

WHAT-Questions in Thai: Focusing on Soliloquy-Based Discourse Markers

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Abstract—Although most utterances are other-directed, some utterances are self-directed, e.g., soliloquy. It has been observed that soliloquies and other forms of self-talk that satisfy diverse personal needs are sometimes strategically manipulated so that the utterances, while marked as soliloquy in form, are uttered audibly enough for the discourse participant to hear, in a delicate double play of manipulating the form (i.e., monologue) and the manner of delivery (i.e., interlocutor-orientation). In Thai, a set of interrogative constructions involving the interrogative pronoun *àray* ‘what’, is typically used in dialogues with intent to pose a question to the addressee, yet with no interrogative illocutionary force by virtue of diverse linguistic and paralinguistic cues. These cues include the absence of interactional particles, the presence of non-interrogative intonational contour, and the absence of paralinguistic cues (e.g., gesture, gaze, etc.) that typically occur with other-directed questions. For these reasons, these discourse markers (DMs) are simultaneously feigned soliloquies and feigned questions. They are used as pause-fillers or markers of emotional stance, such as (negative) surprise, frustration, discontent, disapproval, sarcasm, etc. As has been reported in other languages, such as Korean, these soliloquy-based DMs carry a strong engaging effect on the addressees, despite them being aware that the question is not intended to solicit an answer.

Index Terms—soliloquy, discourse marker, discursive strategy, ‘What’, Thai

I. INTRODUCTION

Most utterances, especially those of interrogative, imperative and hortative speech acts, are normally other-directed, but some utterances ostensibly classified under these speech acts are self-directed, e.g., soliloquy. The distinction between the other-directed and self-directed speech acts is not always straightforward. For instance, it has been observed that soliloquies are sometimes strategically manipulated so that the utterances, although marked as a soliloquy in form, are uttered audibly enough for the discourse participant to hear, in a delicate double play created by manipulating the form (i.e., monologue) and the manner of delivery (i.e., interlocutor-orientation). Thus, this special type of soliloquy can be treated as feigned soliloquy (intended to be heard and reacted on) and feigned question (not for asking the addressee a question as marked by soliloquy features) simultaneously.

Thai has a set of interrogative constructions involving the interrogative pronoun *àray* ‘what’, which is typically used in dialogues with the intention of posing a question to the addressee. Some of the *àray* constructions have no interrogative illocutionary force by virtue or absence of diverse linguistic and paralinguistic cues. Despite their elaborate discourse functions as specialized discourse constructions or discourse markers (DMs), these DMs, based on the core lexeme *àray* ‘what’ and henceforth termed the ‘WHAT-DMs’, have not yet been researched in earnest to date, hence the rationale of the present paper.

The large number of DMs in Thai developed from diverse sources. They carry a wide array of discourse functions, many of which depend on linguistic, paralinguistic, contextual, and situational determinants. These variables are particularly important because DMs are typically multifunctional (Jucker, 2002; Heine et al., 2021). Despite the plethora of Thai DMs and the richness of their functions, Thai DMs constitute a regrettably underexplored area in Thai discourse-pragmatics (exceptions include Vasavarnond, 1996; Angkapanichkit, 2012; Khammee et al., 2024). In particular, Angkapanichkit (2012) notes that one of the WHAT-questions, *àray-yàaη-nūi* ‘what’s like this?’, is used mostly by speakers in the 11-20 age group (although the study was published a decade ago), and carries the dual function of expressing the speaker’s attitude and signaling their identity.¹ To our knowledge, no other analyses of any WHAT-questions or, more importantly, WHAT-DMs have been attempted to date.

¹ Since *àray-yàaη-nūi* is an other-directed WHAT-question, it lies outside our present study. Stance-marking functions associated with other-directed WHAT-questions warrant future study.

The objectives of this paper are twofold: (i) to describe the functions of WHAT-DMs in Thai from grammaticalization and discourse-pragmatic perspectives, and (ii) to discuss relevant theoretical issues such as engagement-disengagement strategies in feigned questions, stance, and (inter)subjectivity. To fulfill these objectives, this paper is organized in the following manner: Section II provides a brief description of the research background and research methods; Section III describes some preliminary issues to facilitate the discussion; Section IV elaborates on the two major types of WHAT-questions, i.e., other-directed questions and WHAT-DMs from self-directed questions; Section V discusses a few theoretically important issues involved in the grammaticalization and functions of WHAT-DMs; and Section VI summarizes major findings and concludes the paper.

II. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

The theoretical framework for this study is grammaticalization theory as pioneered by Meillet (1912), and further elaborated and refined by Kuryłowicz (1975, 1965), Lehmann (2015, 1982), Heine et al. (1991), Hopper and Traugott (2003), among others. For analysis of grammaticalization of DMs and their intersubjective functions, works by Brinton (1996), Davidse et al. (2010 and works therein), Heine (2013), Rhee (2020a, b) and Heine et al. (2021), among others, have been referenced.

As alluded to above, DMs are functionally diverse and polyfunctional. Functional diversity and fluidity are such that it is not unusual to encounter a DM with apparently anomalous or even antonymous functions (Kim et al., 2021; Rhee & Koo, 2021). The diversity of functions is such that no finite inventory has been proposed. The difficulty lies in the variable granularity of analysis. A relatively well accepted list of functions provided by Brinton (1996, pp. 37-38) is as follows: (i) to initiate or close discourse, (ii) to aid floor management, (iii) to fill a gap, (iv) to mark boundaries, (v) to distinguish new and old information, (vi) to mark sequential dependence, (vii) to repair, (viii) to express a response or attitude, and (ix) to effect cooperation, sharing, or intimacy interpersonally. As shall be made clear in the following, the functions of WHAT-DMs mostly belong to (iii) filling a gap, (viii) expressing a response or attitude, and (ix) effecting interaction.

