Turn-final \textit{eða} (‘or’) in spoken Icelandic

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1 Introduction

The Icelandic conjunction \textit{eða} corresponds to English \textit{or} and Swedish \textit{eller}. The coordinating function of \textit{eða} is probably the only one used in formal language, and hence the only one that is accounted for in textbooks and reference grammars. But \textit{eða} also has a different function as a part of a question form in informal spoken Icelandic. In talk-in-interaction \textit{eða} seems to be used by the speaker and received by his interlocutor as a token of a turn unit coming to an end and therefore a perfect place for speaker change. The present paper introduces initial observations of this phenomenon.\footnote{A shorter version of this paper was originally read at the International Conference on Conversation Analysis in Helsinki in May 2006 (ICCA 2006). I would like to thank Jan Lindström for insightful comments on the first draft of the paper. Special thanks are due also to Dagmar Barth-Weingarten, a member of the audience at ICCA, for helpful comments and fruitful discussion via e-mail on the topic of the paper.}

The turn-final \textit{eða} must be investigated in informal language; that is, mundane conversations between relatives or friends.\footnote{The absence of \textit{eða}-constructions in formal language / written language has not been confirmed by a survey; what is said about it here is only based on intuition.} The data I draw upon in this paper are from the ISTAL corpus of spoken Icelandic, consisting of informal conversations between adult native speakers, in same-gender and mixed-gender groups of three or four, in their homes or their workplaces. From ISTAL I collected 26 examples of \textit{eða}-ending questions that I use as a basis for my survey. My collection consists solely of questions followed by a speaker change; i.e., instances where the recipient seems to interpret \textit{eða} as an invitation to take the floor. However, in Section 4.3, I mention utterances other than questions where \textit{eða} occurs in turn-final position prior to speaker change.
The paper is organized as follows: First I look at different examples of eða questions and discuss the design of the utterances and their uptake and function in the dialogue. Second, I approach the following question: Should eða be looked at as a constitutive component of the preceding turn, a turn in its own right, or as a tag, an addition after the turn has been completed? Finally, the interactive role of the eða-ending utterances is scrutinised and compared to the Swedish eller.

2 Design and uptake of turn-final eða

Of the 26 examples in my collection, 16 are typical yes/no questions, nine are questions formed as declarative sentences ending with eða, and one is a tag question where eða is in the turn-final position, after the tag. Example (1) shows a typical yes/no question:

(1) ONLY SPIDERS (ISTAL: 07-230-02)

01 → A: já (.) er tu svolitið illa við þetta eða, 
        yes (.) are you a bit scared of it or, 
        'yes, are you a bit scared of it or'

02 → B: nei ekki járnsmiði
        no not ground beetles 
        'no, not ground beetles'

03 → A: bara kónuglær
        only spiders 
        'only spiders'

04 B: já
     yes 
     'yes'

In (1), A asks B if he is afraid of a certain type of bug. He uses a yes/no-question ending with eða and his utterance is recognized by B as a fully fledged question, judged by his answer: no, not ground beetles. This is the most common form of the eða-inquiry in my data.
The other question type is where the utterances are not syntactically formed as questions but nonetheless function as such. In (2), A’s utterance in line 4 is a continuation of a question asked in line 2 – he is asking for further information:

(2) PEOPLE LIKE HER (ISTAL 04-730-08)

01 B: eða hún vinnur bara á kvöldin held ég
   or she works only in the evenings think I
   ‘or, I think she only works in the evenings’

02 A: nú er hún þá bara að klippa svona, (1.4)
   well is she just cutting hair like, (1.4)
   ‘well, is she just cutting hair’

03 B: bara já (0.2)
   just yes (0.2)
   ‘yes’

04 → A: heima hjá sér eð[a ],
   at home or,
   ‘at home or’

05 B: [já] (0.8)
   yes (0.8)
   ‘yes’

06 B: já eins inná inná H [staðarnafn]sko;
   yes also at at H [a place name] sko;³
   ‘yes, and also at H’

07 A: nú jæja (.) já ((geispar)) það er ekki amalegt að hafa
   well well (.) yes ((yawns)) it is not bad to have
   ‘well, it is good to have’

08 svona fólk í ættinni
   people like her in the family
   ‘people like her in the family’

³ Sko is an Icelandic discourse particle that functions in various ways, depending on its position; it is used initially, in a medium position, and in the final position at the end of the utterances (see Hilmisdóttir 1999).
It is noticeable that in Examples (1) and (2) the questions would be fully fledged without the use of eða; in this context, eða seems to be redundant as a question marker.

