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 ¬*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 <u>epistemic bias towards</u> *p*

3. **...á?** (with rising tone)

   • There is <u>contextual evidence for</u> *p*

   • Speaker **previously** had <u>epistemic bias towards ¬p</u>

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

(có)...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*.**

- <u>Situation 1 — no bias:</u>   **# (2)**
  You are sitting in a **windowless room** with no information about current weather conditions when your co-worker comes in.

- <u>Situation 2 — positive bias from context:</u>   ✓ **(2)**
  You see your co-worker enter the office **wearing a wet raincoat**.

- <u>Situation 3 — negative bias from context:</u>   **# (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 À   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 À   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 ¬*p***.

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

...á? (rising)

➢ Requires positive contextual evidence for *p* and the speaker **previously** had **epistemic bias towards ¬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 ¬p before.

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 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**.

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• <u>Situation 4 — surprising but willing to believe:</u>   ✓**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."

• <u>Situation 5 — surprising and unwilling to believe:</u>   ✓**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 + ¬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.

(*...à?* vs *...á?*)?

A possible candidate for competition with *...à?* is *...á?,* which involves negative epistemic bias.

After evidence for *p*:	Unwilling to believe *p*	Willing to believe *p*
No prior bias	(not possible)	*...à?*
Prior bias towards *p*	(not possible)	*...à?*
Prior bias towards ¬*p*	*...á?*	*...à? / ...á?*

- The infelicity of *...à?* when S is unwilling to believe *p* cannot be due to competition with *...á?,* as *...à?* and *...á?* 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. <u>No bias:</u> You don't know how Sam did.   ✓(4)

b. <u>Positive bias:</u> You see Sam smiling afterwards, so you think he got it.   ✓(4)

c. <u>Negative bias:</u> 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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Jeong, Sunwoo. 2018. "Intonation and sentence type conventions: Two types of rising declaratives," *Journal of Semantics* 35: 305–356.

Rudin, Deniz. 2018. *Rising Above Commitment*. UCSC dissertation.

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...phải 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 ↑ / ↓ . See also…

- Davis 2009 on Japanese *yo*↑ vs *yo*↓

- Rudin 2018 and citations there on English declaratives and interrogatives with ↑ and ↓

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