

Biased polar questions in Vietnamese

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Today

Different polar question constructions can carry different **bias**:

“Is it raining?” vs “Isn’t it raining?” (see e.g. Ladd 1981)

- Today, we describe the **use conditions and bias** of polar question forms in Vietnamese.
- Rudin (2018, 2022) attempts to **derive bias effects by pragmatic competition** between speech acts.
- We show that **some but not all** such conditions in Vietnamese questions can be explained via competition.

Terms

- **(Epistemic) bias:**

The speaker has (epistemic) bias towards p if the speaker's epistemic state makes p more likely than $\neg p$.

- **Contextual evidence** (Büring & Gunlogson 2000):

“Evidence that has just become mutually available to the participants in the current discourse situation.”

Vietnamese polar questions

We concentrate on three polar response-seeking constructions.

- (1) A: Trời (**có**) đang mưa **không**? B: {**Có/Không**}.
it CÓ PROG rain KHÔNG CÓ/NEG
- (2) A: Trời đang mưa **à**? B: {**Phải/Không**}.
it PROG rain À right/NEG
- (3) A: Trời đang mưa **á**? B: {**Phải/Không**}.
it PROG rain Á right/NEG
≈ 'Is it raining? {Yes / No}.'

(We write “?”. “?” does not indicate an intonational contour.)

Vietnamese polar questions

1. *(có)...không?* basic polar question
 - Must be unbiased (when unembedded)
2. *...à?* (with falling tone)
 - Speaker **currently** has epistemic bias towards p
3. *...á?* (with rising tone)
 - There is contextual evidence for p
 - Speaker **previously** had epistemic bias towards $\neg p$

(There are also other polar question forms, such as *...phải không?* which requires private evidence.)

(có)...không?

(1) Trời (**có**) đang mưa **không?**
it CÓ PROG rain KHÔNG

➤ Must be unbiased.

- Situation 1 — no bias: ✓ (1)
You are sitting in a **windowless room** with no information about current weather conditions when your co-worker comes in.
- Situation 2 — positive bias from context: # (1)
You see your co-worker enter the office **wearing a wet raincoat**.
- Situation 3 — negative bias from context: # (1)
You see your co-worker enter the office **with a red sweating face**.

...à? (falling)

(2) Trời đang mưa à?
it PROG rain À

➤ The speaker currently has **epistemic bias towards p** .

- Situation 1 — no bias: # (2)
You are sitting in a **windowless room** with no information about current weather conditions when your co-worker comes in.
- Situation 2 — positive bias from context: ✓ (2)
You see your co-worker enter the office **wearing a wet raincoat**.
- Situation 3 — negative bias from context: # (2)
You see your co-worker enter the office **with a red sweating face**.

...à? (falling)

➤ The speaker **currently** has **epistemic bias towards p** .

- Situation 4 — surprising but willing to believe: ✓

Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you thought he was an only child**. You say:

✓ John có chị à? Tớ cứ-tưởng nó là con một.

John have sister → I thought he COP only.child

'John has a sister? I thought he's an only child.'

- Situation 5 — surprising and unwilling to believe: #

Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you know he's an only child**. You say:

John có chị à? Không thể nào!

John have sister → not possible PRT

'John has a sister? That's impossible!'

...á? (rising)

- Requires positive contextual evidence for p and the speaker **previously** had **epistemic bias towards $\neg p$** .

- Situation 4 — surprising but willing to believe: ✓

Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you thought he was an only child**. You say:

✓ John có chị á? Tớ cứ-tưởng nó là con một.

John have sister Á I thought he COP only.child

'John has a sister? I thought he's an only child.'

- Situation 5 — surprising and unwilling to believe: ✓

Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you know he's an only child**. You say:

✓ John có chị á? Không thể nào!

John have sister Á not possible PRT

'John has a sister? That's impossible!'

...á? (rising)

(3) Trời đang mưa á?
it PROG rain Á

- Requires positive contextual evidence for p and the speaker **previously** had **epistemic bias towards $\neg p$** .
- Situation 1 — no bias: # (3)
You are sitting in a **windowless room** with no information about current weather conditions when your co-worker comes in.
- Situation 2 — positive bias from context: # (3)
You see your co-worker enter the office **wearing a wet raincoat**.
- Situation 3 — negative bias from context: # (3)
You see your co-worker enter the office **with a red sweating face**.

The speaker did not have epistemic bias towards $\neg p$ before.

English rising declaratives

“It’s raining?”

- Vietnamese (falling) ...à? questions have use conditions similar to English rising declaratives (RDs; see Gunlogson 2001, Jeong 2018, Rudin 2018, 2022):
 - Situation 1 — no bias: # RD / # ...à?
You are sitting in a **windowless room** with no information about current weather conditions when your co-worker comes in.
 - Situation 2 — positive bias from context: ✓RD / ✓...à?
You see your co-worker enter the office **wearing a wet raincoat**.
 - Situation 3 — negative bias from context: # RD / # ...à?
You see your co-worker enter the office **with a red sweating face**.

English rising declaratives

- Vietnamese (falling) ...*à?* questions have use conditions similar to English rising declaratives (RDs; see Gunlogson 2001, Jeong 2018, Rudin 2018, 2022):
 - Situation 4 — surprising but willing to believe: ✓RD / ✓...*à?*
Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you thought he was an only child**. You say: "John has a sister? I thought he's an only child."
 - Situation 5 — surprising and unwilling to believe: ✓RD / # ...*à?*
Your friend tells you that John went to the airport to pick up his (John's) sister **but you know he's an only child**. You say: "John has a sister? That's impossible!"

