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Polar Questions in Seri*

Stephen A. Marlett and Mary B. Moser

Polar questions in Seri are always expressed using an interrogative sentence type which, for such questions, is morphologically distinct, but not syntactically distinct, from declarative sentences. Other facts about polar questions in Seri are described and illustrated as well. Some of the utterances are linked to sound files.

1. Introduction

Three kinds of questions as a category of meaning are distinguished in Huddleston 1994 (pp. 416ff): polar questions, alternative questions, and variable questions. A polar question defines a set of two answers: “one has the propositional content expressed in the question..., the other its polar opposite.” Alternative questions are different in that they “have as answers a set of alternatives given in the question itself.” And variable questions are the questions that “have a propositional content containing a variable” (in English, a word such as who). This paper presents a general description of polar questions in Seri. Alternative questions apparently do not exist in Seri (although something pragmatically similar is described below); variable questions will be described in a separate paper in the near future.

Interrogative clauses (as a syntactic category) are formally distinct from declarative clauses in Seri. This distinction is always expressed morphologically, and sometimes syntactically (in the case of variable questions). Polar questions and variable questions are all expressed solely by the interrogative clause type. Unlike English and many other languages, in Seri there are no questions that are expressed with declarative clauses pronounced with a special intonation.

Some of the utterances below are linked to sound files; these are marked with the symbol X.

2. Standard polar questions

2.1 Syntax

Polar questions have the same word order as corresponding declaratives, as shown in (1).

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* Many Seri speakers have contributed to this study over the years. We thank the following people with whom we have worked especially closely in recent years: María Luisa Astorga Estrella, Oscar Perales (who provided the sound files), and Xavier Moreno. We thank David Weber for his helpful comments and suggestions. Some examples are from texts collected by Edward and Mary Moser between 1950 and 1965. When there were some corrections or modifications suggested by one of our current consultants, these are marked with “-X”.

Abbreviations used: 1, First person; 2, Second person; 3, Third person; ActNom, Action Nominalizer; Aux, Auxiliary; Dec, Declarative; DO, Direct Object; DS, Different Subject; Dt, Distal; Em, Emphatic; Foc, Focus; IO, Indirect Object; Ir, Irrealis; Neg, Negative; ObjNom, Object Nominalizer; OM, Object Marker; p or Pl, Plural; Pass, Passive; Poss, Possessor; Pro, Pronoun; Px, Proximal; Q, question morpheme; RL, Realis; s, Singular; Subj, Subject; SubjNom, Subject Nominalizer.

1 See also Sadock and Zwicky 1985:179.
(1) a. Statement

Haxz quih zxicám com i-yóó-hit. (SOV)
dog the fish the OM-Dt-eat
The dog ate the fish.

b. Question

¿Haxz quih zxicám com i-t-áhit? (SOV)
dog the fish the OM-Rl-eat
Did the dog eat the fish?

No question may be asked simply by modifying the intonation of the corresponding declarative. As shown in section 2.3 below, some special morphology is always present. There are no sentences in Seri in which interrogative morphology is lacking, analogous to  

You are going tomorrow? or A tree?

2.2 Answers

Polar questions are commonly answered with a complete sentence. Some examples follow; two of the questions are realis and one is irrealis:

(2) a. ¿Tiix haa-ya?
    that one SubjNom+be-Q
    Is it that one?

b. Tiix i-m-háa-ha.
    that one SubjNom-Neg-be-Decl
    It's not that one.  FP 92

(3) a. ¿Hant tintica t-cooo ox ha-pácta-ya?
    place the Rl-all thus SubjNom-appear-Q
    Is the whole place like that?

b. Hant tintica t-cooo ox yo-pácta.
    place the Rl-all thus Dt-appear
    The whole place is like that.  FP 21

(4) a. ¿Taax ano s-atícpan quee-ya?
    there in Ir-work Aux-Q
    Will he work there?

b. Taax ano s-atícpan ca-ha.
    there in Ir-work Aux-Decl
    He will work there.

