

Yes/no questions in Tunis Arabic

By Ines Dallaji, Ines Gabsi, and Stephan Procházka

Introduction

Our corpus of 94.652 words¹ contains 2137 utterances which can be labelled as yes/no questions in the widest sense. This means they show rising intonation but lack any interrogative pronoun or adverb. Many of the questions in our corpus are syntactically very basic and not infrequently they consist only of a single word, for example, the rhetorical *fhimt?* 'Do you understand?', which alone constitutes almost 10 per cent of all questions.

The aim of this preliminary study is to find out which roles the particle *yā-xi ~ ya-xxi* and the suffixed morpheme *-šī* play in interrogative sentences. Gibson 2009:570 wrote that "yes/no questions can be marked by an initial *yāxxi*", and that "interrogation can be expressed by the suffix *-šī*." These statements could be misleading as they may suggest that the particle, respectively the suffix, is a kind of interrogation marker. However, as we hope to prove in the following paragraphs, both are just modal markers that modify a question. The corpus clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of yes/no questions in the Arabic dialect of Tunis are not marked as questions except by a rising intonation.

The particle *yā-xi ~ ya-xxi*

This particle is derived from the address *yā axī* 'my brother!² and widely employed in utterance initial position in both declarative sentences and questions. Singer 1984:708 notes that it has hortative and adversative meanings but does not mention its use in questions.³ This latter usage is, however, mentioned for the dialect of Takrūna (Marçais & Guïga 1958-1961:47-48). Stumme 1896:148 does not explicitly mention its interrogative use but he presents an example for it: *yaxxi wīn žbībti?* "Wo ist denn nur mein Jacketchen?"

In our TUNICO corpus there are only ten examples where *yā-xi* or, less frequently, *ya-xxi* is found to introduce a question (in examples (6) and (8) postponed to the question). Usually this particle forms a separated intonation group (cf. Gibson 2009:570) which can probably be seen as a reflex of its etymological origin that is a form of address.

At least in our corpus *yā-xi* questions are always embedded into their context, particularly they are connected to a proposition uttered before or to a situation which is obvious to all

1 https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/about_corpus.html

2 In the contemporary dialect of Tunis 'my brother' is expressed by *yā xūya*.

3 At the end of his short explanation of this particle Singer refers to many other examples given in the second volume of his book, which, however, was never published.

participants in the conversation. Thus *yā-xi* can never appear in a question that raises a completely new topic. The following three categories may be distinguished.

A. The particle introduces a rhetorical question about a situation or statement whose veracity is queried by the speaker. If any answer of the conversation partner is expected it would be 'no!'. At least in our corpus the answer is always omitted and the speaker herself/himself continues to explain the real situation as in examples (1) and (2), or it is left open as in example (3). In examples (4-5) the rhetorical questions follow the explanation of facts, and in (1) a second *yā-xi* question follows an explanation.

(1) Artist in Café III:

ya-xxi huwwa ʕabd hāḍāka? ti-wāḥid mībūn ʕb-ṛabb-i! ya-xxi ṛāžil hāḍāka?

'Do you think that one is a (normal) person? Come on, he is faggot! And that one should be a (real) man?

(2) Artist in Café I:

IG: *hāw ṭṭayyib hāw!*

S: *yā-xi hiyya ṭṭayyib? yā-xi ṭa ... yṭayyib-ilha ...*

ID: *hiyya ṭṭayyib ayy?*

S: *dṛa škūn yṭayyib-ilha.*

'That means she cooks herself!

Do you really think she does ever cook? Someone cooks for her!

She cooks; does she really?

(No,) she has somebody who cooks for her!'

(3) Madina Salesman:

A: *lā, mā-nimšī-lū-š. [...] ḥatta bāḇa mustadʕi w-miš māšī-lu. ya-xxi wāḥid ā muš ... muštāq bāš yimšī l-ḡirs?*

'No, we will not go to him (to his wedding). Even my father is invited but does not go. Does anyone like to go on a wedding?'

(4) Artist in Café III:

S: *w-bḥīm. w-yisraq f-la-ḡbād.*

W: *māla kifāh ʕmal āy-fōn w-āy-pād w-kaḥba?*

S: *papāt-u ya-xxi huwwa?*

'And (he is) stupid. And he is stealing from the people.