While the Thai WHAT-DMs have not yet been researched, studies in other languages have addressed comparable forms. For instance, an extensive crosslinguistic lexicon by Kuteva et al. (2019) states that an interrogative word placed at the right periphery develops into a DM to mark an appeal for agreement and solidarity, very much like a tag question, e.g., *what* in Singapore Colloquial English, *mwe* in Korean (both in Kuteva et al., 2018), *quoi* in Spoken French (Beeching, 2002), *enna* in Tamil, *eenti* Telugu (both in Lakshmi Bai, 1991), as well as *was* in Spoken German. The present authors, citing Kuteva et al. (2018), note that rhetorical questions of agreement may have comprised the intermediate stage of the development. Similarly, in his analysis of the Korean interrogative *mwe* ‘what’ and its formal and functional relatives that developed into DMs, Rhee (2016a) asserts that the development involved certain rhetorical strategies such as using questions to elicit attention rather than to solicit an answer. In the absence of research on Thai WHAT-DMs, this paper scrutinizes them in light of comparable forms reported in other languages.

The present research is a conceptual, descriptive analysis of linguistic data, involving no experimentation. The data have been collected from diverse sources, including online resources and contemporary corpora, notably the 33.4-million-word Thai National Corpus, an online searchable contemporary corpus (mostly 1988-2017) and the 163,639-word Thai Drama Corpus containing the scripts of 94 episodes from 14 highly popular TV dramas aired between 2005 and 2009, compiled by Kyungeun Park. The analysis largely is largely based on the native-speaker intuitions of the authors.

III. PRELIMINARIES TO THAI

A brief description of the Thai language, limiting the scope to topics relevant to the present research, will facilitate our discussion. Thai is spoken by 60.7 million speakers around the world (Ethnologue; Eberhard et al., 2022). Genealogically, Thai is a Kra-Dai language, also known as Kra-Kadai, and thus shares many features with its neighboring languages that descended from the common ancestor.

Typologically, Thai is a head-initial, prepositional, SVO word-order, tonal language with isolating/analytic morphology, thus least in degree of fusion, and least in the number of morphemes in a word (cf. Schwegler, 1990). From these typological features, Thai is expected to have the one-morpheme-one-word mapping tendency, whereby a single word is comprised of a single morpheme. It has been observed, however, that interlexical compacting leading to fusion or erosion is not uncommon. For instance, the Thai sentence-final particle *kh-ráp* used in polite male speech (see below) is historically a fusion of a two-verb sequence, *kh-ǎ* ‘v. beg’ and *ráp* ‘v. receive’, which is part of the humilific expression *kh-ǎ-ráp th-òot* ‘beg to receive punishment’ (Matisoff, 1991, pp. 443). Similarly, the DM of confirmation solicitation *ci-j pàaw* ‘True or not?’ contains the negative marker *pàaw* ‘not’, eroded from *plàw* ‘plain, nothing, no, not’ (also note the semantic change from ‘plain’ to ‘not’) (Khammee, 2024, pp. 948). Furthermore, Thai is known to utilize diverse particles or (near-)synonyms added to the core lexeme to create a rich repertoire of similar expressions (e.g., Rhee & Khammee, 2022 for allatives; Khammee & Rhee, 2022 for ‘face’ lexemes; Rhee & Khammee, 2024 for future-time references; Khammee & Rhee, 2025 for ablatives and allatives). Although the forms constituting the (near-)synonymous constructions generally do not undergo fusion, their interlexical cohesion is such that they are sufficiently ‘univerbated’ (Lehmann, 2015, 1982), if not yet fully ‘coalesced’ into a word (Haspelmath, 2011), and are indicative of their

grammaticalization. As shall be seen in Section 4, the Thai interrogative *àray* ‘what’ forms a large number of unverbated expressions carrying diverse textual and discursive functions.

In the domain of discourse-pragmatics, Thai is among the languages with highly ‘pragmatically-oriented grammars’ (cf. Enfield, 2009), often lacking morphological marking of grammatical relations, a type crosslinguistically of low proportion (cf. Iggesen, 2005, p. 206, 2008, pp. 246-257). Furthermore, it is a pro-drop language allowing, or even preferring, arguments to be omitted relatively freely when they are contextually or situationally inferable. Thus, transcripts of spoken data, lacking paralinguistic or suprasegmental cues, are often ambiguous with respect to the elided, implicit argument, which contrasts sharply the actual spoken discourse in the setting, where ambiguity scarcely exists. Another important aspect that bears particular relevance to the present study is that Thai is a highly politeness-minded language. For instance, the gendered particles (known as *hǎaŋ sǎaŋ*, lit. ‘tail of the sound’), *khà* for female speakers and *khǎp* for male speakers, function primarily to signal politeness during interlocution. The particle, however, does not surface in written language registers, being an interactional marker deployed only in contexts where the audience is in view, either physically or mentally (as in television shows, emails, text messages, etc.). However, it is not used in decree announcements or press releases (probably for the sake of objectivity of the content), or in formal addresses by social dignitaries such as monarchs, royal family members, etc. Traditionally, television news reports have not used the marker but more recently have been using it increasingly to add colloquial and friendly aspects.

