

Yes/no questions and the interrogative mood in Forest Enets

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to shed some light on *yes/no questions*, also known as *polar-* or *polar-interrogative questions*, a category not readily encountered in traditional grammaticography. This opening statement is not intended to criticize traditional grammaticography, which generally operates from the perspective *form-to-function*. This perspective, inherited from the description of classical Indo-European languages, is, in spite of all criticism, still suitable for languages which are rich in morphology, among them the languages of Northern Eurasia which have been Juha Janhunen's object of research for several decades. However, yes/no questions, which may and frequently do resist description from the form-to-function perspective (also known as the semasiological perspective) for reasons to be shown with data from Forest Enets, are of course equally valid objects of inquiry but tend to remain outside the scope of traditional grammaticography. For this, either an onomasiological approach or a mixed semasiological-onomasiological approach is more suitable, although not without reservations (see e.g. Lehmann 2004 and Mosel 2006 for some background).

The description of yes/no questions in Forest Enets is, however, also necessary for a deeper understanding of a peculiar mood in the rich mood system of Northern Samoyed: the interrogative mood. The discussion will close with a note on typology showing that Forest Enets¹ does not allow a simple "typological classification" if one were to re-apply the principles of the WALS approach to interrogatives with the necessary strictness.

1. In principle this is valid for several other Northern Samoyed languages (Tundra Enets, Tundra Nenets and Forest Nenets) as the interrogative mood is a common innovation. The discussion is however restricted to Forest Enets.

2. A working definition of yes/no questions and yes/no question strategies

As this paper is not concerned with theory-making, the discussion of yes/no questions in Forest Enets follows König & Siemund (2007). Yes/no questions try to provide “[...] a truth value for the corresponding declarative sentence. Polar interrogatives are typically used to inquire about the truth or falsity of the proposition they express” (König & Siemund 2007: 291). In the survey that follows, they present six major strategies: “(i) special intonation patterns, (ii) interrogative particles, (iii) the addition of special tags, (iv) disjunctive-negative structures, (v) a change in the relative order of constituents and (vi) particular verbal inflection. By far the most prominent among these six strategies are the use of a special intonation pattern and the addition of a particular particle” (König & Siemund 2007: 292).

As König & Siemund aim at a typological definition of yes/no question strategies, the definition is, of course, onomasiological. The second part which describes general strategies for yes/no question formation is concerned with form, and it is therefore semasiological. Still, not all of the six strategies can be covered equally well from the semasiological perspective on grammaticography, especially (i) intonation. As a matter of fact, this category tends to be omitted, and this happened with a recent description of Forest Enets as I shall discuss below.

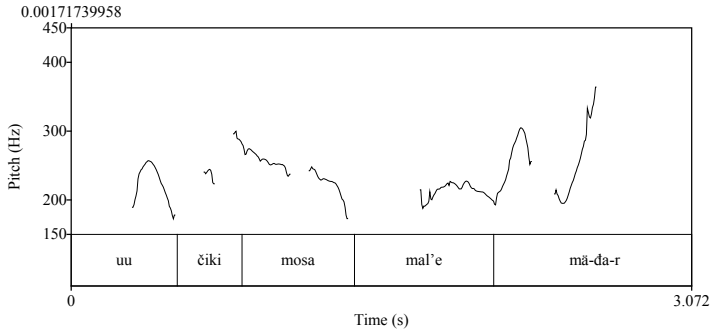
3. Yes/no questions in Forest Enets with non-past reference

Recently, Irina Sorokina published a morphosyntax-based Forest Enets grammar which makes available in book form most of her writings about the language spoken 30–40 years ago (Sorokina 2010). The format chosen for the book is a continuation of traditional Soviet grammaticography, which means that syntax is not dealt with separately. Although syntactic data can be found, a dedicated syntax part is missing. While Sorokina’s description of interrogative pronouns presents a large amount of data on *wh*-based interrogatives, the formation of yes/no questions is not covered (Sorokina 2010: 241–246). This gap is a direct outcome of the semasiological perspective and by no means accidental: Forest Enets lacks overt morphological and syntactical means for the expression of yes/no questions with non-past reference. Even word order remains the same, which means that yes/no questions with non-past reference rely entirely on intonation.² The typical intonation pattern shows a rising intonation on the clause-final verb and may be described as LH.³

2. Without the intonation typical of yes/no questions, a falling intonation would result in regular declarative speech acts.