A reply, if positive, may begin with an affirmative interjection (written here as jen, translated uhuh below), or yoháa yes (probably analyzable as yo-háa, Distal-be) if the reply is in the realis, or asa sure (perhaps analyzable as the irrealis of another, irregular verb for be), whether the reply is in the irrealis or the realis. The reply, if negative, may begin with the negative word saate no (probably etymologically a future verb form). Some realis questions and answers:

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2 Phonetically it is something like [he*]; the word is unusual when compared to standard lexical items of the language; it is not certain how it might be properly written in the practical orthography.
² (5) a. ¿T-icótj?
    RL-reek
    Did it reek?

       uuhh Em-reek
       Uuhh. It reeked. CC-X 234

(6) a. ¿Caanlca c-haa-ya oo ma-t-ai?
    groupers SubjNom-be-Q * 2pSubj-Rl-do/Pl?
    Were you fishing just for groupers?

       uuhh groupers the/Foc * 1pSubj-Dt-do/Pl
       Uuhh. We were fishing just for groupers. FP-X 48-49

(7) a. ¿Hant s-fii ta-ma i-t-áalajc?
    land Ir-? Aux-DS OM-Rl-leave.off/Pl
    Did they end it at dawn?

       uuhh land Ir-? Aux-DS OM-Dt-leave.off/Pl
       Uuhh. They ended it right away (after dawn). CC-X 8

(8) a. ¿Cmaa haa-ya?
    now SubjNom+be-Q
    Now?

       yes now SubjNom+be-Decl
       Yes. Now. CC 1

(9) a. ¿Coi ziix-o zo mi-m-áhit-ya?
    still thing-? a 2Poss+ActNom-Neg-eat-Q
    Haven’t you eaten anything yet?

    b. Saate. Ziix zo hxo-m-áhit.
       no thing a 1sSubj-Em-Neg-eat
       No. I haven’t eaten anything. LB 144

(10) a. ¿José quih i-canóaa quih i-hamoc quih
    José the 3Poss-boat the 3Poss+ActNom-be.night the
    piest hant cö-t-iij?
    fiesta land 3IO-Rl-sit
    Was there a fiesta last night for José’s boat?

       sure. fiesta land 3IO-Dt-sit
       Sure. There was a fiesta. CC-X 3

Some irrealis questions and and answers:
(11) a. ¿Zixcám quih cö-ma-p-atícpan įí
    fish the 3IO-2pSubj-Ir-work first
  cmaax seten quih cö-ma-s-atícpan haa-ya?
  then sea.pen the 3IO-2pIr-work Aux-Q
  Are you going to work at fish (go fishing) first, and then work at sea pen (scallops)?

b. Jen. Zixcám quih cö-ha-p-atícpan įí
  uhuh fish the 3IO-1pSubj-Ir-work first
  cmaax seten quih he cö-s-atícpan xah ta c-amjöjqu-iha.
  then sea.pen the 1Pro 3IO-Ir-work * Aux SubjNom-think/Pl-Decl
  Uuhuh. We intend to go fishing first and then work at sea pen (scallops).
  FP 79-80

(12) a. ¿Mi-hs co-n-síi-co haa-ya?
    2Poss-? 3IO-2sS-Ir-obvious Aux-Q
    Are you going to be familiar with him?

b. Saate, emique i-hs hii-co z i-m-háá-ha.
   no person 3Poss-? 1Poss+ActNom-obvious a SubjNom-Neg-be-Decl
   No, he isn’t someone that I can be familiar with. (Dict)

(13) a. ¿Pedro quih i-canóaa hipi an i-s-atícpan haa-ya?
    Pedro the 3Poss-boat self in OM-Ir-work Aux-Q
    Will Pedro work on his own boat?

