

FROM TEMPORAL ADVERB TO MODAL PARTICLE —
SOME COMPARATIVE REMARKS ON POLISH "CZASEM"
("SOMETIMES")¹

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0. This is a pilot study of a planned universalist investigation on the distribution, use and development of modal particles. The hypotheses proposed for the Polish word "czasem" are very tentative. As modal particles typically constitute both a much neglected area of grammar — neglected because their use is characteristic of the spoken colloquial register — and a rather complex one, and as particles typically exhibit such delicate nuances of meaning as to require a native or near-native competence of the language, I really cannot hope to do more than to awaken the research interests of those more competent than I am.³ Another reason for why it is worthwhile to draw attention to modal particles is that they have recently proved to be an exciting touchstone for theories of semantics and pragmatics (see esp. Woydt (ed.), 1977; 1979).

1. In present-day Polish the word "czasem" is ambiguous. In what was probably once its only meaning, "czasem" is a temporal adverb and it means "sometimes". In this use it is replaceable by "czasami".

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³ I gather (from private correspondence and discussion) that there is, to date, no (good) study of Polish particles and, more particularly, of "czasem".

- (1) Jan *czasem* jeździ do Warszawy.
 John drive to Warsaw.
 John sometimes drives to Warsaw.

In a derived meaning "czasem" is a modal particle meaning something like "by any chance" or "perhaps". In that case it can be replaced by "przypadkiem".

- (2) Czy nie chciałbyś *czasem* kawy?
 question negation like coffee
 Wouldn't you like coffee by any chance?

Such polysemy is neither common nor unique in a language. Among the Slavic languages only Ukrainian seems to have a similar phenomenon ("часом", see *Українсько-російський словник*, VI:408). Among the Germanic languages, only Dutch, a variety of German and probably Afrikaans seem to have it. In Dutch the most common "sometimes" word is "soms".

- (3) *Soms* gaat Jan naar Brussel.
 go John to Brussels
 John sometimes goes to Brussels.

Yet in (4) "soms" has a modal function, derived from the temporal one, the very same as exercised by the word "misschien" ("perhaps").

- (4) Lust je koffie *soms*?
 like you coffee
 Do you like coffee by any chance?

The archaic and dialectal variant "sometijds" is similarly ambiguous. In Standard German the usual word for "sometimes", "manchmal" only has a temporal use.

- (5) *Manchmal* fährt Johann nach Berlin.
 travel John to Berlin
 Sometimes John travels to Berlin.

Yet in the colloquial speech ("städtische Umgangssprache") of Saxony in the triangle between Dresden, Leipzig and Karl-Marx-Stadt "manchmal" can be synonymous with "vielleicht" ("perhaps").

- (6) Haben Sie *manchmal* Feuer?
 have you fire
 Have you got a light by any chance?

As to Afrikaans, according to the *Woordeboek van die Afrikaanse Taal* (I:165), "altemit(s)" has both a temporal "sometimes" and a modal "perhaps" meaning.

- (7) Die kerel **kom** so *altemit* hier.
 that guy come here
 That guy comes here sometimes.
 (8) Het jy *altemit* vir my 'n vuurhoutjie?
 have you for me a match
 Could you give me a match by any chance?

Among the Romance languages the phenomenon may only exist in French, yet not, interestingly enough for "parfois", the most common "sometimes" word, but for the colloquial "des fois".

- (9) *Des fois* Jean va à Paris.
 John go to Paris
 Sometimes John goes to Paris.
 (10) Tu n' as pas *des fois* des allumettes?
 you negation have matches
 You wouldn't have any matches by any chance?

For the few non-Slavic-Germanic-Romance languages that I have checked (Albanian, Amharic, Arabic, Finnish, Japanese, Swahili and Turkana) the results were negative, i.e. the "sometimes" words only have temporal meanings.⁴ Thus we see that the time-modality switch for "sometimes" is not too common, and it is therefore not too surprising that it has received little or no attention.

It should not be thought, however, that the time-modality alternation in "sometimes" is an isolated phenomenon in the sense that it would be restricted to "sometimes". In German and Dutch it also exists for "once", for example (Gm. "mal", Dt. "eens") and in Afrikaans for "soon" ("dalk" and "dalkers"). The very fact that a time word takes on a modal meaning furthermore fits the well-attested localist theory of meaning change, which says, roughly, that the abstract domains of vocabulary are filled with words originally belonging to the more concrete registers.

2. In the above section I have briefly pointed to the similarities between Pl. "czasem", Dt. "soms", Sax. "manchmal" and Fr. "des fois" — for lack of data other than a dictionary entry Ukrainian and Afrikaans will have to be disregarded. There are interesting differences, however. In all four languages, there are distributional restrictions on the use of modal "sometimes". In Saxon, these restrictions seem to be the most severe. It looks as if modal "manchmal" is restricted to "yes/no"-questions, preferably or even exclusively to second person "yes/no"-questions that function as indirect requests.

