The Hindi-Urdu Particle Naañ as Two Lexical Items

Introduction: This study investigates the Urdu-Hindi particle naañ, which is ubiquitous in casual speech, but whose exact contribution has not been satisfactorily described. While some instances of naañ contribute an interrogative meaning, others are incompatible with one – raising the question of whether naañ is even a single lexical item. Following the diagnostic tests for biased questions developed in Farkas & Roelofson (2017) and Goodhue (2018), as well as the investigation into German discourse markers in Kaufmann & Kaufmann (2012) (K&K), we propose that naañ should, in fact, be analyzed as two separate lexical items, naañ1 and naañ2. Our investigation reveals that naañ1 appears exclusively in clause-final position, and contributes a meaning very similar to English reversed-polarity tag questions (questions like you’re going, aren’t you?, where a declarative sentence anchor is followed by a tag with the opposite polarity of the anchor), while naañ2 appears clause-medially, is incompatible with an interrogative interpretation, and behaves almost identically to the German discourse marker doch.

Naañ1 empirical facts: A typical instance of naañ1 is structured as in (1), where naañ1 is pronounced at the end of a declarative sentence anchor:

(1) Tum mere saath aaoge, naañ1?
   you me.OBL with come.FUT naañ1
   ‘You will come with me, naañ1?’

   The addition of naañ1 causes the formerly declarative utterance to become interrogative. Furthermore, (1) is only felicitous in a context in which the speaker is biased towards p. Previous investigations have identified several question types compatible with speaker bias for p, such as high negation questions, rising declaratives, and reversed-polarity tag questions. The goal of this study is to identify any correspondence between naañ1 and one or more of these English question types, to see if an analysis proposed for the latter could be extended to the former.

Our investigation into naañ1 yielded several important empirical facts. Firstly, naañ1 questions can be pronounced with either rising or falling intonation, which indicate lesser and greater confidence, respectively, on the part of the speaker in her bias for p. These intonational options are also present in English reversed-polarity tag questions (for brevity referred to as tag questions), and function in the same way. Diagnostic tests also reveal that the distribution of naañ1 is almost identical to that of English tag questions, while its usage diverges from the other aforementioned biased question types, as in (2), where a downward pointing arrow indicates falling sentence-final intonation:

(2) Waziiir-e-aazam bhii to Nelson Mandela nahiin haiin, naañ1↓!
   Prime Minister also CONTRAST Nelson Mandela NEG is naañ1
   ‘The Prime Minister is no Nelson Mandela either, naañ1!’

   The use of naañ in (2) conveys that the speaker believes that his opinion about the Prime Minister is already shared by his interlocutors, which is also conveyed by the English tag question The Prime Minister is no Nelson Mandela either, is he? when pronounced with falling sentence-final intonation. The same English sentence pronounced with final rising intonation, or as an HNQ like Isn’t the Prime Minister no Nelson Mandela either?, fails to convey the same meaning as (2). Other tests also show that naañ1 patterns with English tag questions all the way down to the intonation used, while failing to pattern with other types of English biased questions. This provides the basis for our conclusion that naañ1 should be analyzed along the lines of an English tag question.

An analysis for naañ1: In Farkas & Roelofson (2017), the authors propose that English tag questions consist of a declarative sentence anchor, followed by a tag which they characterize as an interrogative
operator. They then provide a schema for sentence-final intonation, according to which rising and falling intonation indicate lesser and greater speaker belief in \( p \), respectively. Following their lead, we propose that \textit{naañ1} is an interrogative operator that appends to a declarative utterance and combines with rising/falling intonation to convey the degree of speaker confidence in \( p \).

\textbf{Naañ2 empirical facts:} \textit{Naañ2}, identified by its inability to receive an interrogative interpretation, can appear directly after a subject or object NP, as well as after a PP (a distribution which matches that of previously identified Hindi-Urdu discourse markers such as \textit{bhii}, \textit{hii}, and \textit{to} (Sharma 1999)). In (3), \textit{naañ2} is positioned after the subject NP:

\begin{enumerate}
    \item Tum naañ2 DaakTar ke paas jaa sakte ho
        you naañ2 doctor to go can AUX
        ‘You \textit{naañ2} can go to the doctor’
\end{enumerate}

The insertion of \textit{naañ2} suggests that the speaker believes that the listener should already know and agree with the proposition expressed by the utterance. Moreover, \textit{naañ2} can appear in imperatives and in performative modals, and is barred from appearing in polar questions. These facts about the meaning and distribution of \textit{naañ2} exactly match those of the German discourse marker \textit{doch}, described in detail in K&K.

\textbf{An analysis for naañ2:} The description of \textit{doch} in the K&K paper can be summarized as follows: first, \( \textit{doch}(p) \) is equivalent to \( p \). Second, by using \textit{doch} the speaker presupposes that the reality of whether \( p \) is readily available from the surroundings, but that the listener has somehow failed to find out/understand that \( p \). They illustrate this with the sentence ‘You can \textit{doch} go to the doctor’, which they translate to mean roughly ‘[Why do you behave as if there was no obvious solution:] you can go to the doctor’.

Additionally, \textit{naañ2} is noted to contribute a ‘lightly’ contrastive meaning (i.e., the contrast is noted without an alternative having been explicitly mentioned in the discourse) when it appears directly after the subject NP. This is observable in (3), which is interpreted to mean something like ‘[Why do you behave as if there is no obvious solution:] you [as opposed to someone else] can go to the doctor’. K&K mention that ‘\( \textit{doch}(p) \) presupposes that there is a salient focus alternative \( q \) of \( p \) such that \( q \) and \( p \) are inconsistent’, which we take to be the source of the contrastive meaning. Furthermore, the lack of a contrastive reading when \textit{naañ2} follows an object NP or a PP can likely be explained by \textit{naañ2} taking scope over the entire VP containing it.

\textbf{Further issues:} The clear differences in syntactic positioning and meaning contributions of \textit{naañ1} and \textit{naañ2} provide solid ground on which to analyze the two as separate lexical items. In fact, this investigation additionally brought to light some similarities between the types of \textit{naañ} and English invariant tags (which have been somewhat neglected compared to variant tags), such as \textit{right} and \textit{huh}, which we anecdotally note can also both be used to create biased questions and serve as discourse markers. The observations made here may cause one wonder if, in a broader theoretical context, the phenomena of tag questions and discourse markers could be united under one analysis. We hope that the details of our analysis of the two types of \textit{naañ} can provide assistance with future research along this line of inquiry.

\textbf{Selected References:}