b. Asa. Hapi an i-s-atícpan-a-ha.
   sure self in OM-Ir-work-Aux-Decl
   Yes, he will work on his own boat. CC 310

(14) a. ¿Cmaax hant po-fíi-ta me s-aahit quee-ya?
    now land Ir-?-DS 2Pro Ir-fish Aux-Q
    So are you going to go fishing tomorrow?

b. Saate. I-pácta zo h-xo-m-áa.
   no 3Poss+ActNom-appear a 1sSubj-Em-Neg-know
   No, I don’t know. CC-X 44

Negative polar questions are common in Seri, regardless of the answer expected. One example is given below.

(15) ¿Icáazxl iic cöihíipe zo n-t-con-yáa? Ih-y-áazxl cah
    cough.medicine a 2sSubj-R1-Neg-own 1Poss-ActNom-cough the/Foc
    hant ihmahféaa.
    I.stayed.until.dawn
    Don’t you have any cough medicine? I coughed all night.

2.3 Morphology

In the realis, there are two forms for interrogatives: (1) use of t- interrogative realis form, and (2) use of nominalized forms with interrogative -ya rather than declarative -ha. The interrogative -ya occurs only on NPs (noun phrases without determiners, and nominalized verbs), not on DPs (determiner phrases).
(16) Finite clauses

a. ¿In-t-quéepe?  
   2sSubj-RL-like  
   Do you like it? / Did you like it?

b. ¿T-iim?  
   RL-sleep  
   Is s/he sleeping? / Was s/he sleeping?

(17) Nominalized clauses

a. ¿Me c-atícpan-ya?  
   2Pro SubjNom-work-Q  
   Are you working?

b. ¿Tiix hatéictim zo c-tai-ya?  
   that.one cloth a SubjNom+OM-wear.breechcloth-Q  
   Does that man wear a breechcloth?

c. ¿Canóoa i-h-a-náxz quih me m-o-ah-ya?  
   boat 3Poss+ActNom-Pass-paint the 2Pro 2Poss-ObjNom-do-Q  
   hanso n-t-apási.  
   just 2sSubj-RL-make.wrinkled  
   Did you paint the boat (and) leave it with wrinkles?

d. ¿He h-oo-zt-ya?  
   1Pro 1Poss-ObjNom-tattoo-Q  
   Did I tattoo him/her?

In the irrealis, interrogative -ya (unstressed, low tone) occurs on an auxiliary which accompanies the irrealis verb form. The choice of auxiliary depends on the situation. The auxiliary quee (historically related to the verb say, apparently; it takes an uninflected nominalized irrealis complement in this context) is typical of a question that is a new topic; the auxiliary haa be (which takes an inflected irrealis complement) is typical of a question that is the follow-up of an established topic. The Nominalized clauses are given in the (a) examples and finite clauses in the (b) examples. The (b) examples also seem to be characterized in many instances as examples of “direction” questions (Huddleston 1994:434ff); they are not looking for simple information.

(18) a. ¿Me s-aanpx quee-ya?  
   2Pro Ir-return.home Aux-Q  
   Are you going to go home?

b. ¿In-s-áanpx haa-ya?  
   2sSubj-Ir-return.home Aux-Q  
   Are you going to go home? (Is that what you're going to do? May I take you?)

(19) a. ¿He ma s-aaspoj queeya?  
   1Pro 2sDO Ir-photograph Aux-Q  
   Will I take your picture? (doubt implied?)

b. ¿Ma h-s-s-aaspoj haa-ya?  
   2sDO 1sSubj-Ir-photograph Aux-Q  
   May I take your picture? (Lit., Will I ...?)
2.4 Phonology

According to Moser and Moser (1965:56), a question “which elicits a yes or no response, features a gradually rising contour which reaches level 4 on the syllable preceding the final stress of the utterance and then drops to level 1 on the stress syllable... This contour is manifested by a 4-1 downglide on a monosyllabic form.” Thus the intonation pattern for such questions in Seri is not the common “terminal rising contour” reported in Ultan 1978 (pp. 213ff).