⁴ Eva Stephanides (Budapest) has suggested to me that an Hungarian "sometimes" word is ambiguous, too. Judging from a dictionary entry (*Thai-English Student's Dictionary*: 287) Thai "baan̄thii" would also be interesting to look at in detail.

- (11) Können Sie *manchmal* eine Mark wechseln?
 can you a Mark change
 Could you change a Mark perhaps?
- (12) Haben Sie *manchmal* genaue Zeit?
 have you exact time
 Would you happen to have the exact time?

In French and Polish "des fois" and "czasem" seem to be restricted to two types of contexts, "if"-clauses and preferably negative "yes/no"-questions.

- (13) Si *des fois* tu vas à Paris, dis Jean que je viens.
 if you go to Paris say John that I come
 If you happen to go to Paris, tell John that I am coming.
- (14) Tu n' es pas *des fois* anarchiste?
 you negation are anarchist
 You are not an anarchist by any chance?
- (15) Gdyby *czasem* to była Bruksela, to bylibyśmy w Belgii.
 if this be Brussels this be in Belgium
 If this were Brussels, then we would be in Belgium.
- (2) Czy nie chciałbyć *czasem* kawy?
 question negation like coffee
 Wouldn't you like coffee by any chance?

It is difficult to judge — at the present stage of data collection — just how strong the preference for negative "yes/no"-questions is. Judgments on positive "yes/no"-questions range from "impossible", "understandable but I would never say it" to "acceptable though uncommon".⁵

In Dutch finally, modal "soms" occurs freely in "if"-clauses and in all types of "yes/no" questions — i.e. there is no restriction to second person or negative "yes/no"-questions.

- (16) Als dit *soms* Brussel is, dan ben ik in Belgie.
 if this be Brussels be then be I in Belgium
 If this is Brussels, then I am in Belgium.
- (17) Heeft Jan zijn auto *soms* genomen?
 have John his car take
 Has John taken his car perhaps?

It can even show up in imperatives, when they express a suggestion:

⁵ For Polish, each of the reactions was recorded. For French, the (two) reactions were of the "understandable but I would not say it" type. It is interesting that the "acceptable but uncommon" reaction occurred as an afterthought correcting an earlier "impossible" judgment.

- (18) Kom *soms* vanavond eens langs.
 come to night
 Why don't you come tonight?

It is fairly clear that the two most hospitable contexts for modal "sometimes" are "if"-clauses and "yes/no"-questions. It further appears that there is something particularly hospitable about second person request "yes/no"-questions (see Saxon — and even the Afrikaans example) and about negative "yes/no"-questions (see French and Polish). These tendencies need to be explained. In the search for such an explanation, we will have to face two further, though related questions: (i) what is the function/meaning of modal "czasem"/"des fois"/"manchmal"/"soms"? (ii) how did the modal meanings develop out of the temporal ones? In the rest of this discussion I will have a closer look at "yes/no"-questions.

3. In "yes/no"-questions modal "sometimes" seems to have two possible functions. It shares these functions with "perhaps" words (see Van der Auwera 1983). The first is that of a *politeness* marker. Most typically it occurs in second person questions that function as requests. This use is exemplified in (2), (4), (6), (10), (11) and (12).

The development of the politeness usage out of the temporal one seems to be straightforward. In speech acts politeness often involves making a *weaker* speech act than the one actually intended. So, instead of literally requesting a hearer to tell the time, which is what the speaker in (19) is really up to,

- (19) Weet je hoe laat het is?
 know you how late it be
 Do you happen to know the time?

he merely asks whether the hearer knows what time it is. On the level of the literal meaning, the speaker doesn't commit the hearer to do anything more than to answer with something like "yes" or "no"; the encroachment on the freedom of the hearer is small. Of course, the politeness effect is fully conventionalized. It would be very improper if the hearer only reacted with "yes" or "no". What happens if the speech act in (19) contains a "soms" is simply that it gets a further weakening.

- (20) Weet je *soms* hoe laat het is?

Now the speaker does not even ask the pointed question of whether the hearer knows the time at the one, particular moment of speaking. Instead he issues the more general question, one that should be easier to answer, of whether the hearer sometimes knows the time.

The second usage is the "reactive" one. A reactive particle — the term is due to Wunderlich (1976:77) and Franck (1980:53—54) turns the speech act in which it occurs into a reaction to an immediately preceding state of affairs or

speech act. Usually the reactive speech act suggests an explanation of the preceding state of affairs or the state of affairs talked about in the preceding speech act.

(21) *Mizernie wyglądasz. Czy pitiesz czasem?*
 miserable look question drink
 You look miserable. Have you been drinking perhaps?