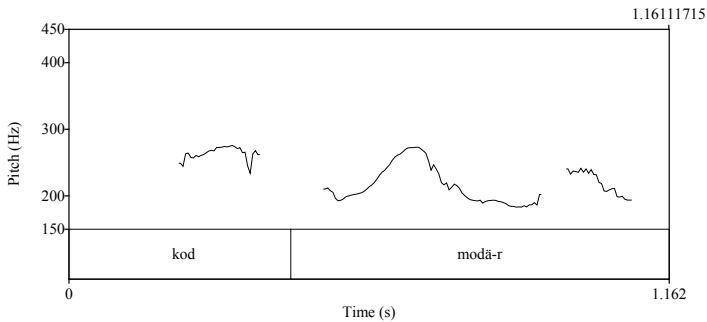
3. Word order in Forest Enets is predominantly SOV.

- (1) *uu čiki mosa mal'e mā-ḏa-r*
 2SG this work_[ACC] already make-FUT-SG.2SG
 'Will you already do this work?' [ZNB IV 61]



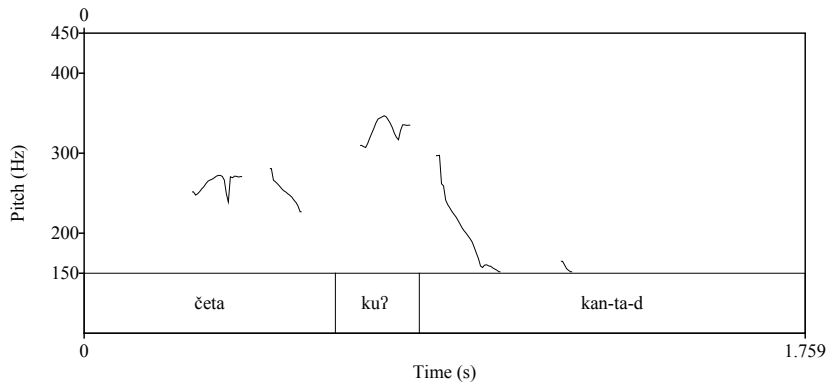
Occasionally, intonation may fall once more towards the end which results in LHL:

- (2) *kod modä-r*
 sled_[ACC] see-SG.2SG
 'Do you see the sled?' [ESG Two brothers]



While yes/no questions must rely on this special rising intonation pattern, it is not restricted to this particular interrogative clause. Content questions show the same rising intonation on the interrogative pronoun:

- (3) *četa ku? kan-ta-d*
 tomorrow where.LAT go-FUT-2SG
 ‘Where will you go tomorrow?’ [ZNB IV 61]



4. Yes/no questions with past tense reference

When asking a yes/no question with past tense reference, the same rising intonation pattern is preserved. The same intonation is also found in interrogative clauses with *wh*-pronouns. However, in addition to intonation, the verb is also obligatorily marked for the interrogative mood:

- (4) *ńe d'ara-sa*
 child cry-IROG.3SG
 ‘Did the child cry?’

- (5) *uu mosra-sa-d*
 3SG work-IROG-2SG
 ‘Did you work?’

The same is also valid for content questions with past tense context:

- (6) *obu-š Potabu-xuđ to-sa-d*
 what-TRSL Potapovo-ABL.SG come-IROG-2SG
 ‘Why did you come from Potapovo?’ [ZNB I 69]

Although it comes as a synchronic surprise that the interrogative mood in Forest Enets has an intrinsic past tense value, this unusual grammaticalization pattern is very well understood (e.g. Mikola 2004: 115–116). The grammaticalization history will be covered again in some detail for two reasons: first, a coherent description of yes/no question formation is still missing and, secondly, yes/no questions in Forest Enets have some typological implications which will be addressed at the end.

Our discussion begins with another typologically unusual feature of Forest Enets and its closest relatives Tundra Enets and the two Nenets languages. The situation in these languages is the exact opposite of the general morpheme-ordering principles which has tense closer to the stem than person; the general past tense⁴ and its equivalent in Tundra Enets and both Nenets languages is marked verb-finally, thus coming after verbal endings:

- (7) a. *uu kaŋi-d*
 2_{SG} go-2_{SG}
 ‘You are going’
- b. *uu kaŋi-d-uš*
 2_{SG} go-2_{SG}-PST
 ‘You went.’