3. Equational polar questions

Equational polar questions (those that ask Is X a Y?) take equational sentence structure with interrogative -ya rather than declarative -ha. (As in the corresponding declarative equations, the sentence-final predicate NP is just that — an NP rather than a DP (determiner phrase), since no determiner may occur with it.)

(20) ¡Mi-tlén oo m-o-ah íi quih [ctam ]-ya?
   3Poss-chest ? 2Poss-ObjNom-do first the man -Q
   Was your first child that died a male?

(21) * ¡[Mi-tlén oo m-o-ah íi quih ] [ctam zo ]-ya?
   3Poss-chest ? 2Poss-ObjNom-do first the man a -Q
   (Was your first child that died a male?)

(22) ¡[Zixcám cacöla quih ] [i-m-p-éxl ]-ya-x?
   fish large+Pl the SubjNom-Neg-Pass-take -Q-?
   ¿S-om-p-éxl haa-ya?
   Ir-Neg-Pass-take Aux-Q
   Is totoaba not being bought? Won't it be bought? FC 31

(23) ¡[Ctam ]-ya? ¡[Cmaam ]-ya?
   male -Q female -Q
   Is/was it a male? Or is/was it a female?

The preceding pair of polar questions are close pragmatically to the alternative question type of English (Is it a boy or a girl?). Each of the pair is a polar question, but the combination elicits an answer that is limited to one of the two alternatives.

Alternatively to the verbless structure described above is one in which the copula verb (e)haa be co-occurs with a DP.

(24) ¡[Pedro quih hant ocóo-ho ac ] [haa ]-ya?
   Pedro the place 3Poss+ObjNom-see the SubjNom+be -Q
   Is it the place that Pedro found? FC-X 43

(25) ¡[Tiix ] [haa ]-ya?
   that.one SubjNom+be -Q
   Is it that one?

(26) ¡[Aal íi c-haa -ya-x? ¡J-m-háa -ya-x?
   3Poss+spouse first SubjNom+be -Q-? SubjNom-Neg-be -Q-?
   Was she his first wife? Or wasn’t she? (i.e., Was she a later one?) CC 316

4. Rhetorical polar questions

4.1 Opposite answer expected

Clauses with irrealis forms punctuated as questions are presented in (27-30); they do not have any interrogative morphology, however. These utterances have a rather special intonation pattern.
No typical auxiliary verb occurs, but the word *teee* (etymologically from the verb *quee* *say*, apparently), with low-tone intonation, follows the inflected irrealis verb. ³ If these are questions, they are rhetorical questions.

(27) ¿Ihp-s-atícpan? ¡Teee!
   1sSubj-Ir-work
   Do you think I'm going to work? Ha! (or Huh!)

(28) ¿S-iipe? ¡Teee!
   Ir-good
   It will be good? Ha! (or Huh!)

(29) Café cop íxaj cah hanso m-oopol.
   coffee the 3Poss-ActNom-strong the/Foc just Px-black
   ¿I-p-ási iic có-s-iipe? ¡Teee!
   3Poss+ActNom-drink 3Poss+side 3IO-Ir-good
   The coffee is very strong. It shouldn't be drunk! (Lit., Its being drunk would be good? Ha!)

(30) ¿Mi-moz t-meeet? — Yoháa, ¿hi-moz s-om-méeet? ¡Teee ma...!
   2Poss-heart Rl-sad yes 1Poss-heart Ir-Neg-sad
   Are you sad? — Yes, I'm not going to be sad ...? (How could that be? Of course I am, because ...)

Rhetorical equational questions also exist, using the negative nominalized form of *haa* *be* and the word *mos* also at the end. In these cases actual interrogative morphology (-ya) occurs.

