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FROM RHETORICAL QUESTION TO ADVERSATIVE CONJUNCTION. THE CASE OF CROATIAN *ALI*¹

The paper revises etymologies of Croatian adversative conjunction *ali*, commonly associated with Polish *ale*. Even though both lexemes contain a conjunction *a*, they are composed of a question particle *li* and restrictive particle *le* respectively. Old Croatian, Serbian, and modern Slovenian disjunctive function of *ali* seems to be unrelated to the adversative function, which might have evolved directly from rhetorical questions. The paper shows what such change could look like, in line with the pragmatics of rhetorical questions and adversative coordination, Old Church Slavonic examples, and the uses in Old Croatian texts.

0. Introduction

Little attention has been paid to establishing proper etymologies of function words in Slavic languages so far. Some work in this field has been carried out lately by Ostrowski (2022) for Polish *ile* ‘how much, how many’. In his paper Ostrowski points out that etymologists usually focus solely on phonetics, and, although it is not enough, completely ignore historical syntax and typology. It leads to creation of / imprecise etymologies such as the one concerning Slavic *a*:

¹ The materials and many of the sources used in this paper were obtained thanks to the hospitality of the Institute for Croatian Language and Linguistics in Zagreb and Amir Kapetanović.

„Co prawda jeszcze w XIX wieku postawiono hipotezę, że spójnik *a* kontynuuje ablativus ide. zaimka **h₁o-/ *h₁e-*, ale nikt nie wyjaśnił, w jaki sposób ablativus zaimka mógł zostać zreinterpretowany jako spójnik zdaniowy. Inaczej mówiąc, jakie zmiany funkcjonalne należy uwzględnić, aby wyjaśnić współczesne użycie spójnika *a*.”² (Ostrowski 2022: 32)

In the example above etymologists only addressed the issues related with phonetics. It is hardly the case if Croatian-Serbian³ and Slovenian *ali* are taken into consideration. Etymologists sometimes compare *ali* to Polish *ale* (Matasović et al. 2016; Snoj 2016), not only ignoring their historical function, but also phonetics. Contrary to what was suggested by Matasović et al. (2016: s.v. *áli*), there is no phonetic reason to consider Proto-Slavic conjunctions **ali* and **ale* to be mere variants. In fact, there is no reason to think such conjunctions even existed in Proto-Slavic in the first place (for arguments see Bauerová 1957).

The aim of this paper is to propose a new explanation to the functional change in the etymology of Croatian *ali*, to demonstrate the direct shift from a rhetorical question to adversative coordination, and in consequence to stress the importance of historical syntax and linguistic typology in etymological research.

The structure of this paper is organized as follows: in the first sections of the paper the phonetics, and the contemporary and historical functions of *ali* in Slavic languages will be reviewed. What will be presented then are the two possible explanations for such functions in accordance with the theories of grammaticalization and semantic maps: one derived directly from Malchukov’s semantic map of adversative coordination, and one related to rhetorical questions.

² Although back in the 19th century it was hypothesized that the conjunction *a* continues the ablative of the PIE pronoun **h₁o-/ *h₁e-*, no one has explained how the ablative of the pronoun could be reinterpreted as a sentence conjunction. In other words, what functional changes need to be considered to explain the modern use of the conjunction *a*.

³ By *Croatian-Serbian* or *Serbian-Croatian* I mean the languages used between Croatia and Serbia (Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, and Serbian, including not only standard Shtokavian, but also Kajkavian and Chakavian; in other words, what used to be called Serbo-Croatian). I use this term when referring specifically to one of them would make things more complicated rather than less.

1. Phonetics

In Proto-Slavic there were two particles: **lě* and **le⁴* meaning ‘only, barely’. Restrictive adverbs often grammaticalize into adversative conjunctions (i.e., Polish *tylko*). Whether those two are of common origin is unclear and will not be disputed in this work⁵. However, a clear distinction between those two needs to be made, especially while considering dialects and languages, where PS. **ě* and **i* merged. Such a phonetic merge in Croatian Ikavian dialects might have led to the semantic merge between adversative **lě* and interrogative **li* also in surrounding areas.

It seems, however, that in Western South Slavic area **a le* was dominant over **a lě*. The lexeme *ale* appears in both Shtokavian and Chakavian dialects only with *e*, there is no **alje* and thus no **ali < alě* according to the material collected by Sławski (1974: s.v. *ale*). Such merge would also not explain the dominance of the disjunctive function of *ali* for centuries in Croatian.