For our purposes, a brief discussion of Thai interrogatives is in order. For polarity (yes-no) questions, Thai uses the question particle *mǎy* or *máy* that occurs sentence-finally (before the politeness particle, if present). For wh-questions, diverse interrogative pronouns and pro-adverbs are used, e.g., *àray* ‘what’, *kray* ‘who(m)’, *thǐi-nǎy* ‘where’, *mǎa-rày* ‘when’, *thammai* ‘why’, *yàaŋ-ray* ‘how’, *bèep nǎy* ‘how, what kind’, *bǔy-khêe-nǎy* ‘how often’, *nǎy* ‘which’, and *thaw-rày* ‘how much, how many’. Among these, *à-ray* ‘what’ has developed into various DMs, which the present research addresses. Wh-questions do not occur with the question particle *mǎy*, which is used only in polarity questions. Syntactically, Thai *wh*-questions do not require *wh*-movement and thus *wh*-words always occur in situ. Another peculiarity is that the interrogative *àray* is also used as an indefinite pronoun denoting ‘something’, a pattern observed elsewhere in Korean (*mwe* ‘what; something’, Rhee, 2016b, c), Chinese (*shénme* for ‘what’; ‘something’; ‘whatever’, Handian, n.d.), Dyirbal (*minyá* for ‘what’ and ‘something’, Haspelmath, 1997, p. 170; Rhee, 2019, p. 210), similar to English (*what* and *whatever*) and Japanese (*nani* ‘what’ and *nanika* ‘something’). Therefore, the Thai expression *àray-yàaŋjǐi* [something-like:this] ‘something like this’ does not function interrogatively but, rather, functions as a general extender akin to the English *something like that, and so on, and the like, stuff like that*, etc. (cf. Overstreet & Yule, 1997; Aijmer, 2002; Cheshire, 2007; among others), or more closely to *whatever, and what not, or what*, etc. involving WHAT interrogatives (Brinton, 2024). Similarly, the Thai expressions *máy-chây-àray* [not-correct-anything/something] and *máy-mii-àray* [not have anything/something] mean ‘(I) have nothing hidden’ and ‘(I) have nothing’, respectively. The former is typically used for apologizing for an unintended offense (as English *No offense intended*) and the latter is typically used when the speaker, on second thought, decides not to continue to talk about something he or she brought up just now (as in English *Oh, it’s nothing; Oh, never mind*, etc.).

IV. WHAT-QUESTIONS: FORMS AND FUNCTIONS

WHAT-questions in Thai are realized in a number of patterns for diverse functions. By virtue of being essentially questions, all forms can be used as other-directed questions, i.e., genuine interrogatives. A major division, however, can be drawn based on whether the form can be, or is generally, used as a self-directed question. Table 1 lists WHAT-questions that are sufficiently unverbated and thus considered to behave as formulaic units carrying textual and discursive functions.² The items in Table 1 are presented along with their source constructions and literal meanings. As indicated above, the elements recruited for creating constructions are typically particles, whose semantics are elusive and difficult to pinpoint. Thus, the literal meanings given in the table are not particularly informative, and it is beyond the scope of the current study to discuss their complexity. This section will instead focus on a brief description of the other-directed WHAT-questions (in IV-A), which will be followed by elaboration on the self-directed WHAT-questions with respect to their forms and functions (in IV-B & IV-C), which is the focus of the present study.³

² The word *ây* in (c) *ây-àray-à* originated from *ây*, a polyfunctional morpheme used to indicate [+male] for human or animal, a title used for addressing a social inferior, a prefix for male to show contempt or familiarity, and for emphasis often in conjunction with a negative word (e.g., fool, idiot, etc.).

³ Thai script does not practice interlexical spacing, and the use of punctuation is also limited. The present study uses interlexical spacing in gloss for visual perspicuity. As a typological characteristic of isolating languages, the basic Thai lexical units are lexemes (including words and particles), but also for the sake of visual clarity, unverbated forms are written with hyphens instead of spaces between them.

TABLE 1
WHAT-QUESTION FORMS IN THAI

Form	Source Construction	Literal Meaning	Other- or Self-directed
a. <i>àray</i>	what	'what is it?'	O/S
b. <i>àray-ná</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
c. <i>ày-àray-à</i>	2/3[male]-what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
d. <i>riak-wáa-àray-ná</i>	call-that-what-PTCL	'what do you call it?'	O/S
e. <i>khâw-riak-wáa-àray</i>	s/he-call-COMP-PTCL	'what does s/he call it?'	O/S
f. <i>àray-wá</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
g. <i>àray-wáa</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
h. <i>àray-kan</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
i. <i>àray-kan-nía</i>	what-PTCL-this:PTCL	'what is this really?'	O/S
j. <i>àray-nía</i>	what-this:PTCL	'what is this?'	O/S
k. <i>àray-iik</i>	what-more/again	'what again?'	O/S
l. <i>arai-iik-nía</i>	what-more/again	'what is more?'	O/S
m. <i>àray-à</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O/S
n. <i>àray-lǎw</i>	what-PTCL	'what is it?'	O
o. <i>àray-kan-nêe</i>	what-PTCL-real	'what is it really?'	O
p. <i>àray-yayyay</i>	what-how	'how come like this?'	O
q. <i>àray-yáay-níi</i>	what-like-this	'what is like this?'	O
r. <i>khuu-àray-ná</i>	that-what-PTCL	'what is that?'	O

As shown in Table 1, the two classes, i.e., other-directed questions and the questions that can be either other-directed or self-directed, do not carry distinctive morpho-syntactic characteristics that justify such uses. This strongly suggests that selectiveness in recruiting source lexemes for DM development may be arbitrary. In other words, certain constructions carrying the literal meaning of 'what is it?' become used in self-directed questions and develop into DMs of special, meta-textual function, whereas certain other constructions carrying the literally identical meaning of 'what is it?' continue to be used for their textual meaning. Of course, pragmatically, questions are not solely used to elicit informative responses, because locutions of questions can be used for a variety of illocution, as famously known with *Can you pass me the salt?* for a request, or *What time is it now?* for reproaching a tardy student, or *What are you talking about?* for reproaching someone for their nonsensical utterances.

