

The grammaticalization path of Latin *post* across the Dolomitic region

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative survey of the distributional and interpretive properties of the adverbial particles *po/pa* across the Dolomitic region. By comparing the syntactic behaviour and the semantic contribution of this lexical item in different but closely related dialects, I try to better characterize the diachronic process of grammaticalization the Latin adverb *post* has undergone in the relevant geographic area, showing that it amounts essentially to a successive upward reanalysis along the functional spine of the clausal hierarchy. In this particular case, an erstwhile temporal and locative adverb takes up a discourse-related functional value, turning eventually into a marker of (canonical or non-canonical) interrogative force. The structural portion involved in the process seems to correspond to the highest functional projections identified by Cinque (1999).

Keywords: particles, grammaticalization, left periphery, functional hierarchy, Dolomitic dialects

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to show to what extent the study of synchronic microvariation among closely related dialects can provide a better understanding of the processes involved in the grammaticalization chain of modal particles. I present a case study in which illocutionary force is affected by the diachronic process of grammaticalization of an adverbial particle which over time turns into a clause-typing maker. The semantic bleaching of a lexical item is generally linked to the subsequent development of a functional usage along a well-attested diachronic path (Roberts & Roussou 2003, van Gelderen 2004); in this particular case an erstwhile temporal adverb takes up a discourse-related functional value, turning eventually into a marker of (canonical or non-canonical) interrogative force.

More precisely, I sketch a comparative survey of the distributional and interpretive properties of the particles *po/pa* across the Dolomitic region; these particles derive etymologically from the (grammaticalization of the) Latin locative/temporal adverb *post* (cf. Pellegrini 1972). By comparing the syntactic behaviour and semantic contribution of this particle in different dialects of

the same area, I try to better characterize the diachronic process of grammaticalization as an interrogative marker this particle has undergone in some Central Rhaetoromance varieties; in doing so, I crucially refer to the role this particle plays in determining the epistemic state of the discourse participants, which relates directly to the definition of modal particle as an element that conveys information about the speaker's attitude or the epistemic condition of the interlocutors, without contributing to the descriptive content of the utterance (cf. Zimmermann 2012).¹

Within the cartographic project outlined in Cinque & Rizzi (2010), the sequence of functional projections which constitute the structural layout of the clause is associated to formal features ultimately responsible for the crosslinguistically parametrized lexicalization of specific functional heads as well as for the displacement of lexical material. My underlying assumption here will be that the grammaticalization of Latin *post* in the dialects under study corresponds to the upward reanalysis of this lexical item into a functional element lexicalizing dedicated functional heads that encode the relevant formal features (cf. Roberts 2012), along the highest portion of the functional hierarchy identified by Cinque (1999):

(1) Speech Act < Evaluative < Evidential < Epistemic < ... < T (future)

A comparative survey of the distributional and interpretive properties of the particle *po/pa* reveals that its grammaticalization as an interrogative marker can be more precisely characterized as the loss of the capacity to encode the epistemic state of the discourse participants, or rather, to quantify the degree of overlap between the speaker's and the addressee's background knowledge.

The article is structured as follows: in section 2 I discuss the usage of the particles *po/pa* in the dialects spoken in the Northern part of Veneto, distinguishing between interrogative and non interrogative contexts; in section 3 I turn to analyze the different interpretive contributions of the particle *pa* in canonical and non-canonical interrogative contexts in the Central Rhaetoromance varieties; in section 4 I describe more in detail the diachronic process of grammaticalization Latin *post* has undergone in the dialects under analysis; finally, section 5 contains some concluding remarks.

¹ This study was carried out within the Rethinking, Understanding Modal Particles (RUM) and received funding from the European Union Next-GenerationEU - National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) – MISSION 4 COMPONENT 2, INVESTIMENT 1.1 Fondo per il Programma Nazionale di Ricerca e Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN) – CUP N. H53D23004410006. This manuscript reflects only the authors' views and opinions, neither the European Union nor the European Commission can be considered responsible for them. Preliminary versions of this work were presented at the workshop *Ways of expressing modality – German modal particles from a comparative perspective* (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, November 15th-16th 2021), at the 16th *Cambridge Italian Dialect Syntax-Morphology Meeting* (University Federico II of Naples, September 14th-16th 2022) and at the *Workshop in honour of Hans-Georg Obenauer* (CNRS/University of Paris 8, October 20th 2023). I would like to thank the audiences of these events as well as three anonymous reviewers for insightful comments and remarks. The usual disclaimers apply.

