On the Characterization of the Cree Question Particle

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This paper addresses the status of the Cree question particle based on evidence from Eastern Swampy Cree.¹

Direct yes-no questions of Cree are marked by a particle, na or ci depending on the dialect,² which displays a clitic-like dependence on contrastively focused material. The particle must immediately follow a sentence-initial constituent which is contrastively focused. This ordering is illustrated in (1a-b), where contrastive focus is marked by small caps in the idiomatic gloss.

(1) a. awāšiša na ki-wāpamēw?
   children(3’) QU-PRT PERF-see(VTA 3-3’ INDEP)
   ‘Did he see the CHILDREN?’

   b. ki-wāpamēw na awāšiša?
   PERF-see(VTA 3-3’ INDEP) QU-PRT children(3’)
   ‘Did he SEE the children?’

Furthermore, the particle is restricted with regard to the phonological size of the focused constituent it follows. It must follow a focused constituent that is composed of a single phonological word, as in (2a). If the focused constituent is composed of several words as in (2b), ungrammaticality arises.³

(2) a. misiwē nā ki-wāpamēw mōswa?
   all QU-PRT PERF-see(VTA 3-3’ INDEP) moose(3’)
   ‘Did he see ALL the moose?’

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1. I would like to thank Anna Bella Goulet and Helen Rodrique for sharing their knowledge of Eastern Swampy Cree. Many thanks also to Greg Spence – Collaborator on the project under which this research was carried out – for his insightful comments, and to the Mushkegowuk Council for their help and support. This research was supported by SSHRCC grant 410-01-1164.

2. The question particle na also lends itself to a distinct usage (which is not addressed in this paper) as a sentence-final question tag.

3. Ungrammatical examples are marked by an asterisk.

b. *misiwê möswa nâ kî-wâpamew?
   all moose(3') QU-PRT PERF-see(VTA 3-3' INDEP)

The paper argues that the explanation for these properties lies with the status of *nâ, a question morpheme that occurs, not as the head of an independent functional category, but rather as an enclitic particle that adjoins to focused constituents. The evidence for this analysis begins with the particle’s semantic association with focus.

THE PARTICLE’S SEMANTIC ASSOCIATION WITH FOCUS

The direct yes-no question particle *nâ associates semantically with constituents that are contrastively focused. The particle is understood to question only the focused expression immediately preceding it, while other material in the sentence is presupposed. This effect is known as a ‘bound focus’ reading, meaning that the particle qualifies, or ‘binds,’ the focused constituent to the exclusion of other material in the sentence. To illustrate the effect, consider the example pair in (3). In example (3a) the sentence questions only the focused expression ‘soon’ and presupposes that there was an ‘arriving’ event. Similarly, in (3b) the sentence questions only the focused expression ‘arrive’ while the rest of the sentence is presupposed.

(3) a. wîpac nâ ta-takošin Paula? 6
   soon QU-PRT FUT-arrive(VAI 3 INDEP) Paula
   ‘Is Paula COMING soon?’

b. ta-takošin nâ wîpac Paula?
   FUT-arrive(VAI 3 INDEP) QU-PRT soon Paula
   ‘Is Paula COMING soon?’

This obligatory semantic association with focused material provides evidence for characterizing *nâ as belonging to the semantic class of ‘focusing particles,’ focus-sensitive expressions which must be construed with focused material, giving rise to bound focus readings. 7

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4. The relevant notion of focus, here and throughout the paper, is that of contrastive focus, where a constituent is understood to be singled out in contrast to a larger implied set of elements or properties.

5. Similarly, Ahenakew (1987:141) describes Plains Cree *cî as a question particle that “... always comes directly after the word about which the question is being asked.” A similar point is made in Reinholtz & Wolfart 1996, 2001.

6. Focus is indicated by small caps in the idiomatic gloss.
The next step in the presentation of evidence concerns the particle's structural association with focus.