In my data all the eða-ending questions result in a speaker change. Most often this occurs immediately after eða, but sometimes there is a short period of simultaneous talk where the participants seem to ‘read’ the dialogue in different ways. Occasionally we find a delay in the uptake after eða resulting in a short silence before the next speaker starts his turn, and sometimes it looks as though the speaker gives a twofold signal of an upcoming speaker change; then eða is accompanied by short laughter as a further token of an utterance coming to an end (Lerner 1996:259).

At first sight and from the viewpoint of standard grammar, the utterances ending with eða could be considered grammatically incomplete with a dangling conjunction at the end, but a closer look shows that they seem to be complete turns in their own right. Both the frequency of the phenomenon and the natural and effortless uptake of it in the dialogue show that the eða-ending utterances are received as complete turns by the listener and, in fact, eða seems to be accepted as an invitation to take the floor.

But why does the speaker choose to end his utterance with this non-connecting connective? One possible explanation is that A uses the eða-constructions to prompt B to carry on; i.e., to complete the utterance, to add a ‘missing’ latter part of it. Conjunctions are sometimes used as stand-alone connectives that work as a turn-continuation prompt (Lerner 2004:152). Among items used to prompt a type-specific extension of the prior speaker’s turn is or, the English counterpart of the Icelandic eða. The nature of these prompting devices is shown below in (3), where and is used for that purpose (from Lerner 2004:164–165):

(3)
01 Mary: ...Guess what happened yesterday
02 Alan: What,
03           (0.3)
04 Mary: I talked t’To:ny:.
05           (0.2)
Needless to say, the turn-final *eða* does not possess the prompting nature of connectives shown in (3). By ending an utterance with *eða*, the speaker is not looking for a certain type of extension; he merely seems willing to give the floor to his interlocutor. We take up this point in Section 4 below.

3 The building blocks and boundaries of the conversational turn

3.1 The TCU and the *eða*-constructions

It is a constant source of amazement for those investigating dialogues how well participants manage to follow the rule of “one party talks at a time” and to coordinate transitions, despite varying length and arrangement of turns. It is obvious that they depend on some system, “some formal apparatus which itself is context-free, in such way that it can... be sensitive to and exhibit its sensitivity to various parameters of social reality in a local context” (Sacks et al. 1974:699–700). The turn-constructional unit (TCU) is such an apparatus. Even though participants use different resources to control the turns of a dialogue, the TCUs are the most important ones. The units can vary in length, and the unit types include sentential, clausal, phrasal and lexical constructions (see Sacks et al. 1974:702). All the units allow a projection; that is, the participants in the dialogue know what is needed to complete a certain type of utterance (*op.cit.*:701–703). By projecting what it takes to complete a turn, the ‘listener’ can estimate when he is supposed to join in or give feedback if he chooses to do so. Sacks *et al.* emphasise the importance of investigating how exactly this projection of unit-types is accomplished, and they leave this question to the linguists to answer (*op.cit.*:722). It is noteworthy that Sacks *et al.* do not mention other types of TCUs than syntactic ones; hence they give more weight to syntax than to other features such as into-

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4 An inverted question mark (¿) is used to indicate a rise stronger than a comma shows but weaker than usually designated by a question mark (see Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson 1996:463).
nation and pragmatics, which recent research has shown to play an important role in achieving smooth turn transfer (Ford and Thompson 1996:171).

The most detailed investigation on the turn and its building blocks is probably Schegloff’s (1996). On the one hand, he deals with the organization of the habitat of TCUs – i.e., the conversational turn – and on the other hand, he looks into the characteristics of the grammar from which the respective TCUs are built (Schegloff 1996:56). He claims that analyses of TCUs can lead to different results from syntactic ones (p. 59): “It appears that there are analytic results to be achieved by examining the talk by reference to the unit ‘TCU’ which are not available by reference to ‘sentences’ or ‘clauses’” (p. 60). This is of importance when analysing the eða-constructions that are inexplicable from the syntactic viewpoint alone (see Section 3.2 below).