Bias from pragmatic competition

Rudin (2018, 2022) proposes that “bias effects associated with RDs should be regarded as pragmatic, not conventional” (Rudin 2022).

A. RD in competition with falling declarative

⇒ **S cannot commit to p**

(Falling declarative makes commitment to p , but not RD.)

- S is willing to believe p but has insufficient evidence **OR**
- S believes p is false

B. RD in competition with polar q

⇒ **S believes A believes p**

(In Farkas & Bruce 2010 Table model terms, RD projects $\{CG+p\}$, unlike polar questions which project $\{CG + p, CG + \neg p\}$.)

Explaining ...*à?* by competition

Can we explain the bias profiles of Vietnamese polar questions from competition? **Yes** and **no**.

- **No:** We cannot extend Rudin's logic for RDs to explain the distribution of ...*à?*
- **Yes:** The requirement of matrix (*có*)...*không?* to be evidentially unbiased is due to competition with ...*á?* and ...*à?* forms.

Explaining ...à? by competition

Let's assume ...à? has a conventional meaning akin to RD (projecting {CG+p} with no speaker commitment) and try to adopt Rudin's logic for ...à?:

A. RD/...à? in competition with falling declarative

⇒ **S cannot commit to p**

- S willing to believe p but has insufficient evidence (✓...à?)
- S believes p is false — **not possible with “...à?”!**

➤ We cannot use this (or similar) competition logic to block the use of ...à? when S believes p is false.

(... \grave{a} ? vs ... \acute{a} ?)?

A possible candidate for competition with ... \grave{a} ? is ... \acute{a} ?, which involves negative epistemic bias.

After evidence for p :	Unwilling to believe p	Willing to believe p
No prior bias	(not possible)	... \grave{a} ?
Prior bias towards p	(not possible)	... \grave{a} ?
Prior bias towards $\neg p$... \acute{a} ?	... \grave{a} ? / ... \acute{a} ?

- The infelicity of ... \grave{a} ? when S is unwilling to believe p cannot be due to competition with ... \acute{a} ?, as ... \grave{a} ? and ... \acute{a} ? overlap in their distribution!
- We must distinguish between **prior vs current** (pre- and post-evidence) **epistemic bias**.

(CÓ)...không? vs (...à? / ...á?)

Recall that *(có)...không?* must be unbiased, whereas *...à?* and *...á?* requires some form of epistemic bias *p*.

➤ **Only *(có)...không?* is possible in embedded clauses (see Duffield 2013) and then it is compatible with bias:**

(4) Nếu tớ muốn biết [Sam có đạt giải nhất không] thì tớ phải hỏi ai?
If I want know Sam CÓ get prize first KHÔNG then I must ask who
'If I want to know whether Sam got the first prize, whom should I ask?'

You know Sam wanted to get the first prize in the contest.

- a. No bias: You don't know how Sam did. ✓(4)
- b. Positive bias: You see Sam smiling afterwards, so you think he got it. ✓(4)
- c. Negative bias: You see Sam frowning afterwards, so you think he didn't get it. ✓(4)

➤ **The requirement of matrix *(có)...không?* to be unbiased can be explained by it being in competition with *...à?/...á?*.**

Conclusion

- We detailed the use conditions and bias of Vietnamese polar questions.
- Despite initial similarities between ...*à?* and English rising declaratives, the use conditions of ...*à?* **cannot be explained via pragmatic competition** as Rudin proposes for English.
 - However, competition may serve to explain the resistance to bias of matrix (*có*)...*không?* questions.
- The distribution of Vietnamese ...*à?* vs ...*á?* shows that grammars can make reference to both **prior and current epistemic bias**.

References

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- Rudin, Deniz. 2018. *Rising Above Commitment*. UCSC dissertation.
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...*phải không?*

Trời đang mưa **phải không?**
it PROG rain right KHÔNG

- Speaker has **private evidence** for p (evidence that the speaker believes is not available to the addressee) and currently has epistemic bias towards p .
- Situation 2 — positive bias from **contextual evidence**: # (4)
You see your co-worker enter the office wearing a wet raincoat.
- Situation 2' — positive bias from **private evidence**: ✓ (4)
A reliable friend just told you on the phone that it's raining outside, when your co-worker comes in.

Incompatible with situation 1 (no bias), situation 3 (negative bias from context), and situations 4/5 (surprising contextual evidence).

Appendix: Decomposing ...*à*? / ...*á*?

We treat *à* and *á* as distinct particles here. Note that:

- Vietnamese tone is lexical;
- we are unaware of any other sentence-final particles in Vietnamese which appear to form tonal minimal pairs; such alternations are certainly not productive;

However, it is still tempting to decompose them into *a* and right boundary tones \uparrow / \downarrow . See also...

- Davis 2009 on Japanese *yo* \uparrow vs *yo* \downarrow
- Rudin 2018 and citations there on English declaratives and interrogatives with \uparrow and \downarrow

There is some evidence for right boundary tones \uparrow / \downarrow being used for interrogatives / declaratives, respectively, in Vietnamese, but not consistently (Brunelle et al 2012).