**The particle's structural association with focus**

In addition to its semantic association with focused material, the question particle displays a structural association with focus. At issue here is the need for *nā* to follow a focused constituent, a property that stands in need of explanation since the presence of focused material is not generally required in Cree sentences. We review first some facts concerning focus in Cree, and consider next the need for *nā* to follow a focused constituent.

*Focus is generally optional in Cree*

In Cree focus is generally optional, and furthermore subject to two conditions. First, focused constituents must appear sentence-initially, preceding all other material in the clause. Second, focused constituents must also have semantic content, typically quantificational or deictic, that promotes a contrastive focus reading. The two conditions are illustrated in (4a,b) below, which also highlight the optionality of focus. The sentence in (4a) shows a so-called discontinuous NP resulting from focus movement, a highly productive phenomenon in Cree. The nominal quantifier *misiwē* 'all' has moved out of a containing DP into sentence-initial focus position, where it receives a contrastive focus reading. The quantifier thus meets both the positional and the content related condition on focus. It is important that focus is optional, meaning that sentences need not contain any focused material. This is illustrated in example (4b), which contains no focused material. The sentence given here shows unmarked or neutral word order, which in Cree is VOS, and illustrates two points. First, the nominal modifier *misiwē* 'all' cannot be understood as contrastively focused. This illustrates the ordering condition: only sentence-initial con-

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8. The only exception to this sentence-initial ordering is that focused expressions can be preceded by complementizer expressions; see also Reinholz & Wolfart 2001.


10. In examples with non-verbal predicates, the unmarked word order is predicate-initial. (Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.)
stituents can be focused. Second, the sentence-initial verb cannot be understood as contrastively focused. This illustrates the content related condition on focus: focused constituents must have semantic content that promotes a contrastive focus reading.

(4) a. *misiwê*; *ki-wâpamêw* [DP t$_1$ moswa].
   all PERF-see(VTA 3-3' INDEP) moose(3')
   'He saw ALL the moose.'

b. *ki-wâpamêw* [DP *misiwê* moswa].
   PERF-see(VTA 3-3' INDEP) all moose(3')
   'He saw all the moose.'

Following Reinholtz & Wolfart 2001 we assume that there is a structural difference between sentence-initial constituents with and without a focus interpretation. Those with a focus interpretation appear in the specifier of a Focus Phrase (FocusP). Those without a focus interpretation appear lower down in the clause, here identified as IP.

(5) FocusP
    QP Focus'
    \[\begin{array}{c}
    misiwê
    \end{array}\]
    Focus
    IP
    \[\begin{array}{c}
    wâpamêw
    \end{array}\]
    [DP t$_1$ mòswa].
    PERF-see(VTA 3-3' INDEP) moose(3')
    'He saw ALL the moose.'

Focused constituents, then, are optional, but must appear in sentence-initial focus position and have quantificational or deictic content that readily affords a focus interpretation. Direct yes-no questions with *nâ*, to which we return now, present a striking exception in that they must contain focus material.

*Focus is obligatory in questions with nâ*

Direct yes-no questions with *nâ* must contain a sentence-initial, focused constituent which the particle immediately follows, as in (6a). If the particle is placed sentence initially, without a preceding focused expression as
in (6b), ungrammaticality arises. Similarly the particle cannot occur after an expression that is not focused, as in (6c).

(6) a. \textit{ki-itohtew nà Greg pihtapêkohk?}  
\textit{PERF-go(VAl 3 INDEP) QU-PRT Greg Fort Albany}  
‘Did Greg GO to Fort Albany?’

b. *\textit{nà ki-itohtew Greg pihtapêkohk?}  
\textit{QU-PRT PERF-go(VAl 3 INDEP) Greg Fort Albany}

c. *\textit{ki-itohtew Greg nà pihtapêkohk?}  
\textit{PERF-go(VAl 3 INDEP) Greg QU-PRT Fort Albany}

Evidence that \textit{nà} must immediately follow a focused constituent also comes from the particle’s effect on expressions which otherwise occur sentence-initially without getting a focus interpretation. Such expressions become focused when followed by \textit{nà}. Verbs, for example, regularly appear sentence-initially without being focused. When they are followed by \textit{nà}, however, they become focused.

