Où en est tu? : A cross-linguistic approach to Quebec French polar interrogatives

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Introduction  Object of curiosity for both linguists and non-linguists, the Quebec French (QF) interrogative particle *tu* shows some peculiar syntactic properties, compared to interrogative particles in other languages on the one hand, such as its position within the clause, and compared to complex inversion in Standard French (SF) on the other hand, such as its incompatibility with negation. I propose an analysis where *tu* heads a hybrid projection at the CP/IP boundary, where it encodes a polarity feature.

Data  While interrogative particles are generally clause-initial or clause-final (see Ultan 1978, Dryer 2005), *tu* is post-verbal (1a). It is also restricted to root contexts (1b).

(1) a. Julie aime *-tu* les chats?  
   Julie likes Q the cats  
   'Does Julie like cats?'  
   b. *Je me demande si Julie aime *-tu* les chats.  
   I myself ask if Julie likes Q the cats  
   'I wonder if Julie likes cats.'

As shown in (2a), QF *tu* is incompatible with negation, unlike SF complex inversion (2b), from which it originates (see e.g. Morin 1985, Picard 1992, Roberts 1993, Vinet 2001).

(2) a. *Julie aime *-tu* pas les chats?  
   Julie NEG likes Q she NEG the cats  
   'Does Julie not like cats?'  
   b. Julie *n'* aime *-t* -elle pas les chats?  
   Julie NEG likes Q she NEG the cats  
   'Does Julie not like cats?'

The particle *tu* is not always incompatible with *pas*, however. Exclamatives such as (3a) are more easily accepted, and utterances such as (3b), where *tu pas* expresses surprise, are quite common.

(3) a. C' est *-tu pas* effrayant!  
   it is Q NEG scary  
   'It's terrible, isn't it!'  
   b. Pis là, je le vois *-tu pas* arriver.  
   and then I him see Q NEG arrive  
   'And then, surprisingly, I see him arrive.'

Analysis  The data above presents us with two puzzles: (i) Is *tu* a C° element, since it is limited to root clauses, or an I° element, since it is post-verbal while the subject must precede the verb? (ii) Why is *tu* incompatible with negation in questions, but not in exclamatives?

(i) Previous accounts have placed *tu* in C° (Vinet 2001, Morin 2009), whereas others have placed it in I° (Noonan 1992, Rowlett 2007, Elsig 2009). I propose that *tu* heads a projection with both C° and I° features, inspired by Giorgi & Pianesi’s 1997 Mood/Agr projection which was proposed to account for complementiser deletion in Italian. While Mood/AgrP can have either an Agr specifier for speakers who accept preverbal subject or a complementiser specifier for those who do not, I propose that the C/I projection headed by *tu* always has an I specifier, which hosts the subject.

(ii) Building on work by Vinet 2001, 2004, I propose that the sequence *tu pas* in exclamatives is actually a single element ‘tupas’, possibly the result of a reanalysis from *tu pas*, or *ti pas* as in voilà-*ti* pas in (4a) below (example from Gadet 1992:83, cited in Vinet 2001:63; my translation; on how *ti* became *tu*, see Picard 1991). As this reanalysis took place, I propose (a) that the combination of *tu* and *pas* specialised as an exclamative marker (‘tupas’), and (b) that interrogative *tu* consequently acquired a [-Neg] polarity feature and is thus excluded from negative questions. This predicts that negative questions without *tu* should be grammatical, a prediction which is borne out (4b).

(4) a. Voilà *-ti* pas qu' on s'arrête même à Epinay!  
   there Q NEG that we stop even in Epinay  
   'Now we even stop in Epinay!'  
   b. Julie aime *pas* les chats?  
   Julie likes NEG the cats  
   'Does Julie not like cats?'

Conclusion  The proposed analysis in (i) reconciles the two conflicting views with respect to the syntactic position of *tu*, and the one in (ii) predicts that incompatibility between an interrogative marker and negation lies in the featural content of the interrogative marker.
References