It is not an easy task to recognize a stream of talk as a TCU and decide where it starts and where it ends (Schegloff 1996:73). A TCU, like any other component of conversation, must have a beginning and must somehow be completed. Sometimes TCUs have an obvious completion, and sometimes the completion is not easily recognizable. It is necessary to realize that any given utterance in a dialogue goes through three phases: from being a next turn, through being a current turn, and to the ultimate phase of being a prior turn (p. 97). Therefore it is of importance in dealing with TCUs to look at relations to both what has preceded and also what can be projected by the talk under scrutiny (p. 81).

As is mentioned above, the eða-construction is neither a grammatical sentence nor a clause in the traditional understanding of these terms. The questions are: How is the turn-final eða connected to what precedes, and what would be the most plausible categorization of the phenomenon? There are several possibilities: (i) eða could be the first component of a new TCU that is never completed; (ii) we can consider eða in this position a TCU in its own right; i.e., a lexical one-word unit; (iii) we can consider eða as an additional component of the preceding turn unit; i.e., as an increment within the same unit; or, (iv) we can look at eða as a valid constituency of the host turn unit.

Here the first three options are rejected. The first one lacks the projectability that Sacks et al. seem to consider a primary feature of the TCU. In the eða-constructions, it is not possible to guess what it takes to complete the utterance, a word, a phrase, a clause or a sentence. The second option is not plausible, both
because a single-word unit is most likely to occur at the beginning of a clause and because *eða* often follows a valid question and questions are usually placed at the end of the turn (Schegloff 1996:63). The third option is rejected here, mostly because *eða* shows no sign of being a tag after the main clause. My material does not support this explanation; furthermore, neither the speaker himself nor the recipient shows any evidence of its being so. The speaker never pauses, laughs, or gives any other signals of an upcoming speaker change before *eða* in the *eða*-questions – the right place to utter these signals seems to be after *eða*. The recipient, on the other hand, never tries to take the floor before *eða* – again, the appropriate place is after *eða*.

This leaves only the fourth explanation – namely, that *eða* is the last constitutional part of the preceding TCU – and this is the one I opt for. My reasons for this conclusion are included in what I have said above on the other three options and are judged by how the *eða*-ending utterances are delivered by the speaker and how they are received by the listener. The speaker produces his *eða*-utterances without inserting any post-completion stance-markers, such as laugh tokens and pauses, between *eða* and the preceding stretch of talk (see Schegloff 1996:92); the listener responds to the *eða*-constructions as whole TCUs without any attempts either to give feedback or to take the floor until after the turn-final *eða*.

### 3.2 Syntax, pragmatics and intonation

The question of how participants in a dialogue know that *eða* marks the end of a turn remains unanswered. From the viewpoint of standard grammar, *eða*-constructions are syntactically incomplete, but nonetheless they function as complete TCUs. Syntax is just one of the three factors that are characteristic of TCUs, the others being pragmatic and intonational factors. All three work at the same time, but in order to deal with every one of these factors it is necessary to explore them separately, even though such separation is not real to the participants of the dialogue. Only by exploring the role of syntax, intonation and pragmatics, respectively, in the construction of the TCUs, is it possible to determine the relevance of each of the three factors in defining and marking transition relevance places (TRPs). In the present paper – following the example of Ford and Thompson (1996) – an utterance is judged as syntactically complete if it can be interpreted as a complete clause without considering the other two factors (*op.cit.*:143). To ex-
plore the role of intonation in completing TCUs, the distinction between ‘final’ and ‘non-final’ contour is used, and finally, in order to explore the pragmatic features, I judge an utterance to be pragmatically complete if it has the property of not projecting anything beyond itself (op.cit.:151).5

In (4) below, A and B are discussing what kind of food is normally served at confirmation parties at the present time; i.e. whether it is more fashionable to invite guests to coffee and cakes in the afternoon or to a dinner party. A asks a simple question (wh-question) “what do people serve,” and before B can answer, A replies herself and brings up the two options that B’s response could possibly include; “dinner” and “coffee” – both phrases ending with eða. By this A changes a wh-question to a yes/no-question ending with eða.