(7) a. \textit{ki-pâhpiw Peter.}  
\textit{PERF-laugh(VAI 3 INDEP) Peter.}  
‘Peter laughed.’

b. \textit{ki-pâhpiw nà Peter?}  
\textit{PERF-laugh(VAI 3 INDEP) QU-PRT Peter}  
‘Did Peter LAUGH?’

Similarly, indefinite nouns and many adverbs, for example \textit{âšay} ‘already’, often occur sentence-initially without therefore being focused.\(^\text{11}\) They become focused however, when they are followed by \textit{nà}.

(8) a. \textit{ki-pâskiswêw niskawa.}  
\textit{PERF-shoot(VTA 3-3’ INDEP) goose(3’)}  
‘He shot a goose.’

b. \textit{niskawa nà ki-pâskiswêw?}  
\textit{goose(3’) QU-PRT PERF-shoot(VTA 3-3’ INDEP)}  
‘Did he shoot a GOOSE?’

(9) a. \textit{âšay ki-wanawîw.}  
\textit{already PERF-go.out(VAI 3 INDEP)}  
‘He already went out.’  

\(^{11}\) Indefinite nouns are often preferred pre-verbally. In sentences without other pre-verbal material, this may coincide with a sentence-initial position.
b. ášay nā kâ-wanawīw?
already QU-PRT PERF-go.out(VAI 3 INDEP)
‘Did he already go out?’

The direct yes-no question particle, then, must have a sentence-initial focused constituent which it immediately follows. Moreover, this is a special property that requires explanation since focused constituents are generally optional in Cree.

A survey of matrix and embedded yes-no questions shows that this property is directly linked to the question particle nā, and not a general property of questions. Matrix yes-no questions can be formed using intonation alone. When this happens, the initial expression is no longer automatically focused.

\[(10)\]  
\[ki-itohtēw?\]
PERF-leave(VAI 3 INDEP)
‘He left?’

Embedded yes-no questions, to which we turn now, do not contain the question particle nā, which is reserved for matrix yes-no questions. Instead they are marked by dubitative verb inflection and, optionally, by the question complementizer kišāspin ‘if’. Neither of these require the presence of focused material. When the question complementizer kišāspin ‘if’ is employed, it appears clause-initially, and it is not accompanied by a focused constituent. This is illustrated in (11a). Similarly, when a yes-no question is marked by dubitative verb inflection alone, as in (11lb,c), there is no accompanying focused constituent.

\[(11)\] a. \[ki-kakwêcihkêmowak kišâspin métawêhkâminikwê Bob-a.\]
PERF-ask(VAI 3p INDEP) if snore (VAI 3’ CONJ DUB) Bob (3’)
‘They asked if Bob was snoring.’

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12. The direct yes-no question particle is ungrammatical in embedded yes-no questions, as in the (b) and (c) examples below. Note that, while the (c) example was rejected as “bad,” sentences where an initial matrix verb is questioned by nā and then followed by an embedded clause do occur. However, they only occur as matrix yes-no questions, not as embedded yes-no questions.

a. \[nki-kakwêcimâw ášay kâ-ki-itohtënîkwê.\]
PERF-ask(VTA 1-3 INDEP) already SUB-go(VAI 3 CONJ DUB)
‘I asked if he had left.’

b. \[*nki-kakwêcimâw ášay nâ kâ-ki-itohtënîkwê.\]

c. \[*nki-kakwêcimâw nâ ášay kâ-ki-itohtënîkwê.\]
b. *ki-kwécíhkémowak métawéhkwáminikwé Bob-a.*
   \[
   \text{PERF-ask(VAl 3p INDEP) if snore(VAl 3' CONJ DUB) Bob(3')}
   \]
   ‘They asked if Bob was snoring.’

c. *nikkwécimik [kimowaniníkwé].*
   \[
   \text{ask(VTA 3-1 INDEP) rain(VII 0 CONJ DUB)}
   \]
   ‘She asked me if it was raining.’