2. The usage of the particle in the Northern Veneto area

In this section I describe the usage of the particles *po/pa* in the dialects spoken in the Northern part of the Veneto region, making a preliminary distinction between interrogative and non interrogative contexts.

2.1 Clause final *pa/po* in Fodom and Pagotto interrogatives

In Fodom, a Rhaetoromance variety spoken in the Northern part of the province of Belluno, the particle *pa* can still have a “connecting function” (Hack 2014: 54), where the speaker refers to a previous context shared with the addressee, which leads to the question containing the particle; consider the following minimal pair:

- (2) a. Olà vas-to?
where go-you
‘Where are you going?’
- b. Olà vas-to *pa*?
where go-you *pa*
‘Where are you going (now) (since x has happened)?’ (Hack 2011: 65-66)

Both (2a) and (2b) are interpreted as canonical questions, as the speaker is simply asking for new information, but in (2b) the particle establishes a more explicit connection between the question and the previous context (Hack 2011: 65). This function is similar to the temporal value of its ancestor POS(T), although it expresses a logical posteriority rather than a temporal one. In particular, the connecting function of *pa* in (2b) may bear on a prior discourse, shared knowledge or expectations/presuppositions that form part of the common ground of the conversation participants.

Similarly, in the Bellunese area *po* can have in interrogatives the ‘connecting function’ identified by Hack (2014) if it appears in clause final position, like in (3), where it conveys a prosecutive flavour:²

² In the dialects of the Bellunese area *po* can also add simply a connecting shade of meaning in the final position of canonical *wh*-questions, where the *wh*-item appears in sentence internal position, like in (i):

- (i) E-la partida (quando) *po*?
is-she left (when) *po*
‘(When) has she left then?’

Other interpretive/pragmatic values conveyed by the particle *po* in this dialectal area are exemplified in the following interrogatives in Ampezzano:

- (ii) Ce faje-o *po* ancora par piazza?!
what do=you *po* still for square
‘What are you doing still around?’

- (3) a. E-la partida *po*?
is-she left *po*
'Has she left then?'
- b. Quando é-la partida *po*?
when is-she left *po*
'When has she left then?'

It is extremely tempting to locate *po* in these contexts in *T (future)*, as the particle signals here the explicit reference to some previous communicative exchange shared by speaker and hearer, and the speaker assumes that the hearer has gained afterwards knowledge enabling him/her to provide the relevant answer.³

2.2 Non interrogative contexts in Pagotto and Ampezzano

As discussed extensively by Munaro & Poletto (2005)/(2008) and Munaro (2023), in the dialects of the Bellunese area, in particular Pagotto, the particle *po* can be used in a variety of contexts with different interpretive contributions.

A very peculiar function is performed by *po* in answers, where the speaker underlines the obviousness of the answer, signalling the complete overlapping between the speaker's and the hearer's epistemic state; this is exemplified by the mini-dialogues in (4)-(5) with Pagotto and in (6) with Ampezzano:

- (4) A: A-tu comprà che?
have-you bought what
'What have you bought?'
- B: *Po*, al pan! / Al pan *po*!
po the bread / the bread *po*
'Obviously the bread!'
- (5) A: E Maria?
B: *Po*, la é partida! / La é partida *po*!

- (iii) a. Te dezìdes-to *po* a vienì?
you decide-you *po* to come
'Come on, hurry up!'
- b. Son-e *po* boi da ruà su in son?
are-we *po* good to arrive up in top
'Are we able to reach the top?'

These examples can clearly be interpreted as non-canonical questions in the sense of Obenauer (2004); more precisely, (iiia) expresses the speaker's surprise/dismay/disapproval concerning the state of affairs he/she is witnessing (which conflicts with the expectations), while (iiib) can be considered a rhetorical question where the intended answer is negative.