(4) DINNER OR COFFEE OR? (ISTAL 04-730-07)

01 → A: hvað er fólk méð/;> mat/ eða;> [kaffi ] / eða;> /what do people have/;> dinner/or;> coffee /or;>
‘what do people serve, dinner or coffee’

02 → B: [nei ]
no
‘no’

5 I do not differentiate between global and local pragmatic completion – neither do I use intonation to decide where an utterance is pragmatically complete.

6 The punctuation marks are not used grammatically, only to indicate intonation. The period indicates a falling intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence; a semicolon is used here to indicate a falling contour but not as low as that indicated with a period (see Steensig 2001:35); a question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question; and a comma normally indicates “continuing” intonation (see Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson 1996:462) but in the present paper it is also used to indicate a slightly falling intonation. The / indicates syntactic completion, and the > sign indicates a pragmatic completion point.

7 In Icelandic, the intonation contour differs from English; the “level” intonation that usually signals continuation in English can signal questions in Icelandic. It has been suggested that yes/no-questions end with a low contour, but the contour of wh-questions in Icelandic can vary from low to high (see Árnason 2005:476–477). My intuition is that the contour of the eða-utterances is somewhere between a ‘level’ intonation and a falling one (perhaps between the comma and the semicolon) and should be interpreted as a final contour for this type of a question.
In (4) we find three syntactic completion points, three pragmatic ones, and three intonational units. In one instance we have a complex transition relevance place (CTRP) where all three completion points coincide. In the other cases the syntactic points are different from the pragmatic and intonational ones which, on the other hand, coincide. The first syntactic completion point is after, hvað er fólk með (‘what do people serve’), a complete wh-question ending in a contour that signals finality in this question type, designated by a comma. This is the place where we find the one CTRP in the example. The two remaining syntactic completion points are after mat (‘dinner’) and kaffi (‘coffee’). The two remaining completion points, both of which are pragmatic as well as intonational completion points, are both after eða (‘or’).

If we look at the eða-questions in Example (5) (where syntactic, pragmatic and intonational completion points have been added to the eða-ending turns of Examples (1) and (2) above), the picture becomes clearer:

(5)

a. (1) já (.) ertu svolitið illa við þetta / eða,>
   yes(.) are you a bit scared of it / or,>

b. (2) heima hjá sér / eða,>
   at her home / or,>

If we look at the intermediate state between a high contour and a falling intonation (these intermediate stages designated with ; or ,) as ‘final’ in the eða-constructions, a pattern emerges from Examples (4), (5a) and (5b); intonational and pragmatic completion points coincide but the syntactic ones are ignored.

In the eða-questions, it seems to be the combination of intonational and pragmatic cues that lead the participants of the dialogue to the conclusion that a
TCU is coming to an end – they even seem to be able to project an *eða*-construction underway.

### 3.3 Boundary shifting

The speaker change in the *eða*-constructions occurs when a turn is intonationally and pragmatically complete, but, judged from mainstream syntax, syntactically incomplete. This contrasts with the most frequent pattern in the survey of Ford and Thompson (1996). Their findings reveal that 71% of speaker changes occur at CTRPs, the ultimate place for a speaker change, where syntactic, pragmatic and intonational completion points coincide (156). Their findings also show that intonational completions are almost always syntactic completions as well (98.8%), but the reverse is not true; only 53.6% of syntactic completion points coincide with intonation completion points (155). The *eða*-constructions are among the almost 50% in which these two completion points do not coincide. What happens in the *eða*-questions is that *eða* seems to integrate with the preceding clause. This kind of integration has been referred to as *boundary shifting* (Barth-Weingarten 2006). Boundary shiftings are defined by the fact that the prosodic boundary occurs one word after the syntactic one. In Examples (1)–(5) above, the turn-final *eða* and the preceding word have integrated so well that sometimes they could be perceived as one word.