These examples show that the need for a focused expression immediately before *ná* is linked to the question particle itself, and is not an independent property of yes-no questions.

**Proposal**

The point established by the preceding subsections is that focused material is not generally required in either statements or yes-no questions of Cree. We must therefore conclude that the requirement for focused material to be present immediately before *ná* arises for reasons which relate to the question particle itself.

We propose that this requirement arises owing to the structural status of *ná*, a question particle that occurs, not as the head of an independent functional category, but rather as an enclitic particle that must adjoin to the right of a focused constituent. This explains the specialized ordering that characterizes direct yes-no questions with *ná*. Focused constituents appear in the structural focus position in [Spec, FocusP] where they precede all other material in the clause. Since the question particle adjoins to the right of a focused constituent, it necessarily appears in ‘second’ position, immediately following the focused constituent to which it adjoins.

(12) \[
\text{FocusP} \\
\text{DP } \text{Focus’} \\
\text{DP QU-PRT Focus IP} \\
\text{niskawa} \quad \text{ná} \quad \text{ki-påskiswèw.} \\
\text{goose(3')} \quad \text{PERF-shoot(VTA 3-3' INDEP)}
\]

‘Did he shoot a GOOSE?’

We further propose that *ná* has clitic properties which preclude adjunction to constituents larger than a single phonological word. This explains why
nā must follow a focused expression that consists of a single phonological word, as in (13). Here nā is adjoined to a constituent which corresponds to a single phonological word (WD).

(13)  
\[
\text{FocusP} \\
\text{QP} \quad \text{Focus'} \\
[\text{WD QP}] \quad \text{QU-PRT} \quad \text{Focus} \quad \text{IP} \\
\text{misiwē}_i \quad \text{nā} \quad \text{ki-wâpamēw} \quad [\text{DP t}_i \text{moswa}] \\
\text{all} \quad \text{PERF-see(VTA 3-3' INDEP) moose(3')}
\]

'Did he see ALL the moose?'

When nā follows a focused constituent consisting of several phonological words, for example misiwē mōswa 'all the moose', the sentence is ambiguous between two structures, both of which are ungrammatical. Adjunction to the entire focused constituent, as in (14a), is ruled out because it entails adjunction to a constituent which corresponds to a phonological phrase (PHR) rather than a phonological word.

(14) a.  
\[
\text{FocusP} \\
\text{DP} \quad \text{Focus'} \\
[\text{PHR DP}] \quad \text{QU-PRT} \quad \text{Focus} \quad \text{IP} \\
*misiwē \text{ mōswa} \quad \text{nā} \quad \text{ki-wâpamēw} \\
\text{all moose(3')} \quad \text{PERF-see(VAI 3-3' INDEP)}
\]

b.  
\[
\text{FocusP} \\
\text{DP} \quad \text{Focus'} \\
\text{Spec} \quad \text{NP} \quad \text{Focus} \quad \text{IP} \\
*misiwē \quad [\text{WD NP}] \quad \text{QU-PRT} \quad \text{ki-wâpamēw} \\
\text{all} \quad \text{mōswa} \quad \text{nā} \quad \text{PERF-see(VAI 3-3' INDEP)}
\]
Adjunction to the last word of the focused constituent meets the phonological restriction but is ungrammatical for reasons of scope. The question particle must adjoin to a focused constituent, and in (14b) the focused constituent is not *misiwe* ‘all’, but rather its containing phrase *misiwe móswa* ‘all the moose’.