Then how could he afford to buy an I-phone, an I-pad and a car?

(Only by means) of his father's (support). Or do you think he (worked for it) himself?'

(5) Rapper:

tilbis libsa, ti-šbī-h hādāya. sāḥāt tẓī hakkāya egzōmp^{al} ənhār wātāt ḥand-ik xaṛṣa. mṛawwaḥ rāu-k wlād il-ḥūma ya-xxi bāš ədzīd tḥuṭṭ il-ḥaṭṭa mḥā wlād il-ḥūma? maw tilbis normāl.

'You put on (nice) clothes (and the people say) "What's up with him?" Sometimes there is, for example, a day when you have a date. The guys from the neighbourhood saw you when you returned home (from your date). Will you put on even nicer dresses when the boys of the neighbourhood see you? (No,) you will dress completely normal.'

B. The particle *yā-xi* is also used in questions that have a nuance of uncertainty like in example (6) or to express an assumption as in example (7). It may also be used to express surprise as in examples (8-9).⁴

(6) Artist in Café II:

S: *ḥāšīlu pägyōd illi qaṣṣīt šaḥṛ-i fī-ha.*

IG: *s-ē ō sīnəy yā-xi?*

'Anyway, (this happened) in a period when I had cut my hair.

Was this perhaps a kind of sign?'

(7) Souq Salesman III:

[Talking about that he looks at people and asks them about their origin.]

ḥatta šāḥibt-ik qutt-ilha ya-xxi gāwriya inti?

'Even to your friend I said, "Are you by any chance a foreigner?'

(8) Artist in Café V:

G: *mā-zāl ki-klīna ḥād aḥna šibḥānīn tawwa mā-zāl.*

S: *ā!*

W: *trižim ya-xxi?*

IG: *ti-baṛra š-nrižim šal...*

W: *māla, šnuwwa kaḥba ḥānān?*

'We have just eaten. We are still full.

Ah!

Don't tell me you are on diet?

Come on, why should I be on a diet?

Well then, so why (do you only eat) a banana?'

(9) Student of Architecture I (talking on the telephone)

ā ḥāḥa... awṛaq əmtāḥ il-ḥāk ā f ... ōkūn idē . mā-ḥand-i ḥadd fī-muxx-i ...

4 In this function *yā-xi* almost completely corresponds to the German particle *etwa*.

yā-xi ā šabqa hiyya bāš taṣṭi-hum?

'Yes dad, the papers for the high-school diploma (baccalauréat) ... no idea. I do not have anybody in mind... Don't tell me you will give them a deposit?'

C. There is one example (10) where *yā-xi* clearly has an adversative function. Because the particle is used isolated it may not be interpreted as a question marker but as the adversative particle *yā-xi* used as a single word question (see above Singer's description of *yā-xi*).

(10) Artist in Café V:

W: *ayy ṣižbit-ni li-blāša w-ḥdā s-sikka.*

S: *yā-xi?*

W: *yā-xi d-dār sā vā pā ṣḡīra.*

'Yes, I like the place next to the railway.

But?

But the flat is not convenient, it's too small.'

The enclitic particle *-šī*

This particle is mentioned by Singer 1984 who also provides numerous examples in which it is attached to verbs, pronouns, nouns, adverbs etc. (pp. 722-723). He does not mention, however, any special meaning or nuance that is added by *-šī* in contrast to questions without it. The same is true for Cohen who states with regard to the Jewish variety of Tunis Arabic: "L'interrogation à l'expression de laquelle peut suffire l'intonation de la phrase est souvent marquée par l'élément *-šī* postposé soit au verbe soit au prédicat nominal." (1975:268)

Only Marçais & Guîga go more into detail and mention the modal nature of this particle: "L'interrogation implique le manque de certitude touchant ce qui en fait l'objet, l'enclitique *š(i)* sert fréquemment à exprimer l'éventuel-potentiel avec une nuance dubitative plus ou moins marquée qui, dans beaucoup de cas, peut être approximativement rendue par le conditionnel français." (1958-1961:2125).