³ Very similar remarks have been proposed by Bayer and Obenauer (2011) about the discourse implications of the particle *denn* in German interrogatives. Notice that the clause final occurrence of *po* can be analyzed as deriving from the attraction of the whole interrogative clause to the specifier position associated to the left-peripheral functional head occupied by *po* (cf. Munaro & Poletto 2005/2008).

- (8) a. *Po*, quando é-la partida?
 po when is-she left
 b. Quando *po* é-la partida?
 when po is-she left

Even in polar questions, clause initial *po* expresses a remarkable degree of surprise of the speaker on the actual state of affairs:

- (9) *Po*, é-la partida?!
 po is-she left
 ‘Has she really left?!’

We can say that in this dialect group *po* can still work as a modal particle providing information about the relationship between the speaker’s expectations and the evidence available in the speech situation. The function of *po* in these interrogative contexts seems to be the one of updating the epistemic state of the speaker, whose background knowledge is related to contextual evidence, which may be in contrast with the speaker’s expectations, giving rise to the surprise effect described above.⁵ Following Hinterhölzl & Munaro (2015), I submit that the particle *po* in these cases is generated as a functional head encoding an evidential feature, most likely the *Evidential* node in the sequence in (1), thereby witnessing a first step upwards in the grammaticalization process.

3. The particle *pa* in Central Rhaetoromance interrogatives

Building on previous studies on this topic, in this section I present the distributional and interpretive properties of the particle *pa* in interrogative contexts across the Central Rhaetoromance varieties.

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- b. ‘Why (has she left)?’
 Parché *po* (magné-o ‘n pom)?
 why po (eat-you an apple)
 ‘Why (are you eating an apple)?’
- (ii) a. Parcé *po*, no aaràe abù da ‘l fei?!
 why po not would-have had to it do
 b. Parcé no aaràe abù da ‘l fei, *po*?!
 why not would-have had to it do po
 ‘Why on earth shouldn’t I have done it?’

The examples in (i) and (ii) convey an emotionally salient attitude of the speaker with respect to the relevant propositional content or to the actual situation.

⁵ In particular, adopting the framework of Bianchi & Cruschina (2022), we can surmise that in interrogative clauses the particle *po* in initial position entails a suspension of the default pragmatic assumption on the presence of an *Open Issue*, as the assumption of *Speaker Ignorance* is suspended and the one of *Addressee Competence* is automatically activated.

3.1 Fassano interrogatives

Benincà (1996) reports the following examples from Fassano, where *pa* either follows the cluster formed by inflected verb and inverted subject pronoun (10a), or precedes the pronominal subject and the inflected verb (10b):

- (10) a. Olà as-to *pa* magnat?
where have-you *pa* eaten
- b. Olà *pa* tu as magnat?
where *pa* you-have eaten
'Where have you eaten?'

According to Hack (2011), the particle *pa* appearing in Fassano *wh*-questions does not seem to perform a particular function from the interpretive point of view, hence the presence of the particle is optional:

- (11) Che as-te (*pa*) fat?
what have-you (*pa*) done
'What have you done?'

As discussed by Dohi (2020), in Fassano the particle *pa* can also optionally appear in polar questions:

- (12) Rùes-te (*pa*) doman?
arrive-you (*pa*) tomorrow
'Do you arrive tomorrow?'

It seems that in Fassano *pa* can be optionally added to an interrogative clause, apparently without contributing a significant interpretive import to the utterance; for Fassano further investigation is certainly needed, as the situation is also complicated by the high degree of microvariation attested in the three subvarieties of Cazet, Brach and Moenat (cf. Dohi 2020).

3.2 Badiotto interrogatives

According to Hack (2014), the situation is different in Badiotto, where the presence of *pa* in polar questions triggers a non-canonical interpretation, so that in (13a) it expresses the speaker's surprise and in (13b) it conveys the speaker's skepticism:

- (13) a. E-l *pa* bel mort?
 is-he *pa* already dead
 ‘Is he already dead?’
- b. Es-t *pa* bun?
 are-you *pa* capable
 ‘Are you capable?’