The account presented above follows the treatment of emphatic *ani* in Reinholtz & Wolfart 2001, suggesting that the two are comparable in status. Supporting evidence for this treatment comes from the parallel behaviour of the question particle *ná* and emphatic *ani*.

THE PARALLEL BEHAVIOUR OF THE QUESTION PARTICLE *ná* AND EMPHATIC *ani*

The question particle *ná* is not alone in showing a clitic-like dependence on contrastively focused material. It shares this property with the emphatic particle *ani* addressed in Reinholtz & Wolfart 2001. Likely a historical development from the earlier form *ani* of *anima*, the inanimate proximate singular demonstrative, *ani* now occurs only as an emphatic particle that associates with focused material.

Semantically, the emphatic particle *ani* parallels the question particle *ná* in that it is a focusing particle, a focus-sensitive expression which exclusively qualifies a focused constituent it immediately follows.

(15) a. *tāšinē ani ninikamon.*
   always PRT sing(VAl 1 INDEP)
   ‘I’m ALWAYS singing.’

b. *ninikamon ani tāšinē.*
   sing(VAl 1 INDEP) PRT always
   ‘I’m always SINGING.’

Structurally, emphatic *ani* also parallels the question particle in that it must adjoin to the right of a focused constituent. Given that focused expressions only occur in the sentence-initial focus position, *ani* is subject to ordering restrictions which parallel those illustrated for the question particle in (6) above. Thus emphatic *ani* cannot occur sentence-initially, without a preceding focused expression as shown in (16b), nor can it be placed after an expression that is not focused, as in (16c).

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ON THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CREE QUESTION PARTICLE

(16) a.  *otākosihk ani kiskinohámâképan.
   yesterday PRT teach(VAI 3 INDEP PRET)
   ‘YESTERDAY she was teaching.’

b.  *ani otākosihk kiskinohámâképan.
   PRT yesterday teach(VAI 3 INDEP PRET)

c.  *otākosihk kiskinohámâképan ani.
   yesterday teach(VAI 3 INDEP PRET) PRT

The particle’s structural dependence on focused expressions is also reflected in its effect on constituents for which sentence initial placement is otherwise neutral. Once again, this parallels the effect of the question particle, illustrated in (7)-(9) above. Verbs regularly appear sentence-initially without therefore being focused, but when they are followed by ani they necessarily receive a focus interpretation.

(17) a.  *petowēšin awēnīhkân wanawītimihk.
   walk(VAI 3 INDEP) someone outside
   ‘Someone is walking outside.’

b.  *petowēšin ani awēnīhkân wanawītimihk.
   walk(VAI 3 INDEP) PRT someone outside
   ‘Someone is WALKING outside.’

In a similar vein, indefinite nouns and adverbs such as āšay ‘already’ often occur sentence-initially without being focused, but are necessarily focused when followed by the emphatic particle ani.

(18) a.  awēnihkən ihtāw wanawītimihk.
   someone(3) BE(VAI 3 INDEP) outside
   ‘There is someone outside.’

b.  awēnihkən ani ihtāw wanawītimihk.
   someone(3) PRT be(VAI 3 INDEP) outside.
   ‘There is SOMEONE outside.’

(19) a.  āšay ki-wanawīw.
   already PERF-go.out(VAI 3 INDEP)
   ‘She already went out.’

b.  āšay ani ki-wanawīw.
   already PRT PERF-go.out(VAI 3 INDEP)
   ‘She ALREADY went out.’

Finally, the emphatic particle ani also parallels the question particle in having clitic properties which preclude adjunction to constituents.
larger than a phonological word. Thus we get a contrast between sentences like (20a), which is natural and well-formed, and the ungrammatical sentence in (20b), where nā appears after a focused constituent that is composed of several words.