The particle *-šī* is surprisingly infrequent in our corpus but where it is clearly used in questions it always expresses contingency or it adds a dubitative nuance to the question. Thus it corresponds roughly to English 'by any chance' and 'perhaps'. In some contexts the particle *-šī* is found completely detached from any interrogative structure and has become a pure modal particle meaning 'perhaps' (15-16).

(12) Medina Salesman:

IG: *lē žōn famma yistaṣmlu kilmāt ā xāšša b-tūnis zaṣma ḥasab rāy-ik mā-fammā-š...*

A: *famma famma ayy.*

IG: *taṣraf-ši ki...*

'Are there words which young people use? And which are used, in your opinion, especially in Tunis? Or aren't there any?

There are such (words), yes.

Do you know by any chance such words?'

(13) Woman in Café:

[The woman says that she is alone and has no friends]

w-hakka f-il-žirān ṣand-ik-ši f... maṣnāha ṣḥāb walla škūn fi-ṣumr-ik?

'Is there perhaps (somebody) among your neighbours ... friends or somebody in your age?'

(14) Two friends in a café

yīṣṣb-ik-ši zāda.

'Well, I never!' (literally: Do you like it?)

(15) Artist in Café II

xāṭir hādi pāgyōd tqūl-ši ṣlī-ha mṣā tūlid

'Because this is a period (of my life) about which you could perhaps say that it is like a (period in which a) woman gives birth.'

(16) Artist in Café II:

w-baṣtāli nuxruṣ-ši f-il-ḥūma nimši naṣmil qahwa walla nimši l-pāgk

'Later I will perhaps go to the neighbourhood and drink some coffee or walk in the park.'

As was mentioned by Marçais & Guíga the particle has developed towards a marker that may be used to express a condition. Diachronically this can easily be explained: The combination of a question to which the speaker expects the answer 'yes!' and a following proposal by the same speaker has the potential to be interpreted as a condition. For example: "Do you want to see the castle? (Yes!) Then I will show it to you. > If you want to see the castle I will show it to you."

(17) Souq Salesman III:

nwaṣṣi-hum-ḥum fi-kaṣ postāl. ṥhibbū-ši timšiu kaḍā w-kaḍā ḥnwaṣṣi-kum famma vū bāhi taṣmlu fi-h ṥṣāwir.

'I show them (the sights) on postcards (and say,) "If you want to go there and there then I will show you nice views where you (can) take photos."'

(18) Souq Salesman III:

fammā-ši aṣṣa gwurra tlāṥa gwurra.

'(I'll have a look if) there are perhaps three or four foreigners.'

(19) Two friends in a mall:

tqūl-šī l-wāḥid qaddāh il-waqt yqul-lik ənhıbb ənhızz

'When you ask someone, "What's the time?" he will tell you, "I want to leave (Tunisia)."'

A special case is *kān-šī* which has the meaning of 'if (anything) then'. Apparently it is a combination of the conditional conjunction *kān* and the particle *šī*. Worth mentioning is that among the conjunctions used for the conditional, Singer 1984:702 lists the variant *kān-iš* which has the meaning 'unless; except where'.

(19) Medina Salesman:

kull-hum əžrāba fhimt? [...] min awwil w-l-ixxir. w-kān-šī l-aswāq əmtāʕ sīdi mahriz

'They are all from Djerba, do you understand? From first to last. Except in the Souqs of Sidi Mahrez.'

(20) Artist in Café V:

ID: *ʕand-ik tašwīra kifāš kunt qbal?*

S: *ā...fāysbūk kān-šī.*

'Do you have a photo which shows how you looked like in the past?

If, then only on Facebook.'

Conclusion

According to the examples found in the TUNICO corpus *yā-xi* and *-šī* can be labelled modal particles which are used in certain contexts to modify questions. They are by no means interrogative particles which only serve to mark a proposition as question. Their usage is restricted to questions that refer to a given conversational context.

Compared to the absolute number of yes/no questions in our corpus both particles are extremely rare. This is particularly surprising with *-šī* which was frequent in the Jewish variety and probably also in the Muslim dialect of Tunis fifty years ago as can be deduced from the many examples found in Singer's work. In our texts it occurs only three times in real questions, that is in less than 0.2 per cent of all questions. The particle *yā-xi* is only slightly more frequent; its rate is almost exactly 0.5 per cent.

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