As is shown above, *eða*, as the final token in an utterance, functions as a turn-exit device. The change of the behaviour of the connective *eða* and its interactional role in its turn final position are worth exploring. This leads us to Section 4, where these topics are addressed.

### 4 The interactive role of *eða*

#### 4.1 To what interactional end?

The departure from the standard grammatical form in the *eða*-constructions must convey some meaning (see Lindström 1999:54 on *eller* in Swedish), and when we find speaker change at non-CTRPs we can conclude that the transition place has been chosen in the service of interaction (see Ford and Thompson 1996:159). One question remains unanswered, even though it has been touched upon in the
preceding sections: Why does the speaker choose this question form – to what interactional end does he do so?

The most prominent role of the eða-questions seems to be related to preference structure. By asking with eða, the speaker gives his recipient an opportunity to give an answer that is semantically opposite to the opinion that the speaker holds himself; the structure facilitates a non-aligning, and therefore a non-preferred, answer (Hutchby and Wooffitt 2003:43–47; Steensig 2001:43). The most basic semantic role of a coordinator is to express the logical relation of the two items it joins; either as a conjunction, like and, or as a logical disjunction, like eða (Huddleston 1988:194 and 195). If there is a trace of eða’s original role as a disjunctive in the eða-questions, one of the possible functions of the question-type could be to divert the meaning of the preceding utterance and give the recipient an opportunity to utter a non-aligning answer.

Another thing that I noticed about the eða-questions was that 12 out of the 26 questions are follow-up questions after the first question has been answered. Example (6) shows an example of this:

(6) PEOPLE LIKE HER (ISTAL 04-730-08)

01 B: eða hún vinnur bara á kvöldin held ég
‘or she works only in the evenings think I’

02 → A: nú er hún þá bara að klippa svona, (1.4)
‘well is she just cutting hair like, (1.4)’

03 B: bara já (0.2)
‘just yes’

04 → A: heima hjá sér eð[a ],
‘at home or’

05 B: [já] (0.8)
‘yes’
In (6), A asks a yes/no-question in line 2, to which B responds in line 3. In line 4, A asks for further information (or tries to keep the conversation going). Here the eða-question is used to pursue a certain line in the talk and is based on the speaker’s inference from the previous context. This could be one of the roles of the eða-questions. However, it should be emphasised here that my data sample is quite small and therefore the frequency of this phenomenon could be somewhat out of proportion.

### 4.2 Not only questions

In my data collection there are 26 eða-enquiries, and my focus has been on them in the present paper. But there are other interesting examples that I would like to explore further. These are utterances other than questions with turn-final eða, to which both or all the participants in the dialogue show sensitivity. Judging by a short pause after the speaker has uttered eða, as if to prompt a speaker change or the giving of feedback, and also by obvious attempts from the listener to claim the floor after eða, they both seem to look at this place as a perfect TRP. Sometimes these attempts result in a speaker change; sometimes not. In (7) below, A is quoting his ‘inner talk’. He is describing a situation in which he had found himself and how scared he was at that time. His questions in lines 2 and 3 are not directed to anybody; nonetheless, B seems to see eða as an invitation to join in. As a further cue of an upcoming turn completion, A laughs (line 3):

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8 Sko is an Icelandic discourse particle that functions in various ways, depending on its position; it is used initially, in a medium position, and in the final position at the end of the utterances (see Hilmisdóttir 1999).
As is shown in (8), the speaker does not have to give a twofold sign of an upcoming completion point. The participants are talking about some prejudice against people from the East Coast of Iceland, and according to A in line 4, they never get good jobs on the ships run by a company on the North Coast:
Here B responds to A’s words with nú, a newsmark that B uses to show that he has gained some new information from A’s utterance, something he did not know beforehand.

In this example, eða seems to be used as a response elicitor, and it could be seen as an indication that a grammaticalization process is going on. The changes would affect the behaviour of the former connectives and could result in eða ignoring boundaries they respected before. It would also change the interactional role of eða in the way we already have accounted for in the paper.