A. Other-Directed Questions

WHAT-questions in Thai, like their counterparts in other languages, carry the primary function of posing a question with a focus on the identity of the entity concerned, when used as other-directed questions. At a more microscopic level, other-directed WHAT-questions have subtly different meanings from one another. The following constructed examples with (n) *àray-lǎw* and (r) *khuu-àray-ná* illustrate the point:

- (1) A: [I have good news.]
 B: *àray-lǎw?*
 what-PTCL
 'What is it?'
- (2) A: [We have a board meeting at 3 p.m. Thursday in the conference room.]
 B: *khuu-àray-ná?*
 that-what-PTCL
 'What is that?'

In (1), Speaker B uses *àray-lǎw?* 'what is it?' in response to A, who brought up a new topic. From a discourse-pragmatic point of view, the question *àray-lǎw?* is best translated as 'What is it? Tell me more about it', a common request for elaboration.⁴ On the other hand, the seemingly identical answer (from the English translations) *khuu-àray-ná* in (2) is best translated as 'What is it? Could you repeat it? I couldn't catch you', a common formula to request repetition.

The WHAT-question (p) in Table 1, *àray-yayyay?* [what-how] 'how come like this?' in other-directed usage is used to elicit more information regarding an event or situation unfolding in an unexpected way, as shown in the following constructed example:

- (3) A: [The police took three of us in custody after we had a brawl at the bar.]
 B: *àray-yayyay?*
 what-how
 'How come like this?'

Speaker B in (3), upon hearing about a surprising, unpleasant incident at a bar, is asking A with *àray-yayyay?* 'How come like this?' to inquire about how things went in such an unfortunate direction, an expression similar to the English 'How did it end up like this?' Unlike (n) in (1) above, *àray-lǎw*, which is used to request elaboration in general, (p) *àray-yayyay?* requests information regarding the why and how of events.

One crucial aspect of other-directed questions is that, since Thai is a highly pragmatic and politeness-minded language, when the addressee is a social superior, the speaker is required to add the politeness-marking sentence-final particle *khà*

⁴ The particle *-lǎw* (/lǎw/) in *àray-lǎw* originated from *rǐu* through a series of phonological changes /rǐu/ > /rǎw/ > /rǎw/ > /lǎw/. Since *rǐu* is a disjunctive conjunction denoting 'or' and is a common question-forming conjunction (cf. *Thai Royal Academy Dictionary*), *rǐu* suggests the presence of multiple options akin to the English sentence-final 'X or what?' as in 'Are you going or what?'

or *kháp* for female or male speakers, respectively. Absence of this particle in utterances by a socially inferior speaker toward a socially superior addressee may not make the sentence ungrammatical but, rather, pragmatically unacceptable. The final particle is such a robust diagnostic in determining interactivity that whether one can utter a particular WHAT-question without the particle in the context of speaking to a social superior is the primary means of determining whether it is an other-directed or a self-directed question.

B. WHAT-DMs From Self-Directed Questions

Table 1 shows that the majority of WHAT-questions are used as either other-directed or self-directed questions. While some of the other-directed questions may carry DM functions in addition to the interrogative function, they are primarily used for asking a question. (Their DM functions will be addressed in separate studies.) Our interest here is in the self-directed questions, i.e., WHAT-DMs, for their distinctive and intriguing discursive functions.

As briefly indicated above, WHAT-DMs in Thai, numbering thirteen as listed in Table 1 (from (a) through (m)), are variable in terms of their degree of formal ‘univerbation’ (Lehmann, 2015, 1982), discourse functions, and pragmatic salience. It is to be noted that all WHAT-DMs are full-fledged question sentences in form (note that argument deletion is not only common but also often preferred in Thai; see Section 3 above). This is an important characteristic because DMs across languages tend to develop from a unit smaller than a sentence, such as adverbials, prepositions, verbs, interjections, etc. (e.g., *actually, truly, like, say, oh*, etc.). Although there are longer units that are closer to sentences, most of them are fragments, i.e., defective sentences (e.g., *I mean, you know, guess what, you see*, etc.) typically lacking one or more arguments, and complete sentences are rather rare (e.g., *That’s OK!*; see, also some Korean DMs such as *eti poca* ‘Well, let’s see (it).’, Rhee, 2020b; *makilay* ‘(X) rashly says so.’, Rhee, 2013, etc.).

These WHAT-DMs have certain formal characteristics in common. For example, they are not used with an interactional particle such as *khá* (for females) and *kháp* (for males) (see (8) below where all sentences end with *kháp*, whereas the WHAT-DM does not); they carry non-interrogative intonational contours; and they may not accompany paralinguistic gestures (e.g., gaze, etc.) that typically occur with other-directed questions. It is interesting to note that most of them carry the other-engaging effect even when they are used with explicit signals of soliloquy, and that some of them carry strong emotional overtones, such as negative surprise and confusion, frustration and discontent, and disapproval and sarcasm, all closely related negative stances. The discursive functions of WHAT-DMs will be illustrated in the following section.

C. Functions of Self-Directed Questions

(a). Pause-Filler

Among the most common functions of WHAT-DMs is to fill a pause, in order to ‘keep the floor’ or maintain position as the focus of attention. In a continuous flow of speech production, speakers regularly pause during speech, primarily because of cognitive needs, such as taking time to consider the proper terms in which to express their ideas, and because of interactional needs, such as purposefully indicating reluctance to readily produce speech because it may threaten the face of the interlocutor, the latter case often being a strategically manipulated pause. Whatever the motivation, a speaker tends to fill pauses in order to avoid losing the floor, to avoid awkward discontinuance of speech, or to delay the production of speech. The following WHAT-DMs are commonly deployed to fill pauses.