This unusual ordering principle is seen as a secondary development and is explained by the cliticization of an earlier free-standing auxiliary (see e.g. Künnap 1978: 139). In contrast, Selkup has preserved the usual order which has tense marking closer to the stem than person marking (Taz Selkup data from Kuznetsova et al. 2002: 199–200):

- (8) *паналықо* ‘сломаться’
паналы-са-к
 break-PST-1_{SG}
 ‘I broke it’

Historically, the past tense marker in Selkup and Nganasan and the interrogative mood marker in Enets and Nenets derive from the same morpheme reconstructed as **-sã* by Mikola (2004: 115–116), although its original function as a past tense marker is preserved only in Selkup and Nganasan. In the Enets and Nenets languages, a new secondary past tense construction based on the finite verb and a free-standing auxiliary emerged. Later, the free-standing auxiliary merged with the finite verb, resulting in the unusual ordering where tense follows personal endings. Although the reasons for this unusual instance of change, as well as for the prior tense/aspect system preceding this change, await a more thorough investigation and reconstruction, the triggered change resulted in the emergence of a new mood which is only used in questions with general past tense reference. This mood is generally known as the interrogative mood. Nonetheless, the temporal restriction of this mood continues to reflect its grammaticalization history. While the discussion so far is well known in Samoyedology, the grammaticalization account is still incomplete without reference to intonation.

4. The tense system of Forest Enets can be subdivided into absolute and relative past tenses. A comprehensive account can be found in Siegl (2011 chapter 7).

The final question which must be asked here is as follows: is the existence of a specialized means for interrogation sufficient for the formation of yes/no questions or does it require further support via intonation? A fully satisfying account is problematic due to the absence of older written records, but not impossible. The only necessary prerequisite is the assumption that the current means for yes/no question formation, i.e. intonation, is indeed archaic. As there is no direct or indirect evidence indicating other specialized morphology or a change in word order, this assumption seems to be reasonably sound. Paraphrasing König & Siemund (2007), some means to distinguish declarative speech acts from interrogative speech acts must be available to ensure discourse organization.

When turning to yes/no questions in past tense context, the primacy of intonation must be assumed as well; the historical past tense marker *-sã* must have been intonation-neutral before it acquired the same rising intonation pattern after its reanalysis as an interrogative mood marker. The only ‘exception’ encountered, if it is really an exception after all, concerns content questions embedded in yes/no questions in phrasal complements in O position as in example (9). Here, the verb ‘know’ receives the typical intonation of yes/no questions; the content question with a verb marked for interrogative mood in the O complement has falling intonation as declaratives would have:

- (9) *uu täni-r ku? kañi-sa*
 2SG know-SG.2SG where.to go-IROG.3SG
 ‘Do you know where he went?’ [LDB I 137]

Before we can sum up the discussion, two more remarks are in order. Due to its inherent tense value, the interrogative mood cannot combine with relative past tenses such as the perfect *-bi* or distant past *-bi + vx + general past -š*. This demonstrates its tight connection to the sphere of absolute past tense. Although the interrogative is not formally marked for tense due to its inherent past tense value, the answer must be tense-marked as the following question-answer pair demonstrates:

- (10) *kokod̄ to-sa-d* → *Karaul-xud̄ to-d̄-ud'*
 from.where come-IROG-2SG Karaul-ABL.SG come-1SG-PST
 ‘Where did you come from?’ ‘I came from Karaul.’ [LDB I 141]

Secondly, in a relative past tense context in which the interrogative mood is blocked, it is intonation once more that indicates a question. This is again true for both yes/no and content questions:

- (11) *bu to-bi*
 3SG come-PERF.3SG
 ‘Did he come?’

- (12) *tor' bāsi d'ori* *kuñ i-bi-ḏa* *nodä-ʔ*
 such iron sound_[ACC] how NEG.AUX-PERF-SG.3SG hear-CN
 'Such noise of an iron trap (lit: sound of iron), how did he not hear it?'
 [LDB Two fishermen]

This means that the use of the interrogative mood is very restricted and by no means a productive 'default mood' for asking questions with past-tense context.