4.3 Icelandic eða and Swedish eller

Nothing has been written on eða’s role as a final item of a question; reference books, textbooks, dictionaries and articles do not mention this interactional role

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9 The process could be similar to what is described in Mulder and Thompson (forthc.) for turn-final but in English, but that needs to be explored for eða.
of *eða* at all (Guðfinnsson 1958:88; Smári 1987 [1920]:196; Rögnvaldsson 1981; Árnason 1983:26; Práinsson 1995:274–275). This function has therefore never been brought to light before.

The use of *eller* in turn-final position in Swedish has been analysed by Anna Lindström (1999). She found that the Swedish *eller* in this position is produced as a constitutive component of its host TCU and is used to mark problems in talk-in-interaction. She shows in her analysis that the *eller*-ending turns are produced and received as coherent units of action (Lindström 1999:103).

This usage of connectives, comparable to Icelandic *eða* and Swedish *eller*, is by no means limited to these languages. Anna Lindström (1999) mentions examples from Japanese, Finnish, and American English, which show parallel constructions with a function similar to *eða* / *eller* in the conversational modes of these languages.

When it comes to interpreting the interactional role, the Swedish *eller*-question shows a similar pattern to the Icelandic *eða*-construction. In Swedish it is used to relax “the preference structure of the turn to facilitate a non-aligning response”, and by that it “reveals a speaker anticipation of recipient resistance to the project the or-inquiry otherwise engages in” (Lindström 1999:77). In other words, the *eller*-construction is used to allow for a *no*-type response (103).

My conclusion is that the Icelandic *eða*-inquiry also seems to be related to preference structure. First, it seems to be used to allow for a non-aligning answer and, in that way, prepare for a non-preferred action. Second, it also seems to be used to facilitate the seeking of further information because many of the *eða*-constructions in my collection are used right after the first question was answered (ex. 6). As we have seen, turn-final *eða* may further be used as a discourse marker in declarative sentences (ex. 8). My observations are however based on a small set of data and should therefore be viewed as only indicative of possible changes in the use of *eða*. 

5 Concluding remarks

By ending utterances with eða, the speaker departs from the standard grammatical form. This he must do in favour of the interaction. The eða-questions seem to be designed to mark a completion of a turn and therefore a TRP; that is the way they are treated in the dialogue.

Based on my small data collection, I argue that turn-final eða was used in three different ways: (i) in questions, to serve the preference structure and allow for a non-aligning answer; (ii) in follow-up questions where a topic is pursued and inference made on the ground of the prior context; and (iii) as a general response-seeking marker, not necessarily in a question.

In one of these roles, i.e., in (i), we can see a trace of eða’s origin as a connective: as an interactional device, it still diverts the meaning of what has been said before and prepares for an answer contradictory to what seems to be the speaker’s understanding. These ‘new’ roles of eða could be due to a grammaticalization in process, a change in the behavioural pattern of eða and in its role in interaction. The focus in the present paper is on questions, but there is evidence of the use of eða in turn-final position in declarative sentences where the participants in the dialogue treat it as a valid sign of turn completion. This is certainly something that should be explored further. It may also prove valuable to examine the behaviour of other connectives, such as og (e. ‘and’) and en (e. ‘but’), and attempt to discern whether they have undergone similar changes.

The literature on Icelandic grammar does not include thorough descriptions of the function of connectives; such descriptions are, in fact, extremely meagre. My small-scale study has shown that turn-final eða has an interactive role that has never been accounted for in reference books and that traditional syntax could probably not address. We have seen that, even though syntax plays an important role when it comes to projecting completion points, intonation contours do not necessarily coincide with the syntactic pattern. I assume that we would discern other interesting interactional patterns if we examined the ways in which other connectives are used in talk-in-interaction (see Turk 2004 on ‘and’).

I do not consider all questions about the eða-constructions answered. In particular, I think intonation is worth exploring further. The listener seems to be able to follow the projection of an upcoming eða-question, and the projection is presumably guided by the intonation pattern of the entire utterance. Therefore it would be relevant to explore the intonational pattern of the eða-constructions and
compare it both to simple yes/no-questions and to constructions where eða is used as a connective. Another field worth exploring is whether these constructions of turn-final eða are a product of grammaticalization. If so, it would be interesting to find out how the change occurred, through what stages it went and, of course, whether more connectives are involved in similar processes of change.

References


