

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

Helle Metslang, Miina Norvik, Karl Pajusalu, Eva Saar (University of Tartu)

The presentation addresses the syntactic and pragmatic functions of the word *või/vai/vaj/vej*, with its variants (here referred to as VÕI), in the Southern Finnic language area. VÕI is a Finnic stem by its origin, and the word functions as a disjunctive conjunction in most Finnic languages.

In the presentation, we aim to answer the following 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?

We rely on existing research and available data sources (corpora, grammars, text collections, etc.). The language varieties studied include Courland Livonian, Salaca Livonian, Standard Estonian, South Estonian, Estonian dialects, South Estonian language islands, Soikkola Ingrian, Votic, and southern Finnish dialects.

The most striking shift in the syntactic and pragmatic function is the transformation of VÕI into a marker of polar questions (cf. Metslang et al. 2017), where VÕI no longer appears within the sentence but on its periphery. The grammaticalisation of the interrogative particle grows out of the function of VÕI as a particle linking the sentence to the preceding or following context and located at the beginning or end of the sentence. Clause-initial interrogative VÕI is common mainly in the southern part of the area: South Estonian, the Leivu language island, Salaca and Courland Livonian, but also in Votic, and as a Votic influence also Soikkola Ingrian. In the case of Livonian, we observe complicated borrowing processes (see Sakel 2007): MAT-borrowing (e.g., Latvian *vai* ‘or’ is a Finnic loan), internal grammaticalization (Latvian *vai* ‘or’ > ‘question’), and PAT-borrowing (the Latvian-influenced polysemy ‘or’/‘question’ of *või* in Livonian). Clause-final interrogative VÕI tends to occur mainly in the northern part of the area (Standard Estonian, North Estonian dialects) but also in some southern Estonian varieties, incl. Lutsi, southwestern and southern Finnish dialects, and also in spoken common Finnish). Clause-

final interrogative VÕI is a relatively late development and often requires another question marker in the sentence.

Syntactically, when used as a conjunction, the word VÕI may have shifted in meaning, expressing, e.g., metalinguistic disjunction in Votic (ETY, cf. Haspelmath 2007: 27) or adversative disjunction in Estonian. The combination of VÕI with the particle *ka* has developed into a particle or adverb with concessive meaning, such as in the Ingrian *vaik* or Finnish *vaikka* (Ikola et al. 1989: 103–104).

When used as a conjunction, VÕI may be used in different pragmatic functions, as self-correction, expressing uncertainty (see e.g., Rass 2021). Communication formulae have developed based on VÕI, signaling changes in information, doubt, questioning, etc.

In the presentation, we will examine the spread of syntactic and pragmatic usage types in the area, as well as the internal and external factors that have contributed to this spread.

References

ETY = *Eesti etümoloogiasõnaraamat*. <https://arhiiv.eki.ee/dict/ety/> (25.02.25)

Haspelmath, Martin. 2007. Coordination. Timothy Shopen (toim), *Language typology and syntactic description*, vol. II: *Complex constructions*, 1–51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ikola, Osmo, Ulla Palomäki, Anna-Kaisa Koitto 1989. *Suomen murteiden lauseoppia ja tekstikielioppia*. Helsinki: SKS.

Metslang, Helle; Habicht, Külli; Pajusalu, Karl 2017. Where do question particles come from? – Jocelyne Fernandez-Vest; Helle Metslang, (eds.), *STUF / Language Typology and Universals* 70 (3). Special issue: Perspectives on Questions, Answers, and Information Structure, 105–137.

Rass, Saskia 2021. Partikli *või* kasutamisest Hargla, Jõhvi, Püha ja Põltsamaa murrakus.

Bachelor thesis. University of Tartu.

Sakel, Jeanette (2007), Types of loan: Matter and pattern, in Yaron Matras, and Jeanette Sakel (eds), (2007), *Grammatical Borrowing in Cross-Linguistic Perspective*, Berlin / New York:

Mouton de Gruyter, 15–29.