Indeed, as discussed in detail by Poletto (2000), in Badiotto we find an interesting asymmetry between constituent questions and polar questions with respect to the presence of *pa*, which is obligatory in canonical *wh*-questions and in non-canonical polar questions.

Poletto (2000) points out that in Badiotto polar questions the non-canonical interpretation is associated with the presence of *pa*, like in (14a), which conveys the speaker’s dismay about the fact that the addressee is going to Venice, while the absence of *pa* triggers a canonical interpretation, like in (14b):

- (14) a. Vas-t *pa* a Venezia?!
 go-you *pa* to Venice
 ‘Are you going to Venice?!’
- b. Vas-t a Venezia?
 go-you to Venice
 ‘Are you going to Venice?’

Conversely, *pa* appears obligatorily in the canonical *wh*-question in (15a), while its absence triggers a non-canonical interpretation, like in (15b), where the speaker expresses his/her surprise/disapproval/disagreement about the fact that the addressee is leaving:

- (15) a. Ulà vas-t *pa*?
 where go-you *pa*
 ‘Where are you going?’
- b. Ulà vas-t?!
 where go-you
 ‘Where (the hell) are you going?!’

Summing up, in order to trigger a canonical interpretation, in Badiotto *pa* is obligatory in *wh*-questions and not admitted in polar questions. Following the line of reasoning sketched in the

previous sections, and considering the strong evaluative entailment associated to non-canonical questions, one can reasonably hypothesize that in Badiotto non-canonical polar questions *pa* undergoes a further step upwards in its grammaticalization process and is reanalyzed by the speakers as the lexicalization of the *Evaluative* head in the sequence in (1).⁶

3.3 Gardenese interrogatives

Hack (2014) observes that in the Rhaetoromance variety of Gardenese the interrogative reading is codified by the obligatory occurrence of the sentential particle *pa*, which has become compulsory in all canonical questions. Hence, unlike in Badiotto, in Gardenese the presence of the particle *pa* is compulsory also in canonical polar questions (Hack 2011, 2014), so that its absence produces ungrammaticality, as witnessed by (16b):⁷

- (16) a. Vëni-el *pa* nce Tone?
 comes-he *pa* also Tone
 ‘Is Tone also coming?’
 b. *Vëni-el nce Tone?
 comes-he also Tone

⁶ As for the obligatory presence of *pa* in canonical *wh*-questions, one could surmise that in this case the particle lexicalizes the highest functional head in (1); independent evidence for this hypothesis is provided by the following data. Poletto & Zanuttini (2003) propose that the function of *pa* in Badiotto is to signal that the entire sentence is focused; interestingly, *pa* can appear in every basic clause type, namely it appears obligatorily in standard *wh*-interrogatives; moreover, it can appear in imperatives, triggering a ‘stronger order’:

- (i) a. Fàl *pa* ch’al é na buna idea!
 do-it *pa* that it is a good idea
 ‘Do it, it’s a good idea!’
 b. Va *pa* tres adërta fora!
 go *pa* always straight ahead
 ‘Always go straight ahead!’

As noted by Poletto (2000), *pa* can appear also in declaratives/statements, turning them into total exclamatives, or in *wh*-exclamative contexts, emphasizing the exclamatory effect:

- (ii) a. Al é *pa* bun!
 it is *pa* good
 ‘It is good indeed!’
 b. Ci bel ca l’è *pa*!
 how nice that it-is *pa*
 ‘How nice it is!’

In these contexts *pa* seems to be rather a semantically empty dummy element marking a reinforcement of the illocutionary force of the clause (type) in which it appears, with broad focus on the whole propositional content; I interpret this as showing that in these contexts it occupies the highest position where the canonical illocutionary force of the utterance is codified, namely *Speech Act*.

⁷ Interestingly, the same behaviour is reported by Trotzke & Monforte (2019) for the particle *al* in Basque, which marks neutral polar questions; leaving out *al* results in a biased interpretation of the polar question. Similarly here, according to Poletto (2000), if the particle is absent, the interrogative sentence is interpreted as a rhetorical question, that is, as a non-canonical question.