2. Functions of *ali*

In modern Croatian *ali* is used as an adversative counterexpectative⁶ conjunction. It appears in Slovene as a disjunctive conjunction and an interrogative particle. In other Slavic languages it is not present aside from historical examples of Old Polish adversative, switch-reference, sequence marker *ali* (Nitsch et al. 1953: s.v.), Old Russian adversative, concessive *ali* (Sreznevskij 1893: s.v.) and Old Ukrainian adversative, disjunctive *aly, ali*⁷ (SSM: s.v., see also Kopečný et al. 1980: s.v. *ali*).

There is no doubt that *ali* is composed of *a* and *li*. Old Church Slavonic (OCS) *a* was primarily an adversative conjunction (SJS: s.v. *a²*) with oppositive function and still has the same function in Croatian, as well as some other Slavic languag-

⁴ Even though we only know *lě* from OCS, phonetics from other languages suggests the existence of the form **le* as well.

⁵ Some remarks on this topic have been written by Snoj (2016: s.v. *lě*).

⁶ Mauri (2008) describes three functions of contrast in coordination: oppositive (*and*), corrective and counterexpectative. The latter is also called *strong adversative*. In this paper I will follow Mauri’s terms.

⁷ Phonetics imply descendants of **a li* and **a lě* likely merged.

es, such as Polish and Russian⁸. It also appears in questions in copulative function, both in OCS and in modern languages. Together with interrogative particle *li*, however, it was used to mark specifically rhetorical questions (SJS: s.v. *a*²):

(1.1) *iny sьpase ali sebe ne možetь sьpasti* Zogr Mar Sav

“He saved others, can’t he save himself?”

(1.2) *azь xoštq otь tebe krьstiti se ali ty kь mně ideši* Sav

“I want to be baptized by you, do you come to me?”

(1.3) *vy boga viděste a azь li jedinь jesmь ne dostoinь viděnyju jeho* Supr

“You have seen god, am I the only one not worth his sight?”

In later stages, *ali* in South Slavic was used mainly in disjunctive function. This is the case in old Croatian texts, such as *Bernardin of Split Lectionary* of 1495, where *ali* was used only in disjunctive and interrogative (including rhetoric question) function, and not even once in clear adversative⁹ one. In 15th and 16th century Croatian texts *Petrisov zbornik*, *Vartal* and *Lulićev zbornik*, *ali* together with *ma* do not conjunctions (Štrkalj Despot 2012: 187). Similarly, in Serbian texts of 12th–15th century, *ali* accounted for only 5,55% of conjunctions in counterexpectative function, and 0% for other adversative function (Pavlović 2014: 130).

The adversative meaning of *ali* was thus present since early Serbian and Croatian texts but did not become dominant until much later. In Mikalja’s dictionary (1649) the first translation of *alli*, *al*, *a* is already Latin *sed* ‘but’ just as it would be today.

It is worth noting that co-occurrence of disjunctive and adversative function of one word is very rare. No language taken into consideration by Mauri (2008) showed such multifunctionality, except for the languages that always coordinate asyndetically. Both functions co-occurred in Old Czech *leč* (Gebauer 1970: 215) and Old Ukrainian *aly* (SSM: s.v.) and the reasons for it might require further research.

⁸ Malchukov notes that the functions of Russian *a* are related both to adversative and *no* ‘but’ and conjunctive *I* ‘and’. It can be used as contrastive (Mauri’s *opposite*), additive and to stress incompatibility (Malchukov 2004, p.183). One could add switch-reference to that list. It is similar in Polish and Croatian-Serbian too, to some extent. I do not elaborate on this topic as it seems irrelevant to the paper in general.

⁹ My own data.

3. Semantic map explanation

The disjunctive function of *ali* is easy to explain. The grammaticalization of interrogative particles towards disjunctive conjunctions is typologically common, i.e., Polish interrogative *czy*, nowadays is used in choice-aimed disjunction.

(2.1) Czy masz zapalki?
“Do you have matches?”

(2.2) Białe czy czerwone?
“White or red?”