(31) ¿ [ Zaah ihyáa quih ] [ i-m-háa ] -ya mos?
    watch mine SubjNom-Neg-be -Q also
    So it's not my watch, huh? (It is!)

4.2 Other rhetorical questions

Other than the cases just mentioned, interrogatives in Seri seem to primarily be inquiries. There is no regular usage of interrogatives in Seri to convey requests or polite commands (cf. English *Would you open the door, please?* and *May we suggest that you wipe out the sink for the next person?*) or an indirect exclamation (cf. *Can it get any worse?*). However, the question *What does s/he say?* is used rhetorically in an expression of admiration, as in the example (32).

(32) ¿Zó qu-ee-ya? ¡Ox i-h-iipe i-t-áai-a!
    what SubjNom-say-Q thus 3Poss-ActNom-good OM-Rl-do-?
    My! S/he knows how to do things right!

5. Cleft polar questions

Cleft questions are formed with an NP (not DP) followed by the verb (c)haa *be* and the interrogative -ya, and the “main” verb in the appropriate realis form for questions. The main verb is not in a form that is used in relative clauses, unlike in English and Spanish. Also, it is not possible to do this with a sentence in the event that two instances of the Question word -ya would

³ Content rhetorical questions using this device occur in the translation of the first epistle of John (*Zíix quih icaamx* 1982), for example; see verses 3:17 (*Can God's Spirit be in him?*), 4:18 (*How can he fear him?*), and 4:20 (*How can he love him?*). Only the first of these three examples is punctuated as a question in Aland et al. 1968.
occur; hence the main verb can only be in the realis interrogative form and not in the irrealis (which always takes -ya if interrogative) nor a nominalization.4

(33) ¿ [ Tiix haa ] -ya tahtiti? ◀ that.one SubjNom+be -Q RL-begin

Was s/he the one who began? (Lit., Was it that one, did s/he begin?)

(34) ¿ [ Pedro quih haa ] -ya Luis quih i-t-nip?

Pedro the SubjNom+be -Q Luis the OM-RL-hit

Was it Pedro that Luis hit? or Was it Pedro that hit Luis?

(Lit., Was it Pedro, did Luis hit him? or Was it Pedro, did he hit Luis?)

(35) ¿ [ Saara quih haa ] -ya i-tóm quih co-n-t-ésxo?

Sara the SubjNom+be -Q 3Poss-money the 3IO-2sSubj-RL-hide

Was it from Sarah that you hid the money?

(Lit., Was it Sarah, did you hide her money from her?)

6. **Focus polar questions**

Focus questions have a fronted NP (not DP, since at least the final determiner does not occur) followed directly by the interrogative -ya, and the “main” verb in the appropriate realis or irrealis form for questions.

(36) ¿ [ Pnaacoj ] -ya i-t-quéezi?

mangrove -Q OM-RL-use.for.shade

Was it mangrove branches that s/he made shade with?

(Lit., Mangrove branches, did s/he make shade with them?)

The focus question may focus a nominalized clause (using –ya) and end with a locational question form.

(37) ¿ [ Hatéictim tiquih qu-inco ] -ya toc co-t-iih?

rag that SubjNom-ragged -Q there 3IO-RL-be

Is that rag in pieces? Dict-X

(Lit., That rag that is ragged, is it there?)

7. **Functional equivalent to tag question**

A statement may be followed by a question that means Isn’t it so? (based on the irregular verb be in the negative subject nominalized form). This question functions as a kind of tag question which expects a positive response.

(38) Pedro quih yoofp. ¿Ima-ya?

Pedro the he.arrived it.is.not-Q

Pedro arrived. Isn’t that true?

(39) Pedro quih siifp_caha. ¿Ima-ya? ▼

Pedro the he.will.arrive it.is.not-Q

Pedro will arrive. Isn’t that true?

8. **References**


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4 We omit the results of the attempts we made to elicit such examples. They were all rejected.


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