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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.”¹ 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 ◀.

2. Standard polar questions

2.1 Syntax

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

* 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; Decl, 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 zixcám com i-yóo-hit. (SOV)
 dog the fish the OM-Dt-eat
The dog ate the fish.
- b. Question
¿Haxz quih zixcám com i-t-áhit? (SOV)
 dog the fish the OM-RI-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 RI-all thus SubjNom-appear-Q
Is the whole place like that?
- b. **Hant tintica t-cooo ox yo-pácta.**
 place the RI-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),² 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:

² Phonetically it is something like [hẽ]; 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.

- (5) a. **¿T-icótj?**
 Rl-reek
Did it reek?
- b. **Jen. X-icótj.**
 uhuh Em-reek
Uhuh. 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?
- b. **Jen. Caanlca cah oo ha-yó-i.**
 uhuh groupers the/Foc * 1pSubj-Dt-do/Pl
Uhuh. 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?
- b. **Jen. Hant s-fii ta-ma i-y-áalajc.**
 uhuh land Ir-? Aux-DS OM-Dt-leave.off/Pl
Uhuh. They ended it right away (after dawn). CC-X 8
- (8) a. **¿Cmaa haa-ya?**
 now SubjNom+be-Q
Now?
- b. **Yoháa. Cmaa haa-ha.**
 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 h-xo-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 piest hant cö-t-iiij?**
 José the 3Poss-boat the 3Poss+ActNom-be.night the
 fiesta land 3IO-Rl-sit
Was there a fiesta last night for José's boat?
- b. **Asa. Piest hant cö-y-iiij.**
 sure. fiesta land 3IO-Dt-sit
Sure. There was a fiesta. CC-X 3

Some irrealis questions and answers:

- (11) a. **¿Zixcám quih cö-ma-p-atícpan íi**
 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 íi**
 uhuh fish the 3IO-1pSubj-Ir-work first
cmaax seten quih he cö-s-atícpan xah ta c-amjójqu-iha.
 then sea.pen the 1Pro 3IO-Ir-work * Aux SubjNom-think/PI-Decl
Uhuh. We intend to go fishing first and then work at sea pen (scallops).
 FP 79-80
- (12) a. **¿Mi-hs co-n-súi-co haa-ya?**
 2Poss-? 3IO-2sS-Ir-obvious Aux-Q
Are you going to be familiar with him?
- b. **Saate, cmique i-hs hii-co z i-m-háa-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 íic cöihúpe zo n-t-con-yáa? Ih-y-áazxl cah**
 cough.medicine a 2sSubj-RI-Neg-own 1Poss-ActNom-cough the/Foc
hant_ihmaféaa.
 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-RI-like
Do you like it? / Did you like it?
- b. **¿T-iim?** ◀
RI-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. **¿Canóaa 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-RI-make.wrinkled
Did you paint the boat (and) leave it with wrinkles?
- f. **¿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-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 equationals, 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 (**c)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?** ¿**I-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.

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 tahíti?** ◀
 that.one SubjNom+be -Q RI-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-RI-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-éxö?**
 Sara the SubjNom+be -Q 3Poss-money the 3IO-2sSubj-RI-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 cö-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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