Further development of disjunction towards adversative is also possible, according to Malchukov’s semantic map (Malchukov 2004: 178). The model would require one to assume that the development passed through several other functions: either additive, consecutive, and mirative, or additive and contrastive (= Mauri’s *oppositive*).

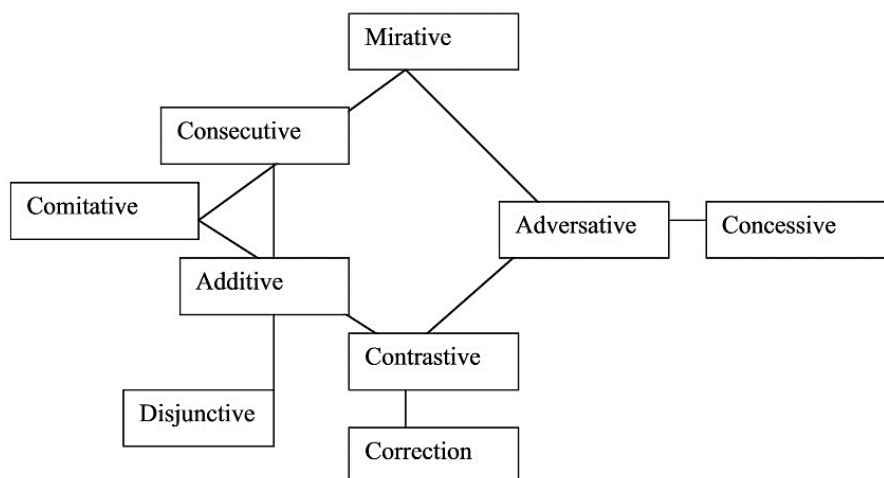


Figure 1. A semantic map for coordinating connectives. (Malchukov 2004)

Note: Malchukov’s *adversative*, *contrastive*, and *correction* are Mauri’s *counterexpectative*, *oppositive*, and *corrective*.

At least some of these functions in Serbian and Croatian texts can be confirmed. Possible additive interpretation can be found in Old Croatian disjunctive examples:

- (3) *I vsaki ki bi ostavio dom, ali bratju, ali sestre, ali otca, ali mater, ali ženu, ali sinove, ali zemlje čiča jimena moga, stokrat veće hoće prijati i život vični bude uzdaržati.* (Bernardinov Lekcionar)

“And everyone who would leave a house, **or** brothers, **or** sisters, **or** a father, **or** a mother, **or** a woman, **or** sons, **or** land for my name, they will receive hundred times more and obtain eternal life.”

Mirative may be attributed to uses such as:

- (4) *Kad ja dođo na vodu Sitnicu, | **AI** Sitnica mutna i povodna* (Karadžić 1818: s.v. *ali*)

When I arrived at Sitnica water, | **And there was** Sitnica, muddy and floody.

This example, however, is not only Serbian, but also more recent. In 19th century, the adversative function of *ali* was already dominant, so any mirative interpretations would originate in adversative, rather than consecutive function.

Such an explanation has its weak points. First of all, *ali* appeared in adversative function as early as in 15th century. (RCJHR: s.v., Štrkalj Despot 2012: 187; Pavlović 2014: 130). There is also no data indicating consecutive or contrastive uses of *ali* in South Slavic.

I would like to propose a different hypothesis. In my opinion, adversative function might have directly evolved from rhetorical questions.

4. Rhetorical questions

Typology and some remarks on the grammaticalization of rhetorical questions (RQs) have already been done by Hackstein (2004). He divided RQs into two types: A. pseudo-questions and B. epexegetic/stimulus questions as follows:

	A. pseudo-question	B. epexegetic/stimulus question
EXAMPLE	<i>Do two wrongs make a right?</i>	<i>Snow is white. How come? Well, snow reflects most of the light.</i>
content/ answer	is implied and not given by the speaker	is implied and is provided by the speaker
pragmatic function	social interaction, i.e.: accusing, ridiculing, intensification/emphasis	discourse marker marking change of discourse mode to an explanation
phonetics	elaborated question	prone to elliptical reduction and phonetic reduction (erosion)
syntactic integration	lesser degree of syntactic integration	higher degree of syntactic integration

(Hackstein 2004: 169)

In his paper, Hackstein only considers stimulus questions interesting in the context of grammaticalization. They are indeed more prone to phonetic reduction and syntactic integration. In the following paragraphs, it will be presented that grammaticalization occurs among pseudo-questions as well, at least in those whose pragmatic function points towards inconsistency or disbelief, i.e.:

