   great.ACC.SG
    'He wonders **if** his mind and feelings are capable of creating something great.'
    (LVK2018)

Previous studies have focused more on the use of *vai* in polarity structures in Baltic and Finno-Ugric material (e.g. Metslang *et al.* 2017; Norvik *et al.* 2022, see also Nau, Ostrowski 2010), but other functions of *vai* have not been examined or compared more closely. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to classify and analyze as many uses of *vai* as a particle /conjunction in Latvian as possible, based on the *Latvian National Corpora Collection (LNCC)* (available at: https://korpuss.lv/en/) which contains data from 39 different corpora.

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