In Gardenese *wh*-questions *pa* is used obligatorily to obtain the canonical interpretation, while its absence implies an emphasis on the *wh*-operator (Hack 2014):

- (17) a. Can compr-i *pa* n liber?
when buy-they *pa* a book
'When do they buy a book?'
- b. CAN compr-i n liber?
WHEN buy-they a book
'WHEN do they buy a book?'

The function of *pa* in *wh*-questions in Gardenese is therefore similar to (but not exactly the same as) the one attested in Badiotto, where - according to Poletto & Zanuttini (2003) - the presence of *pa* signals that the entire sentence is in focus; on the other hand, when *pa* is absent in Gardenese, then another constituent undergoes focalization, as witnessed by the intonational prominence of the *wh*-item in (17b).

Hence, in Gardenese *pa* marks obligatorily all canonical interrogatives, namely both polar and *wh*-questions:

- (18) a. Ciant-el *pa*?
sings-he *pa*
'Is he singing?'
- b. Ciuldì ciant-el *pa*?
why sings-he *pa*
'Why is he singing?'

I would suggest that in a variety like Gardenese, as neutral interrogative marker *pa* has reached the highest degree of grammaticalization and simply marks a default (or conventionalized) degree of matching between the common ground shared by the two discourse participants. In particular, we can analyze the fully grammaticalized version of *pa* as a canonical question marker signalling that the common ground knowledge of speaker and hearer crucially do not coincide, unlike what happens in other varieties where the particle has not reached this extreme stage of grammaticalization. In cartographic terms, one can surmise that in Gardenese *pa* has been

reanalyzed by the speakers as the highest functional head of the sequence in (1), namely the *Speech Act* head, encoding the canonical interrogative reading.⁸

4. Reinterpreting the grammaticalization path of Latin *post*

Hack (2011, 2014) shows that the dialectal varieties of Dolomitic Rhaetoromance can be subdivided into four groups depending on the use of *pa* in interrogative clauses; she claims that the different functions performed by *pa* in the different varieties suggest the existence of a grammaticalization process with different intermediate stages and that every variety of Dolomitic Rhaetoromance instantiates a stage of this diachronic process.

According to her analysis, which builds on Abraham (1991), *pa* had initially only local and temporal functions; at a certain point it has taken up a modal/discourse-functional value through which the speaker could express his/her attitude towards the relevant event. While Fodom and Ampezzano remain by now in this stage, Fassano has developed the conventionalized use where the particle lost its interpretive contribution, but it is not obligatory yet. Eventually *pa* becomes obligatory in *wh*-questions in Badiotto and in all interrogative contexts in Gardenese.

Dohi (2020) checks the validity of this approach against a more detailed diachronic corpus of the different Central Rhaetoromance varieties, concluding that the loss of modal value in *wh*-questions takes place in all the three investigated varieties, while the extension of obligatory *pa* to polar questions does not take place in all dialects.⁹ The survey of the diachronic data confirms that the particle *pa* tends to be used more and more frequently and to lose over time its erstwhile pragmatically marked value.¹⁰

⁸ An anonymous reviewer correctly points out the the Speech Act node is not normally viewed as the prototypical locus where the interrogative reading is encoded, but the data discussed in footnote 6 above seem to suggest that such structural node may be involved more broadly in the encoding of other clause types as well in Badiotto; in this sense, the lexicalization of the Speech Act node by *pa* should be regarded as the morpho-syntactic expression of clause-typing independently of speech-act implications (cf. Corr & Munaro 2022 on the difference between the two notions).

⁹ According to Dohi, in Fassano the loss of interpretive value does not entail the obligatory use in *wh*-questions. Beside this, the sinking frequency of *pa* in the 20th century suggests that it will not become an interrogative marker (unlike in Gardenese or Badiotto); in polar questions the particle seems to be progressively disappearing. In Badiotto *wh*-questions the concurring presence of other modal particles suggests that grammaticalization is not the only factor determining the distribution of the particle; in polar questions the diachronic evolution of *pa* shows an unpredicted tendency leading to its disappearance. In Gardenese it is extremely plausible that speakers have copied onto polar questions the function performed by the particle in *wh*-questions, reanalyzing it as a general obligatory interrogative marker. Notice that also the etymologically related item *poi* in standard Italian performs some discourse functions which are clearly not temporal.