(4) Pause-filling WHAT-DMs

(a) *àray-ná*; (b) *ày-àray-à*; (c) *àray-à*; (d) *ríak wâa àray ná*; (e) *khăw-ríak-wâa-àray*

Among the WHAT-DMs carrying the pause-filling function, *àray-ná* is the most frequently used in contemporary Thai, and is illustrated in (5):

(5) *săw aathít thîi phàan maa chán duu năj ... àray-ná*

Saturday Sunday that PASS COMP 1SG watch movie ... DM

ŏɔ! The Glory năj kawlii

Oh! [title] movie Korean

‘Over the weekend, I watched the movie... DM (= what is it?)... ‘The Glory’, the K-drama.’ (TNC)

In (5), the speaker uses the DM *àray-ná*, seemingly as a *bona fide* question, not to ask the interlocutor (note that there is no clue at all for the addressee about the title of the movie the speaker watched), but to earn time to recall the title. An additional discursive effect is that the DM generally carries a strong engaging effect on the addressee, despite that they are aware that the question is not intended to solicit an answer from them (see V-B below for more discussion). The use of the pause-filler *àray-ná* is currently a trendy speech style for younger generations in Thailand. The following is another excerpt of *àray-ná*, used to fill a pause, while the speaker is trying to recall the topic of a talk.

In this context of discussing the pause-filling function of WHAT-DMs, one interesting function is notable, i.e., the place-holder function. Some interrogatives are known to develop into place-holders, widely known examples being *what-d’you-call-it* (Enfield, 2003), and *whatchamacallit* (< *what you may call it*) (Rhee, 2019, p. 210), etc. *The Cambridge English Dictionary* (online, 2024) lists the following example for *whatchamacallit*:

(6) *I need a – a whatchamacallit – one of those things that you can caramelize sugar with.*

Evidently, *whatchamacallit* cannot be an other-directed question as it has been fully lexicalized as a noun, and it serves the function of a noun occupying a noun slot syntactically. Similar instances have been reported in various languages, such as in Korean, e.g., *mwenka* ‘what is it?’, *nwukwunka* ‘who is it?’, *etinka* ‘where is it?’, etc., each fully lexicalized as

the noun ‘something’, ‘someone’, and ‘somewhere’, respectively (Rhee, 2019), in English, e.g., *whatsit* (Palacios Martinez & Núñez Perejo, 2015), and in Cantonese, e.g., *mat*, *matje*, *meje*, and *me*, Yap et al. (2011). In Thai, a similar case is observable with the WHAT-DM *àray-nîa* ‘what is it?’, which carries the place-holder (PH) function, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

(7) (Berm is a golf-course attendant and is helping two golfers, Phayon and Minister Manop. In order to distract Minister Manop, Berm says to himself loud enough to be heard something that may implicate Minister Manop while he is making a swing, and disconcerted, he makes a bad swing.)

Berm: [Tukta is such a flirt. I don’t know whom she’s pregnant with. If I find out who is messing with my wife, I’m going to cut...cut it (his body-part) off!]

Manop: (makes a bad swing)

Phayon: *hâa hâa thân Manoppen àray-nîa háə*
 ha ha 2SG:HON [name]be PH DM

woŋ lùt krà-than-hǎn yàaŋ nîi
 swing be.off suddenly like this

‘Haha, Minister Manop is PH (= what is it?) You suddenly seem so distracted.’ (2007 Drama, *Aphi Mahuema Maha Setthi* Episode #3)

The excerpt is from a scene in a drama in which two VIPs are playing golf. When the minister makes a bad swing, which is unusual for a highly competent golfer, his golf buddy makes a ridiculing remark. As is obvious from the syntactic structure, the WHAT-question *àray-nîa* occupies the syntactic slot of a noun phrase as the subject complement in [Manop is X]. The place-holder denotes ‘someone who did something of a surprising nature’, which triggers a question ‘what is it?’. Since the WHAT-question *àray-nîa* has been lexicalized as a noun in this function, the directedness, either other-directed or self-directed, has become less relevant. Furthermore, the place-holder, as the name suggests, occupies a specific syntactic slot (i.e., a noun phrase), whereas pause-fillers may occur at any juncture, as necessitated by the speaker, occupying a non-argument slot. Thus, although the two functions may appear superficially similar in that they both fill a slot, their grammatical statuses are quite different: one fills a pause, and the other fills an empty argument position. The place-holder function is observable only with *àray-nîa* among the WHAT-DMs.

(b). Surprise

Another notable function of WHAT-DMs is to mark negative surprise. The interrogative ‘what’ is fundamentally necessitated by the cognitive state of broken equilibrium by a lack of information, and it can be said that it has a natural tendency to develop into a surprise marker. Upon encountering unanticipated information, one is likely to utter ‘what?’ to request elaboration (other-directed) or ‘what!’ to express surprise (self-directed), and the distinction is often fuzzy. The surprise signaled by WHAT-DMs is generally negative in nature, and tends to imply discontent or disapproval as a consequence (see below). This function is carried by the following WHAT-DMs:

(8) WHAT-DMs of surprise

(a) *àray-wáa*; (b) *àray-wá*; (c) *àray-nîa*

The following is an example of *àray-wáa*, taken from a post on the SNS gateway X.

(9) *dìit cháa rǎu àray-wáa!*

flick tea or DM

‘Wired because of tea or DM (what is it?)’

[I feel like today shouldn’t end yet. I’m not even sleepy and still want to do other things. Things that don’t involve getting up, such as laundry or ironing on the weekends. Ugh, such a fuss!] (@SlowlistzZpy, X December 20, 2024)

The above excerpt is a post on X, showing that the poster, strangely unable to go to sleep, is wondering if that is due to the caffeine in the tea he drank earlier. The poster is puzzled by the unusual state, and says, in effect, ‘Why can’t I sleep? Am I alert because of the tea or what?’ This is reminiscent of the English sentence-final DM *or what?!* (Kuteva et al., 2018), Korean ‘general extenders’ (Kim, 2020), and ‘disjunctive general extenders’ (Overstreet, 1999). The circularity of the Thai WHAT-DM *àray-wáa* as a marker of surprise is such that it even appears as the title of a newspaper article (*Daily News*, <https://www.dailynews.co.th/news/47488/>).