5. Yes/no questions and Forest Enets – summary

The discussion so far has shown that yes/no question formation in Forest Enets is far from being uniform. In non-past contexts, yes/no questions are based on intonation alone. With absolute past tense reference, yes/no questions are based on both intonation and verbal morphology. Still, the interrogative mood is not the default for interrogative formation in a past tense context as it is incompatible with the two relative past tenses labelled perfect and distant past. In the latter, intonation again serves to form questions. The following table subsumes the interaction between intonation, tense and mood:

	non-past	absolute past tense	relative past tenses
Intonation	yes	yes	yes
Interrogative mood	no	yes	no

Table 1. Interaction between intonation, tense and interrogative mood

6. Yes/no questions – a Forest Enets challenge to typology

Forest Enets, like several other Uralic languages, is among the languages found in WALS. The ultimate reason for this is the small Forest Enets grammatical sketch (Künnap 1999) which is highly appreciated among typologists due to its compactness and glossing.⁵ When looking at feature 116a "Polar questions" in WALS (Dryer 2011), the following strategies among the languages sampled can be found:

- question particle – 584 languages
- interrogative verb morphology – 164 languages
- mixture of previous type [question particle + interrogative verb morphology – F.S.] – 15 languages
- interrogative word order – 13

5. The fact that this little booklet is nothing more than an English translation of Tereščenko's previous works, thereby reflecting the language of the 1950s and 1960s, is of course of no importance for typology.

- absence of declarative morphemes – 4
- interrogative intonation only – 173
- no interrogative-declarative distinction – 1

According to Dryer, Forest Enets is among the 164 languages which use interrogative verb morphology in yes/no questions. Although this classification is not correct as shown above, let us have an initial look at the original data as presented by Ago Künnap: “The interrogative marker, is, in the case of the verb from with the preterital meaning *-sa-/-d'a-/-t'a-/-ča-*, e.g. *kunne dire-sa-d?* ‘where did you live?’, *kuo? pu-d'a-r?* ‘where did you put (it)?’, *kuñ? kino-ča-d?* ‘how did you sing?’.” (Künnap 1999: 27) Since yes/no question formation is not mentioned in Künnap’s account, one has to wonder on which data Dryer based his classification. Although Dryer is not incorrect, there is no data on yes/no questions in the original source. Furthermore, the past tense implication of the interrogative mood is mentioned in the original as well. Although such dependencies between grammatical subsystems are highly interesting for typologists, this peculiar feature of Enets and Nenets (both varieties) was overlooked. Based on this information, Forest Enets was classified as one of the 164 languages which rely on “interrogative verb morphology”.

When confronting the description of yes/no questions in Forest Enets with Dryer’s map, one easily observes that Forest Enets resists any classification which is based on the current inventory. In fact, Forest Enets (presumably along with Tundra Enets and both Nenets varieties as well) represents a new type, namely a mixed type relying on both interrogative intonation and interrogative verb morphology.

7. Conclusions

From the semasiological perspective, interrogatives are without doubt problematic as their description may require either a mixed semasiological-onomasiological or a fully onomasiological approach.⁶ This was exemplified with data from Forest Enets which generally uses intonation as its major means for encoding yes/no questions. The specialized interrogative mood, which was grammaticalized from an old Samoyed past tense marker, co-occurs with polar questions, but only in absolute past tense contexts. Furthermore, the interrogative mood needs the rising intonation characteristic of interrogative formation in Forest Enets. Relative past tenses rely exclusively on intonation. Interestingly, the Forest Enets yes/no intonation is also used by Forest Enets speakers when asking questions in Russian.

6. Both Lehmann (2004) and Mosel (2006) agree that onomasiological approaches should be seen as the major challenge to grammaticography in the future as they require a different approach to grammatical concepts. While Mosel tries to sketch a general path, Lehmann gives some examples for an onomasiological approach to grammaticography based on UNITYP.

Abbreviations and glossing

- e.g. [ZNB IV 61] Reference to data from elicitation
 e.g. [ESG Two brothers] Reference to data from narrative

Glossing conventions follow those specified in Siegl (2011)

VX	verbal ending
2SG	pronoun
3SG	pronoun
FUT	future tense
[_{ACC}]	non-possessive case
SG.2SG	VX 2SG with reference to an object in the singular (conjugation II)
-2SG	VX 2SG (conjugation I)
IROG	interrogative mood
TRSL	translative case
PST	general past tense (Forest Enets)
PST	past tense (Selkup)
PERF	perfect tense
NEG.AUX	negative auxiliary used for negation
SG.3SG	VX 3SG with reference to an object in the singular (conjugation II)
CN	connegative

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