¹⁰ A very similar diachronic grammaticalization process has been proposed by Bayer (2012) for the German particle *denn*, which has developed into a pure *wh*-interrogative marker in Bavarian, where it appears as the clitic element *-n*. According to Bayer, in Bavarian the clitic element *-n* appearing in *wh*-clauses is deprived of its special modal particle semantics and operates more or less like a pure *wh*-interrogative marker; the grammaticalization path identified by Abraham (1991) is prolonged due to further reduction of *denn* toward a pure marker of root *wh*-questions. The concomitant cline from the categorial status as maximal projection XP to a lexical head X^o, to a functional head X^o and finally to a clitic element is fully consistent with a well-attested diachronic process (van Gelderen 2004, Willis 2007). For a more recent assessment of the role and the syntactic status of the particle *-n* in Bavarian the reader is referred to Bayer (2022).

In the cartographic perspective I am adopting, it is possible to formalize the grammaticalization path described above as a process of successive upward reanalysis along the functional hierarchy (cf. Roberts & Roussou 2003:202; see also Roberts 2012); in particular, we can surmise that *pa* has been reanalyzed as a lexical exponent of each of the heads forming the highest cluster of the functional sequence identified by Cinque (1999), repeated here for convenience:

(19) Speech Act > Evaluative > Evidential > Epistemic > ... > T(future)

More precisely, we can analyze the fully grammaticalized version of *pa* as a lexicalization of the highest Speech Act head; as such, it develops into a canonical question marker (signalling that the common ground knowledge of speaker and hearer do not coincide), unlike what happens in other neighbouring varieties where the cognate particle *po* has not reached this extreme stage of grammaticalization and rather marks information managing between discourse participants, presumably lexicalizing the Epistemic head. This discourse function might be the informational trigger towards the extension of *pa* as non-canonical question marker in some varieties (where it lexicalizes the Evidential and/or Evaluative head) and finally as default canonical question marker in Gardenese, following the hypothesis that the latter function might derive from the conventionalization of the informational divide between speaker and hearer.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show how the study of microvariation among closely related dialects can provide a better understanding of the processes involved in the grammaticalization of modal particles. I have presented a case study in which illocutionary force is affected by the diachronic process of grammaticalization of an adverbial particle which over time turns into a clause-typing maker; in this particular case an erstwhile temporal and locative adverb takes up a discourse-related functional value, turning eventually into a marker of (canonical or non-canonical) interrogative force.

By comparing the syntactic behaviour and semantic contribution of the particles *po/pa* in different but closely related dialects, I have tried to better characterize the process of grammaticalization Latin *post* has undergone in some Central Rhaetoromance varieties, which can be more precisely identified as the loss of the capacity to codify the epistemic state of the discourse participants, or rather, to quantify the degree of overlap between the speaker's and the addressee's background knowledge. In this sense, the particle *po* displays a degree of grammaticalization which is far weaker than the one of Rhaetoromance *pa*, in particular of Gardenese *pa*, which marks the

interrogative speech act in which it appears as a canonical one, where the epistemic state of speaker and hearer crucially do not coincide; as a neutral interrogative marker, *pa* simply marks a default (or conventionalized) degree of matching between the common ground shared by the two interlocutors.¹¹

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¹¹ Space limitations prevent me from going into the details of how this grammaticalization process develops in practice, considering the methods and research questions generally pursued in this field, such as for example the role of bridging contexts, the process of bleaching and of scope expansion/reduction. In particular, as correctly pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, since the alleged change goes so far as to end with an interrogative marker, one wonders whether this is actually a case of pragmaticalization because the effect of the change is visible at the level of the speech act and not the sentence, crucially involving the Discourse Grammar; according to recent literature (Narrog & Heine 2021, Graf & Schweier 2024), this is related to processes of Subjectification that drive the change towards an increased inclusion of the speaker's point of view, leading to an enhanced abstractness of the originally temporal particle.

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