(c). Frustration and Discontent

Still another function, closely related to surprise-marking shown above, is that of marking frustration and discontent. This is among the most frequently attested emotional functions for WHAT-DMs. The WHAT-DMs that carry this function are listed in (15):

(10) WHAT-DMs of frustration and discontent

(a) *àray-kan*; (b) *àray-kan-nîa*; (c) *àray-nîa*; (d) *àray-ìik*; (e) *àray-ìik-nîa*

The following excerpt involves the WHAT-DM *àray-kan-nîa*, which is often used when the speaker feels frustrated or discontented by someone’s utterance or by the situation. It is spoken with paralinguistic and prosodic monologual cues, thus a natural show of one’s negative emotion without notable intention to direct it to a discourse participant. The following example exemplifies the usage:

- (11) (Minister Manop, intending to push his plan of opening a golf resort, wants to use Phayon, an agricultural dealer, to put farmers in a financially difficult condition so that they will sell their land at a cheap price, and is discussing the plan with Phayon at a golf course. Berm, a part-time worker, overhears and asks the minister.)

Berm: [Uh, sir, the place you're talking about, where exactly is that?]

Manop: [Well, it's around Dong... Wait! What does it have to do with you?]

àray-kan-nîa nîi mayday maa khêe aathût diaw eej
 DM DM cannot come just week one only
 thammay pen yàaŋ nîi pay dâay
 why be like this go can
 léew khêet-dîi phûuyîŋ pay năy kan-mòt
 DM caddy female go where all

'DM (= What is it!). Now, I didn't come here for only about a week. But why is everything like this? Where did all the female caddies go?' (2007 Drama, *Aphi Mahuema Maha Setthi* Episode #3)

The excerpt involves *àray-kan-nîa*, which the speaker uses to express his displeasure about a part-time employee asking him about a secret, wicked plan. Its contextual interpretation may be similar to the English expletives, *what the h***!* or *what the f***!*. In the scene, the speaker is not directing the DM at Berm, but he simply blurts out his discontent. That he was not demanding an answer about Berm's intention in asking is obvious in that the discontent DM is immediately followed by another DM *nîi*, of which the primary function is to mark change of topic. His displeasure is carried over to the new topic, i.e., an undesirable change in the resort management's new policy of having no female caddies.

Similarly, the WHAT-DM *àray-iik-nîa* is also commonly used as a marker of frustration and discontent. The following is a constructed example (the naturalness of which has been confirmed by multiple native speakers, including the author), which is often heard in a similar situation:

- (12) (Brother and Sister just completed a call, in which Brother wanted his sister to help him. Sister is overwhelmed with problems both at home and at work, and speaks to herself.)

Sister: *àray-iik-nîa* chǎn cà mây wǎy léew ná
 DM I will not capable PST PTCL
 thammay panhǎa man cháaŋ mâak-maay lǎa-kəən
 why problem it quite many very

'What more could happen? I can't take it anymore. Why are there so many problems?' (Present-Day Thai, constructed)

Among the five WHAT-DMs of frustration and discontent listed in (10), *àray-iik* and *àray-iik-nîa* carry stronger emotional overtones compared to the others. This difference seems to come from the semantics of the participating lexeme, e.g., *iik*, meaning 'again, more', the inclusion of which implies that the speaker has already been feeling frustrated and discontented, and the new development, which triggers the speaker's utterance of the DM, has added displeasure. However, since the string has been fully unverbated as a single unit, Thai speakers understand the meaning intuitively instead of parsing the meaning of each DM analytically.

(d). Disapproval and Sarcasm

The final function of WHAT-DMs is to signal disapproval and even sarcasm in certain contexts. This function is largely carried by the simplest WHAT-DM, *àray* (note that *àray* can be a full-fledged sentence with implicit arguments), as exemplified in (13):

- (13) (A group of people are conspiring to hurt Phiangphen's step-mother, masterminded by Phiangphen. The attempts fail, and the step-mother's sister senses that Phiangphen is the instigator but feigns ignorance and casually reveals her plan of placing a curse using black magic.)

Worakarn: [Aon (= Aon-Aen), huh... it means she must be suspicious of us.]

Aon-Aen: [Oh... so that means she's smart, huh?]

Phiangphen: *chalàat* *bâa-bɔɔ* *àray* *sàttruu* *man* *kɔɔ* *mii*
 smart crazy DM enemy it dm have
 tɛe *phûak-raw* *cà* *sǔŋsǎy* *khon* *hɛn* *dâay* *yanŋay*
 just 3PL will suspect person other canhow

'Smart? (Aren't you) crazy! DM (= No, what's so smart about it!) Her ('its' is used pejoratively) enemies are only us. How could she suspect others?' (Drama 2006, *Khing Ko Ra Kha Ko Raeng* Episode #9)

In the excerpt, the criminals are afraid of the black magic, and discuss how the victim's sister would discern that they were the aggressors. To Aon-Aen's statement that the target's sister must be smart if she could figure out who was responsible for the attempts, Phiangphen responds with the WHAT-DM *àray* to express his disapproval about the assessment, because they themselves are the only obvious suspects among everyone she might know. The disapproval function is simply close to the response token 'No!' but, interestingly enough, this response is not directed at the previous speaker but, rather, is self-directed, signaling a strong, negative emotional attitude, similar to lamenting.