(5.1) *He is so tall, and he can't reach that shelf?*

(5.2) *You said you would pay for all of this and now you suddenly don't have any money?*

(5.3) *You've been to Kraków and you didn't see the Main Square?*

Despite the difference in pragmatics, the semantic value of the above is close to identical to counterexpectative adversative sentences such as:

(6.1) *He is so tall, but he can't reach that shelf.*

(6.2) *You said you would pay for all of this, but now you suddenly don't have any money.*

(6.3) *You've been to Kraków, but you didn't see the Main Square.*

Preceding examples, namely (5) and (6) are parallel to OCS sentences (1). That means bridging contexts for grammaticalization of RQs to counterexpectative existed already in OCS. There is even more proof in Old Croatian texts, such as

adversative *da* used instead of *ali* in different copy of the same text (the second *ali* in the sentences is disjunctive):

(7.1) *Ali tko je vekši: ki sidi ali ki služi?* (Bernardinov Lekcionar)

(7.2) *Da gdo vekši jest: ki sidi, ali ki služi?* (Zadarski Lekcionar)

“**But** who is greater: the one who sits or the one who serves?”

It appeared in RQs that expressed contrast. Open questions do not require the particle *li*, so *ali* serves different function here:

(8) *Ali gdi su učenici, tvoji verni naslednici?* (*Muka Isukrstova*, Tkonski zbornik)

(**But**) where are the disciples, your faithful followers?

There are very few examples of adversative *ali* in Old Croatian texts. A set of them was presented by Štrkalj Despot (2012):

(9.1) *I bila bi se neboga otuda povratila opet, ali ne moraše nijedne noge dvi-gnuti od zemlje.* (Tund-Petr, 311a)

“And she, poor thing, would have come back, but she could not move one leg from the ground.”

(9.2) *Bila bi se rada soped v tělo povratiti, ali nikakore ne moraše vniti.* (Tundal-Petr, 302a)

“She would be happy to return to her body but could not get into it.”

As it can be seen, grammaticalization of a rhetorical question into adversative conjunction is not only theoretically possible, but also visible in texts. Due to its simplicity, it seems to be the most feasible explanation for the adversative function of the Croato-Serbian conjunction *ali*. In consequence, the disjunctive and adversative functions of *ali* one should be considered to derive separately from regular and rhetorical questions respectively.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, I suggest the composition *a li* known from OCS became a particle marking rhetoric questions (hence the usage in RQs that are syntactically open questions) and then grammaticalized as an adversative conjunction.

I believe the example of Croatian-Serbian *ali* proves that superficial analysis including only phonetics inadequately explains the origin of all lexemes, especially those with syntactic function. I suggest avoiding confusing Slavic conjunctions *ali* and *ale*. Despite perfunctory similarity they are not of the same origin. In order not to make such oversimplifications, etymologists need to conduct more detailed research and try to explain not only phonetics, but also the function of each function word. It is only possible if they consider typological and theoretical frameworks provided by other linguists.

The problem of *ali* raised in this paper can be approached even more thoroughly. As noticed by one of the reviewers (to both of whom I am much obliged for their insightful feedback), it could be compared to the development of the disjunctive *ili* and *ali* for better perspective. I intend to publish another work on the topic in Polish, considering West and East Slavic material, in 2024.

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Od retoričkog pitanja do suprotnog veznika. Slučaj hrvatskog *ali*

Sažetak

Ovaj rad preispituje dosadašnje etimologije hrvatskoga veznika *ali*, koji se često povezuje s poljskom riječju *ale*. Iako oba leksema sadrže slavenski veznik *a*, sastoj se također od upitne čestice *li* odnosno restriktivne čestice *le*. Starohrvatska, starosrpska i suvremena slovenska rastavna funkcija riječi *ali* ne mora biti povezana sa suprotnom funkcijom ovoga veznika, nego je nastala direktno iz retoričkih pitanja. Rad prikazuje kako je mogla izgledati ta promjena na temelju pragmatike retoričkih pitanja i suprotne koordinacije, staroslavenskih primjera i uporabe u starohrvatskim tekstovima.

Keywords: etymology, historical syntax, coordination

Ključne riječi: etimologija, povijesna sintaksa, koordinacija