(22) *Elka dag lees je de krant. Heb je soms een abonnement?*
 every day read you the paper have you a subscription?
 Every day you are reading the paper. Have you got a subscription perhaps?

(23) *Ton comportement est assez bizarre. Tu n'es pas des fois anarchiste?*
 your behaviour be rather bizarre you negation be anarchist?

Your behaviour is rather bizarre. You are not an anarchist by any chance?

Saxon "machmal" does not seem to licence this use.

A "yes/no"-question can be reactive without "czasem"/"des fois", too. But it need not be. Its reactivity is only due to context, and it can also function as a neutral information question. With (24), for instance, a speaker can signal that he simply wants to know whether or not the hearer has drunk. It need

(24) *Czy pilies?*
 Question drink
 Have you been drinking?

not suggest as the question in (21) typically would, that the drinking forms an explanation of some state of affairs, either immediately preceding or just talked about.

The development of the reactive use is harder to understand than that of the politeness use. Here are, tentatively, two elements of explanation. The first is politeness again or, at least, discretion or caution. Consider the following speech act.

(25) Aren't you lonely sometimes?

(25) or something very close to it is said by Barry Lyndon in the film named after him. Barry Lyndon has been travelling for days, when he finally finds a shelter. His host is a most charming young woman whose husband has long before gone to war. Guest and host feel attracted towards each other and one evening Barry Lyndon ventures (25). The context strongly suggests that (25) is not meant as a neutral information question. It counts as cautious flirting, meaning or better, implicating, something like (26).

(26) Aren't you lonely NOW PERHAPS?

The flirting is cautious because it allows the hearer to opt out and to reply to the literal meaning of the question. In English the "now perhaps" implicature is "particularized" and totally context-bound. There is no reason to declare the English "sometimes" ambiguous between a temporal and a "perhaps" "reading". It is well attested, however — see Cole (1975), Morgan (1978) and Rombouts (1981) — that implicatures can get conventionalized and give rise to polysemy. Perhaps reactive "czasem", "soms" and "des fois" are the results of such a conventionalization.

The second element of explanation concerns the fact that reactive questions convey a positive bias. While (24) as such is no more conducive to a positive than to a negative answer, the question in (21) suggests a positive answer. Similarly, the questions in (22) and (23) suggest, respectively, that the hearer has a subscription and that he is an anarchist, while (26) intimates that the hearer is lonely. The relevance of this is that even temporal "sometimes" has a positive orientation. That is to say that temporal "czasem", "soms" and "des fois" are positive polarity items, their negative counterparts being "kiedykolwiek", "ooit" and "jamais".⁶ It is rather plausible, therefore, that the positive bias of modal "sometimes" is just inherited from temporal "sometimes".

Somewhat paradoxically, the positive polarity of the "sometimes" words provides a clue as to why modal "sometimes" should prefer negative "yes/no"-questions. In many languages and among them English, Polish, Dutch and French, negative "yes/no"-questions happen to convey a positive bias. (27), for instance,

(27) Isn't George wonderful?

is oriented towards a positive answer. This is a well-known fact, though it is not well accounted for.⁷ Yet, whatever its own explanation is, it explains why positive polarity items are fully acceptable in negative "yes/no"-questions while they are weird in negative assertions.⁸

(28) Isn't George absolutely wonderful?

(29) ?? George isn't absolutely wonderful.

⁶ Positive polarity items are words and phrases that only thrive in positive environments. This is a very vague description. Unfortunately, the study of positive polarity has not come as far along as that of negative polarity (see Ladusaw 1980; Linebarger 1981).

⁷ See Pope (1975), Kiefer (1980:98–99), Karttunen (1978:205). Perhaps the explanation will involve the highly presuppositional nature of negation (see Givón 1979:91–142).

⁸ (29), (31), and (33) are acceptable only when they deny as well as *echo* a positive assertion.

- (30) Isn't Bo rather stupid?
 (31) ?? Bo isn't rather stupid.
 (32) Don't you sometimes think that it's all nonsense?
 (33) ?? I don't sometimes think that it's all nonsense.

The fact that negative "yes/no"-questions carry a positive bias makes it furthermore understandable why they form a more natural environment for positive polarity items than the bias-less positive "yes/no"-questions.

- (34) ?? Is George absolutely wonderful?
 (35) ?? Is Bo rather stupid?
 (36) Do you sometimes think that it's all nonsense?

Note that positive "yes/no"-questions do not treat all positive polarity items in the same way: while (34) and (35) seem to me to be as bad as (29) and (31), (36) is by no means unacceptable, though it may be somewhat unusual. The parallel with the distribution of modal "sometimes" is striking and maybe explanatory — if one remembers that modal "sometimes" is derived from temporal "sometimes": modal "sometimes" is not impossible in positive "yes/no"-questions, though French and Polish exhibit a preference for negative "yes/no"-questions.

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