(e). Summary of Functions

The exposition of the various functions of the WHAT-DMs in the foregoing section can be summarized in Table 2, which shows that nearly half of them carry the function of filling a pause, and that the second most frequently encoded function is to mark frustration and discontent. Since the surprise signaled by WHAT-DMs tends to be negative (see IV-C-(b)), as are frustration and disapproval, the functions of WHAT-DMs can be categorized into two major classes: (i) pause-filling and (ii) negative-stance marking.⁵

TABLE 2
WHAT-DMs AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

Form	Pause-filling	Surprise	Frustration	Disapproval
a. <i>àray</i>				√
b. <i>àray-ná</i>	√			
c. <i>ày-àray-à</i>	√			
d. <i>riak-wáa-àray-ná</i>	√			
e. <i>khǎw-riak-wáa-àray</i>	√			
f. <i>àray-wá</i>		√		
g. <i>àray-wáa</i>		√		
h. <i>àray-kan</i>			√	
i. <i>àray-kan-nía</i>			√	
j. <i>àray-nía</i>	√	√	√	
k. <i>àray-iik</i>			√	
l. <i>arai-iik-nía</i>			√	
m. <i>àray-à</i>	√			

V. DISCUSSION

The development of the WHAT-DMs exemplified above, all commonly involving *àray* ‘what’ in their source constructions, reveals intriguing cognitive and discursive strategies. In the following, we will discuss grammaticalization, engagement-disengagement strategy in feigned questions, and stance and intersubjectification, in turn.

A. Grammaticalization

Thai WHAT-DMs have been grammaticalized from various constructions, sharing the interrogative lexeme *àray* in their source constructions. A brief discussion of their grammaticalization patterns is in order in view of widely accepted mechanisms and parameters, i.e., desemanticization, extension, decategorialization, and erosion (Kuteva et al., 2019).

Desemanticization refers to loss of meaning, and is commonly known by its figurative label ‘semantic bleaching’. Desemanticization is generally applicable to content words, whose meaning can be subjected to generalization through frequent use, but some studies (e.g., Rhee & Kuteva, in press) suggest that desemanticization may be applicable to grammatical functions, such as interrogatives, which may be bleached to indeterminacy and uncertainty. This claim is pertinent to the development of WHAT-DMs insofar as the interrogative meaning associated with *àray* ‘what’ is nearly completely bleached when WHAT-DMs function as pause-fillers and markers of surprise, frustration, and disapproval.

Extension, also known as context generalization, refers to the use of a form in new contexts. This applies to WHAT-DMs in that the newly created DMs carry metatextual or procedural meanings. But if we consider that the source constructions are invariably full-fledged sentences, then it is difficult to ascertain whether or not the development of WHAT-DMs involved extension, which is largely in the domain of morpho-syntax. In other words, positioning of a sentence in its entirety is an issue of discourse organization, not of morphosyntactic structure. This is among the numerous instances of grammaticalization that involves multiple lexemes in the source construction (Rhee & Kuteva, in press).

Decategorialization refers to the loss in morphosyntactic properties that are characteristic of lexical or less grammaticalized forms. This parameter is also difficult to ascertain because the source forms are constructions (or sentences) involving multiple lexemes, not a single lexeme. If the attention is restricted to the core lexeme, i.e., the interrogative pronoun *àray* ‘what’, since the WHAT-DMs are morphosyntactically identical to their source forms (i.e., interrogative sentences), decategorialization is not observable.

The final parameter is erosion, or phonetic reduction, i.e., loss of phonetic substance. Like extension and decategorialization, erosion is also unobservable. Furthermore, if the first form was *àray*, and other more complex forms were created from it, either by recruiting more linguistic materials or by co-opting more complex interrogative sentences for similar functions, the development of WHAT-DMs in Thai can be said to have occurred in the reverse direction, a pattern observed with ablatives and allatives in Thai (Khammee & Rhee, in press).

A survey of grammaticalization of WHAT-DMs, though necessarily cursory, reveals that only the parameter of desemanticization is observable in their grammaticalization scenarios and that extension and decategorialization cannot be examined being beyond the scope of morphosyntax, while erosion is plainly violated through phonetic reinforcement, the reversal of the common directionality.

B. Feigned Questions

⁵ Multifunctionality is a commonly observed aspect of DMs (Brinton, 1996; Heine et al., 2021), and, as an anonymous reviewer points out, identifying the specific function of a DM use crucially depends on the context in which it occurs (see also Rhee & Koo, 2021). Elaboration on the relation between individual DM functions and their contexts cannot be pursued here for space limitation and should await future microscopic research.

The functions of WHAT-DMs elucidated in the preceding exposition can largely be classified into two major categories: (i) operators of floor and interlocutor management (pause-filling and (dis)engagement), and (ii) stance marking (surprise, frustration, and disapproval). We now discuss these two issues in turn.

Discourse participants feign diverse linguistic elements as part of their discourse strategy, which often contributes to the emergence of diverse grammatical forms such as false promises, fake quotations, feigned questions, feigned interaction, disguised monologue, etc. ('linguistic bad guys', Rhee, 2019, p. 202; see also Rhee, 2016a, b, 2020a, b; Koo, 2015). The development of WHAT-DMs constitutes a good example of feigned questions.

This phenomenon is well illustrated with pause-fillers. For instance, we have seen in (5) that the WHAT-DM *àray-ná* is commonly used in discourse when the speaker encounters difficulty finding a word. In this example, the speaker is searching her mind for the title of the movie that she watched over the weekend. When the title does not come to mind immediately, she fills the pause with *àray-ná* while she tries to remember. This pause-filler is important for the discourse because, without it, the interlocutor might think that the utterance already produced, i.e., "Over the weekend, I watched the movie", is a complete utterance with which the speaker has concluded her turn. Thus, in order to preempt the interlocutor's taking the floor, a pause-filler is deployed. As we have seen, the DM *àray-ná* is a question 'what is it?' in appearance, but it is a self-directed question rather than an other-directed one, hence, a feigned question. This type of soliloquy question seems to be widely used across languages, as has been discussed with the notion of 'polyphonic self' (Hermans, 1996), or dialogue between the 'speaking self' and the 'thinking self' (Koo & Rhee, 2019).