(20) a. *mihcēt ani ki-nikamowak awāšišak.
   many PRT PERF-sing(VAl 3P INDEP) children(3P)
   'MANY of the children were singing.'

   b. *mihcēt awāšišak ani ki-nikamowak.
      many children(3P) PRT PERF-sing(VAl 3P INDEP)

The emphatic particle ani, then, displays properties which are strikingly parallel to those of the question particle nā. This provides support for a unified treatment along the lines proposed for ani in Reinholtz & Wolfart 2001. As focus-sensitive or ‘focusing’ particles, nā and ani both associate semantically with focused material. Being right-adjoined to focused constituents – which appear in sentence-initial focus position – both particles must appear in ‘second’ position, immediately after a focused constituent. Finally, having clitic properties that preclude adjunction to constituents larger than a phonological word, both particles are limited to following a focused constituent that consists of a single word.

SUMMARY AND FURTHER CONSEQUENCES

The purpose of this paper was to address the direct yes-no question particle nā, with special attention to its clitic-like dependence on focused expressions. We have shown that the explanation of this behaviour lies with the status of nā, a direct yes-no question morpheme that is focus-sensitive and obligatorily associates with focused expressions, structurally as well as semantically. Specifically we have shown that nā is a question marker that occurs, not as the head of an independent functional category, but rather as an enclitic particle which adjoins to focused constituents that correspond to a phonological word.

This provides a characterization of the Cree question particle nā, but also raises interesting questions for further research. By way of conclusion, we comment briefly on one line of inquiry which arises given the findings presented above.

One consequence of the characterization developed for the question particle nā concerns clause-typing theory. Interrogative clauses are
widely held to contain a question feature [WH] which ‘types’ sentences as interrogative, giving them a question interpretation. This feature is located in Comp, the highest functional category in the clause, and the site where clauses are held to be ‘typed’ for major sentential functions such as interrogative and declarative.  

Given evidence for characterizing the direct yes-no question marker *nâ* as an enclitic particle that adjoins to focused constituents, we are forced to conclude that question morphemes do not uniformly occur in Comp. The further question then arises of what circumstances in the grammar of Cree give rise to this behaviour. We leave the detailed answer for further research, but note here some facts which suggest, interestingly, that the answer to this question lies with focus-sensitivity. Specifically, there is a need for further investigation of the syntactic conditions that surround focus-sensitive expressions in Cree.

Semantically, the direct question marker *nâ* differs from the indirect question marker *kišâspin* ‘if’ by being focus-sensitive. This property can be related to the deictic content of direct question markers with illocutionary force and is in fact common in direct yes-no questions across languages. The indirect question marker *kišâspin* ‘if’, on the other hand, lacks deictic content and focus-sensitivity, and in this regard it too patterns with indirect question markers cross-linguistically. Although the semantic difference between *nâ* and *kišâspin* is by no means unique to Cree, there are two sets of facts which suggest that the syntactic behaviour of *nâ* is, nevertheless, linked to focus-sensitivity. First, Cree provides no evidence for ascribing the syntactic behaviour of *nâ* to an unavailability of the Comp position. Instead, the behaviour of *kišâspin* ‘if’ gives every reason to believe that Cree does have a Comp position which ought also to be available for *nâ*. Thus *kišâspin* only occurs sentence-initially before all other material in the clause, and cannot co-occur with another complementizer expression, indicating that it is a question complementizer located in Comp. The failure of *nâ* to occur in Comp therefore cannot have its source in the absence of a Comp position, but must rather arise for independent reasons. Second, focus-sensitive expressions of Cree, emphatic *ani* as well as a range of non-clitic expressions, display the same structural dependence on focused material as *nâ*. This strongly

suggests that the question particle *nâ* owes its structural dependence on focused constituents to a general syntactic condition affecting focus-sensitive expressions in Cree.

This completes a characterization of the Cree question particle *nâ*, a focus sensitive morpheme which does not occur in Comp, but rather as an enclitic particle that adjoins to focused expressions. We leave for further research the question of why *nâ* displays this behaviour, but note that the immediate evidence strongly suggests the culprit to be a general syntactic condition on focus sensitive expressions in Cree.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

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