An interesting aspect of the feigned question used as pause-filler is that it is an interrogative speech act in form, not another speech act, for example, statements like 'I am thinking' or 'I haven't finished', or imperatives like 'just a moment', 'do not speak yet', etc. The characteristic of an interrogative speech act is that it is highly impositive and potentially face-threatening. Thus, an interrogative speech act alerts and engages the interlocutor. Using questions to engage the audience is among the more widely used speech skills, and this rhetorical effect has led some questions to grammaticalization of (micro-)topic markers (Rhee, 2014). However, equally important is the fact that the questions used as pause-filling WHAT-DMs do not carry the characteristic properties of genuine questions, such as question intonation, gaze, etc. In writing, these questions are normally punctuated with an exclamation mark instead of a question mark. Most remarkably, they are not marked with an interactional politeness particle even when the speaker is addressing their social superior. The absence of these properties immediately signals that what is said, while it is a question in appearance, is in fact not a question directed at the interlocutor. In other words, this type of question does not carry illocutionary force. In discourse, this characteristic has the disengaging effect. The discourse strategy of simultaneously employing two opposite strategies creates an intricate balance of interlocutor management, many examples of which have been grammaticalized in Korean (see Rhee, 2014, 2016; Koo & Rhee, 2013). It is noteworthy in this context that in the reported cases of feigned soliloquy grammaticalizing into sentence-final particles of discontent, the speakers make sure to utter the soliloquy with sufficient audibility for the interlocutor (Koo & Rhee, 2013). Clearly, a delicate interplay of engaging and disengaging strategies with feigned questions for interlocutor management operates behind the grammaticalization of WHAT-DMs.

C. Stance and (inter)Subjectivity

The second issue relates to stance marking of WHAT-DMs, with their functions of marking surprise, frustration, and disapproval. An upsurge of interest in stance has been witnessed in research in recent years (White, 2003; Englebretson, 2007 and works therein; Yap & Chor, 2014; Iwasaki & Yap, 2015; Yap et al., 2023; among many others). As Englebretson (2007, p. 1) notes, the term 'stance' is not a monolithic concept and has been discussed using various names, including positioning, footing, alignment, perspective, etc.

Stance is fundamentally interactional (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1992, 2004), and is often conceptualized as inseparable from intersubjectivity (Traugott & Dasher, 2002), i.e., expression of awareness of the addressee's attitude and beliefs. In this light, stance and intersubjectivity constitute important elements of interpersonal pragmatics. For instance, Rhee (2016a, p. 51) notes that intersubjectivity is prominent with stance-marking functions, since employment of stance presupposes the presence of discourse partners, be they real or imagined. According to the model of the stance triangle (Du Bois, 2007), stance involves the interrelated dimensions of objective, subjective, and intersubjective orientations (pp. 140-141). The relation (alignment) between one actor's (or subject's) subjectivity and another's is intersubjectivity, and the relation (positioning) between an actor (or subject) and an object (propositional content) is subjectivity. Hence, there exist intertwined relations among subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and stance.

The surprise-marking function is primarily a subjective one that involves the subject's evaluation of the object and consequent positioning (see also Khammee et al., 2024); similarly, the function of marking frustration and discontent is also subjective. On the other hand, the disapproval-marking function is primarily an intersubjective function, involving disalignment between the interlocutors ('subject₁' and 'subject₂' in Du Bois's model). Although subjectivity and intersubjectivity may seem discrete, actual application to the exemplars can be complicated, and the boundary between them may be vague. For instance, a surprise of negative nature is directly related to discontent or frustration, and when the emotion caused by the evaluation of the object (largely propositional content) is projected to its author (typically the interlocutor), the attitude toward the object and the attitude toward the interlocutor become merged and indistinguishable. The difficulty is often further complicated with a fine-grained approach to analysis. Detailed complications notwithstanding, subjective and intersubjective orientations of linguistic expressions are important elements of interpersonality and interactivity in language use, especially in DM uses.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have addressed a number of DMs based on *àray* ‘what’ (WHAT-DMs). These DMs take the form of self-directed questions (soliloquy) lacking linguistic and paralinguistic features that are observable in other-directed questions. Their development into pause-filling WHAT-DMs is the result of managing the speaker’s turn and of a delicate combination of engagement and disengagement strategies for manipulating the interlocutor. In addition, WHAT-DMs’ functions of marking surprise, frustration, and discontent are subjective by virtue of involving the subject (stance-taker) and the object (proposition), whereas the function of marking disapproval and sarcasm is intersubjective by virtue of involving two subjects (two stance-takers who are interlocutors).

A review of the grammaticalization scenarios of WHAT-DMs in view of the grammaticalization parameters and principles proposed by Kuteva et al. (2019), i.e., desemanticization, extension, decategorialization, and erosion, shows that WHAT-DMs do not, or only weakly, exhibit such phenomena, or, due to the poly-lexemic nature of the source constructions, compliance with those parameters could not be ascertained.

The grammaticalization patterns of WHAT-DMs in Thai, from feigned soliloquy to DMs, are not isolated examples. Similar patterns and strategies have been reported in Korean, with rhetorical questions and feigned soliloquies. Further studies in other languages are warranted for a fuller understanding of the role of feigned soliloquy or soliloquy in general in grammaticalization.

APPENDIX

DM: discourse marker; HON: honorific; NOMZ: nominalizer; PH: place-holder; PST: past; PTCL: particle; SG: singular

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